

# *Lenten Devotions 2019*

Dr. Richard E. Rusbuldt



# ***Lenten Devotions 2019***

***By Dr. Richard E. Rusbult***

*Lenten Devotions 2019*

Copyright © 2019 by Dr. Richard E. Rusbult. All rights reserved.

*This e-book file and its devotions may be reproduced for noncommercial use by individuals, churches and other religious organizations. Otherwise, no part of this e-book may be reproduced in any form, except by a newspaper or magazine reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review.*

*For further information, contact Dr. Rusbult at 364 Pughtown Road, Spring City, PA 19475, or email him at [rusbult@comcast.net](mailto:rusbult@comcast.net). All opinions expressed are his own.*

*Front Cover Photograph entitled “2017-04-21 SCOTLAND 78 Edinburgh - Diversion Sign (St. Mary's Street).” Copyright © 2017 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. For many people in the postmodern world of the twenty-first century, the invitation to embrace a Lenten journey may feel like a diversion (or in American English, a detour) from the business of life. Nevertheless, this is precisely what we must do in order to experience spiritual reality. Jesus calls us to the desert, to solitude, to silence, to quiet reflection. The photograph may be viewed on <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lbsimages/35627579041>.*

*Back Cover Photograph entitled “2016-07-06 CANADA Vancouver 152 Stanley Park Seawall Series - Siwash Rock and Runner.” Copyright © 2016 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. The multi-mile seawall path around Stanley Park is a joy to experience. Beach, forest, sea, birds, landmarks and fellow adventurers pass one by, but there are plenty of opportunities for being with oneself – and God. The photograph may be viewed on <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lbsimages/28571582611>.*

*Scripture taken from THE MESSAGE. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.*

*This is a Spiritual Journey Press E-Book (Adobe Acrobat Reader Format).*

*Spiritual Journey Press  
10 Bentwood Drive  
Bordentown, NJ 08505  
[www.spiritualjourneypress.com](http://www.spiritualjourneypress.com)  
Email: [sjourneypress@comcast.net](mailto:sjourneypress@comcast.net)*

*Dr. Spitzer's Flickr Photography Site: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lbsimages>*

*Dr. Spitzer's Photo Blog: <https://lbsimages.wordpress.com>*

March 6 – April 21, 2019

## AN INVITATION TO A LENTEN JOURNEY

Welcome aboard the 2019 Lenten Journey. If this is your first “walk to the cross,” get ready for the challenge to walk on sandy, dusty roads, to leap two thousand years back in history to another era in time, and to seek new insights and answers to what really happened in Palestine about 33 AD. If you’ve “walked the walk” before, may you be challenged anew to recall and reflect on the words and actions of Jesus, the disciples and many others.

Lent falls between Ash Wednesday and Easter. For most of the Christian “world” the focus is on the climax, Resurrection Sunday, which we call Easter. Not many around the world will pause to read and reflect for forty-five days before celebrating Easter Sunday. As you know, some faiths encourage you to “give up” something in Lent. If you follow this year’s Lenten Journey, you will have decided to “give up” some time you’d have used to do other things. As you read, reflect, and pray about the daily readings, perhaps you will discover you haven’t “given up” anything – instead, you will have “gained new perceptions and/or understandings of Jesus, God, and the human race.

Each day there is a verse or two of Scripture, and a one-page “thought” on which to ponder or react. There is a short prayer if you choose to use it, and most days there are questions for reflection. At the end of the readings you will find the Scripture verses for each day, taken from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson. I am indebted to Dr. Lee Spitzer, who in the midst of a new and challenging position as General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches, USA, and joined by his wife, Lois, continue to be partners in this Lenten Journey. Besides the new position, Dr. Spitzer underwent major surgery from which he has recovered nicely. He worked on these devotions during his later recovery period. Please include them in your daily prayers.

World events increasingly cause fear and consternation among world populations that there ever was, or now is a living, caring, loving God, One who would come under any guise to walk our dusty roads, or travel our busy highways. It is my hope that you will find strength and confidence for your daily journey as you ponder Scripture, stories, history and people.

You probably won’t agree with everything that’s written herein – that’s not a problem at all. We are friends of Jesus, travelling together! If you don’t like some of the suggestions, conclusions or questions, then skip them! Perhaps you’ll miss a day or two, here and there – that’s OK, too. Each day’s journey stands pretty much by itself, and can be missed, or picked up at a later date. We will meet good and evil people, consider wisdom from “above,” ponder the humanity and divinity of Jesus, shudder at the suffering and brutality he endured, confront the “why” questions again and again, pray daily, and even more.

God loves us ---- and God came!!!!

**Thought:** As we join Jesus and his disciples on their walk to Jerusalem, they aren't walking today. Instead, there are several hundred folks from nearby communities sitting on the ground with Jesus the center of attention. Of course, this isn't the first time such a thing has happened. Jesus was often found surrounded by a crowd that listened carefully to what he had to say. When it was over, they always had plenty of questions not yet answered for either their understanding or satisfaction.

This is his third year of moving around Palestine, teaching much of the time to all who would listen, and on many occasions, performing acts of mercy and miracle that defied human understanding. Yet many who sat and listened were still not satisfied. The Jews of Jesus' day were very confused about many things. But the biggest mystery of all centered on Yahweh, God of the Jewish nation.

"Where is our God, Yahweh? We are God's special people – how could God allow us to be taken captive again, this time by the Roman Empire? Is Yahweh playing games with us? We never, ever thought this could happen. We thought Yahweh was honestly on 'our side' and that we could depend on both his provisions and protection."

Were they making the proverbial mountain out of a molehill? Did they have reason to believe they were a special nation to Yahweh? Did they have reason to think Yahweh had let them down? If you could listen to them recite their history with Yahweh, they would make quite a case. Here are a few of their historic claims to Yahweh's leadership and protection. In the column on the right, jot down anything from your own journey that might be of equal intensity, and a match for their claim!

#### The Israelites

#### My Journey

"We were slaves in Egypt. We wanted to be free. God brought plague after plague to pummel and unnerve our captors."

God did:

"God told us to put blood on our lintels...none of our baby boys died. The Egyptians did not, and all boy babies under two died that night."

God did:

"We were fleeing from Egypt. We came to the Marsh Sea, with Egyptian troops right behind us. God parted the Sea, and we walked through...no one was lost. The Egyptians followed, but all were drowned."

God did:

"We wandered in desert country for 40 years living in tents, unable to raise crops to eat. God provided Manna for us to eat each day, and water where there was none."

God did:

"The cities were fortified. We had to fight. Jericho was a big, walled city. God told us to walk around it for 7 days, and the walls would fall down. They did!"

God did:

"Then God led us into Canaan...the land that would be ours forever. We loved it."

God did:

"Now the Romans have it, and we are once again slaves. Who is Yahweh? Where is Yahweh?" As in 33 AD, the questions are the same in 2019: Where is Yahweh? Where is God? What is God doing?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us with our questions today. Amen.

- Question:**
1. If you had been a "betting Jew", would you have "bet" on Jesus? Why? Why not?
  2. When did God last impact your journey in such a way that you really knew that God was doing something in your life?

**Thought:** If Jesus were in the area, you'd know it by the crowd gathered around him. This often meant sitting on the ground with a hundred, maybe five hundred, or sometimes thousands who flocked to see and hear him. One thing about the Jews of that day – they still believed they were God's people, and that God was going to, once again, change things for them. In order to do that, however, they needed a new leader. Was this fellow named Jesus up to the task? Ninety-five percent of those who gathered around Jesus were classified as "poor." There was a small "rich" class, and everyone else struggled daily to survive. Those who were rich viewed anyone who worked with their hands, whether an artisan or a farmer, as being "poor." Life was difficult, food and health were daily issues, fear of the Roman occupiers permeated everything they did, and as well, they were held "in bondage" to the Temple through temple taxation.

As they listened to Jesus, they knew several things about him. They knew that he grew up in a devout Jewish home. His father, Joseph, was described as "a righteous man." They knew that Jesus' family went to Jerusalem for the rites of purification after his birth. They knew his family also attended the Jewish festivals. Having said this, they also knew he grew up in Nazareth, a backwater town in Galilee...and no one in his or her right mind would ever think of a prophet coming from Nazareth – not even from Galilee, in general! Talk about "fake news"!!! This guy can't be for real! Did you hear what he said the other day in reference to the old saying ... "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth"? He said we should forget such talk! "Here's what I propose," he said, "don't hit back at all. If someone hits you, stand there and take it. If you get dragged into court and they sue the shirt off your back, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it..." Many responded: "We all know that's not the way we have to live today. He's nothing but fake news!"

In today's reading, Jesus raised from the dead the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, a synagogue leader. Three of every ten Jewish children died before the age of 18. At the same time, the number was much higher for their non-Jewish neighbors. Eighteen years of age in Jesus' day was almost middle-age. The average longevity then was between forty and forty-five. Now if you were looking for a leader with energy and youthful strength to lead Israel again, how could Jesus qualify when, in that culture, he was already on the "edge" of old age? (How do you answer the question: Why did Jesus not begin his public ministry at age 20, rather than waiting till he was 30?)

Some who listened had another problem with Jesus. They knew he had a group of men he called "disciples" who followed him wherever he went. There was nothing strange about this, because every so-called "prophet" in Israel had a set of followers. Many were the rumors about Jesus and his own family – they didn't understand what he was about (Mark 3: 31-35; John 2: 1-12; Luke 2: 41-52). Jesus actually suggested that when God's Kingdom came, it must receive your primary loyalty, not your own physical family. He even warned that physical families would be divided over him. There is little question but that Jesus was too radical for many in his own day who wanted to ground religion in family ties.

Two more things happened that kept the "fake news" label alive and healthy. If you were to sum up all of his teachings on all of the hillsides thematically, two stand out: 1. The Kingdom of God was happening through his ministry; 2. Jesus was the Son of Man. All of the Gospels agree that Jesus used this phrase to describe himself. No doubt it is a reference to Daniel 7 where one like "a son of man" was promised an eternal kingdom. People sat and listened, and pondered what God was going to do about the human predicament. Two thousand years later, evil spins the globe on its fingertips, with the same messages: God is not in charge. You have no future with God. God died on a cross. God doesn't care. God is fake news!

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me show someone in a new way that you are not fake news! Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Why does today's world not listen to what God's church has to say today?  
2. In a few words, how can Jesus make a difference in a person's life in today's world?

**Thought:** As they listened on the hillsides, one message came through loud and clear: When God is in charge, life will be radically different. God's reign will be unbelievably satisfying and dependable. He said things to them that have never been said to listeners in any other human culture, generation or politics.

For many generations "Do not kill" was a basic foundation-stone in human relationships. But in the new reign Jesus talked about, it's just the tip of an iceberg. Because if you just get mad, even a little bit, at your wife, husband, family, preacher, neighbor or the guy driving that car that almost just ran you off the road...it's THE SAME AS committing murder! (Yes, Jesus said that!) If you call your kid "stupid" because of something he/she did, even if it was dumb or wrong, remember you are on the brink of hell's fires itself! Wow! Do you think he got their attention? But there was more to come.

He told them that when they went to church, before it was time for the offering plates to be passed, to think of their relationships with family, co-workers, friends, and if there was anger, a grudge, trouble or whatever, get up and walk out of church! Go find the person and talk until something has been resolved. Then, go back to church...and ONLY THEN CAN YOU DEAL with your God!

Jesus mentioned the old written law, "Love your friend." He then referenced its unwritten companion, "Hate your enemy." Then came the punch to the nose of each listener: "I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst." OK, you Democrats reading this...you are to love those nasty Republicans. And you Republicans are supposed to love those dastardly Democrats!!! Come on, Jesus...now you're meddling!!! Can you imagine those sitting on the hillsides thinking of the rich overlords, the Roman soldiers, the tax collectors, the temple priests who collected the temple tithe...the list was long. "How could I possibly love that Roman soldier, who just cracked a whip at my son who was carrying on near the crowd?"

Jesus suggested that when you go to church, and want to have a chat with God, don't let someone else do it for you. "All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat?" so asked Jesus. Jesus suggested that too many people do our praying for us, when all God wants is a few words with each of us – personally. God is your Father you are dealing with, and God knows better than you what you need...so with a God like this loving you, keep it simple, like this: "Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are. Set the world right; Do what's best – as above, so below. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil. You're in charge, God! You can do anything you want! You're ablaze in beauty, God! Yes. Yes. Yes."

And yes, almost all who sat on those hillsides had a common concern/worry...about tomorrow. What will we eat? Where can I get a better job? How can I get the kids an education? Will the soldiers hit our place tomorrow? They were not one iota different from today's followers: Do I have enough insurance? Do I have enough to retire? What happens if I end up in a nursing home? Can I get a better car? Can my kids afford a college education? Can I.....?

He summed it all up when he said "You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. You can't worship God and money both." "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes." And many sitting on the hillside said "Come on...it's time to get out of here. He can't possibly know what he's talking about." And what say you?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me turn off my phone, and listen to you! Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How can Jesus' teachings make a difference in today's world?  
2. How much longer do you think God will wait for the world to "get it"?

**Thought:** In just a few sentences, Jesus captured their attention and the world's ever since by telling them plainly that God is more important than money, and tomorrow is not nearly as important as today!!! In their world, over 95% of the population lived as poor, hungry, desperate people, to whom food was life or without it, death. And yes, they worried greatly about tomorrow, because their God, who brought them out of Egypt, had led them into the promised land which was now ruled by the forces of Rome!!!

2,000 years later, is anything different? Are there any driving forces greater than time and money? Money, getting more and figuring out how to keep more, takes up huge chunks of our daily lives. Watch television for several hours and see what place time and money have in our lives. Isn't that what cell phones and iPads are all about? Instant communication? It's all about time! How can anyone say that spending time with God, alone or with others, should be our highest priority?

Where is God today, they mused as they listened to Jesus. Not a Jewish person in any of the crowds was unaware of the God of the Israelites. They had grown up in synagogue schools and heard the details of the great things God had done for them. In fact, some of the stories they were told were close to being unbelievable.

A friend sent me a fitting story: Nine-year-old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school.

“Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his army build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he radioed headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.”

“Now, Joey, is that really what your teacher taught you?” his mother asked.

“Well, no, Mom, but, if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!”

Those sitting on that grassy hillside with Jesus were also having a hard time believing what they were hearing. After all, the ‘getting out of Egypt’ story *was* almost unbelievable. Yet it was followed by a forty year stint in the so-called wilderness. “We moved often, and dragged our tents along with us. We never planted a seed the whole time because we were constantly on the move. Yet we were never hungry. Every morning -- and it never failed -- there was food, manna, waiting on the ground for us to gather and eat two or three times a day. And when we needed water, even in the dry desert, God provided us with our daily drinking water. God did many, many other unbelievable things for us as we moved to the land of Canaan. But where is God now? Why doesn't God do for us today what God did for us then? What is God waiting for?”

2,000 years after Jesus said the human race needed to “spend time with God”, become better acquainted with the ruler of the universe, it seems the world is marching to a very different drummer. Time, money, power and control dominate the agendas of today's leaders, anywhere you look on the globe.

Perhaps it would be helpful to place yourself where those people sat on those hillsides so long ago. Place in one hand a dollar bill (or a coin), and in the other hand place your cellphone, iPad, or put your hand on your TV. Then ask yourself the question: Where are you in my life today, God, in relationship to time and money? Then close your eyes and listen for an answer.

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me understand more clearly what is important in my life today. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How can you “spend” more time with God?  
2. What will God allow to happen before God takes charge again?

**Thought:** Jesus had been walking the countryside for well over two years. There were hundreds of stories about Jesus that were passed on by word of mouth by young and old alike. As it still happens today, when stories were told, they often were embellished in a variety of ways. One had to listen carefully, and then try to figure out what was really true.

Most of those who gathered on the various hillsides were struggling to put food on their tables, and a safe roof over their heads. As we recreate in our minds a picture of Jesus and the crowds, it seems to be a peaceful scene. In fact, at the time of Jesus, Palestine seemed to be at peace. Indeed, peace there was, but it was a peace vigilantly guarded by legions of Roman soldiers. They had one charge: Quell the first hint of rebellion that appears.

Perhaps the best word to describe Palestinians of Jesus' day is "unsettled." Wherever a Palestinian Jew looked, he saw signs of distrust, unrest, and fear. On most of the main roads in Palestine there were empty crosses set by the Romans – a reminder to all that dying on a cross awaited any who crossed their so-called line. In one stretch of roadway, over one thousand crosses stood in place – waiting.

Then there were the Samaritans whose main "enemy", other than the Romans, was the Hasidaeans, who prior to Jesus' time split into three groups: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. These were the successors to the two rival states of Israel and Judah, who fought each other for centuries before Jesus arrived. A hundred or so years before Jesus sat on those hillsides, the Samaritan temple at Mt. Gerizim was totally destroyed. The Samaritans exacted revenge by defiling the Jewish temple with human bones and attacking a festival bound caravan of Galileans. The Jews responded with more vengeance. The Samaritans did the same.

Most who listened the day he told the story of the Good Samaritan were unsettled in their thinking. How could he ever challenge them to do good to the Samaritans? "I couldn't. I wouldn't. I'm more than disturbed by what you're telling us to do. After all, God is our God...who also hates Samaritans, just as we do", so their thinking went.

When life becomes unsettled, what do people do? Look around today's world. Do you find much in the way of a "settled" mind or future? Now that almost all of the world can talk with each other at a moment's notice, is it providing a more settled mindset than in the "good old" days when it took months to get a written communication across an ocean or two?

There were murmurs all through the crowd that day when Jesus casually mentioned the disciples sitting on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel! You can believe this was most unsettling. What Jesus said was totally intolerable to the ruling priests. And if the priests were upset and totally unsettled, so were the Roman masters for whom the priests worked and kept their positions. Jesus provided more unsettling thinking when he told them that God was his Father – and then told them that he and the Father were one and the same. Almost everyone there was unsettled!

In a culture rooted in getting, and getting more, how unsettling is it to hear Jesus tell us that we cannot love what we spend most of our time doing ... getting money and things ... and that instead, we should first focus on our relationship/s with the God of the universe? Are you sure you want to continue this walk to Jerusalem? What words or thoughts are most unsettling to you? Ponder them, and give them to God – so that you can carry them together.

**Prayer:** Jesus, help settle my thinking when the world is so unsettled. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What word comes to mind most quickly when thinking of our unsettled lives?  
2. Is most of your prayer time spent in asking, listening or sharing?



**Thought:** What do you suppose were the “wonderings” going on in the mind and thinking of each disciple? By this time, they had been traveling hither and yon with the man who had enlisted them as his disciples. They hardly ever put in a day of work as they used to do. They often slept on the ground overnight, rather than in their own homes. They often depended on the generosity of others for food and drink. And almost each day, they were either shocked or totally amazed at what Jesus said or did.

Without a doubt, with each passing day, they tried to find answers to the basic questions: What does Jesus intend to do? Where is he headed with his approach to being a teacher/prophet? How can he overcome the Roman overlords if he doesn't have an army of some kind? Not only were there the Romans to contend with, there were the Temple's leaders. Not one of them ever thought about a cross. If you had been following Jesus walking around Palestine for almost three years, what kind of questions would you have been asking? As you sit in your own seat/pew at church each Sunday, what kind of questions do you have about what your church should be doing?

Not only did the disciples ponder the need for an army or fighting unit of some type, throughout history there have been highly committed followers of Jesus Christ who chose the course of war. You've probably never heard the name, but a fellow named Thomas Muntzer was born in the Harz Mountains of Germany in 1490. Even as Jesus' disciples pondered what they were up against, the condition of the many poor people, the greed of the Temple priests, and the bondage to Rome, so Muntzer saw hopelessness everywhere he looked.

He received a good education, studied theology, and became a priest. Along the way, he was intrigued with the writings of Martin Luther. He actually collaborated with Luther in the posting of his ninety-five theses. So he began to preach openly against the unjust distribution of wealth. Muntzer believed in God's power to speak through visions and foretold the imminent collapse of the current world order. He founded a missionary church and loudly spread the message that, as written in Revelation, God now wanted to raise up a chosen people, and lead them into epic battles that would result in a new society without poverty or private property.

He soon became a man on the move. He'd go to a village and preach about his vision, and distribute pamphlets, specially read by the lower classes. Their support for him grew rapidly. Slowly but surely, he gathered a so-called rebel army around him. He announced: “God promised that he would help the afflicted . . .the princes are truly tyrants . . . God will not tolerate this any longer. He wants to annihilate them. Look at the sky. See the sign of his grace, the rainbow! God is showing that he is supporting us, proclaiming the defeat and destruction of our tyrannical enemies.”

A rainbow had been in the sky for several days. But the rainbow, which was there as the battle began, quickly disappeared. The slaughter lasted only minutes. One moment, the throng of several thousand armed peasants sang an expectant prayer – “Come, Creator Spirit.” The next, the air was suddenly heavy with smoke and screams under a barrage of cannon fire. The Duke's army lost six men that day; the peasant army lost thousands. The movement was over. Muntzer was beheaded.

As the disciples came closer to Jerusalem, their minds were plagued with how Jesus was going to make anything different. “We need an army. We need to fight for what Jesus is talking about. But what will Jesus do?” They sat on the hillside with him, pondering how to change things. . . and never thought about a cross. What are your thoughts about “bringing in God's Reign”?

**Prayer:** Jesus, talk with me about what it really means to be your disciple today. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What evidence do you see today of God's reign present on earth?  
2. How long do you think God will wait before Jesus comes again?

**Thought:** Jesus didn't spend all of his time speaking to people on hillsides. He invested a large amount of time in walking from village to village, from province to province. Many different things happened to those who sat and listened, as well as to those with whom he traveled or met along the way. Most of the miracles recorded in the Gospels happened when Jesus and a person or group were in close physical contact. But there are three Gospel reports of healings that occurred with distance and separation being key factors. Jesus did not touch, speak to or even see the person healed.

One such healing took place regarding a Centurion's servant who lived in Capernaum. The Centurion had heard of Jesus (and who hadn't after the last two-plus years?), but didn't feel he could approach Jesus in person. The Jewish elders thought highly of the Centurion because of the help he'd given them in building a synagogue within which to worship. This was a rare occurrence.

Jesus headed for the Centurion's home, but along the way, a messenger arrived to tell Jesus that he was well aware of the fact he couldn't come into his house. The Centurion knew of the authority that he had, that all he had to do was give an order, and his servants would carry it out immediately. If Jesus would only give the order, he was sure his servant would be healed!

Talk about faith!!! Jesus was so surprised at the request that he said: "I tell you, not even in all of Israel have I found such faith!" Remember the Centurion at the cross and what he said? Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. A Roman legion was composed of 6000 men, and was divided into 60 centuries under the command of a centurion. Each centurion signed up for a 20 year tour of duty. They were the men who held the army together. They had different degrees of honor among them, as would be expected, but the most honored of all was the centurion who had charge of the eagle, which was the standard of each legion.

We know that this centurion is a Gentile: "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof."(Luke 7:6) The Jewish law was most definite about this: "The dwelling places of Gentiles are unclean." It's obvious the centurion was a Gentile or the law would not have applied. Besides this, we would have known he could not be a Jew since there was not a single Jew in the Roman armies. The Romans had a kind of compulsory military service, but Jews were exempt from it. They were exempt because Jewish law forbade them to carry arms on the Sabbath Day. To do so would have meant they were carrying a burden, and Jewish law forbade such.

Another amazing thing about this centurion is that he was said to have loved the Jewish nation (Luke 7:5). There were very, very few Gentiles who ever loved the Jews. They were the most hated nation in the world. Cicero called the Jewish religion a 'barbarous superstition.' Tacitus called the Jews 'the vilest of people'. In Alexandria the story went that the Jews had taken a deliberate oath never to show kindness to any Gentiles, and it was even said that the Jewish religious ceremonies involved the yearly sacrifice of a Gentile. In all of history, there never has been any people so hated, so misunderstood, so misrepresented, so persecuted as the Jews.

Yet the Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant – at a distance – must have loved the Jewish people. Clearly he was no ordinary man. First, he loved his slave so much that he pleaded with Jesus to heal him. Second, he was a man of humility, who in spite of position and authority would not approach Jesus directly and order him to heal his slave. Third, he was a man of faith, who believed that Jesus, with but a word from a distance, was of God and could heal humanity. And if you haven't thought about it, the Centurion and we are alike...we believe Jesus is the Son of God even though we've never been in his physical presence. Ponder your perceptions of Jesus, the Christ.

**Prayer:** Jesus, forgive me for not believing you more than I do. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What were most of those who sat in the crowds thinking about Jesus?  
2. How do the non-Christians in your life perceive your Christian faith?

**Thought:** “Because you’re not taking God seriously,” so said Jesus to the disciples!!!!  
 So the obvious question for us to talk about today while we walk is just how serious are we with God?  
 Can you not see the look of shock in the eyes of the disciples when Jesus zinged them with this observation? After all, they were twelve fellows who no longer had jobs, no longer spent much time at home, walked miles on end to listen to what Jesus had to say, either to them or the crowds – and Jesus told them that they weren’t taking God seriously!

So, how serious are you in your relationship with God? That’s a very difficult question to handle, because we surely don’t live in a world such as it was in Jesus’ day. Someone has said that the world in which we live today is encircled by the omnipresence of speed. Our world, and therefore life itself, is driven by speed. Here are some words or phrases that tend to describe the world we live in, whether young, middle age or older. (Check each one that reflects your life.)

I’m going as fast as I can...	Speedy recovery...	Hurry up...
It’s a mad dash...	Get a move on...	The sooner, the better...
Step on it...	Get cracking...	I’ve got to run...
I don’t have much time...	Wait a minute...	Just a second...
Right away...	How soon can I expect it?	Running late...
Running scared...	Run down...	Running out of time...
Grab a bite...	On the run...	It’ll only take a minute...
Use your cellphone...	Step on the gas...	I don’t want to be late...
I just don’t have the time...	I don’t have time for church.	

Just how are we to take God seriously in a world run by speed? If Jesus came to your church next Sunday, and you heard him say to those gathered, “You don’t take God seriously...”, what would be your response? Do you think Jesus was “fair” to the disciples by asking such a question? Without a doubt, some church-attenders would honestly tell you that it was a relief to spend an hour in church. Why? Because they could just sit still, listen if they chose to, and didn’t have to run anywhere!

Of course, Jesus wasn’t finished with them when he told them they weren’t taking God seriously. He continued the point he was making by telling them that their faith was smaller than a mustard or poppy seed. Believe me, such seeds are small, tiny, almost invisible unless you’re in good light, have good eyesight, and are looking for them.

How seriously are you taking God today? One answer would be you’re reading this Lenten page, and that means, “I’m investing time on trying to know more about God.” Would you believe that no one in the world who is alive is out of range of God’s presence and blessing? That we can know God is the most astonishing assertion of biblical truth. But it doesn’t just happen without some effort to stop, notice, listen and receive.

Being still is a requirement for knowing God. Jesus modeled for us the stillness and solitude needed to know God more deeply. But because speed/hurry drives us every day of the week, such hurrying is an enemy of stillness. Our faith in God hinges mostly on our relationship with God. The closer we are to God, the greater is the chance we can move mountains.

God speaks to anyone who will listen. That’s who God is. God loves every human being on the planet. How close are you to God? What’s the size of your faith? When was the last time you heard God whisper “I love you?”

**Prayer:** Jesus, forgive my constant running; slow me down so I don’t miss You. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What drives your running most of all?  
 2. When was the last time you said to God “I love you”?

**Thought:** Jesus suggested the disciples weren't taking God seriously. Might Jesus say the same thing to us today if we are frustrated that something we wanted to happen wasn't happening? He most likely would. For Jesus, time was the essence of both talking to, and listening to God. He wanted to talk with God so much that at times he stayed up at night – gave up sleeping hours – to guarantee he and God both talked and listened to each other.

Everywhere we look today, it's obvious that everybody is running in one direction or another. Can you imagine the fellow who was in such a hurry he had an iPad in his hands, and a cellphone tucked up to his ear with his shoulder – and was working both at the same time?

Only a few hours after I completed writing yesterday's devotion, I went to church. A friend of many years said she had something to give me, and handed me a folded paper. I sat down and opened it to see what it was about. I could hardly believe my eyes, in light of what I had just been writing, to read for the first time the Stress Version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (the author is unknown). If you have a minute, please enjoy another version of Psalm 23:

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.  
It makes me lie down only when I'm exhausted.  
It leads me into deep depression.  
It hounds my soul.  
It leads me in circles of frenzy for activity's sake.  
Even though I run frantically from task to task,  
I will never get it all done, for my target is ever before me.  
Deadlines, and my need for approval, they drive me.  
They demand performance from me beyond the limits of my schedule.  
They anoint my head with migraines.  
My in-basket overflows.  
Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration forever."

At least some of us would say, "Ain't it the truth?"

In his book titled *Addicted to Hurry*, Kirk Jones offered some suggestions for why we run most of our life. We run to get things done, because we are wired to work, to labor, and to create. We run because the clock is running; after all, there are only so many hours in a day, so we need to run to get everything done. We run because there is so much to do – and there aren't enough hours in the day to get them all done.

We run so that we can acquire prized possessions. Every way we turn, we are hit with a barrage of invitations to buy this, get that...whatever it might be. We run to catch up...and when we fall behind, the first remedy we apply to falling behind schedule is speeding up. We run to remain in control, whether young or old. Sometimes we run just to please people.

Jesus was highly intentional about stopping his walking in order to spend time with the One he called his Father. As I write this, being a long-time runner, I'm again asking myself just where I can slow down, and have more time to listen – to God. How about you?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me to know how to model my life's walking and running after yours. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How do you feel about the "rush" of everyday running?  
2. What change would you need to make to spend one more minute a day with God?

**Day Ten**

**Friday, March 15, 2019**

**Matthew 18:12**

**Thought:** My mind was significantly challenged as I read the “Stress Version” of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. But that wasn’t the end of it. As I finished reading that version, my eyes spun quickly towards the bottom of the page, for lo and behold, there was another Psalm 23 printed, and it was named the “Relief Version.” (Again, the author is unknown.)

**“The Lord is my pacesetter; I shall not rush.  
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.  
He provides me with images of stillness which restore my energy.  
He leads me in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind and His guidance is peace.  
Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day,  
I will not fret.  
For His presence is here.  
His timelessness, His all importance will keep me in balance.  
He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity  
by anointing my mind with His oils of tranquility.  
My cup of joyous energy overflows.  
Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours  
For I shall walk in the pace of my Lord and dwell in his House forever.”**

**I’m sure I don’t need to ask which version is most preferable. However, in a world that’s rushing more on a daily basis, or so it seems, how would anyone be capable of living a life that models the Relief Version? Just for the fun of it, place a check before each of the items listed from the Relief Version:**

- I do not rush
- I often stop and rest
- I often find ‘images of stillness’ in my daily activities
- My mind is calm both day and night
- God’s guidance is peace
- I never fret over anything
- I sense God’s closeness from time to time
- God keeps me in balance daily
- God provides me often with renewal
- I have experienced God’s oils of tranquility
- I have lots of joyous energy
- I sense harmony and effectiveness in my journey
- I’m walking in the “pace of the Lord”
- I expect to live in God’s house forever.

**You weren’t asked to complete a checklist on the Stress Version. Why? Because I, and most of you, would have to check most of the items listed. It matters not to anyone else what you and I have checked. But if you’re not in too much of a rush, I challenge you to take the time to read – out loud – the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm from your favorite version. Then read – out loud – the Stress Version. When finished, read – out loud – the Relief Version. Could you have walked the dusty roads with Jesus, and not been in a rush to get somewhere? Do you find the time each day to ‘have a little talk’ with Jesus as you rush from here to there?**

**Prayer: Jesus, help me keep pace with you, and will you please keep me from running? Amen.**

- Questions:**
- 1. What does “walking with Jesus” mean to you on a seven days a week basis?**
  - 2. Which part of the Relief Version applies to your own daily walk?**

**Thought:** Jesus found time – every day or night – to have “a little talk” with God, his Father. It didn’t make any difference what the day’s agenda was, he always made time to talk to, and listen to the voice of God. He encouraged the disciples to pray often, and to not allow agendas to come between them and God. God is a loving, caring God. Some throughout history would dare to say that God was not only loving, but God was a pursuing God...God doesn’t give up.

A name many of you will remember is Johnny Cash. Cash grew up in a Christian family; his mother told him that his voice was a gift from God. When he started writing and performing, he wanted to sing gospel music. Sam Phillips, his producer convinced him finally there wasn’t money in it.

Then Cash began touring, performing all over the country, keeping a schedule that allowed no time for a quiet moment. While touring in the late 1950’s, he took his first amphetamine, and he liked the effect. Although tired, it made him more energetic, and it got rid of his shyness. It felt so good, he took more pills. But the more pills he took, the more pills it took to get the same “rush” feelings. The drug binges began taking up more and more of his time. When he was sober, the withdrawal feelings were ghastly.

After taking thousands of the pills, he felt that the drugs had separated him from both his family and God. His touring career was suffering also. It got so bad, he finally had to cancel an appointment. Then more and more were canceled. When he did try to perform, the drugs made his throat dry and affected his voice. Some of his friends warned him that the drugs could kill him. He became angry with them and told them he could handle it. As time went by, however, he reached a point where he felt “barely human” and decided he had wasted his life.

When things got worse and worse, he decided to end it all. He drove out to a group of caves on the Tennessee River with the intention of getting lost in the deep caverns and never coming back. He crawled farther and farther back into the cave system. Suddenly his flashlight went dim, and then went out. The batteries were finished. He lay down on a rock to die.

As he wrote later, “The absolute lack of light was appropriate for at that moment I was as far from God as I have ever been. . .” Cash concluded that God had abandoned him. Then something happened to him. Cash “felt something very powerful start to happen to me, a sensation of utter peace, clarity, sobriety. I didn’t believe it at first. I couldn’t understand it. How, after being awake for so long and driving my body so hard and taking so many pills could I possibly feel all right?”

“The feeling persisted, though, and then my mind slowly started focusing on God.” In Nickajack Cave, Cash was clearly convinced that God was not only alive, but that God was coming back to take charge of his life. Now he knew he didn’t want to die. But neither did he know how he could escape the caves. Slowly, he turned himself around, and started crawling over the rocks. After a long, fearful time of crawling, he saw what looked like a light ahead of him. He crawled towards the light, and was suddenly free from the cave. And to his utter amazement, there he found his wife and mother looking for him. Over the next weeks, Cash went through a very painful period of withdrawal, coupled with horrible nightmares and hallucinations. Through all of this, his family “formed a circle of faith” around him.

Cash never found life easy; the temptation was always there. Cash said “I believe in God. And he’s been the power, the nucleus, and the very soul of my work. And it’s a positive force that will never be denied in my life and in my heart.” Now tell your story, Lenten Walker.

**Prayer:** Jesus, our stories are all different; but you remain the same to each of us. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Which of your life’s ingredients bring you closer to God?  
2. Which of your life’s ingredients separate you from the presence of God?

**Thought:** As Jesus neared the end of his journey, he waxed eloquent about what lay ahead for all of humanity. In a sense, he was saying to all of humanity that there will be a “pay day” for all who have ever walked the dusty roads of earth. The “sheep” heard the verses above, and wanted to know when they had done these things. Jesus responded: “I’m telling the solemn truth: whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it to me.”

Audrey West, a former seminary professor, has experienced Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats in a personal and family way. In his younger days, following his vocation as a country veterinarian, her father was a walking miracle. He survived a fall through the ice on a lake, a rattlesnake bite, a massive exposure to rabies, and a double diagnosis of melanoma. He had a stroke in his 50’s, and quadruple bypass surgery in his 60’s. In his 70’s, his pelvis was crushed in a passenger van accident. In his early 80’s, he was stricken by a neurological illness called Lewy body dementia. He was confined to a hospital bed at home. His hands contracted like claws. He was unable to turn or shift his body. Then he could no longer swallow, and a nurse showed them how to dip a sponge in juice and hold it to his lips.

It was clear there were no miracles left. Yet suddenly they began to appear. Miracles arrived in the form of women and men who, for more than six years, blessed the family with their offerings of food, friendship, service, and love. They came as visitors and caregivers from as far as Fiji and as near as the next block. They prepared meals, cleaned the house, took his wife out to lunch, or brought goodies from their garden. They sent cards, knitted prayer shawls, listened to all their stories, and held the family in their grief.

Some who visited regularly were members of local churches, including their own. It was obvious they were acting on their desire to love God by loving their neighbor. Yet there were others who came who did not identify as followers of Jesus. Some were from different religious traditions, and some from no religion at all.

The compassion of all who came reflected the parable’s criteria by which the sheep and goats will be distinguished: through acts of mercy such as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison. Do you not find it interesting that the criteria for separating sheep from goats do not include a confession of faith? For West’s father, believers and unbelievers alike were the sheep who provided mercy.

She said “We knew them by their fruits – nothing else.” One caregiver arrived each evening before dinner and stayed until after breakfast, voluntarily arising from sleep to check that all was well. Another read aloud from “All Creatures Great and Small”, James Herriot’s delightful memoir of his life as an English country veterinarian. She said, “It was a joy to hear my father’s laughter as he recalled snippets of his experience reflected in those stories – even on days he could not remember the names of his own children”. Members of a Threshold Choir chapter filled the house with gentle music during their weekly visits.

West viewed all who came as being the people in the parable who are gathered like sheep at the right hand of the Lord. The ones who are proclaimed righteous before the heavenly throne are those who have loved God by serving Christ, and the way they have served Christ is by loving their neighbor.

The faster we run, the more things we do, the harder it is to love our neighbor. So which will it be, my walking companion – the sheep or the goats?

**Prayer:** Jesus, open my eyes to see my neighbor in need. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Remind yourself of the last time you were a sheep on a mission to a neighbor.  
2. How do you interpret Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats?

**Thought:** The world we live in today isn't really much different from the world Jesus lived in two thousand years ago. Oh, technologically, the world has radically changed. It does every day, every week, every month, every year. That's the horizontal part of the human journey. But vertical thinking has changed little since Jesus' walk to Jerusalem.

John chose to highlight this early in the Gospel he penned. "In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word (Jesus) was with God, and the Word (Jesus) was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it." (John 1: 1-5)

Then there was Nicodemus, one of Israel's great theological and philosophical minds, who struggled to comprehend the kind of life Jesus offered. As a politician, Nicodemus cared about the crisis in Israel, for God's kingdom had become a province of Rome. As a teacher of Scripture, he cared about truth. As a religious man, he cared about morality and conduct that pleases God. As a man, he cared about himself, his future, and his standing before God.

So Jesus rocked the very foundation on which he was standing when he said to him: "You must be born again" (3:7). Nicodemus questioned how such a thing could happen – it wasn't realistic to think such a thing. So Jesus expanded on the theme by telling him that "...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." As Jesus continued to expand on being born again, Nicodemus put his hand to his forehead, and asked, "How can these things be?"

He was the teacher in Israel and one of the most devout men serving in God's temple, yet he had no awareness of the spiritual dimension of the kingdom and the kind of abundance its citizens would enjoy. Because Nicodemus was a seasoned student of Moses, Jesus took him back to some Hebrew history recorded in Numbers 21:4-9. In brief, the Israelites had just experienced God's miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They had witnessed ten plagues, experienced the parting of the Red Sea, and seen the pillars of cloud and fire to lead them. Nevertheless they began to grumble and complain. Disobedient and unbelieving, they lashed out at God. So God decided to discipline them. His discipline came in the form of venomous snakes, from which a number of people died, prompting Moses to intercede, saying to God "If this keeps up, they're all going to die".

God responded with a specific set of instructions. "Fashion a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that anyone who's bitten can look up at it. Once a person sees the snake, the venom in his or her body will lose its effectiveness." Then Jesus tied this story to the final solution "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

To what was Jesus referring? That's why he was walking to Jerusalem – to a cross! Nicodemus didn't understand him, the disciples didn't understand him, and the crowds couldn't put the puzzle together from what they heard him saying. But it was/is only the cross that is the complete payment for all sin – sin past, sin present, sin future. All sin -- Nicodemus', yours, mine, all.

This led to John's most famous writing: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that everyone who believes on him will not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

This is what our walk is all about. As you walk, would you covenant with God to tell someone new about God's great love before our walk is ended?

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for your walk to the cross, and for my eternal salvation. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What's the best way to tell/show people today what it means to be "born again?"  
2. What are some new ways to highlight the need for people to be "born again?"



**Thought:** Most of us in our country don't use or hear those two words -- born again -- very often. Two thousand years after Jesus told those listeners about the new birth, the concept is still valid, and in spite of extreme opposition to such, it is shared around the world. But in many countries, there is a price to be paid. Punishment, prison or death are among the options if you preach the Good News. Today, Christians are openly persecuted in these countries: Venezuela, Columbia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Mauritania, Cuba, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Belarus, China, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Mindanao. The writer of Hebrews says: "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." (13:3)

The first Christian arrested under Pakistan's blasphemy law, Daniel Scot, tells this story. "In all of Pakistan, I was one of only two Christian lecturers in mathematics. I thank the Lord, for by his grace I shared my faith with every Muslim in the university, whoever was interested to hear the word of God. But in 1986, the government of Pakistan passed a blasphemy law. Anybody charged under the law could be given life imprisonment or death by hanging.

In September, '86, five senior professors of the College Council called me for investigation. They wanted me to convert to Islam. They told me it was a golden opportunity for me; otherwise, anything could happen -- meaning I could be killed by anybody. By that time I had been receiving open death threats. But I saw this investigation process as a golden opportunity to share the message of salvation with them. So I asked a question: If I become a Muslim please tell me who is the Savior in Islam. Because I know there is NO other saviour apart from the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the professors responded by saying that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, could save me. I showed them from the Qur'an Hadith that Muhammad had no assurance of his own salvation, so how could he save anybody else? On the other hand, Jesus said in John 14:6 'I am the way, the Truth and the Life; no one can come to the Father, except through me.' I explained the verse to them and invited them to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

The professors did not like my response and filed a blasphemy case against me. The next day they organized all the students to boycott my classes and set up demonstrations on roads. Some friends warned me to leave my house immediately; otherwise I would be killed. So I went into hiding. A mob of more than 6,000 students, many with pistols and daggers, began to search for me.

Because mine was the first such case of this nature, it got much publicity. A lot of Christians prayed and fasted on my behalf. By God's grace I was able to escape the city and went into hiding from police and radical Muslims. A meeting was arranged with the president of Pakistan through the intervention of 150 Christian leaders. The president said he could not cancel the case since it was the first time the law had been addressed. However, he promised to delay it. After that the police left me alone, but I had to hide from others for over 10 months. At that point I fled from Pakistan and went to Australia.

In Australia, I was able to teach mathematics again, and continued to reason with Muslims about the Good News of Jesus. As a result, the Islamic Council of Victoria took me to court to keep me quiet. They won the case, but I thank God that we won in the Supreme Court -- the right to freedom of speech...I could openly talk about Jesus, the Christ." Jerusalem walker, what is your story to tell?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us when we are shy or afraid to witness to the living Christ. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Remember the last time you made a public witness to Jesus, the Christ.  
2. Is it easy, or hard for you to make a public witness?

**Thought:** Without a doubt, Jesus knew he had to be careful wherever he went. He was well aware of the power behind Temple leadership as they held hands with the Roman overseers. The people were looking for a “messiah”, one who would free them from the domination of fellow Jews who controlled the Temple, and as well, from Roman domination. Jesus also knew that the most significant event in Jewish history was being freed from Egyptian slavery, which lasted for more than four hundred years. So the word “messiah” was packed with mystery, as well as potential.

As in the story from Pakistan yesterday, hundreds of similar stories could be told of Christianity in China. Over the last century and a half, Chinese Christians have been sent to slave labor camps or killed outright for trying to gather to worship the Christ. In some cases, only a few leaders were killed; but there were times when the killings numbered in the thousands. When Christian gatherings were prohibited, the house-church movement began. A Chinese writer, Li Feng, described what was happening for many decades in China: “They had no churches, but used the mountainous areas of the locality, meeting in mountain valleys, lonely places, etc., meeting together at night rather than in the day. They had no pastors, but many believers organized themselves and produced their own leaders. They had no Bibles, but they recited them from memory, using hand-written copies and mimeographed sheets to meet their needs. Although some secret meetings were discovered, local Christian activities continued uninterrupted.”

In the early 1980’s, the Communist Party published “Document 19” on the control of religious affairs. It stated that “so far as Christians carrying out religious activities in house meetings are concerned, they should in principle not be permitted, but they should not be rigidly stopped. Through work undertaken by the patriotic religious personnel to persuade the religious masses, other suitable arrangements should be made.” This remains the situation today. House churches are still frowned upon, but implementing the policy varies considerably from place to place.”

Of late, there has been an attempt to enforce the registration of all house churches, but most house churches continue to remain unregistered. For many decades, the house-church movement was largely in the rural areas. But with a huge influx of Chinese to the cities, where less than 1% of the population was Christian, house churches began to surface there...but with great care.

On the eve of the communist victory in 1949, there were around one million Protestants (of all denominations) in China. Less than a decade ago, the most conservative official polls reported 40 million Protestants, and this number does not take into account the millions of secret Christians in the Communist party and government. Almost all observers point to the role of house churches, both rural and urban.

Watchman Nee said, “I want nothing for myself. I want everything for the Lord.” Nee formed an independent Christian assembly in Fizhou in 1922. It practiced believer’s baptism and a weekly Lord’s Supper, and was governed by elders rather than by a single pastor. He moved his activities to Shanghai, and his group became known as the “Little Flock Church.” Nee became an eloquent, widely known evangelist who had a gift for calling people to a deeper spiritual life. In 1956, Nee was publicly tried, condemned as the head of a “counter-revolutionary” group, and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He died in May 1972, in a labor camp. Today, Little Flock is the largest Christian group in China.

Would we American Christians have the courage to stand up for Jesus Christ if we were to be persecuted for doing so? Only you know. Only I know. How deep is our faith?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me put my ‘faith roots’ down deeper, even if I am to be persecuted. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. If needed, would you gather with others in secret in order to follow Jesus?  
2. Would you take time right now to pray for persecuted Christians around the world?

**Thought:** Daniel Scot met Jesus, the risen Christ, and he was forever changed. Watchman Nee also met Jesus, the risen Christ, many hundreds of years after the ascension, and his life was radically changed. And while Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine, some who met Jesus were changed forever, as well.

Throughout history, and around the world, there was no disease more terrible than leprosy. It was, literally, a living death. Josephus declared that the lepers were treated “as if they were, in effect, dead men.” Although you hear little about it, there are many lepers in the world. In Britain and Palestine, there are few known cases. However, it flourishes in India, China, Malaya and Africa. In earlier recorded history, other nations did not isolate their lepers. But Israel demanded total isolation. In a number of nations, key national leaders and captains of armies were lepers, yet held in the highest regard, and they functioned well at whatever they were doing. History tells us of lepers who held high office in government, and as well, had the privilege of entering into holy places and temples. But in the case of the Jewish people, the leper was totally segregated.

In Italy, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century people noticed that at times of the plague, the Jews were less affected than anyone else. They came to the conclusion that the Jewish laws of uncleanness must have something to do with this, especially the law that said a Jew was unclean after he had touched a dead body. So the Italian authorities made a law that anyone touched by a dead body with a suspected case of plague must be isolated for forty days. The Italian word for forty is “quaranta,” from which we gained the word “quarantine.”

The ravages of the disease leprosy were bad enough, but it was made far worse by the treatment the leper received. Whenever leprosy was diagnosed and labeled such by the priest, the leper was banished from human society. “He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp” (Leviticus 13:46). A leper had to move about with torn clothing, disheveled hair, and with a covering on his upper lip. Anywhere he went he had to cry out “unclean, unclean” (Leviticus 13:45).

In the Middle Ages, when a man became a leper, the priest, having donned his stole and taken the crucifix in his hands, would bring the man into the church and read the burial service over him. In Palestine, a leper could not enter the Temple, or go into Jerusalem or any walled city. If a leper went inside and was caught, he was given forty stripes. Lepers were not barred, however, from the village synagogues. The leper had to be the first to arrive, and the last to leave. While there, he was confined to a little isolated chamber called the Mechitsah, which was ten feet high and six feet wide.

If you came into contact with a leper, the law contained 61 different types of contact. If a leper so much as put his head inside of a house, everything in it became unclean – even the beams of the roof. It was forbidden to greet a leper even on an open road. No one might stand closer to a leper than six feet! If the wind was blowing from a leper in the direction of another person, the leper had to move away from or stand at least 100 cubits away!

In light of the above, think of the boldness of the leper who came directly to Jesus. He would never have dared to approach an ordinary Rabbi. But he walked right up to Jesus. Indeed, Jesus was approachable. I find it amazing that Jesus (God) was more approachable than other human beings! I also thrill at the fact that Jesus did what no one else would even think of doing – he reached out and touched the leper! And although you and I never have had leprosy, Jesus has reached out and touched each of us...and we have been healed – for eternity!

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for touching lepers, and also for touching me. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. In what ways can Jesus heal (transform) lives today?  
2. What would you do if a leper came to you for help?

**Thought:** There are different ways to touch lives, as today's Scripture indicates. Yesterday's reading told of Jesus reaching out and touching the leper with his hand. Today it was done somewhat differently.

There were three Jewish Feasts called "Feasts of Obligation." Every Jewish male who lived within 20 miles of Jerusalem was obligated to come. Scholars believe that Jesus had come for the Feast of Pentecost. Bethesda was the name of the district of Jerusalem, which lay north of the Temple. In Greek, the name of the pool meant, "to dive," which indicated it was a deep pool. Scholars estimate it was the size and depth of today's swimming pools. There were colonnades with five arches above them that gave shelter from the weather. There were all kinds of people crowded around the colonnades in hopes of a chance at being healed.

Why would anyone believe such a thing? What was it that drew people from miles around to come and wait for a miracle to take place? Every now and then, the pool bubbled up. There must have been a subterranean spring beneath it, which every now and then, sent out a gush of water. People believed that the bubbling up was caused by an angel and that the person who was first into the pool after the water was disturbed would be cured of any disease they had.

You think this is strange? Probably so. But it was the kind of thing ancient people commonly believed, not only in Palestine, but all over the world – and some believe such today. The people of Hierapolis believed that a goddess called Atargatis and her son had plunged into a sacred pool near their temple. They had both died, but their lives had been transferred to the waters and gave them special power.

There was another pool in Aphaea into which the goddess Astarte was said to have descended in the form of a fiery star which fell from the top of Mt. Lebanon. Thus the waters of this pool were considered to be filled with magic and power. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that anyone who bathed in spring-time in the waters of the Euphrates would be free of sickness for one whole year.

Hesiod says that when a person is about to ford a river, take a look at the running water, pray and wash your hands – because if you wade through a stream with unwashed hands you incur the wrath of the gods. When the Persian armies of Xerxes reached the Strymon River in Thrace, their wise men sacrificed white horses and performed ceremonies before the army could cross the stream. The Roman general, Lucullus, sacrificed a bull to the Euphrates River before he crossed it. Such stories and beliefs, from long before Jesus' time, can be found in Wales, northern Europe, India, China, Africa, etc.

One obvious thing about this fellow is that he had no friends with him. He must have had some people who carried him and his bed to the pool every day. Perhaps in the early years they waited with him. But when nothing happened over a period of time, they most likely left him at the pool alone, and went on about their business.

His persistence in coming every day over a 38-year period tells us clearly that this man had not yet given up hope! How many of us could keep hope alive for anything for 38 years? Jesus didn't really have to ask his question: "Do you want to be healed?" But this was another way for Jesus to touch a life! Jesus reached out to the man. No doubt he could have asked others the same question. Jesus told him what to do, and he did it...he got up and walked away. When Jesus backs us up, the impossible becomes possible. Whom do you know who needs a miracle? How will you pray?

**Prayer:** Jesus, point me to touch the life of someone who needs a miracle in their life. Amen.

1. What experiences have you had with miracles from God?
2. Will you make a list of several persons who need "miracles", and pray for such for them?

**Thought:** The disciples, as well as some who were part of the daily crowd following Jesus around, had been hearing him teach for over two-and-a-half years. All would admit that they had never heard anyone say anything close to what they heard Jesus saying. No one in the crowd was sleeping when Jesus placed before them what we call the Beatitudes. But they were just the beginning, because what is called the Sermon on the Mount followed. And the farther he went with it, the harder it was to either understand or believe. When was the last time you talked with someone about one of the Beatitudes? When was the last time you reminded someone (or perhaps yourself!) of something Jesus said that day on the hillside? At Texas A&M University, Professor Virginia Owens assigned the Sermon on the Mount to her composition class. She asked them to write a short message about it. Being in Texas, and being in what is called the Bible Belt, she thought it was a reasonable assignment.

One wrote, "In my opinion religion is one big hoax." Another said: "There's an old saying 'you shouldn't believe everything you read', and it applies in this case." Some other reactions included: "I did not like the essay 'Sermon on the Mount.' It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is;" "The stuff the churches preach is extremely strict and allows for almost no fun without thinking it is a sin or not;" "The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery. That is the most extreme, stupid, unhuman statement that I have ever heard."

As the people sat and listened, Jesus addressed a question that worried almost everyone who was there that day. Was he a revolutionary or an authentic Jewish prophet? Jesus addressed their question head-on: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them."

Was Jesus really serious? For instance, to avoid defiling the Sabbath day, they outlawed thirty-nine activities that might be construed as "work." How could an ordinary person's righteousness ever surpass that of such professional holy men? So was Jesus one of them? Perhaps Jesus was better than them? Or was Jesus laying the groundwork for a revolution yet to come that would free them from Roman domination?

What Jesus actually did was make the law impossible for anyone to keep, and then charged them (us) to keep it! In reality, every human grouping throughout history has had a law against murder. They may differ in application, but everyone has had some law to address it. But no society in all of history has come up with anything like Jesus' expanded definition of murder: "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment . . . anyone who says 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

Every society has rules or laws against sexual promiscuity. But no society has ever proposed a rule as strict as Jesus' recommendation: "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." So what do I need to do? "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

Not only did those who sat on the hillside struggle to find the meaning behind Jesus' teaching that day, for two thousand years, followers and non-followers have struggled to get at the basic meanings behind all he said. The question remains to this day: Was he, indeed, a revolutionary who never made it in defeating the enemy, or was he truly sent from God, and welcomes all who believe into his kingdom? Only you know your answer. Only I know my answer.

**Prayer:** Jesus, lift me up when I'm weak, and prepare me for your kingdom. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What will be different in your life when you are in Jesus' Kingdom?  
2. How do you interpret for yourself Matthew 5:48?

**Thought:** In less than a month, Jesus' walk to the cross will have been completed. Even for the disciples, the more Jesus taught, the less they seemed to understand. It had been that way from the very beginning. Most of it began with that first great day of teaching on the side hill. Not many were able to understand what he was teaching...and it all began with the Beatitudes. Most who read the Bible pretty much think the Beatitudes are the prelude to the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew. However, there are forty-four beatitudes in the New Testament. Thirteen are located in Matthew, fifteen in Luke and two in John.

In the history of all religions worldwide, none have ever come close to the things that Jesus said that day. The state of blessedness or happiness is related to the joy that is occasioned by the presence and activity of Jesus! He ascribes happiness to the poor, hungry, weeping and hated, not because these persons have done anything themselves, but because Jesus' presence signifies the inauguration of the kingdom of God and a new reality for them. Throughout the Old Testament, there are many references to the "future" kingdom of God. Jesus told them to forget such a thing...the kingdom of God is here now. "That's why I'm here."

They didn't get it in the beginning. Neither did they get it one month before the cross. They appear to have "got it" after the ascension, when their eyes and minds were opened – their mouths as well, as they looked up in amazement as Jesus disappeared from their sight. How many of the Beatitudes do you think we "get" today? Any of them? When was the last time you heard a message on the Beatitudes? Perhaps never. They didn't "get" them then; we don't "get" them now. As we walk, let's take time to listen to Jesus again:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God." \_\_\_\_\_

"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you." \_\_\_\_\_

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourself proud owners of everything that can't be bought." \_\_\_\_\_

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat." \_\_\_\_\_

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full, you find yourself cared for." \_\_\_\_\_

"You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world." \_\_\_\_\_

"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family." \_\_\_\_\_

"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom." \_\_\_\_\_

"Count yourself blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me...be glad when that happens – give a cheer! Though they don't like it, I do!" \_\_\_\_\_  
(Now place a check on the line provided for each Beatitude that is an everyday part of your life.)

**Prayer:** Jesus, speak to me today once again about being blessed. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Which is the easiest Beatitude to understand... and live out?  
2. Which is the hardest Beatitude to comprehend...and live out?

**Thought:** Four days back, we remembered one of Jesus' miracles – the healing of the man with leprosy. We were also reminded that leprosy is still a disease to be dealt with in many countries around the world. Paul Brand, working in the New Life Center in Vellore, India, shared the story of John Karmegan – and why and how lepers still need to be “touched.” When John came to the Center, he was in an advanced stage of the disease. Both his feet and hands had been damaged irreparably. Little could be done to help him physically. However, they offered him a place to stay and employment at the Center. Because of one-sided facial paralysis, John could not smile normally. When he tried, the uneven distortion of his features drew attention to the paralysis. People often responded with a gasp or a gesture of fear, so John learned not to try to smile.

He caused terrible problems socially, perhaps in reaction to his marred appearance. He expressed his anger at the world by acting the part of a troublemaker. He often had to be confronted with some evidence of stealing or dishonesty. He treated fellow-patients cruelly, and resisted all authority, going so far as to organize hunger strikes against New Life Center leaders. Most of the doctors felt he was beyond rehabilitation.

But Paul's mother saw in him a leper who “needed to be healed,” and went out of her way to befriend him. She ignored his negatives, looked for some positives, and spent significant time listening to him. Over a period of time, she was able to introduce John to Jesus Christ, and he confessed belief. He was baptized in a cement tank at the leprosarium. Conversion, however, did not temper or dampen John's great anger with the rest of the world. A lifetime of rejection and mistreatment had permanently embittered him against all non-patients. One day, defiantly, he asked John what would happen if he visited the local Tamil church in Vellore.

Paul went to the leaders of the church, described John, and assured them that despite obvious deformities, he had entered a safe phase of the arrested disease and would not endanger the “health” of the congregation. They agreed he could visit. Paul asked if John could take communion, knowing that the church used a common cup. They looked at each other, thought silently for several minutes, and then agreed that he could take communion. Not long after that visit, Paul took John to the church, which met in a plain, white-washed brick building with a corrugated iron roof. When a leprosy patient takes the first step to re-enter a so-called “normal” world, he/she is filled with trauma and paranoia. Paul took him inside the entrance door, and stood with him against the back wall. John's face showed little reaction, but his body was visibly trembling. Both John and Paul wondered if they would be welcomed, ignored, or rejected.

They entered during the singing of the first hymn. An Indian man toward the back of the congregation half-turned and saw them standing there. Paul said “We must have made an odd couple; a white person standing next to a leprosy patient with patches of his skin in garish disarray.” It happened quickly. The man put down his hymnal, smiled broadly, and patted the chair next to him, inviting John to join him. John was startled. Then, haltingly, he made shuffling half-steps to the row and took his seat. Finally, Jesus touched his life in the outside, real world.

Years later, Paul visited Vellore, and made a side trip to a factory that had been set up to employ disabled people. As they walked through the noisy plant, the manager shouted to him that he wanted to introduce him to his prize employee! Arriving at the work station, Paul saw the unmistakable crooked face of John Karmegan. “He wiped the grease off his stumpy hand and grinned with the ugliest, the loveliest, most radiant smile I had ever seen.” Jesus had touched his life through a church member – inside the church! Where are the “lepers” in your life? Will you touch one of them?

**Prayer:** Jesus, open my eyes to see people whose lives need to be touched...by You and me. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How would you describe your compassion for people who are hurting?  
2. Remember, and ponder over the last time you reached out and touched someone.

**Thought:** As we near the end of March, you're probably already aware that by mid-April, the IRS will be expecting to hear from you. So it was in Jesus' time. Even as our government doesn't run itself on nothing, neither did the Temple at Jerusalem. The rituals and sacrifices were costly! Some of the temple taxes were offered by worshippers out of their own pockets. But there were certain sacrifices made for the whole nation every day. Morning and evening three offerings were made: a male lamb of one year in age, a meat offering of flour and oil, and a drink offering of wine. (See Exodus 29:38-41.) As long as the Temple stood, even when under siege or the people were starving, these three sacrifices were never omitted.

In addition to the expense of the daily sacrifices, there was the expense of the incense that was burned before the morning, and after the evening sacrifice. There was the expense of the wood for the altar fires and oil for the lamps. The robes for the priests were another expense, as well as all of the hangings and curtains in the Temple courts. As well, there was the cost of maintaining the whole Temple facility and administering the sanctuary. This was, indeed, big business!!!

The tax itself was one-half shekel, which was roughly equivalent to two denarii. In Jesus' time, a workingman's wage was one denarius a day. Scholars differ on the worth of a denarius back then, with its value as low as 15 cents and as high as 20 cents! The Temple tax was two days wages. A man was liable for the Temple tax at the age of 20. In earlier years, the tax was voluntary. But in 78 BC, it became compulsory...every man had to pay! About the middle of March, proclamation was made that the time of the tax payment had come. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, stalls where the tax could be paid were set up in all the villages, towns, and communities. After March 25<sup>th</sup>, the stalls were taken down, and the tax could only be paid at the Temple. Jews dispersed all over the world were expected to pay the tax, and they did so gladly to support the Temple they loved so well; in Palestine every Jew paid whether he liked it or not.

Then Jesus came into the picture. He and his friends were in Capernaum and booths for the payment of the Temple tax had been set up. Local authorities asked Peter if Jesus was in the habit of paying this particular tax. No doubt they hoped Jesus would refuse to pay so they would have another reason to accuse him of being a law-breaker.

Of all of Jesus' recorded miracles, what happened next is probably the most strange. The tax was half a shekel...or two silver drachmae. If Jesus was to pay the tax for both himself and Peter, he had to find a 'stater,' a four-drachmae piece which was a lot of money in those days. Not only was the coin to come from the mouth of a fish, Peter had to catch the fish!

There's more history here, which you don't get from Matthew's account. This Gospel was written sometime between 80 AD and 90 AD. In AD 70, the city of Jerusalem was taken and destroyed by the Romans; the Temple was totally ruined. The Romans then declared that what had once been paid as a Temple tax should now be paid to support the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. Suetonius, a Roman historian, wrote that in the reign of Domitian, "Besides other taxes, that on the Jews was levied with the utmost rigor." He went on to say that those who lived as Jews without acknowledging the Jewish faith were also brought under tribute. By this he meant the Christians, because he thought they were a sect of the Jews.

What did Jesus communicate through this miracle? Jesus pointed out clearly that each Christian has a duty to fulfill as a citizen and as a member of the community, even if we believe we are on a pilgrimage while here. So how do you feel about IRS day on April 15<sup>th</sup> this year?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me in my attempt to be a good citizen – and not complain. Amen.

**Question:** 1. Compare your feelings of being a good citizen here, and as well, in heaven.  
2. Have you ever asked God to bless the taxes you pay when you send them in?



**Thought:** If you ask the next person you talk with who Jesus Christ is – not was! – what kind of answer would you get? One never knows. Recently in a conversation with a young fellow struggling with several problem areas, I mentioned that I met a guy a long time ago, who helped me when I needed help. Of course he wanted to know who he was. I responded with two words – Jesus Christ! His face brightened, and then told me he had decided to go to church and see if he could get some help. But so far, he hadn't met the Christ, he admitted. (Jot down what you think you would hear if you simply decided to ask someone – anyone – who Jesus Christ is: \_\_\_\_\_.)

People in Jesus' day would have given all kinds of answers. Obviously, he was a very interesting teacher or lecturer; you wanted to catch every word he was saying. Some branded him as a troublemaker. Some hoped he would be a liberator. It was obvious to those who had seen one of the miracles he was a healer. The label "heretic" would have been attached by a small group of listeners. Yet others were sure he was another in a long line of prophets in Jewish history. As we walk towards Jerusalem, about three weeks away, what label were they using now, rather than the ones they were using three years earlier?

At the beginning of his ministry, he went to Nazareth, his hometown. Like any good Jewish man, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. There is a time in the synagogue gathering when men can read a passage of Scripture (Old Testament, of course!) and offer comments he'd like to share with the group. So Jesus stood and asked for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He slowly unrolled the scroll until he came to the passage that speaks of the Spirit anointing someone to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, healing to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.

By reading these words from Isaiah, Jesus stirred the hopes of the people for one of God's promises to Israel. They'd been asked, over the centuries and by different prophets, to wait for this person, pray for the day to come, and prepare for it, as well. Then Jesus sat down, which was the custom for readers in the Synagogue – then he spoke. Instead of sharing a long commentary on what he had read, he said only a few words, which surprised, shocked, and astonished those gathered: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

If Jesus had said: "...someday this Scripture will be fulfilled," they would have settled back, sighed in relief, and nodded their heads. If he'd told them that some of the Scripture was already fulfilled, but some of it was not, they would have rather agreed with him and found what he said to be acceptable. Instead, they were astonished, and struggled to find meaning in his words.

How about us? If Jesus came today, here are some of the things he probably would be saying. "It's time to dismantle your military-industrial complex and work out peace agreements with your enemies." "Now is the time for CEO's to slash their mammoth salaries and give huge raises to their lowest-paid employees!" "It's time for criminals, police departments, militias, weapons factories and armies to turn in their guns and bullets so they can be melted down and recast as swing sets for the kids, garden tools for all, and musical instruments." "It's time to stop plundering God's earth for quick corporate profits, and start healing the Earth for everyone's benefit." "Don't say 'someday' or 'tomorrow.' The time is today. Now is the time."

If Jesus was "radical" then, he would be more radical today. Jesus would not be found sitting in a church every Sunday morning. Jesus would be "out there", working in the world – today! Jesus made quite a difference in his world. As payment, he was crucified. What difference can Jesus make in today's world – through us, his followers? What's the price tag?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us make "today" a reality in someone's life. Amen.

**Question:** 1. Jesus paid quite a price for what he believed. Was it worth it?  
2. Jot down several names of persons whom you would like to meet Jesus.

**Thought:** Of all of Jesus's miracles, which one do you see as the so-called "greatest?" I imagine many would point to the raising of Lazarus from the dead. If so, what about the raising of Jairus' daughter, and the son of the widow of Nain? In the case of Jairus' daughter, who had the greatest compassion --- the father who literally came to Jesus and groveled on the ground, or Jesus, whose compassion was summed up in his instructions to the father -- "Do not fear, only believe."? After all, Jairus was a very important man. He was one of the rulers of the synagogue, and they were responsible for the administration of the synagogue and the reverent conduct of its services. They handled all the synagogue's financial affairs. They decided who was to take the prayers, and who was to preach the sermon. Everyone looked up to them.

What is even more amazing that Jairus would go to Jesus is the fact that by this time, Jesus had incurred the hatred of all Jewish authorities. Why? Because he'd healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, and thereby had broken the Law. As a result, Jesus was no longer welcome to preach in the synagogues; he had to take his act to the open country (Mark 3:1-7). Apparently, Jairus was a man who was willing to swallow his pride, and publicly seek help from a man he knew was unwelcome in their synagogue. It's also nice to know that Jesus held no grudges whatsoever. He could have avoided, berated him or refused to heal the twelve-year-old daughter. But Jesus had compassion and cared. His compassion was also great enough to sidetrack him from Jairus' sick daughter to comfort the frightened woman who had touched his robe and been miraculously healed.

What did Jesus find when he finally got to Jairus' home? There were three customs in Jesus' day that would be found in every house of mourning. Jairus' daughter had died, and immediately the family and friends went into action. First there was the rending of garments. There were 39 different laws that described how garments were to be rent. The rent was to be made while standing. Clothes were to be rent to the heart so that skin was exposed. For a father or mother, the rent was to be made exactly over the heart. For others, the rent was on the right hand side. The rent had to be big enough to put your fist through it. For the seven days of mourning, the rent was to be left wide open. For the next 30 days of lighter mourning, it was to be roughly stitched up. It was laid down that a woman should rend her inner garment in private; she then reversed it and wore the back in the front. Then, in public, she had to rend the outer garment.

The second custom in Jesus' day was that all the time the body of the dead person was in the house, non-stop wailing was kept up. Matthew talks about the people "making a tumult" (9:23). The verb that is used to describe the weeping really means "howling." There were women who carried out this duty professionally. There was not a house of mourning in Palestine where these wailing women would not be present. One writer (Thompson) gives this description;

"There are in every city and community women exceedingly cunning in this business. They are always sent for, and kept in readiness. When a new company of sympathizers come in, these women make haste to take up wailing so that the newcomers may the more easily unite their tears with the mourners. They also know the family history of every person, and immediately strike up impromptu lamentations in which they introduce the names of their relatives who have recently died...making sure that every person there is "touched" by the reality of dying and death..."

Third, there were the flute players -- present at every funeral, from the poorest to the funeral of the Roman Emperor Claudius in AD 54! It was into such a scene that Jesus entered when he went into Jairus' house. Jesus put them all out...and you know the rest or the story. Jesus had compassion...and the daughter jumped up and walked around the room!

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for compassion then, and for your compassion for us today. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Where do you find compassionate caring in our world today?  
2. With stories such as this, why has the world essentially rejected Jesus?

**Thought:** How long are you and I going to live? Not one of us knows with certainty; but in Jesus' day, it was a fact of life that the age of fifty was "old age." History tells us that at that time, four out of ten children would never reach adulthood. Nain was 25 miles from Capernaum, and could actually be seen from the hilltop above Nazareth. Jesus knew the town well. Today Nain is just another small village. However, the burying place the funeral cortege was going to is still to be seen. Tristram wrote: "Thus at Nain the approach to the place is from the north-east, the Tiberias Road. On this road, just beyond what once were walls, is the burying place still used by Moslems."

In Palestine, cemeteries were always outside the city or town boundaries. As Jesus walked towards Nain, he heard long before he saw a grief-stricken funeral procession: a widow's only son was being taken to his tomb or burial plot of some kind. When a person died, there were strict steps to be taken. The corpse was kissed, the eyes were closed and the head was bound in a napkin to keep the jaws from dropping open. The body was washed and anointed, and wrapped in elaborate clothes. The hair and the nails were cut.

Then the funeral procession started out. The body was carried on a bier in a wicker work basket. The face was left uncovered and the hands were folded on the breast as if the dead person was asleep. In front of the procession were the professional wailing women. Next came the mourners, just ahead of the bier. These were followed by a crowd of men and boys. Everyone who could possibly do so joined the procession. Not to do so was said to be a sin as serious as mocking one's Creator.

The professional mourners worked themselves into a frenzy. Tristram wrote: "They fling up their arms, tear their hair with the wildest gesticulations of grief, and shriek out the name of the deceased, with lamentations that God has taken him." He told how the women tossed their arms, and swung their handkerchiefs while shrieking at the top of their voices. He also said that they got into such a state that generally someone went into convulsions, while foaming at the mouth like an epileptic, then falling to the ground senseless.

You can picture in your mind such a scene that Jesus met as he walked towards the entrance of Nain. First, somehow Jesus stopped everybody in their tracks. If not, no one would have heard a word he said. The next thing he did was say to the mother/widow: "Do not weep." Everyone else told the mother to weep, and they wept with her. Jesus told her the opposite.

Then he moved beyond her to the bier, and the bearers stood still, in shock and amazement at what was happening. Then Jesus spoke: "Young man, I say to you, arise." And just like that, the man sat up and began to talk. Next comes one of the most beautiful, compassionate statements in the New Testament: "...Jesus gave him back to his mother."

Jesus had compassion on the widow. The word used for 'he had compassion' is the strongest word in the Greek language. It is *splagchnizesthai*. The *splagchna* are the bowels, and *splagchnizesthai* is defined as being *moved to the very depths of one's being*. The word is repeatedly used of Jesus through the four Gospels, and never about anyone else. Jesus took a risk in what he did, as well. He touched the bier. A dead body, or anything that dead body had touched was unclean. The law was clear: "He who touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days" (Numbers 19:11). Cleansing was a complicated process. Jesus knew this quite well, yet without hesitation he touched the untouchable. He took a risk in order to help someone. Reflect on your journey: have you ever taken a risk to help someone else?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us to duplicate your compassion. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Is anything too difficult for Jesus to do...today? If so, why?  
2. What are your feelings about death? Will Jesus "walk with you thru the valley?"

**Thought:** How did you answer yesterday's question #1? I can imagine that some of you responded to the question by saying there isn't anything Jesus can't do today, but the real question is does he want to do it/them? If he did want to do them, this old world would be a far different place than it is today. He also stated clearly to those listening that one of these days, this old world was going to be a new world – completely changed from anything we see around us today.

Have you ever thought of the Jews of Jesus' day as being immigrants? There's quite a section of the Bible that tells the story of their immigration journey...from Egypt to the so-called Promised Land. And all of the people of the Canaan territory saw the Israelites as immigrants – foreigners who didn't belong there...and they fought tooth and nail to try to drive them out, kill them off, or destroy them entirely. History tells us they failed at every attempt they made. As you look around the globe today, there are very few places where some type of upheaval is not occurring regarding the movement of people from one country to another. Much of what has been happening is a sad commentary on humanity. "What's mine is mine, and you can't touch or have" seems to be a part of being in the human family for many.

What do you expect when you go to church on a Sunday morning? The usual, I imagine. It's a time to separate from a weekly schedule packed with demands to spend some "quiet" time with our loving God, touch base with friends, perhaps "calm down" a bit, and reflect on what this earthly journey is still all about. A number of weeks back, my wife and I went to the Exton Community Baptist Church (Kadin Williams, pastor) with some of the above feelings. But we hadn't been inside the sanctuary very long when it was obvious that something was wrong. We weren't sure just what ... but people were whispering, some were gathered close together in small circles, and a cluster gathered at the front of the sanctuary. Our first thought was that something bad must have happened.

Skip ahead to today. If you were to visit our church tomorrow, you'd see something that wasn't there that Sunday. To the right side of the pulpit area (facing front) you will see three large chairs. A long sash is draped over the top/back of each chair. On the chairs, you will see 3 signs that say "Saved for Jonathan," "Saved for Daisy," "Saved for Jane." If you should come a year from now, those chairs will most likely be there with the same signs on them. What happened?"

Jonathan, Daisy, and 8-year old Jane were three ECBC members from India, living in the United States under an authorized and current H-1B Visa program. They were in full compliance with all the Visa requirements, and were productive, contributing members of our society, community and ECBC family. Jonathan had pursued study at nearby Palmer Seminary. Suddenly, without cause or explanation, they were given 10 days to leave the country.

What we were seeing as we moved into the sanctuary was the living reality of what you've just read. Although everyone wanted to know what alternatives there were, the reality was that there were no alternatives – just be on a plane back to India in ten days time. In that short time, they had to take care of a myriad of details, both in reference to "getting rid" of everything they had, to making preparations for the flight, and making arrangements for a place to live once they arrived in India.

ECBC has created a Saving Their Seats program, through which caring Christians can make a contribution to be used to hire an attorney to shepherd their request and paperwork needed for re-entry, a process that will take 12–16 months at a minimum. Please pray for Jonathan, Daisy and Jane with us as the process continues, probably even after you have read today's page. There's a lot of hurt in this old world – some of it hits close to home at times. Jonathan, Daisy and Jane still believe that Jesus loves and cares for them. They also believe he still answers prayer.

**Prayer:** Jesus, please touch the lives of Jonathan, Daisy and Jane in a new way today. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. My great-grandparents were immigrants. Were yours?

2. How do you see Jesus acting in our world today?

**Thought:** The first four books of the New Testament are the primary resources through which we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem. One of them is the Gospel of Luke, and its author also wrote the book of Acts. He addressed the gospel to “most excellent Theophilus” who might have been a close friend, or to everyone who loves God, which is the meaning of the name Theophilus.

Luke was a physician. He was well educated. As to the stories and rumors of the one called Jesus, Luke decided that reading and studying weren’t enough. He learned about Paul during his ministry in Antioch, and he went to hear him speak about the new religion called Christianity. When it came time for Paul to take the gospel message “on the road,” Luke volunteered to go along and record all of it for posterity. So Luke became the first Christian historian.

From Paul’s letters, it was evident that men passed in and out of Paul’s ministry. But Luke was the one who stayed by his side to the very end. In 2 Timothy, Paul wrote: “Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me...Crescens has gone to Galatia...and Titus to Dalmatia...only Luke is with me.” Despite persecution and temptation, Luke was faithful to the end. Paul was executed in Rome, and Luke left the city behind him. By now, he was so committed to the missionary life that he continued to travel and teach about Jesus for the rest of his life. After the death of Paul, Luke’s ministry lasted almost thirty years.

No writings exist of Luke’s ministries until the end of his journey. His last days were spent in Greece, where he preached the Good News and opposed the worship of the Greek gods among the people of the Peloponnesian cities. His primary message was recorded in the book of Acts: “There is salvation in no one else but Jesus! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them.” Luke so upset the world of the idolatrous priests with his teaching that they incited a mob against him and took him to an olive grove near the port city of Patras. There they hung him in a green olive tree until he died. He was eighty-four years old at the time of his death.

Luke was totally captivated by what he learned about Jesus, and did his best to give us an accurate picture of the one with whom we’re walking to Jerusalem. Allow God’s Word itself to paint the real picture of Jesus, as recorded by Luke:

“Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and heap insults upon you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets...

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back.

And just as you want men to treat you, treat them in the same way. And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same thing. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.”

(Luke 6: 22-23, 27-35)

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me increase my visibility as I try to reflect your Light. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What are your feelings when you read the Gospel of Luke?  
2. Find the time to write out your own description of Jesus, the Christ.

**Thought:** God came ... in Jesus! That's right – God came! According to Jesus, Divinity was walking the dusty roads of Palestine. Then God came ... in the Spirit. And this time, God is present at any time or place on planet Earth. Not one of us ever knows when the Spirit (God) will touch a life again. It happens all the time.

At 7:40 a.m. on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, Commander Mitsuo Fuchida of the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service led the first wave of bomber and fighter planes in the attack on Pearl Harbor. He sent up the green flare from his plane signaling the order to attack. He ordered his radio operator to send the message “Tora! Tora! Tora!” informing the Japanese that they had achieved complete surprise.

This attack caused the deaths of 2,400 Americans, and 64 Japanese. The next day, the United States officially declared war on Japan. Fuchida served Japan throughout the war. Once he escaped death when an emergency appendectomy left him “stranded” on the bridge of the aircraft carrier Alagi instead of being in a fighter plane when the Americans attacked during the battle of Midway.

Later, having broken both ankles when thrown by an explosion, he became a staff officer with Vice Adm. Kukuji Kakuta. He was ordered to Tokyo just before Kakuta failed to stop the American liberation of Guam. If he had remained on Guam, he would have committed suicide with Kakuta and all his staff. “Again the sword of death had missed me by inches,” he told a reporter in 1971.

One of his tasks was to inspect the city of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb was dropped. Again, he was the only one in his party not to die from radiation poisoning. As well, he should have been in Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped but had been abruptly sent to another city for an intelligence briefing the day before. After returning to his family and their chicken farm, he said: “Life has no taste or meaning...I'd missed death so many times...and for what? What did it mean?”

After the war, a number of Japanese military personnel were put on trial for war crimes relating to their treatment of prisoners of war. Fuchida, called on to testify, felt the trials were a sham. He had harbored resentment to the United States for decades due to its restrictions on Asian immigration. He also believed the Americans had treated Japanese POW's just as badly. So he went to work to make his case. He sought out recently released POWs to gather evidence. One he contacted was his former flight engineer, Kazua Kanegasaki, whom he thought had died, but instead was a POW.

Rather than telling a story of abuse and torture by Americans, the man told him of a young American woman, Peggy Covell, who treated him and fellow prisoners with great kindness, even though Japanese soldiers had killed her missionary parents in the Philippines. Fuchida was astounded. The code of all warriors not only permitted revenge, it demanded it. But this woman, a committed follower of Jesus, declined revenge, and offered instead compassion.

Fuchida decided he had to learn more about this “thing” called Christianity. He soon encountered Jacob DeShazer and his testimony of Christ, whom he met while an American POW in a Japanese camp. In September 1949, Fuchida became a believer in, and follower of Christ. A bit after that, he said: “Looking back, I can see now that the Lord laid his hand upon me so that I might serve him.”

Fuchida established the Captain Fuchida Evangelistic Association and traveled fulltime sharing with everyone his journey and story of conversion to Christ. He wrote: “I remember the thrill that was mine when in one of my first evangelistic meetings, I led my first soul to Christ in America...and he was one of my own countrymen!” Yes, God's Spirit is alive and active in today's world.

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me let my light shine so that people can see...You. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Whom do you know who has a story of change to tell?  
2. Through whom is God most active in today's world?

**Thought:** For three years, the disciples didn't have any problems trying to figure out who God is/was or what God was doing. After all, God was with them every day of the week...in plain sight...busy doing things...talking with them...listening to them...teaching them...helping them...surprising them...and caring for them. The only problem was they didn't know Jesus was God...in person, in the flesh, night and day, in full reality every moment. Why didn't they know? Jesus told them more than once, and in different ways, that he and God were one. God was with them, in person, every day! You could say they couldn't figure it out, or they didn't believe him.

Is it any different today? Jesus told them more than once before he ascended into the clouds that God would be with them every day, every moment, in every situation, both day and night, in easy times and in tough times. God's Spirit dwells within every believer. What he told the disciples almost 2,000 years ago are still his words to every one who believes that Jesus came, as God, to save all people from their sins and eternal punishment.

Whatever time of day you're reading this page, how many crossing-points have you had with the living God? For some, the crossing-points happen on Sunday when they attend a worship service or whatever. But God, as Jesus did for three years with his disciples, is present, available, listening and responding to every believer every moment of each day. There are some folks who consider the simple act of going down the driveway to pick up the morning newspaper an occasion for praise. In a sense, they believe God is walking with them, joining with them at the beginning of the day's journey, whatever may come their way. If you get your news electronically in some fashion, is God present with you as you learn what's happening in God's world today? After all, it is God's world, isn't it – no matter how many smart-phones you may have?

Jews at the time of Jesus practiced making ordinary moments the occasion for blessing – and it began with the first conscious breath of the day when they said: “Blessed are You, O loving One, who opens my eyes from sleep, and my eyelids from slumber.” Some had blessings that linked every action of a day to God. Some devout Jews kept a bowl of water by the bedside in order to wash their hands in a deliberate consecration of every thing they would do that day to God's purposes. Some today would call such an action ridiculous, silly, unnecessary, or ritualistic. If so, what do you do to consciously acknowledge that God is a Spirit, and dwells within the life and body of believers in Jesus, the Christ.

In his book *Wrestling With Grace*, Robert Morris took some of the ancient blessings and wrote them for use in some of today's language:

“Blessed are you who has woven my body a many-chambered mystery,  
to stand and praise you.

Blessed are you, who has formed me in your image to be a man (woman).

Blessed are you, who brought me forth fragrant and naked in your sight.

Blessed are you, who taught me how to clothe the naked.

Blessed are you, who raises my body to walk the path with strength.

Blessed are you, who sets the solitary into families, loving every tongue and tribe.

Blessed are you, who makes me part of your servant people.

Blessed are you, who calls me in the work of creation day by day.”

As the disciples listened, questioned, followed, struggled with, and at times doubted Jesus, they didn't turn their backs on him and return to fishing. Each Christian today is challenged to daily, or hourly confront the indwelling Spirit of God in the reality of today's life. God is alive to each of us today.

**Prayer:** Jesus, open my eyes that I may see the living God within me every hour of the day. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How often are you in touch with God's Spirit in an ordinary day?

2. Where is God when you're having a tough day?

**Thought:** As Jesus walked ever closer to his “date” with Jerusalem, there were three power groups that shadowed his every step and word. The Temple itself provided one of the power blocks in the large group of priests who “called all the shots” for worship, rituals, and taxes. The second power group was the priests who negotiated with the Roman leaders to be certain all of Rome’s laws and wishes were kept, and as well, make every effort to put down the slightest hint of rebellion or anti-Rome sentiment. Of course, the largest power group was the Roman Empire, with puppet leadership and a good supply of soldiers stationed in Palestine.

In the four Gospels, there are many occasions recorded where Jesus went “head-to-head” with priests from both groups mentioned above. We do not find similar public confrontations with the Roman government/leaders. Yet Jesus “confronted” Roman politics and society every day he walked the dusty roads. Let’s take a look at the Roman political system in Jesus’ day.

First there was the Emperor. In 27 BC, Octavian succeeded his uncle and took the title Augustus Caesar. For Rome, in a sense this was a new beginning. He and all who succeeded him as rulers took the title “emperor.” In taking such a title, they claimed to be ordained by the gods to represent them and carry out their will on earth. Augustus and all his successors were called “Father of the Fatherland” or “Father of the country.” The implication was that the Roman Empire was one big family where the Emperor had the task/right to protect, disciple and bless the family members. As a result, when Jesus called God his “Father” and told his disciples to “call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father -- the one in heaven,” he was taking an anti-Roman position.

The Roman Emperor also accepted the title of “king of kings” or “king over all lesser client kings.” From this titling came the taunting Jesus received as they readied him for the cross, including the title of “king of kings.”

Rome had a two-level social structure. On top were the elites who had absolute authority over the great multitude of people and controlled all social and governmental structures. Historians estimate that the elites of the Roman Empire consisted of 2% of the total population. They held in their hands the collective wealth and power of the empire. As ruling elites, they lived in luxurious palaces and villas and enjoyed the finest life could provide.

Roman leaders believed that paid soldiers were more loyal to the emperor and less likely to support local rebellions. Augustus Caesar dismantled the former militias and formed the first full-time army and navy, over which he served as commander-in-chief. He used taxes to pay for the professional army. There is no question soldiers kept track of Jesus and listened to some of what he said.

When Octavian was named the new Caesar, and the Senate gave him the title Augustus, a new Roman cult was born – the cult of the Emperor, which gained widespread popularity throughout the Roman Empire. When he became Caesar, the Senate posthumously recognized Julius Caesar as divine. So Octavian took the title of “Son of God.” Only a few years before Jesus’ birth, the Provincial Assembly in Asia declared Augustus to be “divine” and “sent. . . as a Saviour” -- whose birthday marks the “beginning of good news” for the entire world. Can you see more clearly some of the political mix into which Jesus came...and in which he lived and moved for his three years of ministry? If you ponder the kind of a background into which Jesus came, can you perhaps find it somewhat amazing that God would choose to enter human history in such a context? One can almost say it’s little wonder that he ended up on a cross.

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us see more clearly the human context into which you came to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How would you have felt if you lived in the Roman Empire’s context?  
2. What are your feelings about God’s plan to bring salvation to the world?



**Thought:** Luke provides numerous accounts of Jesus confronting the Jewish establishment. In chapter seven Jesus is invited to dine with one of the Pharisees. Jesus agreed, came into the home, but didn't wash his hands before he reclined for the meal – which shocked the Pharisee. Then Jesus pronounced woe after woe on the Pharisees. One of the lawyers present got mad at him and said: “Teacher, when you say those things, you insult us, too” (7:41). Jesus responded by saying: “Woe also to you lawyers for you load people with burdens hard to bear.” Again and again Jesus confronted Temple leadership, so much so that by this time on the journey, many were the plots being laid to entrap him in something that would put him away for good.

As to the Roman Empire, where one reclined at a meal in relation to the host was an open acknowledgment to all present of one's social status. The seats closest to the host were the seats of honor. If an invited guest had done something during the past week or so to benefit the host or his holdings, that guest would be moved closer to the host, and someone else would be moved farther away. This was Roman elitism at its best.

Luke tells how Jesus took on the Roman Empire in chapter 14. “When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited. . . But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place. . . For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This parable is radical anti-Roman and anti-Jewish leader thinking, just as radical as the day Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Temple. Roman elites had created a social stratification that marginalized 98% of the total population. What Jesus told them is the exact opposite of the Roman elitist position. He said clearly that the way a person acts at the meal table now will result in either reward or punishment. He also connects the two meals – the one “eaten” in the present time, and the messianic-meal/wedding feast to be eaten at the consummation of this age (Rev. 19:9). At the latter meal, God will serve as host. The invited guests are those humbled in this lifetime, i.e., elitists who have chosen to humble themselves, and the marginalized that have been shamed and kept away from any banquet table. The lesson from Jesus is very clear: exchange imperial values based on title or status for God's kingdom values based on equality.

Jesus took on the Roman Empire in another matter, the action of reciprocity. Those who were invited to a banquet were expected to repay in kind. Gifts were never free, but came with strings attached. Therefore, one invited to his banquet only those who could reciprocate. In this way, one's social status was maintained. A person of wealth or status would never consider inviting a peasant to such an affair. If he did so, his own social image would be tarnished – in the eyes of his peers. This was the Roman Empire at its best. If you're on top, you build a social structure that will always keep you on top, and keep the peasants, poor, and marginalized forever on the “bottom.”

Jesus shocked all who listened when he said: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14: 12-14). Rome was listening to Jesus, too, in the above illustrations, and others. Today's world is vastly different from 2,000 years ago. But not much has changed, for anywhere you look, you will find the “haves” and the “have not's.” What do we intentionally do to reach out to the “have not's” of today?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us see more clearly, and act more Christ-like as the days go by. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Place yourself in the “haves” or “have not” group, and tell yourself why.  
2. How does Jesus' social system fit into today's world?

**Thought:** As we walk closer to Jerusalem, take another look around and try to figure out whom each person is. When talking about Israel at the time of Jesus, one normally assumes that we are talking about the Jews. But Palestinian Judaism at the time of Jesus did not constitute a monolithic and uniform religion. While all accepted Yahweh as their God, the Jewish people were divided in many ways. Some could be described as spiritual movements, while others could be described as religious parties.

I marvel over Jesus' ability to address the many different positions held by his Jewish audiences. In a sense, he "took them all on" at the same time, which is truly remarkable. One of the movements was, it was agreed by all Jews, to be heretical, and as well, didn't belong in the Jewish community. They were called the Samaritans. The Samaritans regarded only one book as being holy, the Pentateuch. They did not recognize in the Temple of Jerusalem the true dwelling-place of God. Instead, they offered their sacrifices on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria.

There was a small political group favorable to King Herod. Another small "political" group was the scribes, who were largely officials in charge of the Law. With these three groups there were also the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

The Sadducees represented the party of opportunists who willingly collaborated with the occupying Roman leadership. They felt they were privileged, quite conservative in their beliefs, and openly scornful of "ordinary" people. Along with their linking role with the Roman hierarchy, they were also influential in the Temple. They went one step farther than the Samaritans and believed in reading only the written Law (Pentateuch and Prophets). They read these books as literal for the day in which they were read, and did not in any way look forward to a Messiah, any type of resurrection, angels, etc. Along the way, however, they eventually drifted away from what began as a religious movement to become more politically based, since they were respected and "safe" in the eyes of the Roman governmental leadership. They were "paid" well, since they did some of the "dirty work" for the conquering Romans.

If the Sadducees linked hands with the Roman leaders, the Pharisees went in an entirely different direction. Over 150 years before Jesus' time, they moved slowly but surely into practicing strictly all facets of the Law. They did this by both explaining and multiplying them, and as well, adding hundreds of oral traditions from centuries past. They enlisted scribes throughout Israel to work with them in reaching even the remote towns and villages, so their influence was felt in every rural synagogue. Unlike the other groups in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were only "into" religion.

They believed in the resurrection of the body and in a final judgment, as well as in angels and spirits. They believed that human beings could practice the will of God. They also shared a messianic hope common among most Jewish people, and as well, constantly looked for signs of the Messiah. Needless to say, most of them didn't see these signs in Jesus, although some did. They also waited for the liberation of their nation, the punishment of the wicked, and the return of the Holy Land to all dispersed Jews. They also felt they had the task of winning converts to the Jewish Law and faith from all over the world.

There were two other smaller groups, as well...the Essenes and the Zealots. It was into such a mix that God chose to come...in Jesus. Jesus shared some of the basic concerns of the Pharisees. But he couldn't go along with such traditionalism that it was impossible to try to observe the Law. So two weeks before that black Friday, the above wheels were all, in one way or another, in motion to rid themselves of such a threat.

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for facing the reality of Judaism when you came. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Why do you think God chose this point in history to send Jesus?

2. How does today's world compare to the world Jesus penetrated?

**Thought:** For three years, Judaism wasn't sure how to deal with the so-called Messiah named Jesus. His teachings were so radically different from what they taught as the Law that he was a threat in his first week of ministry. Actually most of the various offshoots in Judaism (mentioned yesterday) saw in Jesus neither the long-awaited Messiah (for some), nor the person who would lead them out of the Roman Empire.

If they didn't know what to do with Jesus and his followers then, for the next 200 years, the Roman Empire didn't know what to do with Jesus' followers who called themselves Christians, either. Less than 100 years after Jesus was crucified, a Roman governor was perplexed about what to do with people who were accused of being Christians. Pliny "The Younger" was appointed governor of Bithynia in 110 AD. While serving, he wrote 42 times to the Roman Emperor Trajan asking for his opinion on matters. In one of them he asked Trajan what to do about Christians.

"I was never present at any trial of Christians; therefore I do not know what are the customary penalties or investigations, and what limits are observed. I have hesitated a great deal on the question whether there should be a distinction of ages; whether the weak should have the same treatment as the strong; whether those who recant should be pardoned, or whether a man who has ever been a Christian should gain nothing in ceasing to be such; whether the name itself, even if innocent of crime, should be punished, or only the crimes attaching to that name.

Meanwhile, this is the course that I have adopted in the case of those brought before me as Christians. I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it, I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment; if they persist, I sentence them to death. Thereupon the usual result followed, the very fact of my dealing with the question led to a wider spread of the charge, and a great variety of cases were brought before me. An anonymous pamphlet was issued, containing many names. All who denied that they were or had been Christians I considered should be discharged, because they called upon our gods at my dictation and did reverence with incense and wine, and to your image which I had ordered to be brought forward, together with the statues of the deities; and especially because they cursed Christ, a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be induced to do.

But they declared that the sum of their guilt or error had amounted only to this: that on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath not for the commission of any crime but to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery and breach of faith. At the conclusion of this service, it was their custom to depart and meet again to take food, but it was ordinary and harmless food. They said they had ceased this practice after my edict in which, in accordance with your orders, I had forbidden secret societies.

I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in this by applying torture to two maidservants, who were called deaconesses. But I found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition, and I therefore postponed my examination and had recourse to you for consultation. The matter seemed to me to justify my consulting you, especially on account of the number of those who are imperiled for what they say they believe – for many persons of all ages and classes and of both sexes are being put in peril by accusation, and no doubt this will go on. The contagion of this superstition has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well; yet we may be capable of checking it and setting it right."

Lenten traveller, let's ask ourselves what those who know us at least a little bit have learned about the Christ.

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us keep our Light shining brightly in the darkness of today's world.

**Questions:** 1. What obstacles do we face today in trying to live Christ-like lives?  
2. Why isn't today's "church" shining more brightly?

**Thought:** As Jesus looked at the crowds that gathered wherever he went, how many of them were actually seeking a living relationship with a living God? For those who were truly looking for the Jewish Messiah, the reasons behind their search were a bit on the selfish side. The coming Messiah was going to make them a “free” people again, with their own land, with their own king, without outside rulers/bosses, with plenty to eat, with nothing to fear. As well, they wanted the day back when the living God dwelt with them, a pillar of cloud by day, and a beacon of light at night. They wanted the God back who didn’t tax them every time they went into the Temple. They wanted, again, to be God’s favorite people, as they thought of themselves.

As you look around you today, how many people do you think are looking for a loving relationship with a living God? In a world that is increasingly obsessed with technology, instant communication, and power issues, how many fellow-travelers do you know who feel there is a God, and that we need to be in constant touch – today – with the God of the Universe? How many whose feet are today planted firmly on this globe believe what the four Gospels tell about Jesus Christ? How many of the world’s “minds” believe that the God of the Universe would love created human beings so much that this God would actually come to, in a sense, bail them out of the mess they had made of creation?

One writer suggested that Christians, by and large, don’t like tech culture. To many, Silicon Valley seems irredeemably hostile to New Testament values (Alexi Sargeant). There is so much concern today about the possible dangers of Artificial Intelligence (AI) that a culture of rational thinking has been created, named LessWrong. What would Jesus say to today’s rationalistic culture? Would he deliver the Sermon on the Mount as he did, beginning with the Beatitudes? Would he tell them that the God of the Universe has every hair on their head numbered? Would he, with words or touch, reach out to the ever-increasing host of depressed and desperate people who see their only way out by committing suicide? How would Jesus address the “god” known as mass media?

Don’t we all need someone to worship, even those who revel in their ability to think rationally? Or perhaps many who walk the “dusty” roads today worship their ability to think. Consider these thoughts from over a century ago, addressing the task of “Finding Someone To Worship”:

“Have you ever looked at the world to see what is driving it, what it has dreamed up in the way of worshipping God in some way? The whole creation is thirsting for God. Human history is but a burning thirst for God. ‘What do I care about God’ people say, and yet they go on to create their own gods anyway. And then they cry out for God’s mercy as soon as life overwhelms them.

Whether people are pagan, Muslim, or Christian, or find it impossible to believe anything, Jesus hears their cries. So suffer with those you meet, and love them. All the misery of this world stems from a deep thirst that results from living far away from God. The heavy load of sin that presses down on people with such satanic power leads millions into wrong and perverse ways, into dark paths of idolatry and sin, confusion and twisted thought about God. All the more, keep your heart open to hear their heartache.”

(Christopher F. Blumhardt -- 1842-1919 -- a German pastor with unconventional ideas about faith and the kingdom of God.)

With each new idea, discovery or invention, humanity takes one more giant step in the direction of the supremacy of the human mind – “We can solve our own problems, God; we don’t need you.” Having read the above would Jesus still teach/preach the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount if he was to appear, in person, in 2019?

**Prayer:** Jesus, help my mind know that it is not my God. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How far can humanity go in terms of solving its problems?  
2. How do you explain your faith in God to someone else?

**Thought:** How long did you, or will you pray today? After hearing the Sermon on the Mount, how long do you think the disciples prayed each day? As the months went by, they observed Jesus' praying efforts. Do you think the disciples eventually came to the point where they went off by themselves to pray through the night? If they did, they didn't tell us about it in the Gospels.

Instead of Jesus launching his focus on prayer by telling the disciples what it should be, he began by telling them what prayer is NOT! "Don't turn your prayer into a theatrical production," said Jesus. This really caught their attention, and they felt they had been hit by a battering ram. The Jews of Jesus' day had prescribed times each day for prayer. When the time arrived for prayer, they were expected to stop whatever they were doing and pray.

So pious Jews made it a point to be on a busy street corner – or walking into the synagogue as the signal to pray sounded. In this way they would be strategically placed for the whole world to see!!! Prayer was a public display that had little to do with an intimate conversation between two persons! Jesus tried to set his listeners free from the idea that somehow the effectiveness of prayer was tied to being in the right place, at the right time, so that others could see one's deep devotion to God.

Not only were there prescribed times for prayer in Jesus' day, there were prescribed prayers as well for every occasion. The prayers were better if repeated again and again, and louder the second and third times...and on and on! Jesus was urging his listeners to put a stop to repetitive, wordy, meaningless prayers. Both the people who made a big show of their praying and those who felt they needed to pray repetitively and at great length were placing the emphasis on what THEY were contributing to the process. In the Jewish concept of prayer at that time, they were responsible for getting God's attention, and once that was accomplished, God just might respond IF they said the right words enough times, loud enough, followed all the Jewish rules, and led a worthy enough life.

As we walk with Jesus today, remember that Jesus confronted all who listened by telling them they were "doing prayer" totally wrong. In nine verses in the above chapter, Jesus attempted to liberate the disciples and all who listened from the Jewish concept of prayer. To sum it up, this is what he basically said:

1. Stop worrying about your method, position, time of day, or loudness of voice.
2. Stop worrying about the wording, or the number of times you say the prayer.
3. Stop worrying about the setting, or the length of your prayers.
4. Concentrate on what God wants to offer you in your time of prayer:  
"This is your Father you are dealing with, he knows better than you what you need."

So how goes your prayer life? Do you pray one minute a day? Five minutes a day? Morning? Evening? In between? Do you say the same prayer every day? Or do your prayers change with the circumstances? Circumstances have a great deal to do with authentic prayers. The most amazing prayer I've known about in my life wasn't said in church. The pray-er didn't address God by name at all, and it didn't last 10 seconds. The pray-er had never attended a worship service in his life. He'd never put a dime in an offering plate. He wasn't sitting down, or lying down, or standing up when he prayed. The pray-er had never read the Old Testament or heard it read in the Synagogue. He didn't know there would be a New Testament written. Who was he? He was one of two thieves hanging on a cross beside Jesus. And in spite of all he didn't know or do about prayer, he was in the presence of a loving God within a matter of a few minutes, no more than an hour after his prayer. His was an authentic pray-er. God hears those kind of prayers, so Jesus promised.

**Prayer:** (Write your own prayer today!)

- Questions:**
1. Describe your prayer life.
  2. There are 288 five minute periods in every 24 hour day. Do you – could you give one five minute period each day to a conversation with God?

**Thought:** For Jesus, Jerusalem was just around the corner. He'd been walking the dusty roads for well over two years, and knew his earthly journey would soon come to a conclusion. His teaching continued to confound not only the thinking of the scholars of the day, but everyday folks found it hard to comprehend his description of "God's Kingdom." It was so radically different from everyday life that many just shook their heads and walked away.

How could Jesus tell them/us to pray "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? They wondered then, and I ask you today where is God's will being done on earth? He told his disciples "In this world, you will have trouble." They wondered what he meant; but not too many weeks went by before they experienced what he had told them.

He also told them "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come." Two thousand years later, the end is still to come, as Jesus predicted. Have you heard any rumors of war lately? When will the end come? The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse give a preview of how the world will end: in war; famine; sickness; and death. But two thousand years before our reading today (or many years yet to come) Jesus was, at that very moment, giving a personal preview of how the sad old world would be restored. How? He made peace. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick. He brought the dead back to life.

You and I are the "kingdom builders" today. Do you feel like that as you walk with Jesus to Jerusalem? Have you settled any differences lately? Have you taken food off your table and given it to some hungry folks? Have you, in some way, been instrumental in helping someone who is sick to be healed – whatever the sickness may have been? Have you brought anyone back from the world of the dead lately? I imagine most of us, beginning with me, will skip the fourth question and perhaps concentrate on the other three.

Mother Teresa was known worldwide for living out the kind of kingdom Jesus suggested. She told this story:

"I will never forget the night an old gentleman came to our house and said that there was a family with eight children and they had not eaten, and would we do something for them. So I took some rice and went there. The mother took the rice from my hands, then she divided it into two, and left me standing there. I could see the faces of the children shining with hunger.

When she came back I asked her where she had gone. She gave me a very simple answer: 'They are hungry also.' And 'they' were the family next door and she knew that they were also very hungry. I was not surprised that she gave, but I was surprised that she knew.

And this is something that is so beautiful to see, that shining happiness in the face of that mother, who had the love to share. I had not the courage to ask her how long her family hadn't eaten, but I am sure it must have been a long time, and yet she knew – in her suffering, in her sorrow, in her terrible bodily suffering she knew that next door they were hungry also. Do we know that our neighbor needs love? Do we know that our neighbor needs care? Do we know that our neighbor may even need food? As the example of this family shows, God will never forget us, and there is always something you and I can do...for God's Kingdom."

As it was then, the world is still waiting for Jesus' show to get out on the road.

**Prayer:** Jesus, help me touch lives by doing what you would do if you were here today. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Which of the four "Kingdom acts" listed above are you the best at?  
2. How long do you think it will be before God's new kingdom becomes reality? Or is it already here?

**Thought:** As we near Jerusalem, of the thirteen persons who had walked together for almost three years who was the most frustrated with what was happening? There is no question that the disciples were frustrated with Jesus because, again and again, they couldn't get the point to what he was saying. Or, perhaps, they got the point, but couldn't believe what they were hearing. Or, perhaps, was Jesus even more frustrated than the disciples.

**Scott Peck put it this way:**

“I was absolutely thunderstruck by the extraordinary reality of the man I found in the Gospels. I discovered a man who was almost continually frustrated. His frustration leaps out of virtually every page: ‘What do I have to say to you? How many times do I have to say it? What do I have to do to get through to you?’ I also discovered a man who was frequently sad and sometimes depressed, frequently anxious and scared . . . A man who was terribly, terribly lonely, yet often desperately needed to be alone. I discovered a man so incredibly real that no one could have made Him up.

It occurred to me then that if the Gospel writers had been into PR and embellishments, as I had assumed, they would have created the kind of Jesus three quarters of Christians will be trying to create . . . portrayed with a sweet, unending smile on His face, patting little children on the head, just strolling the earth with this unflappable, unshakable equanimity. . . But the Jesus of the Gospels – who some suggest is the best kept secret of Christianity – did not have much ‘peace of mind’, as we ordinarily think of peace of mind in the world’s terms, and insofar as we can be His followers, perhaps we won’t either.”

Before we move on to Jerusalem, take a moment to consider some of the things Jesus said in one hillside teaching session (found in Matthew 7)...as you read each point he made (still makes!), give yourself a grade:

- Don't pick on people, point out their failures, or be critical of anyone else.
- Don't be flip with the sacred; banter and silliness give no honor to God.
- Don't bargain with God; ask for exactly what you need, and believe God will provide.
- Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then do the very same for them.
- Don't look for a short cut to God. The way to God is vigorous and requires full attention.
- Using a correct password, like saying ‘Master, Master’ won't get you anywhere with God.
- Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't worry about tomorrow.
- Steep your life in God-reality, God initiatives, and God-provisions...you will be full indeed.
- Build your life house on a rock base, and none of life's storms will destroy you.
- Serious Christian obedience is doing what “my Father wills”.
- Don't be impressed with charisma; look for God-like character.
- Dare to be a nonconformist by being different, like salt and light in the world.

These (and many other) early words from Jesus set the tone for his eventual walk to Jerusalem. Jesus said and did everything he could to convince all who would listen to the fact that God is gracious and compassionate and does not need to be appeased through sacrifice. God's love is freely given and does not have to be earned. What God desires most is that we seek God's justice for the world, live with generosity and kindness, and walk humbly on our life road with God. Then we will live forever with God. If you had been there earlier on that hillside, no doubt you would have been impressed. But would you have said “yes” to Jesus?

**Prayer:** Jesus, bring our minds and walk back to your vision of us being followers today. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What overall grade did you give yourself to the items listed above?  
2. What makes it hardest to present Jesus' vision of God's world to the world today?

**Thought:**      With little more than a week to walk, can you envision Jesus looking at the twelve disciples, then looking over the gathered daily crowd, and wondering to himself what will each one do because I came? The book of Acts tells us story after story of what happened when followers of Jesus lived out his teachings. It has been so in every century since Jesus ascended.

Two familiar names to American Baptists are those of Ann and Adoniram Judson. On a July morning in 1813, the young missionaries first sight as they approached Burma (now Myanmar) was the massive Shwedagon pagoda, the most sacred shrine of Buddhism. Everywhere they looked, there were other shrines. Can you imagine how overwhelming the task of bringing the Good News to Burma loomed to the Judsons? Then Burma was one of the poorest nations in Asia. Today much remains the same. But there is one huge difference if you were to approach Burma as the Judsons did. Along with the pagodas there are now spires from many churches dotting the skyline.

Where would you begin? Judson set a goal for himself that first year. During his lifetime, he would translate the Bible into the language of the people and see a little church of 100 members. But when he died in 1850, he left the entire Bible in Burmese, and there were over 100 churches with over 8,000 believers in Jesus Christ. When you touch lives for Jesus, you never know what's going to happen.

Ko Tha Byu was born in Burma, and was a member of the Karen tribe, a non-Buddhist ethnic group. At age 15, he left home and became a criminal, committing 30 murders along the way. In the late 1820's he faced enslavement for his debts. He was a man of rage and violence.

Along the way, a Burmese Christian paid the ransom of Ko Tha Byu from slavery, but soon found his rage and anger was literally unmanageable. Adoniram Judson, when asked, accepted responsibility for him and began teaching his new charge. It was slow work. One missionary wrote that Ko Tha Byu's mind was "extremely dark." But somehow a light from above began to break through. Largely owing to Judson's witness, Ko Tha Byu accepted Jesus as his Savior, and requested baptism. But Burmese Christians, aware of his ugly past, questioned his transformation and delayed thoughts of baptism.

The delay helped. In 1828, George and Sarah Boardman, Baptist missionaries working with the Karen people, invited Ko Tha Byu to join them. Boardman baptized his colleague in the presence of three non-Christian Karens. The Karens asked Ko Tha Byu to accompany them to their village and preach. He accepted – and spent the rest of his life as an itinerant evangelist to his own people.

Ko Tha Byu's ministry quickly became a great success, partly because of the position of Karens within Burma. The Buddhist Burmese despised and marginalized non-Buddhists. Oppressed by their neighbors, the Karens were open to the Good News, which to them was literally true. Ko Tha Byu also proved to be an interesting and powerful preacher. He was not well educated and was not generally a quick learner – except when it came to Christian doctrine. The evangelist/preacher approached his faith with single-minded devotion and shared it with energy and fervor.

Poor health and Burmese persecution slowed Ko Tha Byn's ministry in the late 1830's. Soon he was unable to travel, and preached in a small Karen village until his death in 1840. But the seeds he planted continued to grow and by 1856, the Karen Church reported over 11,000 members. Today, about half of all Christians in Burma/Myanmar are Karens...a tribute to a criminal who met Jesus, and his life was changed forever. This is just one of millions of reasons why Jesus was headed towards Jerusalem.

**Prayer:** Jesus, embolden us to touch ugly, hurting, criminal, evil lives with your Good News. Amen.

**Question:**    1. How many lives have you touched with the Good News?  
                  2. What differences has the Good News made in your own life?



**Thought:** In the last few weeks before he rode into Jerusalem, Jesus began to say things that were difficult for listeners to understand, and that inflamed anyone related to the Jerusalem Temple. One day, Jesus said: “I tell you the solemn truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but my Father is giving you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world . . . I am the bread of life.”

Some of the listeners nodded their heads – slowly. Others muttered under their breath that Jesus must be crazy. Jesus heard their grumblings, and thrust in the sword again: “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that has come down from heaven, so that a person may eat from it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Again, some sort of nodded their heads in agreement with what they were hearing. Others in the crowd, however, began to raise their voices as they heard Jesus taking away the Temple as the Way to Heaven, and in its place, He was the world’s life-giver. It is safe to say, two thousand years later, that most likely not a person in the crowd understood what Jesus really meant. Then the Jews who were hostile to Jesus began to argue among themselves. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Jesus didn’t waste any time and plunged into the fray: “I tell you the solemn truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood resides in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who consumes me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the bread your ancestors ate, but then later died. The one who eats this bread will live forever.”

God’s provision of food and water during the forty years they wandered across the wilderness was never forgotten, anymore than their escape from Egypt when the waters parted and they walked through unscathed. After all, these were stories that went beyond anything that other people could talk or brag about in their history. Suddenly they heard the upstart named Jesus telling them that he was the living bread, and they had to eat that bread if they wanted to get to heaven.

When Jesus made the above statements, he guaranteed for himself either some kind of imprisonment or even death. Those who nodded their heads in agreement were not thinking death thoughts about him. But you can rest assured that after he spoke to the crowd that day, nothing would be the same. Added to the case building against Jesus were the facts that he had been saying such things, and performing miracles so great they could never be matched by the Temple priests. Nothing they said or did stopped him from speaking to large crowds almost on a daily basis. He was dangerous. They whispered to each other, “How can we get rid of him?”

Jesus said he was giving them “the solemn truth” – and let’s face it, the truth is rarely popular. It’s interesting to see that “many left Jesus.” He was definitely not the kind of Messiah they were waiting for. He was definitely not going to get rid of the Roman overlords. Then Jesus turned and asked the disciples, “You don’t want to go away too, do you?” And good old Peter responded by saying “Lord, we don’t exactly understand everything you just said, but you’re our only hope. We have nowhere else to turn. We’ve chosen you...and that’s that.” Jesus then responded with the reality of the moment: “Didn’t I choose you, the twelve, and one of you is the devil?” Today’s reading will give you a reality check on what would happen in the very near future. Unsettling?

**Prayer:** Jesus, I shiver as I think of the reality you faced those days – for me. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How do you explain “living Bread” to someone today?  
2. As we race through each day, how much thought is given to life after death?

**Day Thirty-Nine**

**Saturday, April 13, 2019**

**Luke 5: 31, 32**

**Thought:** Jesus was approaching Jerusalem for the same reason I couldn't weigh my box of veggies at the Giant supermarket several weeks ago. There was a sign on the weighing machine that said "Out of Order." The next time I tried, it still said "Out of Order." Then, one more time, it was the same. But yesterday, it was quite different. The weighing machine was gone. So getting my veggies is now a different routine, all because of a sign.

God came as Jesus because from Heaven's view of earth there was a huge banner flying over the globe that said "Out of Order." There once was a time (Genesis) when everything was peaceful, enjoyable and comfortable, with unlimited pleasure and lack of worry. There wasn't a hint of despair, drought, sickness, death, greed, war, rich/poor, hunger, or fear. It won't take you many minutes in this world to find all of these ingredients around the globe, and many more...and as well, some of them are just next door.

Genesis tells that in Paradise a great separation took place. Humans reached too far, trusting themselves rather than God to set the rules of living. They tasted of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and ever since, human beings have known evil as their daily menu. The good is something we long for every day. Lewis Smedes rather summed it up when he said: "Christians must forever pick their way between delight in creation's gifts and sorrow for sin's distortions."

One criticism of Jesus by Jewish leaders was that he ate and often celebrated with notorious sinners. They didn't like in the least his choice of dinner companions. He responded by saying: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Is it possible that Jesus, at this moment outside of Jerusalem, with tears in his eyes as he looked at the city and its inhabitants, was fulfilling God's plan for healing and restoration? As with the prodigal son, the loving father said: "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Evil then, and evil now, has many faces. Over the centuries, humanity itself has brought its thinking together to identify seven "deadly" sins. We live in a modern world so disordered from God's original design that the entire notion of what is good for us has been turned upside down. The so-called seven deadly sins include: pride, envy, anger, greed, sloth, gluttony and lust.

There are some minds today that tend to feel that of the seven deadly sins, it is GREED that should be put in caps. Getting more and more has become an obsession with all of society, whatever level a person may be on. In a world of instant communication, almost all of the messages, whatever they may be, are accompanied by "commercials" that suggest you don't have enough, you need more and better and newer...whatever! These messages are aimed at individuals, families, races, age-groupings, and even have country-to-country challenges.

As Jesus paused outside the city, do you suppose his mind might have slipped back to the Garden of Eden of long ago, and for a minute mused that it didn't have to be this way. It's not what God ever wanted or intended. His mind didn't linger long on such a thought because Jesus, more than any other person on the scene, knew he was surrounded by sin, which separated people from their loving God. And because Jesus' love was God's love, he began walking again, intending to walk all the way to the cross, to take away the sins of the world for every person who would believe that God loves.

As we prepare for the final week, look inward and see what you find that reflects a living, dying, and loving God. In a few words, describe for yourself what is God's love.

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for being willing to continue your walk into Jerusalem. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. How do you define "sin" for yourself?  
2. Ponder the different feelings Jesus must have had as he approached the city.

**Thought:** Even as Jesus approached Jerusalem, many others from all points on the compass approached the city, as well. It was time for the Jewish Passover, and faithful Jews traveled long and hard journeys to be in their sacred city at this time. It was a reference to the fact that God literally passed over the blood-sprinkled homes of the Israelites, and punished the homes of the Egyptians that were not. You don't read about it in the news these days, but every year, a lamb is sacrificed on the slopes of Mt. Gerizim by the Samaritans. On the first Passover night in Egypt, all Israelites homes were to have the lintels (top piece) and side-posts of all doors smeared with the blood of a lamb. The blood was carried from home to home in a basin, and was applied with hyssop, the foliage of the marjoram plant, which was a common emblem of purity.

In the New Testament, there are references to Jesus being the "Lamb of God" or "Christ our Passover." Jesus also said, more than once, that he is the "Light of the world." He suggested he came to bring light into the darkness. It wasn't a streak of lightning that lit up the whole sky that everybody could have seen. Instead, it was a tiny, flickering candle, in a far off edge of the vast Roman Empire. Jesus was a light in the midst of significant darkness. He left his followers to bring their own lights to the continuing darkness.

A little girl was afraid to sleep at night. She often cried and made such a fuss about it that her parents dreaded tucking her in at night. They tried reading to her, and then she would say her prayers. They would sit with her after the light was out, and eventually she would go to sleep. But it was never very long before she was at her parents' bedside.

One night when she was there, her mother asked her of what she was afraid. "I hear sounds and they scare me," she said. Her mother said, "Well, don't you know that God is here and it's alright, and that God will protect you?" The child thought about it for a minute and then said: "But I want somebody with skin on."

So as Jesus approached Jerusalem, he was God with skin on. What God did in Jesus was put skin on. Jesus referred to such when he said just outside of Jerusalem: "Whoever believes in me, believes not just in me, but the one who sent me. Whoever looks at me, in fact, is looking at the one who sent me ... God!"

As Jesus rode into the city seated on the donkey, people lined the way shouting "Hosanna!" Contrary to what many think, it is not a song of victory. The Hebrew root for the word is "hoshia" which means "to save." It can also be translated as a cry for "Help!" or "Help us!" They shouted:  
"Blessed is He who comes in God's name!  
Blessed be the coming Kingdom of our father David!  
Hosanna to the highest heaven!"

The triumphal entry of Jesus into the capital city of the Jewish people marked a change in his relationship to the Holy City. He no longer visited as a worshiper. Instead, he claimed it as King. It's also noted that Jesus wept. "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and surround you and close in on you from every side. They will demolish you – you and your children within your walls – and they will not leave within you one stone on top of another, because you do not recognize the time of your visitation from God" (Luke 19: 42-44).

History tells us that Jesus knew very well what lay ahead for Jerusalem. He also knew what waited him once he was inside the walls. Only the love of God could keep him going.

**Prayer:** Jesus, even today, we are sorry for the tears you shed that day. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. What do you feel when you hold the palm branch in your hand at church?  
2. Have you ever met God with skin on?

**Thought:** Any Jew who knew his/her Old Testament very well wouldn't have been surprised at what happened as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The prophet Zechariah had put these words in writing many years before: "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your king will come to you. He is righteous and victorious. He is humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the offspring of a donkey." Zechariah wasn't finished yet. He continued: "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem. The bow used in battle will be cut off. He will speak peace to the nations. His rule will stretch from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the Earth."

Jerusalem's residents were familiar with other parades, quite unlike what Zechariah said, or what Jesus did. These parades occurred on the other side of Jerusalem. They happened when Herod, for whatever reason, decided he needed to get a message across to Jerusalem's residents. He would come with a full procession from his headquarters in Caesarea Philippi. He would not come riding on a donkey, but on a mighty warhorse – the biggest and the best! He would come in the name of Caesar, not in the name of the Lord. No one would be seen waving palm branches or coats or jackets. He would be surrounded by chariots, accompanied by uniformed soldiers with their swords and spears and bows held in plain sight, or high in the air. His military procession was a show of force intended to inspire fear and compliance, not hope and joy.

At the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire held much of the world in the grip of its hands. If you protested against Roman domination, you'd better fear for your life. Yet Rome with its crowds, innovations, luxury and power was seen by some of its own brilliant minds as a cesspool of sin, with no hope for redemption. Epictetus saw the Roman age in which he lived as "total weakness and insufficiency in necessary things." Seneca said: "We have all sinned, some in greater measure, some in less, some in purpose, some by accident . . . Not is it only that we have sinned, we shall do so to the end." In other words, there was nothing that human beings could do with the sinful human condition in the midst of one of the world's greatest empires.

Jesus addressed this very condition with these words: "I am the Resurrection and the Life." He stated clearly that he was/is able to rescue mankind from the deadly power of sin. No one seems to want to talk much about sin these days. With all of the world's technology, innovations, and self-confidence in our ability to make a better world, there is more and more evidence of evil permeating the very foundations of human life today.

But if one looks, there is evidence yet today that Jesus is able to, literally, change lives and living. Tockichi Ishii was a Japanese criminal with an unparalleled record of horrifying crime. He had murdered men, women and children. At last he was caught. In prison, he was like a caged tiger. He was visited by two Canadian women who tried to speak to him through the bars; but he simply glowered at them like a wild beast. They left a Bible with him, though. He finally opened it and began reading. He found that he was unable to stop. He read on and on, coming eventually to the story of the crucifixion. It was the words: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," which broke him up. "I stopped," he said. "I was stabbed to the heart as if pierced with a five-inch nail. Shall I call it the love of Christ? Shall I call it compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that I believed and my hardness of heart was changed." Later, when the jailers came to lead him to the scaffold, they found not the surly brute they had expected, but a radiant man, for Tockichi Ishii, the murderer, had been born again.

Yes, in spite of what an evil world says, Jesus is still the Resurrection and the Life.

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for being both Resurrection and Life. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. Describe to yourself God's choice of a plan for salvation for the world.  
2. How could Zechariah have made such a statement hundreds of years earlier?

**Thought:** It was well over two years ago that Jesus began his public ministry. Most people remember how he turned water into wine at a wedding reception as being his first public act on his journey. Others recall his early teachings, healings and other things. However, as Jesus now looked around Jerusalem, he remembered again how it all began...and it wasn't any of the above!!

No, his first act of ministry was when he went into the wilderness and fasted and prayed for forty days! What did he do while there? He spent his time sorting out what was important. When he was finished, it was clear that he denied evil's offering that humanity's goals should be worldly treasure (in any form you can get it!) and that the good life is the absence of hardship and/or pain. Instead, Jesus was bent on offering us a pathway to new, rich, and fulfilling living that is above external circumstances. That's why he was walking around in Jerusalem this Tuesday on his way to the cross.

What were his closest friends, the disciples, thinking at that point? There's little doubt that they were worried, frustrated that Jesus would even come into Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. After all, if he was God as he said, or if God was his father, how on earth could he ever begin his kingdom with no earthly resources, and with all the authorities mad at him? Didn't God have a better plan than this?

Helen's great-grandfather came to live with her family when she was eight years old. With him came two battered suitcases and a cardboard box filled with his "valuables." That was everything he owned. His stay was indefinite. "Just till my time comes," he would say. At a moment's notice his serious face could light up with a bright smile. At the top of the stairway was his room. It was an ordinary room, yet different. There was no bed. Because of his asthmatic condition he slept in a brown leather chair with his feet resting on a footstool. Helen found there was love in Grandpa's room. His love for her was apparent in many ways, but in his room she learned of his great compassion for others. His "valuables" had a story all their own – pleasant memories of the past. Countless times he leafed through the pages of a faded album, lovingly touching each picture as if he were caressing old friends and loved ones. His open Bible lay by his chair. It was well worn with penciled markings throughout. The cover was nearly off.

Grandpa was almost totally deaf. However, every Sunday morning he sat in the first pew at church, cupping his hand to his ear, trying to hear the sermon. During the cold, wintry weather in Iowa, he never missed a church service. At night, Helen often crept down the hall and sat crouched outside the door to hear Grandpa's prayers. He prayed long and loud, beginning every prayer with the same words: "Thank you, Lord, for my many blessings!" "Blessings?" she would think to herself. Being old and deaf, having to sleep upright in a chair, no worldly goods...what blessings could he have? One evening in late summer, they came home to find Grandpa's crumpled body lying at the bottom of the stairs. He looked up at Helen as if to say, "My time has come." And shortly after that he died.

After he died, Helen sat in his big chair many times. She missed him, as well as the box of "valuables" – the old photograph album and his well-worn Bible. Sometimes at night she could still hear his prayers, always opening with the words: "Lord, thank you for my blessings." One day it finally occurred to her that he really did have the greatest blessings of all – a steadfast and abiding faith in the One who traveled with him on every step on his life's journey, good times and hard times; the one who understood every heartache, every sorrow, every pain, because he had experienced them all Himself.

...and that's why Jesus was walking around Jerusalem that Tuesday.

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for lifting us up on our own earthly journey. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. When things go wrong what kind of feelings do you deal with?  
2. What were Jesus' strongest feelings that Tuesday?

**Thought:** For the past three years, Jesus had spent most of his time giving out instructions on how to get to heaven...with Him!!!! Not only did he provide “how to” material, he also provided plenty of warnings about needing to get on the “straight and narrow” path that leads to Heaven. He provided more than adequate warnings to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Jewish nation, the Roman Empire, the rest of the world. His instructions and warnings were also meant to be heeded for the next 2,000 years – and beyond!

But you know how people are about warning signs. I’ve been seeing such almost every day. For two years in a row, accidents have closed the covered bridge I walk through to get to Beaver Hill for my climb. On each side of the bridge, there are warning signs of all kinds. They state quite clearly that the bridge is closed to cars, trucks, bikes. But do people heed these warning signs. Not on your life!

On almost every walk, and on both sides of the bridge, I see cars “speeding” to get to the bridge – because the signs surely can’t be right! They speed by me, get to the bridge, sit still for a moment or two, then slowly turn around. Most drive slowly, shaking their heads rather visibly. Several times, drivers have pulled alongside of me, and actually asked: “Is this really true?” I can’t help but smile!

Just as these drivers can’t believe what they are seeing, neither could the Roman soldiers, the Temple priests, and most of the Jewish people. After the mob scene as he rode into Jerusalem on the donkey, with palm branches being thrown on the ground in front of him, Jesus still had much more to do.

He spent much of what we call Holy Week in the Jerusalem Temple. His words of warning were: “It is written, my house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den or robbers!” (Jeremiah 7:11). The prophet chastised the priests for using the Temple to rob widows and oppress children, while continuing to call it the “Temple of the Lord.”

However, Jesus went further than just words. He tipped over the tables of the moneychangers, and literally chased them out of the Temple. Earlier on his journey, he cast out demons (Luke 9:40, 49) who were controlling and oppressing people.

Jesus warned the leaders of the Temple, and at that moment, his fate was sealed. When Jesus, in person, interrupted the “protected” rituals of the Temple, its leaders immediately knew they couldn’t let him get away with what he had done. The Roman garrison was already upset and preparing to do something about anyone who suggested they were royalty, even if it was under the guise of riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. If Jesus had done what he did at some other time of the year, and not at the time of Passover, he might have gotten away with it, and without harm.

Immediately, and for the rest of the week, the chief priests, the scribes and other leaders of the people tried to find a way to kill him. But they didn’t dare to make a move against Jesus because “...all the people were spellbound by what they heard” (Luke 19:47-48).

Jesus anti-imperial message of divine liberation had the city of King David in a state of excitement. With hopes of deliverance swirling in everyone’s minds and quietly on everyone’s lips, what better time than Passover to usher in God’s kingdom? It was in this volatile political setting that Jesus ate his “Last Supper” with the twelve followers.

**Prayer:** Jesus, it’s difficult for us today to fully understand the tremendous pressure that was building all around you, and we thank you from our hearts for your commitment to follow through with God’s plan. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. When “life pressures” surround you, how do you handle them?  
2. Ponder Jesus’ feelings as he went into the secret dining place with the disciples.

**Thought:** Jesus and the twelve disciples gathered on Thursday evening for a “going away” party. However, only one of them knew what “going away” really meant. The disciples were rather excited when Jesus said: “You are those who have stood by me in my trials, and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.” The word “kingdom” caught their attention immediately. For three years they had wondered when Jesus would make a move to “take over,” whatever that might mean. Come to think of it, 2,000 years later, have you been wondering when Jesus might “take over,” when God’s Kingdom that Jesus talked about for 3 years might become a reality?

The Passover meal was both a somber gathering as well as festive for many. That Thursday evening, Jesus and the disciples, just before sundown, arrived in their festive, white tunics. As they arrived, under normal conditions a servant would have helped them loosen their sandals, and rinse their feet. But this was not a “normal” night, and that didn’t happen. There was excitement in their voices, and they probably laughed with each other as they lay down on a cushion and propped themselves on one elbow near the table. But only two of them knew this would be their last meal together.

Jesus settled into the honored place reserved for him at the head of the table. He lit a ceremonial lamp to signify the end of work and the beginning of the Passover celebration. He filled a cup of wine, the first of four ceremonial cups for the evening. Jesus gave thanks to the Father for his faithfulness to Israel, and then dedicated the evening to remembering the Exodus.

But another huge surprise awaited the disciples. Each one drank his cup of wine, and then expected to have a bowl of water for the first ceremonial washing of the hands. But at that point, Jesus stood up, removed his outer tunic, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He went to the servant’s station and got a pitcher of water and a basin. He did what servants did, which was to get down on their knees and rinse each person’s feet, and dry them with a towel. Jesus was demonstrating for the disciples an anti-Roman act – for the Roman empire was a society in which only the rich and rulers lay down to eat their meals while they were waited on by servants/slaves.

Peter wanted nothing to do with Jesus’ intentions, and told him so rather plainly: “Never will you wash my feet!” This was the first of a number of times that Thursday night and Friday when Peter was totally wrong. And Jesus did wash his feet. He also washed the feet of Judas.

Two thousand years later, consider your response to Jesus’ instructions: “If I then, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you, too, ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example –you should do just as I have done for you.” Have you ever had your feet washed by another Christian? If so, how did you feel? Have you ever washed someone else’s feet? Again, what were the feelings? If you haven’t had it done to you, or done it to someone else – why not? Having washed other’s feet, I confess that those moments were some of the most humbling, revealing, sacred moments of my walk.

More shocks were to follow. At one point, he said: “The one who eats my bread has turned against me.” Eyes blinked, they looked around at each other, and then saw that Jesus was almost crying and he said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray me.” They asked who it was. Jesus said: “The one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him.” He took a piece of vegetable, dipped it in a bowl of saltwater representing the tears shed by Israel during their slavery in Egypt, and deliberately placed it in the mouth of Judas. Indeed, the die was cast. Death was only hours away.

**Prayer:** Jesus, help us understand what it means to wash someone else’s feet. Amen.

**Questions:** 1. When you receive communion, what do you remember from that night?  
2. If you had been present that night, what might have been your strongest feelings?

## Day Forty-Five

Friday, April 19, 2019

**Thought:** There is little that I can share with you about that ugly Friday that you don't already know. So I'm not going to try. Followers of Jesus, even 2,000 years later, can't erase from reality what actually happened that day. When the day started, although he was basically sleepless, he was still breathing. Before the afternoon was over, he no longer breathed. But what fantastic things Jesus accomplished while he was still breathing!

Leonard Sweet concludes his book *Quantum Spirituality* with these thoughts about Jesus and his breathing:

“Jesus took a deep breath...when he chose Simon the Zealot as a disciple...and political barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he dined with Zacchaeus the despised politician...and class barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he conversed with a woman of Samaria...and sexual barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he celebrated a Roman centurion's faith...and racial barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he allowed a woman who was a sinner to touch him...and ideological barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he heeded the appeal of a Syrophenician woman...and national barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he washed his disciple's feet...and social barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he rebuked the disciples for criticizing a follower who was an outsider to the group...and denominational barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he chastised the adults for not suffering the children to come to him...and ageist barriers were blown away.

Jesus took a deep breath...when he told Lazarus to come forth from the tomb...and physical barriers were blown away.

Jesus, God's breath made flesh, took deep breaths...

Will we?

Will we be God's breath made flesh?"

Then Jesus said, late that afternoon: “It is finished”...and his breathing stopped...so that you and I, as believers and followers, could do his breathing for him until time comes to an end.

Amen.



**Day Forty-Six**

**Saturday, April 20, 2019**

**All day that Saturday, the disciples, Mary his mother, Lazarus and his sisters, the Roman Centurion, the Temple Priests, the soldiers at the tomb, and people everywhere quietly pondered what had actually happened that yesterday afternoon.**

**At the same time, some of them wondered to themselves what was going to happen next ... if anything!**

## Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

**It was Light that dawned on Easter Sunday morning. The darkness of the world had been shattered, and Jesus, the Light of the world was now shining in that darkness. Soon the disciples were shining. Then, more disciples. And 2,000 years later, more disciples...more Light.**

Mother Teresa was one who lived to bring Jesus' light to the poorest of the poor. She told this story:

**"I will never forget the first time I came to Bourke and visited the sisters. We went to the outskirts of Bourke. There was a big reserve where all the Aborigines were living in those little small shacks made of tin and old card-board. Then I entered one of those little rooms. I call it a house, but it's only one room, and inside the room everything. So I told the man living there 'Please allow me to make your bed, to wash your clothes, to clean your room.' And he kept on saying, 'I'm alright. I'm alright.' Then at the end he allowed me to do it.**

**He allowed me in such a way that at the end he pulled from his pocket an old envelope, and one more envelope, and one more envelope. He started opening one after the other, and right inside there was a little photo of his father and he gave me that to look at. I looked at the photo and I said, 'You, you are so like your father.' He was so overjoyed that I could see the resemblance of his father on his face. I blessed the picture and gave it back to him, and again one envelope, the second envelope, and the third envelope, and the photo went back again in the pocket near his heart.**

**After I cleaned the room I found in the corner of the room a big lamp full of dirt and I said, 'Don't you light this lamp? It's such a beautiful lamp. Don't you light it?' He replied, 'For whom? Months and months and months nobody has ever come to me. For whom would I light it?' So I said, 'Won't you light it if the Sisters come to see you?' And he said 'Yes.' So the sisters started going to him for only about 5 to 10 minutes a day, but they started lighting that lamp. After some time he got into the habit of lighting it himself. Slowly, slowly, slowly, the Sisters stopped going to him. But they used to go in the morning and see him. Then I forgot completely about that, and then after two years he sent word – 'Tell Mother, my friend, that the light she lit in my life is still burning.'"**

**Jesus died – and Light came into the world. As a follower of Jesus, will you help someone living in darkness, whatever that might be, to find the Light?**

## Daily Scripture Readings from *The Message* (E. Peterson)

Day 1 – “He continued according to plan, traveled to town after town, village after village, preaching God’s Kingdom, spreading the Message. The Twelve were with him.” Luke 8:1

Day 2 – “Jesus was abrupt. ‘Why all this busybody grief and gossip? This child isn’t dead; she’s sleeping’. Provoked to sarcasm, they told him he didn’t know what he was talking about. But when he had sent them all out, he took the child’s father and mother, along with his companions, and entered the child’s room. He clasped the girl’s hand and said, ‘talitha koum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up.’ At that, she was up and walking around.” Mark 5: 39-42

Day 3 – “Don’t hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or – worse! – stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it’s safe from moth and rust and burglars. It’s obvious, isn’t it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.” Matthew 6: 19-21

Day 4 – “If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion.” Matthew 6: 25

Day 5 – “Jesus replied, ‘Yes, you have followed me. In the re-creation of the world, when the Son of Man will rule gloriously, you who have followed me will also rule, starting with the twelve tribes of Israel.’” Matthew 19:29

Day 6 – “Peter took him in hand, protesting, ‘Impossible, Master! That can never be!’” Matthew 16: 22

Day 7 – “Taken aback, Jesus addressed the accompanying crowd: ‘I’ve yet to come across this kind of simple trust anywhere in Israel, the very people who are supposed to know about God and how he works.’ When the messengers got back home, they found the servant up and well.” Luke 7: 9-10

Day 8 – “Because you’re not taking God seriously”, said Jesus. “The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a poppy seed, say, you would tell this mountain, ‘Move!’ and it would move. There is nothing you wouldn’t be able to do.” Matthew 17: 20-21

Day 9 – “God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I’m not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty Shepherd’s crook makes me feel secure. You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head, my cup brims with blessing. Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I’m back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.” Psalm 23

Day 10 – “Look at it this way. If someone has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders off, doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine and go after the one?” Matthew 18: 12

Day 11 – “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.” John 3 :16

Day 12 -- “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundations. And here’s why: I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was homeless and you gave me a room. I was shivering and you gave me clothes. I was sick and you stopped to visit. I was in prison and you came to me.’” Matthew 25: 34-36

**Day 13 – “Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to the original creation – the wind hovering over the water creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life – it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom.” John 3: 5**

**Day 14 – Jesus said: “I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me.” John 14: 6**

**Day 15 – Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge. “God authorized and commanded me to commission you. Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” Matthew 28: 19, 20**

**Day 16 – Then a leper appeared and went to his knees before Jesus, praying, “Master, if you want to, you can heal my body.” Jesus reached out and touched him. “I want you to be clean.” Then and there, all signs of the leprosy were gone. Matthew 8: 2-4**

**Day 17 – The sick man said, “Sir, when the water is stirred, I don’t have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in.” Jesus said, “Get up, take your bedroll, start walking.” The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off. John 5: 7-9**

**Day 18 – “Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” Matthew 5: 48**

**Day 19 – When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. Matthew 5: 1, 2**

**Day 20 – That evening a lot of demon-afflicted people were brought to him. He relieved the inwardly tormented. He cured the bodily ill. Matthew 8: 16**

**Day 21 – “But so we don’t upset them needlessly, go down to the lake, cast a hook, and pull in the first fish that bites. Open its mouth and you’ll find a coin. Take it and give it to the tax men. It will be enough for both of us.” Matthew 17: 27**

**Day 22 – He answered, “I suppose you’re going to quote the proverb, ‘Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.’” Luke 4:23**

**Day 23 – While he was still talking, some people came from the leader’s house and told him, “Your daughter is dead”. Why bother the teacher anymore?” Mark 5: 35**

**Day 24 – Then he went over and touched the coffin. The pallbearers stopped. He said, “Young man, I tell you: Get up.” The dead son sat up and began talking. Jesus presented him to his mother. Luke 7: 14, 15**

**Day 25 – God spoke to Joshua: “Moses my servant is dead. Cross this Jordan River, you and all the people. Cross to the country I’m giving to the People of Israel. I’m giving you every square inch of the land you set your foot on – just as I promised Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon, east to the Great River, the Euphrates River – all the Hittite country – and then west to the Great Sea.” Joshua 1: 2-4**

**Day 26 – Since I have investigated all the reports in close detail, starting from the story’s beginning, I decided to write it all out for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you were taught. Luke 1: 3, 4**

**Day 27 – This is how much God loved the world. He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in Him, anyone can have a whole and everlasting life. John 3: 16**

**Day 28 – The Friend, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send at my request, will make everything plain to you. He will remind you of all the things I have told you. I’m leaving you well and whole. That’s my parting gift to you. Peace. I don’t leave you the way you’re used to being left – feeling abandoned, bereft. So don’t be upset. Don’t be distraught. Luke 14: 26, 27**

**Day 29 – No one else should carry the title of Father; you have only one Father, and he’s in heaven. Matthew 23: 9**

**Day 30 – He went on to tell a story to the guests around the table. Noticing how they had tried to elbow into the place of honor... Luke 14: 7**

**Day 31 – Just then some Pharisees came up and said, “Run for your life! Herod’s on the hunt. He’s out to kill you!” Luke 13: 31**

**Day 32 – “If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand.” Matthew 5: 15**

**Day 33 – “Now that I’ve put you there on a hill-top, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house, be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in Heaven.” Matthew 5: 16**

**Day 34 – “This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply...” Matthew 6: 8**

**Day 35 – “Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” Matthew 6: 33**

**Day 36 – “Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults – unless, of course, you want the same treatment.” Matthew 7:1**

**Day 37 – “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, up to the end of the age.” Matthew 28: 19, 20**

**Day 38 – “The real significance of that Scripture is not that Moses gave you bread from heaven but that my Father is right now offering you bread from heaven, the real bread. The Bread of God came down out of heaven and is giving life to the world.” John 6: 35**

**Day 39 – “Who needs a doctor – the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders – an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.” Luke 5: 31, 32**

**Day 40 – Later his disciples came and told him, “Did you know how upset the Pharisees were when they heard what you said?” Jesus shrugged it off. “Every tree that wasn’t planted by my Father in heaven will be pulled up by its roots. Forget them. They are blind men leading blind men. When a blind man leads a blind man, they both end up in a ditch.” Matthew 15: 12-14**

**Day 41 – “You don’t have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?” John: 11: 25, 26**

**Day 42 – One of their religion scholars spoke for them, posing a question they hoped would show him up. “Teacher, which command in God’s Law is the most important?” Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it. Love others as well as you love yourself.” Matthew 22: 36-39**

**Day 43 – “When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right, and goats to his left.” Matthew 25: 31, 32**

**Day 44 – Then Judas, already turned traitor, said, “It isn’t me, is it, Rabbi?” Jesus said, “Don’t play games with me, Judas.” Matthew 26:25**



## ***Lenten Devotions 2019***

***By Dr. Richard E. Rusbult***

***A Spiritual Journey Press E-Book (Adobe Acrobat Reader Format)***

***Spiritual Journey Press***

***10 Bentwood Drive, Bordentown, NJ 08505***

***[www.spiritualjourneypress.com](http://www.spiritualjourneypress.com)***