

THE WORD FORMING US TOGETHER:

LENTEN REFLECTIONS FROM
CBF OF ARKANSAS

A COLLECTION OF LENTEN
DEVOTIONAL REFLECTIONS
FROM THOSE AROUND THE
ARKANSAS FELLOWSHIP

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THE WORD FORMING US TOGETHER

IN WORSHIP: A LITANY

One: O God of words, speak to us.

**All: In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
The Word was with God in the beginning.**

One: In your wisdom and power, you spoke the world into being.
In your gentleness, you breathed life into creation.

**All: Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word nothing came into being.**

One: In you, we live and move and have our being.

**All: What came into being through the Word was life,
and the life was light for all people.**

One: You have told a great story
and invited us to be a part of it.

**All: What came into being through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.**

One: You have told a great story
and invited us to be a part of it.

**All: The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.**

One: Through your Word, you offer us friendship.
Grant that our words may speak of your goodness;
let us speak of your love and light.

**All: We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.**

Amen.

*This litany was originally published in *Fellowship!* magazine, February/March 2016, page 30.

The Word Forming Us Together: Lenten Reflections from CBF of Arkansas

We invite you to join us on a devotional journey through this Lenten season. On the following pages you will find devotional reflections from brothers and sisters connected to our Arkansas fellowship. The diverse authors of these reflections will challenge you to *consider how the Word is forming us together* this Lenten season. We hope you will join us in *forming together* through prayer, reflection, and response to Christ's sacrifice and resurrection.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

(John 1:1-4)

Please take some time each Wednesday and Sunday during the season of Lent to read the passages, consider the reflections and questions, and use the guide in your prayers. We are excited to see how the Spirit will lead our CBF of Arkansas community through this devotional guide. Feel free to share this collection with friends and family; we encourage you to forward the PDF file to friends and family, make copies to share with those in your church, or follow the devotional online (website: www.cbfar.org/lenten-devotional or Facebook: www.facebook.com/cbfofarkansas).

You have an incredible opportunity to journey through this Lenten season together with other CBF Arkansans. Please share with us how God has spoken to you as we consider the Word of God forming us together this Lenten season.

Forming together with you,
Megan J. Pike, CBFAR Associate Coordinator

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February 10, Ash Wednesday
Genesis 1:1-3

The Word Creates*

I struggle to make friends with winter. The cold bothers me, the wind irritates me, and cold rain and snow are not my friends, either. But my real struggles with winter are the short days and the long nights. Some people struggle so much with the lack of light that there is a clinical diagnosis for it. They call it Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD. They use special full-spectrum lights to offset its affects and stave off depression.

Isn't it fascinating that in the creation story the very first action of God was to speak light into existence?

Before he gave earth any form at all, he brought light. The breath of God, the breath of speech, passed over the formless waters beginning its work. And the very first act was to bring light into being.

Light. Waves of particles. Bands of energy. Bearer of warmth. Purveyor of sight. The first thing. The very first thing was light.

We often equate light with good and night with evil. But in Scripture God often breaks in to the night to deliver messages in dreams, to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt, or to deliver manna to them in the wilderness. God brought good news to Nicodemus when he came to Jesus at night. God is speaking light into darkness throughout Scripture.

In Matthew's gospel, darkness fell up on the earth as Jesus died on the cross.

Advent is a time we prepare for the coming of the Christ child. We start softly and slowly and we build for four weeks and end with a grand celebration of Immanuel, God with us!

It seems to me that during Lent we start with the humble repentance of Ash Wednesday and descend for forty days ever deeper into darkness. It takes work to go deep enough into darkness to find Jesus on the cross. We descend until we find ourselves at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, gazing through the darkness at the wounds of Jesus.

And then Easter comes.

God spoke again. He said let there be light. And the longest night ended.

Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!

Reflection

What kind of light is God breathing into your life? How is God using you to breathe light into the lives of others?

Prayer

Gracious, light-breathing God, hold our hands in the darkness as we seek to go deeper and ever closer to your glorious light!

*By Charlie Fuller, Pastor for Congregational Life,
Second Baptist Church, Little Rock and member of the CBF Governing Council*

14 February, Sunday
Colossians 1:13-17

My niece, Kinsey, and I like to play board games. That's our thing! We play everything from Candy Land to The Game of Life. Our favorite game at the moment is the new and improved Empire Monopoly. In Empire Monopoly, the first person to fill up her miniature Empire State Building wins.

The thing is - although winning a game of Empire Monopoly requires some skill, it is mostly a game of chance. Neither Kinsey nor I have the benefit of knowing which roll of the dice will lead us to victory. Sometimes I win and sometimes my seven year-old niece wins the battle.

In today's Lenten devotional found in Colossians 1:13-17, we are reminded of another kind of battle; between good and evil. It is a spiritual conflict between the kingdom of darkness and the Kingdom of Light. The question is whose empire or Kingdom will win the war?

As we reflect on recurring acts of racism, rampant police brutality, inimical voter suppression tactics; and as we witness unbridled xenophobic rants, environmental racism in Flint, Michigan and the cold-blooded killing of Christian missionaries in Burkina Faso, it is easy to begin to question whose empire is winning. From the looks of it, it often *seems* that Satan's empire of darkness is conquering God's Kingdom of Light.

Despite the looming darkness, the apostle Paul assures us that the Kingdom of Light will triumph. First, Colossians 1:13-14, says God "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption..." In other words, because of Christ's salvific work on the cross of Calvary we, as believers, have been transferred to the Kingdom of Light. Second, our victory is not left up to chance. Colossians 1:16 reveals that Jesus is the prime mover of all of creation; "by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things have been created through him and for Him." You see, there was never a time when Jesus was not. Jesus, **was** before time again. He knows the end from the beginning.

It's one thing to *play* a game; it's another thing to be its Designer. The truth is, citizens of the Kingdom of Light have an advantage. Jesus, as the Creator and Designer of all things, is privy to pertinent intel that promises a sure victory.

As citizens of the Kingdom of Light, Christ has granted us a permanent, prominent, preeminent place in His Kingdom. So, no matter what tactics the enemy employs, no matter what number the enemy rolls and no matter how dark it often seems, we can rest in the fact that as followers of Jesus, we are on the winning side.

***The Kingdom Advantage* ©**

Colossians 1:13-17 (NRSV)

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Reflection

As a citizen in the Kingdom of Light, what is your responsibility in a world that is inundated with darkness?

Prayer

As the Creator and Designer of all things, Oh Lord, You have given us an advantage over the enemy and his tactics. Thank You for rescuing us from the power of darkness and granting us a permanent, prominent and preeminent place in Your Kingdom of Light. Thank You God that we always win! In Jesus' name, Amen.

*By Rev. Demetria Edwards, CBFAR Coordinating Council member
New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, Lake Village*

February 17, Wednesday Haggai 1:1-6

Called to be Builders

If possible, when we are calling out truth to power, we're more likely to experience a change when we appeal the powerful person's (or institution's) self-interest. This is difficult for prophets to do. Prophets naturally want to keep the message pure and the conversion clean. "Thus says the Lord, do this because it's the right thing to do!"

Those prophets generally are chased out of town or killed. We know of a few of these. Alternatively, some prophets have a slightly less altruistic approach, "Thus says the Lord, do this because it's right and you will: a) not die b) grow your reputation c) end up with more wealth d) find universal peace, or e) something else you secretly want." Haggai points out to the governor and the high priest that their lives aren't quite what they could be because they have left God's temple in shambles. While the thought of having more helps motivate the leadership, Haggai is not ultimately concerned about the prosperity of a few elite individuals. I'd add that neither is that God's concern. God's calling is that all the people get to work together in an effort that glorifies God. (2:4).

Reflection

Do you see situations in our society today where individuals fail to glorify God but the impact is on the whole community? New construction can be very exciting. Might God be calling you to re-build a historical aspect of your community that has been neglected? What might that be?

Haggai 1:1-6 (NRSV)

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house. Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.

Prayer

Lord, help me to consider my ways. Open my eyes to the work you started before I was even born as well as the work yet to be done. Help me to find words to speak when I am prompted by your courageous Spirit. Even more, help me to put your words into my actions. I am listening for your call.

*By Ryan Clark, CBF Global Church Engagement Manager,
graduate of Arkansas Tech University*

February 21, Sunday Luke 9:23-25

The Word Calls*

As you read this, I am preparing to leave on the journey of a lifetime. My husband and I are pursuing a 2,200-mile thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. As we lay out our gear, we carefully contemplate the value of each item in terms of necessity. A 31-ounce down sleeping bag is certainly worth the weight, but what about a 4.5-ounce phone? Or a 4.75-ounce paperback book? Since we will be carrying everything we need, there is no room for any extra gear. Ounces add up to pounds. Clothing, shelter, food, water... everything else is optional and will likely be left behind. I've never considered the weight/value of things so critically until I started packing. If Jesus were leading a hike on the Discipleship Trail, what would he ask you to bring?

Luke 9:23-25 (NRSV)

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

From this passage, it is clear that self-sacrifice is a key piece of gear to following Jesus on His trail. In preparation for a backpacking trip, you realize that most of the things you own fall into the "optional" category. Jesus' only concern is that you take up the cross and follow him. It's such a simple command but an impossible task. He asks us to lose our lives for Him! He's asking for our hearts and souls, each and every one of us.

Jesus wants our words, actions, time, money, and motivations. The cross is the only thing He asked us to pack. No matter how much it weighs, no matter what other "necessities" we think we may need, it is the cross that will sustain us and give us life on the Discipleship Trail.

Reflection

What is Jesus asking you to leave behind to make room for the cross? How are you taking up your cross? Do you do it daily?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to deny myself and take up the cross. Help me to be a disciple that packs only a cross. Allow me to lose my whole self for your kingdom. Amen.

*By Claudia Carberry
Second Baptist Church, Little Rock*

February 24, Wednesday
Romans 13:8-10

The Word Commands*

The degree of difficulty is huge when love is a command rather than a suggestion.

A command takes away options on love, particularly when it is used as the base for all other commands. It eliminates the appropriation of love.

Many of us prefer love as a noun. In that way, we can treat it like a beautiful bouquet. We can place it on the mantle of our minds. As we point to the occasional flowering blooms, we can marvel at the beauty of the love we possess, that we prominently display it on our terms and we don't have to do anything other than water and fertilize it from time to time. We can even spotlight it during certain seasons and even set aside one day a year that we can decorate it with hearts and celebrate love with candy, flowers, balloons and fine food.

Romans 13:8-10 (NRSV)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

However, Paul, reflecting both the Old Testament commandments and New Testament marching orders of Jesus, has made love a verb.

As a verb, love requires action. It is high maintenance. It requires an object, which is our neighbor. The difficulty is intensified when neighbor is described as everyman.

There are no conditions. When love is a verb, the object is open-ended. The practice is active and constant.

When love is a verb, it draws us to the very nature of God and provides a foundation for what it means to be human and created in the image of God, "For God so loved the world that He gave ..."

When love is a verb, it provides a way to counter the challenges of the forces that move against it: fear, hate, indifference, prejudice, vengeance and intolerance.

When love is a command, we don't have a choice of whether to practice it.

Reflection

What is the opposite of love? Hate, fear, indifference, all of the above, something else?

Prayer

God, help us not just admire love and accept love on our terms. Help us live it and give it unconditionally on your terms.

*By David McCollum, former CBFAR Coordinating Council member
Deacon, Second Baptist Church, Little Rock*

February 28, Sunday
John 15:8-17

The Word Commands*

John 15:8-17 (NRSV)

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

(John 1:17). And, He brought a new commandment, one that trumped all other commandments: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Living in obedience to this command will transform every facet of my life. Following the very heart of this command will be harder than all other commands combined. It will, however, form me into the person I want to be – a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Reflection

How are you doing with following your Commander-in-Chief, Jesus Christ? After all, he only gives one over-arching command.

Prayer

Jesus, give me eyes to see the many opportunities to love others; and give me the courage to follow your command to love even as you have loved me.

Command. Just the very word seems a little... well...commanding. Makes me squirm a little. Unfortunately, I've shared space with a little rebel in me all my life. She needles me like an evil twin: "Be independent. You don't have to take orders from anyone." But if I adhere to that advice, I often have to ask myself, "How's that working for you?" We take orders, or commands, from parents, lawmakers, law enforcers, professors, and employers. The military is inundated with commanders. We even live in a country under the leadership of a Commander-in-Chief. In fact, if I'm honest, I must admit I am formed by these various commands: I am an honest, law-abiding citizen, I am educated, I have maintained gainful employment and am in good standing with my family and community. Following basic commands in each of these areas of my life has then opened literally thousands of opportunities for growth, satisfaction and happiness.

The Old Testament is obviously saturated with commands. From the Ten Commandments came thousands of ancillary commands for God's people. I am convinced had I been an Old Testament Jewish woman the little evil-twin rebel in me would have played havoc with my obedience. But then came Jesus! He fulfilled the law and brought grace and truth

March 2, Wednesday
John 1:1-14

The Word Saves*

I like to view Chapter 1, verses 1-14 of the New Testament's Gospel of John as a bookend to the Old Testament's Book of Genesis narrative. In the latter, the text describes creation as a sequence of events with significant milestones that include the creation of Adam and Eve, the Fall, Abel's dastardly murder of his brother, God's covenant with Abraham, and the continuance of a relationship with Abraham's descendants. While Old Testament prophets were frequently utilized as lightning rods to help bring a frequently wayward nation into line, prophets served as seers, prophesying events and admonishing the people to mend their ways. The Old Testament Prophet Isaiah stands above all others as having articulated a foreshadowing of the Abrahamic Covenant, that Divine promise to redeem humanity.

Unfortunately, for two millennia the Covenant God made with Abraham has been misunderstood as an exclusively ethnocentric agreement between God and a certain national group to the exclusion of others, and as a real estate transaction between God, Abraham and his descendants. Hence the prevailing misinformed notion among numerous evangelicals claiming that current events in the Near East are part of God's grand design.

Because a cornerstone of Christian dogma is based on revelation, the very first verse in the Gospel of John establishes the following certainty: God was, is, and will be; God is the Word; He is the source of life and light, a light that "shines in the darkness." The operative words and phrases in verses 1-14 are: "Beginning;" "Word was with God, and the Word was God;" "All things through Him, ... in Him was life, ... [and] life was light. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

No doubt influenced by Neoplatonic concepts and in scholarly style, the Apostle John utilizes the first 14 verses as a prologue to succinctly declare that God is the Alpha and Omega, and that the ancient covenant made with Abraham was fulfilled when God offered himself as a sacrificial lamb, and in human form, to die for and to save all of humanity.

Jesus' human suffering and his resurrection are an affirmation that we are redeemed and assured eternal life through His son.

John 1:1-14 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reflection

Inevitably, at certain instances in our personal journeys on the road we call life - when and if we encounter doubt – what can we draw from this text?

Prayer

During this season of Lent we are reminded of the significance of Your word and promise of eternal life, a life that can only be attained through salvation. We are reminded that You offered Your son as a sacrificial lamb, a lamb who suffered excruciating pain so that we may attain eternal life through him. Forgive us of our sins and give us the wisdom and fortitude to do Thy will so that Your light will shine in our lives.

*By Raouf Halaby, former CBFAR Coordinating Council member
First Baptist Church, Arkadelphia*

March 6, Sunday Revelation 21:22-26

The Word Saves*

I am fortunate to live on the side of a mountain where I have a wonderful view of my city. At night, I can see the lights and it is beautiful and, in some ways, comforting. As I look out over the landscape, I am drawn to the lights – not the surrounding darkness.

In today's passage, we read about a place where everyone will be enveloped in the divine –so much so that there will be no need of any light– the glory of God and the Lamb will illuminate everything. Darkness will not exist there because light chases away the dark.

Jesus, the Word that became flesh, is the divine light of the world. Those of us who have been redeemed have been filled with this light, which guides, encourages, and sustains us. We have been given grace beyond measure and now have a future filled with hope! We are privileged to live forever within this light.

Along with privilege comes responsibility. We have all walked through dark times in our lives. During those times, we hoped for glimpses of light and rejoiced when we found our way out of the darkness. Though we were once in darkness, now, we are children of light (Eph. 5:8). As children of light, we are called to let our light shine so that others can see their way to eternal life with God. As we shine as lights among the darkness around us, people in our world will be drawn to the divine light – to the God who saves.

Revelation 21:22-26 (NRSV)

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

Reflection

Is the life and light of Christ within me shining brightly so that others will be drawn to God? Am I allowing something in my life that diminishes the brightness?

Prayer

Lord, thank you that we have the living Word within us that shines so brightly in our dark world. Use us as vessels of this light to draw those in darkness to your wonderful salvation.

*By Cinda Smith, hospice Chaplain
Batesville, AR*

March 9, Wednesday Psalm 27

As our three-year old son, Kyle, was chest deep, and twisted up, in the green pea vines of his Poppaw's garden, he repeatedly yelled for his Poppaw to pay attention to his need. After hearing four or five, rapid-fire, exasperating requests for help, Poppaw curtly said, "Just wait a cotton-pickin' minute, Kyle!" With hands on his hips, our little boy looked at his grandfather and replied, "Okay, Poppaw, me wait a cotton-pickin' minute!"

People of faith know how hard it is to wait for God (vs. 14). It's hard work! It's especially hard when you are fearful and anxious. As King David reflected on some fearful moments, he may have pondered the time he was in a Judean cave, hiding from his enemies. King Saul wanted him dead and had vowed to kill him. So David felt anxiety over his life and future. As the small candle he held pushed back the darkness of the cave, the words he said to himself and to God, pushed back the dark fear of his anxious heart.

David's faith pep talk can be instructive for us. In faith, David made these confessions: God is the light that will show me the way through this. God will save me from those who seek to harm me. I will not give in to fear. When trouble comes, those who seek my life will fail. I will stand above them as on solid rock. Worshipping God is the sanctuary where I want to live my life. Even if everyone else forsakes me, God

"Okay, Me Wait!"

Psalm 27 (NRSV)

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.
Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

never will. I will live and thrive because of the goodness of the Lord. My heart will be strong as I wait for the Lord to act.

So as he waits for God to act, he talks to himself and to God. And with each word David speaks, his spirit and his heart grow a little stronger, and more confident, and less fearful.

That can happen to you, too. As you wait for God to get you untangled from life's pea vines, have a faith pep talk with yourself and with God. While you say to God, "Okay, me wait!" search and read the Bible. Meditate on God's promises. Remind yourself and confess to God His promise to always be with you, to never leave you nor forsake you. Be strengthened by God's promise to always be at work, in every circumstance, to bring about His will and your good. And watch for God's activity in your circumstance. The Words of Scripture you receive will be like light and salvation to sustain you and give strength to your anxious heart!

Reflection

What words do you need to say, to yourself and to God, to sustain your faith and confidence in God, as you wait for Him to act on your behalf? What person can you help do the same?

Prayer

Lord, calm my fears and relieve my anxieties; give strength to my heart as I wait for You to act on my behalf. I confess and receive, anew, Your Presence and Your promises. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

*By Rev. Gerry Claybrook, CBFAR Coordinating Council member
Barcelona Road Baptist Church, Hot Springs Village*

March 13, Sunday 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Snow Day

I awoke early that morning, well before the sun rose, and noticed immediately that instead of the house being dark and shadowy as usual on a cold January morning, my room was light and bright, almost as if it were mid-morning instead of pre-dawn. With a feeling of anticipation, I knew what that meant: it must have snowed quite a bit during the night. If that were the case, the streets were going to be impassable except for those people in critical professions or those few foolhardy souls who dared to brave the elements.

After a quick phone call confirmed that my place of employment was indeed closed for the day, I planned how I would spend this unexpected day of rest, knowing that what had started out as a busy, whirlwind day of nonstop work at the office had, in the twinkling of

an eye, turned into a much different kind of day. Similarly, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

Just like that, the day was changed for me and thousands of others. Today there was a respite from normal activities, but tomorrow we could continue anew, refreshed and sustained from the extra day of rest, ready to work again.

Reflection

What are the many ways that God nourishes your soul?

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for your Word, your love, and even your weather which sustains us.

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (NRSV)

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

*By Suzette Cannon, CBFAR Coordinating Council member
New Millennium Church, Little Rock*

March 16, Wednesday Deuteronomy 30:11-14

I have to wonder if the first readers laughed (or scoffed) incredulously at this passage. Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses gives five lengthy speeches reminding the people of God’s provision and all those seemingly tedious commandments God gave at Sinai. To top it all off, God says that the commandments are not all that hard.

The Word Shapes*

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 (NRSV)

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

I bet the Israelites begged to differ.

However mind-numbing we may find those commandments, it is with that Law that God set about shaping his people, giving them a new identity. The words of God defined them. When the Word became flesh and revealed the deeper meaning of the Law—which is love—God continued the work of shaping the identity of his people. This time, he did more than command with words; he demonstrated his love toward us. The redeeming act of love in which the Word gave himself for our sins shaped the identity of his Covenant people, the Church.

With the Law God said, “This is who you are. Now, go be it.” On the cross God said, “This is who *I* am. Now, go be it.”

Today we breathe a sigh of relief and thank God that we no longer have to keep the Mosaic Law. Our commandment is simply to love like Christ, to be his body, to deny ourselves and take up our crosses to follow him. That’s not too hard for us, right? (Maybe the Law doesn’t sound so tough, after all.)

The Early Church Fathers often said that when the Church speaks, Christ speaks. As the body of Christ, our mouths are filled with his words because he dwells in our hearts. He is not too far from us that we need someone to go to heaven or across the sea to find him. Rather, he came to us just as he has always done. We have the means to love like Christ. We have Christ himself.

Reflection

Does your heart and mouth bear witness to the fact that God’s Word dwells in you?

Prayer

May we not forget our true identity and calling. May our mouths and hearts be filled with the transforming Word of God.

*By Tylor Standley, 2015 Logue Scholarship recipient
George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, Texas*

March 20, Palm Sunday **1 John 3:1-3**

God loves us so much that he calls us his children now, while we are still sinners. Oh how great an honor; especially when we are so undeserving of it. This should make us want to become more deserving and encourage us to be like Christ. We should strive to purify

Through Christ we are God’s Children

1 John 3:1-3 (NRSV)

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

ourselves by turning from sin and doing as Christ called us to do: focusing our hearts and minds on loving God fully and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

These are not easy tasks – impossible in fact – since it is our sinful nature to put ourselves first. Love means putting God and others first. It means showing that we care and not just saying it.

To fully love others and be in fellowship with God is impossible with sin in the way. We must set a path to purification with our focus on the horizon and not on the ground just beneath us, for we will surely stagger on and off that path. At the same time we cannot pretend or convince ourselves we are righteous when we are walking with one foot on the path and one foot off the path.

To be the people we are called to be, we must be in a constant, communal relationship with the Holy Spirit so that we may be changed on the inside, thus reflecting Christ on the outside. We also must seek close, supportive relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters so that we may sharpen one another and grow together to be more deserving of being called God’s children.

Lastly, to love as we are instructed means that we cannot ignore those children who are not called His own. We must tell those longing, “orphaned” children that their Father is in search of them. There is no greater act of love than this.

Reflection

Are you seeking the help of the Holy Spirit and others to change you into one that is more deserving of being called a child of God?

Prayer

Lord, I pray that you will help to get “me” out of the way so that I may love as you have called me to love. Draw me closer to you in all that I do and make me more like you so that I may reflect you. Amen.

*By Tony Hoyle, CBFAR Coordinating Council member
First Baptist Church, El Dorado*

March 23, Wednesday Psalm 22:1-11

The call to discipleship is, in our minds, an easy one. After all, doesn’t Jesus promise that disciples will be able to do all of the things that Jesus does, and then some? Throughout the Gospels, disciples are given the ability to cast out demonic powers, to teach, to preach, to heal, but also to suffer. It is here that Psalm 22 stops us in our tracks, reminding us that if disciples are those

The Word Sends*

Psalm 22:1-11 (NRSV)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

who follow Jesus, this is not only a journey of life but of death as well.

I doubt that any of us would paint Psalm 22 on a nursery wall, or use it in a commissioning service. It's doubtful that, apart from Good Friday, these verses ever cross our minds. But for disciples of Jesus, this is the promise: that God sends us out to join in the work of Christ, to do great signs and wonders, but also to follow Christ to the cross.

Psalm 22 offers a sobering reminder that the way of the Lord has been made straight, full of witnesses to God's faithfulness, but that the way of Jesus is one which will involve darkneses which we do not yet see. And yet, even there, God is present, in the darkness of the way ahead, in the past behind us, and on the road beside us.

Reflection

Do I trust that God has sent us out, even when there is no hope in sight?

Prayer

O God, you have sent us out with your strength and with your Spirit, and your word does not return void. Remind us of the many ways that you have delivered us in the past, and let us look forward to the deliverance which is to come as we live out your calling.

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put
to shame.
But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by
the people.
All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake
their heads;
"Commit your cause to the LORD; let
him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he
delights!"
Yet it was you who took me from the
womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's
breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you
have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

*By Dr. Myles Werntz, T. B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics,
Logsdon Seminary (Hardin Simmons University),
2000 graduate of Ouachita Baptist University*

March 27, Easter Sunday Isaiah 42:6-9

The Word Sends*

One of my favorite quotes comes from F. Scott Fitzgerald: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

I love this because I believe it is deeply true! And I love it because I believe that it is more than a test of intelligence; it is the holy work that we are called to. It is what hope is – holding grief for what is and dreaming of what could be.

This calling began many generations ago and it is where Israel finds itself in this passage from Isaiah, trying desperately to hold on to two ideas in their minds: they are in exile in Babylon, held captive by their enemies. They feel abandoned, and yet – God is still God.

He has taken them by the hand and kept them, as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to set free the prisoner and make the blind see.

We haven't left the days of exile behind. Our world has been shaken by people being driven from their homes by violence, searching desperately for a new home. Might they be trying to hold in their mind two opposing ideas? That home is behind them, and home can be found again?

The Word sends you and me into the exile of discomfort, far from where we want to be, sometimes physically, sometimes emotionally or spiritually. We're called into the discomfort of loving the stranger, offering a home, learning from each other, hearing and sitting in each other's pain together. This season is one of discomfort, where we stand face-to-face with our own brokenness and the brokenness of our world, and acknowledge our need for the coming redemption. Yet the Word sends us to this very discomfort in the relentless pursuit of new things, in relentless pursuit of the Kingdom, of redemption for all, of love, of justice, of grace. Not alone – hand in hand with us.

May we hold in our mind both ideas: both the pain and the joy of this season, the call to discomfort and the truth that God stands with us in it.

Reflection

Into what discomfort is the Word sending me? Where do I see God's hand with me in it?

Prayer

God, you are the Lord. You have called us in righteousness.

You have taken us by the hand and kept us that we may share your love and grace with all we meet.

We give glory to your name for your redemption and healing.

May you use us in this world to create a new thing: a world where your justice, mercy, and love reign.

Amen.

Isaiah 42:6-9 (NRSV)

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,

a light to the nations,

to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the LORD, that is my name;

my glory I give to no other,

nor my praise to idols.

See, the former things have come to pass,

and new things I now declare;

before they spring forth,

I tell you of them.

*By Mollie Palmer, Director, Together for Hope, Arkansas
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