

Lent
1998 - 2013



**Forty Meditations on the Scripture
for the Journey Toward Easter**

**Written by Members
of
The Church of the Ascension**

IN THE PAST, the Spiritual Development Committee has toyed with the idea of publishing a Lenten Devotional booklet using a previous year's submissions. In doing so, it allows the reader to not only reflect on parishioners' thoughts and perceptions from the past, but also to recognize and remember members of our parish family who are no longer with us.

The committee has chosen 2013 as our year of reflection on past devotions and is re-publishing Ascension's Lenten Devotional booklet from 1998. The year 1998 is of great significance to us because fifteen years ago we were also participating in a rector search, or a "year of transition," as we are currently again in 2013.

We hope you will enjoy reading the devotions from fifteen years ago. You will see familiar names, as well as names you may not recognize. Please know that everyone featured in 1998 was a faithful member of our parish and shared the same passion and energy for Ascension as we do today.

Preface from Lent 1998

GATHERED HERE ARE 40 MEDITATIONS, one for each day of Lent (not including Sundays, which, technically, are feast days). The Evangelism Committee of the Church of the Ascension has invited parishioners to take a day's readings, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, and write a short meditation. These meditations are intended to be read quietly or aloud, or to be studied in conjunction with the evening Eucharist, daily at 6 P.M. at the Church of the Ascension (Fifth Avenue at Tenth Street). Or simply to be opened at random — during Lent or throughout the year.

The points of view and insights contained within this booklet are as diverse as they are wonderful, and I hope you will enjoy reading them as much as I have. The minds behind the faces in the pews are a delight with which to become better acquainted.

Lent can seem, by its nature, a dark time in the church. It is a time of self-examination and self-denial. A great sadness seems to weigh on us as we await the Resurrection and the triumph of Easter Sunday. How fortunate we are not to have to navigate this path alone. How fortunate we are to have Christian fellowship and the love of God to guide us along our way. May these meditations keep you company on your journey, and provoke you to think and rejoice and question and weep and giggle and pray. And may we rest assured that this year, as every year, our sadness is simply a door we must walk through.

Let's walk through it together.

*Psalm 103**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

OUR SAVIOR, who calls us always to draw nearer, closer still in the movement that informs our lives, sustain us in our struggle to give ourselves wholly to thee. Help us, we pray, to increasingly make all that we are called to be have only thee at our center.

T.S. Eliot perceives this convergence as "the heart of light, the silence." With humility and immense yearning, we would learn in this time of preparation to approach that light. Help us, we pray, to distance ourselves from those worldly preoccupations that merely reflect our need for affirmation from others.

May we replace our hunger for approbation with a new-found strength to fully fix our souls on thee, putting aside the personas with which we have sought to establish identities apart from what thou would have us be.

As you made us free, help us to choose more worthy things on which to focus. Give us the courage to try to understand what becoming genuinely loving entails, moment by moment—what it asks of us.

Help us, we pray, to cast ourselves utterly on thy unflinching mercy, to give ourselves only to those things which may bring joy to thee. And once we have learned to be with thee, close to thy heart, help us to carry that light into the world in an ever-widening circle.

Finally, may we accept that only love illuminates the shadows. In the days of holy preparation that lie ahead, help us to place our treasure where it originated: in thy love. Slowly, haltingly, let us learn to love one another.

Help us to know that thou will provide the light. Amen.

*Psalm 1**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**Luke 9:18-25*

AS I LIVE, by choice, in the sophisticated, educated and often jaded society that prevails in this city, friends are surprised that I maintain the spiritual beliefs that were instilled in me at an early age. What can an intelligent, thinking person gain from adhering to old stories and rituals when science provides insight into our creation, psychology explains our behavior, and popular moral standards fluctuate like the stock exchange? And yet, I still go to church.

The human heart hasn't changed much over the course of millennia, as far as I can tell, and the lessons and advice we receive in church are every bit as relevant today as they were 100, 500 or 1,000 years ago. Whether expressed as a commandment from God to the Hebrews or as an invitation to follow Christ, the message of reward for those who are faithful to God's laws and the ultimate suffering of those who are not is universally applicable to everyone, regardless of religious beliefs.

It doesn't take blind faith to recognize the inherent value of Christ's teachings; qualities like generosity, compassion and love are promoted by the religious, agnostic and atheist alike as necessary components of healthy human society. It is surely possible to exercise these qualities without believing in God or belonging to a church. But why choose a solitary path when the wisdom that sustained hundreds of generations before us can also serve as our guide too?

Psalm 51:1-10

Isaiah 58:1-9a

Matthew 9:10-17

IT'S CURIOUS that traditional Lenten behavior should be self-centered — as in self-abasement, penance, self-denial. Sections of scripture, such as the three for today, clearly enjoin us to not settle for self-involvement and sacrifice, but to make ourselves useful: *"to loose the bonds of wickedness ... to share your bread with the hungry."*

Isaiah has numerous suggestions as to how we should care for others, and he mocks those who *"fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with the fist."*

The psalmist, too, from the depths of his distress, observes, *"thou hast no delight in sacrifice."*

Christ (in Matthew) abjures us to not fast and *"mourn,"* but to get the lead out and take a sinner to lunch.

So how did we come up with the dour approach to Lent, as opposed to the doer alternative?

Psalm 86:1-11

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Luke 5:27-32

MY WORK REQUIRES ME to travel frequently to many different countries, so I often find myself in foreign places on Sundays — sometimes not in Christian countries. Last December in Moslem Kuala Lumpur, I saw all kinds of Christmas decorations and heard Christmas songs and carols everywhere.

Consequently, this has given me the opportunity to worship in many different churches around the world. Some experiences are very special, such as the opportunity to attend services at St. Margaret's in London where Ascension's friend Canon Gray is the rector, and I was allowed to go “behind the scenes” at Westminster Abbey after the service.

Some experiences are memorable as when, on a Sunday in Prague when the temperature was below freezing, I attended the 11 A.M. service at the unheated Anglican church and only removed my gloves to receive the Eucharist.

I miss not being able to attend services at Ascension more often. But I have come to the realization that, no matter where in the world I am, I am never alone. God is always with me. He is my protector and my companion. He is giving me the opportunity to worship him at many different churches, in many different countries, and have some very special experiences.

Today's psalm says it better than I can: *“I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify thy name forever.”*

Psalm 19:7-14

Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18

Matthew 25:31-46

TO THE HEBREWS HUDDLED in the desert against the forbidding heights of Mt. Sinai, the God who had liberated them from the Egyptians presented the Law. These Ten Commandments were a code for relating to both God and man. The psalmist, in a later generation, says the Law “*revives the soul, sweeter than honey, finer than gold.*”

In Christ, we have the Law taken a step further. He refined it, as a tool for us to reach out to those around us in all walks of life. For he charged us to “*feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, clothe the naked.*” Our Lord tells us that if we do these things, we do them also to him, and we will become inheritors of the Kingdom. What a promise! His pronouncements are a logical extension of the Law from Mt. Sinai.

During this Lenten period, we should make an earnest attempt to do what our Lord has asked of us — to reach out to those about us and clearly attempt to build bridges with honesty and sincerity. Our Lord has given us a great blueprint for living in harmony, trust, compassion, understanding and most of all, in love toward one another. Indeed, a difficult task, but clearly, not impossible. If we don't try, then we lose the opportunity to live by our Lord's instruction and reap his promises.

Moreover, by following the Law, we can set a standard for our life which, the psalmist tells us, will be happier, sweeter and more fulfilling.

Let us put it to the test during this Lenten season and throughout the long year. Let us join together on this voyage of discovery of a deeper, more edifying life experience.

Psalm 34:15-22

Isaiah 55:6-11

Matthew 6:7-15

A YOUNG GIRL in Thornton Wilder's beautiful play *Our Town* tells her brother of a letter a friend received:

Rebecca: The address was like this: It said Jane Crofut; the Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America...

George: What's funny about that?

Rebecca: But listen, it's not finished: The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God. That's what it said on the envelope.

George: What do you know!

Rebecca: And the postman brought it just the same.

Has it ever occurred to you that we all exist in the mind of God? Have you ever tried to understand God's caring for us, each one a pinpoint on the earth, which is itself less than a pinpoint in limitless space?

The mind aches from trying to take it in. Better not try, in my view. Better to just live our daily lives by faith and the quiet acceptance of words like today's passages: "*Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all,*" and "*Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.*"

Christ himself, in the passage from Matthew, helps us to come closer to God in what we call the Lord's Prayer.

Psalm 51:11-18

Jonah 3:1-10

Luke 11:29-32

WE FIND, NOT SURPRISINGLY, THE THEME of repentance in all three readings. The psalm is lyrical, highly rhythmic and poetic in the King James translation, and the parallelisms in verses 11 and 12 make repentance actually an expression of desire and a reaching toward divine union. “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with thy free spirit.”

The selection from Jonah may inspire mixed feelings. Did we really expect the king and people of Nineveh to repent? The news sounds good, but in the next chapter we find the prophet angry that God had chosen to save the city. Jonah, not a very sympathetic character in this context, is rebuked, and thus ends the book. We can, to be sure, extract a sort of pop psychology moral about self-righteousness. But such platitudes are seldom rewarding, and the passage is disquieting.

Even more perplexing is the Gospel according to Luke. How can Jonah, the Queen of Sheba, and the Son of Man be “signs”? Aren't they people? The Greek text reads “semion,” which can mean a distinguishing mark, an identification, a signal to action, even a foreshadowing of the future. Christ calls his contemporaries a “wicked” or “evil” generation, but the Greek term can also mean “oppressed.” Jonah preached repentance, and the Queen sought wisdom. “What is here,” we are told, is greater than Jonah or Solomon.

“What is here” is clearly Christ, and are we not being called to respond with that joyous and anticipatory repentance that must precede a closer relationship with God?

Psalm 138

Esther (Apocrypha) 14:1-6, 12-14

Matthew 7:7-12

THE PASSAGE FROM MATTHEW'S GOSPEL is part of his account of the Sermon on the Mount, the great cornerstone of Christ's teaching and theology. In verse 12, Christ instructs us "...whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." With this statement, the Sermon on the Mount reaches its highest point. The Rev. William Barclay of Trinity College, Glasgow, wrote in his analysis of Matthew, published in 1956: "This saying is the topmost peak of social ethics, and the Everest of all ethical teaching."

And here we are, near the beginning of Lent, reminded of this scripture which surely all of us heard for the first time years ago, and have heard countless times since. How appropriate to have this teaching of Christ included in our Lenten journey. As we experience this period of self-reflection, let us all keep in mind as fellow human beings, fellow New Yorkers, and fellow Church of the Ascension parishioners, what Christ is commanding us to do with these words.

*Psalm 130**Ezekiel 18:21-28**Matthew 5:20-26*

LET ISRAEL HOPE IN THE LORD: *for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption.* (King James Version)

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption. (Revised Standard Version)

In most parts of the Bible, the King James Version speaks to me more movingly than the Revised Standard Version, and Psalm 130 is no exception. However, I sometimes gain interesting and valuable insights by comparing the older and more poetic translation with the new and presumably more accurate one.

Here the psalmist declares that with the Lord there is mercy (or steadfast love), and we are reminded that it is not only in the New Testament that God is represented as loving and merciful. In fact, the juxtaposition of this psalm with this lesson from St. Matthew gives us a jolt if we are inclined to think of the God of the Old Testament as a stern and vengeful deity and the New Testament God as more easygoing. Jesus tells us in the Gospel lesson that unless we are kind and patient with others, we are in danger of hell fire.

Certainly the New Testament contains much emphasis on God's mercy, but it also exhorts us — frequently and urgently — to get along with our fellow men. A little later on in St. Matthew, we hear Jesus say, “*For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*”

*Psalm 119:1-8**Deuteronomy 26:16-19**Matthew 5:43-48*

YOU THEREFORE, MUST BE AS PERFECT, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Ah, the perennial reminder: You fall short; keep going! There is always more slope ahead, even when the top seems near, for the Father is perfection, and by definition, none can approach his perfection. Why such an impossible goal?

And yet, in art such perfection is a way of life. When writing a piece of music, I am haunted by an ineffable sense of what it needs to be, the natural form for that particular music. I write and write, strip away and strip away, seeking the essence, often racking my brain for what should be obvious but is still hidden.

When a work is premiered I get a clearer view of what I was after. (It feels more like “what was after me.”) I clarify the piece so players and audience will more immediately grasp what I have tried to understand and convey.

If my work develops from piece to piece, it is because the conceptions become clearer and stronger. But the process of composing is always driven by the feeling that I must attain an ideal that has somehow occurred to me. I apply a perfectionism that can prevent me from being completely satisfied with a finished piece, but that never prevents me from continuing in the quest or recognizing that the process itself is deeply sustaining.

Can I apply the same focus and passion to my relations with other people and God?

*Psalm 79:1-9**Daniel 9:3-10**Luke 6:27-38*

BOTH PSALM 79 AND DANIEL are about asking God for his compassion and forgiveness after the people of Israel have gone against God's wishes. Daniel prays to the Lord, asking him for forgiveness because the people *"have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from the commandments and ordinances."* The Lord is merciful and forgiving. We expect this from God, for, after all, he is God. As man, we know we have a hard time doing what God has asked of us. We expect to ask for forgiveness, for, after all, we do sin from time to time.

Then we read Luke, when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us. He issues one command after another that sounds impossible to fulfill. Love our enemies? After what they have done to us? Our natural reaction is the opposite: to treat them badly and get even with them.

But wait! In Daniel we expect God to forgive us. So if we are made in the image of God, we should do likewise. In this time of Lent, let's all try even harder to be good to each other: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

*Psalm 50:7-15, 22-24**Isaiah 1:2-4, 16-20**Matthew 23:1-12*

I AM A TRUE PRODUCT of the Me Generation, whose litany has been: “I’ll do it alone / No help needed / Can’t listen to you as I am too busy with myself and my worldly goals.”

This mantra had encased my nascent spiritual life in a polished and seemingly impregnable cocoon, and therefore, isolated, I believed my relationship with God to be unique.

I use the past tense for the above because a small crack was rent in that shiny surface, widening just a bit more after meditating on today’s readings.

These three works from disparate periods conjoin beautifully, forming a concise and clear summation of the simplicity of our relationship with God.

Listening to God and acting upon his word is the crux of the matter. God’s message is loud and clear:

- Praise God for he is glorious and omnipotent.
- Rejoice because he has made a covenant with man and has sealed it with a new sacrifice of thanksgiving.
- Cease doing evil and help the oppressed.
- Put aside our ostentatious trappings and put ourselves last, not first, in our dealings with others.

The summation of these commands is simply to listen, for if you are willing and obedient, you will know what to do and will have the strength to do it.

Perhaps this Lent we can try to simply listen and listen simply.

*Psalm 31:9-16**Jeremiah 18:1-11, 18-20**Matthew 20:17-28*

HAVE YOU EVER FELT like that clay pot? Looking around and thinking, hey I'm a pretty good pot. I'm pleasant to look at; I hold cold, clean water for people to drink; I am always available whenever I'm needed. I'm doing just what a pot should do. And I'm feeling pretty good about myself. Then along comes the potter to take a look at you. He carefully examines your inside and your outside, and says, "Well, this is a nice pot, but it's not quite what I created it to be." And there you go, back onto the wheel, being reshaped.

There's an Amy Grant song that says, "All I ever have to be is what You made me to be." True. But it's not always easy to know what that is. I find that my image of myself is not always in line with what God's image of me seems to be. Likewise, my image of God is not always in line with who God really is. Much like James and John's mother, seeking something from a worldly "king-to-be" and missing the reality before her. How disappointed people must have been when Jesus was captured and crucified. Consider how many people, in addition to the Apostles, followed him and how few came together after Easter Day.

When God doesn't live up to our expectations, it is because our expectations are of the image we have created, not of the reality. The truly joyful news is that God continues to shape us into beings who can see that reality.

Psalm 1

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Luke 16:19-31

THE BOY ASKED, “Why doesn’t God send Jesus back to earth again to remove all doubt?”

He took the thought no further. What would he have wanted? That Jesus come to Iowa, climb the steps to his parents’ porch, and knock on his door?

If they fed the 5,000 on catfish and Wonder Bread in Dostal’s pasture, would the boy have investigated the perimeter for signs of caterers’ trucks? How great a bonfire of abandoned crutches and canes would it take to substantiate the miracle of healing? Would a resurrection at the Emerson School playground have convinced the world?

Still, the question lingers.

The man finds the answer in Luke. Jesus himself provides it, in a parable. A man is howling in agony from hell. Oh, God, he pleads, send one of the dead who is with you in heaven to my brothers on earth, so they can know the truth of your word and repent.

But God refuses. *“They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.”*

Is the boy listening?

Psalm 105:16-22

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-28

Matthew 21:33-43

JOSEPH SOLD INTO SLAVERY, the messengers and then the son of the vineyard owner beaten and killed....

These readings describe in vivid detail the jealousy and greed of humanity at its worst. However, taken one step further, Joseph's enslavement led to Moses and the Promised Land, and the slaughtered Son led to the Resurrection and our Christian faith and worship.

Now, I am not one of those people who believes that God sends tough times to get our attention or to punish us. I do think, however, that while God does not cause these things, he is willing to give us the very best help he can if we are willing to look for it.

So it is really important for me to try and develop the most positive attitude I can so that I am alert for that help. Time and again I am forced to face the fact that my attitude is the thing that holds me back from the help and sustenance that I need. Like Joseph, I don't know what I am going to find in my future. Egypt! Twenty years ago I was led to a new and totally unexpected life. Would I have chosen this if left to my own devices? Of course not. Who knew that it would turn out so wonderfully?

So although humanity's faults seem to lead to disaster, God guides, comforts, and helps us. As one of my favorite hymns says:

“O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.”

Amen.

*Psalm 103:1-12**Micah 7:14-15, 18-20**Luke 15:11-32*

THE STORY JESUS TELLS of the Prodigal Son may be the first parable I remember. No wonder: As the oldest of two sons, I'm sure I saw myself in the story's elder brother, whose little brother got away with everything and received a party as punishment. I wasn't completely certain what "loose living" was, exactly, but I knew it must describe my brother's annoying behavior perfectly — or surely would someday, just as soon as he learned to drive.

In the years since, however, I've come to feel very differently about my younger brother — in fact, he somehow became one of the greatest guys I know. (And I can even grudgingly admit his intelligence and sense of humor aren't solely the result of genetics!) As hard as he works as a television producer, I now realize he's more responsible than most people. Two weeks of every month, he has to be away from home, flying to some mountain range or Arctic base camp. Last year, he came close to hypothermia just north of the Brooks Range in Alaska. The year before, he was bluff-charged by a bear. Every time I know he's on a trip, I say a quick prayer that God keep him from harm and bring him home safe.

I try to turn my family and friends over to God, knowing he will do far more good for them than my late-night fears and worries will ever do. But I read Jesus' parable these days and wonder if the elder brother ever worried about the younger even though our brothers are away from home for very different reasons. Did he ever learn that his brother was more important than the rules he'd always abided by? I wish by the end he'd followed his father's example and said: "I'm glad you're home safe. I love you."

*Psalm 42:1-7**2 Kings 5:1-15b**Luke 4:23-30*

PLAYING THE HOMETOWN CROWD is not always easy. What stirred the congregation at Nazareth into such a rage? I have never heard a sermon so offensive that the preacher deserved to be hurled from a cliff. Perhaps if Jesus had been from a faraway town or a noted rabbi down from Jerusalem, his reception would have been different. The sudden fury could have come only from people who knew Jesus well.

To his neighbors in Nazareth, Jesus was just another boy who had grown up among them. Naaman, on the other hand, was known as an important man. He, nonetheless, had the humility to listen to his wife's servant — someone with about as much standing in his society as an illegal immigrant has in ours. He also had the humility to undertake a simple act of faith to cure his disease.

God does not always speak through the channels we set up or in the manner we may expect. I am often surprised that the voice of God or the presence of Christ manifests itself in some of the simplest, everyday things and through some of the people I know best.

Psalm 25:3-10

Song of the Three Young Men 2-4, 11-20a

Matthew 18:21-35

REMEMBER NOT THE SINS OF MY YOUTH.” (But how often shall I forgive my brother?) The combined lessons of the day left me with the following impressions:

- We ask God to set up guidelines for us (e.g., “Lead me in thy truth,” “Teach me thy paths,” “Make me know thy ways,” etc.)
- Daily we beg God's forgiveness and remind him of his promises to deliver us in the time of need. (All this despite the fact that we systematically disregard the very guidelines we asked him for in the first place.)
- We ask for (and secretly expect) *carte blanche* forgiveness for ourselves while carefully calculating and cataloging wrongs done to us by others. We are the children of God, and we often react like children — striking out blindly in fear/anger and avoiding responsibility for our actions by pointing a finger at someone else.

Peter asked Jesus: “*How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*” We know the answer to that question by rote — this Lent let us learn it by heart: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Psalm 79:1-6

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 5-9

Matthew 5:17-19

AFTER REVIEWING TODAY'S READINGS, I felt I had been given counsel as to how to create a path toward fulfillment and wholeness. It was a set of instructions that I needed to hear today and need to remind myself of everyday. *"Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live..."* All three readings, from Moses in Deuteronomy to Asaph in Psalm 78 to Matthew, are exhortations on the path to fulfillment and wholeness. "Live by God's law," they cry out in unison.

Deuteronomy counsels further that to have once known and lived this path offers only momentary solace. Here Moses warns of the danger of complacency and arrogance and the need for ever-present diligence: *"...take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart..."*

Each day in my life, despite the knowledge that the only path to wholeness is through God's law, I stray from this path. Though my eyes have told me otherwise, I, at times, believe that I have found a gentler, easier way to fulfillment. But there is no gentler, easier path. From the time of Moses *"till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law till all is accomplished."* This Way is the only path.

Psalm 95:6-11

Jeremiah 7:23-28

Luke 11:14-23

REMEMBER THE CARTOONS that had an angel on the character's right shoulder and a devil on the other? Well, today's readings brought this scenario to mind, however simplistic it may sound.

In all three readings, the people are warned about how their ancestors "stiffened their necks" against God, his prophets, and, of course, against Christ, who warned: *"Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls against house."*

However — even though in the psalm, "Do not harden your hearts," and "They are people whose hearts go astray...they shall not enter my rest," is proclaimed — God also told us (through Jeremiah to the nation of Judah) that if we obey/listen to God no matter what is happening — rather than to our own counsel — we shall always be his people.

The messages in these readings may seem to come from the "punishing God," but I have found that it is much easier to "kneel before the Lord" than have the angel/devil battle rage on. It seems that by having God — *good orderly direction* — take over, many issues seem to miraculously disappear. The added advantage of *not* having such a stiffened neck or a hardened heart is well worth it — don't you think?

Psalm 81:8-14***Hosea 14:1-9******Mark 12:28-34***

YOU ARE NOT FAR from the Kingdom of God,” Jesus tells a questioner in today’s Gospel, unlike our two Old Testament readings, in which Israel seems very far indeed. Yet Hosea and the psalmist are at pains to stress that it is *our* distance from God, not God’s distance from us. Hosea likens God to a foolish lover, longing for the affection of those who carelessly abuse and spurn him. The psalmist strikes the same plaintive note: “*If my people would but listen to me....*”

The Lenten season seems to be about turning down the noise of our secular culture so that we might listen. For only in the silence of prayer and meditation may we hear what God says to us: that our egotistic false selves are a fiction, something we created to cope with being born and growing up in the world with no intimate experience or knowledge of God’s presence in us. And in this silence we may perhaps experience something of our true selves that emanates from God every moment, selves that are distinct from God but not separate from him, and slowly be transformed by his power, relinquishing our self-centered ideas of holiness and goodness.

As Hosea makes clear, everything we need for a joyful spirit is his free gift. All we can do is consent to accept that gift in humility and faith — “*for in Thee the fatherless find a father's love.*”

*Psalm 51:15-20**Hosea 6:1-6**Luke 18:9-14*

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN SURE of my motivation to be baptized, and sure of my motivation to be confirmed in the Episcopal Church and once there to become an acolyte and serve on various committees. But do I sometimes push aside the fact that I wish to glorify him in all these things, and instead wallow in the warmth of self-importance? Do I sometimes yield to the temptation of thinking, as the Pharisee in the Temple, that I'm better than the person next to me on the subway because I'm so involved in the life of my church? Am I quick to mention the shelter program or the food pantry so acquaintances and colleagues can stroke my ego and tell me what a good person I am? Happily, God is present in the Scriptures to guide me back on track when I stray: *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

These passages are wonderful reminders of what is truly important to God and, therefore, important to me. From time to time, I may fall into the indulgence of self-congratulations but I can also bask in self-pity. I look at people who seem so spiritually centered, so sure of their faith, so willing to give of themselves and I despair I will ever be worthy enough in God's eyes. Again, the Lord provides the window through which I can see that comparisons are wasteful, meaningless exercises, because we all have unique gifts to bring. And while there may be some extraordinary people like Mother Teresa, there are many more ordinary people doing the best they can to lead productive, worthwhile lives. Incredibly, God embraces us all, so long as we seek to know him and love him with a steadfast heart.

Psalm 30:1-6, 11-13

Isaiah 65:17-25

John 4:43-54

GOD, YOU HAVE TAUGHT us through your son Jesus Christ that a prophet has no honor in his native place.

Let me honor you, though my heart has been a native place to you; since a child, I have known you through Baptism and the Sacraments.

And you have said, “*Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe.*” Let me believe in you *only* through your promises, words and, above all, your sacrifice for us on the cross. Grant that I should forever recall your admonition to “*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well*” (Matthew 6:33).

Let me reflect, at this special time, on the compassionate thoughts you had for me and all mankind as nails pierced your sacred hands at the Crucifixion.

Amen.

Psalm 46:1-8

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12

John 5:1-18

EARTH CHANGES...MOUNTAINS SHAKE...RIVERS ROAR.”
Amidst the uproar, Psalm 46 says: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*”

What a juxtaposition of thought — strength and refuge! We need the church to provide spiritual shelter and protection from distress. Yet, a comforting place to retreat from “the troubles of the world” is only part of what we need. Today's lessons challenge us to balance our need for refuge with strength of mind and body, enabling us to do God's will in the world. Spiritual strength gives us the courage to stand up against wrongdoing and to fight injustice, as Jesus did.

The psalm promises us that “*There is a river whose streams make glad the City of God.*” In Ezekiel, this river is “*a stagnant water*” that “*has to be passed through.*” Only after enduring stagnant worldly trials and tribulations will the water “*become fresh.*”

It takes strength to survive the "stagnant water" of life.

In John, people walked by troubled water, indifferent to the multitudes of needy people along the way. “*No man put me in the pool and others stepped before me,*” said an invalid. Can there be refuge where there is indifference?

Christian, in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, thought he could ignore earthly distractions. Yet, he concluded: “The way to the Celestial City lies just through this town...and he who would go to the city, and yet not go through this town must needs go out of the world.”

Let us choose not to “go out of the world.” Let us resolve to seek both refuge and strength in our religion.

Psalm 145:8-19

Isaiah 49:8-15

John 5:19-29

IN TODAY'S LESSONS we read of the constant theme of all Jewish and Christian history: the relationship between God and his people. In Isaiah we witness the people of Israel hearing of the faithfulness of God, but responding that "*The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.*" The Lord responds to the servants unfaithfulness with continued faithfulness: "*Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*"

In Psalm 145 we read of the many sorts of occasion in which the Lord is loving and faithful. We also read what our part of the bargain in this relationship is: "*The Lord is near to those who call upon him, to all who call upon him faithfully.*"

Finally, St. John explains what a faithful calling upon the Lord might look like: "*...he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*"

John's words have particular significance on this day, when we commemorate the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. That moment when our Lord was "conceived by the Holy Ghost" — when the Angel announced unto Mary that she would "conceive by the Holy Ghost" and she did. Mary "heard the word," she believed, and she bore the word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let us, as we question, and search, and wait, join Mary in the eternal refrain: "*Be it unto me, according to thy word.*"

Psalm 106:6-7, 19-23

Exodus 32:7-14

John 5:30-47

ALMIGHTY AND MOST MERCIFUL GOD, drive from us all weakness...”

Obedience, never a word with which I am particularly comfortable, is what is asked for. God has made a promise to Abraham that he will give us eternal life, greater than anything that we can imagine, if we obey him.

The people of Israel following Moses through the desert had a very difficult time grasping this concept. Even after the parting of the Red Sea and the manna and the other marvels that God performed, they greedily disregarded these acts of love. They took it for granted and wanted more.

They had been sustained by God, surviving the great ordeals and hardships of the desert, but they lost their resolve to love and trust in God because of greed and avarice.

In John, Jesus refers to these lessons when he admonishes the disciples for not having the resolve to believe what they had heard and studied — that through Christ they would have eternal life.

During this period of Lent, while we struggle across our own “deserts” in our faith, we can be reassured that God loves us and will bring us through. He will keep his promise. We must have only the resolve to obey him and trust in his love for us.

Psalm 34:15-22

Wisdom 2:1a, 12-24

John 7:12, 10, 25-30

MEMBERSHIP HAS ITS PRIVILEGES; membership has its price."

These words from a sermon this past year accurately portray faith's dual nature. The price of faith is the constant testing we must overcome in our daily existence. I have experienced many tests in my relatively short lifetime: unemployment, betrayal, rejection and the difficulty of forgiving those who have trespassed against me.

After my adult baptism, I had hoped the testing would abate. No such luck. In fact, the testing has increased and seems to take new forms as life progresses. Realistically, my tests (and joys) are no more or less than many in our community, whether at Ascension or next door. Yet I wonder is the price of membership too high? Can faith that is constantly bombarded by the negative variables of existence endure?

On a more positive note, the privilege of faith is echoed in Psalm 34: *"The Lord is close to those whose courage is broken; he saves those whose spirit is crushed; his ears are open to my cry; the Lord delivers the lives of his servants."* It is this privilege, his saving grace, that makes me want to renew my membership through Christ. Membership provides the privilege of a constant dialogue with an entity who listens and will not let the tests of life go unrewarded. Before launching his Cultural Revolution, Mao Tse Tung stated: "After much pain, there is much pleasure." Membership has its price, membership has its privileges.

Psalm 7:6-11

Jeremiah 11:18-20

John 7:37-52

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING is perhaps understood best in the context of the preceding chapters. John announces the Incarnation immediately, and then throughout his early chapters illustrates Jesus' dual nature as both God and man. In John, Jesus announces that he is the Messiah, that he has come to save the world, and that we must be reborn of the spirit through him.

Since he is also Joseph the carpenter's son and he breaks the Sabbath laws, his claim to be from God confuses most and threatens many. Jesus explains his dual nature with metaphorical language, as in the episode of the Samaritan woman at the well — his "*I am the bread of life*" statement and the "*come and drink*" invitation at the beginning of our passage.

Although many of his listeners are convinced, most understand only literal meanings of food and water. Explanations are thus futile, and forebodings of the Crucifixion are strong: Jesus' "*time is not yet come*" (but will come), he will "*go unto him that sent*" him, and he is not taken seriously because "*out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.*" In these chapters we may see then an announcement of our redemption from the Fall despite our inability to comprehend and accept Jesus' sacrifice.

God's righteous anger against the wicked of the Old Testament passages is transformed into the loving sacrifice of God incarnate for a humankind unwilling or unable to understand his message.

*Psalm 23**Susanna (in some Bibles, Daniel 13) 1-9, 15-29, 34-62**John 8:1-11*

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul."

In John, scribes and Pharisees bring before Jesus an adulterous woman. Rather than condemn her, Jesus defends her as he says to those who brought her, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And all the men walked away and Jesus bid her to go and not sin again.

"He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

Susanna's story is one of a woman's great faith in God. Hearing her cries to him as she is about to be wrongfully put to death, God acts by arousing the spirit of Daniel, who proves her innocence.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

The Lord is forgiving, and the Lord is our protector. Through worship and study, may we learn to be more like him.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

*Psalm 102:15-22**Numbers 21:4-9**John 8:21-30*

THESE PASSAGES DESCRIBE God's forgiving nature, his openness to the plights of mankind, and his guiding people to recognize Christ as his representative. Lent is a time of reflection and absolution of one's sins; however, the forgiving of sins is only accomplished through faith in the Lord and acceptance of Christ's words as those of God. These three passages poignantly speak to elements of the Lenten "contemplative process."

In Psalm 102, the Lord's sensitive side is highlighted through his respect for the prayers of the less fortunate and their needs. He also is responsive to the sufferings of prisoners and dying individuals. The Lord, unlike other religious deities, is a God who reaches to the worshipers equally as the worshipers come to the Lord.

Numbers illustrates God's wrath and subsequent forgiving nature. God punishes the people for their ingratitude through fiery serpents, but then delivers forgiveness through the serpent staff that Moses creates upon God's order. The Lenten period is similar: People sin, then reflect and ask God's forgiveness. The modern day "serpents" represent our guilty consciences and remorse.

Finally, in John, Christ delineates the realm he has come from, then contrasts it to the world the Jews originated from. This passage clearly affirms that Christ is the vicarious embodiment of God and emphasizes the importance of having faith in God and Christ's words — the same faith that allows us to bring closure to the Lenten "contemplative process."

Canticle 2 (BCP, p. 49)

Daniel 3:14-20, 24-28

John 8:31-42

TODAY'S LESSON FROM DANIEL is the tale of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that seemed so fantastical in childhood. As an adult, I have to wonder, "Why risk being hurled into a fiery furnace when you could just pretend to worship the golden calf?"

The unfortunate truth is that it's rarely the most attractive option. The passage commands us to leave the safety and security of where we are. To be strong. To risk being unpopular. And even to suffer

Examples abound. Do you occasionally close one eye to unethical situations at work because it pays your bills? Have you laughed at a joke made at a friend's expense in order to fit in? Have you ever made up an excuse to a loved one because it seemed easier than hurting his or her feelings? Our ideals are constantly called into question. And the context is often far more subtle than golden calf vs. death.

But if we are to be martyrs for the truth, how can we be certain of the truth? John tells us that the word of God is a good place to start: "*If you continue in my word...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*"

And so, my meditation for today is this:

God, grant me awareness. Keep my heart and mind open to your teachings. Let the division between truth and falsehood be markedly clear. And grant me the courage to cleave to the truth.

Psalm 105:4-11

Genesis 17:1-8

John 8:51-59

M.F.K. FISHER REMEMBERS A TIME when, on Maundy Thursday, there was in Aix-en-Provence a kind of fiesta of *repositoires*, or Altars of Repose:

Chapels that were forever otherwise closed to the lay public were open that day.... In the small convents and monasteries the whole main altar, with, as I remember it, no candle or flame burning, was turned into a wall, a solid wall, of the most beautiful flowers that could be found.... In the larger churches the main altar was dim, and to the left of it, rising from floor to ceiling, sometimes perhaps thirty feet high, was the same solid mass of blossoms, now mixed all in a riotous jumble of spring, now austere one kind of flower, one color.

In today's passages, there is something of the shock of revelation which those elusive *repositoires* must have held. I can never hear Jesus' great I AM without a kind of internal gasp, a shiver of knowing that glory has been revealed. With Abraham, who bowed to the ground in awe and amazement before the Almighty God of the Covenant, I know that such moments are rare indeed, and not to be trifled with. It is good to be reminded that God is not only the friend and companion of our dailiness, but also a transcendent force beyond all our reckoning, a wonder and a glory elusive to us now, but finally to be revealed. "*Before Abraham was, I AM.*"

Psalm 18:1-7

Jeremiah 20:7-13

John 10:31-42

I *LOVE THEE, O LORD, MY STRENGTH*” These are words of joy — they leap out to me, and I am smiling as I open my arms to receive them. This is God! Perfect love!

Love has always been important to me. Knowing and understanding love is a lifelong project. As a child I used to watch adults and wonder what love was. Perfect love. How I longed (and still long) to give and receive perfect love.

Of course, as I am working in my classroom, I sometimes forget about love and God, and I shoulder the burden of the impossible job of teaching alone. In my distress, I don't call upon the Lord.

As I read Jeremiah, I wish I had lived in “Bible times,” when God spoke to people. I want God to speak to me the way he spoke to the prophets. But of course, he does, and when I take the time to listen, I hear him.

That is what I love about Lent — the meditative inner nature of this season puts quiet spaces between all of my activities that sometimes overwhelm and consume my dialogue with God. Lent's quiet spaces create the loveliness of Lent — hearing the voice of God.

Psalm 85:1-7

Ezekiel 37:21-28

John 11:45-53

WE ARE BUT SIX DAYS AWAY from the Crucifixion. Caiaphas, high priest, has persuaded the Pharisees that by executing Jesus they will keep the Romans at bay. And so now it is just a matter of time. Another human atrocity — the worst atrocity ever — is about to be committed.

Several months ago, moaning to a dear friend about the long history of man's inhumanity to man, I asked her, "Two thousand years and what have we learned?" I went on and on, detailing how I felt about all this. My friend, wise beyond her years, listened to me with her usual patience. When I ran out of breath, she said to me — so simply that I was knocked over — "How do you think God feels?"

In that moment, she laid bare for me her own connection to God. It was a living, breathing thing, as if I were watching a human heart beating. Moreover, I suddenly understood that it is not God's job to make me happy. It is my job to make God happy. By loving him, by loving all of you. I try. I fail. I try again. With your help, with his help, I will. We will. It's the only chance we've got.

Psalm 36:5-10

Isaiah 42:1-9

Hebrews 11:39-12:3

John 12:1-11

LET US ALSO LAY ASIDE every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us....” Easier said than done! How can we “lay aside” our sins, and what is “the race that is set before us”?

During Lent, Christians traditionally attempt to achieve these goals by confession, repentance and sacrifice. But in the busy, larger, not-exclusively-Christian world that we inhabit, Lent can be a difficult time. Do others understand how we feel if we can't share in a colleague's birthday cake if we've given up sweets?

Perhaps we should dwell less on the uniqueness of our Lenten experience and instead understand that all humans need to commit to a cyclical observance of our broken-ness and need for purification.

On Yom Kippur, the Jew neither eats nor drinks anything at all, observing the strictest of fasts, and he spends all his waking hours in prayer. Do I understand or care about my Jewish brethren on that day in October?

Do I understand that perhaps my assistant has given me a project with too many typographical errors because it is the third week of Ramadan and he hasn't eaten anything at all since dawn? Do I care?

Our Lord knows that human beings cannot endure a life-long buildup of sins. But he provides all of us, at different times in the year, with a vehicle by which we can live anew. During this Lent, I am praying that we Christians will persevere in running the race, which I believe to be the “at-one-ment” of humans with God...and with each other.

Psalm 71:1-12

Isaiah 49:1-6

I Corinthians 1:18-31

John 12:37-38, 42-50

IF LAZARUS WERE REALLY DEAD, Christ couldn't have brought him back. He must have been in a deep coma or something. Burning bushes? Loaves and fishes? I don't think so. These colorful stories and hundreds more like them surely were fables designed to enthrall the easily enthralled, not me. I hoped that God existed. But he had not as yet revealed himself to me in any way that I understood. I would figure him out and find my faith on my own in my own good time.

Well, I hadn't figured him out, and my own good time was running out, until the fateful moment not long ago when I finally realized that all my wondering — and my propensity for playing doubting Thomas — had landed me nowhere. I decided to give my restless brain a rest. I stopped thinking about God.

I just let go and allowed myself to feel. In time my heart came to understand that the Scriptures and the liturgy and the music and the art and the fellowship I had rediscovered within the walls of Ascension had not so much offered me answers to profound questions, but had blessed me with beautiful and true ways to perceive the presence of God in my life and to understand Christ's abiding interest in my welfare.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he preaches that we must find God through the surrender of ourselves to God's power. Such a sacrifice is much to ask of the worldly, until you discover how profoundly the awareness of God's presence, in turn, can warm — and transform — your life.

Psalm 69:7-15, 22-23

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Hebrews 9:11-15, 24-28

John 13:21-35

TODAY'S READINGS, three great men are suffering: King David (who is most probably the author of the psalm), Isaiah and Jesus. They have been betrayed, scorned, spit at and shamed for the Lord's sake. Yet they confess confidence in God's presence and seek refuge in his love,

The beauty of these Scriptures seems to tear down our childhood dream of good things happening to good people. These three righteous holy men with wisdom beyond most human beings' had bad things happen to them. Jesus was even perfect — unblemished as the Scriptures document — yet horrible things happened to him.

Very rarely in our day-to-day lives are we scorned for the Lord's sake, but rather challenged in very simple ways to assume an attitude.

Let us reread John 13:34-35. Can you imagine if we could really accept one another in this manner? In very simple ways we could make excuses for our brothers and sisters such as "forgive them Lord for they know not what they are doing." It is quite relevant that Jesus mentions this when he is about to be crucified. More than likely, he is not talking about loving just your friends and family, but about loving your enemies.

The reading may also suggest that it is good for us to love because carrying around angry hearts can be a very heavy load. Our attitude is a choice, and it is the only thing that separates us from hypocrites.

King David and Isaiah reminded us that the Lord is our refuge. It must have been difficult because even they had the need to write these verses.

Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25

Exodus 12:1-14a

I Corinthians 11:23-32

John 13:1-15

ON THE NIGHT BEFORE... “It was as if a shadow passed across the floor in that upper room. I wanted to scream, to stop him, but my lips were fastened shut as if gripped by invisible fingers; I watched in mute silence, an inexpressible grief gripping my heart as he began washing our feet and wiping them with the towel he was wearing. Simon Peter had protested but relented; I too wanted to refuse him, to hold back my feet, thinking that if somehow I could stop him then all that he had foretold might be prevented; if I could cause one dot to remain absent from this script then I could change it. But when he came to me and looked up into my eyes, how could I refuse him? I could only weep; tears rolled down my cheeks. He looked lovingly into my eyes and met my tears with compassion, addressing us all saying, *‘I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done.... You must love one another just as I have loved you.... I will not leave you orphans.’*

“Now we are frightened, and he is alone. I wish I could rest my head upon his bosom once more, once more listen to his sacred heart.”

Psalm 22:1-21

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Hebrews 10:1-25

John 18:1-40, 19:1-37

GOD, WHO NEEDS NOTHING, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them. He creates the universe, already foreseeing — or should we say ‘seeing’? there are no past tenses in God — the buzzing cloud of flies about the cross, the flayed back pressed against the uneven stake, the nails driven through the mesial nerves, the repeated incipient suffocation as the body droops, the repeated torture of back and arms as it is time after time, for breath’s sake, hitched up. If I may dare the biological image, God is a ‘host’ who deliberately creates His own parasites; causes us to be that we may exploit and ‘take advantage of’ Him. Herein is love. This is the diagram of Love Himself, the inventor of all loves.”

— from *The Four Loves*, by C.S. Lewis

The brutal way in which Jesus suffered and died that we may live is the contradiction God used to prove his love for us. This day, some 2,000 years after the Crucifixion, we are flies buzzing about a cross, seeking Jesus as our host, knowing this love is our salvation.

May we always remember this barbarous act of love.

Psalm 130

Job 14:1-14

I Peter: 4:1-8

John 19:38-42

OH, HOW THESE WORDS GRASP YOU and leave a chilling sensation throughout your body. Here it is, written so matter-of-factly: *“Then they took the body of Jesus and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews to bury.”*

It brings an odd feeling because here is our Lord, our Jesus, being treated like any other person who dies.

When one reads this passage, one needs to know and feel this was not an ordinary man. This was not an ordinary burial. This was and is Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Throughout the other passages assigned to Holy Saturday, this rings clear: *“That he no longer should live the rest of time in flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.”*

That has power. That is sacrifice. That is Jesus Christ.

Let us not take for granted what he, Jesus Christ, means to us. Let us always remember what he did for us. And let us see his burial as Joseph of Arimathea did, who feared to make this special, but in his heart knew, indeed, this man was very special.

In Psalm 130, we read about this very thing. We cry unto the Lord. We wait for the Lord. We know his power. We feel his love and trust. *“I wait for you the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.”*

Let us say this again and again. Let us feel this ultimate trust and love in our daily lives. When we pray, when we talk to one another when we look at our families or children — let us know in our hearts the power of Jesus, the specialness of Jesus, and the love we share.

Easter

I got me flowers to straw thy way,
I got me boughs off many a tree,
But thou wast up by break of day,
And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.

The sun arising in the east,
Though he give light, and the east perfume,
If they should offer to contest
With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,
Though many suns to shine endeavor?
We count three hundred, but we miss;
There is but one, and that one ever.

— *George Herbert, 1593-1633*
