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**Greendale Ecumenical Group
2020 Lenten Devotional**

Wednesday, February 26, 2020

Righteousness; Not Piety!

Scripture: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Beware of practicing our piety before others! People are to seek God's rule and God's righteousness, rather than human righteousness that can be seen by others or ourselves.

When we give of our money, our love, our time, talent, our attention, our thoughts, and our prayers, we are not to draw attention to ourselves but to the Love of God, God's Grace, God's Presence and Presents to all of God's children.

Being forgiven requires us to forgive others. How can we ask God to forgive us if we do not forgive others? The Lord's prayer teaches us to include everyone in the world, for God's forgiveness is for all God's children everywhere.

In Matthew 6, Treasures is another word for righteousness. Treasures on earth are visible righteousness; treasures in heaven are God's righteousness. Humans seek either one or the other. It is living in darkness or living in the light of God's Love. We cannot serve two masters. One either seeks God's righteousness or visible human righteousness; never both.

Lord, we ask you to pick us up when we stumble in our actions. Please be with us as we follow where you lead us to do your will with our actions. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

— *Roberta F. Briggs, Grace Ministries*

Thursday, February 27, 2020

Freedom From Difficult Places

Scripture: Psalm 51; Jonah 3:1-10; Romans 1:1-7

You know this is a powerful text from the book of Jonah because in the story we are told that God changed his mind.

The book of Jonah is small. We have to fish for it in our Bibles, often bypassing it multiple times before finding it shoe-horned in between Obadiah (another biggie) and Micah.

What I like about Jonah is the very real person he was. Sent to Nineveh, where does he go? In the opposite direction. He goes to Tarshish. But spit back on shore, Jonah is given another chance with God. The story seems to underscore that faith asks difficult things of us.

I notice in the prelude to Psalm 51 that this was a psalm of David, and that perhaps it was written following his time with Nathan, his prophet and confessor. I imagine that David's time with Nathan was excruciating. Here David gets all pumped up with self-righteous energy only to get the boom lowered on him when Nathan revealed that "He was the man!" David was the man whose sin was so great that he feasted on the little lamb of a poor man — the lamb that was the only pleasure the man had in his life.

Shame is a powerful emotion. It differs from guilt in that guilt is the result of us doing something wrong. Shame is that overwhelming feeling that not only have you done something wrong, but YOU are wrong. Your whole being is bad to the core.

Psalm 51 is the Psalm we all need when confronting the shadowy sides of ourselves. It is the balm that can totally cleanse and the only vehicle of true forgiveness and grace. This is what Lent is about: becoming whole through forgiveness, mercy, and grace. And the only one to it is Jesus. Praise be to God.

— *Mark Nilson, Pastor, Salem Covenant Church*

Friday, February 28, 2020

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— *Mark Nilson, Pastor, Salem Covenant Church*

Saturday, February 29, 2020

Freedom From Difficult Places

Scripture: Matthew 18:1-7

Young children see possibilities. Their is a land of adventure and happiness, unless of course something hurts, emotionally or physically. And parents/guardians look to resolve hurt so the adventure might continue; that discovery unfold into understanding and growth, deepening the character and facility of the precious one.

As the created of God, each of us is referred to in scripture as children of God, and this is actually what we are. And Jesus uses children in metaphor to encourage us in seeing each other as valued, loved, equally important and unique in the “family” of humanity; each of us with a responsibility for each other and not destroying joy or wellness, but encouraging it.

Let us be a blessing!

— *The Rev. Andrew H. Borden, Grace Ministries*

The Choice Is Ours

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

We return this day to well-known and well-trod themes within the Christian church, namely the entrance and trajectory of sin into the world, beginning with Adam and resolved by Jesus. Let me begin by admitting that I do not believe in original sin; my own spirituality is grounded in the notion of original blessing. So what, then, happened in the garden and was ultimately challenged by Jesus, you ask. The garden is for me the setting of the ancient quest by humankind for knowledge and power. If there is sin present, it is the persistent draw that the “things” of this world can make us like gods. I’m mindful here that the apple is the icon of one of the world’s most powerful technology companies. Scholars tell us that what is probably behind the story in Genesis is a warning against cultic impurity. Snakes were very much associated with agrarian cults in the area through which the pre-Hebraic tribes traveled. The story is as much a tale of “Don’t become one of them” as anything else. What resonated for me is the juxtaposition between the power of things, and others, against the primacy of my relationship with the source of life itself.

In other words, the message is, for me: Do not substitute anything for the relationship you have with the source of life, which many call God.

What does Jesus do? Exactly what Adam and Eve don’t, which is to uphold the primacy of his relationship with the God of his own faith and understanding. He is not tempted by the “things” of this world. No need for power — he knows all too well what is powerful. No need for fame — he knows that will come soon enough. No desire to place others before the primacy of his relationship with God. He is not tempted.

On this first Sunday of Lent, the question to ponder is: What is primary in my life, and how have I and will I exemplify that relationship? That we all fall short of the potential of that relationship; that we often are tempted for those “things” that purport to give us more power; that we have the capacity to recognize this and to choose a different path is the essence of the Psalmist’s cry, and, for me, the purpose of Lent itself. “Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.”

— *Rev. Aaron Payson, Minister, UU Church of Worcester*

Monday, March 2, 2020

Overwhelming Journeys

Scripture: Psalm 32; 1 Kings 19:1-8; Hebrews 2:10-18

I learned of a fourth response to overwhelming stimulus: flight, fight, freeze, or fix. Fix, I guess, was added for us Western, Enlightenment folks who in the face of any/all challenges believe we can always “fix” things.

I don't think Elijah was thinking through a “Western Enlightenment” lens. Elijah was plain old terrified. So he ran (I guess that counts as “flight”). But when in the desert, the wilderness, he was slowed down, and when alone (after dropping off his servant in Beersheba), he began to take in his plight, inviting God into the conversation.

I like that he fell asleep, and I wonder if that became his saving grace. Usually, our responses have something to do with control. Fight, flight, and at least fix seem to indicate some action that we are taking. Freeze, I'm not sure of. But one thing I do know is that during sleep I have totally given over the controls to something beyond me (God?). It is during this sleep phase that Elijah is given truly what he needs: sustenance for the journey.

More and more, I believe that what we truly need to face the challenges of our lives are not more information or some secret power. What we really need is strength and courage, which the Lord served up for Elijah in heaping cakes and buckets of water.

— *Mark Nilson, Pastor, Salem Covenant Church*

Wednesday, March 4, 2020

That Nobody Should Perish

Scripture: Psalm 32; Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28; Matthew 18:10-14

When God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, (Exodus 34), giving Moses guidelines for righteous living through the Ten Commandments, God made a solemn covenant between Himself and the people of Israel. God promised to bless the Israelites, and their part was to follow in God's ways. The Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, includes that which pertains to loving God and how we are to treat our neighbor. It is the rule of righteous living, and the measure of how we recognize our sinful nature. "All have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

Psalm 32 reminds us of how utterly hopeless it is for us to stand in righteousness before God through our own merit. Furthermore, when we remain silent in our sinful nature, we suffer the physical, mental, and spiritual consequences, leading to death. "For the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23).

God calls us to confess our sins with contrite hearts that we may receive forgiveness of our sins. It is by the blood of Christ in His atoning death on the cross that we are washed clean, and that we are forgiven by God's Grace, and not by our own merit. The lesson in the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18), is that God is not willing that anyone should perish. As we continue on our Lenten journey, let us humble ourselves before God, honestly examine our lives against the Ten Commandments, and seek forgiveness of our sins.

"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! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

— *Marie Sturdevant, Grace Ministries*

Sunday, March 8, 2020

Transfiguration! Death and Resurrection! Trust and Obey!

Scripture: Matthew 17:2-9

“Jesus led them up a high mountain ...” Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother, John, up a high mountain. High mountains like Sinai and Zion often were seen as sacred places where God and God’s power are present.

In this story there is a conversation between God and the disciples. Jesus appears in Glory. “His face shines as bright as the sun, and his clothes as white as light.” Jesus speaks with both Moses and Elijah, who represent the law and the prophets.

Peter wants to honor the three of them, but God identifies Jesus as God’s son. God told them to listen to Jesus! Jesus told them not to be afraid, and speaks about death and resurrection. As they were coming back down the mountain, they see only Jesus. Jesus orders and instructs them to tell no one until the “Son of Man” has been raised from the dead.

We, too, are instructed to listen to Jesus and to Trust and Obey. We are to follow The Ten Commandments! To not be afraid. Every day, I talk with God many times. I have turned my life over to God. I know that God is with me no matter what I do or where I go. I can’t tell you how many times a day I reach out to share my thoughts with God and ask for God’s direction in my life. But not only for myself, but for all those in my life whom I love, and even those whom I find difficult to love. I ask for God’s love, Grace, forgiveness, blessing, direction, hope, peace, trust, understanding. I thank God many times a day for everything. When I pray, I usually start off thanking God first, for each day is the beginning of the rest of my life. At the end of the day, I thank God again and ask God to bless all those I love and to keep us all safe.

Amen!

— Roberta F. Briggs, *Grace Ministries*

Thursday, March 12, 2020

God So Loved the World

Scripture: Psalm 95; Exodus 16:1-8; Colossians 1:15-23

Psalm 95 - *Call to worship and obedience*

God created us, the earth and the sea. We worship and praise God in song and prayer, because God has blessed and loves us.

Exodus 16:1-8 – *Bread from Heaven*

God's action to deliver people of that time from bondage.

Colossians 1:15-23 – The letter of Paul to the Colossians

Paul's letter tells us that Jesus is created by God, the first-born of all creation as well as the head of the church.

We can praise God in a worship service or silently anytime during the day. During Lent 2020, we need to take a deep breath and accept and thank God for all the blessings He has provided us. It is important to establish a relationship with God and share the good and bad things in our lives. We need to ask God for guidance to be humble, patient, and kind to others. Only God is the true judge, and we need to be open and listen to other people's views to truly understand their point of view.

All my life I have sung in many types of choirs. My favorite is singing in church choir. The music enables me to share a gift from God to provide a worship message. My favorite song during Lent is "God So Loved the World." The song provides a message of God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son (Jesus). The song continues to point out that whosoever believeth should not perish but have everlasting life.

Thank God for our blessings and for sending Jesus, His only begotten Son.

— *Linda Kikutis Kropp, Grace Ministries*

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Rock of Salvation

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

On this third Sunday of Lent, we ponder stories that ask us to consider: What is the foundation of my faith?

It is not hard to imagine the kind of bickering that Moses endured as his people experienced the trials of the Exodus. The story of their thirst being quenched as Moses raps his staff on a rock set in motion centuries of metaphors for the foundation of one's faith. Even Jesus echoes this in "on this rock I will build my church." And then there is the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, in which we are treated to a dialogue that challenges the woman, and us, to consider what "water" we really thirst for, and what will truly govern our actions as we seek that source of life.

On this day, we, too, are asked to consider what we truly seek, what will truly save us, and how shall we be with each other.

— *Rev. Aaron Payson, UU Church of Worcester*

Monday, March 16, 2020

The Word Becomes Flesh! The Way, the Truth, and the Life!

Scripture: John 1:1-13

The word: The Greek word for “Word” is Logos, which has roots in Greek thought, as the Ordering Plan of the Universe, and in Hebrew as Divine Wisdom.

In John Chapter 1:7 “so that all might believe is the first occurrence of the verb “to believe”. Belief is always active in John’s Gospel---it is something one does, not one has.”

John’s Gospel begins with a hymn of praise for the word of God made flesh and focuses on who Jesus is, including the way he describes himself as “I am” statements. The author of John is unknown. Early traditions credit John the son of Zebedee as its author. The “Beloved disciple” mentioned in the book has been identified as John.

I believe all things come into being through Jesus. Jesus is the Light of the World. Therefore, there is no darkness. We are/were all born through the Love and Grace of God. The whole Gospel of John shows what Grace upon Grace looks like because of God’s presence in Jesus.

Jesus was in the world, and the world came into existence through Jesus, but the world did not accept him. God gives the right to become God’s children to everyone who believes in God. Through baptism we become children of God. As children of God, we are to listen, hear, and obey God for Jesus is the light of the world. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

God, Please hear us as we pray: Thank you for always walking with us, in us, and beside us as we move forward to do your work with our hearts, minds, hands, and feet. Help us to put our complete trust in you to lead us to make the right decisions as we work together to strengthen the knowledge of your presence with all those who put their trust in you, Our Heavenly Father. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

—*Roberta F. Briggs, Grace Ministries*

Friday, March 20, 2020

Rock of Salvation

Scripture:

Ephesians 5:1-9 GOD'S WORD Translation (GW)

1 Imitate God, since you are the children he loves. 2 Live in love as Christ also loved us. He gave his life for us as an offering and sacrifice, a soothing aroma to God.

3 Don't let sexual sin, perversion of any kind, or greed even be mentioned among you. This is not appropriate behavior for God's holy people. 4 It's not right that dirty stories, foolish talk, or obscene jokes should be mentioned among you either. Instead, give thanks to God. 5 You know very well that no person who is involved in sexual sin, perversion, or greed (which means worshipping wealth) can have any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Don't let anyone deceive you with meaningless words. It is because of sins like these that God's anger comes to those who refuse to obey [God]. 7 Don't be partners with them.

8 Once you lived in the dark, but now the Lord has filled you with light. Live as children who have light. 9 Light produces everything that is good, that has God's approval, and that is true.

Parents/guardians help children grow into societal mores, moral and ethical norms in place to help honor and respect each other. These guidelines have much rootedness within the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments God handed to Moses on Sinai to help humanity lead healthy, synergistic lives within the human family.

Jesus' emphasis was in bringing back into focus what the law and prophets lifted up in God's name that over time had become buried in human-concocted rules and doctrine and snuffed the life out of what it mean to be faith-filled.

The light of Christ now highlights the truth from God, separating out human platitudes and value that compete and destroy the benefits of Grace and Mercy.

Let us follow the illumination!

— *The Rev. Andrew H. Borden, Grace Ministries*

Monday, March 23, 2020

Scripture: Acts 0:1-21

When I first read this passage, I thought, I can't really relate to Saul in this story, except for the fact that without my glasses, I'm pretty blind. I know, I know ...it's just a story. He was "blinded by the light" rather than literally unable to see. I think I need to find another way to connect with this ...

In the beginning of this passage, Saul was consumed by darkness. He couldn't see a way out other than to persecute the people he envied — people who had a clear direction. Now this part of the story, I can relate to! I have parents who are, unfortunately, fans of the New York Giants. I have spent many a Sunday listening to their criticism of my New England Patriots. I have sat by while my dad comments on the refs giving in to Brady. "Go ahead, give the babies their bottle!" is a taunt I'm very familiar with. Years ago, I laughed and even sided with them. Thankfully, I had a moment similar to Saul. I, too, was blinded by the spectacular realization that TB12 is not someone to ridicule and that I shouldn't be ill-spirited toward his fans. Loving the Pats was the direction my life was lacking. I'm saved! I can see! (Much to the chagrin of my family.)

All kidding aside, I can relate to this story about Saul in a different way. I'm not the man who is putting down others and then suddenly realizing they're right. I am the follower of Jesus who others might see as wrong or different or even criminal. I'm sure a lot of us have felt this way. I'm sure a lot of us have heard the tone in people's voices when we say we can't do something because of a church engagement. "Why don't you just skip it?"

Lent is supposed to be a solemn time, where we reflect on our own faith and look forward to Christ's resurrection on Easter. What if, instead, we took time to reflect on the Sauls in our life and look for opportunities to shine a light in their eyes and blind them? "Why don't you come with me?!" Let's be more like Ananias ... a little apprehensive, a little annoyed, but ultimately instruments of His love—a direction for people who need it so desperately.

— *Stephanie Harms, Grace Ministries*

Saturday, March 28, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 130

To me, Psalm 130 is almost like four different psalms written by different family members. The first stanza sounds like an overdramatic teenage girl's lament (one that I've said many times). It's very easy to feel like the bottom has fallen out of our lives and that nobody is listening to our cries. The second stanza is the rebellious son, whose record of wrongdoings would shock you. The third and fourth stanzas are the parents, trying to explain to their hyperbolic and wicked children that God is there for us.

Maybe this is why I struggled to connect with this text as a whole. I can definitely relate to the drama queen aspect of it. Woe is me, my life is over! At times I've also wrestled with my not-so-squeaky clean track record. God could never forgive me for that! If the psalm stopped there, I would be content. Life can be terrible and I can sin, but God forgives me and that's why I love Him.

Maybe you relate more to the pensive nature of the second half of the text. Just wait for God to give us the answer. God's going to take care of everything.

Either way, the message is clear. God loves us and is looking out for us. I think even the whiniest teenager can agree with that thought.

— *Stephanie Harms, Grace Ministries*

Monday, March 30, 2020

Spirit Breath

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Breath is what you have when you are living, and what you don't have when you are dead.

Anxiety has a constricting grip on our whole being. There is an imprisoning narrowness caused by our shallow breath when in the midst of deadening anxiety. The Spirit, who acts like a kind of tour guide through this dusty, dry, bone graveyard invites us into courage, hope, and a radical trust that this less-than-life we experience in the cemeteries of our anxieties can be different. And, the key to it is breath. Count how many times breath or breathing is mentioned in Ezekiel's passage.

Deborah Smith Douglas was a self-confessed "white-knuckler," one who was much more inclined to anxiety than trust. One day in a particularly difficult dizzying family crisis, she discovered that she had been essentially holding her breath for hours. Her momentary discovery led to the revelation that much of her life was lived in the shallow end of her breath.

A friend had recommended meditation and the practice of yoga. It was here that she was first instructed in the gift of deep breathing. Deep slow breathing slows the pulse, calms the nerves, and can relieve pain and treat illness. It also can prevent the scattering of our thoughts, which is so much a part of our anxious times. Douglas writes, "When we breathe deeply, air flows into the lungs — the only part of the body where the blood-oxygen transfer on which our lives depend occurs. When our breath is shallow, the vital oxygen never reaches the tiny capillaries in our lungs, and it cannot embark upon its remarkable journey into the farthest reaches of our bodies. Unless we maintain contact with the depths, we isolate ourselves from the life-giving air we must breathe to live.

This is not just good physiology, it is also deep biblical and theological wisdom.

Breath. It not only nourishes our bodies through the blood-oxygen transfer, but it is the life-giving force of God's Spirit that calls our dry bones to life anew.

— *Mark Nilson, Pastor, Salem Covenant Church*

Friday, April 3, 2020

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-11

I am a hopeless romantic. I like to read this as a real love letter, rather than an epistle to a group of believers. It rivals Shakespeare in some of its figurative language, and paints the picture of someone so deeply in love — a sincere and intelligent love, not sentimental gush. Who wouldn't want a love like the one described here? Christians in Phillippi must have blushed when they read this.

Lent is always treated like this serious time of the church year where we fast and give up something in order to be closer to God. In recent years, I've switched my focus from giving something up and have added something extra instead. I'll keep drinking my Dunkin' iced coffee, but I'll also go out of my way to do an extra random act of kindness. Chocolate will still make up the majority of my diet, but I'll also put money aside and donate it to a charity that's close to my heart.

This love letter of sorts reaffirms my belief that Lent can be more than a solemn time of restriction. It can be a time to celebrate what we have and how lucky we are. It leads up to the best day of the year, when Christ, who died for us, came back to life and showed us just how much he loves us!

And, to top it all off, there's so much chocolate!

— *Stephanie Harms, Grace Ministries*

Tuesday, April 7, 2020

Scripture: John 12:2-36

Night Vision helps the military see in the dark. This technology improves recognition in support of discernment for renditions informing appropriate response.

Jesus states that the teaching he came to recover from the law and prophets and emphasize with his life-example and illustrations help those who listen and hear see more clearly in life how to avoid pitfalls and best honor the gift of breath and being.

Jesus has left those of faith Godly Night Vision that also functions in the light of day to help Grace and Mercy live well, to best effect.

Let us lean into the hop of God equally distributed and available for each of us!

— *The Rev. Andrew H. Borden, Grace Ministries*

Friday, April 3, 2020

The First Meal

Scripture: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

We've now entered into the most sacred time period of the Christian year: the meal, which leads to the arrest, which leads to the death, which leads to the waiting, which gets us to RESSURECTION. But for today, we are at the beginning of the end.

I like reading the institution of the meal provided us in the book of Exodus. It reminds me that what we do together on this night carries with it the power of time and the centuries after centuries after centuries of its observation. We are not the only ones who sit on the edge of a sacred moment waiting for God to reveal God's power. What must it have been like to have first received these instructions ... the sacred use of bread and blood? Was it embraced with utter trust, or was it reluctantly followed ,thinking that it was crazy talk, but you did it anyway?

What was it for those disciples shaken to the core by the threats of Roman power and the new knowledge that the one you have followed was going to his death?

What is this sacred meal for us today? Do we keep this festival as a "perpetual ordinance," as it says in Exodus ,out of the deep remembrance of all that God has done? Or has it become a common, thin ritual in which we blindly engage?

Tonight is the beginning of a new drama in which God will reveal God's power. Listen, wait, ponder, pray. The meal will be there, I promise.

— *Mark Nilson, Pastor, Salem Covenant Church*