

Lenten Devotions

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Face to Face with Christ My Savior

March 6 —April 20, 2019

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Introduction

In December 2017, as I was getting ready to close out the year and prepare for 2018, the Lord laid a challenge on my heart. That challenge was to read and seriously and intently study the Gospel of John in 2018. That was a unique challenge, a challenge far different than anything I had previously received from the Lord.

As I began to put together a plan to implement this challenge, I felt compelled to utilize the results of this study in a Bible Study that I lead at the Vilas Home, a local assisted living home. At first, I sensed that this was going to be a greater task than I had anticipated, but as we began to work our way through this study, I discovered an eagerness and desire to discover new truths from God's Word. In particular, there was an eagerness to discover Jesus' teachings on faith and belief and believing. As we journeyed through this study, we learned and grew together.

One special lady, Mary Godwin, took to heart the teachings on faith and Jesus' challenge that all who believed would receive the gift of eternal life. Mary soon received Jesus as her Savior and Lord. In June 2018, I had the privilege of baptizing Mary. As the weeks passed, it was thrilling to watch her grow in her faith, even through an intense battle with pancreatic cancer. In December, the Lord chose to call Mary home to be with Him. She was ready and was even anxiously anticipating being united with her Savior. It is with joy and humility that I dedicate this year's Lenten Devotions in memory of Mary who, during those few short months that she attended our Bible Study, taught me so much about faith.

As we delve into this book and these Lenten Devotions, I would encourage you to take some time to read through the Gospel of John during this Lenten season. I pray that as we make our way through these devotionals that each one of us will meet Jesus face to face in a new and a deeper way and that we will indeed grow in our faith. May we be challenged in greater ways to trust Jesus and see the amazing things He wants to do in our hearts and lives as we grow deeper in our faith in Him. Then, may we in turn reach out to share these truths and His love with others!

Wednesday, March 6, 2019

John's Purpose for Writing His Gospel Account

John 20:30-31 — “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

When I was a teenager, I loved to read and would read whatever I could get my hands on. When I would get a new book, I would read a bit at the beginning of the book, and then I would check out the ending of the book. My mother would get so annoyed with me for not reading the book through from beginning to end, but I explained my reasoning to her. You see, if the book did not have a good ending, then why should I waste my time reading the whole book? It made sense to me.

In reading and studying the Gospel of John, it seems imperative to begin — not at the beginning of the Gospel — but by taking a quick look at a statement the Apostle John made near the end of the Gospel. That statement explains John's purpose in recording the events he did and the challenge to look at those events, those miracles, and those encounters with fresh eyes and a new perspective and in so doing to come to the point where we will believe in Jesus and put our faith in Him. In his Gospel, John shared a number of word pictures of Jesus to help us to better understand Who He is. He also provided a number of powerful descriptions of miracles that Jesus had performed to help us to see His compassion and power in meeting the needs of His followers and others He came in contact with. All of these were recorded for one single purpose — to bring his readers to the point of faith and belief in Jesus — the kind of faith that goes beyond mere acceptance and knowledge of who Jesus is to life-transformation now and to life-giving hope in regard to eternity.

John reminded his readers that Jesus had performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples besides the ones he recorded, but he specifically chose to record in this book the ones that would have the biggest impact in helping his readers to believe — to truly believe and put their faith and confidence in Jesus who is the Christ, the Son of God. He also affirms “that [by] believing you may have life in his name.”

As we walk through this Lenten season and these devotions, let's do so with eyes to see and hearts to believe in Jesus.

Thursday, March 7, 2019

The Word of God

John 1:1-2 — “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”

Words have always fascinated me. As a youngster, I could often be found relaxing and reading a dictionary that my family owned. My curiosity with words and communication, as well as my love of writing, created within me a desire to do everything I could to improve my vocabulary and gain a better grasp of the English language. To me, words painted beautiful pictures, communicated powerful truths, and even had the potential to greatly impact people’s lives for good. Words hold beauty and meaning and power

It’s no wonder then, that the very first picture John paints for us is of Jesus as the Word of God — Jesus who is in very essence God — Jesus who existed even before time as we know it began — Jesus who spoke the very words of God and brought all that has been created into being.

Consider for a moment another description of Jesus. This one is found in Hebrews 1:3 — “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.” This is so beautiful, isn’t it? The Word of God, the Son of God, is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being. Wow! When we look at Jesus, the Word of God, we are given a glimpse into the very nature and person of God.

This verse from Hebrews also teaches us something else about the Son of God. He sustains all things by His powerful word. Yes, He was with God in the beginning. Yes, He is in very nature God. Yes, He has created all things, but He also sustains all things. He holds all things together.

Jesus as the Word of God also communicates to us. As the Word of God, Jesus communicates to us so many wonderful things in regard to His Father, heaven, truth, things yet to come, and how we should live our lives in a way that will honor and glorify our Heavenly Father. Jesus as the Word of God is the great communicator.

There’s a lot of food for thought here, isn’t there? May God open our eyes in a new way this Lenten season to the wonderful person of Jesus Christ, the one and only Word of God.

Friday, March 8, 2019

The Life-Giving Power of the Word

John 1:3-5 — “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

Imagine with me the power of speaking a word — just one word — or perhaps even a phrase — and seeing something amazing, miraculous, and powerful take place. It’s hard for us to imagine, isn’t it? There are days and times when we have to struggle so hard just to accomplish some of the common, ordinary tasks in life. I just read a Facebook post from a dear friend who had to walk to the doctor in the snow, cold, and blustery wind, because her car is broken down. I could sense the discouragement, the frustration, and the depression in her words. Oh, to be able to just speak a word and see miraculous things happen. We can’t, but God did through His very own Son, the Word of God.

If we would pause to read the first two chapters of Genesis, we would discover that it was the Word of God spoken into the cosmos who brought order out of the chaos. We also see in John 1:1, that it was the Word of God who has touched time with the significance and value of eternity. It was the very Word of God who spoke, and light shone in the darkness, dispelling the darkness with its brilliant display. It was the Word of God who brought life into a lifeless world. It was the Word of God who brought meaning and purpose to life. When we pause and look at the world around us, we should remember that this all began because of the wonderful and powerful Word of God.

As we work our way through these Lenten Devotions, we will see God’s work displayed in miraculous ways through His Son. We will also discover God’s work displayed as Jesus, the Word of God, spoke life into a lifeless man, healed those in need of healing, and met other needs — simply through a word. Our study takes us through the Gospel of John, but other accounts record other stories of miracles that took place as Jesus, the Word of God, spoke. For example, in Mark 4:29, Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be Still!” Perhaps you can think of others. Feel free to do some exploring through the Word of God on your own and let me know what you find.

For today, I would encourage you to pause and consider all of the blessings that we enjoy because of the Word that brought life and beauty into our world.

Saturday, March 9, 2019

Unrecognized

John 1:10-13 — “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

Have you ever had the embarrassment of meeting somebody you knew but whom you could not recognize or remember? From time to time, I meet a long-time neighbor while I’m out grocery shopping. She remembers me. She knows who I am. But, honestly, I never knew her well enough to recognize her when I see her. It’s embarrassing to have to ask her name every time.

Jesus faced that when He came into this world. He had made the world. He came into the very world that He had created. But, sadly the world of His day — and the people of His day — did not recognize Him or know Him or receive Him. How sad!

That, however, is not the final commentary on Jesus’ coming into the world. John 1:12 paints an amazing picture for us: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” There *were* those who received Jesus. There *were* those who believed in His name. There were those who were overjoyed for the opportunity to meet Jesus, to know Jesus, and to walk with Him. Those individuals were given the wonderful blessing of not just knowing Him, but of being given the wonderful invitation and opportunity to have a close relationship with Him, and to be allowed to become children of God.

The same opportunity is available to us today. We can choose to go through life not recognizing or knowing Jesus. Or, we can choose to receive Him for He is. We can choose to believe in Him and put our faith and confidence in Him. When we receive Him, when we believe in His name, He joyously and lovingly welcomes us into His family, and we are given all of the privileges, rights, and blessings of being His dearly loved children.

What about you? Have you accepted Jesus and received Him as your Savior and Lord? Have you believed in Him by faith? Do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are His child? You can have that assurance today as you come to Him in simple faith.

Sunday, March 10, 2019

God in Flesh

John 1:14 — “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

When we consider the wonderful truth of the Word becoming flesh, our thoughts usually turn toward the birth of Jesus, and rightly so. It is in the birth of Jesus that we see this truth come to life. Jesus, the Word of God, the Son of God, became flesh, became a human being, and made His dwelling among us. He came to us from the Father full of grace and truth. Jesus, the Messiah, had been foretold by the prophets of old, but it's only as we come the New Testament that we see the fulfillment of those promises as Jesus made His appearance on the human scene, born as a baby to the Virgin Mary.

Probably one of the most moving and beautiful passages that recalls Jesus' coming to earth is Philippians 2:5-11:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,

taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus was in very nature God, but He willingly humbled Himself and gave that all up so that He could come to earth to accomplish God's plan and purpose. He willingly chose to humble Himself and become one of us. He willingly came to this earth as a servant, taking the very appearance of a man. But He went even further and humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross, so that He could give us the hope of eternal life. Just think, Jesus, the Son of God, the powerful Word of God, left the glory of heaven to die for our sins so that we can one day enjoy the glory of heaven. What a wonderful truth!

Monday, March 11, 2019

Jesus — Lamb of God

John 1:29-31 — “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

It’s hard for us today to understand and grasp the purpose of the Old Testament sacrificial system. It’s hard for us to fathom the purpose of killing helpless, innocent animals to deal with human sin. Why were the innocent slaughtered for the guilty? How could these possibly provide atonement or forgiveness of sins? It seems senseless — and, oh, so gory! Bleating animals! Flowing blood! Dead animals!

Throughout God’s Word, several things are made clear about sin. Sin is contrary to God’s holy nature. Sin is disobedience to God’s command and God’s perfect will. Sin will not be tolerated. The sacrificial system that God established forced God’s people to face the reality and the consequences of their sins and their disobedience. For sure, the animal sacrifices were only a temporary solution, but they forced the people to face what they had done instead of excusing it, covering it up, or denying it. The sacrificial system also allowed them to gain a bit of a taste of the wonder and glory of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

With this a backdrop, it’s no wonder that when John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the world, he announced, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) Jesus was the perfect, pure, sinless Son of God. He came to be the ultimate substitute and sacrifice for sin. He who had done no wrong would willingly give Himself to die for the sins of mankind. He would take the punishment of our sins on Himself as He was nailed to the cross of Calvary. He would allow His blood to be shed for the cleansing of our sin. He would die in our place in order that we might receive the wonderful and amazing gift of eternal life. It is through belief and faith in what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross that our sins are dealt with once and for all, and we receive the forgiveness of our sins.

Let’s pause for a few moments today to thank our wonderful and loving Heavenly Father for providing His Son, Jesus, to be the Lamb of God who would take away our sins!

Tuesday, March 12, 2019

We Have Found the Messiah

John 1:40-41 — “Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.”

Have you ever met somebody who made such a remarkable impression on you that you just had to introduce him or her to your family and friends? Perhaps it was their mannerisms, the way they treated you, or even the way they made you feel, that left a lasting impression. You knew that you had met somebody very special — and you knew that you just had to introduce this special someone to others in your circle of family and friends.

It’s interesting to note that Andrew and another man had been disciples of John the Baptist. One day, as Jesus was passing by, John pointed to Jesus and declared, “Look, the Lamb of God.” Intrigued, they turned and started following Jesus and even went to see where He was staying and to get better acquainted with Him. It turned out to be a life-changing moment for those two individuals.

That day when Andrew first encountered Jesus, he knew immediately that there was something different about this man. Somehow in his heart of hearts he knew that he had finally found the One his heart was longing for — the long-awaited Messiah — the promised Christ — the One whom all of Israel had been longing for with great anticipation. Andrew was so excited about meeting Jesus and finding the Messiah that the very first thing he did was go find his brother, Simon Peter. Bubbling over with joy and excitement, Andrew proclaimed to his brother, “We have found the Messiah,” and he brought Simon to Jesus so that he could meet Him for himself.

As we journey through this Lenten season, I want to remind you that there are many people around us who need to be personally introduced to Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Their hearts are hungry. Their souls are unsatisfied with the wide variety of options this world offers. They know there has to be something more. They know there has got to be something — or Somebody — who can satisfy the deep-down needs of their hearts. They are just waiting for somebody to introduce them to the One who can make all of the difference in their lives. What an awesome opportunity we have as His followers to introduce people to Jesus! Are you willing to let God use you to introduce them to the Lord even during this Lenten season?

Wednesday, March 13, 2019

Come and See

John 1:43-46 — The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.” Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip.

For some people, the faith journey is very simple and straightforward — an introduction to Jesus at a young age (or at any age, for that matter), a response of unquestioning faith, and a steady, consistent, faith walk with the Lord. For others of us (myself included), the faith journey is full of twists and turns, questions and doubts, commitments and failures — and re-commitments and more failures. It would be great if we all had a consistent testimony from the very first day that we met Jesus, but that is usually the case. We are all different — every single one of us — and He is so very patient with us

In this passage of Scripture from John 1, we meet two men — Philip and Nathanael. When Jesus extended the call to Philip to “Follow me,” Philip seems to have jumped right on it and excitedly accepted that invitation and challenge. We need to notice, however, that he wasn’t content in just jumping up and following Jesus. No, he insisted on finding his friend, Nathanael, so that Nathanael could meet Jesus as well. Now this picture is one we often see when somebody meets Jesus for the very first time. They are so enamored with Jesus that they want to introduce their family and friends to Him. That was Philip through and through.

We also need to notice that Nathanael wasn’t quite as eager to meet Jesus. Nathanael struggled with a mental roadblock. “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” It’s interesting to note that Philip didn’t argue with Nathanael. He didn’t try to present a valid reason to meet Jesus. He didn’t give a sound theological statement regarding Jesus. No. Not at all. He simply urged Nathanael, “Come and see.” He urged Nathanael to come and meet Jesus for himself before he jumped to any conclusions about this man. It was a simple enough approach, but in reality it was one that involved a personal invitation to a one-on-one personal encounter with Jesus, the Lamb of God. That encounter would prove to be a life-changer for Nathanael.

What about you? Where do you stand? Have you come and seen for yourself that Jesus is who He said He is? What about your friends? Do you have a friend that you need to introduce to Jesus? Philip simply invited his friend to “come and see” for himself. You can do the same.

Thursday, March 14, 2019

The Savior Who Sees Me

John 1:47-49 — “When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, ‘Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.’ ‘How do you know me?’ Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, ‘I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Then Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.’”

Our Thursday Afternoon Ladies Bible Study group has been working our way through a study on the Names of God by Ann Spangler. One of the lessons that really struck a chord in my heart centered around the name given to God by Hagar after Sarah had decided to give her Egyptian maidservant to her husband Abraham to have a child through her since God was seemingly taking too long in fulfilling His promise of a child to them. After Hagar became pregnant, she despised her mistress, Sarah. Sarah complained to her husband, and he in turn left it up to his wife to deal with her. Sarah mistreated Hagar, who then fled into the desert. Wonderfully and graciously, the angel of the Lord met Hagar in that desert place and gave her instructions on what she needed to do. He reminded her who she was — “servant of Sarah” — and that her place was to go back and submit to her mistress. The angel of the Lord foretold what her son would become, and the problems he would cause. It was there in that barren, desert place that Hagar gave the Lord the name, “El Roi,” which means the God who sees me, because God had seen her in her distress and had come to her.

Just think, even before Nathanael spoke a word, Jesus knew him. He had seen him under that fig tree before Philip called him. Jesus also knew what was in his heart, and He knew Nathanael’s prejudicial attitude toward those from Nazareth. To be sure, Jesus had seen him. To be sure, Jesus knew him. Jesus would use that knowledge as an opportunity to reveal Himself to this future disciple in a way that would open the door for Nathanael to be ready and willing to come to Him.

As we consider Jesus’ encounter with Nathanael, I am reminded once again that the Lord is the One who sees us and knows us. He knows the depths of our hearts that no one else can see. He knows the mindsets that cause our responses to be clouded with prejudice. He knows even the attitudes that overshadow our judgments and hinder our coming to Him in faith. He sees — He knows — and He comes to us anyway. He meets us right where we are. He accepts us as we are. He then seeks to mold us and shape us into people He can use. He did with Nathanael. He will with you! Will you let Him meet you today?

Friday, March 15, 2019

The God Who Provides

John 2:6-10 — Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.” They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

As we come to John 2, we find Jesus and His disciples, along with Jesus’ mother, in Cana of Galilee enjoying a social event — the celebration of a wedding ceremony. Now wedding celebrations from that time period were a big deal. The celebrations could well go on for a week. With that in mind, it was imperative to make adequate preparations with adequate provisions for the duration of the celebration. It would seem as we look at this passage that the one in charge of these details had failed to plan and prepare properly. The wine ran out — too soon — way too soon.

Mary urged her son, Jesus, to do something — anything. It was obvious that she shared the embarrassment of the family. Jesus reminded her that His time hadn’t come, that it wasn’t yet His time to step out of the shadows and make His real identity known. However, Mary turned to the servants and urged them to do whatever He told them to do.

Nearby were six stone water jars — the kind of water jars that the Jews used for ceremonial washing. Each of those stone water jars held from twenty to thirty gallons of water. Jesus instructed them to *fill* the jars with water. The servants did exactly as they had been instructed. *They filled those water jars right to the very brim.* That’s amazing, isn’t it? They didn’t fill those water jars just half-way or almost to the top. No, they filled them to the very brim. Once those water jars were filled, Jesus instructed them to draw some out and bring it to the master of the banquet.

Now, I would have loved to have seen the look on the faces of those servants when they brought that sample to the master of the banquet. They knew that they had filled those water jars with — you guessed it — WATER. But when the master of the banquet took a taste, the look on his face, and the expression of pleasure indicated something much better, much more pleasurable than water. Somehow, miraculously, between the time they had filled the water jars with water, a wonderful and amazing transformation had taken place — a transformation from water to the best wine ever.

You know as well as I do that those servants had a choice that day. They chose to follow instructions — to obey. They took the sample to the master of the banquet by faith. Then they witnessed firsthand the amazing miracle and provision that Jesus performed when he turned mere water into wine.

You know as well as I do that those servants had a choice that day. They chose to follow instructions — to obey. They took the sample to the master of the banquet by faith. They saw firsthand the amazing miracle and provision that Jesus performed when he turned mere water into wine.

Saturday, March 16, 2019

A Searching Heart

John 3:1-2 —”Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God was not with him.’”

Lieutenant Colonel William B. Smith was his official rank and title. Those of us who knew him well affectionately called him “Bill.” Bill had proudly served his country in the United States Air Force and would often regale anybody who would listen with tales of his time of service here and abroad. Bill was also the beloved husband of Joanna and the proud, doting father to four amazing sons — Rod, Geoff, Greg, and Tony. Unfortunately, shortly after I became acquainted with Bill and his wife, Bill began a fight for his life, a fight he would eventually lose — a very serious battle with cancer. But Bill wasn’t worried. He had served his country. He had been a faithful husband. He had raised four amazing sons. That had to count for something. Yet he did not, could not, see his need for God.

In John 3, we come to an encounter with a man who had everything going for him. Nicodemus was one of the best of the best. He was a member of the elite religious group known as the Pharisees. He was also a member of the Jewish ruling council. He was a top-notch, spiritual leader in his day. In fact, most of our churches today would love to have somebody of his caliber to serve in a leadership position in our churches. He excelled as a leader.

As we consider this passage from John 3, we notice that Nicodemus came to Jesus. Jesus did not search out Nicodemus, although we will see in tomorrow’s devotional the work Jesus’ searchlight performed on Nicodemus’ heart. No, Nicodemus searched out Jesus in the quiet and privacy of night. There’s often been much discussion about why Nicodemus came to Jesus in the secrecy of night, but the important matter isn’t why but the wonderful truth that he had come. You see, he had been watching Jesus; he knew about Jesus; he knew that Jesus was a teacher among his people; and he knew that Jesus was performing miraculous signs unlike anything he had ever witnessed before. As a spiritual leader, he knew that Jesus could not perform those miracles unless God was with him. There was so much he did not understand — and, so many things he wanted to ask Jesus. And so, he came seeking and searching.

Allow me to state a hard truth here: it’s hard for people to step out of their self-sufficiency and their comfort zones to make their way to Jesus. Nicodemus did. The wonderful news is, so did Lieutenant Colonel William B. Smith. I was in my first year at United Wesleyan College when I received the word that Bill had lost his battle with cancer. He had fought valiantly to the very end, but cancer had won and claimed its victim. However, when word came to me of Bill’s passing, there also came the glorious news that Bill had finally come to Jesus, received Him into his heart, and was ready to meet him face to face. What about you? Will you make your way to Jesus today?

Sunday, March 17, 2019

You Must Be Born Again

John 3:3-8 — In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

I remember her well. Her name was Ruth Hagen. When I first met Ruth, this dear lady was in her 80’s. She regularly and faithfully attended a Bible Study I was leading at a local senior high-rise complex. Ruth would often tell me that she could not understand why everybody kept telling her that she needed to be born again. She explained it this way: “*I grew up in the church. I have diligently obeyed the Ten Commandments. I have faithfully taught Sunday School and Bible studies. I have led various women’s ministries and missions projects. I really don’t feel that I need to be born again.*” No matter how I tried to explain the concept of being born again, Ruth could not comprehend this wonderful truth.

When Jesus told Nicodemus, one of the religious leaders of His day, that he needed to be born again, Nicodemus couldn’t understand it either. After all, he (Nicodemus) was a well-respected religious leader of his day. He knew God’s teachings. He lived and breathed God’s teachings. He faithfully taught the truths of God. Wasn’t that good? Wasn’t that enough? Wasn’t that good enough? What was he lacking?

Even today, we have many like Nicodemus and like Ruth who are focusing on doing the right things, saying the right words, and even living the right way, but who haven’t discovered the wonderful truth that Jesus made known to Nicodemus. Doing the right things, saying the right words, and living a certain way are things I DO! These are external things — outward things — actions dependent on ME. You and I can do all of the right things but not have a heart toward God that loves God and desires to please God. The bottom line is that God wants more than my behavior — He wants ME! He wants my heart, and He wants to change my heart so that I can and will love Him, love what He loves, and live like He wants me to live. That requires that I be made new by a spiritual process known as the new birth. Although, we cannot understand it, it is God working His work inside of us. It’s about HIM — not you or I!

By the way, I shared the story about Nicodemus at Bible Study one day and urged those attending to take that next step of being born again through God’s love and grace by putting their faith totally in Jesus. Not only did Ruth finally see her need to be born again but so did several others. What a day!

What about you? Have you been born again? Has your heart been changed by God’s love and grace? Come to Him today.

Monday, March 18, 2019

I Hate Snakes

John 3:10-15 — “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Every time I read about the incident from Numbers 21 that Jesus references here in His conversation with Nicodemus, I am reminded of the assertion that Indiana Jones makes in the various movies of which he is the lead character. He vehemently declares, “I HATE SNAKES!”

God, under Moses’ leadership, had brought the people of Israel out of Egypt. You would have thought that the people would have been grateful for such a mighty deliverance from the hand of those who had cruelly enslaved them. You would have thought that they would have gladly followed Moses to the Promised Land — a land flowing with milk and honey. Nope! They grumbled and complained — and then grumbled some more — until God had had enough of their ungrateful attitude. As punishment, the Lord sent venomous snakes among them, and many people died. The people finally admitted their sin and begged Moses to pray to the Lord on their behalf. Moses called out to God for mercy. God instructed him to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Anybody who was bitten by a snake could look to that bronze snake that Moses had lifted up, and he or she would live. There was no other way. One thing was clear, they could not save themselves. The only way to be saved was to look to that snake in faith. That was the one and only remedy. There was no other way than the one God had so graciously provided.

Now this incident from Numbers was one that Nicodemus would have known well. Jesus utilized that Old Testament incident to teach Nicodemus an even more powerful truth. He declared, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Looking to that bronze snake provided deliverance for those who had been bitten by a venomous snake. Looking to Jesus as He was lifted up on the cross would be the only remedy for those stricken with condemnation and punishment for sin to be saved and to receive eternal life. Jesus assured Nicodemus that He was God’s remedy for sin and that “everyone who believes in him may [will] have eternal life.”

It thrills my heart to see what Jesus is doing here for Nicodemus. He does not tell him that what he’s doing is right. He doesn’t commend him for obeying all of the laws required of the Pharisees. Nor does He criticize him. Instead, he takes what is familiar to Nicodemus and tells him that He [Jesus] is the answer to sin’s problem and urges him to put his faith in Him.

Tuesday, March 19, 2019

Why Would a Good and Loving God. . . .

John 3:16-18 — “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

In 1999, I was diagnosed with an ASD — an atrial septal defect. At 39 years old, the doctors discovered that I had been born with a hole in the wall between the two upper chambers of my heart that had never closed up. Even though I sought out other options that were being explored at that time, the only realistic and viable option was major surgery whereby a doctor would go into my heart and repair that hole. At that point, the surgeon told me that the surgery was optional. I could have the surgery done, but I didn’t have to. The remedy for this major heart issue was available, but it was my choice what I would do.

I cannot begin to tell you how many times as a pastor I have been asked the question, “Why would a good and loving God send somebody to hell?” Here is my reply, taken right from Jesus’ words to Nicodemus.

Most of us can quote John 3:16 with no problem. It’s a favorite verse of most of us. It thrills our hearts to think about God’s amazing love and the extent He went to in order to show us that love. God loved us so much that He sent *His own Son* to die on the cross in our place so that we could be saved from our sin and receive the gift of eternal life.

As we move on to verse 17, Jesus made it very clear that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world. Not at all. No, God sent His Son into a world and to a people already condemned to death and to an eternity without Him all because of sin. Every single person that has ever lived — and every person yet to be born — is born into the world a sinner and stands condemned already. Jesus came into the world not to bring judgment but rather to bring a wonderful gift and an amazing remedy for all those already facing judgment and condemnation. Jesus came to offer the wonderful gift of salvation. But He will not force anybody to accept that wonderful and gracious gift of salvation. He offers it as it is — a gift to be graciously accepted and received. What we do with that gift is up to us. He has given us that option. We can either accept it with joy and thanksgiving by believing in Jesus, or we can say, “Thanks, but no thanks. I’m not interested.” He leaves the choice and option up to us. The remedy is there; the gift is offered; but He leaves the acceptance of that remedy and gift up to us.

As many of you who read this know, I accepted the remedy that was offered to me, and on January 25, 2000, the doctors performed heart surgery that ended up saving my life. What about you? Will you accept God’s remedy that will not just keep you from going to hell but that will grant you the gift of life — eternal life? The choice is yours. What will you choose?

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

A Divine Urgency

John 4:4-7 — “Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, ‘Will you give me a drink?’”

Imagine with me for a few moments the scene in John 4 as it unfolds before us. Jesus and His disciples had left Judea and were headed back to Galilee. The Gospel writer records that: “Now he [Jesus] had to go through Samaria.” Most Jews would do anything to avoid going through Samaria. They would even cross the Jordan River and travel on the east side so that they would not have to pass through that region. When John records that Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” there was an urgency of mission that surpassed a geographical need or desire to travel a certain route. Somehow, Jesus knew that there was a divine appointment, a divine meeting, and a desperately needy individual awaiting Him in Samaria. He pressed on and would not be deterred.

Jesus and His disciples came to a town in Samaria called Sychar which was near the plot of ground which Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there. Jesus, tired from His journey, sat down by the well while His disciples went into the town to buy some food, and there He waited . . . and watched. He knew it would not be long.

The unnamed, Samaritan woman was making her daily trek to the well to draw water. It was the hottest time of the day, but she was so ashamed and embarrassed by the sneers and the jeers of the other women, that she came when there was least chance of encountering anybody else. It was a hard life. She was the village outcast. She struggled daily with her own marital failures. She wrestled constantly with her moral shortcomings. How could she not? It stared her in the face day in and day out. Even though she had never intended for life to turn out that way, it had. You and I both know that nobody deliberately sets out to make such a mess of one’s life, but all it takes is one bad decision after another to go down a disastrous path of no return. Can you relate?

On this day, like every other day, she made her way to the well — a scorned woman seeking to avoid the stares and the jeers of the other women. By the time the woman saw the man sitting by the well, it was too late. He had already seen her, made eye contact with her, and even spoken to her. There was no turning back now. But somehow, this woman, though startled by this man’s presence, didn’t really seem to mind. Her bruised and broken heart that was so desperate for love and acceptance sensed something refreshingly different. He seemed so kind and so gentle. Before the day was over, her life would be changed forever.

Just think — a divine sense of urgency would put the Son of God right where He needed to be to make a difference in the life of one desperately needy woman. Nothing would deter Him— not even the reputation of a place called Samaria.

Thursday, March 21, 2019

An Unforgettable Offer

John 4:13-14 — “Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’”

Have you ever been so parched with thirst that your mouth felt like you’d been sucking on cotton balls? I take some medications that make my mouth so dry. The only thing that can quench that kind of thirst and satisfy that need is water — lots and lots of cold, clear water.

When the Samaritan woman approached Jesus at the well, Jesus asked her for a drink of water. At first she was shocked. She was a woman — and a Samaritan. Those were two strikes against her. Jesus was a man and a Jew. Jews did not associate with Samaritans. Besides that, to even take a drink from a cup handled by a Samaritan would have made a Jew unclean.

When the woman hesitated to give a drink to Jesus, He answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (John 4:10) Pay attention to those words, “If you knew — if you only knew — the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink. . . .” She asked Him if He was greater than their forefather Jacob who had given them that well. By her response, it would seem that this woman was still focused on the water, but Jesus was trying to point her beyond the need to quench a physical thirst to the One who could meet the deepest longings and needs of the human heart. Jesus reminded her that everyone who drank of that well and that water would be thirsty again, but He was offering her something far greater — something that would satisfy that thirst once and for all and that would become “a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Notice her response in John 4:11 — “The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.’” Now Jesus’ offer had really snagged her attention. Oh how she must have dreaded sneaking out each day at the hottest time of day in order to avoid the humiliation of having to deal with the other women when she went to draw water? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to never have to face the sneers and jeers of the other women ever again? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have an endless supply of water and never ever have to go back to the well? Was that what Jesus was really offering her? Not at all!

Jesus wasn’t offering this at all. No, Jesus was offering her something far greater — something that would change her heart and life forever. He was offering her Living Water that would change her life once for all. He was offering her something that would meet the deep down needs and longings of her heart. He offered Himself to her as the life-giving one.

He offers you and I the same. Are you thirsty? Are you searching? Do you have needs that have not yet been met? Jesus offers to meet those needs. Will you come to Him today and accept the Living Water He offers you?

Friday, March 22, 1019

Confronting Sin

John 4:16 — “He told her, ‘Go, call your husband and come back.’ ‘I have no husband,’ she replied. Jesus said to her, ‘You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.’”

One of the classes that I enjoyed taking while attending United Wesleyan College was called Personal Evangelism. Dr. Theodore taught us many do’s and don’ts about sharing Christ with those around us. One important lesson that has stayed me with is that our task is to help bring people one step closer to receiving Christ. He reminded us over and over that it’s hard to take somebody who is very antagonistic toward God to receiving Him in one sitting. He encouraged us to help them to come one step closer to receiving Him.

Now, as we read through the encounter with Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, isn’t that what Jesus did? First, He started a simple conversation by asking her for a drink of water. He drew her in. Next, He took the conversation a little further by telling her that if she really knew who He was, she would have asked Him for a drink of Living Water. He sought to rouse her interest in who He was and what He offered. Finally, He addressed her sin, but notice that He never once came out and called her a sinner. He did not make fun of her. He did not judge her. No, He addressed the area of her life where she was struggling and helped her to open up and share about herself and her needs. He invited her to go and call her husband. She said she wasn’t married. But Jesus already knew. He knew about her 5 broken marriages. He knew about the man she was living with outside of wedlock. Jesus knew, but never once did He look down on her because of her sin.

The woman tried to side-step the conversation by bringing up the differences between the places where the Jews worshipped and where the Samaritans worshipped. Jesus asserted that what really mattered wasn’t the place of worship but the attitude of worship. True worship — worship that honors God — is worship that is done in spirit and in truth. The woman went on to acknowledge that when the Messiah comes, He would explain everything to them. At that point, Jesus looked at her and spoke these most amazing words: “I who speak to you am He.” Can you believe this? Jesus introduced Himself to this Samaritan woman as the Messiah who was to come into the world to provide salvation from sin. Wow!

Let me remind you that just as Jesus knew all about this woman and her sin and her needs, so He knows all about you. He knows you! He loves you! He wants you to know that He is the Messiah, the Savior, the One who has come to take care of your sin and meet your needs. Today, He offers you the wonderful gift of forgiveness — His forgiveness — and a chance for a new life. Will you take Him up on His most gracious offer?

Saturday, March 23, 2019

A Compelling Witness

John 4:28-30 — “Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.”

John 4:39 — “Many of the Samaritans from the town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’”

The most compelling witness — the most compelling testimony — is a changed life. A verbal testimony is important, yes, but nothing matches the powerful testimony evidenced in a changed life.

This Samaritan woman was so excited about what Jesus had done for her, that she left her water jar behind and hurried off to the town to share the good news with the townspeople. Imagine that! She was so thrilled with Jesus’ ministry in her heart and life that she lost sight of why she had come to the well in the first place. She left her water jar behind! That’s right! She had come to get water for her family’s needs, but that paled in significance in comparison to the miracle Jesus had worked in her heart and life. She hurriedly went back to the town where she could share the good news of that miracle.

Do you know what happened next? Revival broke out in that Samaritan town. That’s right! Revival broke out! People met Jesus for themselves and many put their faith in Him.

This woman who had been an outcast, who had been scorned by the other women of the town, had met Jesus and her life had been touched and, yes changed by Jesus’ love and grace. As she shared what Jesus had done for her, people already seeing the change, wanted to experience Jesus’ love and grace for themselves. Now that’s amazing, isn’t it?

Allow me to ask a personal question. Can those around you see the change that Jesus has made in your heart and life? Do they see the miracle of new birth? Can they tell that you are a changed person — changed because of Jesus’ touch on your heart and life?

My prayer today is that those around us will indeed see Christ in us — yes, in you and in me — and come to faith in Jesus Christ. Will you make that your prayer as well?

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Healing at a Distance

John 4:49-50 — “The royal official said, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’ Jesus replied, ‘You may go. Your son will live.’ The man took Jesus at his word and departed.”

Recently a couple from our church was en route to visit their son and his family in Virginia when they were involved in a very serious accident with a tractor trailer in the heart of Pennsylvania. They were hundreds of miles from home — and hundreds of miles from their son. However, they knew and counted on the prayers of their church family and the protection of the Lord to surround them as they traveled. God miraculously protected this precious couple and kept them safe even though their vehicle was destroyed.

In John 4:46-54, we find an amazing account of a miracle worked at a distance. Jesus was in Cana of Galilee where he had turned water into wine. There was a certain royal official there whose son lay sick 20 miles away in Capernaum. If you've ever had a child or other close family member struggling through serious health issues, you can understand this official's anxiety and concern. When this official heard that Jesus was in town, he went, found Him, and begged Him to go with him to heal his son.

At first appearance, Jesus' response seems quite harsh. “Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will not believe.” Was he criticizing the official for asking for healing for his son? Or was he challenging the official to believe regardless of what happened to his son?

Again, the official begged Jesus to go with him to heal his son. Jesus replied, “You may go. Your son will live.” The Gospel writer records this man's response: “The man took Jesus at his word and departed.” As he was on his way, he was met by his servants with the wonderful news that his son was living. When he inquired as to the time the son got better, they replied, “The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour.” The father realized that that was the exact time that Jesus had told him that his son would live. As a result of this wonderful miracle, this man and his entire household put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Just think, this man wanted Jesus to GO and heal his son. That was his plan. But Jesus showed him that faith in Him surpasses any distance. He [Jesus] did not have to be physically present for healing to take place. The man only needed to believe by faith that Jesus could work the miracle that was so desperately needed. He not only needed to believe — he also had to step out in faith trusting that Jesus would do as He said.

What about you? Do you have faith that God can work in those situations that weigh heavy on your heart? Will you trust Him to meet that need? Will you step out in faith letting Him lead you to the answer?

Monday, March 25 2019

Facing Excuses

John 5:5-6 — “One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’”

Imagine the scene with me. In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate was a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda. It was surrounded by five covered colonnades. It was there that a great number of disabled people used to lie — the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed. Word had it that from time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. After such a disturbance, the first one into the pool would be healed of whatever ailment he or she had. And so these disabled people lay there day after day after day, waiting for another opportunity to receive healing. (I hate to say it, but it sounds about like waiting to be seen in a doctor’s office. The wait goes on and on and on.)

It’s amazing that in the midst of this scene enters Jesus. Even though He saw all of the heart-ache and suffering, He singled out one individual. This one man had been an invalid for 38 long years. When Jesus came on the scene, one thing was obvious, this man had given up. He had lost all hope. After learning about his condition, the first thing Jesus did was to ask him a very pointed — yet seemingly insensitive — question. He asked him, “Do you want to get well?” Imagine suffering for 38 years and somebody comes along and asks you if you want to get well. Who doesn’t want to get well?

The man responds but with all kinds of excuses: “I have no one to help me.” “While I am trying to get in, somebody else goes down ahead of me.” (John 5:7) It seems as though this man had given up hope and help. It’s interesting to note that it was only after Jesus had enabled the man to voice his excuses, that Jesus gave him a command that when followed would change his life forever.

In John 5:8, Jesus commanded the man, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” The man hadn’t walked in 38 years, yet Jesus commanded him to take action — to “Get up!” It would be an act of faith for this man to even attempt to get up, but he did as he had been commanded. “At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.” (John 5:9) Once Jesus had helped him to face his excuses, he found tremendous deliverance and healing.

Let me ask you today: What excuses are keeping you from receiving God’s answer to the problem you are facing in your life? Are you willing to see those excuses for what they are — excuses that are keeping you from enjoying God’s blessings? Are you willing to take that step of faith He is asking you to take which will open the way for you to receive God’s answer for your problem? He’s here to help, but you need to face your excuses, and then you need to step out by faith and do whatever it is He is asking you to do.

Tuesday, March 26, 2019

A Boy's Lunch

John 6:8-9 — “Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’”

Have you ever had a hungry mob to feed and wondered if you would ever have enough food? A number of years ago, when my husband and I were serving at the Wesleyan Bible Camp, I would occasionally cook meals for work crews that would come in. I clearly remember that on a number of those occasions, I would have the meal all prepared for those who had worked all morning, only to discover that many more people had shown up just for the meal. It was nerve-wracking trying to figure out if we were going to have adequate food or not. God always provided, but sometimes it was close.

Today, we want to pause and consider a very familiar miracle. Jesus and his disciples had crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd of people followed Him. Basically they had seen and were impressed by the miraculous signs that Jesus had performed on the sick. Jesus went up on a mountainside where he sat down with His disciples. As He looked up, He saw that massive crowd of people coming toward Him. There were thousands and thousands of people in that crowd. Allow me to rephrase that: there were thousands and thousands of *hungry* people in that crowd. They had followed Jesus for quite some time but had never given any thought of taking any provisions with them.

Jesus, concerned for the well-being of those in the crowd asked Philip, one of His disciples, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” Philip was clueless. He explained that eight months worth of wages would not even begin to provide enough bread for each person to have a bite. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, brought a little boy to Jesus. That young lad had brought his lunch with him — five small barley loaves and two small fish. It was just the right size lunch for a hungry little lad. I really believe that Andrew knew that there was no way that little boy’s lunch would feed that size of a crowd, but He brought him to Jesus anyway.

Do you remember what Jesus did next? He had the people sit down, then he took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. I would have loved to see the look of amazement on that little boy’s face, as his little lunch was broken and given to thousands upon thousands of people. The food kept right on multiplying! Nobody went hungry. In fact, there was way more than enough food for that hungry crowd. Amazingly, there were twelve baskets filled with leftovers.

I don’t know if that was the first time that young lad met Jesus, but I’m sure He never forgot the day when his little lunch fed so many people. The important thing we need to see here is that young lad had to be willing to let go of what was his, hand it over to Jesus, and allow Jesus to use it and multiply it.

Wednesday, March 27, 2019

What is That in Your Hand?

Exodus 4:2 — “Then the Lord said to him [Moses], ‘What is that in your hand?’ ‘A staff,’ he replied.”

A number of years ago, while I was serving as interim pastor at another Wesleyan Church, I preached a sermon entitled, “What Is That In Your Hand?” I had been reading and studying the life of Moses and had come across this question that God had posed to Moses when Moses was struggling to come to grips with God’s call to go back to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians. Moses had voiced one question or doubt after another. Finally, God asked him what that was in his hand. The obvious answer was: “a staff.” Moses had been tending his father-in-law, Jethro’s, sheep and used the staff to guide and protect and care for the sheep. God told him to throw the staff down on the ground. When he did, the staff became a snake. When he took the snake by the tail, it turned back into the staff. God gave other wonderful signs for Moses to use to help the Israelites believe and understand that it was indeed God who was sending Moses down to deliver His people. In essence, God wanted Moses to take the staff that he’d been using to tend sheep and use it to lead God’s people.

Consider for a moment other items that God’s people were called to use — or chose to use by faith. For David, it was a slingshot and five small round stones used to kill Goliath, the Philistine giant. For Rahab, it was a scarlet cord to mark the window where she and her family were hiding, awaiting rescue by the Israelite spies. For Noah, it was carpentry tools used to build the ark that saved him and his family. From yesterday’s devotional, a young lad gave his lunch to Jesus. That lunch, 5 loaves and 2 small fish, was meant to feed one hungry boy, but released into Jesus’ able hands, that little lunch miraculously fed thousands of people.

God often calls His people to use common items at their disposal to accomplish mighty things in His name. It may not seem like a significant item that’s going to make a huge difference, but in God’s hands it may be used to accomplish mighty things.

Think with me for a moment. God is asking you, “What is that in your hand?” What is He asking you to use for His work? How will you respond? Will you respond by faith and surrender it to God for His use — or will you hold on to it with a death grip? God can only use what you release to Him.

Thursday, March 28, 2019

A Man Who Walks on Water

John 6:19-20 — “When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water, and they were terrified. But he said to them, ‘It is I; don’t be afraid.’”

Have you ever tried walking on water? Many, many years ago, my father had gone ice fishing on a nice spring day. The weather was beautiful, and the fish were biting. In fact, he related to us afterwards that he had never had such a good day of ice fishing. As time went on, he noticed that the chunk of ice he was on had broken away from the rest of the ice and was floating down Lake Champlain. Oh, what a dilemma he was in. Fortunately, some people on the shore had seen his predicament and had called for help. The sheriff’s department was dispatched with their water rescue equipment and saved him and his pail of fish. After that, we would tease him about the day he tried to walk on water.

In John’s Gospel, we are told that Jesus had withdrawn to the mountain to be by Himself. When evening came, the disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. Now some of those disciples were fishermen, and their lives were spent on the lake. They knew it well. However, that night, a strong wind was blowing, and the water was rough.

After they had managed to row three to three and a half miles with great difficulty, they noticed a figure approaching the boat, walking on the water. They were shocked! Terrified! They could not believe what they were seeing. It was Jesus — yes, Jesus — walking to them on the water. As Jesus approached the boat, he assured them, “It is I; don’t be afraid!” Wow! They needed that reminder. And honestly, we do, too, at times, don’t we? In the midst of life’s difficult storms, we need to be reminded that we are not alone, that Jesus *is* indeed with us, and that we don’t need to wallow in fear and anxiety.

Then in John 6:21, we read: “Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.” This is an interesting scenario, isn’t it? Before Jesus could help them in this horrific storm, they had to be willing to take Him into the boat with them. As soon as they did that, even in their fear, they miraculously reached the shore where they were headed.

There are so many miracles here, aren’t there? God gave safety on the water through a difficult storm. Jesus walked on the water to where they were. Once Jesus was in the boat, the boat immediately reached its destination. God was indeed with them and helped them every step of the way.

You know, we may never see Jesus walking on the water, but we can have the assurance that He’s walking with us through each storm, and He will help us safely reach our destination — if we let him into the boat with us.

Friday, March 29, 2019

The Bread of Life

John 6:35 — “Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.’”

At least once a week, I make bread for my family. My favorite recipe is for honey grain bread. I make the dough in my bread machine, then take it out, knead it again, divide it into two loaf pans, and let it rise again in the oven. When it's finished rising, I bake it. There is nothing that beats the aroma of fresh bread baking in the oven. What a wonderful treat it is to have a slice of warm bread covered with butter melting over it! Amazing!

What did Jesus mean when He called Himself the bread of life? Was He comparing Himself to a loaf of bread?

We need to remember that Jesus had miraculously fed a crowd with a little boy's lunch of five loaves and two small fish. Thousands of people had eaten until they were satisfied — and there were even leftovers. After Jesus had performed this amazing miracle, and knowing that the people were intending to come and make Him king by force, He had withdrawn to the mountains. After nightfall, He had made His way down to the lake and had walked across the lake on the water to His disciples. When the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor His disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

When Jesus saw the crowds coming, He rebuked them: “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your full. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” (John 6:26-27) Jesus knew their hearts. He knew they had eaten and been satisfied. He knew that ultimately they were looking for somebody to take care of them and feed them.

Jesus wanted them to know Him. Jesus wanted them to understand why He had come. He truly wanted them to experience much more than a full stomach. He wanted them to know Him as the life-giving One who would give eternal life to them, if they would but put their faith in Him.

You know, we are so much like the people in that crowd. We want to make Him King, because He met a temporary need, but we don't fully understand the wonderful things that could be ours if we truly trusted Him to be our Savior and Lord. We want bread to feed our bodies while He wants to give us bread to feed our souls. We want Him to meet a temporary hunger, while He wants to give us eternal life. The real question is: what will you do with the Bread of Life He offers you? Will you graciously accept it by faith and receive all He offers you — salvation, forgiveness, eternal life, peace, love, joy? These can all be yours today, if you put your faith in Him.

Saturday, March 30, 2019

The Woman Caught in Adultery

John 8:7 — “When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’”

A number of years ago, I came across a story of a mom and her young son. He had asked if he could have a cookie. She reminded him that it was getting close to supper time, so he would have to wait. After a while, she discovered him sneaking out of the kitchen with something clutched in his hand, and cookie crumbs all over his face. She asked him if he’d taken a cookie out of the cookie jar. Struggling to speak with a mouth full of cookie, he said, “No, I didn’t take a cookie.” But they both knew, he had been caught. The evidence was all over his face and his hands.

Many of the older manuscripts do not include the incident described in John 8:1-11, but it gives us an amazing picture of Jesus extending grace to an individual who had been caught in the very act of sin. When this adulteress came face to face with Jesus, He offered her grace and a new life.

At dawn, Jesus had appeared in the temple courts, where all of the people had gathered around Him. He sat down to teach them. Suddenly there was an awful ruckus. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were dragging in a woman — just a woman, but no man — who had been caught in the very act of adultery. They knew that according to the law of Moses, those who had been caught in the act of adultery were to be stoned to death. (Let me note here, that the Law of Moses required that *both* the man and woman caught in the act of adultery were to be stoned to death.) They asked Jesus, “Now what do you say?” John notes that they were using this question to trap Jesus.

At first Jesus didn’t respond. He just bent down and started to write on the ground with His finger. They kept questioning Him. Finally He straightened up and spoke to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7) Again, Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground. One by one, stones dropped to the ground, as one by one, their own sins exposed, the men walked away, the older ones first. Finally, the only ones left were Jesus and the woman. There they stood face to face.

Jesus straightened up and asked the woman, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she replied. Jesus’ response is filled with grace — and a challenge: “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:10-11) Wow! Now that’s grace!

For those of us who are quick to condemn another whose sin is different from ours, Jesus gives a powerful lesson. We are all guilty of sin. We have all done wrong. But, He is more than willing to extend forgiveness and grace no matter what sin we have committed. However, He does give us one command — we must leave our life of sin. We must stop sinning!

Have you discovered God’s grace for yourself? Do you have the assurance that your sins have been forgiven? Have you left your life of sin?

Sunday, March 31, 2019

Love and Grace

Ephesians 4:32 — “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

In yesterday’s devotional, we considered the Bible passage in which the teachers of the law and the Pharisees had dragged a woman caught in the act of adultery before Jesus as He taught in the temple courts. They had reminded Jesus that the law of Moses had required such women to be stoned to death.

Keeping His eyes on the ground, He stooped down and began to write on the ground. We have no idea what He was writing. Some suggest He may have been focusing on the ground instead of on the woman, since she may have been naked. Some suggest that He may have been making a list of their sins. We don’t really know. What we know is that when He looked up and spoke, He addressed the men gathered there. He said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Notice that little word “if.” Jesus knew that no one in that crowd — not even the teachers of the law and the Pharisees — were without sin. He knew there was no one in that crowd who was guiltless. As He turned His focus back to the ground, and as He began to write in the sand once again, He could hear stones being dropped to the ground, and the men shuffling away. His words had hid their mark. The men’s sins had been exposed. They could not condemn the sin in that woman when sin abounded in their own hearts and lives. The truth of the matter is that neither can we.

There is a powerful lesson that we need to see here. We have all sinned! We have all fallen short of the glory and the goodness of God! There is not a single one of us who is not guilty of one sin or another. We are all guilty. The good news is that God sent His own Son into the world to die on the cross so that our sins could be atoned for — so that our sins could be forgiven, the guilt removed, and the condemnation lifted. Those of us who have received that gracious gift of forgiveness are challenged in turn to forgive those who have wronged us. We who have been shown grace — and those of us who have received grace — are challenged to become grace-givers and to forgive as God so wonderfully forgave us.

Sometimes it’s easier to judge another than to extend grace. Sometimes it’s easier to judge another than to show forgiveness. As Christians, and as God’s church, our lives, our fellowship, and our worship are to abound in grace and love as God’s grace and love flow through us! We can’t point fingers at others when we ourselves are sinners saved by grace.

Let me ask you today, is your life marked by grace? Let me ask you, is the church you attend marked by grace? May God help us!

Monday, April 1, 2019

Jesus —The Light of the World

John 8:12 — “When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’”

In the first part of John 8, we discovered the incident where the woman who had been caught in adultery, had been dragged before Jesus. He had graciously forgiven her and had then challenged her to go and leave her life of sin. As we move on, we discover Jesus making a wonderful and powerful statement about Himself. He announced, “I am the light of the world. . . .”

To fully understand this statement that Jesus made in regard to Himself, we need to look back to the Old Testament. God had called Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. In Exodus 13:20-22, we discover the instrument God used to lead His people: “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.” God’s provision of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night would guide them on their journey, yes, but it would also be a constant reminder to them of God’s presence and protection.

Each year, when the Israelites celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, they would gather together to remember how God had led the people out of Egypt and had guided them with that pillar of cloud by day and that pillar of fire by night throughout their wilderness wanderings. As part of that yearly celebration, there would be the lighting of massive candelabra in Jerusalem that would flood that ancient city with light. It was in this context that Jesus declared, “I am the light of the world.” Jesus declared that He is the One who gives light.

Just think, God had graciously and lovingly led the people of old in a powerful way by a pillar of cloud and of fire, but Jesus wanted the people of His day to know that He had come to provide an even greater light. You see, the pillar of cloud and of fire was a visible and physical manifestation to lead the people of Israel out of bondage and away from a physical enemy and to the land of blessing. However, Jesus didn’t come to bring a physical light into a physically dark world. No, He came as a spiritual light to bring people out of the darkness of sin and evil. He came to make God’s will and God’s ways known in order to liberate and set God’s people free so that they could obey God and walk in His ways.

Consider again the challenge Jesus gave: “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus came to bring spiritual light that would light the way to bring us out of darkness and into His light. He gives us a choice — to stay in the darkness, or to come into the light and follow Him wherever He leads us. It’s our choice — yours and mine. Whoever comes into His light and follows Him will never again walk in spiritual darkness but will have the light of life. What will you choose?

Tuesday, April 2, 2019

Sight for the Blind

John 9:6-7 — “Having said this, he [Jesus] spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. ‘Go,’ he told him, ‘wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.”

Can you imagine a life of blindness — of seeing nothing day in and day out but total darkness? We were blessed for a number of years to have a young lady in our youth group and in our church who was totally blind. Christina was a remarkable young lady who did not let her blindness deter her. With the help of her peers, she even went with the youth group on community service projects. Even more remarkable was the day she joined her friends on a mountain climb. And, yes, she did make it to the top. For Christina and for many others, the means of triumphing over their disabilities is all about attitude.

As we come to John 9, Jesus and His disciples encountered a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Their question presupposed an attitude common in that day — blindness or any other birth defect or disability was the result of sin. Jesus told them very clearly that neither the man nor his parents had sinned, but that this had happened so that the work of God might be displayed.

Then Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. He then instructed him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. I don’t know about you, but this certainly does not seem like a medically known and approved method of healing blindness. Regardless of how unorthodox the method seems, what happened next is the most important thing. The man went by faith to the Pool of Siloam *and came home seeing*. He heard Jesus’ instructions, and he obeyed by faith. Even if it didn’t make sense, the man did what he had been told and found miraculous healing. God is so good, isn’t He?

To be completely honest, God’s methods don’t always make sense to us, do they? There are times when God’s ways don’t make any sense at all. Our place isn’t to question, but to trust God . . . and to step out and obey Him by faith when He commands us to. He knows and sees what we cannot. He works in ways we cannot figure out.

God knows what you are facing today. He knows what you need more than you do. He has the answer to your problem. What is God asking you to do today? Will you step out in faith and obedience? Will you trust God to meet your need even if His methodology does not make sense to you or to those around you? Trust Him today!

Wednesday, April 3, 2019

Spiritual Blindness

John 9:30-33 — “The man answered, ‘Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’”

There are a number of accounts recorded in the Gospels in which Jesus performed a wonderful miracle and was met with tremendous opposition. Usually the opposition came from the Pharisees or other religious leaders. Often the opposition came due to the fact that the miracle or the healing took place on the Sabbath day — a day that was supposed to be set aside for worship, not work.

When Jesus healed the man born blind, the man’s neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging wondered if this was the same man. They knew he looked like him, but they could not fathom how he had received his sight after all of those years. It didn’t make sense to them. They had never seen anything like it before. The man who had been healed explained what Jesus had done for him, but they just didn’t get it. They then brought him to the Pharisees — the religious leaders to get their opinion.

The main concern the Pharisees had in regard to the man who had been healed was that Jesus had healed him on the Sabbath. Their laws prohibited that any work be done on that sacred day. They questioned the man. They questioned his parents. His parents didn’t want to get involved with their arguments. The parents urged the Pharisees to question their son, not them, since he was old enough to testify concerning what had happened to him.

The one who had been healed kept trying to explain the wonderful healing that he had received, but nobody could see beyond the fact that only a “sinner” would do such a deed on the Sabbath. The man freely and joyously testified to what Jesus had done for him, but nobody would believe him or accept the miracle he had received.

It boggles my mind to think that people could get so caught up in the keeping — or the failure to keep — their religious laws, that they missed out on seeing the miracle that set a man free from the bondage of blindness. They were so caught up in their own ways that they refused to see and believe in the One who came to set all people free from the things that bind them.

The Pharisees had been blessed to see some of the wonderful miracles Jesus had done, but they refused to believe or put their trust in Him. Jesus reminded them that there is no greater blindness than spiritual blindness — claiming to be able to see but being blind to the things of God.

But are we really any different? When God works in a way that we cannot understand, do we believe — or do we criticize? When God works in a way that is outside of the realm of what we are used to, do we accept it and believe, or do we press on with closed minds and hearts? Lord, open our eyes, that we might see! Lord, open our hearts that we might believe. Amen!

Thursday, April 4, 2019

I Am

Exodus 3:14 — God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

When my brother Tom was in grade school, he received a book entitled, *Who Are You?* I don’t remember much about the book except how it began, “Who are you? What’s your name? Would you like to play a game? Let’s pretend we’ve never met. I’ll ask you questions, now get set.” The narrator went on to ask all kinds of silly, nonsensical questions to find out more about the reader.

Now when we introduce ourselves as “I am . . .,” we are describing some facet of who we are or revealing something about our identity. I am a wife, and I am married to Rudy. I am a mother to my son Brandon. I am Congregational Care Pastor at Turnpike Wesleyan Church. Go ahead, and describe who you are. It’s interesting isn’t it?

Now when God was conversing with Moses at the burning bush, Moses questioned Him in regard to who he should tell the Israelites had sent him. God told him, “I am who I am. . . .I am has sent me to you.”

As we move on to the New Testament, and in particular the Gospel of John, we find 7 statements made by Jesus in regard to His identity. When Jesus made these statements, He was pulling back the curtain on who He is and teaching something profoundly important — something that His followers should not miss. Take a moment and read these “I am” statements for yourself. I would also encourage you to meditate on them and let them sink in to your heart.

John 6:35 — “*I am the bread of life.* He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

John 8:12 — “*I am the light of the world.* Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 10:9 — “*I am the gate [door];* whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.”

John 10:11 — “*I am the good shepherd.* The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”

John 11:25-26 — “*I am the resurrection and the life.* He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

John 14:6 — “Jesus answered, ‘*I am the way and the truth and the life.* No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

John 15:1 — “*I am the true vine,* and my Father is the gardener.” John 15:5 — “*I am the vine;* you are the branches. If a man remains in me and in I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

These “I am” statements teach us so much about Jesus’ glorious character. Jesus satisfies our deepest longings. He provides light to guide us. He opens the door for us to come to God. He cares for us. He gives us hope of the resurrection. He is the only way to God the Father. He enables us to experience the life-giving, fruit-producing power of God. Amazing, isn’t it?

Friday, April 5, 2019

Holding to Jesus' Teachings

John 8:31-32 — “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

My mother-in-law, Ruth Pribis, was an accomplished artist. Our house is filled with her artwork consisting of paintings on various medium — canvas, clam shells, and even driftwood. She had also painted amazing scenes on canoes and paddles for family members as well as murals on walls in various businesses in the Albany area. What thrilled me the most was watching her in her 80's still learning new techniques and methods. She wanted to keep learning and expanding her talents, and she did so until the day she died.

For me, the amazing part of teaching and writing is that I am always discovering and learning something new. Yesterday, we briefly considered the “I Am” statements of Jesus. I would encourage you to take a few moments and go back and read them again. As I was working my way through these again, the Lord has challenged my heart with some amazing and precious truths.

The “I Am” statements give us a beautiful picture into the character of our Savior, Jesus Christ, but they also give us a powerful picture of what He desires for us. As the Bread of Life, He desires for us to find our deepest longings and needs satisfied in Him. As the Light of the World, He brings us out of darkness, but He also shines light on our paths to lead us in His ways. As the gate or the door, He provides a way for us to enter His kingdom and come to God. As the Good Shepherd, He not only laid down His life for us, but He daily cares and provides for us. As the Resurrection and the Life, He gives us the joyous hope of sharing in His resurrection. As the Way, the Truth, and the Life, He provides the way to the Father, truth that we can build our lives on, and life abundant and free. As the Vine, He nurtures us and reproduces the kingdom through us. Wow! This is amazing, isn't it?

But take a closer look. In each of these “I Am” statements there is a challenge for us — something we need to do. He is the Bread of Life, but I must come to Him and partake of that bread. He is the Light of the world, but I must follow Him. He is the gate or the door, but I must enter through Him in order to be saved. He is the Good Shepherd. I must listen for His voice, and I must get to know Him. He is the Resurrection and the Life, but I must believe in Him. He is the Way, the Truth, and The Life, but I must come to the Father through Him. He is the True Vine, but I must remain or abide or continue in Him. My failure to comply does not change who He is, but I miss out on the blessings He offers me.

How about you? Do you know Him as the Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the Gate [or Door]; the Good Shepherd; the Resurrection and the Life; the Way, the Truth, and the Life; and the True Vine. Have you come to Him? Are you feeding on Him, believing in Him, following Him, entering through Him, listening to His voice, and abiding in Him? This is the way of blessing. You can know Him, but you also have to hold to and live by His truths.

Saturday, April 6, 2019

The Gift of Friendship

John 11:1 — “Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.”

John 11:5 — “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.”

Think with me for a moment about the value of friendship. Who do you have in your circle of friends that you enjoy spending time with? We all have those people outside of our family circle that we enjoy spending time with — relaxing, enjoying each other's company, and spending time doing pleasurable things together (for example, eating out, going to movies, enjoying sports activities, or working on crafts together.). Life is better with friends who love you and care for you.

When we think of Jesus, we usually picture Him in the company of His disciples. We usually don't think of Jesus spending time with *friends*. However, the Gospel accounts paint a picture of this threesome — two sisters and a brother — that Jesus enjoyed spending time with whenever He was near Bethany. They enjoyed meals together, conversing together, and relaxing together. Their home was a quiet place of refuge for Jesus and his disciples in the midst of a busy and hectic lifestyle.

In 1855, Joseph Scriven, painted a beautiful word picture of Jesus as a friend in His very familiar hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged — Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful, Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness; Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden, Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge — Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield thee, Thou wilt find a solace there.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were privileged to enjoy the earthly friendship of Jesus, but you and I can enjoy having Jesus as a friend who will never leave us, who is always there for us, who will help us in every area of our lives. Do you know Jesus as your friend? He wants to be your Savior and Lord, but He also longs to share a special friendship with you as well. Will you open your heart to Him today?

Sunday, April 7, 2019

Unanswered Prayer

John 11:3, 6 — “So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick.’ . . . ‘Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.’”

Unanswered prayer. Have you ever faithfully asked God to meet a particular need, yet your prayers seemed to go unanswered? You believed in the power of prayer. You knew that God had encouraged you to bring all of your needs to Him — and so you had. And yet, heaven’s gates seemed to be closed — and God seemed to be strangely silently. How did that make you feel? Frustrated? Abandoned? Alone?

Sometimes God wonderfully and gloriously answers our prayers, and we praise Him. On other occasions, God answers in ways that we would never have anticipated, but His answer was good — even better than anything we had ever imagined possible. At other times, His answer seems to be needlessly delayed — and we question whether or not He even heard us. And sometimes, yes, sometimes — the answer is just plain “NO!” Why?

When Mary and Martha’s brother, Lazarus, fell ill, the first thing they did was to send word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” They hoped beyond hope that Jesus would drop everything and come heal their brother — His very dear friend. He did not. Instead, he stayed where He was two more days. He even voiced this prediction: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” (John 11:4)

Can you imagine the anguish of these two sisters as they watched helplessly as their brother grew sicker and sicker? Can you picture them wringing their hands in frustration as they kept peering out the window hoping to see Jesus and his entourage of disciples coming down the road? Can you envision their hope waning as one day faded into night, then another day dawned, and that day likewise faded into another night?

Jesus told His disciples that they were going back to Judea, and He confirmed that Lazarus had fallen asleep. They thought for sure that meant good news. Surely if Lazarus had only fallen asleep, then there was hope that he would get better. But Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” (John 11:14-15)

God’s plan was different from that of the sisters — or even that of the disciples. They hoped that their friendship with Jesus would result in a wonderful miracle of healing. But God wanted to show them an even greater miracle — a miracle of life. They did not understand at first. They had to be patient and wait. The right answer in God’s timing would result in glory and honor and praise being given to God’s Son.

What answer to prayer are you still waiting for? God will work in His time and in His way in such a way that HE receives all the glory and honor.

Monday, April 8, 2019

An Amazing Promise

John 11:25-26 — “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’”

When we lose someone dear and precious to us, sorrow and heartache are a natural part of the grieving process. It’s natural to grieve and mourn, to allow the tears to flow, to question why, to struggle with a myriad of emotions. Each one of us is different, though, and we each grieve in our own way and on our own timetable. However we walk through the grieving process, we must walk through it. There are no shortcuts, but we do have the assurance from God in His Word that He will walk through the process with us.

As Jesus returned to Bethany following the death of His dear friend Lazarus, He learned that Lazarus had already been in the grave for four days. Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she hurried out to meet Him, while Mary remained at home. When Martha saw Jesus she said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” (John 11:21-22) Can you hear the frustration and agony in her voice and in her accusations? “If only you had been here!” “If only you had come when we sent for you!” “If only. . . .”

Have we ever made those same accusations: “Lord, if only you had been here!” or “Lord, if only you cared what was happening to me!” There are times in life when we just plain cannot understand God’s delays or God’s way of working. Martha and Mary couldn’t, and they knew Jesus face to face.

Jesus went on to assure Martha that her brother would indeed live again. Martha was confused and thought that He meant that, yes, Lazarus would rise again in the resurrection at the last day. She was looking ahead to some far-off future time.

At that point, Jesus did not answer her request or grant her a miracle. No, He gave her a promise — a wonderful promise based on who He is. He promised her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” What a powerful statement, and what an amazing promise Jesus gave to Martha! He assured her that He — Jesus — is the Resurrection and the Life. He is the life-giving One. He is the One who can raise people from the dead. He challenged her to believe this and to put her faith in Him. She affirmed, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” (John 11:27) After she affirmed this, she returned home and sent Mary out to see Jesus.

Before we consider Jesus’ encounter with Mary, let’s take a few moments to let Jesus’ promise to Martha sink into our hearts. As we will see, Jesus not only gave Martha a wonderful promise, He later proved it by raising Lazarus to life. Not only that, in a few days, He would be put to death, and He, too, would be raised to new life by God’s mighty power.

Tuesday, April 9, 2019

Jesus Weeps With Those Who Grieve

John 11:33-35 — “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept.”

I once read about a woman who was absolutely overcome with grief at the loss of her dear husband. She had completely withdrawn into the privacy and refuge of her home. She didn't want to see anybody. She didn't want to leave her house. In fact, she closed the blinds and the drapes to prevent her from seeing out — and to prevent others from seeing in. One day, a friend stopped by for a visit. After she left, the woman opened her blinds and drapes and ventured out. Asked what had happened to make such a difference, the friend replied, “I just sat with her. When she cried, I cried with her.” All that precious woman needed was somebody to sit with her and to share her devastating loss.

After Martha had returned to the house, she sent Mary out to see Jesus. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, He was still waiting at the place where Martha had met Him. When the Jews who were grieving with her noticed how quickly she got up and left the house, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to mourn. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was, she fell at His feet and in her anguish cried out, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (John 11:32) If these words sound familiar, they are the same words that Martha had spoken to Him. Both sisters struggled wondering if somehow things would have been different if Jesus had been there. When Jesus saw Mary weeping uncontrollably, “He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” His heart ached to see this sister, this friend, so overcome with the horrific loss of her brother. He inquired as to where they had laid her brother. They urged Him to come and see. As He did, He wept. He could no longer contain the grief in His own heart.

Just think, it was to Martha that He had given the amazing promise, “I am the resurrection and the life.” But with Mary, He wept with her in her grief. He knew each of these precious ladies, and He met them right where they were in their season of grief.

Some of you may be walking through a season of grief right now. Just remember that Jesus knows and understands the pain and heartache that you are struggling with. He longs to come alongside and walk with you through this time and this season of your life. Will you let Him come and minister to your heart today?

Wednesday, April, 10, 2019

A Miracle of Miracles

John 11:43-44 — “When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go.’”

With the recent passing of my father, I can tell you from personal experience that one of the hardest aspects of loss and the grieving process is burying your loved one. There is something so brutally final about watching that casket lowered into the ground, and the vault closed and covered with shovelfuls of dirt tossed in on top. The gut-wrenching pain of walking away and knowing that you will never see your loved one again in this earthly life is almost unbearable.

As Jesus came to the tomb where Lazarus was buried, He was once again deeply moved. Jesus loved His friend. His heart broke thinking about the pain and suffering Lazarus had endured. His heart broke as He grasped the loss Martha and Mary had been forced to endure. His heart broke as He considered the curse of death brought by the entrance of sin into this world.

There was a stone laid across the entrance of the tomb. Jesus urged those gathered there to take the stone away. Martha was the one who objected. “It stinks in there!” Yes, death stinks, doesn’t it? Yes, death causes decay and stench. After four days, it would have been unbearably unpleasant to roll that stone away. But Jesus wouldn’t take no for an answer. He reminded Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God.” (John 11:40)

After they had taken the stone away, Jesus looked up toward heaven and thanked His Heavenly Father for hearing Him. Ah, yes, He knew that His Father always heard Him, but He was saying this for the benefit of the people that they would indeed put their faith and belief in Him. Then Jesus did the unthinkable. He cupped his hands around His mouth and called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” To the amazement of all those gathered around the tomb, the dead man came out, still wrapped in his grave clothes. Then Jesus urged them to take off his grave clothes and let him go.

Can you imagine the joy and the wonder when Martha and Mary saw their brother, once dead, walk out of that tomb alive? I cannot imagine their joy, their delight, their amazement as they saw their brother alive again. They had begged for Jesus to come and heal their brother. And you and I both know that He could have. He could have healed Lazarus and prevented his death, but God’s plan was to show them something even greater. He wanted them to know that He not only had the power to heal; He also had the power to restore life. After all, He was, and He is, the Resurrection and the Life. Praise the Lord!

Thursday, April 11, 2019

Jesus Anointed at Bethany

John 12:2 — “Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled the fragrance of the perfume.”

It was now six days before the Passover. Jesus and His disciples had made their way to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was being given in Jesus’ honor. Martha was serving. Lazarus was among those reclining at the table. It was a time of great joy and celebration. Lazarus had been dead, but Jesus had wonderfully, gloriously, miraculously raised him to life again. Lazarus and his two sisters would never forget what Jesus had done for them.

Mary took about a pint of pure nard, a very expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped it with her hair. As she did, the house was filled with the wonderful fragrance of that perfume. It was a moment of adoration and appreciation for all that Jesus had done for their family.

But one of Jesus’ disciples started complaining and grumbling. I hate to say this, but there always has to be one, doesn’t there? Judas Iscariot saw Mary’s gift as a waste and not as the loving, sacrificial gift that she had intended. He objected, saying, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages?” (John 12:5) Now was Judas Iscariot really concerned about the poor? Was he really that interested in helping the needy?

If we read the previous verse — verse 4 — and then the next verse, we are given a look at the heart of Judas Iscariot. “But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot who was later to betray him, objected.” (John 12:4) “He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.” (John 12:6) Judas Iscariot may have indeed been one of Jesus’ disciples, but one thing is obvious from these verses; his heart was definitely not in the right place. He would betray Jesus. He was a thief. He helped himself to the money in the money bag. This is not a good picture of one of the closest followers of Jesus, is it?

Jesus rebuked Judas Iscariot, while also commending Mary’s loving sacrifice. “Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.” (John 12:7-8)

A large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came to see the one who had raised Lazarus from the dead. The chief priests became determined to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus, since many people were putting their faith in Jesus because of that miracle.

This passage gives us a true picture of those who had come face to face with Jesus. Mary chose to worship. Judas chose his own agenda and not that of His master. The chief priests had murder in their hearts. Some Jews believed. Others rejected Him. What about you? What will you do with Jesus?

Friday, April 12, 2019

The Triumphal Entry

John 12:12-15 — The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the King of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, “Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.”

Sometimes life is like a roller coaster with glorious highs and tumultuous lows. Maybe you’ve been through those times. You and I both know that life at times can be very rough.

As we come to the end of Jesus’ earthly life, and especially as we come to that final week, Jesus faced a myriad of gut-wrenching situations. The week began with His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and would end with His crucifixion on a cruel wooden cross at Calvary. He would go from being praised and exalted as He rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, to being scorned and crucified.

As we consider Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, we need to remember that this day of celebration followed the greatest miracle of His earthly ministry to this point — the raising of Lazarus from the dead. As we look back, we remember that Lazarus’ body had been in the tomb for four days before Jesus made His appearance at Bethany and had called Lazarus to come forth from the place of death and stench. Still wrapped in his grave clothes, Lazarus had come forth ALIVE! Many of those in the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem were still celebrating this miraculous resurrection from death to life. They couldn’t understand it, but they rejoiced in the mighty miracle that Jesus had performed.

As we consider Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, I must admit that I prefer Luke’s account as recorded in Luke 19:28-44. Luke’s account gives details regarding Jesus’ instructions to His disciples in obtaining a donkey for this memorable trip into Jerusalem. Luke’s account also includes a picture of the burden on Jesus’ heart, especially as He approached Jerusalem and caught a glimpse of that ancient city. When He looked out over that great city, His heart broke with anguish and sorrow. In the midst of the praise and celebration of the wonderful miracles Jesus had performed, Jesus saw beyond the celebration and the shouts of praise to a city and to a people who had for the most part rejected Him, who had rejected the coming of their Messiah, their Savior, and who had rejected the peace and the hope that He offered to them. His heart broke in anguish.

Today, as we pause to remember Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, let’s also pause and ask the Lord to give us a burden for those who do not yet know Him. Today, may we pause and pray that their eyes and their hearts would be open to Him. May we also pray for their salvation.

Saturday, April 13, 2019

The Servant Heart of Jesus

John 13:1 — “It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.”

When I attended United Wesleyan College in Allentown, PA, I was so blessed to sit under the teaching and ministry of a wonderful man of God, Dr. Edward Bean. He taught me so much through his teaching and his example. He pastored a little country church at Pt. Phillip, PA called Zion Wesleyan Church. The church sat on a little knoll. Whenever it would rain, snow, or was even a little bit icy, the walk up to the entrance of the church was treacherous. On those days, Dr. Bean, dressed in his long overcoat and equipped with a large umbrella, would wait in the entranceway ready to go out and escort people into the church. I was impressed and challenged by the servant heart he portrayed for us and knew his example in ministry was one I longed to emulate.

What an amazing passage of Scripture we have here in John 13! In this passage, we find many precious nuggets of truth, but we are given a beautiful and humbling picture of the servant heart of Jesus.

Now, in that day, there was normally a servant positioned by the door with a bowl of water and a towel to wash the feet of the guests who had come. Most wore sandals, and the roads were dusty, so even though they had bathed already, their feet would be dusty. On this particular day, there was no servant to do this menial, yet needed task, and none of the disciples had offered to do it.

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. Jesus knew who He was, where He had come from, and what was ahead of Him. He knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and return to His Father. It was not going to be easy or painless, but He knew that this was the reason and the purpose for which He had come into the world. With that as a backdrop, Jesus “got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.” (John 13:4-5) Jesus was willing to take the place of the lowest servant to meet a need and to serve His disciples.

It’s interesting to note that Jesus went around the room and washed the feet of each one of His disciples. The only one who objected was Peter, but finally even he relented and allowed Jesus to wash his feet. It’s amazing to me that Jesus knew each one of His disciples — the one who loved Him, the one who doubted Him, the one who would betray Him, and the one who would deny Him, yet He did not hesitate to wash their feet. Perhaps He even said a silent prayer for each of them as He knelt before them. When He was finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. He then used that experience as a teaching opportunity and a challenge to them to go and do likewise — to wash each others feet and to serve one another.

This challenge is for us, too. How is Jesus asking you to serve others today? What does He want you to do to minister to someone else?

Sunday, April 14, 2019

A Call to Love

John 13:34-35 — “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

As I was doing some research on John 13 for both yesterday’s and today’s devotionals, I came across an interesting insight. The central theme of the first part of John’s Gospel is life. Jesus is life; He is the creator of life; and He is the giver of eternal life to all who believe in Him. As we consider John chapters 13 through 21, the emphasis is on love. Just think, the word life appears 50 times in chapters 1-12 while the word love appears only 6 times. In chapters 13-21, the word life only appears 6 times, and the word love appears 31 times. It seems as Jesus changes the focus of His ministry to prepare His disciples for His death and resurrection, the theme of His ministry and teaching also changes. We especially see that coming to the forefront in John 13.

Yesterday we considered the passage that focused on Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. That passage begins with these powerful words: “It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” As we move on, we discover Jesus predicting His betrayal by one of His disciples. It’s hard for us to imagine, let alone believe, that one of Jesus’ disciples, one of His closest followers, would be the one to betray Jesus and turn Him over to His enemies. But Satan had already entered Judas Iscariot’s heart, and he was waiting for the opportune time to betray his master. As we move on, we also discover Jesus’ prediction that Peter, another of His disciples, one of the inner circle, would deny 3 times that he even knew Jesus.

Jesus would be tested to the utmost, and so would His disciples. In that upper room, He sought to remind them of His love for them, and He sought to show it to them in a tangible way, but He also sought to challenge them to love one another with that same kind of love.

In fact, He told them that He was giving them a new command. That command was summed up in this way: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Previously, they had vied for top position in His kingdom. He had just reminded them by serving them, that true greatness and true love is demonstrated by caring for and meeting one another’s need — no matter how demeaning that service might be. He would soon demonstrate that real love is being willing to lay down one’s life for others.

Jesus went on to remind His disciples that others would know — truly know — that they were His disciples if they truly loved one another.

Let me ask you today, does love mark your life? Will those around you know that you are a Christian — a Christ-follower — by your love for other believers? What a powerful witness it is to a world that is watching the church when they see genuine, heartfelt, compassionate love from His people.

Monday, April 15, 2010

One Got OUT!

Acts 2:22-24 — “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

Phil Callaway wrote that when his oldest son was only five years old, they were driving past a graveyard one sleepy Sunday afternoon. Noticing a newly excavated tomb with a pile of dirt beside it, his son pointed and said, “Look, Dad! One got out!”

Phil almost drove off the road laughing, much to the surprise of his son. Now, every time he passes a graveyard, and every time he sees a cross at the front of the church, he is reminded that “One got OUT!” Death could not keep our Savior in the ground. (from *What the Cross Means to Me*)

Due to the theme of these Lenten Devotions, we are not going to consider the final week of Jesus’ life and His death, but I would encourage you to take a few moments to read John chapters 18 and 19. Instead we are going to focus on Jesus’ resurrection appearances as recorded in John’s Gospel. There are a number of face-to-face encounters following Jesus’ resurrection that give us a beautiful picture of Jesus ministering to His followers helping them to regain hope and joy.

Before we consider any of these accounts, we need to remember that it was God Himself who raised Jesus from the dead. It was God Himself who freed Him from the agony of death. Why? Because it was impossible — absolutely impossible — for death to keep its hold or its grip on Him — the sinless Lamb of God. It was impossible for death to keep its grip on the sinless Son of God. Wow!

Take a few moments today to ask God to reveal this wonderful and powerful truth to you. Jesus died for your sins and mine — but He did not stay dead. God, through His mighty power, raised Him to life again. What a miracle! What power! What love! He did this for you — and He did this for me! Let’s pause today to celebrate this wonderful and amazing miracle.

Tuesday, April 16, 2019

Surprised by Joy

John 20:1 — “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.”

We find little information about Mary Magdalene in the New Testament, but what we do find shows a life miraculously transformed by the love and compassion of Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, we learn that she had been delivered from seven demons. What a miraculous deliverance she must have experienced! In response, she chose to follow Jesus and live her life in service and dedication to Him.

Mary was indeed a faithful follower of Jesus. We find her huddled at the foot of the cross as Jesus languished between life and death. She would not — she could not — forsake her Lord in His darkest hour. Later we see her at the tomb as Jesus’ body was laid to rest. And later still, we find her among the first to visit the tomb on the first day of the week, coming to prepare His body for a proper burial, coming to weep and mourn the loss of her precious Master and friend.

Can you imagine Mary Magdalene’s shock when she reached the tomb on that first day of the week and found that the stone had been rolled away? She immediately hurried off to find Peter and John and report to them what she had seen. They in turn ran back to the tomb and found that not only had the stone been rolled away, but Jesus’ body was gone. The strips of linen were lying there as was the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head, but there was no sign of His body. They went back to their homes believing but still not understanding.

Meanwhile, Mary stood outside of the tomb weeping. She bent over to look inside the tomb and saw two angels in white seated where Jesus’ body had been. “Why are you crying?” they asked. Mary’s response echoed the grief in her heart, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put Him? Even after seeing the empty tomb and the angels, she still did not understand. All she knew was that *Jesus’ body was not where it was supposed to be!*

Suddenly, she turned and saw Jesus, but she did not recognize Him. He spoke to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she begged Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him.”

He spoke again. It was just one word — her name: “Mary.” And in that moment, at the sound of His voice speaking her name, she recognized Him. She knew who He was. She knew it was Jesus, and she knew that He was alive. She turned to Him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” which means teacher. He then gave her a message to bring to His disciples.

Just think, Mary did not experience the joy of Jesus’ resurrection until she had mourned His death and found the empty tomb. Oh the joy she experienced on that first day of the week. Jesus was alive, and she had seen Him!

Wednesday, April 17, 2019

A Surprise Visitor

John 20:19-20 — “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

Over the years, I have had a recurring nightmare that always leaves me unsettled. I dream that I am at my parents house, and I hear a burglar outside trying to enter the building. I hurry to lock the door — and I lock one lock after another. No matter how many locks I lock, the burglar still gets in. I always wake up with an uneasy, unsettled feeling. It is indeed an unsettling feeling when you think you are in a safe place, and you find out that you are not alone.

Peter and John had themselves seen the empty tomb. Not only that, but Mary Magdalene had already shared with the disciples the wonderful news that she had actually seen Jesus and that He was indeed alive. However, as we move on in the narrative of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, we find the disciples huddled together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Instead of rejoicing that Jesus was alive, they were cowering in fear, hiding from their own people, and fearing that if they had put Jesus to death on the cross, what would they do to them.

Suddenly, without any warning, Jesus stood in their midst. Wow! They could hardly believe their eyes. Then Jesus spoke to them, “Peace be with you.” How many times in the past had Jesus come to them, seen how frightened they were, and challenged them, “Fear not! It is I!” Now, instead of challenging them, “Fear not,” He extends a blessing of peace. “Shalom.” “Peace be with you.” He knew what they needed. He knew they didn’t need words of rebuke. Not at all! No, He knew they needed words of peace, of comfort, and of God’s blessing.

He showed them His hands and side. He showed them the wounds He had suffered on the cross. The disciples were absolutely overjoyed when they saw Him for themselves and knew without a doubt that He was truly alive.

Again, He spoke to them, “Peace be with you!” This time, He added these wonderful words, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:21) He then breathed on them and instructed them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:22-23)

What a reminder this was that Jesus was giving to His disciples. He still had work for them to do. Just as the Father had sent Jesus into the world, so now Jesus was sending His disciples into the world to continue the work He had begun. He knew they could not do it alone, so He breathed on them and instructed them to receive the Holy Spirit. Just think, the same Holy Spirit who had empowered Jesus would now empower them. Now they could go forth in His name to serve Him! Just think — so can we!

Thursday, April 18, 2019

A Special Appearance

John 20:24-25 — “Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.’”

Have you ever struggled with doubt or with questions in regard to your Christian faith? Have you ever wondered or even questioned if what you have been taught and believed is right or true? Have you ever longed for solid proof that what you believe is true? If you answered yes to any of the above questions, be assured that you are not alone. You are not the first one to struggle with doubts and questions. Also be assured that just because you have questions or struggle with doubt that does not make you any less of a Christian. We learn by asking questions and searching for answers. Our faith grows stronger as it is tested.

Even one of Jesus’ disciples struggled with doubts and was given a nickname that branded him a doubter. You’ve probably heard the name — “Doubting Thomas.” Fortunately for us, the Gospel accounts record how Jesus helped Thomas to face and overcome his doubts and questions and confidently affirm his faith in Jesus. I firmly believe that this account was recorded for us who grapple with questions and doubts, so that we too can confidently affirm our faith in Jesus.

Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene. He had also appeared to His disciples. However, for whatever reason, Thomas was not with the other disciples that evening. When the other disciples told him that they had seen Jesus, Thomas vehemently declared that he would not believe unless he saw the evidence for himself. He didn’t want a second-hand report. He wanted proof! He wanted to see and touch Jesus for himself!

A week later, the disciples were gathered together again. Thomas was there with them this time. Suddenly, even though the doors were locked just as before, Jesus stood in their midst. He went right to Thomas and challenged him, “Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Jesus wasn’t intimidated or put off by Thomas’ doubts or demand for proof. No, He accepted Thomas’ challenge and gave him unequivocal evidence. Jesus showed him the unmistakable nail-prints in His hands and the wound in His side. He not only showed Thomas those wounds, He also urged Thomas to touch His hands and to put his hand into His side. Wow! Thomas wanted evidence. He wanted proof. Jesus came and gave him the proof he longed for.

Thomas’ faith was important to Jesus — so important that He was willing to make a special appearance to help Thomas declare, “My Lord and my God!” But what about you? Are you willing to believe the evidence He has set before you? Will you stop doubting and affirm your faith in Him?

Friday, April 19, 2019

Breakfast on the Seashore

John 20:1-3 — “Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ‘I’m going out to fish,’ Simon Peter told them, and they said, ‘We’ll go with you.’ So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.”

Have you ever blown it? Really blown it? Have you ever messed up so horribly that you were embarrassed to even look in a mirror, look your boss in the eye, or even face your family or friends? It’s awful, isn’t it?

When we think about people who have really messed up, one individual immediately comes to mind — Peter. Peter was impetuous. He had blown it many times. He often spoke before he thought. He blundered ahead making great boasts. This character flaw often got him into trouble. His worst blunder, though, came after Jesus had been arrested and was awaiting trial. Peter had denied THREE times that he knew Jesus. Once would have been bad enough, but *three times* Peter denied knowing Jesus. What made this blunder so bad was that just a few days before this, Peter had vehemently declared to Jesus’ face that he would never do such a thing. He would never turn his back on Jesus. He declared that even if all others forsook him, he never would.

As we come to John 20, we need to understand that life was confusing to those disciples at that point. Jesus had been crucified. He had been raised to life. He had already appeared to His disciples a couple of times. But what next? Peter boldly spoke up, “I’m going out to fish.” The others decided to join him. They ultimately went back to the only thing they knew — FISHING — but even that became a failure. They caught NOTHING — NOT EVEN ONE FISH! Their nets were completely empty.

At their pint of utmost failure and disappointment, they noticed a man on the shore, but they didn’t recognize Him. He called out to them “Friends haven’t you any fish?” How embarrassing for them to have to admit that they hadn’t caught any fish. Their reply was a dismal, “NO!” This man called back, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find them.”

Can you imagine what was going through their heads at this point? After all, most of them were fishermen by trade. After all, they had fished all night. They did as this man commanded them and caught so many fish that their nets could not contain them all. In fact, somebody even counted the fish — 153 in all. In that moment, they finally recognized the man on the shore. They knew it was Jesus! Peter immediately made his way to the shore where the others joined him. When they landed they saw a fire of burning coals there with some fish on it, and some bread. Jesus encouraged them to bring some of the fish they had caught and invited them to “Come and have breakfast.”

A night of failure had ended with a special invitation from Jesus to join Him for breakfast. Jesus had once again met them at their point of need.

Saturday, April 20, 2019

A Disciple Reinstated

John 20:15 — “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’”

What a beautiful time of fellowship Jesus and His disciples must have enjoyed along the shore as they ate breakfast together. Oh, how that time together, especially when Jesus took the bread, broke it, and gave it to them, and then did the same with the fish, must have reminded them of other times — the feeding of the 5000, the previous miraculous catch of fish, and even the last supper together. How wonderful it was to be able to enjoy intimate fellowship together once again!

After sharing breakfast together around the fire on the seashore, we find Jesus taking Peter aside and the two of them going for a walk along the shore. I can’t help but wonder if Peter had been dreading this moment alone with Jesus. Oh, yes, he loved Jesus, but he knew — and Jesus knew — that there was some unfinished business that needed to be faced.

As they walked along, Jesus confronted Peter. Three times Jesus questioned Peter about his love for him. Twice He asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] me?” Twice, Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love [phileo] you.” In other words, Jesus was asking Peter, “Peter, what’s most important to you? Do you love me above all else?” Peter had known that he would eventually have to face what he had done when he had denied three times that he knew Jesus, but to now have Jesus question whether or not he really loved Him — and whether he really, truly loved Him with the greatest love there was, now that was tough, really tough. Peter replied that he loved Jesus, yes, but his response indicated that he struggled to love Him with anything more than a friendship kind of love. He had boasted earlier about his love for Jesus, but now Now he hesitated to make that kind of a commitment.

The third time when Jesus asked Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me,” He stooped to Peter’s level and used the word *phileo*. In other words, “Simon, son of John, do you love me as a friend?” Peter was hurt when Jesus questioned him the third time, but he replied, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus had a plan and a purpose for addressing Peter’s love for Him. You see, Peter’s love and commitment were too important to Jesus to just let him go. He had work for Peter to do. There were lambs to be fed and sheep to be taken care of. There was indeed work for Peter to do, but Peter would never be able to do it until he faced his past and his failure and reaffirmed his love for Jesus and his commitment to Him. Jesus lovingly brought Peter to that point. He could not let Peter flounder aimlessly. He had to help him find restoration.

Just as Peter’s faith, love, and relationship with Jesus were too important for Jesus to let him go, so is yours. If you have failed Jesus or been unfaithful in your commitment to Him, Jesus wants to restore you today! Will you seek His forgiveness and renew your commitment to Him today?