

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible: February 17, Ash Wednesday

On this first day of lent we read from Mark 3:1-6, about Jesus in conflict with authorities about Sabbath choices. There is a man whose hand needs healing and synagogue leaders ready to pounce on any unsanctioned healing. Jesus asks these leaders, who are fixing him with a steely gaze, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But Scripture tells us, these synagogue leaders who certainly know the answer, refuse to say. They remain silent.

A fascinating thing about reading the One Year Bible is the way Scriptures that we’d never normally think of together, are placed in close proximity. Today we also read passages from Leviticus about sin and guilt, even indirect or unintentional guilt. There are so many rules about all this. But when I read about the synagogue leaders refusing to speak up when Jesus asked them to testify about Sabbath regulations, I couldn’t help but to remember Leviticus 5:1 (which we’d just read this same day), “If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible.” What do we think about this?

We “good church people” remember from hearing multiple sermons on the subject, that Jesus chooses to heal and these synagogue leaders, biting their lips, take it in, without comment and then immediately, on the same Sabbath, begin to plot about how to kill Jesus. We, of course, have the takeaway that healing on the Sabbath is good and planning to kill people is bad, but what about remaining silent about God’s law? Can our reading from Leviticus give us a nudge about the importance of speaking up? Not chiming in with our opinions (of which we surely have plenty and are rarely hesitant about sharing), but what about testifying about what we’ve learned, in Scripture? Are we ever keeping silent when, like the “good church people” in the synagogue we DO know better? Do we testify not just with our words, but our own choices about what to do (or not do) on the Sabbath? Do we apply Scripture lessons about the just treatment of aliens when we consider immigration policies? Are there Scriptures that apply to our daring to identify and dismantle white privilege? My hope is that this Lenten season can call us all into deeper understanding of God’s word and the sacred call it places in our hearts... a call that is meant to nudge us into God’s kingdom of loving intent.

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### One Year Bible, February 18

In today's reading from Mark, it's hard not to notice the clarity with which evil spirits identify and cry out their witness to Jesus. Debby Hughes pointed it out from Mark 1:23-24, in our Bible study yesterday. "Evil has no problem recognizing Jesus or the ultimate good," and Jesus, clearly could know, name, and command the evil, but people, regular people, seem ill-equipped to notice and name evil (or even Jesus as good when he is not working a miracle). Today in Mark 3:11 we have, "Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.'" But Jesus won't let them spread the word. He orders the silence of evil spirits. They are not the witnesses Jesus is preparing to speak of him. Evil voices are told to be still. Does Jesus prepare us to NOT be still, to dare to speak up?

As we continue this Lenten journey what might this mean to us? Evil exists, but it is hard for us to see. Jesus has 20/20 clarity for evil, but we do not. And yet it is the human condition to be engaged in a struggle with evil whether we recognize it or not. Jesus who walks before us in everything was, Scripture explains, tempted by the devil in the desert before he began his earthly ministry. In our most recently read version from Mark, (February 15, Mark 1:12-13) there are no details, but earlier in the year, January 3, we read Matthew's version which contains all the devil's snaky bending of Scripture to try to trick Jesus into a misstep. The devil can quote Scripture, but Jesus sees to the heart of the text... clarifying the call to relationship with God.

Maybe key to recognizing evil is understanding if a call moves us closer to God, closer to pure love with others, or to jockeying for position, attempting to prove ourselves or to diminishing another. As Jesus was tempted, we will be too, in our lives and in this Lenten journey. Jesus taught us to pray not to be led into temptation, but to be delivered from evil. We continue to require God's deliverance. Scripture (if we continue to read it and let the questions that arise open us) gives glimpses of truth. The Holy Spirit is, after all, the Spirit of Truth. (John 16:13) and the devil is the father of lies (John 8:44). Just as we read in the first account of Jesus in the desert, evil can use snippets of truth, pieces of Scripture, and weave them into a misleading lie. So maybe, like those Hebrews in Exodus, on their own desert journey, we too have to learn there are no shortcuts to discipleship. We have to keep following, keep learning more about Scripture, and dare to move closer to the One who sees the path most clearly.

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### One Year Bible, February 19

Did you ever marvel at what a bad farmer God seems to be in the parable of the sower? Have you ever planted a garden or observed typical farming practices? Have you *ever* seen farmers, who earn their living planting huge acreages or even backyard gardeners cast seed out into roadways, rock piles or thorn bushes? I haven't and I'm pretty sure no one did that even two thousand years ago. Likewise, remember the parable of the lost sheep? It would have been whacko for a shepherd to leave an entire flock to search for a stray. It simply would not have been cost effective. A shepherd or farmer with such wild practices would not have been able to put food on the table for long. That is probably an aspect of these parables that made the stories stick with people. God is not like us.

God is wildly extravagant in the parable of the sower...leaving no ground absent of seed. And the shepherd left no daredevil or oblivious sheep alone...even a single stray was carefully carried home. That speaks of mind-boggling resources, energy, and care. Is it wasteful? Is it beyond our ability to emulate? Should we even aspire to such practices?

When Jesus explains the parable of the sower to his disciples, it is clear we are not invited to see ourselves, in the context of the story, as God, but as *receivers* of the seed-word of God. And soil does not whip itself into fertility any more than it sows seed. It is up to the sower to ensure the condition of the soil. So, what does that mean when God's word takes root in us? Should we be puffed up at our own fruitfulness? Probably not. In the context of the parable, it's an unearned blessing of being in the right place at the right time.

One thing I noticed at our camp on a lake in Northern Maine, was the relentless fruitfulness of God's planting "failures". On one large flattish giant granite bolder rising out of the middle of our lake, there is a tiny tree growing, with roots in a crevice. The crevice has been fertilized by many "failures" of other seeds that have blown out to the middle of the lake, tried to set roots, died, and provided a bit more organic material for the next seedling, until finally this little tree could begin growing... it has lasted some years now. It will die too, but it will leave that granite bolder, more fertile still. Eventually, understanding geology, the whole lake will someday be a meadow, if we don't obliterate this entire planet with our short-term thinking about only ourselves. God's purposes and plantings occur with the infinite resources and infinite love of an unlimited Creator and grower of our souls. God's intent for us, will always pick us up and carry us home in the arms of our good shepherd. We may wander, we may fail, we may not be able to take all of God's goodness in *yet*, but this Lent we are called to press on. God's plan wastes nothing... certainly not!

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### One Year Bible, February 21, 2021

Is twelve years a long time? The One Year Bible reading today has the stories of the woman who had been suffering bleeding (thus making her “unclean” and requiring social isolation) and a young girl who was twelve years old and dying. Twelve years... is it a long time?

For a woman who'd tried everything, spent everything, desperately seeking healing, twelve years was an eternity. We know a little about social isolation during these pandemic days... we've been at it for a year now. One year. Now try and imagine the social distancing she was required to endure for TWELVE YEARS... excluded from celebrations, religious gatherings, even basic socializing with friends. Twelve years was so much more than she could tolerate for even one more day. She risked everything to force her way through a crowd and dare to reach out and actually touch a strange man in her condition! Twelve years had been horrifically long.

But for parents whose precious child had only had twelve years of life... how long did twelve years seem? Crushing, heartbreakingly, intolerably short! The girl's father was so broken by the prospect of losing her after only twelve years that he raced to Jesus (whom other synagogue leaders would plot to kill) and even when he saw that Jesus had become “unclean” through contact with the bleeding woman... and even when the synagogue leader brought Jesus to his house and they were met with news that the girl had already died... twelve years was an impossible limit to accept and he went with Jesus and his wife into the child's room with desperate hope in his heart. Twelve years simply could not be all there was! Twelve years was horrifically short.

We have these stories together in Scripture for a reason. When folks protest unjust and racist systems in our country, where depending on skin color some people literally get away with murder, are protesters pushing for too much too fast? Should they be more patient? When immigrants to our country who have fled deadly circumstances in their home countries are told to come back later, how long should they wait before trying for safety? When little ones are taken from their mothers how long is too long to endure these separations? How did Jesus measure time?

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### One Year Bible, February 22, 2021

In today's reading from Mark Jesus says, "Only in his own house is a prophet without honor." And then Scripture tells us, "He could not do any miracles there, *except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them*. And he was amazed at their lack of faith." All I can think is that, for those "few sick people" and their loved ones the *non-miracles* must have felt pretty miraculous. So, in a situation where folks were lacking in faith, in a place where Jesus was unable to do miracles, miracles happened. Even in his hometown, miracles were, in truth, unavoidable.

If God incarnate found the hometown crowd, his own relatives, challenging to impress, we should not be surprised by our difficulties. Getting folks who knew us when we were young to see our developed talents, to hear our fresh insights or appreciate our adult knowledge and capabilities is such a common struggle that the Scriptural quote about a prophet in his hometown is well remembered and repeated. In this sensitive area it may be some comfort to know Jesus has gone before us in that difficulty.

But Jesus' model is not to quit. He did use his abilities where the overall response was bleak, but where nevertheless some good could be done. Even in a place that failed to offer honor, Jesus offered healing and some people were healed. Some lives were changed.

Remember the story about thousands of starfish washed up on the seashore, dying in the sun, and a man was picking up starfish and throwing them back to the water and safety? The story says another man saw his efforts and said, "Why do you bother? How can you possibly make a difference for all these starfish?" The first man bent down and picked up another starfish, threw it back to the water and answered, "Well, I made a difference for that one." Perhaps the message of Jesus in his hometown is that we don't have to fix everything to make a difference. And perhaps unbridled approval is not the best test of value.

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### One Year Bible, February 23, 2021

There are a LOT of things that are difficult about reading the Old Testament... many passages are never read in church. One of these is Leviticus 14:49-53. I am NOT recommending that if you haven't yet read this passage that you go to it now. Honestly, it is one of those passages that are exquisitely painful to read. Two little birds... one is killed, and the other is abused and terrified, then set free and tada... a house that was "unclean" is made "clean". Sheesh. Did God REALLY want such a thing? According to the book of Leviticus, God gave these bizarre directions to Moses and Aaron to help the Hebrews sanctify as "pure" a house that had previously been restricted due to mildew issues.

As near as I can tell, there is no good way to explain this horrifying request "from God". Glenn Miller, who is a former professor of mine when I attended Bangor Theological Seminary, and current Baptist minister (but not one of *those* Baptists... you know the folks whose rules are different from our rules) explains passages like this by pointing out that the Christian church has rules too, and not all of them "make sense". For example, he says, some Christian churches require fasting before participating in communion while others do not. Religious practices and cultures all have rules under which they operate and many of the restrictions to which we consent heighten our appreciation of the meaning of the practice to which these rules are attached. One concept he suggests we may need to accept in the final analysis is that we will never understand or be able to justify to our current understanding why every "rule" or passage among the people from whom we inherited faith ever came to be. We may never understand all of Scripture, but it is possible, Glenn says, that failing to understand, we can nevertheless use Scripture as a ladder through which we can ascend to "heaven's gate". Somehow the climb, even in the steep, twisty places that make little or no sense can strengthen us for the One who calls us to keep climbing.

I frequently conclude in these spots the deepest inner meaning is that sometimes, maybe often even, we can misunderstand what God is communicating. Perhaps, we can cling to God's love and hold our understanding of God's rules loosely.

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### One Year Bible, February 24, 2021

The “good church people” are after Jesus again (and not in a good way). They are looking for nits to pick and they find some. The disciples aren’t using proper handwashing technique. They are not living in the prescribed “clean” ways. They want Jesus to explain this shocking laxity, but he is having none of it. He is outraged and calls those “good church people” hypocrites because they are scrupulous about minutia, but as to the overarching holiness code’s connection to God’s purpose, they are adept at providing workarounds... maintaining the façade but gutting the loving point.

Jesus says that these outer details, cleanliness of food, hand washing, etc. are much ado about nothing. Jesus says it is not what goes *inside* a person that causes uncleanness; it’s what *comes out of a person* that determines their true cleanliness. Our own thoughts, intentions, actions, and speech are what either corrupts or cleanses us, not the rules we use to hem one another in.

Scripture reports that Jesus said, “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can make them ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach and then out of his body.” And then it adds, “In saying this Jesus declared all foods ‘clean’.” The Jewish Annotated New Testament suggests that rather than simply ending kosher laws, “... the saying may reflect an older Jewish apocalyptic tradition concerning the elimination of impurity at the end of time.” And it references Zechariah 14:20-21 which speaks of the ultimate holiness of every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah being sacred to the Lord... the ordinary becomes extraordinary as time moves into sanctity that will no longer be restrained.

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### One Year Bible, February 25, 2021

Just yesterday we read about Jesus saying it is not what is outside a person that can make them ‘unclean’ by going in them, but rather it is what comes out of a person that makes them ‘unclean’... he warned about evil thoughts, slander and a bunch of really worse things. But today some sweet mother comes pleading for help for her little daughter. She falls at Jesus’ feet, pleading him to free the little one from demon possession. We know he’s an ace at that. Remember the demons that were so many they called themselves “Legion” when Jesus sent them packing? So what comes out of Jesus when the desperate mom cries for help?

“Dog.” He calls her a dog! Is this even possible? Jesus! How can this even be happening, especially when he has just told us that whatever comes out of a person is what is significant, and what comes out of Jesus? “Dog.”

Biblical scholars have stood on their heads through the centuries trying to explain this. They try to say he used the “diminutive” form of the word dog and what he really was talking about is a cute, little pet dog. Ask any woman if there is a “polite way” to be called a dog. Scripture makes it clear that the woman is “other,” not one of the Hebrew people. So, does that make it all okay? Jesus is God’s call to the Jews, right? Can a gentile just step in?

Remember the desperate father, who didn’t care if he was a synagogue leader and Jesus was an officially suspect healer and didn’t care that he witnessed Jesus become ritually unclean before his eyes? Remember the father who didn’t care about anything except finding a way to help his daughter live? This desperate mother, on the floor at Jesus feet, has that power-filled love for her daughter. She will endure anything, even insults, to get her precious child the healing she needs.

That woman, like Stacy Abrams who lost an election but transformed the senate by carrying the state of Georgia home in the end, reframed everything. “God’s abundance is so overwhelming,” the mother said, “That there is always more than enough at the table... *even under the table*,” she said. And Jesus acknowledged her teaching of truth. Jesus healed from God’s abundance of love.

So, was Jesus wrong to say what he did? Did Jesus allow an outsider, a female outsider, to teach him? Did the woman provide the first opening for Christ’s salvation to be carried to us? Did Jesus know the woman’s strength and love and provide her an opening to witness to a truth we all needed to hear? The questions bubble up with life that brings healing still.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 1, 2021

Today's reading included a memorable quote about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Folks have stood on their heads trying to explain how such a thing could be possible. The bottom line and ridiculously obvious answer is that it's impossible. Rich people do not get into heaven. Period.

I did a children's time about this. Little ones had zero problem with the concept. This probably also helps explain why Jesus said we needed to become like little children if we wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven. They have an easier time with basic concepts... because there are fewer preconceptions in between them and ideas... in between them and God's call.

For adults we think there HAS to be an escape clause that lets rich people into heaven. We've heard too much prosperity-gospel talk. We like to believe that God gives us rewards, nice houses, nice cars, and good health if we are good people. We like to think we DESERVE the good things we have. So sure, we think, it would be HARD to get a camel through the eye of a needle, but perhaps we just need a really small camel and a really big needle. Many of us who have been in church for a long time have heard Biblical scholars posit that a particularly low gate into Jerusalem was called "the needle" and camels had to get on their knees to crawl through this gate... seriously, adults share this kind of nonsense. No wonder QAnon followers proliferate.

Show children a needle and some thread (that would go through the eye) and then some thick yarn. Ask them if the thread will go through. They will say yes, they've seen it done. Ask them about the yarn. They will immediately size it up and say no. Ask them if you could put a cat through the eye of a needle, ask them about one of the kids, ask them about a camel... By now they are laughing and making their own silly suggestions. They KNOW camels cannot go through the eye of needles.

Then try asking children how much money, how many houses, how many cars people have to have to be rich. They have some fun answers. Ask them how much money they think a person can carry. Then ask them how much money they think a dead person could carry. They know... not any... dead people cannot keep or carry anything. If you had a house, your family, or your friends or maybe even your church get it when you die, because you don't own anything when you die. Tell them what Jesus said about camels and needles and rich people and heaven. They see it... impossible... silly to talk about.

At the end of our lives, we can leave behind... a lot or a little... of material substance, but what we take when we stand before God is equaled out by death. No rich people will ever enter heaven because the second you die; you don't own anything. Jesus told his disciples about camels and needles, rich people, and heaven because a young man had changed his mind about becoming a disciple when Jesus said, he'd have to give up all he had. Stuff so easily becomes a stumbling block.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 2, 2021

In today's reading from Mark 10, A man who was blind hollered, as Jesus was entering Jericho, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. He makes no assumptions. Many of us assume we know what is best for other people, what would help them best. Jesus asks. The man says, "Rabbi, I want to see!"

Jesus' first word as He heals the man is, "**Go,**" and then he adds, "your faith has healed you." What I can't help but notice is that *the man does not go*. Scripture says, at Jesus' words, "Immediately" the man "received his sight *and followed Jesus along the road.*"

This is the truth about Jesus' healing in all our lives. First, God asks us to name what it is that we hope for. Part of praying is to articulate a hope.

When we are healed, Jesus does indeed free us to go. Our articulation of need and willingness to be loosed from what shackles us, can be integral to the healing process. Jesus provides freedom. We are no longer chained to hurt, to harm, to the circumstances that have bound us, restricting our choices. "Go," answered prayers tell us, revealing our new freedom. And then, so like that no longer blind man, we find ourselves moving closer to Jesus.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 3, 2021

As someone pointed out in our Bible study this morning, Led Zeppelin sang about mountains crumbling into the sea. This is a quote from Psalm 46. It is also a quote from Led Zeppelin's song "Thank You." Apparently, Robert Plant wrote this compelling declaration of love in honor of his wife, Maureen Wilson. When Plant wrote, "If the sun refused to shine, I would still be loving you. When mountains crumble to the sea there will still be you and me," I am fairly sure he meant it and couldn't predict that the marriage would fail and that he'd have a son from a brief affair with his wife's sister and then move on to someone else. There was no time for mountain crumbling before his best intentions headed south.

In Psalm 46, we are called to a more enduring love, a love that will NEVER fail us. Psalm 46 reminds us that no matter what end times vision assaults us (and who was not given pause when they saw the graven image of Trump at the CPAC gathering?!) our God will never fail us. We have a safe place, a "fortress", always. We will NOT give way to fear, we are reminded, because "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." If we did not have God, we'd be scared, but with God, we need not fear. Robert Plant might have failed Maureen Wilson, despite beautiful words, but our Creating, Redeeming and Sustaining God, is not going anywhere without us! In our blessed Savior, our hearts and lives are home safe. Always.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 4, 2021

In our reading from Mark today, Jesus is having a dicey word dance with Pharisees. The “good church people” are, clearly, out to get him. He fends them off when they ask by whose authority, he is doing all the acts of healing and teaching in which he engages. He queries them about John the Baptist and the “good church people” are NOT taking a stand on God’s movement within the ministry of John.... NO WAY can they win by answering that one. Scripture clarifies the problem; if they affirmed John, the next obvious question is why didn’t you follow him? If they said John was not an instrument of God’s truth, the people, who believed he was a prophet, would be ballistic. Having asked them to affirm John’s ministry as from God, Jesus was free to refuse to answer their questions when they dodged his query... check.

But the Pharisees and Herodians are not quitters... they come back, trying to cross-examine him about taxes. Jesus asks them for a denarius. As they hand one over, the “good church folks” already “lost”. They just don’t know it yet. The problem with the denarius was that it had a picture of the Roman emperor and as such was, for the Jews, a graven image. The emperor was depicted as a God on the coin. The second they start talking about the legitimacy of paying taxes, the “good church people” are trying to trap Jesus. If he says, “Sure, go ahead,” he will have supported use of graven images (in conflict with the ten commandments). If he says, “Don’t handle this pagan false god!” They can contact the authorities and accuse him of rebellion against Rome. It looks like a no-win situation. But when Jesus needs a denarius to make his point and the “good church people” rather than Jesus or his disciples are the only ones who can come up with one (and they do so immediately), the evidence is clear. The purveyors of graven images, by the evidence they produce, are the Pharisees and Herodians. And Jesus wraps it all up neatly by asking whose picture is on the denarius... of course... it’s Caesar, so Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Checkmate.

Many of us are VERY used to this story. The line that may need to echo in our hearts is the advice to give to God what is God’s. What do we recognize as God’s in our lives and how do we give it to God? What do we do with the financial resources that we have? What do we do with our time? Our thoughts? The things we do... are they honoring God? Are we “good church people” trying to split hairs to put ourselves in the right and send Jesus’ pesky influence packing? Or are we willing to dig in our pockets and our hearts to hand over what must be offered up?

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 6, 2021

Jesus was not a fan of big shows. Our reading from Mark today begins with him criticizing teachers of the law who “like to walk around in flowing robes and... have the most important seats in the synagogues...and for a show make lengthy prayers.” This ought to give pause to all of us pastors who lead worship in long robes... and sit at the front of the sanctuary in what I refer to as the queen chair! (Men may claim king chairs, but you know what I mean... those fancy chairs at the front of churches for worship leaders.)

Having raised five children, I have learned to keep my prayers short. Children are excellent at critiquing worship that reaches or drifts off. And the pandemic has gotten many of us pastors out of the fancy chairs. I preach from a regular chair in my dining room on zoom these days. Honestly, I think the pandemic has forced some deeper understandings that seem more aligned with Jesus’ point about *show* versus *sincerity and compassion*. We’ve had to rethink many things during these painful COVID days (over 365 of them by now!). Every time we are forced to regroup, we have an opportunity to reevaluate what matters, to realign with God’s call to our hearts.

How have we honored and expressed gratitude for God’s grace when the trappings and routines we were used to have been disrupted? Jesus always calls us deeper, inviting us to remember what matters. It’s not the look of liturgical garments, fancy seating, or long prayer, Jesus reminds us in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. If our hearts sing when we see each other’s faces on zoom tiles, we may be closer than we could have imagined to worship that heals and holds us.

What will worship look like as we begin to return to our sanctuaries? Surely there will be changes. Can our coming together again transcend queen chairs and “the way things used to be”? Jesus criticized a form that had become synonymous with “holy” and invited folks to look closer, *to value one another*, acknowledging the generosity and worth of folks who had the least status and net worth. We have missed each other more than we can say. Social distancing has become hard even for our biggest introverts. We are ready to be in the same space again. Jesus invites us to make this space safe for everyone, a place where all of God’s children know themselves cherished... no one needs a queen chair.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 9, 2021

God reaches us wherever we are. Today's Old Testament reading from Numbers 11 shows us that even when we try to avoid God's call, if God is calling, we will pick up... one way or another. God's intent is to call seventy people to receive the Holy Spirit so that there are others empowered to assist Moses in guiding God's people. Moses had cried out to God in our reading, yesterday, that it was simply too hard to carry all these people by himself, "the burden is too heavy for me". So, God asked for, "seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among people... I will come down and speak to you... and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone."

In today's reading, we learn how this plan played out. Most of the guys show up and God comes down in a cloud, talked with Moses and took (as promised) some of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. The result was that they were suddenly able to prophesy. This was not a gift that lasted, it was a one-time manifestation of Grace to reveal that they had, indeed, have received the Holy Spirit. It authenticated that they were chosen by God to lead in support of Moses. But there was a breath-taking catch.

Two guys did not go to the tent of meeting, we don't know why; Scripture just says that they were no-shows. The Holy Spirit, however, DID show up and rested upon the designated seventy ***including the two guys who stayed back at camp***. A young tattle tale runs up complaining, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!" Joshua is outraged and wants to nip this renegade prophesying in the bud. "Moses, my lord," he hollers, "STOP THEM!"

Then we learn why Moses was selected by God in the first place. He calms Joshua right down. "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" Clearly, when God intends to call us, we get the call, no matter how we try to dodge or duck. And just as clearly, we have to notice a quality of leadership that God empowers... God supports us in sharing leadership and in being flexible about how and where leaders pop up. If God reveals God's self through Grace that bubbles up in the most unlikely time and place... in the most unlikely folks... we are called to acknowledge Grace in action. We are called to remember that the Holy Spirit can change everything... even those of us who are trying to duck.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 10 and March 11, 2021

In 2004 Mel Gibson directed a movie called *The Passion of the Christ*. It was hugely popular and lots of good church people attended and claimed that it was one of the most powerful religious experiences they had ever had. I refused to see it. The pressure to go was intense. A number of parishioners at the time thought it was shocking that I was missing this “religious experience”. People offered to go see it again with me. They insisted that I would never REALLY understand the passion of Christ if I didn’t see it. I never did see it and I can assure you, I never will.

One of the arguments for attending the movie is that it made Christ’s suffering palpable in a way the Bible never could. I submit to you that that is only true for folks who don’t actually read the Bible. I offered a study on the passion of Christ. We read, out loud with pauses for prayer in between, all the descriptions of violence in the four Gospels’ depiction of the period from Christ’s arrest to his death. How must that have felt, not just to Jesus, but to his mother and the other women who stood by with hearts torn by pain and love?

The readings from Mark yesterday and today cover this period. Mark 14:53-37. It is hard to read. The desertion, repeated humiliation and cruelty are relentless. Luke’s Gospel offers a shred of warmth when one penitent thief speaks up from a cross beside Jesus’ and asks to be remembered in his kingdom. None of the other Gospels mention even this small trickle of decency. We shouldn’t need a movie to have our hearts powerfully touched by Jesus’ suffering. There is something wrong with us if we are not moved to question why this horrific event happened...to question how such an event can and must change us.

Some of us have seen the video recording of George Floyd’s death. Does that barbaric cruelty move us? Is that event, or perhaps the telling of Breanna Taylor’s slaughter in her own home in the middle of the night for no sane reason, enough to change us? Can we sense the movement of evil as power is abused to crush the life out of a person? Does the fact that Jesus suffered abuse and death at the hands of the “authorities” shape our ability to see right and wrong clearly when another is horrifically harmed, even killed? Does the torture and death of our Savior make any real difference to the choices we make today?

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 12, 2021

I love the end of Mark's Gospel, by which I mean what was probably the original end of Mark's Gospel, not the add-on bit (Mark 16:9-20). I think it packs a powerful punch Easter Sunday to read that the women fled from the tomb. The angel (whom they met in the otherwise empty tomb when they tried to anoint Jesus' body) had told them to bring word to his disciples that, as Jesus had promised, he'd gone on ahead to Galilee and would meet them there. But Mark's Gospel (original ending) says, "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid."

Remember those old Paul Harvey stories? He'd begin a story and then he'd say, "and now for the rest of the story..." He'd be telling this over the radio, and we would wait through a ton of commercial time because of the cliff hanger... we just HAD to know "the rest of the story." His tales always had surprising twists that made the waiting worthwhile and the ordinary person we were hearing about turned out to be someone famous, but we NEVER knew this particular story about them before. Mark's Gospel reads like a Paul Harvey story right up to the cliffhanger part.

"WHAT????!!!!," we find ourselves thinking as we sit, Easter morning in unusually packed churches! "WHAT DO YOU MEAN THEY SAID NOTHING TO ANYONE???" How did it get in the New Testament then? How did we come to be here?? There is definitely more to this story! Actually, that is why this is usually NOT the version of the first Easter that we hear about in church Easter morning. Unless I am preaching.

I love it because of the fact *that there is a VERY IMPORTANT "rest of the story" to which our presence* in church, and hopefully elsewhere each day of our lives, *bears testimony*. Clearly, they DID tell someone. We can imagine how that might have happened, the way really important information we are too stunned to share widely is always shared... person by person, one trusted friend or family member is told and they in turn, just have to tell, in confidence, another person... one by one and the circle widens. This is still the most effective way to share our experiences of the risen Christ.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 13, 2021

Silence... in the first chapter of Luke, is it a punishment or a gift? It reads a bit like a punishment when Zechariah is visited by an angel of the Lord in the temple and disbelieves the promise that he and Elizabeth will have a son whom they should call John. Can we blame Zachariah for wanting to ask questions? He and his wife were past the time when they could reasonably expect to welcome a child. Those of us who have either had fertility issues ourselves or have dear friends who have endured this torturous rollercoaster of “trying” and failing to conceive or carry a child to term have little wonder that after such painfilled years, Zachariah would want a little more detail. How could he be sure? No way was he going to grieve Sarah with one more false hope!

When he asks the angel, how he could be *sure* of this promise, the angel offers no fancy explanation or signs... except for the sign of silence. “And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.” It reads, at first pass as a punishment, but I think it had to have been the perfect blessing for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Scripture says she, herself, remained in seclusion for the first five months of her pregnancy. The two, who had grieved so long together, could now lean into a miracle together. Zechariah was given a blessing of unavoidable silence. He had the quiet necessary to let his heart grow into this great joy. He didn’t have to worry about saying the wrong thing to Sarah (sometimes dicey with hormonal pregnant women) because *he couldn’t say anything*. For once he would be able to listen to *her* words, *her* thoughts and he could add his own silent prayers of support. He didn’t have to be the religious leader, explaining ad nauseum to others... he could just *be*. He could focus on listening and leaning into the miracle that was growing in his own household.

We have three more weeks before Easter. How might some silence help us lean into the miracle that Easter continues to be in our lives? Instead of imagining what we will say to ourselves or others about our Lenten experience, how might we soak up the gift of silence, and simple *being*? John the Baptist came to prepare a path... a way to help people turn their lives around so that they could receive the Messiah. This pandemic has been a punishing experience, even for those of us who have enjoyed good health and safe homes; but is there a way we can incorporate the slower times social distancing creates, to cherish the silences and grow in them? The thing about the miracles God gives us is that they come again and again. Can we accept the gift of silence long enough to listen and lean in?

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 14, 2021

I adore everything about the story of Elizabeth and Mary. It is such a clear movement of the Holy Spirit. Mary has just learned that, as an unmarried young woman, she's becoming pregnant. This was life-threatening for a woman who, while betrothed, had not had sexual relations with her espoused. Of course, mystically inseminating a virgin is an act of God, but the integral plan for loving support is at least as stunning to me. The same angel who delivers a message to Mary about bearing a son of God immediately follows up with word about Elizabeth's pregnancy. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, is now six months pregnant. With this nudge that is just where Mary goes.

Mary needs a safe, welcoming place for her first trimester. There was zero opportunity to wonder where that could be because news of the pregnancy was coupled with news of a haven. And this is exactly how God's blessings work. Elizabeth had the support of Mary as she prepared for the birth of John. Mary had an opportunity to be sheltered by loving family and to witness childbirth, in preparation of her own dicey circumstances for delivery. If we look in our life-trials, we will be able to observe God weaving our lives together with friends and support for the most challenging parts of the journey. We are never forsaken. There is always a way through no way.

**One Year Bible, March 15, 2021**

Today's story of the talking donkey is odd. Yesterday, in Numbers 22:20, God said to Balaam, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you." Now today, in Numbers 22:22, we read, "But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him." What the heck?! Isn't Balaam just following the instructions he received from God a MERE TWO VERSES AGO! Even those of us with short attention spans find it hard to miss this point!

Next animal cruelty creeps in. The donkey sees the angel, even though Balaam cannot, and she keeps dodging the confrontation in an effort to keep Balaam safe. Repeatedly the poor donkey swerves aside and each time Balaam beats her with his staff for refusing his expectation that she must move ahead. Finally, having run out of directions in which to swerve she simply lays down underneath him. He's furious and sets about beating her wildly. At this point God gives the long-suffering animal the ability to verbally defend herself. She asks WHY he is doing this to her. And he tells her (still not seeing the angel) that she's made a fool of him for refusing direction, repeatedly, and if he had a sword, he would kill her!

She reasons with him, asking if she was not the faithful donkey he'd been riding for years. Then she asks if such disobedience is typical. He has to answer no and immediately God opens his eyes so he too can see the angel with a sword drawn. The angel asks him why he has been so heartless to his donkey, explaining that if not for her Balaam would have been killed. Balaam, face down on the ground at this point, offers to go back home. The angel tells him to keep going, but to only say what God wants him to say.... *which was the original instruction*. Why threaten to kill him, only to say the same thing AGAIN??

It makes no sense until we remember that this is the same God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. It was odd, wasn't it, seeing a bush, apparently on fire, but not consumed? The oddness drew Moses closer. That is when God called him to the big rescue mission of bringing the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Perhaps God's choice of sending an angel, whose presence would be revealed, first, by *oddness* is God's preferred method of ensuring that God's emissary would be able to follow instructions. Balaam was a prophet, but a non-Israelite... not a prophet of God, but of false Gods. Perhaps God was training Balaam to pay close attention. Balaam needed to learn to pay attention to the nudges. If Balaam was going to speak for God, *he would need to learn to listen to God*. Odd differences, he needed to learn, could flag communication from God. Perhaps we listen best by learning to attend to the ways God calls us through differences. Are we curious? Good! Let's move closer.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 16, 2021, AND a WORD ABOUT LGBTQ JUSTICE!

In today's reading from Luke, we read about the angels announcing the Messiah's birth to a bunch of shepherds out in fields watching their sheep. This MATTERS. God did NOT send out birth announcements to the synagogue leaders or to the residents of the palace in Jerusalem. The angels came to shepherds out working another nightshift among the smelly sheep. The culture at the time was pretty suspicious of shepherds. They generally stayed away from "polite" society. They bathed infrequently. They visited town infrequently... they kept to themselves and the sheep. If they could have lived an easier life, they would have. This was what was left to them. God's angels came specifically to these folks.

The angels told them not to be afraid because they were getting "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." But how many people heard it first? The shepherds, period. And what did this news do, even BEFORE they came to the holy child? It empowered them. As soon as the angels left, the shepherds found themselves not just left with news; they were also left with enough courage and self-worth (despite cultural messages to the contrary) that they went into town to see this glorious happening for themselves. The angels had told them what to look for and they followed those directions and they brought themselves into the presence of Christ.

The shepherds also did not fail to get the word out. Scripture says, "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." Mary, herself, "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Those faithful witnesses, received, responded, and shared. Who could have done better?

Many of our congregants at the United Church of Christ in New Smyrna Beach, and indeed, folks all over the world, and not just Catholics, are currently reeling from the horrific recent pronouncement of Pope Francis. He is not our religious leader, nevertheless, we had grown to hope for more from him. There have been numerous statements that encouraged the belief that times were changing, that maybe the Catholic church would go so far as to endorse civil unions (always, at best, a second-class attempt at "separate but equal" ... which, as in issues of racial equality, never proved equal). But as the Washington Post reported, "Monday, Francis definitively signaled the limits to his reformist intentions, signing off on a Vatican decree that

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

reaffirms old church teaching and bars priests from blessing same-sex unions.” He reaffirmed same sex relationships as a “sin”. A door slammed in the face of many hopeful people... told to step back, as shepherds were, in Jesus’ day, time and time again. It would help if Catholicism was alone in this, but many conservative protestant churches are totally on board. And people die because of this. Others remain the walking wounded.

Did Jesus EVER reject folks with a same-sex attraction? No. Pure and simple, NO. Furthermore, he *did* reference Sodom and Gomorrah and he made clear that their sin was a failure of hospitality, NOT homosexuality. So those of us who are allies for beloved friends and family members in wonderful same sex relationships and marriages must continue to push back HARD against the LIE that homosexuality and gender differences are anything but beautiful examples of our Creator’s beloved diversity. YOU! You shepherd, you transgendered person, you same-sex oriented person, you bisexual person, YOU, fearfully and wonderfully made person, YOU are a child of God and God’s angels have a message for YOU that no pope or ANY human can ever take away! Good news of Great JOY! God seeks and holds you still. Night shift/day shift, homosexual, heterosexual, LGBTQ... or letter we haven’t started using... YOU are beloved and welcomed into the full life of Christ’s body the church. Find a church that understands this. YOU ARE LOVED!

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 17, 2021

I love the story of Anna today. (Luke 2:36-38) Scripture makes it clear that she has been in the temple worshipping night and day, fasting and praying for YEARS. Surely this devout woman had seen many parents come to consecrate their firstborn son in the temple and to offer a sacrifice. Day after day, for many years this scene had been repeated. How did Anna KNOW that Jesus was special, that he among all these years of consecrated babies, was, the child meant for “all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem”?

Simeon, another elderly person, had noted the same thing in yesterday’s reading. (Luke 2:25-35) Simeon didn’t live in the temple like Anna. Scripture says he was, “moved by the Spirit” to go to the temple, at just the moment Mary and Joseph were arriving with baby Jesus and he KNEW that he was seeing “the Lord’s Christ”. How did he trust that this child at this moment was the ONE for whom he waited?

I have always liked hearing about these dear old folks. I find increased interest as the years go by for me and I’m becoming one of the old folks. Anna and Simeon had a few things in common. First, Scripture clarifies that they were both devout, they’d made a practice over years and years, of turning their hearts to God. That’s another thing they had in common... years and years. They had presumably learned something about God’s nudges over years of attentiveness. The third thing they shared was an ability to respond when the Spirit moved them. Simeon picked himself up and went to the temple when the Spirit called and Anna, already onsite, recognized when the Spirit nudged her to see the wonder in a poor, ordinary looking couple and their regular looking baby. The Spirit opened her eyes to the WHOLE truth right there in the temple.

Apparently, it takes practice, but we can learn to experience the Holy Spirit. Like Simeon and Anna, we can learn to feel nudges and recognize the presence of Christ in the most surprising places... even in a church!

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 19, 2021

What's in a name? In today's reading from Luke there is a l-o-n-g list of names. Those of us are reading the One Year Bible have been reading lists of names... so many names. We are used to the lists in the Old Testament, but today we have a l-o-n-g list in the New Testament. The list of Jesus' genealogy, but for those of us who have read the Gospel of Matthew, we have to notice it is not the same. People who try to take the Bible literally repeatedly crash into contradictions. Folks who try to take the Bible literally suggest that one genealogy is for Joseph and the other is for Mary, but that is not what the Gospels say. Both Matthew and Luke claim to trace Jesus' ancestry through his earthly father, Joseph, but, of course, they are not the same lists. Names are not a perfect match at all... even Joseph's father is different in Luke from Joseph's father in Matthew and that is certainly recent enough in the genealogy for the difference to be startling.

When the Gospels are organized chronologically, Biblical scholars tell us the order would be Mark, first, then Matthew, then Luke and last John. Mark has no genealogy. The first recorded Gospel just starts Jesus' story with Jesus meeting up with John the Baptist and beginning his adult ministry. Matthew, the next recorded, begins with a genealogical list that includes women, foreign women, who are integral to God's purpose... weaving Holy purpose with surprising female lives. Those who are outside the circle, are revealed as essential to God's plan. Mathew begins the genealogical list with Abraham, the first to hear a call to the ONE true God. Luke's Gospel blows way past Abraham to Adam, God's first crated human, so the lineage begins way before Abraham, with Adam, the first created human. The final Gospel, John's, blows past Adam to the dawn of creation BEFORE the first named human... to the time when God's Spirit moved over the waters, calling into being all that is. John's Gospel reminds us that beyond all origin stories, there is Christ, from the beginning.

Four Gospels and four ways of understanding Jesus' beginning among us. Jesus', genealogy is uncertain. Two Gospels have genealogies that don't match. Two Gospels omit the tangled origin. Do we care? Should we care? Maybe trying to nail Jesus down is not a job for folks who cherish Christ's resurrection. Perhaps the point of the story for us is more about living into our part, letting our lived discipleship leave a trail for our children and children's children. Maybe it is the genealogy of faithfulness that *follows us* that matters more than the one that precedes us.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 20, 2021

Jesus, in Luke 4:1-13, is “tempted” by the devil. He certainly doesn’t sound tempted, though, does he? Jesus deftly fends off every devilish thrust with the ease of a ninja. This is a perfect example of how Bible study can help us. We have to notice the apt citation of Scripture each time Jesus rebuffs the slick offers to run amok. Scripture is a shield that protects him every time.

Eventually, the devil tries to beat Jesus at his own game, trucking out a nifty quote himself, “For it is written...” the devil says, using Scripture in his final attempt to trick Jesus into proving himself to the devil’s standard. But Jesus knows who he is. Jesus has nothing to prove.

There are three important take-aways in this exchange. First, Scripture is an excellent defense when we are hard pressed. It lets us reframe our circumstances so that we can remain aligned with God’s purpose for our lives.

Second, while Scripture is an empowering help to us, it can be perverted when it is twisted out of context. Even the devil, we have to remember, can quote Scripture. A Biblical text divorced from a dynamic loving relationship with God is poison. Context is everything if we hope to use Scripture for healing purposes.

Thirdly, a child of God has nothing to prove. “If you are the son of God...” the devil said, trying to insinuate self-doubt or an expectation that Jesus must measure up to a test or standard that is not from God. Jesus knew better, and we must always know better than this too. The forces of evil continue to invite comparisons and “tests”. But when our lives are joined to Christ, we are in, there is no other hurdle or proof that is needed. We are worthy of love. Each of us becomes a child of God, made perfect, not because we are so great, but because our God is.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 21, 2021

Jesus called Simon away from fishing, but, WOW, Jesus was actually the best fisher ever. Simon, a pro, had been fishing all night and hadn't caught a single fish. Then Jesus came along, commandeered Simon's boat for preaching and afterwards Jesus showed Simon how to fish. Even though Simon fished day after day for a living, when Jesus offered advice, Simon said he'd try it... just because Jesus asked him to. The sermon Jesus preached was that good... it nudged Simon to try... to listen to Jesus, right there in the boat... with the setting of his nets. He explains to Jesus that he's fished these waters to the best of his abilities, but because Jesus asks, he will try again. Jesus calls and Simon answers. Answering changes everything.

Even though there have been no fish all night long, with Jesus beside him, Simon takes in so many fish he can't do it alone and has to call in an extra boat. Simon is overwhelmed by this sea change of fortune and asks Jesus to step away because he is a sinful man. Luckily for Simon and us, Jesus is experienced with sinful folks... Simon and we will fit right in!

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 22, 2021

One of my very favorite Bible stories (Luke 5:17-26) is the one about the paralytic whose friends lug him in to see Jesus. They want him healed. They carry him from wherever he lives to where Jesus is talking and healing. The crowd is too crazy-big... there is no way they can get him close enough for Jesus to touch him. But I'm telling you, some of us have friends like this and it is a miracle of God's love! Those friends will not take no for an answer... they can't push the paralytic through the crowd so they lug him up onto the roof AND THEN THEY PULL APART THE ROOF SO THEY CAN LOWER HIM THROUGH THE ROOF DOWN INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE CROWD RIGHT IN FRONT OF JESUS!

I delight in imagining that scene because it has to have been WILD. What are the odds that the homeowners and their friends quietly thought to themselves, "Oh look, some guys are tearing apart our roof; well, that will be more natural light in the living room. Nice!" Zero chance, right? There would have been angry yelling; folks were probably running out to stop them. Was there a fight right there on the roof? Maybe. Stuff must have fallen on the crowd below. Do we imagine they took the ceiling fragments bonking them on the head and dust getting in their eyes quietly? I don't. And the poor guy on the mat! How did he even feel about being in the center of the mayhem?

We don't know much about that guy, the paralytic. But we DO know a lot about his friends. They loved him beyond measure, and they were willing to try absolutely everything, even wild crazy stuff to bring him a chance, just a chance. These are EXACTLY the kind of folks you want praying for you when times are hard. Your prayer warriors have to be folks that will not give up!

Scripture says, "When Jesus saw THEIR faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'" We don't even know if the paralytic on the mat had so much as a scrap of faith. Maybe he was in the depths of despair. Maybe he gave up things like hope and faith a long time ago. Lots of times we tell people that if they have enough faith they'll be healed. We don't know if this guy had even a speck of faith, because Jesus is not looking at the guy who is paralyzed, but at his friends who are the OPOSITE of paralyzed. They are in full faith-in-action mode. That is what Jesus sees. And that is all that is necessary for a miracle. Friends who will not quit and are prepared to go the distance... even if there is yelling.

P.S. And I like to think the friends went back to fix the roof later... and the no longer paralytic could have helped!

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 23, 2021

Today's psalm 66 verse 18 really caught my heart. I happened to be reading an NIV translation and it said, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." In the NRSV translation says, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart." I don't know about you, but, for me, "sin" is more visceral... "iniquity" seems a little too posh to be a real threat. Although, obviously, that is just a sign of inadequate word sense. The NLT does a nice job, "If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." That sounds more practical and points toward a critical aspect of prayer... owning the ways one has gone wrong when one asks God for help. But is that possible? Can I do that with humble regularity? Are the most insidious sins-iniquities-screwups-injustices-*results of unfair privilege* even possible to discern? Can I confess what I can't see? And are there hidden places in my heart (to me, not God) where I am hanging onto wrong-headedness, hard-heartedness that I resist opening to the light of God's truth? And why am I more comfortable when Scripture makes me question God than when it makes me question myself?

This week we are trying to prepare our hearts in the week of Lent that immediately precedes Holy Week for taking in this sort of question... the kind of question that makes me consider what part my sin might play in the torture and murder of Christ. In churches where Passion Sunday is relived year after year, it is the role of the congregation to shout, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" I always have refused to do that because I am firmly against the death penalty. I write letters to congress people and have never wanted someone killed in my life! (Although I must admit to a sketchy ambivalence toward a few politicians' exposure to and consequences from COVID infections.) I think it is fair to say that I cannot imagine myself EVER shouting for someone's death. But I'm forced to consider, how my peace with certain injustices, how what I've become inured to, may have a cherished place in my heart because it is unexamined when I come before God. What if instead of yelling, "Crucify Him!" I would have figured, "Well this is just too big a problem to tackle right now," and kept quiet.?

So today, I am asking for God's help with open hearted confession. I'm asking to be better prepared to acknowledge sins of omission. I don't want to cherish them... confessing a need to notice the sins that, while too big for me to tackle, are the perfect size for my work to be joined to the work of God among us all. Forgive me and guide me, in Your name, Christ.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, Marche 24, 2021

Proverbs 11:27, “He who seeks good finds goodwill, but evil comes to him who searches for it.” Well, it is hard to argue with this. Sophocles said something similar, “Look and you will find it—what is unsought will go undetected.” And Mr. Roger’s mother encouraged him on a similar vein, “Look for the helpers.” People who look for good in even challenging situations have been able to find it. In our deepest struggles, gratitude, finding things for which to offer thanks, can change everything. Truly, there is much that is wrong and heartbreaking in this world, but as we learn to seek out the good, we find God moving and beckoning to us.

### One Year Bible, March 25, 2021

Yesterday in Proverbs we read that, “He who seeks good finds goodwill...” and suffice it to say that if one is looking for the opposite of good, that’s what turns up. In our One Year Bible reading from Deuteronomy 4 today Moses explains that even when people mess up (and it is clear that they will... they have so many times before), even at the place of failure and despair, Moses, speaking for God, reminds them, “But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

If right from there... where we are now... we seek God with all our heart and all our soul... there God will be, “For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon...” Phew! Asking our all is a lot... but a God Who never gives up on us, Who always stands at the ready when we come looking? *What could we, would we give* to find Her...even (maybe especially) **now**?

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 26, 2021

Earlier this week in a zoom Bible study someone mentioned that the Bible is big on things happening in threes. They had noticed that the devil (in Luke 4:1-13) had made three attempts to “tempt” Jesus and that the number 3 recurs a lot in Scripture. (In both the Old and New Testaments) Bible.org has an extensive look at the number three in the Bible. (<https://bible.org/seriespage/3-use-three-bible>) And I remembered the discussion of threes when, today, we read about Jesus’ heart going out to the widow in Nain, whose only son is being carried out, dead, from the city gate. He tells her not to cry and then raises her son from the dead. I had to notice *this is one of three times in Scripture where we read about Jesus raising someone from the dead*. He raised Lazarus (only in John 11), Jairus’ daughter (Matthew 9, Mark 5, Luke 8), and the widow’s son in Nain (only in Luke 7). So, one of the resurrection stories occurs in three Gospels. Today’s story of the widow’s only son being raised only occurs once... but it is one of three New Testament stories of resurrection which occur at Jesus’ word.

Interestingly, there are also three stories of resurrection in the Old Testament. Elijah raises a widow from Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:17-24, Elisha raises the son of a Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:18-37, also, in 2 Kings 13:20-21, an Israelite man is resurrected when he is thrown in a cave where his body touches Elisha’s bones. So, three resurrection stories in the Old Testament.

However, the fourth story of resurrection (found in all four Gospels) is the one upon which we hang our hope and trust. After three days in the tomb Jesus was resurrected on Easter. That’s the biggest resurrection story we have, and it is the deepest mystery of all. We can puzzle over numbers all we want... Peter would deny Jesus three times, there were three crosses on that hill at Golgotha, Jesus would ask Peter three times if he loved him, but what this all means to us goes way beyond the numbers. There is no numerology that will make the resurrection more meaningful.

Soon we will remember the resurrected Christ saying Mary’s name and that is how she recognizes him. She knows him as soon as he shows she is known to him. Other disciples will recognize him in the breaking of the bread... the table where we remember we all are called to join and belong. Today when we read about the widow in Nain whose only son had died, Scripture says Jesus’ heart went out to her. Perhaps that heart connection with the heart of God is always what resurrection is about... throughout the ages, Easter Sunday, and today as we dare to be made alive in Love that changes everything.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible, March 27, 2021

Two passages claim my heart today. I love the reading from Deuteronomy 8:17-18, “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.” The passage goes on to make clear that all we have and our *very ability* to earn it is God’s gift to us. Neglecting this truth will put us on shaky ground. All we have is the result of God’s largess. We don’t truly earn or deserve anything.

Some of us work wicked hard. Some of us have studied hard and have overcome obstacles too numerous to list. Nevertheless, our ability to meet the challenges and reap rewards is not actually based on us. We may participate in God’s plan, but we haven’t designed it. And as we learn more about white privilege and the horrific legacy of racism embedded in our nation’s bones, we begin to see that there are forces opposing God’s plan for the equality of each human before God. To humbly accept God’s movement in everything we have it is essential to avoid standing between others and the provisions God sends. God led the Israelites out of enslavement and just as surely God can lead us out of enslavement to a racist past that poisons our present.

And Proverbs 12:1 is perfect. The ability to learn and stand corrected is essential. We must learn to reexamine history without rose colored glasses. “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid.” Let’s try harder not to be stupid.

## LENTEN DEVOTIONALS FOR 2021 by Rev. Dr. Diane Langworthy

### One Year Bible March 30 and 31, 2021

On the 30<sup>th</sup> there was an interesting reading at the beginning of Deuteronomy 15. The passage talked about a method for cancelling debt for fellow Israelites every seven years. In verse 4 of this passage it says, “There should be no poor among you.” Verse 7 elaborates, “If there is a poor man among your brothers [*wait a minute what happened to “there should be no poor among you”?*] ... do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be open handed and freely lend him whatever he needs.” Then in verse 11, we read, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.” There should be no poor... when there are poor do this... there will always be poor people. Sigh, that went south quickly!

Nevertheless, clearly God’s intent for God’s people is not just empathetic thought, but empathetic action. “Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.” (Deuteronomy 15:10) The thought continues in God’s instructions (today from Deuteronomy 17:14-20) regarding the type of king the Israelites will someday have. “He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.” And further, a future king must, “not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or the left.” Fairness and equality matter before a loving God. Leaders are not exempt.

As many of you, I have been watching the heart wrenching trial of ex-police officer Derek Chauvin. I have said, it feels like the stations of the cross playing out before me. Horrific abuse of power, humiliating, vicious violence culminating in unwarranted death. The people who watched this unfold are traumatized and felt powerless to do anything but cry out and witness. What does it mean to us in light of God’s clear call for equal treatment under the law? As we journey through this Holy Week, how do we see Christ’s suffering connecting to the suffering of all persons abused and killed through callous disregard of humanity? How does God’s claim on our hearts and lives effect our response to suffering this day?

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### One Year Bible, April 1, 2021

Today there is an apt piece of advice about how you can figure out if a prophet's message REALLY comes from God. I have loved its practical, foolproof nature. And since today is April Fools' Day I decided that it is the perfect time to share a foolproof test for prophets. Deuteronomy 19:22 explains, "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him."

We can see how this has played out in our time. Pat Robertson has made many predictions, "The Lord has told me..." There's a link outlining his many glorious, flopped predictions. (Google: Pat Robertson's annual predictions, greatest flops) Clinton was supposed to be elected to only one term and Trump was destined by "God" to have two. Clearly you don't have to be afraid of Pat Robertson. But, putting current examples aside, people throughout Scripture and the ages following have stood up claiming to speak for God. Whom do we trust? Deuteronomy still has strong advice; all people leave a trail of choices and claims. As we look back some things become more obvious.

In our reading from Luke chapter 9, Jesus makes a prediction about being betrayed. This Maundy Thursday, we looked back on how that prediction held up. Over two thousand years later we can still affirm the truth, but at the time his disciples did not want to acknowledge it. They got sidetracked arguing about which one of them would turn out to be the greatest. Jesus took a little child to stand beside him and said, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all--- he is the greatest."

That is another powerful test for identifying God's truth. Are the vulnerable receiving loving care? Is the hierarchy of "importance" obliterated? Are servants the greatest? No April fools here. If love is the message, God's word is being spoken.

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### One Year Bible, April 2, 2021

Yesterday I spoke with my daughter Whitney. My twelve-year-old grandson and she had had a rough patch as he tried to go out the door to the bus in just a t-shirt. They live in Northern Maine, and it was 19 degrees outside. She was insisting he wear at least an extra thick hoodie on top of the t-shirt. He was beside himself because it was so “warm out”. (We raise them tough in Northern Maine!) Finally, he did put on a hoodie, but it was no small feat to ensure that. I laughed because I used to have these same verbal wrestling matches with Whitney and her siblings. It is “cool” (literally of course!) for kids in Northern Maine to run around oblivious to the weather... especially once the temperature gets above zero.

This came to mind as I read Deuteronomy 21:18-21. “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them...” Surely this passage addresses a more serious situation than balking at a sweatshirt, but for particularly difficult children, the biblical solution is “stoning”. I suppose that could cut short some debates... listen up or we’ll get the stones!

I think about this this Good Friday. Today we remember, in a special way, Jesus’ death on a cross. We understand that He died for each and every one of us... parents hitting tough patches with children, children hitting tough patches with parents... and folks whose way has been more seriously lost. As I’ve mentioned, I have been watching the trial of Derek Chauvin as a spiritual devotion. It connects me to Jesus’ own public humiliation, pain, and murder. How, I keep asking myself, must the cross change us? Last night at our Maundy Thursday service the benediction used the words, “May Jesus Christ, Who for our sake became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, keep you and strengthen you this night and forever more.” How do we become obedient to Christ’s call to love so that, as Jesus led, we avoid power over and learn the ways that make for peace? How can we learn to use power with? When push came to shove Holy Week, our Savior did neither. The last words last night were, “Go in peace.”

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### One Year Bible, April 3, 2021

In Deuteronomy 23:3 we read that, “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, even down to the tenth generation.” This is amazing to those of us who know that Ruth, who has her own book in the Bible, is a Moabite. She followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem because she insisted on keeping their connection of love. (If you are reading the One Year Bible you will get to the beginning of this cool story on May 5<sup>th</sup>.) So, wait, we have to ask, WHAT DO YOU MEAN NO MOABITE??? WHAT ABOUT RUTH???

Yes, Ruth somehow slipped in... deep enough into the story of God’s people, deep enough into the assembly of the Lord, that SHE GETS HER OWN BOOK IN THE OLD TESTAMENT!!! And, honestly, that isn’t the half of it. Ruth marries a VERY wealthy man, Boaz, but that is not nearly the end of her story. Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David. For those of you who are counting, that makes King David a third generation Moabite. And St. Paul testifies about David in Acts 13:22 “God testified concerning him [King David]: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man of my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’” King David is a third generation Moabite. What does this say to us about Scriptural admonitions about who is sinful and deserves to be excluded?

This is why we read the One Year Bible. There is a lot in that Bible and the parts must be connected if we have any hope of understanding the big picture. We have to notice that again, and again, people who “should” be out are woven in, integral to God’s healing message of love and hope.

Today’s New Testament reading included Jesus’ story of the “Good Samaritan”. It’s helpful if we understand that Samaritans were on the “outs” when Jesus told this story. Furthermore, “good church people” in the story fail. A priest and a Levite walk by the wounded man, but not the Samaritan. Samaritan, in our day is synonymous with “good guy”, but in Jesus’ time it meant “suspect, half-Jewish outsider.” God (Jesus came to help us see) has always about gathering in folks who have been pushed aside or out. Who are we to exclude, EVER? Tomorrow we will celebrate Easter, Jesus’ proof that God can do the impossible... including provide a way out of no-way and a way deep into God’s abiding love for each and every one.