

## Ash Wednesday, February 18 – Ezekiel 37:1–3

*Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith, Senior Pastor*

Before you jump into my words, claim the time to read this first scripture of the Lenten season slowly. The passage begins in the valley of dry bones; an appropriate setting for Ash Wednesday, the day in the church calendar when we are challenged to confront our mortality. The charred palms placed upon our foreheads are a reminder that we are each marked for death. The dry bones which are laid out before Ezekiel are not only a reminder of the people's mortality, but also a metaphor for their hopeless living. The Israelites have lost their way, they have worshiped self-made gods, they have failed to love their neighbor, and in this state of sin they feel far from God's provision and protection. The people cry out, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." God asks, "Son of man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel replies, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." This is the dialogue which invites us into the season of Lent. If we come honestly, we know we have sinned; we have failed to love God and our neighbor. We know that sin disrupts our connection with God and destines us for natural and spiritual death. Only God knows if and how our dry bones can live again.

In the weeks ahead we will hear God's answer spoken from the cross. As Jesus speaks his last words he reveals the forgiveness and grace through which our relationship with God can be restored. The savior's words, carried by his final breaths, move over us and invite us to rise up and live in God's favor today and for eternity.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, savior of the world, receive me this day with the mark of death upon my head. You know my sin completely, for nothing is hidden from you. Convict me of the consequences of my sin. Forgive me and fill me with your strength to sin no more. Reshape my sin and fear of mortality into the mark of your victory and source of my salvation, the cross. Amen.**

**Thursday, February 19 - Micah 6:6–8**  
*Roger Bridges, Adult Sunday School Teacher*

What does God want from us? Burnt offerings? Year old calves? A thousand rams? Ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Our firstborn? Micah offers these as possibilities, but he says they are not what God wants. What God wants is for us “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” This sounds pretty plain, but is it? What does it mean to act justly?

Today there is disagreement about what is just. We often look at what is just as being what we like, what we want, what meets our needs. In our history we have justified war, slavery, discrimination, violence, etc. We justify these actions because they get us what we want. Christians have justified these actions even though they are contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

What does it mean to love mercy? We don't have any problem loving mercy when we are the recipient. However, we have problems showing mercy to others. Immigrants, for example. Because they don't look like us, because they have a different language, or different customs or religion, we often do not want them. Do we love them as Jesus loves us? What does it mean to walk humbly with God? Some synonyms for humility are meekness, lowliness, modesty, and submissiveness. We are well aware that we do not deserve the privilege of walking with God. Sometimes we forget that all people are made in the image of God. We are in the image of God. Do we see God in other people? Do other people see God in us?

Our songs of praise to God, our offerings, and our prayers in church are all good. But they are not enough. God wants us to be just, have mercy, and be humble in our relationship with other people, even those not like us.

**Prayer: Father, help me to examine my ways to know if I am giving you what you really want. Amen.**

## Friday, February 20 -Psalm 51:1–12

*Lucas Roe, Worship Team, New Members Class Co-Teacher*

I grew up singing a version of this psalm, a poignant tune matching the pleading tone of the text. I love how bluntly David puts his feelings to and about God into his poetry—rage, despair, distrust, self-justification, but in this case, begging.

At this point, David is sitting in the wreckage of his wrongs. In his confrontation with Nathan, he declared that the consequence for these sins were a fourfold repayment of Uriah's losses and his own execution. Nathan's assurance he would be spared doesn't seem to soften the blow, and wallowing in wretchedness, David apologizes not for his heinous actions but for his heart.

In trying to understand the context better, I read an overview of 1 Samuel (apparently they were fighting a war while this happens? Priorities?? Hello?? Apparently Uriah felt similarly!). It described David's ascendance to the kingship through humility and commitment to God's ways and ideals. Foiling Saul's pride, violence, and covetousness were David's humility, mercy, and gratitude. First in his taking of Bathsheba and then of Uriah's life, David sees his inward being, his secret heart laid bare. He grieves the pride and self-centeredness leaking from him into the world, causing abuse and then deception and finally death. He begs for a renewing of his spirit into something that my Bible translates in a few ways, "right" and "willing," but also "steadfast" and "generous." In knowing God's heart, he rejoices that we aren't abandoned to our pride and misery, but are washed thoroughly in mercy and called to joy in salvation.

**Prayer: Loving and merciful God, teach me true humility. Show me the places in my spirit that I have shut you out or decided I know better. Create in me a clean heart, and put a steadfast and generous spirit in me. Amen.**

**Saturday, February 21- Confession Prayer, Psalm 51:1-17**

*Dan Eschliman, Director of Worship*

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

## **WEEK 1: Monday, February 23 - Luke 23:26–34**

*Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith, Senior Pastor*

**Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”**

For the next six weeks we will take our place just beneath the cross, close enough to hear the final words of our Savior. I am keenly aware of the prominence last words carry in our minds. If we are blessed to share a moment with a loved one in their final days and that one is awake and lucid enough to speak a word of love or wisdom, we will give those words significance for years to come. If a loved one is suffering from terminal agitation and mutters words of frustration or contempt, we will need counseling to shake them.

Our scriptures contain four accounts of Jesus’ hours on the cross. While each author reflects on just a few of the words which were heard on that Friday afternoon they all agree that while Jesus’ body was suffocating under the weight of crucifixion, his mind and his spirit were sharp and clear. Thus, these words are intended to live long and reverberate far in the lives of all who listen.

The first sentence captures what Jesus intends to accomplish with his final monologue. During his mortal years Jesus brought God and humanity together within himself; he was fully human and fully God. Thus, as he speaks this line he can accomplish what no other could. He can beg on behalf of humanity for the forgiveness we don’t know enough to ask for, and pronounce the forgiveness that God alone can give.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Savior of the world, look upon me a sinner, and save me by your grace. Forgive me for the sin I am aware of and the sin I commit in ignorance. Grant me the clarity you embodied on the cross so that I can live in your truth and love. Amen.**

## Tuesday, February 24, -Matthew 18:21–35

*Mary Ellen Wickham, Finance Committee*

There are times when we need to extend grace or forgiveness to someone; and forgiveness is not always easy. Jesus taught us about forgiveness though, through both example and parables. Today's reading from the gospel of Matthew is 'The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.'

*Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother who sins against him. Seven times? he asks. Jesus replies that no, Peter should forgive his brother seventy times seven. Then Jesus tells Peter the story of a king who forgave the debt of his servant, but the servant would not in turn forgive the debt of another man. The king found out and told the servant that he should have given mercy to the other man, just as the king had given mercy to him.*

The lesson that we have been forgiven and therefore we must also forgive others is familiar because it is the same promise we make to God each time we say the Lord's Prayer. Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. As we pray, we acknowledge that God is our Father in heaven, we ask for our daily sustenance, we ask to be forgiven our mistakes, and we ask God that we will not be tempted, but kept out of harm's way. There is only once in the Lord's Prayer where we promise to do anything in return. That is the promise to forgive others, as we have been forgiven.

If forgiveness were easy, I do not think that Jesus would have placed so much emphasis on it in his teachings. When we first remember that God has given us grace and forgiveness, and an example of what forgiveness looks like, through Jesus, then hopefully that will make it easier for us to forgive others. Even if it takes seventy times seven.

**Prayer: Gracious God, instill in me a forgiving heart, so that I may forgive others as you have forgiven me. Amen.**

## Wednesday, February 25 -Psalm 32:1–7

*Wendy Novak, Youth Ministry Team*

We are blessed that God forgives us, we do not need to hide from him. It is hard to accept that at times, and can be so instinctual to hide. God knows us and loves us, sins and all. When we try to hide our sins, we hurt ourselves; it is exhausting to hide who we are or our sins. When we confess our sins, God forgives us immediately. God knows us and forgives us. We don't have to hide from God; we can hide IN God. God is our fortress; he keeps us safe from trouble.

When we hide our sin, we are separating ourselves from God. Carrying our sin around us is painful. The scripture describes the body becoming weak from our “groaning” all day long. When we confess our sins, we experience freedom. Freedom from our sin, freedom from the burden of our sin. We grow closer to God through confession. There is freedom in confessing your sins and not hiding the worst parts of yourself. There is freedom in acknowledging that you need God's help. Confessions free us from the exhaustion of our sin and the broken feeling.

Confession gives us the freedom to be our best selves, and a growth in our relationship with God. God will surround us with songs of deliverance while he protects us. How joyful is that? We will be forgiven and surrounded by songs of deliverance. Confession frees us from the guilt, shame and secrecy of the sin. These things weigh us down, confession frees us.

**Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for forgiving us, for protecting us and surrounding us with songs of deliverance. Help me to take these words from my head to my heart and truly accept your forgiveness. Help me to be genuinely honest with you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

## Thursday, February 26 - Luke 4:16–21

*Tim Haynes, Racial Justice & Reconciliation Team*

When Jesus returned to Nazareth in the early days of his ministry, he read from the scroll of Isaiah (61:1-2, specifically). Isaiah prophesied “good news for the poor,” “freedom for the prisoners,” “sight for the blind,” and “freedom for the oppressed”. As Jesus sat down, he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled.” At first glance this fulfillment of God’s promises may seem like Jesus ministering to the downtrodden masses, but perhaps if we look a bit deeper, we can see how this applies to all of us. Are we not all prisoners to sin and temptation? Are we not all blind to injustice? Are we not all oppressed by our worldly/ human traits? Only by God’s amazing grace are we forgiven. By believing and trusting that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, we are forgiven and freed from the bondage of sin and death. Hopefully we are inspired by God’s forgiveness and his unconditional love for us to study the life of Jesus and attempt to emulate him as we grow in our Christian faith. With that faith and freedom, we can develop understanding, compassion, and unconditional love for each other – our greatest commandment: **Love your neighbors**. We are reminded that ALL people are God’s children, and we all receive his grace and love equally and unconditionally no matter our backgrounds or standing in society.

What wonderful news that God’s promises are fulfilled, but they are just the starting point to developing our faith and unconditional love of our neighbors! We must not only actively reach out to help the vulnerable and marginalized, but also examine our own prejudices so that we can emulate God’s impartiality and unconditional love. Acceptance and respect get us a step closer to welcoming, togetherness, and our end goal of unconditional love for ALL of God’s children.

**Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for your amazing grace and faithfulness to your promises. Guide us as we grow in faith and help us reflect Jesus’ unconditional love to all. Amen.**

## Friday, February 27 -Isaiah 1:16–18

*Will Winans, Middle Schooler*

“Wash and make yourselves clean.” This may make us think that God says we stink and need a bath. But the stink is not the message He is trying to get to us. What He wants us to do is to recognize that we have done wrong and reflect on those actions. The act of “washing” is not to take soap and water to your skin, but to be honest to the Lord. He is willing to forgive you, but only if you confess.

The scripture also says to “take your evil deeds out of my sight” and to “stop doing wrong.” What I believe God is trying to say is that we should try not to do wrong and forgive those who have wronged us. These things could be something as small as forgetting to fully close the refrigerator to something as big as being mean to your best friend.

The scripture then gives us several ways to do right in the world. It tells us to “seek justice” and “defend the oppressed.” Finding out what is right does not just mean following the rules so that you do not get in trouble, but also helping others. You can do this by being there for someone who needs a friend. “Defending the oppressed” just means helping that person who needs help. If you do these things, God says He will “make your sins no longer as red as crimson, but as white as snow.” This shows that God is willing to forgive anyone that recognizes that they have done wrong and does something to help fix it.

**Prayer: Dear Lord, even though we may be mean at times, or forget to close the refrigerator, we know that you will still love us. Please help us feel empowered to help those in need, not just ignore them. We ask that you look over us as we help others in need. We ask that those in need find people who are willing and able to help them. We ask all this in your son’s name Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Saturday, February 28, -Confession Prayer**

*Dan Eschliman, Director of Worship*

God of compassion, in Jesus Christ you did not disdain the company of sinners but welcomed them with love. Look upon us in mercy, we pray. Our sins are more than we can bear; our pasts enslave us; our misdeeds are beyond correcting. Forgive the wrongs we cannot undo; free us from a past we cannot change; heal what we can no longer fix. Grace our lives with your love and turn the tears of our past into the joys of new life with you. Amen.

**WEEK 2: Monday, March 2 - Luke 23:32, 39–43**

*Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith, Senior Pastor*

**“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

For me these words provide some assurance in the midst of a century old debate. The question is, “When will the dead be resurrected?” This question has inspired deep conversation, the construction of creeds, and even the division of denominations. We are eager to know the answer because the implications are vast and eternal.

If you missed yesterday’s sermon, catch it online for the wider conversation, but for today’s devotion consider what you believe and why.

When do you believe the dead will be raised? Are we welcomed into the kingdom of heaven at the moment we die on earth or will all who die in the Lord be raised on the last day when Christ returns?

As you engage your intellect and curiosity to explore the matter, know that there is wisdom in finding the question unresolved. In our lack of conclusions we can continue to pursue the truth God will reveal through a lifetime of searching the scriptures, praying, listening to the teachings of the church and conversing with other believers. The seeking draws us ever closer to the one we hope to see whenever we arrive in the kingdom of heaven.

In the meantime we can rest assured that there will be no conscious space between the moment of our last earthly breath and our awareness of Jesus’ closeness in the Kingdom of Heaven.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, our Alpha and Omega, as I search for answers lead me closer to you. Grant me the assurance that wherever you are present I am home, now and for eternity. Amen.**

## Tuesday, March 3 - Romans 5:6–11

*Owen Forbes, High Schooler*

Have you ever been in a fight with someone you cared about?  
How easily do you forgive that person?

This passage makes me think about the way God is calling us to live as Christians in our daily lives. It reminds us that Christ died on the cross for His people—the very ones He loved—while we were still not living the way He taught us to live. Christ gave us every tool to be good and faithful servants, yet we still fell short. We were sinners, unjustified and unrighteous. And still, God wanted a relationship with us. Still, Christ wanted a relationship with us—2,000 years' worth of forgiveness. Let's just sit with that for a moment.

The Lord could have easily denounced us as failures when we disobeyed Him, but He didn't. He gave His only Son for the sake of a relationship with you and me. Forgiveness. Love. Even for people who make us feel undeserving of it. In this Lenten season—and all year round—I hear God's message clearly: Forgive. Forgive. Forgive.

I find this difficult in my own life at times, whether forgiving my brother, my friends, or others because everyone makes mistakes. Yet the message feels simple: Forgive, even when you don't want to. Forgive, even when someone hurts you. Forgive, even when it feels unforgivable. Recently, I found myself resenting a teammate who had not treated me as an equal. I realized that my resentment was only widening the gap between us. When I chose to bridge that gap through forgiveness, something began to change.

So this Lenten season, try to establish a habit of forgiveness. There are likely more people who need your forgiveness than you think.

**Prayer: Lord, teach us to forgive as You have forgiven us, and soften our hearts with Your grace. Amen.**

## Wednesday, March 4 - Romans 8:1–11

*Jane Woodworth, High Schooler*

Romans 8:1-11 introduces the idea that by following Christ, we will be forgiven of our sins. However, we must live like children of God if we are to be forgiven. God sent his son, Jesus, down from heaven to become an offering of sin. God sent Him to condemn sin in a physical form, so that we may be forgiven of our sin.

This scripture speaks of life in the spirit versus life in the flesh. People who simply live in their bodies with no spiritual connection to God will only care for physical desires. However, when we create a spiritual connection with God, we can have eternal life in heaven. Those who only care about the world before the afterlife tend to live in sin, and only care for what benefits them in the flesh. Contradictorily, by believing in God and building a relationship with the Holy Spirit, we open the doors to new life in heaven after our time on Earth is complete.

God's grace allows us to enter heaven if we have followed Him and lived good and moral lives. This scripture states that if we have the same spirit inside that Jesus had in him, we too can ascend to heaven. God gives us the freedom to live with His spirit inside, and to live a loving, Christian lifestyle. God's grace can be defined by His forgiveness and unending love. God provides his grace indefinitely and willingly to us all, giving us the freedom to follow him. We are not forced to follow him and accept his love, but by becoming one with the spirit of the Lord, we are opened up to new possibilities, like heaven and eternal life and freedom. By living a spiritual life with God, we can be forgiven for our sin and accepted into heaven as God's children.

**Prayer: Holy Spirit, lead us to live as children of God, walking in new life and resting in the forgiveness given through Christ. Amen.**

## Thursday, March 5 - Romans 8:31–39

*Jenny Brookhart, Racial Justice & Reconciliation Team*

Romans 8:31–39 offers a powerful scripture, reminding us that Christ’s sacrifice ensured that we are not only forgiven, but eternally held in God’s love. During this season of reflection and repentance, these verses reassure us that even our failures cannot separate us from his everlasting grace. Romans 8:33–34 reads, “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.” During Lent, we often focus on the ways we have failed in our faith. These are the moments when our hearts are hardened or we stumble in our walk with the Lord, despite knowing better. We may feel that our sins have built a barrier between us and the Father, leading to shame, guilt, or unworthiness. I have personally felt this when I have asked, “Why is this happening, Lord?” in the hardest seasons of my life.

However, Paul’s message in Romans 8:31–39 becomes a kind of victory lap of grace. He asks, “If God is for us, who can be against us? If He gave up His most precious Son for us, why would He withhold the forgiveness we need now?” In my hours of need, this truth has comforted me beyond measure. I pray for God’s grace and ask Him to help me show that same grace to myself—something we are not always good at, as we often judge ourselves most harshly. True Lenten forgiveness is not only about our effort to repent; it rests in God’s final word of grace. Because Christ died, rose again, and intercedes for us, all charges are silenced. As we walk toward Good Friday, remember: your hope does not depend on how tightly you hold onto God, but on how tightly He holds onto you. His love does not fluctuate based on your worthiness, performance, or status.

**Prayer: Gracious God, help me rest in your unfailing love and release the burden of self-condemnation through the grace of Christ. Amen.**

**Friday, March 6 -John 14:1-14**  
*Matthew Parisi, Middle Schooler*

This passage from John is a good example of how we need to put our trust in Jesus. The first four verses are Jesus telling his disciples how God has a place for all of us in Heaven. I believe that this is something a lot of people need to hear. Many of us are busy comparing ourselves to others, something even I'm guilty of. There is no need to think that we don't deserve a place in Heaven just because someone gets better grades or looks cooler than us. We are perfect in God's eyes, and all of us have a place in Heaven with Him.

Verses 5-14 are a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. After reading this passage, I see how Thomas felt is a lot of what I feel. Uncertainty is something I struggle with in my life. Not knowing exactly what my plan is moving into high school and where I want to end up in my relationship with God is definitely hindering my ability to trust Him as much as I could. Thomas was unsure about how to find his way without Jesus walking next to him and showing him. Jesus assured Thomas that just by knowing Him and trusting Him, he will know the way.

Uncertainty is part of all of our lives. Not knowing God's plan or how he moves the people in your life can sometimes lead to a difficult relationship with God. Whatever happens in our life we need to know that he cares for us and does have a plan. When bad things happen in our life we need to remember that while it seems like nothing will get better and we're lost in this world, he is carrying us through our struggles. We can have hope that through our relationship with Jesus, we will also find our way. As followers of Christ, if we can put our trust in God and His plan for us, good rewards will follow in Heaven.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus, when we feel uncertain or lost, help us trust Your promises, rest in Your love, and follow You as the way that leads us home. Amen.**

## Saturday, March 7 -Confession Prayer

*Dan Eschliman, Director of Worship*

Ah, Holy Jesus

United Methodist Hymnal #289

1. Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended,  
that we to judge thee have in hate pretended?  
By foes derided, by thine own rejected, O most afflicted!
2. Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!  
Twas I, Lord Jesus, it was I denied thee; I crucified thee.
3. Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered  
the slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered.  
For our atonement, while we nothing heeded, God interceded.
4. For me, kind Jesus, was thy incarnation,  
thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's oblation;  
thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion, for my salvation.
5. Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee,  
I do adore thee, and will ever pray thee,  
think on thy pity and thy love unswerving, not my deserving.

**Week 3: Monday, March 9 - Mark 15:29–36 (NIV)**

*Rev. YuJung Hwang, Associate Pastor*

**“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

These words of Jesus echo from the cross with raw honesty. They are not polite or carefully measured. They are the cry of someone who feels abandoned, alone, and surrounded by darkness. I cannot fully imagine what it must have felt like for Jesus—tortured, mocked, and hanging on the cross—to feel forsaken by God. The fear. The pain. The unbearable silence.

Yet, there is a moment in my own life that helps me glimpse just a small part of that feeling. When I first came to the United States, I was 26 years old, but I felt like a child again. It was the first time I had ever lived far from my family. I flew over the Pacific Ocean for fifteen hours and arrived in a land where I had no relatives, no familiar language, and no shared culture. I stayed with a host family, and even though they were kind, my English was so limited that I could only say, “Hello” and “Thank you.” Each night felt unbearably quiet. I cried often. I called my mother, but even after the call ended, sleep did not come easily. Loneliness settled deep in my heart.

Remembering those nights, I tremble to think of Jesus on the cross. His loneliness was deeper. His suffering was greater. In the darkness, he cried out to God, not because his faith failed, but because his love for us was real. Jesus chose to fully enter human pain—even the pain of feeling abandoned. Because Jesus experienced forsakenness, his promise becomes trustworthy: *“Surely I am with you always”* (Matthew 28:20, NIV). He knows that pain. He knows that fear. And he promises never to leave us. On the cross, I hear Jesus saying, “I love you. I chose this so you would never be alone.”

**Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the cross and the depth of your love. Hold us close when we feel alone, and remind us that we are never abandoned. Amen.**

## Tuesday, March 10 -Psalm 22:1–11

*Mya Lemenager, Chancel Choir*

From September 2024 to September 2025, I went through, by far, the toughest period of my life. I bore the feeling of abandonment by my family, friends, my old church, and God himself. As Psalm 22 says “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” I felt unbelievably empty and drained of anything that made me, *me*. For a time, I gave up on my faith. I stopped praying, reading scripture, and even listening for God. I tried *really* hard to stop believing entirely, but God wasn't done with me even though I was.

One day, last November, I was driving back home from CCBC and I had what I can only describe as a revelation. I was on 695 in heavy traffic, trying to calm my frustrations, when I was struck with the tune of *It Is Well*, and I couldn't get it out of my head. I was enraged at first, but I let my jagged edges be smoothed by the waters of God's peace. I remembered who first breathed life into me. I think the words from Psalm 22:9-10 encapsulate the sudden calmness I felt in that moment: “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.” I can't say my suffering ended then, but I knew I had someone on my side. My Father, the one who gave me life, my life. I'd like to think that in that moment I re-dedicated my life to God. Since then, I have felt this inexplicable connection in my soul to Him. I have experienced countless blessings after surrendering. It's not that I don't experience pain anymore, but now I finally let my heavenly Father into my heart to gently mend all the pieces that were broken.

**Prayer: My Father, let my heart be softened by your grace, and let the words of my mouth and the actions I do be wholly in pursuit of Your kingdom. I love you, even in my darkest hour, I feel the warm light of Your presence. Go before me, after me, and beside me. Amen.**

## Wednesday, March 11 - Lamentations 3:31–33

*Laura Wolfsheimer, Hope Rising Team*

Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, wrote the above in his book Lamentations. A book about sorrow, loss, trauma, and death. Life at times feels heavy, overwhelming and out of control, especially when you experience loss. It could be the loss of a job, marriage, family, friends, or pets. I have experienced all of these, and they all feel like an ending, a death of a season in my life. Truly a heartbreaking feeling. Through my tears, I asked God why, why me? Why now? Can't you just wait a little longer until I'm ready? Please God!

I recently had to say goodbye to my sweet Macky, she was a yellow lab. We shared a lot through our 14 years together, playing ball with her sister Molly, car rides, swimming, and stealing kids' peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at lunch. Macky enjoyed a nice bath and being dried with the hair dryer. She loved her crate and I could always find her taking a little nap in there. She was there to listen to me when I needed an ear and comforted me when I was sad.

Saying goodbye to Macky was incredibly difficult. The sickness I felt in the pit of my stomach and tears that felt never ending were all too much. The grief felt horrible. I just wanted it to stop! My family started sharing memories and pictures of good times we all had with Macky. I cried and they cried, but the more we talked and shared, the more my love for her eased my grief. I am continuously in awe of God's compassion, allowing us to feel love especially when grieving. Even though I am grieving Macky, I am so grateful to God that he placed her in my life.

**Prayer: Dear God please hold and love all your children that feel grief this season. Fill their souls with your love and compassion. Let them feel your unfailing love. Amen.**

**Thursday, March 12—Luke 10:33-37 (NIV)**  
*Connie Clarke, Racial Justice & Reconciliation Team*

In the passage leading up to these verses Jesus is asked several questions from an expert in the Law concerning eternal life and what constitutes a neighbor. As Jesus frequently does, he draws out a response from the expert by asking him questions. Jesus' questions are designed to make the man think and reflect on what God's Law has always been: a law rooted in love, mercy, and compassion that crosses all boundaries. The principles in the story of "The Good Samaritan" are widely known, but not always widely practiced. We still struggle to understand what loving "our neighbors as ourselves" looks like in our world. We fail to see that extending our mercy and love to all who come into our radar is God's way and we are to obey him. Loving our neighbor will require us to go beyond our comfortable communities and seek to serve and advocate for people who come from different cultures and backgrounds. It will lead us to see and value diversity rather than seeking sameness.

God's Law of love, mercy, and compassion will lead us to open our hearts and minds to new possibilities that come from receiving and giving to others in our diverse world. The Samaritan bandaged the stranger's wounds and gave the equivalent of two days wages so that the care for the man in need could last up to several months at the inn. He seemingly did these things without thought to the fact that they were considered enemies who would have avoided each other ordinarily. Jesus' message should be clear to all of us and will hopefully make us "Go and do likewise."

**Prayer: God of all people, help us to see your image in each person we encounter as we go about our days. Lead us into actions that reflect love, mercy, and compassion for all people. Open our hearts and minds so that we can receive from, as well as give to, your people. In your name we pray. Amen.**

## **Friday, March 13 - Hebrews 4:14–16**

*Andrew Hardick, Youth Ministry Team*

Hebrews 4:14–16 offers a profound comfort for the Lenten season. It reminds us that Jesus, our great High Priest, is not distant from our experience. He lived as we live. He knew hunger, weariness, grief, loneliness, and temptation. He knew love, anger, sadness, compassion, and betrayal. Nothing about the human condition is foreign to him. Because he has walked this road, he understands us in a way no one else can. In this way, the humanity of Jesus draws us into a closer relationship with God.

Lent often draws our attention to our shortcomings. We become more aware of the habits we struggle to break, the patience we lack, the faith that sometimes feels fragile. It can be tempting to think these weaknesses should keep us from God. Yet this passage tells us the opposite. Because Jesus understands us, we are invited to “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence.”

Confidence does not mean pride or pretending we have it all together. It means coming honestly, just as we are, trusting that we will find mercy rather than rejection. Jesus stands as the bridge between our frailty and God’s holiness, not to condemn us, but to welcome us.

When we bring our worldly burdens, failures, and fears before God, we do not come alone. We come with a Savior who knows the weight of human life and who intercedes for us with compassion. In him, our weakness becomes the very place where grace meets us most deeply.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus, you know my heart and my struggles. Give me the courage to come before you honestly, trusting in your mercy. Draw me closer to you, and let your grace strengthen me in my weakness. Amen.**

## **Saturday, March 14 -Confession Prayer**

*Dan Eschliman, Director of Worship*

For our families, where they are open, loving, supportive,  
that their joy might be kept safe,  
Lord, hear us.

For our families, where they are tense, troubled, fragmented,  
seething with suspicion, that they may find a way through pain,  
not a path away from it,  
Lord, hear us.

For our churches, where they risk welcoming the stranger  
where in language, hospitality, evangelism and service,  
they employ the imagination rather than the rule book,  
that they might be encouraged and surprised by joy,  
Lord, hear us.

For our churches, where they have become introverted,  
suspicious of the stranger,  
obsessed with dead rather than living stones,  
suffocated by tradition, that they might be redeemed  
from the pawnshop of past glory  
and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
Lord, hear us.

For ourselves, in this place of worship,  
surrounded by people whose journey we have not traveled,  
whose depth of faith we do not know,  
whose potentials we cannot imagine,  
that we might somehow know we belong to each other,  
Lord, hear us.

And before you leave the cross and we vacate this building,  
if there is one of your family for whom we should care more  
fondly, direct our gaze to them,  
as you turned Mary toward John. Amen.

## **WEEK 4: Monday, March 16, - John 19:25–27**

*Cindy Shruell, Executive Assistant to the Pastors*

### **“Behold your son. Behold your mother.”**

At some point in life, caring for our parents can become part of our own spiritual journey. It is often a tender and unfamiliar season, filled with twists and turns. The dynamic can change quietly yet profoundly when we become the caregivers and our parents become the ones being cared for. Yet, this calling often comes from a deeply ingrained love. We are drawn to care for and protect our parents just as they once cared for us—when we were young and vulnerable. It is the circle of life before death: we are cared for, we grow because of that care, and then we are called to become caregivers ourselves.

I have been caring for my aging mother for several years as she has navigated major shifts in her life. It has been difficult—and at times painful—to witness the changes that come with aging and the loss of independence. Looking back, I realize that having a plan in place would have made this journey less difficult for her. In John 19:24–27, Jesus models this very truth. While hanging on the cross, enduring unimaginable pain, He pauses to ensure His mother will be cared for after His death. With love as His guide, Jesus entrusts Mary to the beloved disciple. Even in suffering, He makes a plan. This moment reveals not only His compassion, but His intentional care for those He loves. As I reflect on this scripture, it speaks deeply to me. Love often requires adjustment, reshaping our lives to ensure the well-being of others. Jesus’ final gift to His mother was not only His sacrifice, but His foresight and care for her future.

Throughout my care giving journey, I have drawn strength from my love for my mother, the grace of God, and the example of Jesus. When worry or anxiety arise, love has the power to reorient our hearts. Christ’s love gently guides our care and shows the way.

**Prayer: Dear Lord, may my care and guidance always be led by love. Give me strength to rest in the deep love I have for those entrusted to my care. Amen.**

## **Tuesday, March 17 - Ruth 1:16–17**

*Jared Revay, Youth Ministry Team*

If you aren't familiar with Ruth as a biblical character, I highly recommend you first read the beginning of the chapter up to the verse we will be focusing on today. When I read this chapter, I tried to read it like a story and put myself in Ruth's shoes. I processed the adventure it was to leave home with her spouse and go to new lands, the despair of losing her spouse, and being left in lands that weren't the same as those she grew up in—the land—Judah—it was her husband's and mother-in-law's land, especially with the excitement of wanting to go see what the Lord was doing in that stranger land, Judah, for her.

Fun little factoid: a common saying people use is “blood is thicker than water” to imply that family (blood relatives) is more important than friends or others in the world. It's been more recently rewritten as “the blood of the covenant is thicker than water of the womb.” I think this phrase is a perfect way to describe Ruth's covenant of love and faithful presence to Naomi. Ruth declares to stay by Naomi's side as she embarks on this new journey, even though Ruth has no obligation or incentive.

If you are like me, you may not have a large or close family: whether it is from fractured relations or simply loved ones have passed onto the next life. Those close friendships like Naomi and Ruth become even more valuable and important. As we may seek to cleanse ourselves of bad habits by giving up something this Lent season, I want to also encourage you to add a new habit of being that “Ruth” for someone else. That doesn't necessarily mean you need to uproot your life and move with someone, but simply being committed and invested in encouraging someone to be their best self can make the difference in someone else's world.

**Prayer: God of unending love, thank you for the ways you show us heavenly love through your sanctifying grace. Help me find my light so I may shine your light onto others and love as Ruth loved Naomi. In Jesus' name, Amen.**

## Wednesday, March 18 - 1 John 4:7-12

*Dana Parisi, Hope Rising Team*

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.” These words from John feel especially difficult to live out in the world right now. Everywhere we turn there are headlines, arguments among friends, and constant pressure – both real and perceived – to pick a side. It often feels like we are expected to have someone to blame, someone to be angry at, or someone to fear. In our lowest moments, we can find ourselves deciding if someone is still deserving of love or grace. Choosing love in the middle of all that feels messy. Scary. Hard.

John’s world probably looked a bit like this too: divided, searching for direction and unity. Perhaps people believed that love was theirs to own, to withhold, or give as they saw fit. But John tells us that love doesn’t come from us. Love comes from God. That means it isn’t ours to manage, and it isn’t ours to judge who is or isn’t worthy of receiving it. John goes a step further and says, “Whoever does not love does not know God.” Loving others isn’t about our perceived worthiness or reserved for those who we agree with politically or socially. In fact, love isn’t about us at all. We like to think we are the ones sending the message, and deciding who is deserving of it. In reality, we are more like a string connecting God’s message to those around us.

In today’s world, where fighting and exclusion often feel encouraged, it would be easy to shut down, avoid hard conversations, or decide that loving others is just too hard. But God’s love is there, even in the mess we are all in right now. When love feels hard, remember: we are the string, sometimes stretched, but still connected to God’s love.

**Prayer: God of love, when loving others feels hard, keep us rooted in Your love and use us as faithful vessels to share Your grace in a divided world. Amen.**

## Thursday, March 19 - Galatians 6:2

*Angie Spessard, Racial Justice & Reconciliation Team*

Paul's instruction in Galatians 6:2 reads as if it's simple to do, but it requires us to be intentional. He tells us to carry each other's burdens, not to just notice them, not to just pray for them. **Carry them.** This is Christian love in action.

We often view our faith as something that is only private and personal, but this verse reminds us that following Christ is deeply communal. God never intended us to walk alone. We are formed, strengthened, and sustained in community where joys are multiplied and sorrows are shared. When one person stumbles under the weight of their burden, whether it be grief, fear, addiction, or injustice, Christ calls us to step in to help carry their heavy load. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. captured this truth when he said, *"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."* To bear each other's burdens is to recognize that our lives are intertwined and that love demands participation.

Jesus modeled this love when He entered our suffering, bore our sin, and walked with the broken. When we bear one another's burdens, we reflect His heart. Community becomes the place where grace is made visible through listening ears, helping hands, and walking alongside each other.

Whose burden might God be asking you to help carry? And where might you need the humility to let others carry yours? In a Christ-centered community, no burden is meant to be carried alone.

**Prayer: Lord, thank You for community. Open my eyes to the burdens around me and soften my heart to respond with love. Give me the courage to ask for help when I am weary and the strength to walk alongside others when they are struggling. Teach me to live out the love of Christ each day. Amen.**

## Friday, March 20 -Colossians 3:12–14

*Michael Newcomer, Middle Schooler*

This passage calls us as Christians to live out our new identity through Christ by living the way Christ has taught us. He has told us how important it is to love and forgive one another. The Lord says to forgive one another as He has forgiven us.

The passage seems simple on the surface; just be kind, compassionate, and patient with one another. But, when I get into a situation when I am angry at someone, it's really hard to portray the virtues that this passage asks of us as Christians. Being in middle school, I witness verbal and sometimes physical disputes often. I see this online as well, including social media, group chats, or text threads. It can be hard to be kind to someone that is making fun of you, or to be patient with someone that may have posted an embarrassing picture just for laughs. Forgiveness in these situations can be very difficult when you've been treated so unkindly. Our natural response could be to do or say something unkind to get back at them. But I know this is not what God wants from me or my classmates. That is why it is so important to forgive and approach these situations with kindness and love. For me, after I forgive, I feel a lot better instead of continuing with anger. I feel that it is God working His way into my life and filling me with humility. If Christ can forgive all of us sinners, I can forgive my peers.

As we continue throughout the 40 days of lent, take some time to forgive yourself and fill yourself with patience, kindness, and compassion just like the Bible tells us. As you do this you might feel a sense of peace, this is God's grace and workings.

**Prayer: Lord, sometimes we may feel betrayed by you. Let our hearts be humbled and still. And let us thank you for what you have given us. Help us to forgive not only others but also ourselves, for we are sinners. Amen.**

**Saturday, March 21 -Confession Prayer**

*Dan Eschliman, Director of Worship*

O God, our great shepherd, you tenderly gather us as lambs,  
carrying us with your all-embracing love.

Yet, like sheep, we wander from you;

following our own ways,

ignoring your voice,

distrusting your provisions.

Forgive our stubborn rebellion,

our hardened hearts, our lack of trust.

Refresh us once again by your quiet waters of mercy

and restore our souls by your redeeming love.

Guide our paths, that we might follow you more closely.

Through Jesus Christ, our good shepherd, we pray. Amen.

**WEEK 5: Monday, March 23,-Psalm 69:1–21**  
*Kevin Silberzahn, Certified Local Church Historian*  
**Jesus said, “I thirst.”**

Psalm 69 is an urgent plea for help in a time of trouble. It starts with a person calling out to God for rescue, because the water has come up to his/her neck; it is deep and there is no foothold; the person is growing weary and thirsty. Recall the key scripture passage from yesterday’s sermon. Jesus (in order to fulfill the scripture) said, “I am thirsty.” This Psalm is that scripture. Reading it now, with the hindsight of knowing the New Testament story, it seems obvious to me that Jesus is calling to mind this Psalm through the words, “I am thirsty.” During his entire ordeal on the cross, He has been continuing to teach his Disciples and the others present with him, including the two men who were crucified alongside him. So, what is it that Jesus is seeking to teach us, when we read this scripture? The key idea is that, even in the direst circumstances of our life, we can trust that God is with us and able to see us through (verses 1-3). Keeping in mind that Jesus was calling this Psalm to mind for the benefit of those listening and for us reading it today, we see where the next several verses (4-12) talk about various woes befalling Jesus. At the same time, we see Jesus putting his faith in the steadfast love of God to deliver him, acknowledging and pleading for God to not hide His face (verses 13-18). Recall that Jesus had earlier asked, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Finally, Jesus notes that God knows what he has suffered, and concludes this portion of the Psalm, saying: “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (verses 19-21).

Jesus uses this simple phrase “I am Thirsty” while on the cross to call this Psalm to mind, so that we, too, may put our trust in God, even in the direst circumstances of our own lives.

**Prayer: Merciful God, thank you for your presence with me in times of joy and trouble. Help me remain mindful of Jesus’ example and live with steadfast faith. Amen.**

## **Tuesday, March 24 - John 4:7–15**

*Katy Revay, Youth Ministry Team*

How do you allow Jesus to fill your cup? Perhaps in worship, prayer, service, or meditation you are renewed in His spirit. It's not solely the act of singing, or talking with our eyes closed and hands folded that make those moments spiritually fulfilling—it's the invitation we give God to be with us during those moments. The moments that we choose to live in God's presence are an opportunity to encounter and be filled with His living water.

As I read today's scripture I was caught by two considerations. First, Jesus' invitation to disregard the social barriers that define who this woman believes she should be talking to. To give the Samaritan woman His grace, all that Jesus asks of her is recognition of who He is and the request for living water. There is no boundary or affliction that outweighs the love God has for all of His people.

Second, Jesus' words "Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." What a wonderful promise—not only will Jesus fill our cup, but he will stir up in us a well-spring, that we might share His grace with others. His love and grace doesn't provide a short-lived satisfaction, but rather an eternal source of grace.

**Prayer: Gracious God, you are Love. Thank you for being present with us in this and all moments. Please grant us Your grace and living water. Make us a vessel to show Your goodness to others and allow us to see Your work in our lives. Amen.**

## Wednesday, March 25 - Isaiah 55:1-3

*Roger Bridges, Adult Sunday School Teacher*

With all the social media today, it is hard to know what to believe. There are so many false statements, scams, and proposals that one has to be very alert not to get caught up in some wild scheme. Then we read this passage from Isaiah and want to question the writer about buying food without money and for no cost. This has got to be a scam. Such promises surely cannot be true. Yes, these are wild promises that seem too good to be real. Even when we know the speaker is God, it is hard to imagine how he could love us and care for us so much that he wants us to have a great life. Yet that is just who he is and what he wants. The teachings of Jesus we find in the gospels are not to restrict us and make our lives hard. They are there to show us how we can have the best life possible.

We don't need money or wealth because we can never buy God's blessings. God's blessings are free. All we need is to see them and to receive them is faith. We need faith that affirms that God wants what is best for us. Read the beatitudes in Matthew 5. The word "blessed" was a word that described the island of Cyprus. People believed that Cyprus contained everything one would need to have a great life. Jesus is telling us what we need to have a great life. The quality of our lives is not determined by what is in our bank accounts, but what is in our hearts.

If there are things you search for to make your life more meaningful, don't look at material possessions, power, or status. Look to God. He wants what is best for us. Always has and always will.

**Prayer: Dear God, open my eyes to see how much you love us. Open my heart to receive that love in all its many ways. Open my life so that others may see your love through me. Amen.**

## Thursday, March 26 - Revelation 7:16–17

*Megan Forbes, Racial Justice & Reconciliation Team*

We all suffer—that is part of being human. Yet the ways we suffer are as varied as each individual life. This passage speaks to God’s promise that all suffering, pain, and sorrow will be wiped away by His grace in the kingdom of heaven.

As I make my way through the Lenten book series *The Color of Compromise*, my mind and heart are being further exposed to the shameful and terrifying realities of oppression and slavery forced upon people of color from the earliest foundations of our country. (Lord, according to these accounts, I have not suffered.) It is deeply upsetting to learn how people who called themselves Christians found ways to justify treating others as “less than,” even owning human lives as property. The fact that this active role in systemic racism still lingers today is a painful reflection of our humanity. At times, it feels overwhelming. How can I, one person who has lived a life of abundance and privilege, make things right?

I find grace in this passage. It reminds us that those who have “washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb” will see an end to suffering, hunger, thirst, and sorrow. Lord, help me to wash the feet of others who have not yet felt your healing water. Through God’s provision, all will be restored to paradise, regardless of the burdens they carried on earth. God will make all things right and wipe away the suffering caused by others.

I pray that this promise continues to bring deep comfort to the persecuted, the enslaved, the abused, and the displaced.

**Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the promise of eternal peace; guide us to seek justice and healing here on earth through your grace. Amen.**

## Friday, March 27 - Psalm 63:1–5

*Ryan Forbes, Middle Schooler*

In this scripture, the Bible talks about your love and longing for God. The object of today is to help you to love God with your whole heart. To me this means that you are coming to church every Sunday, and praying and speaking to God regularly. This is how I see loving God with your full being, because in order to love God with your full being, you must give up other things for him.

First, in verse 1 the book states “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.” In my mind this is God telling us that loving him is a crucial part of survival. It uses the word thirst, most likely referring to water, which is necessary to life. This gives us an idea of how God feels about us loving him, and how it is necessary. Next, verses 2-3, we hear how we are to love and honor our Lord when it says “I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.” This tells us how we are to recognize God as an impactful and powerful presence, necessary to our life’s fulfillment. Finally, in the last verses of the reading, it says “I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.” In my belief, this refers to the fact that no matter how old you are, how wealthy you are, or how satisfied you are with your life, singing in God’s name will fulfill you more than you will ever know.

In conclusion, to me as an 8th grader, I believe that in order to love God with your full heart and body is to sacrifice things to worship Him, make efforts to show your love for Him, and be fulfilled by His holy spirit.

**Prayer: Lord, help us love You with our whole hearts and find our fulfillment in You. Amen.**

## Saturday, March 28 -Confession Prayer

*Dan Eschliman, Director of Worship*

From the Iona Community

Jesus, Prince of Peace, humble and riding on a donkey.

**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.**

Jesus, disturber of the peace, you upset bad religion when it gets in the way of God.

**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.**

Jesus, upsetter of the self-righteous, you turn questions on their head, offering no instant answers, but showing the way.

**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.**

Jesus, lover of the lost, you say “forgive” when we want to shout “condemn!”

**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.**

Jesus, host at the table, you share your best even in the face of our worst.

**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.**

Jesus, Savior of the world... yes, even the world which wants you until it meets you.

**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.**

**HOLY WEEK: Monday, March 30-Luke 23:44-49**

*Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith, Senior Pastor*

**“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”**

The majority of the Lord’s words teach us how to live. Today, Jesus teaches us how to die. The words carried from Jesus’ lips, with the air of his final breath are words of absolute surrender. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” As his incarnate years conclude Jesus acknowledges that he is returning to the One from whom he came. The One to whom he has always belonged.

There will come a moment when you realize you are taking your last breath. This may be at the end of a long illness or at an unexpected instant. We don’t know how much time we will have to prepare so we are wise to practice everyday.

Jesus gives us the words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” These are the words through which we can hope to transition from mortal life to God’s eternal care. If genuinely spoken every morning, these can also be the words in which we live everyday of our earthly lives in unison with the one from whom we come and to whom we shall return.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus help me to pray with full surrender and absolute confidence, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Amen.**

## Tuesday, March 31 -Psalm 31:1–5

*Michele Carroll, Hope Rising Team*

David, the author of this psalm, was an extraordinary man, not because he was without sin, but because he continually turned back to God. In moments of fear and struggle, David trusted that God would deliver him. That same faith allowed David, as a young shepherd, to face Goliath. He believed that the battle was not his to fight, but the Lord's. David's life reminds us that true strength does not come from size or weapons, but from trust in God. As an adult, David continued to rely on God's mercy and grace. In distress, he cried out, "*In you, O Lord, do I take refuge... rescue me speedily!*" He declared, "*You are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake, you lead me and guide me.*" He surrendered himself fully to God, saying, "*Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.*" And God was there. He is always there.

This past year, I experienced some of the darkest times of my life—times of fear, hurt, anger, and despair. My distress peaked on one particular day as I traveled to court, terrified that I would not receive the help I needed. I had planned to pray on the drive, but I found myself unable to form coherent words. My thoughts were scattered and unfocused. So instead, I repeated a simple prayer: "*Your will, not mine. Your will, not mine.*" Over and over, mile after mile, I spoke those four simple words. In them, I placed my trust. All of my fear, hope, and surrender were contained in that prayer. God heard me and answered. As I surrendered control, a sense of peace slowly replaced my panic. I was able to face the meeting knowing that God was present, that He heard me, and that He would give me the strength I needed.

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for being our rock and our refuge. In our weakest moments, remind us that we are never alone. Help us trust you as David did—bringing you our honest, raw emotions and placing our battles into your hands. Help us find true strength by surrendering to you. Amen.**

## Wednesday, April 1 -Romans 8:1–11

*Oliver Novak, High Schooler*

The Lord our savior will not turn us away for our sins, he will embrace us for our love of Jesus Christ. As said in Romans 8:1-2 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit who gives life has set you.” Then in Romans 8:4-5 it states, “In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the spirit.” The passage is trying to persuade us that God will cherish all those who do not give into temptations of the flesh. For example, during this time of Lent the temptation to do wrongful acts may be strong. As long as we listen to the Holy Spirit that is guiding us the whole way, no wrong may come to us. Also in Romans, we read that all good things will come to those who put their faith in God. There can be many moments where we feel alone and like no one will help us, but believing in the love and strength of the Lord our God can give us all the warmth and nutrition we may need. During the season of Lent we can imagine how Jesus’ disciples may have felt, maybe they were mad, or scared to be alone, but eventually Jesus did come back to them, just like how we know no matter where God is He will always come back to us when we truly need Him and when He feels we are ready for His love.

**Prayer: Gracious God, Thank you for not turning away from us. Help us to listen to the Holy Spirit. Thank you for giving us warmth and nutrition. Thank you for always coming back to us when we truly need you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.**

## **Holy Thursday, April 2 - John 13:1–17 (NIV)**

*Rev. YuJung Hwang, Associate Pastor*

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus did something unexpected. Knowing that his hour had come, fully aware of who he was and where he was going, Jesus chose to kneel. He took off his outer garment, wrapped a towel around his waist, and washed the feet of his disciples. In that humble act, Jesus revealed the heart of God.

Foot washing was the work of a servant, not a teacher or a leader. Yet Jesus shows us that true love is not demonstrated through power or position, but through self-giving service. Love moves downward. Love humbles itself to serve. On this Holy Thursday, we remember that before Jesus gave his life on the cross, he first gave himself in love at the table. Peter's resistance reflects our own discomfort. We may be willing to follow Jesus, yet we struggle to receive his grace and to practice his humility. Jesus responds clearly: unless we allow him to serve us, we cannot fully share in his life. Forgiveness begins here—by letting go of pride and allowing God's love to wash over us.

Jesus then turns to the disciples and asks, “Do you understand what I have done for you?” He calls them, and us, to follow his example. To love as Jesus loves means serving one another with patience, compassion, and mercy. It means choosing humility in our homes, our church, and our community.

On this Holy Thursday, we remember that we are washed by Christ's love. Having been loved so deeply, we are sent to love others in the same way—freely, humbly, and faithfully.

**Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the humble love of Jesus, who kneels to serve and washes us with grace. Clean our hearts, soften our pride, and teach us to love as Christ loves. Shape us into servants of forgiveness, compassion, and peace. Amen.**

## **Good Friday, April 3 - Luke 23:44-56**

*Rev. Dr. Jennifer Smith, Senior Pastor*

By 3:00 pm the One on the cross falls silent. The heavens grumble and the rocks crash but there are no more words from the Cross. For a while the body of Jesus will linger on the beam, and then in their arms, and eventually in the tomb, but the Word will not speak. Jesus has finished talking, at least for now.

The silence of one who has died is profound. The absence of their voice changes everything. We are left with our own thoughts and the question that eventually emerges. What will I do now?

Like those who endured the death of Jesus, acute loss can leave us stunned. We go through our days in a fog, the grief makes us tired. But eventually, the memory of the life becomes more profound than the death, and we begin to breathe again. For the followers of Jesus the Resurrection accelerates their revival. His restoration to new life does not negate the trauma of his death, or the physical absence they will feel when he returns to heaven. Their lives, like ours each time a loved one dies, are forever changed. But into this profound loss there is hope for life after death and that hope, in time, allows our grieving to make room for living.

On this Good Friday, read a few chapters of Jesus' life. Remember Him alive even as you anticipate celebrating his Resurrection. And look at a few pictures of loved ones who have died, remember them alive, even as you hope for their resurrection.

**Prayer: Lord Jesus, we are mortal so we live in the shadow of death and we have loved so we live in the reality of grief. Remind us that this is the place where we encounter you dying and the place where you assure us that life is stronger than death. Amen.**

**Saturday, April 4 - A prayer for the Long Wait for Sunrise.**

*Dan Eschliman, Director of Worship*

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.