

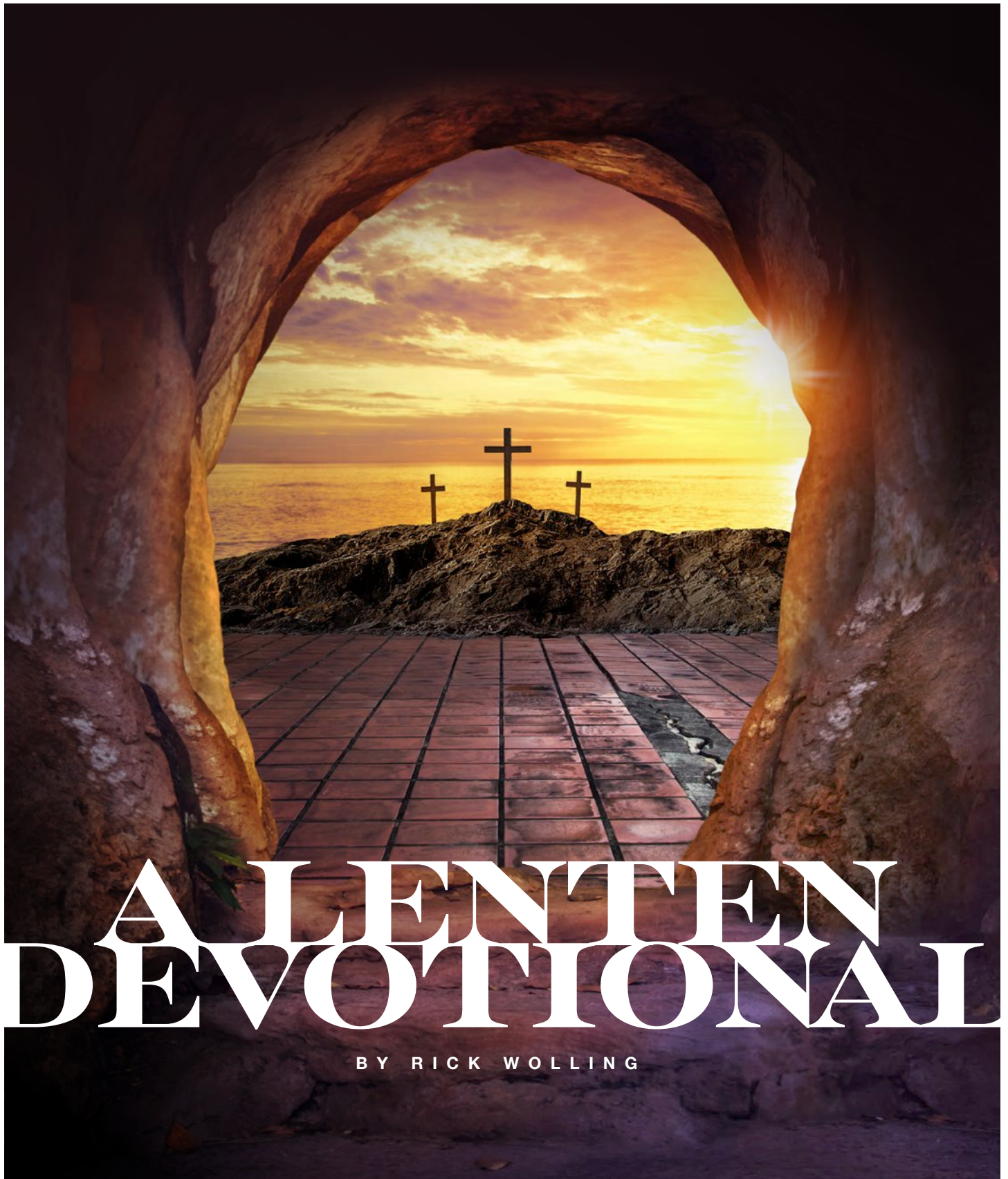


Beverly Heights
Presbyterian
Church

scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2022



A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

BY RICK WOLLING

INTRO/ DUCTION

The idea for this devotional edition of Scattered Seeds was given birth at the Wednesday Evening Bible Study, which I have taught at this church for more than 30 years. Presently we are studying the book of Exodus. I had commented on how often (nine times) the Lord told the Israelites in captivity that what He was about to do would cause them and, particularly, Pharaoh and the Egyptians, to “know that I am the Lord.”

In response to my comment, it was suggested that a study of that phrase, in its various contexts throughout Exodus, would make a helpful study for the congregation during this Lenten season.

Though intrigued by the challenge of such a project, my thoughts turned, alternatively, toward a more traditional look at the passion of Jesus and the cross of Calvary.

“THERE IS NO GREATER THING”

I soon came to realize, no doubt through the strong prompting of the Holy Spirit, that while the phrase is used nine times in Exodus, it is found almost 90 times throughout the Old Testament. The location of the other references, found mostly in Ezekiel and Jeremiah, when taken together with those of Exodus, form a rich catalogue of God’s promises to His people when they were experiencing various forms and places of displacement and slavery.

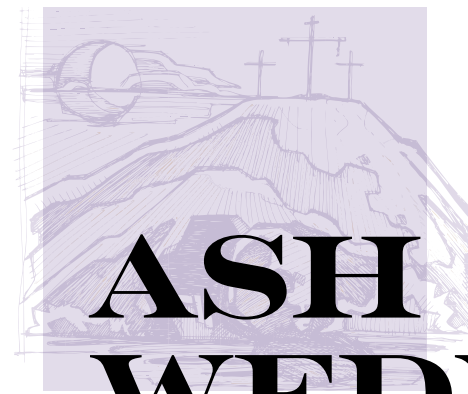
What emerged from this is that people who are in captivity, whether in Egypt, Babylon or in some form or place today, need to be delivered from their burdens by the only One Who can do so and, through that divine salvation, can come to know “that I am the LORD.”

Years of eternity are surely required to capture the glory and wonder of our Lord’s salvation and our earthly quest will not be exhausted by the short seasonal meditations which follow. However, the attributes of God’s character and His acts which are highlighted here can galvanize our thinking about His deliverance for us through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, thereby helping us to know He is the Lord.

May the daily meditations (omitting Saturdays) which follow – along with occasional hymnal passages which came to mind, as below – do just that for you.

*All I once held dear, built my life upon
All this world reveres and wars to own
All I once thought gain I have counted loss
Spent and worthless now, compared to this*

*Knowing You, Jesus
Knowing You
There is no greater thing*



ASH WEDNESDAY MARCH 2

When the Lord called to Moses through the burning bush (Exodus chapter 3), telling him to go to Pharaoh and command him to let the people leave Egypt, Moses protested that neither Pharaoh, nor the people of Israel, would believe that God had sent him.

“If the people ask me the name of the God Who sent me, what shall I say to them?” Moses asked.

Tell them “I AM” has sent you.

Verse 14 can be a bit confusing to the reader. When transliterated, it means that God’s name is YAHWEH and the meaning of His name is something like “I AM and I cause to be.”

In our English Bibles, YAHWEH – YHWH in Hebrew and known as the Tetragrammaton, the “four letter word” – is typically rendered THE LORD. To the Jew, God’s name was so sacred it was forbidden to be vocalized, Jehovah often standing in as the replacement.

If the purpose of our Lenten meditation is to know that God is the Lord, then we must begin not with Who we think He is, but with His own self-revelation.

If we fail at this – fail to understand how the Lord has chosen to make Himself known to the world – we will fail to grasp the significance of all we celebrate in this glorious season of the church year. We will fail to truly know Him.

Who is the only One who can claim that not only is He self-existent (eternal in being), but He causes everything else to exist? Only the one, true living God, the Lord.

The eternal, self-existent God through Whom was made everything that was made entered into the life and history of His world and, according to promise, delivered His people out of their bondage of slavery to the Egyptians. It was through that deliverance that the people of Israel came to know that He is the Lord.

And, in a greater, more wonderful way, this same God, YAHWEH-the LORD, entered our world, according to promise and delivered us out of our bondage to sin, guilt, fear, death and hopelessness.

He did this that we might come to know that He is the Lord, the God of love and life, the God of mercy, grace and forgiveness. The God Who we can know only through His Son, our Savior, the great I AM, Jesus Christ.



What is the appropriate posture of one who stands in the presence of the eternal creator, God?

Like Moses, some people today assume a posture of curiosity. They wonder what He is all about. Said Moses, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt" (Ex. 3.3).

Sadly, most others are not curious at all. They can walk past a burning bush and be totally unmoved.

The God Who wants to be known by us has a different view. Along with His eternity and creative design and power, He wants to be known for His holiness.

God is holy. He is wholly other than we are in every aspect of His being. As the beloved hymn says, "... perfect in power, in love and purity."

Therefore, the proper posture before our holy God is one of humility. For Moses, it meant taking off his shoes as he stood on holy ground (Ex. 3.5).

Ours is a season to come into the presence of our holy God, to stand at the foot of the cross – holy ground – and there to gaze into the face of the One who was nailed there because, though He is holy, we are not.



YAHWEH, the name God used to reveal Himself to Moses and to us, "the LORD" in most English Bibles, is the name by which God is disclosed as the God of the covenant.

God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.

According to divine plan and initiative, the Lord alone reached out to Abram and established an intimate relationship. Abram had done nothing to deserve such an honor. No good act or moral character moved God to reach out to him. It was all a matter of unmerited favor, of grace.

The terms of this Creator-creature relationship were set in assurances that Abram would be blessed; that he would be the father of many nations (to this point he had not fathered even one child!); and that, through him, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

At the very heart of this covenant was the vow that YAHWEH would be Abram's God.

And these promises were passed down to us from one generation to the next, each one finding its fulfillment in the person and work of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Our celebration of Lent and its focal point at the cross underscores the extent to which God went to keep those promises.



Today is Sunday, the Lord's Day. I suspect that if you are reading this you will soon "go to church," if you haven't already.

Why do we go to church? The reasons are as varied as those who might choose to answer. It's the fellowship or the music, the preaching or the peace offered to the life-wearied worshiper.

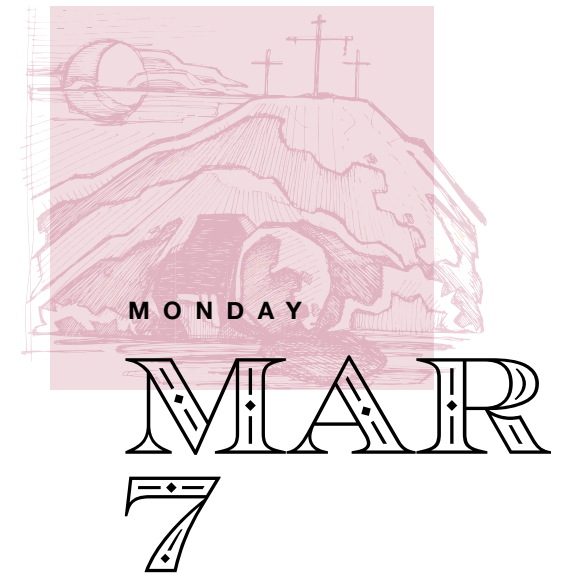
While there are many wonderful benefits of attending church, there is one that exceeds them all.

When the people settled at Sinai on their way to Canaan, Moses received instructions from the Lord to build a tabernacle, a portable tent, which would serve as a focal point for the people's worship on their travels.

Its purpose could not be clearer: "There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by My glory ... and they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 29.43).

There are some in the church who break their habitual absence throughout the year by attending worship during the season of Lent.

Though it may be difficult to understand the attraction of church during the Lenten season, this much is sure – a prime way of knowing that the Lord is God is by hearing the glorious Good News of God's deliverance for His people through the story of His Deliverer and ours, Jesus Christ.



One of the most well-known and beloved words of Jesus comes to us in Matthew 11.28: "Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

The English poet and hymn writer William Chatterton Dix wrote a wonderful hymn which sets these words of Jesus into verse:

*"Come unto me, ye weary, and I will give you rest."
O blessed voice of Jesus,
which comes to hearts oppressed!
It tells of benediction, of pardon, grace and peace,
of joy that hath no ending,
of love which cannot cease.*

The great tragedy of our age, of any age, is that the universal human condition is one of weariness and oppression, but relief and rest is sought in all the wrong places. Possessions, experiences, relationships, power and freedom are too often seen as the remedy for the weary and fearful soul.

It is Jesus alone Who offers true grace and peace with the joy and love that never ends.

Why? Because the source of our weariness and unrest, revealed through the warp and woof of daily living, goes much deeper than everyday experiences. It goes to our very estrangement from God because of our sin.

When we come to know that the Lord is God, we realize that the source of life that we crave is found only in Him. But we must first be reconciled to Him if we would possess it.



In the Foreword to *Hymns for a Modern Reformation* – a hymnal in our pews written by Dr. James Montgomery Boice, former pastor of Philadelphia’s historic Tenth Presbyterian Church – his collaborator in that effort, Paul Jones, wrote on their behalf:

“It is the hope and prayer of both author and composer that this collection of hymns will be used of God to kindle in all who encounter them a desire to know him more fully, for to know him is life eternal.”

Over the past few decades, hymn writing, composing and choral singing have fallen out of favor. Often, this unfortunate reality is blamed on the growing popularity of contemporary worship. An entire industry of solo worship leaders, worship bands and all manner of high-tech accoutrements contribute to what is sometimes rudely and unfairly branded “worship lite.”

Setting aside the blame and recriminations, it must be affirmed that one glorious way in which God has blessed people with the knowledge that He is God and Lord, is through the singing of hymns. Good hymns with sing-able tunes, pleasing harmonies which speak not of how the worshiper thinks or feels, but Who God is; what He has said; what He has done; and what He desires from us.

What one hymn speaks most powerfully and profoundly to you about God, your Lord and your Redeemer? Find it and read through it as your prayer today.



*Come to the waters, whoever is thirsty;
drink from the Fountain that never runs dry.
Jesus, the Living One, offers you mercy,
life more abundant in boundless supply.*

Of the catalogue in his hymnal, Mr. Boice’s favorite was “Come to the Waters,” which is based upon both Isaiah 55.1 and Revelation 22.17. Like so many other beloved hymns of the Christian faith, it gives voice to God’s call to come to Him and, in Him, find “life more abundant in boundless supply.”

A topic of great interest in our day is that of human flourishing. What do people *think* they need in order to flourish in life and where can they find it?

In fact, it depends not so much on what people think they need but what they really need. And what they really need is to be connected to the very Source of Life itself – almighty God.

Those who have no intimate faith-connection with God, who are therefore unconnected to the Source, have no chance of flourishing.

But from His cross, Jesus reaches down to any who look to Him and says, “Come ... the fullness of life for which I created you is found in Me.”



*Come to the Fountain without any money;
buy what is given without any cost.
Jesus the gracious One, welcomes the weary;
Jesus, the selfless One, died for the lost.*

The resources that are spent to satisfy the desire for human flourishing are most often uncalculated but are astronomical in measure.

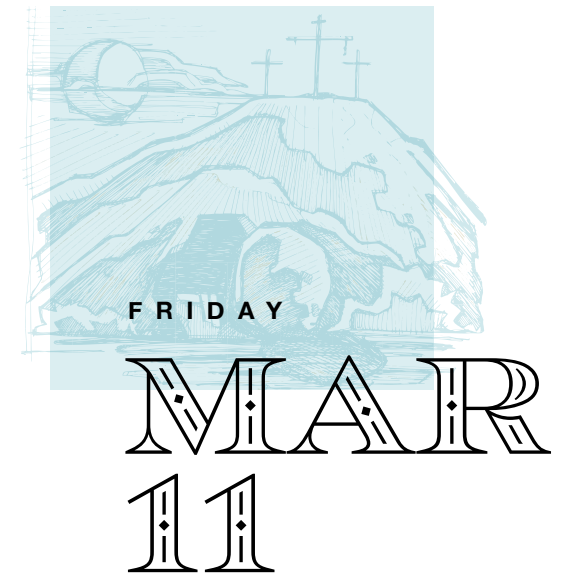
There is the cost of time, finances, broken relationships, general dissatisfaction and frustration with life, all of which too often lead to depression, despair and a lack of hope.

Acquiring more possessions, rising to higher levels of authority, pursuing new and varied experiences, and receiving personal and profession accolades – all have the effect of dulling the soul. Far from providing the fullness of life, they contribute to greater thirst and emptiness and a sense that life is not hitting on all cylinders.

Only God, alone, can fill the emptiness. Only the One who is the Lord can truly address the frustrating weariness of living life apart from the divine Giver of true life.

One may not be able to pinpoint just what the matter is, but the antidote to joylessness in all of its manifestations is to come to Jesus, the gracious One.

He died for those who have lost their way, plodding through life along a self-made path that is not God’s, but a rut of ruin.



*Come to the Savior, the God of salvation.
God has provided an end to sin’s strife.
Why will you suffer the Law’s condemnation?
Take the free gift of the water of life.*

When God tells His people that they will know “that I am the Lord,” He is most often speaking to those in captivity and in need of salvation; they needed to be saved.

The words salvation, savior and saved are various forms of the same word. People live in the throes of captivity of one sort or another. They need to be delivered, to be saved. They can only be saved by a savior and when they are saved, they enjoy salvation.

The Israelites lived under bondage to Egypt and later under the captivity of Babylon. In both cases their only salvation came from a divine Savior. Before they were delivered, they had no real life but a living death. When He reached down to them in love and grace, they were saved; they possessed His salvation.

Captivity takes many forms. People are enslaved to sinful behavior, enslaved to fruitless pursuits, enslaved by despair, fear and hopelessness. Captivity is the condition of living apart from God who is the only Source of true life.

The Good News is that “... God has provided an end to sin’s strife.” God has offered us salvation through a Savior, that we might be saved. And that Savior is Jesus Christ Who died for the lost – for you.



SUNDAY

MAR
13

Today is the Lord's Day. It is a holy day, one that is special and distinct from all of the other days of the week.

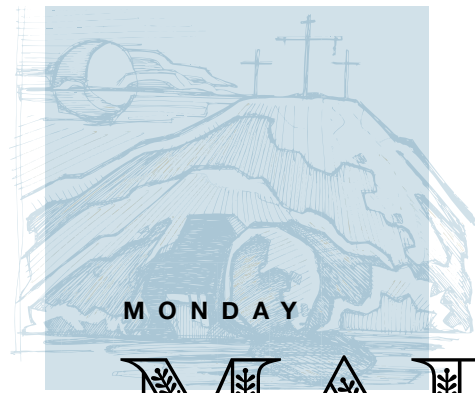
Why is that so? The simple answer is that God said it is special, hallowed, holy. Of all the days of the week, this is the day that gives us a special reminder that the Lord is God.

When in the midst of the Babylonian captivity, the prophet Ezekiel reminded the Israelites of the history of God's graciousness in bringing them out of Egypt. He repeated what God had said, "I the Lord am your God ... hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I the Lord am your God" (Ez. 20.19-20).

The Lord's Day is like a stick shoved into the spokes of the spinning wheel of our week. It brings things to a full stop. It catches our attention. It focuses our gaze. It reorients our lives. And it does so by reminding us that God, He alone, is our Lord.

Every Lord's Day is like that but particularly on the Lord's days in the Lenten season.

Our stop, attention, focus and reorientation are on the Lord who, in Jesus Christ's cross, claims us as His own, calls us to Himself and reaches out to us with the free gift of forgiveness and the offer of "life more abundant in boundless supply."



MONDAY

MAR
14

The Bible makes clear that God's people are special to Him.

We are so special that He sent His only Son to take the punishment for our sin through His death on the cross. It cost God the death of His beloved Son in order for us to be His special people.

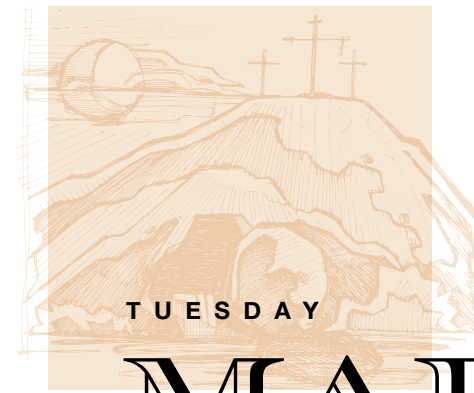
But we don't want to be special. We don't want to be the apple of our heavenly Father's eye. We want to be liked and embraced by people in the world. At any and all cost, we don't want to stand out as the special people of our heavenly Father, even if that special status came at a great price to our God.

Ephesians 1 says that it was God's eternal plan to send Jesus to die for us in order that we might live lives of holiness. Lives of special "otherness," apart from the world. Lives that identify us as God's holy people.

God's special people think differently, act differently, view the world differently, possess and pursue different goals, and take a different approach to the stewardship of life.

But a life of holiness is too much for us to bear, too extreme, too embarrassing, too "other" than what the world deems acceptable.

And yet Jesus hung on the Cross ... that we might have that very holiness.



TUESDAY

MAR
15

Ezekiel reminded the Jews, in the Babylonian captivity, that though their Exodus forebearers deserved to be punished for their profaning the Lord's Sabbaths, God withheld His hand of judgment.

He did this so that "... my name might not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they dwelt, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt" (Ez. 20.9).

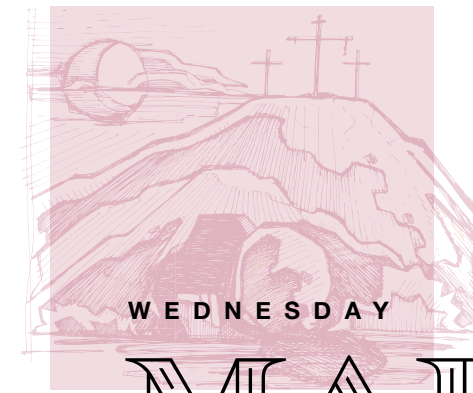
Remaining obedient to the commands of the Lord and keeping His Sabbaths holy was a means of declaring, to the surrounding nations, that the Lord is God.

To what extent do we understand holy living as a testimony to those around us that the Lord is God?

Believers live under constant pressure to conform to the world's standards. Our schools press Christian parents to make choices for their children between school activities and those at church. Sporting events suck up every discretionary hour of a family's life with the expectation that the church must be flexible with its scheduling.

And adults are forced to make difficult choices for themselves, too.

There are no easy answers. But decisions must be founded upon a faith that asks, "Lord, what would you have me do?" During the Lenten season, it is good for us to remember that our Savior was despised and hated for His association with us. Can we do anything less for Him?



WEDNESDAY

MAR
16

The call to holy living which manifests itself in hallowing certain days, pursuing a life of holiness and taking a special (divine) approach to life, is all founded upon the holiness of God.

We are to be holy because God is holy and, as was already mentioned, it is God's eternal plan through Jesus Christ that we live lives of holiness for His glory. We do this for our benefit and for the sake of the world in that others may know that the Lord is God.

The cross of Calvary, which is our proper focus during Lent, is all about holiness.

At the very least, the cross declares these important truths:

1. God is holy.
2. Man is not holy.
3. God takes His holiness seriously.
4. A holy God cannot live with unholiness.
5. There is a penalty for unholiness.
6. The cross is a demonstration of both divine wrath and divine grace.

*Oh to see the dawn of the darkest day
Christ on the road to Calvary
Tried by sinful men, torn and beaten then
Nailed to the cross of wood*

*This the power of the cross
Christ became sin for us,
took the blame, bore the wrath
We stand forgiven at the cross*



God is holy and we are not. This is the clear message of the cross.

A technical yet helpful definition of the holiness of God was offered by Louis Berkhof (in 1939). He defined holiness as “that perfection of God, in virtue of which He eternally wills and maintains His own moral excellence, abhors sin and demands purity in his moral creatures.” Moral excellence, purity, abhorrence of sin: these are at the heart of what God is.

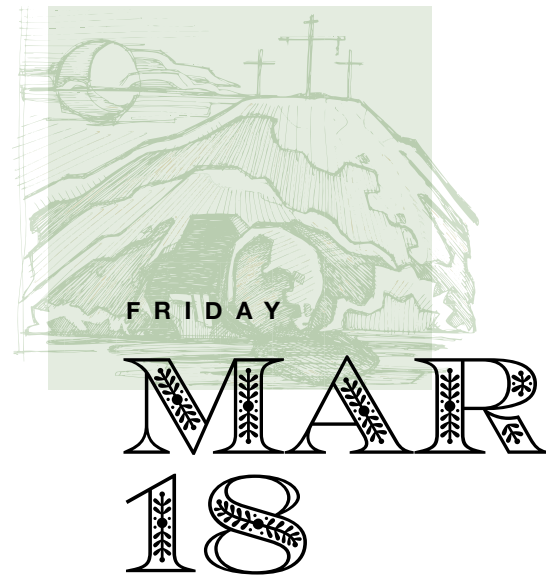
He is perfect in His righteousness – He is the very definition of what is right, good and true. In Him there is no unrighteous thought, word, action or desire. He is absolute perfection itself in all that comprises His being and character. He is majestic in His holiness.

And we are not. Our very lives are a demonstration of that truth.

As to His holiness in conjunction with our unholy, Habakkuk 1.13 speaks of God “... Who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wrong.” Hence heaven’s silence as Jesus, bearing our sin, cried out, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”

*Oh, to see the pain
Written on your face
Bearing the awesome weight of sin;
Every bitter thought
Every evil deed
Crowning Your bloodstained brow.*

*This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,
Took the blame, bore the wrath;
We stand forgiven at the cross.*



We may not take God’s holiness seriously but be assured, God does.

He possesses “all the rights and privileges that appertain thereto,” because He’s God. That includes His absolute right to declare what He requires which, because He is holy, is a perfect requirement.

To disobey God is blasphemous because it imposes my will over God’s. It claims for myself a privilege which belongs to God alone.

This is what Eve did in the garden. God said not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She imposed her will over God’s will. This was the sin of blasphemy. And because God is holy and takes His rights and privileges as God seriously, He responds.

God cannot abide sin. It is abhorrent to Him and so He separates Himself from it. In Eve’s case, He sent her and Adam out of the garden and away from His presence. Adam and Eve were alienated from God due to sin. It was a holy and just punishment.

This is the message of the cross. Christ takes upon Himself the guilt of all who transfer their guilt to Him by faith. Because He Who was perfect in holiness now “wears” the guilt that we give Him, His heavenly Father cannot abide with Him. On the cross He suffers, on our behalf, the alienation that we deserve.

This is a difficult truth to embrace. But it is the truth that helps us to know that the Lord is God.



There is a penalty for sin. Eve and Adam paid that penalty by being driven out of the garden, out of the presence of God.

The Bible summarizes the truth when it says, “The wages of sin is death.” Death is, essentially, separation from God. Because we are sinners, we live in a state of alienation from God. Such alienation will be eternal in duration unless it can be remedied.

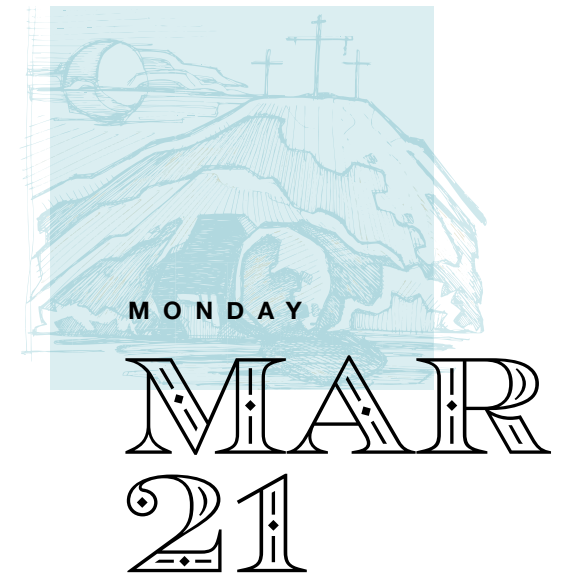
Our only hope is that our alienation can be transformed into reconciliation. And that is what God accomplished on the cross. The cross is a grim and terrible validation of the grievousness of sin. It is a demonstration of how seriously God takes His own holiness. It is an affirmation of divine justice. And, it is a declaration of God’s grace.

How so? Because there, on the cross, in our place, God has allowed Someone to stand (hang) as our substitute. There, on the cross, Jesus, Who accepts the guilt of our sin given to Him by faith, suffers the alienation from God, and the death which we deserve. He endures it all for us.

The sinner, in need of salvation, is saved by the Savior through believing faith – grace that is greater than all my sin!

*Now the day light flees,
Now the ground beneath
Quakes as its maker bows his head.
Curtain torn in two,
Dead are raised to life;
“Finished!” the victory cry.*

*This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,
Took the blame, bore the wrath;
We stand forgiven at the cross.*



Many people desire a relationship with a god who never gets angry ... who understands we are not perfect and “lets the small stuff slide.”

We may be able to conceive of a god like that. But that kind of god is an idol who, in our imaginations, lets things slide but in fact cannot save.

Reading the book of Ezekiel can be a tough-go because it speaks of God’s response to man’s sin.

God reacts to man’s sin with divine wrath. It is His just and righteous response to any belittling of His holiness. It is what theologians refer to as God’s “retributive justice” – His just anger to all that is not holy.

Ezekiel says that one of the ways we can know that God is the Lord is through His wrathful response to sin: “... I will punish you for your (wicked) ways. Then you will know that I am the Lord” (Ez. 7.4).

People are often put off by the notion that God would punish Jesus for our sin on the cross. But the God of kindness, mercy and grace is also the God of wrath. Are you willing to know Him in His fullness?

*Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live*



T U E S D A Y

MAR 22

A popular verse, often found on Christmas cards, was written in 1926 by James Allen Francis, a Canadian Baptist pastor. It is entitled “One Solitary Life.”

The familiar poem begins:

He was born in an obscure village. The child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village ...

And it ends:

All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as has that ONE SOLITARY LIFE.

Though the poem is enjoyable to read and, no doubt, caused some to contemplate the significance of the life of Jesus whose birth it was meant to celebrate. There is a major flaw in its theology of the atonement.

One of the verses declares: *When He was only 33 the tide of popular opinion turned against Him.*

Did Jesus die on the cross because “the tide of popular opinion turned against Him?” The Prophet Isaiah gives answer when he writes, “Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; He has put Him to grief.” (Is. 53.10)

Though it may be true that political and religious issues served as secondary causes of Jesus’ crucifixion, the Bible is clear that Jesus’ death on the cross was God’s perfect plan to save us from our sins. He did this by inflicting His Son with the penalty that we deserved.

To know this is to know that the Lord is God.



W E D N E S D A Y

MAR 23

“Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.” So begins the third verse of Augustus Toplady’s hymn, “Rock of Ages.”

It is the clear message of the hymn that there is nothing that we can do to gain God’s favor; nothing we can offer to God that requires Him to accept us; no power of our own by which we might save ourselves from the guilt and penalty of our sin. We bring nothing of value to God.

However, that does mean we come empty handed to Jesus. In fact, we come with our hands full to overflowing. John Bunyan’s character, Christian, had so much to bring to the cross he carried it in a pack on his back!

What is it that we bring in our hands to Jesus? It is the guilt of our sin. That’s what Christian was carrying on his back. Sin is a weight, a burden that we cannot bear. We must off-load it, get rid of it, if we will truly be free of its guilt and shame.

So, we bring it to the cross. We lift it up to Jesus by faith. We transfer our guilt and shame to the divine Son of God who graciously takes it from us and pays its penalty for us.

Theologians call this “propitiation.” We might more simply call it salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.



T H U R S D A Y

MAR 24

Scan the shelves in a Christian bookstore, or the pages of a Christian book catalogue, and one will find few, if any, books on the wrath of God.

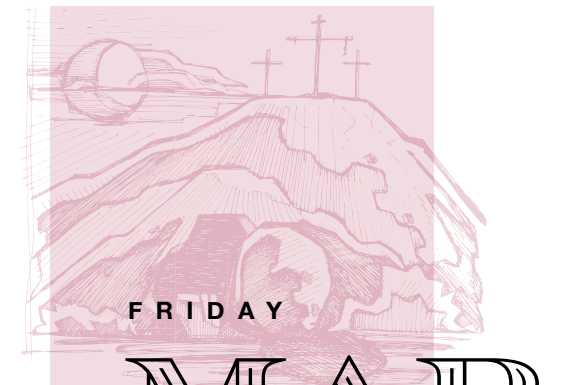
Many books address “felt needs,” while many others explain how to be a successful or effective Christian. But none catalog God’s revulsion against all that contradicts His holiness.

Why? Most probably it is because books on the wrath of God won’t sell. Who wants to pay good money to read about such a negative topic? Besides, isn’t this anger of God unworthy of Him, a stain on His character, an outdated and mistaken concept from an earlier time?

God thinks the attribute of His wrath is important. The Bible contains more references to God’s wrath than it does to His love and His tenderness – more than 600 citations.

The early chapters in Exodus contain numerous references to God’s wrathful response to the defiance of Pharaoh and the Egyptians toward Israel’s God. The 10 plagues brought against the people were a divine answer to their refusal to bow before His sole position as Lord and God.

Did Jesus refuse to bow before the holiness of His heavenly Father? He didn’t of course, but we most certainly do. Jesus takes that sin upon Himself and, along with it, the wrath of God that we assuredly deserve.



F R I D A Y

MAR 25

Parents rarely punish their children anymore. Twentieth century child psychology has suggested that punishment and its correlative, wrongdoing, is detrimental to a child’s self-esteem and healthy self-image. Instead, children are disciplined, a less pejorative and damaging response to mistakes and poor decisions.

But punishment and discipline are two different things. Punishment is the consequence of transgressing a standard. Discipline is a structure which sets the boundaries of behavior in order to avoid breaking the rule.

Instead of establishing standards for humans based upon God’s perfect holiness, we turn that on its head, alternatively establishing standards for God based upon man’s determination of what is right and good. Consequently, we come to believe that God does not determine what is right and wrong. We wrongly convince ourselves He does not respond to our infractions with punishment.

Such divine action is beneath the dignity we’ve assigned to God.

In fact, God does establish what is right and wrong based upon His holy character. And He punishes wrongdoing with holy wrath. He does not count to three. He does not let things slide. He does not excuse our sin. He does not explain it away.

So God punishes sin. He is just. But He allows His Son to take the punishment for us on the cross. He is just and He is merciful.



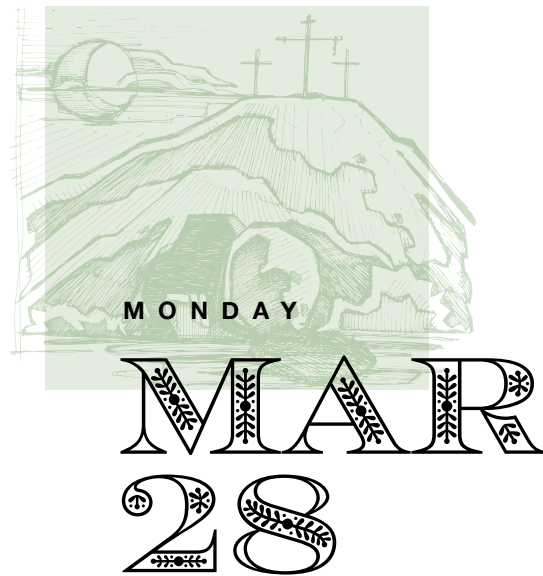
The Bible says that if we would truly know that the Lord is God, we must know Him in His fullness which includes not only His mercy, kindness and love but also His holiness, justice and wrath.

As bad as the bad news is – and defying the holiness of God is very bad news – the good news is greater still. As dreadful as Good Friday was, Easter Sunday's brightness outshone its darkness. Jesus took the fatal blow of His Father's wrath for our sin and then His Father raised Him from the dead to newness of life.

Ignoring God's wrath will not make it go away. Choosing to believe that it does not exist does not spare us its fury. The only escape from the wrath of God is deliverance by a Deliverer.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church of Thessalonica, he said: *you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.* (1 Thess. 1.10)

God's wrath is real and His deliverance is sure. Jesus is our Deliverer.



The first use of the phrase "that you will know that I am the Lord your God" is found in Exodus 6.7: *... and I will take you as my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.*

God is known by His people through His deliverance. God showed himself to the Israelites as their deliverer. Through the generations the people of God were commanded to remember this at Passover.

But the greatest symbol of God's divine deliverance is the cross. On the cross is displayed the panoply of all that comprises His holiness: justice, wrath, righteousness, kindness, love, mercy, grace, and so much more.

One of the beloved hymns of the Lenten season was written in 1872 by Elizabeth Clephane, a Scottish hymn writer. The lyric casts the 19th century writer and the 21st century singer as standing "Beneath the Cross of Jesus," contemplating its wondrous glory and personal significance including the *wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.*

The cross of Calvary declares the extent of God's sacrifice for us that we might thrive through His deliverance (His love) and how absolutely undeserving we are of His salvation (His grace).

Do you know this Lord and God?



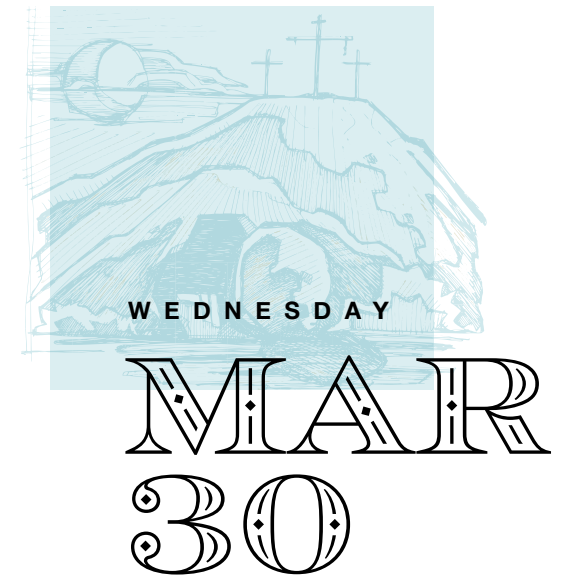
A novel way of meditating upon the wonder of the cross is suggested by a sometimes omitted stanza of *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*, which says: *O safe and happy shelter, O refuge tried and sweet, O trysting place where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet!*

Have you ever thought of the cross as the place where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet? We tend to focus on the love of God and, surely, the Lord's love is a supreme, divine attribute and a great focus in the Bible. Too often, however, the love of God is sentimentalized, distorting its true meaning and blunting its true power.

The love of God is an act of divine sacrifice. It is His action of giving up His priceless treasure, His only Son, so that we, undeserving though we are, might have the fullness of life.

But it is on the cross where heaven's love is displayed alongside of God's justice. The cross would not be necessary if God were not holy, faithful and just, as well as loving and merciful. Our sin is real and must be punished through divine wrath. God's love is real and spares us that punishment through the death of His Son.

Stand at the foot of the cross, gaze up at the Savior dying for you, and see where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet.



Elizabeth Clephane's hymn, *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*, originally included five verses. Only three are found in hymnals today, as it is often a matter of space that determines the length of hymns that ultimately get published.

The original fourth verse has been omitted and that is a shame indeed. It reads: *There lies beneath its shadow, but on the further side, the darkness of an open grave that gapes both deep and wide; and there between us stands the cross, two arms outstretched to save, like watchman set to guard the way from that eternal grave.*

Jesus died, not only to deliver us from the power of sin that estranged us from God for eternity, but also to deliver us to heaven through the eternal life His redeeming death purchased for us.

What a picture is painted for us in this missing verse: Jesus Christ, our Deliverer, hanging on the cross, whose outstretched arms signal a welcome into the eternal and heavenly presence of the Father but also serve to navigate us around and away from eternal death.

From the cross Jesus cries, "Don't go there and die ... come here to Me and live!"



God's deliverance of His people is one of the ways He declares Himself to be our Lord and our God. Verse after verse in the Bible tells us as much. He redeems us according to His eternal plan by grace and by His power. He claims us as His own, and He calls us by name.

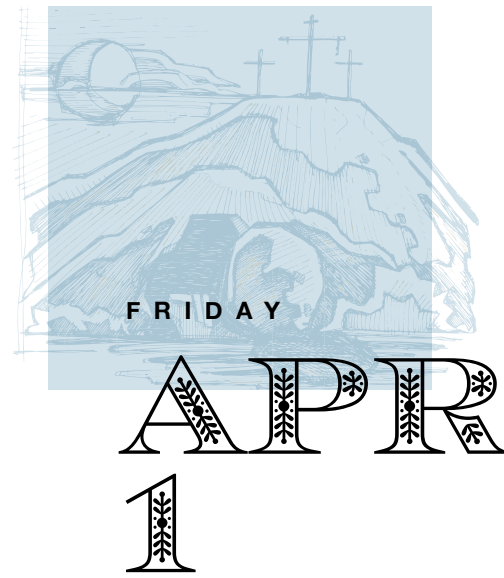
Through Isaiah He says:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior ... you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you ..." (Isa 43:1-4)

With such intimacy the Lord summons us to Himself. He calls us by name.

At the sound of our own name, the brain releases dopamine and serotonin which give us a sense of peace and pleasure. No wonder writer Dale Carnegie said that "a person's name is the sweetest and most important sound in any language."

To the believer, it is sweet because it confirms that we have been reconciled to the Source of life and we belong to our Lord and God forever.



Today is April Fool's Day. Its history is a bit sketchy with some suggesting that it dates to 1582 when the French switched from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. Those who failed to get the news that the new year now began in January and not April were called "April fools."

This day has traditionally been a time for playing innocent practical jokes on friends and family amid cries of "April Fools!"

In 1985, *Sports Illustrated* writer George Plimpton tricked his readers by making up a story of a fictional baseball player, Sidd Finch, who could throw a fastball over 168 m.p.h. In 1996, Taco Bell announced it had purchased Philadelphia's Liberty Bell and would rename it "The Taco Bell." And in 1998, Burger King announced the introduction of a "Left-Handed Whopper."

On this day in the Lenten season, one is reminded of that well-known quote of the missionary Jim Elliot who, in October 1949, famously wrote in his personal diary: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

He was commenting on the prospect of giving up all earthly comforts and possibly his very life (which he could not and did not "keep," having been martyred in Ecuador in 1956) in response to the gift of salvation graciously given to Him through Christ (which he did not and will never "lose").

Can you profess the same?



Today is the Lord's Day ... a day to extol the glory of His holiness in all its manifestations, including and especially, His power.

The unparalleled power of God, His omnipotence, is often displayed in the context of deliverance. In Exodus 7.5, God says: And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, *when I stretch forth my hand upon Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.*

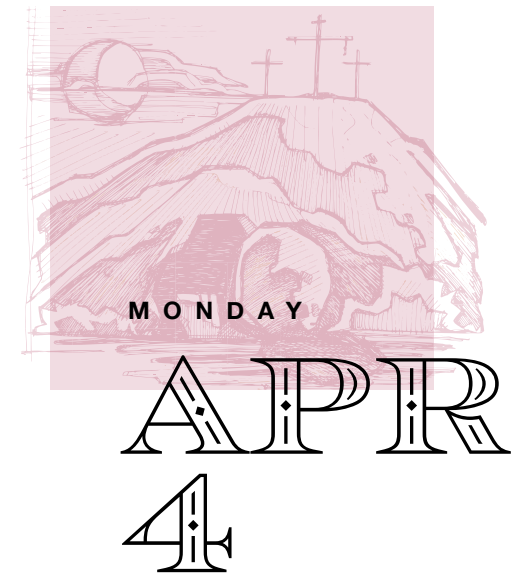
One of the hymns in which the church regularly declares God's holiness on the Lord's Day is: *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name!*

Of particular significance for us during this Lenten season is verse three: *Ye seed of Israel's chosen race, ye ransomed of the fall, hail him who saves you by his grace, and crown him Lord of all.*

Jesus' death on the cross, a picture of pathetic weakness and impotence, is also a portrait of divine power. It is on the cross that the incomparable power of God to save us is displayed. Indeed, as another hymn writer has declared: *There is power, power, wonder working power in the precious blood of the Lamb.*

In the cross there is God's power over guilt, shame, the evil one, the grave, fear, despair and hopelessness.

Come to the cross and, in Jesus, receive this power as your own.



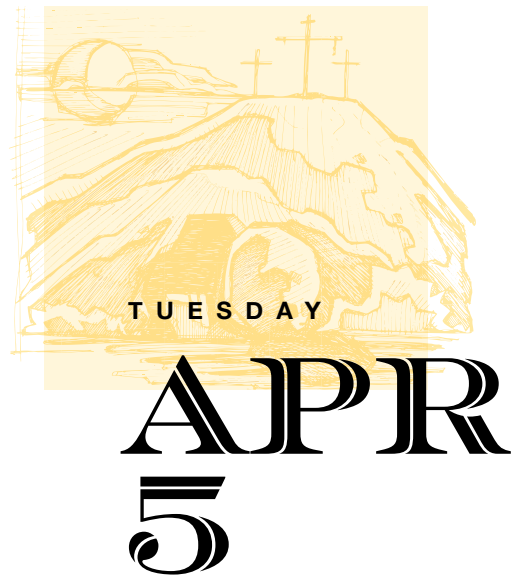
The power of God – by which He reveals Himself to be the Lord, beside which there is no other – becomes clear in numerous ways at the cross. One that may not readily come to mind is God's faithfulness.

The faithfulness of God is a powerful reference to how His actions conform perfectly to His words, particularly words of promise. The cross of Jesus Christ declares that God is faithful and can be trusted.

From the very beginning in the Garden, God promised that He would provide redemption and reconciliation for those who trust in Him. That provision would come through a clash between the evil one and the Lord Jesus Christ. In that battle, the evil one would receive a fatal blow and the Lord Jesus, though wounded, would not suffer ultimate demise.

Throughout the history of God's dealing with His people, the promise of the coming Messiah, who would bring deliverance through His atoning death, was reiterated. The prophets foretold His coming and the people longed for His advent.

On the cross was the fulfillment of God's promise of redemption through His Son. As Jesus hangs on the cross, in accord with the divine plan, God declares, "Just as I said ... you can trust in me. I'll do what it takes to give you eternal life."



People often confuse guilt with feeling guilty. There's a reason why we feel guilty ... it's because we are, indeed, guilty.

Real moral guilt stands apart from our feelings of guilt. Guilt refers to the objective transgression of a standard or law. When our actions fail to measure up to the law, we are guilty and, in relation to the law, we stand condemned.

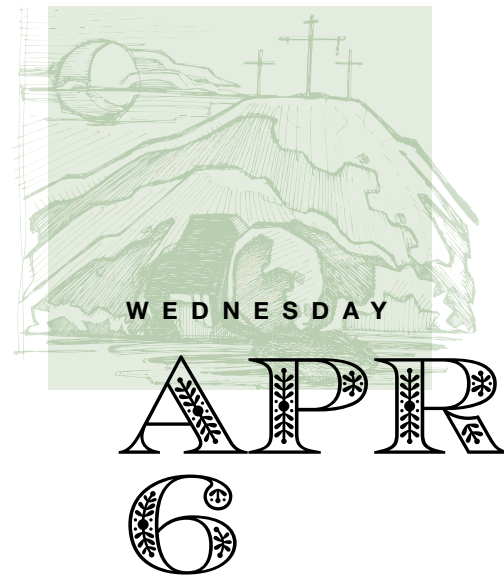
The person driving 65 m.p.h. in a zone limited to half that speed is guilty of breaking traffic law. He stands condemned and liable for punishment, commonly a fine.

The standard by which we can enjoy fellowship with God is His holiness. When we don't measure up, and we never can, we stand guilty. Missing the mark, we sin and are condemned by our actions that fail to conform to God's holiness.

The cross of Christ has power over our sin and guilt. It's power that comes not from setting aside the standard or by failing to punish the transgression. Rather, it is the power of perfectly maintaining God's righteousness and receiving just punishment for sin's guilt.

And that is what Jesus did for us.

*For me, kind Jesus, was thine incarnation,
Thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's oblation:
Thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion,
For my salvation*



And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Gen 3:15).

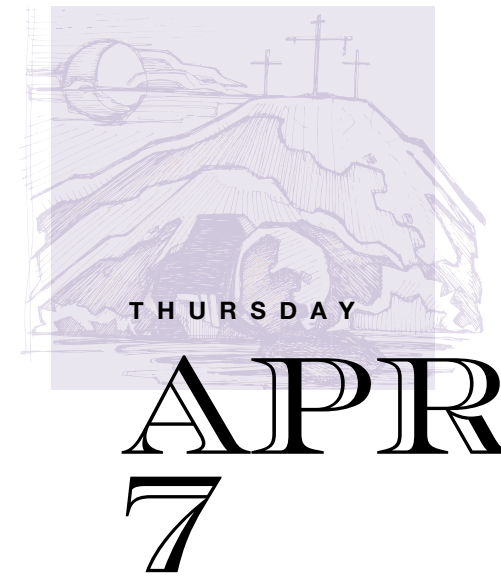
The crush of Satan's head indicates a mortal wound. It is a promise that he will be utterly defeated by Jesus on the cross, and so he was. What does that defeat look like?

Satan is "the prince of darkness" whose stock in trade is death, as he defies the rule and authority of the Lord and Creator of life. He plans to demonstrate his supposed superiority through the death of God's creatures.

What's more, Satan wants our just God to do his dirty work by punishing our sin through death – God, the Author of life, becomes the source of death in Satan's scheme. That would be ultimate victory for him ... our death at God's hands.

But Satan's prideful delusion was no match for the power of Christ's cross. In the death of Jesus, God's wrath was poured out, sin was atoned for, God's justice was preserved, forgiveness was purchased, and our lives were saved.

Scheme foiled!



*Taste the goodness of the Lord:
welcomed home to his embrace,
all his love, as blood outpoured
seals the pardon of his grace.
Can I doubt his love for me,
when I trace that love's design?
By the cross of Calvary
I am his and he is mine.*

The great power of the cross is made clear in God's love for us. Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God, came to earth for the eternal purpose of dying on the cross for lost sinners. Such love cannot be doubted when one traces "that love's design."

- The design of God's love is sovereign; it is from before the foundation of the world.

- The design of God's love is sacred; no other example of such love will ever exist.

- The design of God's love is sacrificial; it required God the Father to give up His only Son.

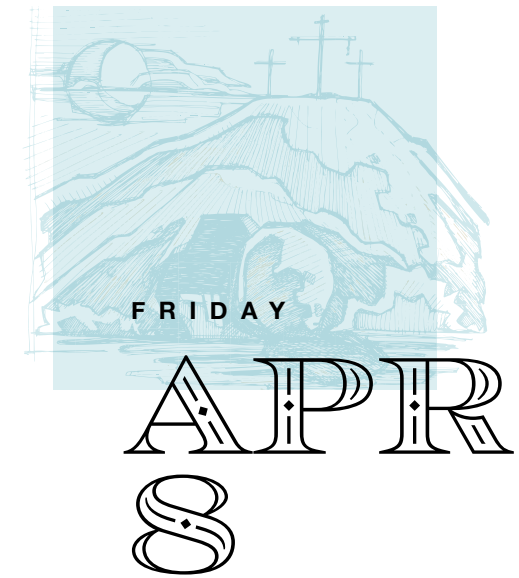
- The design of God's love is sure; it is guaranteed by the faithfulness of God to His own Word.

- The design of God's love is sufficient; it fully meets my need for life with Him.

- The design of God's love is specific; it is poured out for me personally.

- The design of God's love is secure; nothing can separate me from it.

Can there be any doubt that He loves you?



The cross of Jesus Christ has life-transforming power. How has it changed your life?

God's great love displayed on the cross provides a powerful example of what love is all about. The Bible says that if God has so loved us, we ought to love one another. Is your life characterized by this kind of love?

God's great love displayed on the cross challenges us to live lives of holiness. The cross italicizes how repugnant our sin is to God's holiness. It therefore challenges us to avoid a sinful life that grieves our God.

God's great love, displayed on the cross, takes away our grief and fear of death. On the cross our guilt – the very definition of death which separates us from God – is swallowed up in forgiveness. We are reconciled with God, both now and forever.

God's great love displayed on the cross makes us people of hope. Jesus came to earth in fulfillment of the Father's promise. Jesus died for sins in fulfillment of God's promise. Jesus rose from the dead in fulfillment of God's promise.

Our eternal life with God is sure because of the Father's promise.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*



APR 10 PALM SUNDAY

One of the most poignant sights a visitor to the Holy Land encounters is looking westward from atop the Mount of Olives. From this elevated perch one observes a magnificent view of the Kidron Valley dropping down below and running to the east wall of the city of Jerusalem.

Amid the olive trees that dot what is purported to be the Garden of Gethsemane, one can see a gate built into the wall. Now bricked up for reasons which continue to be debated, this “Golden Gate” may very well have been the place where Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday.

Rejoice! It’s the Lord’s Day – and a special one at that.

Today we celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem where He, five days hence, was nailed to a cross between two common criminals. He possessed no guilt of His own and deserved none of the treatment He received.

Nevertheless, He was jeered, tried, beaten, mocked, convicted and crucified on Golgotha, the “place of a skull.” On this site, outside the city wall, Jesus Christ, God’s only Son and our only Savior, was slaughtered as the sacrificial Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world.

But on this day, Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem and was lauded as the King that He was and is. And today, we join with Christians

around the globe and in adoration we exclaim, “*Hosanna! Lord, save us!*” Our cry is one of worship and praise because Jesus is the eternal God.

And in dependent faith we exclaim, “*Hosanna! Lord, save us!*” because He is the only one who can deliver us from our captivity to sin, guilt and death.

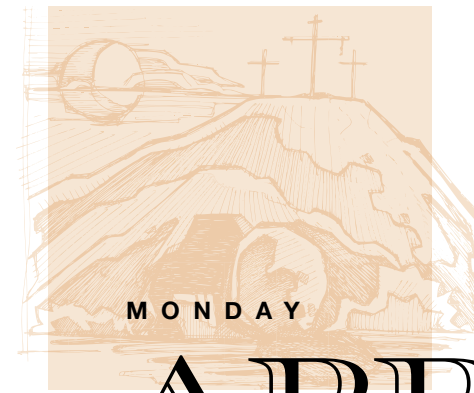
For many years, our Palm Sunday worship has begun by singing a relatively new (1978) hymn written in and for the Post Green Christian Community of Dorset, England.

Great and deep theological truths are not expressed by the lyrics but its value to the worshiping congregation is its expression of a simple yet profound truth:

*We bear the name of Christ.
Justified we meet with Him.
His words and presence calm our fear,
revealing God, our Father, here.*

*Alleluia! Alleluia!
Opening our hearts to Him,
Singing alleluia! Alleluia!
JESUS IS OUR KING!*

Is He?



APR 11

It was a welcome fit for a king ... but not quite.

There were the vague trappings of a conqueror entering a city in glorious array ... but with a twist.

The military victor, proudly waving at the adoring crowd, was replaced by an unknown teacher who traded a war steed for a humble donkey.

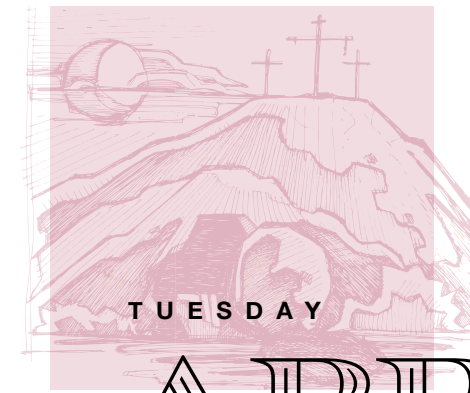
Matthew reports: *And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?”*

According to C.S. Lewis, only three answers to the question are possible. One is that Jesus was a liar. Jesus knew He wasn’t a king, a savior, the Son of God but he played along just the same. His lie gave him publicity and a flock of adoring followers. Is this Who sat on that donkey?

The second option of this great “trilemma” is that Jesus was a lunatic. His mother and brothers thought he was not mentally whole. They encouraged Him to tone it down. What emotionally healthy person makes the claims and promises He did? This one who drew such a crowd was undoubtedly unstable.

But if Jesus was not a liar to be scorned, and not a lunatic to be avoided, there remains only one other option: Jesus is Lord.

What say you?



APR 12

The Golden Gate through which Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem is comprised of two doors, one of which is the Gate of Mercy.

The city of Jerusalem was known as the city of God. It was the place where the Temple was built, that place where God promised His name would dwell. It was where sacrifices were made which reminded people of their estrangement from God and their need for sins to be atoned.

It was a place where devout lovers of God went to be near Him.

How fitting that an entry to Jerusalem was called the “Gate of Mercy.”

No one has the right to enter into the presence of the living God. No one dare approach Him for He is holy and we are not. Yet, God condescends to fellowship with those who humbly approach Him. It is by God’s great mercy that we are able to enjoy His fellowship.

Jesus, who entered the city of God through the Gate of Mercy, presented Himself before the Father as the acceptable substitute in sacrifice for our sins. It was God’s mercy that allowed Jesus to be our substitute. It was God’s mercy that allowed Jesus’ perfection and punishment to count for us.

And so, it is through the Gate of Mercy that we enter into the presence of God.



The door on the north side of the Golden Gate is traditionally called the Gate of Repentance.

While the Gate of Mercy declares that fellowship with God is open because of His holy grace and love, the Gate of Repentance is a reminder that God desires us to come to Him with a repentant heart.

Repentance and confession are often confused. Confession involves acknowledging that we have sinned, admitting as much before Christ and seeking forgiveness. Repentance involves a change of direction. It is turning around and changing course.

The Gate of Repentance tells us that our approach to God, made possible because of His great mercy, also requires a change in life.

God mercifully provides forgiveness of sins through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. But God's action on our behalf must trigger an action on our part. Turning away from sin that separates us from God is at the heart of any reconciliation with the Father.

When we approach God through the Gate of Repentance, we declare that we seriously desire intimate fellowship with Him who alone is Lord and God.

*Create my nature pure within,
and form my soul averse to sin;
let thy good Spirit ne'er depart,
nor hide thy presence from my heart.*



In his final days of leadership over Israel, Moses led the people in a covenant renewal ceremony. He rehearsed all the wonderful things the Lord had done for them since leading them out of bondage in Egypt.

Through Moses the Lord said: "You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt." (Dt. 29.2)

In addition, the clothes the people wore in the wilderness did not wear out and the sandals on their feet did not wear off. Further, the people ate no bread and drank no wine in all their wanderings because the Lord provided manna for them to eat.

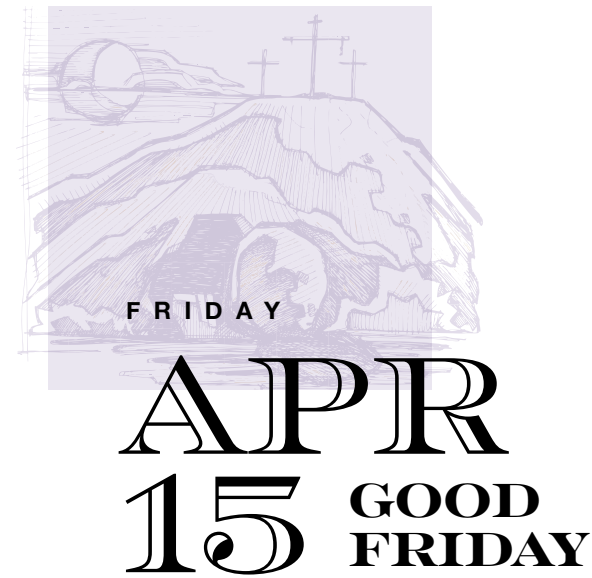
All these divine provisions were so that you may know that I am the Lord your God. (Dt. 29.6)

Today, we do not abstain – we eat. Today the church gathers around the Lord's Table to eat His meal. We receive the elements of bread and cup with thankfulness because they represent the body of Christ broken and the blood of Christ shed for us and for our salvation.

Jesus is the true manna from heaven.

And while the table focuses on Christ's atoning death which makes fellowship with God possible, it also is the place where believers enjoy the benefits of His atoning death, as Christ meets us at table by His Spirit.

*Here I will feed upon the bread of God,
here drink with you the royal wine of heaven;
here I will lay aside each earthly load,
here taste afresh the calm of sin forgiven.*



The gospel writer Matthew reports the occurrence of five miracles when Jesus died on the first Good Friday (Mt. 27.51-54):

1. Darkness between noon and 3 in the afternoon.
2. The tearing of the Temple veil from top to bottom
3. An earthquake that opened tombs near the place of the crucifixion.
4. The resurrection to life of some who had previously died.
5. The confession of a Roman centurion.

These five events perfectly satisfy the requirements of a bone fide miracle. They were all the result of an extraordinary work that only God could do. They all took place in the observable physical world. They all occurred contrary to the laws of nature. And they all served to lend credibility to a revelatory message from God.

Notice the realms of reality in which these miracles occurred. One took place in the celestial world which was created by God. One took place in the ecclesiastical world which provided a place for the worship of God. Another occurred in the environs of death over which God is Lord. And one occurred in the heart where God is either embraced or rejected.

These miracles represent not only the comprehensive scope and profound impact of Christ's death, but also the overwhelming response of the entire created order to the death of its Creator. The Apostle John said that without Jesus the Creator there was not anything made that was made. And when the Creator died, all of creation shook in horror, revulsion and dread.

The prophet Isaiah (40.4-5) promised that at the coming of the Messiah:

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

When the Messiah died for the sins of the world, everything was turned upside down; the sun went dark, the earth trembled, the graves opened, the dead were brought to life, and nothing could be the same ever again.

And, as promised by the prophet, the glory of the Lord was revealed. Not only by miraculous signs in the physical world but, most importantly, revealed to the heart of a Roman centurion. That was the greatest miracle of all. When he saw Jesus die on the cross, he exclaimed, "Surely this was the Son of God."

Some people come to faith through reading the Bible or a Christian book. Some people respond to a sermon or the testimony of God's grace given by a believer. Still others, like the centurion, look into the face of Jesus on the cross, sense the reality-shaking significance of His death for sin and, by the Holy Spirit, come to confess Him as Lord and God.

What about you?



EASTER SUNDAY

APRIL 17

Christ is risen ... He is risen indeed! May the Lord's blessing be yours on this Resurrection Day!

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church of Philippi, he spoke of what was most important in life to him. It was not that he was a good Jew, a promoter of the law of Moses or a persecutor of the church. What was most important to him was his intimate knowledge of God through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

(Phil. 3.8-11)

During these past weeks of the Lenten season, we have focused our attention on the ways in which people come to know that the Lord is God.

Like those in Bible times, men and women today experience His love, grace, power and majesty in a multiplicity of ways. It is through His provision of earthly needs, His protection against all manner of threat, His faithfulness to what He has promised, and His miraculous deeds in the created order, that people are drawn to Him.

What is important to remember is that as much as we long to know God – a longing for Him placed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit – we come to know Him because He first reveals Himself to us. God takes the

initiative to show Himself and by that divine grace, we come to know Him as Lord and God.

Presumably, the centurion at the cross was a pagan who, at the very least, pledged loyalty (if not worship) to Caesar. Perhaps he was a worshiper of one or more gods of the Roman pantheon. But through the cross, God reached out to him so that he, an unbeliever, might know Jesus as the very Son of God.

Our God still makes Himself known. For every member of His church, there is a unique story of how one came to know that He is God and Lord.

Perhaps, like the centurion, it is through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, God's most glorious manifestation of holiness, justice, wrath, faithfulness, mercy, grace and love, that you have or will come to know the wonder of intimacy with God.

However you come to know Him, it will be miraculous in nature and will be a wonder which you will enjoy forever.

*Oh, to know the power of Your risen life
And to know You in Your sufferings
To become like You in Your death, my Lord
So with You to live and never die*

*Knowing You, Jesus
Knowing You
There is no greater thing*

*You're my all, You're the best
You're my joy, my righteousness
And I love You, Lord ... love You Lord*