

CCUCC LENTEN DEVOTION



2025

3/5 Pastor Brian

Mark - 8:27-30

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Meditation:

And so it begins... Today's passage reflects Jesus's acknowledgment of who he is, what he represents, and what he must do. It is miraculous that God loves us enough to want to be with us in person, tearing down the long-standing divide between humanity and the divine.

Today is Ash Wednesday. Today is the day where we acknowledge who we are and what we represent as followers of Jesus, and recommit to what we must do as followers.

Ashes represent many things. In the ancient world, they would offer an act of contrition to God by sitting in ashes. Back when people used to offer burnt offerings to God, the smoke and the aroma is what was lifted up to the Almighty, and the ashes that were left over represented what was unworthy of God. By sitting in the ashes, they made an outward gesture of repentance, suggesting that they too are unworthy of God. On Ash Wednesday, we don't sit in ashes, but we mark our foreheads with them. The ashes represent repentance as well as a reminder of our mortality. But, we put the ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the cross, which reminds us that even though we may fall short of Jesus's example, that God finds us worthy enough to come all this way to be with us as Jesus.

Prayer:

God, on this holy day, as we wear the mark of the cross, we pray that we can live up to all that you called us to be, and we thank you for finding us worthy. Amen

3/6 Lisa & Tom Donovan -

Mark - 8:31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Meditation:

Mark shares a teaching moment about, the difference between the concerns of God and the concerns of man. In this story Jesus shares that He as the Son of Man will suffer many things. Thus, preparing us to understand the importance of living a God centered life. This of course means it can bring pain and suffering. What good is it to have wealth, fame, and a fabulous home only to lose our soul. We see that a man centered life is an illusion. True happiness is when we focus on WWJD (What would Jesus do?) We must be willing to lose our life for the sake of the gospel in order to save it.

Prayer:

Let us pray that we find HIS courage to face the scorn of the world. That we have the wisdom to choose HIM and choose Love even when we endure hardships. Amen

3/7 Becky Bruce -

Mark 9:1-8

And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Meditation:

This passage describes the "Transfiguration" of Jesus when he takes disciples, Peter, James and John up into the mountains and is changed momentarily into a brilliant white glowing state. This got the attention of the disciples, and they were frightened by the unknown. Moses and Elijah also appeared with Jesus while he was in that state. I believe this shows the continuation of the story with Jesus being joined by Moses and Elijah who came before him by many years. They all were following God and trying to fulfill his prophecy with His Son Jesus being the ultimate fulfillment. The voice from Heaven, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him" shows the special relationship with God and that Jesus' power and authority will prevail. Jesus' divine glory was revealed to Peter, James and John showing that while he appeared in human form, he is also the Lord.

Prayer:

Oh Lord, we ask that you enlighten us to see your Glory as you did with the disciples, Peter, James and John. We ask that you continue to be with us and guide our lives so that we also have special relationship with you and our Father in Heaven. Amen

3/8 Linda Rothgery -

Mark 9:9-13:

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'

Meditation:

In my twenties, when I was going out to singles clubs, my sister and a friend of mine were at a club that was in the Cleveland "Flats" area by the water. My friend met a guy, she was going with him on his boat for a ride. She asked us if we wanted to come along. We said no and she went anyway. It ended up going very badly. She had become a changed person. I was not on that boat, however that experience changed me as well.

Life experiences, good and bad, change us. We have the opportunity to learn and grow spiritually from them. I remember feeling fear and hate that night, but also learning compassion and love listening intently to my friend's pain. It was a difficult and life-changing night for all of us and still evokes sadness in my heart for all involved.

Prayer:

Dear God, the pain and hurt of others can actually cause us to ache as well. Please help to heal our hurting hearts with your undying love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

3/10 - Marc & Jami -**Mark 9:14-29:**

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

Meditation:

Why do we so often try to handle our problems alone—especially those situations that are completely beyond our control? Why is Jesus sometimes our last resort instead of our first? Do we truly believe He has the power to heal every situation we face? We need to have more faith, never doubting Jesus. In the passage, the father asked Jesus, "Have mercy on us and help us, if you can." Of course, we know that Jesus can help, but do we really believe it? Hear Jesus's reply, "Anything is possible if a person believes."

Anything—anything—is possible if we put our faith and trust in Jesus! Jesus is constant and will not fail us. We must fully believe. We put our trust in other people, why not put it in Jesus, the one that has the power and will never let us down?

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, thank you for this day and for Your Word. Please help me to have more faith, to turn to You first, and to “overcome my unbelief!” Amen.

3/11 Beth Naro -**Mark 9:30-37:**

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

Meditation:

This passage begins with Jesus telling the disciples that he will be betrayed and killed, but will rise again after three days. In true disciple fashion, however, they do not understand what he means and they are afraid to ask Him. As I read this passage, I think about how many times in life something is right in front of us, but we don’t see it or are too afraid to ask about it. We miss out on opportunities. We misunderstand meanings and intentions. We need to be intentional about seeking understanding, especially in this age of technology, where many of us (me personally) would rather text than talk.

We move on to Jesus asking his disciples what they were discussing as they walked. The disciples don't want to tell Jesus that they were arguing over who is the greatest among them, but of course Jesus already knows. He tells them, as He has so many times, that if they want to be the greatest, they need to be a servant of all. He then tells them that if they welcome little children, they are welcoming Him and His father.

So many times in Scripture, Jesus tells us to serve others. We see Him live His words as he washes the disciples' feet. We see Him preach when He's tired, heal the sick, and pray ceaselessly. He tells us that the meek shall inherit the earth, and that we need to receive the Kingdom like a little child. So today, as we read this piece of Scripture, may we remember to serve others, remain humble, and capture a child-like wonder for our Lord.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, may we always seek to understand, rather than to be understood. May we love and serve our neighbor, whatever her need. And may we open our hearts to receive your love with a child-like wonder. Amen.

3/12 Pastor Brian -**Mark 9:38-50:**

John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell., And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one

eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

'For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

Meditation:

I recently told a person who is atheist that *'I will take a kind atheist over a mean Christian any day.'* I knew my thinking was grounded in scripture, and in reading today's passage I found more evidence to that claim. Today's passage begins with someone who is not necessarily in the disciples tribe, who is going around and doing good things in Jesus' name. Jesus told the disciples not to confront him, saying that whoever is not against us is for us. Bearing the name of Christ is about action, we bear his name when we act like him. Later in today's reading Jesus reminds us that we must be salt and light. The idea of light is self-explanatory. Of course light is a good thing, and we are called to shine a light in the darkness. But what does it really mean to be salty? A modern understanding of someone being salty is that they are disgruntled, agitated, irritable. But in the ancient world salt was incredibly valuable. Because salt could keep food preserved for very long periods of time, salt made it possible to live between harvests, and salt made it possible to travel long distances. For salt to lose it saltiness, means that it no longer can preserve what it was supposed to preserve. Since Jesus was very critical of the religious authorities of his day, it's safe to assume that he was confronting them for not preserving the true meaning of God's word given to them through the scriptures of the Old Testament. Jesus challenged them, and us, to receive and preserve our faith, enabling it to continue through all of the generations to come

Prayer:

God, help us to see you and all people, help us to celebrate kindness in every form. Lord help us celebrate our commonalities with others as we preserve our faith and the traditions that bring it to life. Amen

3/13 Carol Pullins -**Mark 10:1-12:**

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

Meditation:

Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Judea, on their way to Jerusalem, when they were confronted by some Pharisees. So many times these religious leaders tried to trap Jesus with controversial questions. They hoped he would say something that they could use against him. But Jesus answered their question about divorce, by asking them, "What did Moses say about divorce in the law?" Jesus used God's word as the ultimate authority, so the Pharisees could not dispute what he said. Later that day, Jesus and his disciples discussed the matter and again, and Jesus strongly emphasized how important it was to stay in a committed relationship. Many people today have gone through break ups and divorce. Marriage is a serious commitment, and is not something to be ended hastily. We can be assured though, that throughout scripture, in the Old Testament laws, as well as teachings from Paul in the New Testament, there are reasons divorce is allowed. Although it may be hard, if we turn to God, he will not abandon us. He cares about, and loves us, and knows our pain. He will hear our cries and prayers, and see us through. As Jesus continued his journey from Judea to Jerusalem, he knew he was getting closer to fulfilling His purpose on this earth. To take all our sins and wash them away with His blood. No one, who believes, is guilty. We are forgiven!

Prayer :

Thank you Lord, for your many examples that you gave us through scripture about how we should live our lives. Thank you for your sacrifice, so even when we fail, through your grace, we are washed clean. Amen

3/14 Cindy Bryda -**Mark 10:13-16**

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth any one who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Meditation:

I love the song I SURRENDER ALL. Like an innocent child trusting and surrendering all to their parents, we should try be like that innocent child surrendering all to our heavenly father. In 2006, my mom was diagnosed with multiple myeloma- a blood cancer. I quit my job to become a full time caregiver. I had many emotions- doubt (can I do this?), anxiety, fear and worry. I never questioned God. My prayer was, ok God I surrender all and trust you to help me.

One day I woke up to horizontal rain falling from the sky. My Mom's chemo appointment was at 10:00 a.m. I fixed her breakfast, and got her ready, but my instant worry all morning was, how am I going to get her safely from the porch, down 5 steps and into the car? She had a detached garage. I turned to God in prayer. It was 9:15. I had the car packed. As we stood on the porch ready to descend the steps, the rain suddenly stopped. I got my Mom safely into the car. As I closed my door, the rain came slamming down from the sky. I immediately thanked God. I knew he helped us. My Mom lived 8 more years. Through this challenge, I learned to trust God and surrender all just like a child. I truly had no choice. Trusting, having faith, believing and seeing God's protection, I was able to rest in God's love and peace.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, Surrendering all is hard especially when we want to be in control and fix things. As we greet each morning, help us to surrender all, trust in you and accept the things we cannot change. Help us to live in peace. Amen

3/15 Cristal Tomblin -**Mark 10:17-31**

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.' Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Meditation:

In these verses, we read about a wealthy man who followed many of God's

commandments, but he was unwilling to give away his possessions in order to follow Jesus. Jesus tells us that it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Initially, I thought these verses were about judgement, but as I studied and read deeper, I began to see them as more of an expression of Jesus’s love. We are told that Jesus still loved this wealthy man. He also tells us that with God all things are possible (maybe even a camel going through the eye of a needle???). He teaches us to love him more than anything or anyone else. He wants our hearts to be in the right place, full of love for Him, and not focused on our possessions or other worldly desires. In our lives we get distracted by things that don’t really matter. Our society glorifies and encourages us to want and strive for the big beautiful house, most expensive car, most fashionable clothes and perfect looking family. Oftentimes we start focusing on these worldly wants and forget to make serving God our priority. My dad always tells me, “sometimes the more things we have, the more problems we have.” I don’t think he is specifically referencing these verses, but I think it’s true that having lots of “things” can often lead us away from serving God. When we have a lot of money and possessions we can easily become prideful and may lean less on God. We may become so preoccupied by these “things” that we miss opportunities to walk with Jesus, like the man these verses tell us about. Jesus loves us, and he reminds us in these verses that with God anything is possible. I believe Jesus knew that he would be dying on the cross so we could receive forgiveness for our sins when he spoke to his disciples about this wealthy man. He loves us all, even when we don’t do the right thing. We all make mistakes and sometimes focus on the wrong things, but when we put our faith in Jesus our love of the unimportant things weakens, we learn to focus on what matters, our hearts start to crave helping and sharing our possessions with others and thankfully, our many mistakes are forgiven.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, please help us keep our focus on you. Please don’t let us get distracted by our many possessions and things that don’t matter. Help us use our gifts and riches as a way of serving you and helping others. Let us give with joyful hearts full of love, gratitude and faith in you. Please forgive us for the times we fail to walk with you because of our love for things of this world. Thank you for your love and forgiveness. Amen.

3/17 Tim Hoffman (and Pastor Brian) -**Mark 10:32-34**

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

Meditation:

Jesus sometimes speaks in parables, sometimes he uses simile and metaphor and his words can be mysterious. Not in this passage. He is very direct, matter of fact, outlining in specific detail what will happen to him in the coming days. His followers have seen Jesus do great things, and by this point they have seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. So they at least have some precedent for believing someone could come back from the grave. Perhaps this is why Jesus chooses to wait until then to tell his followers the hard truth about what he must do. Jesus does this because he knows his disciples are afraid. When we are afraid, we have far less interest in mystery and metaphor, we just want the facts, even if they are hard to hear.

Jesus's disciples were aware that they too will be persecuted for their beliefs. As long as Jesus is with them however, they feel somewhat bulletproof. They were there to hear Jesus defeat every argumentative trap his persecutors threw at him. They've seen him do marvelous things. But if they can get to Jesus, certainly they can get to his followers. Knowing that they will be persecuted must have made it more difficult for them to full-throatedly declare Jesus the Messiah.

Fear of persecution takes many forms. In today's world, many of us are afraid of declaring our faith, our beliefs, our convictions, because we are afraid that others will fill up our comments section with negativity, or will "unfriend us", or will draw us in to some pointless debate, where no one changes their mind, or even attempts to understand the other person. We worry about putting the wrong sign in our yards, we worry about wearing a T-shirt that says the wrong thing in some people's minds, we are afraid to authentically follow Jesus's example of welcoming the stranger, offering shelter to the refugee, because of all the modern ways we can be

persecuted. Living out our faith means risking being cancelled. Being an authentic follower of Jesus means that our allegiance to his example is greater than our allegiance to any political party, greater than any current cultural movement, greater than any earthly authority that would persecute us.

Jesus told the disciples the future, because he knows the future, because he holds the future, because he is the future. So we step forward in faith despite the risk of persecution, because even though we don't know exactly what will happen, we know the future is in his hands.

Prayer:

Jesus, help us boldly claim our identity as your followers. As the body of Christ we know that we are to bring hope, peace, love and joy to a world that is not ready to change. Give us your strength Lord to stand up for what is right, and give us the wisdom to know your heart. Amen

3/18 Krys Mackowski -**Mark 10:35-45**

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Meditation:

We've all met someone who had no business being in a position of authority. Maybe it's a former boss, a co-worker, or the coach's kid on your summer ball team. Maybe they don't have the necessary experience. They might bully, or try to intimidate. More often than not, they make you miserable. They usually all have one thing in common: They didn't earn it. When I think back to my favorite boss, what I appreciated most about him was that he never asked me to do something he would not, and had not, himself done. He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. He didn't leave early, or take the weekends off to go golfing leaving me stuck at work. He was in the trenches with us.

And that's the thing about a good leader - they are with you. He took his position of authority seriously, because he understood that a good leader serves his people, and not the other way around.

Prayer:

Oh Holy One, please grant us the hearts of servants, not only as followers of Christ, but as leaders of men. Help us to remember that we will occupy the places you have prepared for us, in your timing. Guide us so that we may guide others to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

3/19 Emily Herrmann -**Mark 10:46-52**

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Meditation:

Bartimaeus' story is a wonderful example of faith, persistence, and transformation. Though blind and disregarded by society, he refused to be silenced, calling out to Jesus with unwavering faith. Jesus, full of compassion, stopped for him, acknowledged his need, and restored his sight. Bartimaeus shed his cloak, which symbolized to me that he was shedding his old identity of beggar. He was letting go of what was holding him back and fully following Jesus. This was the last recorded miracle before Jesus' journey to the cross, reminding us that His mercy is always available to those who seek Him. Like Bartimaeus, we are called to cry out in faith, trust in His power, and follow Him wholeheartedly after experiencing His grace.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your compassion and mercy. I pray to come to You with persistent faith, trusting that You hear my cries. Open my eyes to see You more clearly and strengthen my heart to follow You without hesitation. No matter the obstacles, help me to remain steadfast, knowing that You are always near. In Your precious name, Amen.

3/20 Elizabeth Russell -**Mark 11:1-11**

"When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.' ' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at

everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”

Meditation:

This passage in Mark fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” As I read the verses from Mark and Zechariah, I found myself thinking about that colt and its mother. Some years ago I heard that donkeys with colts are exceptionally stubborn and will refuse to go anywhere. But if you start leading away the colt, its mother will come voluntarily. I haven’t had many experiences with donkeys to know whether or not that’s true, but I found myself thinking about the colt and its mother quite a bit. There is great symmetry in the telling of the Good News. In Mark’s telling of the story, we are in Jerusalem, awaiting the Messiah. Jesus is coming to his people. His coming is celebrated in song. He rides humbly on a colt. He is exalted now, but he will face rejection and isolation. But that will not be the final word of the story, and God’s love for us will win out in the end. In Luke’s Gospel, the Messiah is foretold. He is coming to his people. His coming is celebrated in song. The person who sings the song will ride on a donkey. That person will face rejection and isolation. But in the end, God’s love for us will win out. The story of Mary parallels that of her son. The angel says to her - in the classic wording: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” Mary responds with, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She is exalted by heaven but will be shunned by many who know her. When she is in the late stages of her pregnancy, she will ride - most likely on a donkey - with Joseph as they journey to Bethlehem. They will be rejected and told there is no room for them. But Emmanuel, God with us, will come into the world to bring light and love to all God’s people.

Mary and Jesus. Prophecies and songs. Humble journeys. Sorrows and rejection. God’s love winning. May we rejoice at such beautiful symmetry in the stories of the Bible whenever we encounter it.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, when we encounter prophecies, songs, journeys, hardships or great joys, may we respond as Mary and Jesus did: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Amen.

3/21 Pastor Brian -

Mark 11:12-19

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?' But you have made it a den of robbers.'

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Meditation:

" Oh, that poor fig tree!"

Honestly, I love this parable. Without understanding the symbolism within today's scripture, I used to struggle to understand why Jesus would just cause that fig tree to wither just because it had no fruit. The way that Jesus decisively dispatches this poor tree could be interpreted that he only values things that produce results. Unfortunately, I've heard that sermon.

Thankfully, I've learned what's really going on in this passage. Fig trees in that part of the world only produce leaves when they are bearing fruit. You can't see the fruit underneath the leaves until you are right next to it. Jesus was hungry and saw the leaves on the fig tree as an advertisement that there is probably some fruit to be had. This fig tree that was "in leaf" was actually doing some false advertising. It is as if the fig tree's leaves were saying: "I am a fruitful fig tree, come and have one." This parable, like all of Jesus's parables are intended to teach us a lesson. This one teaches us that we need to be who we say we are, and we need to bear the fruit that we are intended to share. The apostle Paul tells us about the fruits of the spirit that serve as evidence of our identity in Christ. The fruits of the spirit

are : love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control". So if we are advertising to the world that we are Christian but do not bear these fruits, we are like that poor little tree – all leaf, and no figs.

Prayer:

God thank you for the powerful lessons found in your word. Help us to live our lives in the way that bears fruit for all who are hungry for Jesus presence in our world.

3/22 Mary Romano -**Mark 11:20-26**

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'

Meditation:

In this Bible passage, Jesus teaches his disciples important lessons about faith, prayer, and forgiveness. The first message is that they should have faith in God and believe in Him with all their hearts. God can do amazing and miraculous things. In the reading, "moving mountains" is a metaphor describing the ability to overcome significant challenges or difficulties. People cannot trust God to help them face hardships if they doubt His intentions and capabilities.

I remember first learning how to pray when I was little. My four-year-old self truly believed that if I asked God for something in prayer, He would deliver. "Pray, and you shall receive"—well, that didn't happen. I didn't understand why my prayers for the Hulk Hogan workout set (Hulkamania headband and yellow tank top included) were not answered. As an adult, that is still a hard pill to swallow at times, especially when my prayers are pure of heart.

But I know that God listens and answers in the way that is best for me and on His timeline, not mine.

Jesus also teaches that people must forgive others before they pray so that God will also forgive them. That's a tough one! Forgiveness is so important, yet many—including myself—hold on to grudges and harbor bitterness and resentment toward those who have wronged us or the ones we love. A forgiving heart is at peace because forgiveness isn't about approving of or forgetting what happened; it is about choosing to rise above it and release the emotional burden it carries. God gives us the support and strength needed to forgive.

Prayer:

Dear God, As I take this Lenten journey, I come to you with an open heart. Help me to have strong faith in you, even when things seem impossible. Teach me to be patient and trust that you will answer my prayers in the best way. Guide me to forgive those who have wronged me, just as you have forgiven me. Take away any anger, bitterness or hurt, and fill me with love and peace. In Jesus's name we pray, Amen

3/24 Darlene Issacs -**Mark 11:27-33**

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.' They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But shall we say, "Of human origin"?'—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Meditation:

In this passage Jesus' authority is questioned by those who felt they themselves were the authority; the lead priests, teachers of religious law and other leaders or elders. As he has many times, Jesus answers them

with a question of his own. In essence he is asking - Do you believe in me as the son of God?

Their response to him reveals their reason for asking - their fear.

If they answer that John's baptism is from God or heaven they fear Jesus will ask them why they did not believe him. If they answer John's baptism was merely human they fear the people will riot.

Jesus is allowing the leaders to answer their own question. He is also allowing them to consider what their motive is for asking the question.

Because the leaders' reply was that they did not know, Jesus said to them "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Jesus asks this of each of us.

That we think for ourself.

That we consider what we know, what we have seen, read, gleaned from others we trust, felt in our hearts and experienced for ourself about God.

And that we make up our minds about what it is we believe, who we believe and who we believe in.

What does God want me to know?

Sit quietly in His presence. And listen for His voice. His presence with us is a sacred privilege.

Prayer:

Lord, You alone are omniscient. Many questions we really don't have the answer to. But God you give us everything and every proof to believe in You. You are the God who always was and always is, all powerful, merciful, our kind and loving God full of patience, peace, love and justice. The creator of life and grantor of hope in Jesus Christ that is ours to accept. Father help me to see how I chose to be deaf, blind and insensitive to my sin, pride and perceived power or authority. Help me to respond to your authority and mercy with humble gratitude. In Jesus' name, Amen

3/25 Pastor Brian -

Mark 12:1-12

Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower;

then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture:

"The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes"?'

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Meditation:

In today's reading, It is evident that Jesus is confronting the religious authorities that have rejected the prophets that came before him, like John the Baptist. And Jesus knows that they intend very bad things for him. Jesus also knows that the same religious authorities are very proud of their magnificent temple, which will eventually be destroyed.

A cornerstone in the ancient world functioned as a foundation. Everything else was going to be built upon and around this cornerstone. The cornerstone must be very strong and surefooted. The temple in the first century represented where God lived. Jesus makes clear that God is not confined to a man-made building, but it's everywhere, and in all of us, accessible to people everywhere regardless of the faith traditions we inherit. Jesus issues a stern warning to these religious authorities, who functioned more like politicians than clergy, that everything they built will come crashing down, and it won't be because they were not warned. With Jesus, the very nature of God is revealed. Jesus confronts their images of God as some distant, always-angry deity, whose wrath is only satiated through violent sacrifices. Instead, Jesus tells the truth that God is like a parent who loves us very much, who is slow to anger, who's grace is boundless. Jesus tells us that God is like a father who runs to welcome home his wayward son. Jesus tells the truth that God is like a hen hovering

over her nest to protect her young. Jesus tells the truth that God doesn't want our grand gestures, but our hearts. Jesus tells the truth that the true cornerstone, the foundation of our faith is the love.

Prayer:

God, thank you for your love, your truth and your light. May our footsteps always be firm on the foundation you laid before us. And may Jesus who began a good work in us, always be with us as we continue to grow the faith he came all this way to tell us about. Amen

3/26 Cindi Manning -**Mark 12:13-17**

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his word. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" He asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

Meditation:

The Pharisees and Herodians were hoping to get Jesus into a trap with his answer. Whether he said yes or no in regard to paying taxes he could be seen as offending either the Jews or the Romans. They were generous in how they called Jesus a teacher and a man of integrity. They acted as friends; someone who would believe in His word. Do you ever feel that people in political positions or followers of a political party try to sway your views by embracing you as a smart and proud citizen who only wants the best for their country? Regardless if this is a friend, the media, a politician, these situations feel awkward and sometimes very unsettling.

"Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" is a response they didn't expect. It wasn't the anticipated yes or no. This world has government rules and regulations including taxes and this part of

scripture tells us to give to the government what belongs to them. Personally, it has been hard for me and at times I have found myself angry and worried and concerned about our country. What can I do? I could promote justice, peace, and love when it comes to my civic duties. Since we are made in God's image, we are what belongs to God. We listen to the government but our trust and hope is in God. We give back to God what is God's by following His word.

Prayer:

Dear God, I know that as my Father, I belong to you. Help me to keep Jesus' teachings in my heart and mind. During times of divisiveness in the world, help me to respond with love and kindness keeping my focus on what is pleasing to you. I give my life to you. You are my hope and salvation.

3/27 John Herrmann -**Mark 12:18-27**

Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.'

Jesus said to them, 'Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.'

Meditation:

When Jesus is challenged on his teachings on the resurrection of the dead, he very directly points out that the member of the Sadducees that is challenging him is not only wrong, but also that they don't understand the

scripture with which they are challenging him. Jesus then quotes a passage from the book of Moses, where God says to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” God states this in present tense as if to say that as the God of the living, he was and still is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in resurrection. Jesus promises that there will be resurrection for the dead and that when it happens, we will be like angels in heaven, therefore no longer like people currently living on Earth. Faith in Jesus must sustain us, however, because we can never fully understand the resurrection nor the power of God.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, please bless us with the wisdom to understand scripture and the teachings of Jesus as you and as Jesus intended us to. We ask not for full understanding, but for the wisdom to know how to live and love as Jesus taught, in a way pleasing to the God of the living. Please also grant us the strength to have faith in you that is beyond our level of understanding.

3/28 Emily Marty -**Mark 12:28-34***The Greatest Commandment*

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Meditation:

Who doesn't want to win a debate? Before I had kids I used to advise a debate team at school. Students had to prepare by both studying lots of content and practicing public speaking techniques. There were 13 different styles in our league and each style had a specific way of earning points so students had to understand the structure of each. For example the speaking order of the Lincoln-Douglas style debate starts with 6 minutes given to the affirmative constructive speaker with three minutes given to the negative cross-examination, etc. Students presented their well structured arguments with facts from reputable sources in an orderly way. There was a clear way to win a formal debate.

Most of us probably participate (willingly or unwillingly) in informal debates which sometimes may lack decorum or well-researched facts. Healthy debate was built into the ancient Jewish religious traditions through a practice called *midrash*. In this practice rabbis would continue to dive deeper into the meaning of scriptures through ongoing dialogue with the texts. They would sometimes research linguistics and specific words or they would examine texts from different perspectives or sometimes rabbis and their students would participate in a sort of Socratic seminar by asking questions to find the main lesson of a particular scripture that could be applied to the contemporary world. Generation after generation, the world was constantly changing and midrash continued.

In this scripture, it begins with Jesus engaged in one of these debates. When given the prompt: "which is the greatest commandment?" Jesus responds that there is one universal God whom individuals should love with all their faculties and should show compassion and care for others. No matter what specific well-researched laws his fellow debaters had prepared, the simplicity of what essentially became the "golden rule" surpassed any other argument or legal analysis. That's because there is no other argument and there is no debate. No matter the circumstance, love wins. When we defer to kindness, warmth, endearment and compassion, we live a more abundant life, the kingdom of God.

Prayer:

Dear God, Thank you for providing us with the guidance to lead with love, no matter the topic of debate. Please remind me to continue to engage others with patience, grace and compassion, even when we disagree.

3/29 Chris Rothgery -**Mark 12:35-40**

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared,

"The Lord said to my Lord,

'Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet.' "

David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?' And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

Meditation:

When I was a young lawyer, there was a judge who was often verbally abusive of people who appeared before him. Police, probation officers and lawyers, but most of all criminal defendants. This always disturbed me. I would think, "What is the point of all this? What is this young person going to learn from being yelled at, that he won't learn from his lengthy prison sentence?" It seemed like misguided bullying. This particular judge's hearings were long and loud, like the scribes Jesus called out. I thought to myself, if I was ever in this particular position I would hope to refrain from this behavior. It's been 20 years that I have been granted the privilege of serving in this capacity and I still have to remind myself to strive everyday to avoid this trap.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please grant me patience and humility to remain calm and kind in my treatment of others. We are all God's children and equally important and loved by Him. In Jesus' name. Amen

3/31 Jackson Schaeffer -**Mark 12:41-44**

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Meditation:

In Mark 12:41-44, a poor widow quietly steps forward and drops two tiny coins into the offering box. To everyone else, it's insignificant, just pocket change. However, Jesus sees something deeper. Unlike the wealthy who gave large sums from their surplus, she gave up every coin she had. She wasn't trying to be noticed, and she wasn't giving out of some kind of religious duty. She gave because she wanted to. Her offering wasn't just money, it was a quiet reflection of her heart, a quiet act of trust in God to provide for her needs.

This widow didn't give because she had extra; she gave because she loved God more than she feared her own lack. That's what made her gift so powerful. It wasn't about the amount—it was about faith. Sometimes we hesitate to give, whether it's our time, energy, or resources, because we're afraid it won't be enough. But God doesn't measure generosity by size; He sees the heart behind it. Like the widow, may we learn to give not out of obligation, but out of love and trust, knowing that God sees and values every sacrifice, no matter how small.

Prayer:

Jesus, You see what no one else sees, our heart behind our gifts. Just as you saw the widow's offering, you see us when we give out of love and trust rather than obligation. Lord, please teach us to be generous, not with just our resources, but also with our hearts, our attention, and our time. Lord, please help us place our trust in you, so that we might have a more giving spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

4/1 Brett Thompson -**Mark 13:1-8**

“As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.’”

Meditation:

Mark 13: 1-8 is incredibly relevant in today's society. At first glance, this is a scripture that appears downright negative. In fact, I was a little disappointed that of all the verses in the Bible, I was assigned one that focused upon destruction, earthquakes, wars, and famines. I envisioned a hopeful passage that would be uplifting, so I could share one of my happiest experiences with everyone in the church. I imagined we would sit in a circle and sing Kumbaya together after I read it to the congregation. But nooooo....I had to get the death and destruction Bible verse. Then I remembered to follow the directions Pastor Brian sent.

I practiced “Lectio Devina” and I read it three times.

I thought about what stood out to me about this scripture.

And I reflected upon my own life and how the teachings of Jesus could apply to me and to other members of the church.

Some would read these words and immediately think of the Apocalypse. And I am sure they are not wrong. Without diving too deep and looking on the Internet, this is probably what Jesus is referencing. He is also probably foreseeing his own demise on the cross and imploring his disciples to stay

true to him. But I am following the assignment and avoiding looking it up. Instead, I am sharing the message I received from this scripture. At the beginning of the scripture, one of his disciples is marveling about how magnificent the buildings are around them. Instead of agreeing with the disciple, Jesus turns to him and says that someday, these buildings will fall. He goes on to warn the others that many will come in his name and that they shouldn't be alarmed when they hear of wars, earthquakes, and famine. He goes on to say that nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. To reiterate, this definitely seems to be a pretty harsh message. And quite honestly, it sounds a lot like the 6 o'clock news on any given Tuesday.

But four words stand out to me - Do Not Be Alarmed. Jesus says that buildings will fall, earthquakes will strike, and nations will fight. Yet he tells his disciples to not be alarmed. To me, this is the most important part of this passage. It reminds me of one of the worst days I have ever experienced. On 9/11, I helplessly watched in horror as terrorists attacked our country and killed thousands of innocent people. I felt like the world was ending, or at least my world. I was shocked that God could allow such destruction and sadness. I was actually angry with God and questioned my faith a bit. But after my initial reaction, many people reminded me to "not be alarmed" and to focus on all the good things to come. Out of the destruction, anger, and despair came two things we all should always hold onto - hope and salvation. And I think that is the message Jesus wants us to receive from his words. Despite its poor first impression, I choose to look at this scripture as one of hope. With everything going on in the world today, I pray that you will, too.

Prayer:

Dear God, in a world filled with war, famine, destruction and despair, give us hope and salvation. Through our struggles, our trials, and our tribulations, help us persevere and persist to someday see a world of triumph. Amen

4/2 Becky Bruce -**Mark 13:9-13**

As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death and a father his child and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Meditation:

This passage describes the persecution that the disciples will face and Jesus' warning that they should be prepared for this but not to be anxious as the Holy Spirit will guide them. They should use the situation as an opportunity to convey the messages of Jesus to a greater number that might not otherwise have an opportunity to hear the Gospel. He encourages them to share their faith.

Jesus also warns that families may be torn apart with family members turning against each other and that we as his disciples should continue to speak his word and attempt to reach as many others as possible. We may be hated by people but the ones who believe in the Lord will be saved.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please guide our words and actions so that we may share your Gospel in our everyday life. Help us to convey the messages of your Peace, Love and Forgiveness especially at this time in our church calendar and in our changing world. We ask that you be with us and put the correct words in our message to help others share their faith as well. We ask this in your name, Amen

4/3 Elizabeth Russell -**Mark 13:14-23**

‘But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be, then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. And if anyone says to you at that time, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “Look! There he is!”—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything.

Meditation:

The Gospel of Mark is said to have been written around the year 70 CE. In this passage, Jesus speaks about the desolating sacrilege and the subsequent flight and suffering of the people from Judea. Mark’s audience would have immediate firsthand knowledge of such suffering because of the destruction of the temple - and Jerusalem itself - in what historians call the First Jewish-Roman War. Jesus was not the Messiah that many children of Israel expected. It is unsurprising that many Jews continued to look for a new King David to lead military forces against their hated Roman oppressors. In 66 CE, they rose up, burning down palaces, attacking Roman garrisons, and inflicting catastrophic losses among the Roman troops sent to quell the rebellion. A stronghold was established in the city and its walls were fortified; the Jewish fighters within were determined to end Roman rule for good. What followed was a 3-year siege of the city and its near-complete destruction. Though food had been stockpiled within the walls, fires destroyed much of it. Homes and the temple were ransacked for food and plundered for treasure. Fighters who fled outside the walls were executed. Every person who could wield a weapon was armed, yet the pillaging, raping and massacring of the population continued. And in case you are thinking that this is how the Romans took control of Jerusalem, you need to know that everything you just read was caused by civil war among the Jews. Three separate factions laid claim to the city and ordered their forces into battle against each other. Content to let starvation

and civil war take their toll, the Romans camping outside the city walls waited years for the right moment to strike. When it came, as many as 50,000 troops systematically attacked the fortifications, and belated efforts by the Jews to unite could not save the city. In 70 CE, the Romans breached the Temple Mount, setting fire to the temple. They looted and killed combatants and civilians alike. They razed the city to the ground so completely that the historian Josephus remarked, “[A]ny foreigner that had formerly seen Judaea and the most beautiful suburbs of the city, and now saw it as a desert, [could] but lament and mourn sadly at so great a change. For the war had laid all signs of beauty quite waste.”

When Jesus laments the destruction and flight of the people in today’s passage, he is not only lamenting destruction from outside. He also laments what his people do to one another. His heart is broken by discord and disunity, which are not God’s will for God’s people.

There is a lesson here for us in our present age of discord and disunity.

When we are presented with depictions of “them” versus “us,” we should know that there is no “them” but only “us:” all of us are God’s children.

When this person or that person claims the mantle of the one who will save us, we should know there has only been one Messiah for us to follow.

When people call for the vanquishing and destruction of their enemies, we should remember only love can cast out hate.

None of us is as strong as all of us together. No darkness can prevail if we each shine our lights. No act of retribution or violence can ever build God’s kingdom. And no one can lead us as well as the Good Shepherd, the Prince of Peace, the Alpha and Omega, the Way, the Truth and the Life - the very source of strength, light, harmony and love.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, when I encounter fear, anger, revenge and disunity, help me remember that you desire comfort, joy, peace and unity. Make me a vessel of your word and your ways, that I may also bring comfort, joy, peace and unity to all I encounter. Amen.

4/4 Cindy Bryda -**Mark 13:24-31**

But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time, men will see the son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. He will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Meditation:

No one knows when Jesus will return. So what do I do in the mean time? How do I live out my faith in my daily life? I need to keep God first in all aspects of my life, demonstrating humility, love, and compassion towards others and also deepening my relationship with God. As I wait, I will try hard each day to be that personal representative and servant of God. I will share my faith with others, attend church for the “food” I need, practice generosity, gratitude, forgiveness and genuinely trying to be a good follower of Jesus. However, I fail miserably. I am a sinner. The book of Mark tells me that Jesus is the Son of God whose death and resurrection paid the price for my sins. So as I wait, I will stay close to Jesus, remain faithful and trusting in him. I will keep my eyes open to see and feel his presence until his return.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, as we wait for your return, help us to be your personal representative. Give us the guidance and strength to serve others with joy, love and compassion. Amen

4/5 Marc and Jami -**Mark 13:32-37**

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

Meditation:

Jesus calls us to stay alert and be ready. Are we living like the faithful gatekeeper, watching and waiting for the Master’s return? What does it mean to stay spiritually awake instead of drifting off into sleepy complacency? If Jesus returned today, would we recognize Him? Could He be the person asking for help? Could He be the child in need? It’s easy to get distracted by TV, social media, daily routines, and even our jobs. But Jesus reminds us that our focus should be on Him and our spiritual growth. Staying awake means spending time in prayer, serving others, and living each day with the awareness that He could return at any moment.

Let’s live today—and every day—with open eyes and expectant hearts, ready to see Jesus in the faces around us and prepared for His return.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, thank you for this day and for your Word. Please help me to stay spiritually awake, always looking for You! Amen.

4/7 Carla Park -**Mark 14: 1-9**

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.’

While he 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. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Meditation:

As I was meditating on this bible passage, verse 4 stood out to me. A woman was pouring expensive perfume on Jesus to help prepare him for his burial, as everyone in the room knew that his crucifixion was imminent. The others that were present became critical and began to question why she was wasting this expensive perfume on Jesus, when it could be sold, and the proceeds given to the poor. The law enforcers of the time were looking for the right time to arrest and kill Jesus, to prevent a riot, as stated in verse 1 & 2.

While this woman was trying to help Jesus, others were judging & criticizing her. I think the part that I found to be unsettling, was the lack of empathy toward Jesus, who was about to be killed. The people who were present became indignant, began talking about her, and judging her. This made me think about the importance of showing empathy towards others. It's easy to judge and be critical of others, but sometimes we have to pause, and put ourselves in another person's shoes. It appeared that no one else in the room had any real empathy toward the plight of Jesus, who was about to die an agonizing death on the cross. To me, having true empathy, is to try and be aware what another person is feeling. The dictionary defines empathy as "showing an ability to understand and share the feelings of others"

This made me think about the times in my life when I could have been a little more empathetic, and a little less critical, if I would just take the time to put myself in someone else's shoes and not jump to conclusions. Although I have always strived to be empathetic, can I do a better job ?

Prayer:

Dear God, please guide us to pause and be more empathetic to others.
Amen.

4/8 - Max Lotko -**Mark 14:10-21**

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.' So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?' He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.'

Meditation:

Jesus knows that one of his disciples will betray him. Jesus knows what scripture foretold about the Son of Man dying. And yet, Jesus still invites all the disciples to share the Passover meal with him. I think this is Jesus showing us to welcome all to the table. But Jesus also does say to the group "One of you will betray me". As if to say to them, not all here come with good intentions. In Mark 14:21 he says "but how terrible for that man who will betray the Son of Man!" I've always wondered if Jesus was trying to scare that person, or maybe sway them to change their mind. But I think

he is also bringing attention to the fact that his followers are not perfect, and the disciples need to be reminded of this. And a reminder that Jesus, as the Son of Man, is not immortal.

Prayer:

God, Teach us how to make the most of our time here on Earth to love one another, break bread with one another, and invite all to the table, show kindness to those who are hurting, and may that kindness change their heart. Amen

4/9 Cindi Manning -

Mark 14: 22-31

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written:
"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered."
But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."
Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."
"Truly I tell you," Jesus answered. "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Meditation:

Mark 14: 22-26 is a portion of The Last Supper. Jesus gathered all his disciples to show them how to commemorate his sacrifice and resurrection. The bread, symbolic of his body and the blood symbolic of the blood shed for all of us became our sacrament of communion. What is so personally important to me is that here at the United Church of Christ, ALL are welcome to take part in communion. In my previous faith I could not receive communion due to being divorced. That made me feel ashamed and

unwelcomed. Here at CCUCC I am welcomed. I do not feel ashamed. Being a part of a community who allows everyone to partake in this amazing ritual that keeps us close to God is one of the main reasons I attend this church.

Mark 14: 27-31 tells us that Jesus knows his disciples will deny him. Just like Peter, we too, would never want to think that we would fall short. How could we turn against Jesus? But we are not perfect. I'm sure we can all remember a time when we didn't act in a christian manner, where we weren't as kind as the Bible teaches us to be. A time when we chose to protect ourselves and not God. Fortunately, later in the Bible we find out that Jesus named Peter the rock of the church. Like Peter, we should strive to better ourselves by being an example of God's word in all we do.

Prayer:

Dear God, I appreciate the sacrament of communion and will cherish the opportunity each time that it is offered. I will strive to show my love for you through my words and actions.

4/10 Melissa Thompson -**Mark 14: 32-42**

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

Meditation:

As I reflect on this scripture, verse 38 stood out to me, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”. This is when Jesus knows what is awaiting him. He knows that death on the cross is upon him. The passage shows us that Jesus had fear, too. That in a moment of struggle with the weight of his coming suffering, he turns to prayer; he prays fervently.

Verse 34, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” are Jesus’s words to his disciples. He prays to God, “Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet, not what I will, but what you will.” But YOU will. Jesus feels so much despair that he surrenders to God, believing this is God’s will for Him. He knows at this moment that this is no longer about Him; that he is laying down his life for others.

Jesus emulates for us that we are not alone. There are times in our lives where we struggle with God’s plan for us. In my own life, there have been moments of doubt and anxiety where I’ve felt like my faith was being tested. As I move through my faith journey, I’ve learned that prayer really does help ground me and lead me to a better sense of peace and understanding.

Prayer:

Dear God, Thank you for showing us that surrender is not weakness but a powerful act of trust. As we walk through the Lent season, help us to turn our fears and doubts over to You. Help us to lean in on Jesus' example, finding peace in Your Light and Love. In Your Name We Pray, Amen

4/11 Elizabeth Russell -**Mark 14:43-52**

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.’ So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day

after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.' All of them deserted him and fled. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

Meditation:

In the last year or so, Brian and I have been captivated by a series called *The Chosen*. It tells the story of Jesus' ministry, thus far over 4 seasons, in unique and compelling ways. And though its creators take liberties with the stories in the Bible, it has breathed life into scripture for us - or should I say - brought scripture to life. The show follows in the footsteps of the tradition known as midrash in Judaism, or exegesis as it's known in the modern world. And while I am no Biblical theologian, I would like to engage with today's passage in ways that they - or the creators of *The Chosen* - might.

We know that Jesus came to find the least, the last and the lost. His disciples are commoners with no special wisdom or learning, not called to serve any other rabbi. They try to listen to all that he tells them, but they frequently misunderstand and quarrel among themselves. They see all the signs and miracles, yet still anticipate a reborn King David to usher in a golden age for Israel. And perhaps no one among them is more lost than Judas, the one who betrays Jesus. The Bible says that he is the keeper of the purse, yet steals from it. He complains that the money spent on ointment used to anoint Jesus' feet could be better spent on the poor. The high priests pay him to identify Jesus to the authorities. In today's passage, he is the one to greet Jesus by following the custom of kissing him on the cheek, thus marking him as the one to be arrested, tortured and crucified. Despite the apparent evidence of Judas' greed, the Bible does not offer a clear explanation of his motives for the betrayal. Certainly greed could have been it, but that explanation feels lacking. Some scholars have theorized that Judas may have hoped that his act would force Jesus to reveal himself decisively as the Messiah, to believers and unbelievers alike. Another theory suggests that Judas was a zealot seeking to spark a military conflict that would cause Jesus to take up arms and lead the Jewish people against the Roman Empire. Judas' motivation is not fully known or explained. What is stated in Matthew's Gospel is the aftermath of Judas' actions: that he tries to return the money to the priests, then dies by suicide over his betrayal. Readers of the Bible might conclude that such a fate is fitting, that Judas has no one to blame but himself, that he deserves death for what he did to Jesus.

But what if Jesus has compassion for Judas? What if Jesus asking the Father to take this cup from him would also mean Judas' betrayal wouldn't happen, or would come to nothing? What if Jesus is dismayed by how the religious elites used Judas to silence Jesus and remove him as a threat to their own power? What if Jesus desires to spare Judas from having to kiss the Messiah, turning an act of friendship into the act of betrayal - even if that act is Judas' own idea? What if Jesus - knowing the prophecies about his imminent suffering and death - despairs of the scriptures and wants them not to come true? What if Jesus knows how much this event will hurt Judas, how remorseful he will feel, how it will lead to his death? What if Jesus knows he won't be able to appeal to his disciples to show mercy to Judas, saving Judas from isolation from everyone and God? And what if the thief hanging on the cross next to Jesus will not be the only one to hear Jesus say, "Today you will be with me in paradise?" What if Jesus can forgive the unforgivable, can rejoice over his lost sheep, can stretch out his hands to save even Judas?

What if?

Prayer:

Jesus, our Savior, help us to live into your truth that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in you.

4/12 - Crosby Marty -

Mark 14:53-62

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands."' But even on this point their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood

up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' Jesus said, 'I am; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven." '

Meditation:

This reading is about Jesus being brought up to the High Priest who accused him of many things such as Blasphemy, just so Jesus could be sentenced to death. But, anybody who testified, testified falsely. They make these things up just to have the satisfaction of the death of someone who was dedicated to help them. I, myself, do not understand that idea. If someone you know was trying to help you, would you push them away?

I feel that the High Priest and the court may have been jealous. They themselves were in charge of religion; they even made crazy laws that people had to follow in order to be a true Christian. Jesus then came down and showed people the real reason of being Christian. Being Christian is about being kind and nice to anyone, no matter what they do to you, or no matter what they believe in. It's not about who can be Christian (anyone can), or even what religion you believe in. Almost any religion is a passageway to becoming a good person. That is what Jesus wanted to explain, although the court and High Priest did not like this, as what Jesus said went against most of the things they said.

Even the fact that Jesus's 'friend', Peter, stayed far behind to hide the fact that he is a friend of Jesus is just horrible. All Jesus wants to do is spread the word of being kind while also helping people. He wants to make the world just a better place. There should be no fighting, no war, but helping one another and compromising. They lied about him. They conspired about him. They did all of that just so they could take more kindness off of the planet. Even after this, Jesus would have still forgiven them, as he always does. When has Jesus ever said, 'I hate you,' or 'You don't belong,'? He hasn't. He is kind and wants others to be kind. I don't get the pure hatred that comes from this court. All Jesus does is love and be kind. All they did is hate him due to jealousy. Life isn't a competition; anybody can be kind. Life is better when you are kind.

Prayer:

Dear God, please help me to be patient with people that dislike me, just as your son was with the court. Please help me to be kind to anybody, no matter who they are, what they look like, what they act like, what they believe, and what they do. Amen

4/14 Gary -**Mark 14:66-72**

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, 'You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.' But he denied it, saying, 'I do not know or understand what you are talking about.' And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, 'This man is one of them.' But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, 'Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.' But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about.' At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept.

Meditation:

I believe Peter was afraid of what others might think of him for being a friend of Jesus, let alone a disciple. Peter didn't want to be judged by others for being Jesus's friend and disciple. People (most) didn't really know Jesus and were perhaps afraid of him?

Having friends and family disown you because they're afraid of what others, even strangers might think of them for knowing you and hanging out with you, based on your past and/or beliefs, can really hurt. I'm sure Jesus's heart hurt, and we know Peter was saddened because he wept later, I believe because he betrayed Jesus, his friend.

For myself, I would rather stand with God and be judged by the world, and to stand with the world and be judged by God.

Prayer:

Lord, give us strength to stand with you, embolden our hearts to claim our identity as Christians, so when the world sees us, they see You. Amen.

4/15 Alex Baker -**Mark 15:1-15**

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 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!' Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Meditation:

Reading this passage, I am struck by the power of inaction. The one that has always stood out to me is Pilate's inaction; we can see throughout the passage that he can see clearly that Jesus has been brought to him due to the pettiness and jealousy of those who want to uphold the status quo, and who don't appreciate anyone gaining more righteousness and attention than they have. He even tries to stack the deck by offering to release Barabbas. He seems almost flabbergasted when the crowd still wants Jesus to be put to death. Despite his own misgivings, he ultimately makes the final decision for Jesus to be tortured and put to death.

But his is not the only inaction in this passage. When I begin to think about Pilate, I can't avoid thinking about Jesus' own choice not to act out. In His case, Jesus is given an opportunity to speak out of his own behalf. He

chooses silence. The scripture states that Pilate is "amazed" at this choice. Can you think of anything He might have said that would have had greater impact? I certainly can't.

I have always thought Pilate was such a sympathetic character. He just wants to be liked, doesn't want to ruffle any feathers. I see so much of him in myself. When I think about this, I feel a lot of shame for the times I have failed to act in the face of evil. But in this reading, I also felt Jesus calling me back - reminding me that my lack of inaction can also sometimes be my strength. When I choose not to take the bait in an argument, when I choose not to be defensive and snap back at someone who has hurt me, I am modeling the strength Jesus showed in this moment.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, help me today to be better than I was yesterday at standing up and speaking out against injustice and hatred. Give me just a little more confidence and strength to not take part when someone is picking a fight. And please grant me the insight to know which is which. I ask this, Lord, in Your name. Amen

4/16 Jim Strohmeyer -**Mark 15:16-20**

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. 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.

Meditation:

Men have never really changed, only the style of clothing they wear. Jesus is the king of heaven and Earth. He had all the power in the universe. He sat quietly accepting the mockery this creation could deliver. The cohort of soldiers held all the power over the real king, Jesus. However I would probably be part of the crowd. For people of that age, this was their fun, just like in the Colosseum. Then I would yell: "Crucify him! Crucify him."

Still, Jesus would sit silent. He would not deliver the divine retribution the cohort deserved. He would accept the cruelty of the cross. I was a human being who couldn't understand acceptance and love. Love your enemies no matter what they do to you. Acceptance, not destruction. Love, not hate. My style of clothing did not change.

Prayer:

Jesus help us to be silent. Give us your peace. Help us to accept our Crosses as you did. Forgive us when we are resentful. Give us your peace. Amen.

4/17 - Pastor Brian**Mark 15:21-32**

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

Meditation:

One of the reasons why I say that Mark is my favorite gospel is because it is so action packed. Mark's account is the shortest of the gospels, with an efficiency of words, all of which are full of meaning. As I read through today's passage, I'm struck by how pretty much any one of these verses could be a sermon itself. So I'll focus on a character in this passage who is easy to overlook - Rufus.

Rufus is the young son of Simon the Cyrene, the man that the Roman soldiers forced to carry Jesus' cross. He was in Jerusalem with Rufus and his other son Alexander and warned them to stay close as he completed his terrible task.

Rufus was just a boy, and I think seeing the events of the crucifixion must have scarred him deeply. But Rufus was most likely paying close attention to Jesus's words in the middle of this chaotic, violent and fearful moment. It is believed by many biblical scholars that Rufus was the one who wrote down Jesus's words when he said : "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." When Jesus said this, he got the attention of the thief next to him, as well as a Roman centurion. But neither of them would have been available later on when Luke includes this in his gospel account. Rufus however, according to the majority of biblical scholars, grows up to be an important leader in Rome for the young Christian church. In Romans 16:13, Paul writes, "*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.*" Rufus certainly would've had the authority of being a firsthand eyewitness to Jesus's last human moments. And it doesn't make sense for Mark to mention Rufus unless he becomes someone who will be noteworthy later on. So this young boy named Rufus, certainly scarred by the violence of the cross, was equally inspired by the grace and mercy Jesus showed on that cross.

So I'm thankful for Rufus, for doing his part in telling God's story. I'm thankful for Rufus because he reminds us that even though we might seem insignificant, and we might conclude that what we have to say doesn't mean much, that we all have something to offer in telling God's story. Rufus who could've easily been ignored, is most likely the reason that we know some of Jesus' most important words from the cross.

Prayer:

God, thank you for including us in your story. I pray that as we are called to carry our cross, that we will pay close attention to your words. And I pray that we will let your words into our hearts so that we can share them with the generations to come. Amen

4/18 Krys Mackowski -**Mark 15:33-41**

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Meditation:

There are times when it feels as if all hope has been lost. We've stumbled and fallen, and it feels impossible to get up. Everything is crumbling around us. We're being crushed by the weight of the darkness surrounding us.

I imagine that's how Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome felt. The fear and apprehension would have been palpable. They dedicated years of their lives to supporting and caring for Jesus, only to be forced to watch him take his last, painful breath, wounded and bleeding on the cross. In the dark.

And yet, that's when the miracle happens. The veil is torn, and a new covenant is formed. Theologian Thomas Fuller said, "It's always darkest just before the dawn." While Jesus took his last Earthly breath on that dark afternoon when the entire world felt lost, a fresh breath from Heaven descended upon the world. And the light dawned on a new day, a new era, a new life for the world.

Prayer:

Heavenly One, Help us to remember that with you, hope is never lost. Help us to remember to find rest, and not fear, in the dark. Help us to remember that your hope is the light that shines on us and makes us new. Help us to reflect your light so that others may find your hope as well. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

4/19 Carol Pullins -

Mark 15:42-47

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.

Jesus had died on the cross, Friday afternoon, and his burial had to be done quickly. It was only hours before the Jewish Sabbath would begin, and no work was permitted. Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the council, asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. He bought linen, and took him down from the cross, wrapped his body, and placed Jesus in a tomb.

Meditation:

To all who knew and loved Jesus, his burial had to be a very hard thing to face. As the heavy stone was rolled into place it seemed like the end. At this moment, it was like the years of Jesus' teaching, healing, and ministry was for nothing. I know what His mother, Mary, must have felt. Losing a child, no matter what their age or circumstance of their death, is a traumatic thing to go through. Someone you loved and watched grow from a child to an adult, suddenly gone, breaks your heart. Even his closest followers were probably confused and scared, as they were not sure what the future held.

But the best part of this story was yet to come. This scripture selection, seemed like the end, but we know that it wasn't. I can't finish this devotion on a low note. After the Sabbath was over, the women came to the tomb, and it was EMPTY ! Jesus wasn't there, He had risen, and is the hope of every one of us today.

Prayer:

Lord, we are so thankful that you are with us, even in our saddest, darkest hours. When we face hard trials in our lives, and it seems like the end, remind us, that it is not the end, only the beginning. Amen

Thank You for walking this Lenten Journey with us. I hope this congregational devotional was a blessing to you - See you Easter Morning!

Pastor Brian