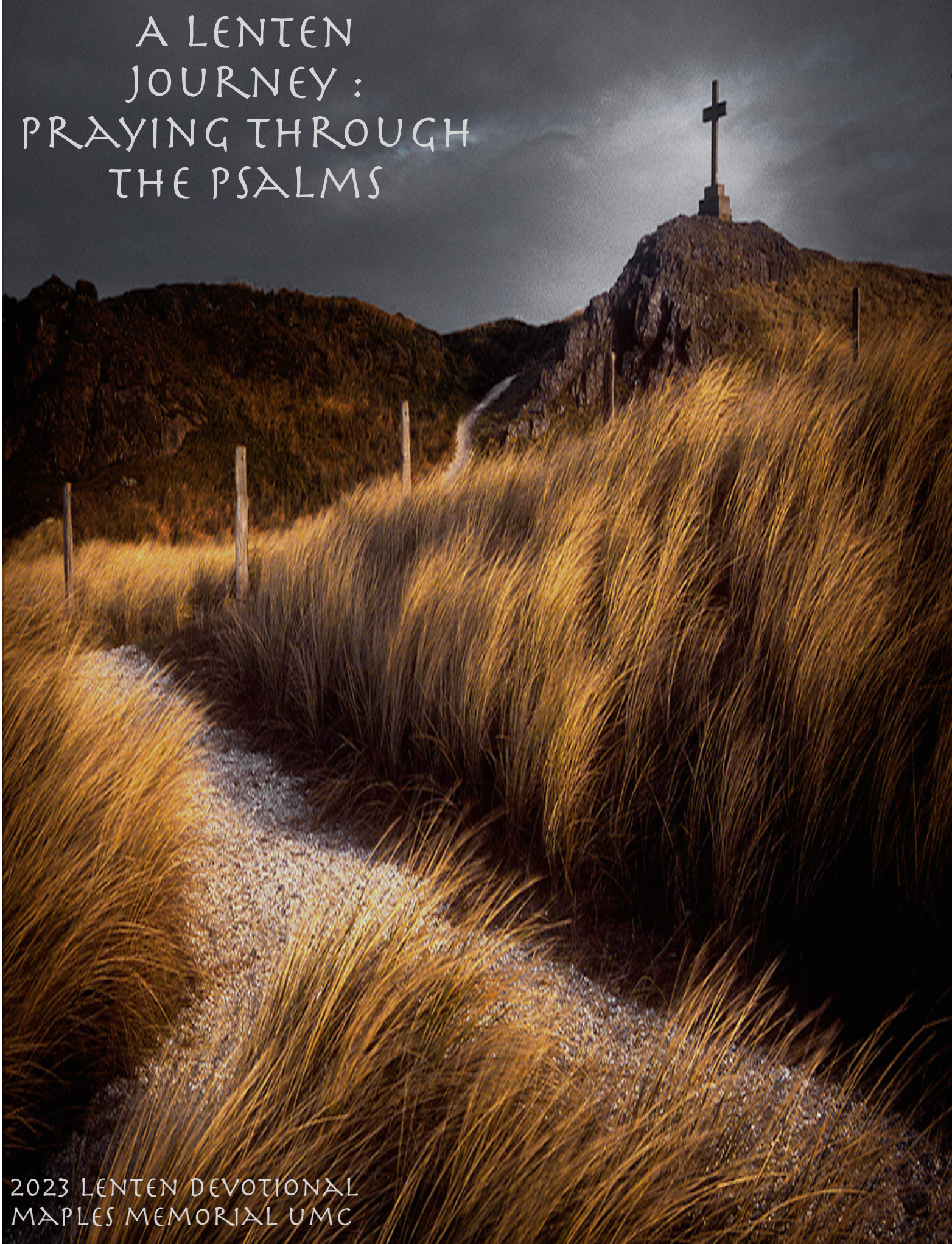


A LENTEN  
JOURNEY:  
PRAYING THROUGH  
THE PSALMS



2023 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL  
MAPLES MEMORIAL UMC

We are so excited you are joining us on this journey through Lent. This year, we are walking through the book of Psalms. The Psalms are an ocean of inspiration, encouragement, and instruction in the life of both corporate and personal prayer. The Psalms are also one of the richest sources of wisdom for the practice of worship.

Each person who submitted a devotional was assigned a chapter of the book of Psalms, asked to reflect on the passage, and then share their thoughts. Some of these reflections were written during our Covid edition Lenten Devotional. You will hear from our current and former church staff, current pastors, choir members, Sunday School teachers, senior high students, and college students.

As you take time each day to read these reflections, prepare yourself. Find a quiet place to be alone with the Word. It might be your favorite comfy chair with a cup of coffee or hot chocolate as you begin or end the day. Wherever you find yourself, take a moment and breathe. You will find the scripture for each day, a reflection, and a prayer. You will also have a few lines below the reading to journal your own response. As we journey together, know that you are loved!

In His Love,

**Joey Lott**

February 26th

Read: Psalm 63

Reflection by Dr. Joey Lott, Worship Arts Pastor

Well, here we are. Beginning another year..starting our journey through Lent. You and I might feel lonely. I mean lets be honest....hasn't the last year, at times, felt like a barren waste land? When do we get to see our family and friends face to face? Oh to hug my beloveds again!!!

This Psalm was possibly written when King David was seeking refuge during Absalom's rebellion (2 Samuel 15-18); David had already lived a full life. His quiet confidence as stated in this Psalm can be seen in the account in 2 Samuel of the events that shook his life. His actions closely paralleled his beliefs during those turbulent days. David was in the wilderness of Judah..he was lonely..he desperately wanted a friend he could trust to ease his loneliness, which makes sense when he cried out "O God....My soul thirsts for you..in this parched and weary land."

You see... we get so caught up in our feelings and not physically being present with others that we lose sight of the very fact that we are not alone. Look around you. Take a minute. Seriously....go ahead. What do you see? We have constant reminders that we are not alone....sunsets, sunrises, trees and flowers soon blooming, birds singing. I know I know..it's not the same. Or is it? God constantly sends us reminders that we are not alone. Reminds me of the hymn, "The Hymn of Promise," that we sing.....*unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.* We are not alone.

**Prayer:** God of the wilderness, reveal Yourself to us in Your time. May we see with Your eyes, hear with Your ears, and touch with Your hands. Fill us with Your abiding spirit that overflows to all who cross our paths. **Amen!**

My Response/Thoughts:

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February 27th  
Read: Psalm 41  
Reflection by Bettie Cox, Chancel Choir Member

Oh, how my heart hurts for the writer! He feels betrayed by his friends' actions, close friends. He wants revenge- it would be so easy to lash out in a flash of anger. It is so hard to love all the time. The Psalmist reminds us, "because of his integrity, he would be raised up and held in God's presence FOREVER."  
There is enough hate in this world.

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate only Love can do that." Martin Luther King Jr.  
We should choose love and the higher ground. In the words of Josh Wilson, Let's start a kindness "Revolution". "Why does hate become so ordinary, when did Kindness become Revolutionary?"

**Prayer:** Father in Heaven hear your children, give us the will and compassion to always choose Love. In Jesus Name, Amen

My Response/Thoughts:

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February 28th  
Read: Psalm 48  
Joel Garrott, Former Youth Pastor

In ancient Jerusalem, almost 1000 years before the birth of Christ, the great first Temple was built on a hill known as Zion. For the Old Testament writers, "Zion" came to mean not merely that hill, but the Temple itself, the surrounding city, and even the entire people of God. "Zion" meant the center, the high point, the pillar of God's relationship with God's people.

Tragically, Zion was captured and the Temple destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. This was an incomprehensible loss for the Hebrew people. The Temple was rebuilt within the century; but it was destroyed again by the Romans in 70 AD, and was not built again.

These historical notes are important, I think, because they help us read the depth of Psalm 48. The author has much to say in praise of Zion and the Temple, and if we didn't read carefully, we might think that those things are what the Psalm is about. In fact, the Psalmist knows that the human Zion is only an impermanent work of human hands. In the midst of praise for that beautiful and mortal city, the Psalmist is able to see beyond it, toward the One who gave it as a gift for a time. It is God's "steadfast love" that endures forever, Temple or no Temple. The real praise is due not to the human construction, but to the God of Israel, whose faithfulness endures far beyond the life of brick and stone.

**Prayer:** Lord, we give you thanks for the beautiful things of this life. Help us to regard them in the proper light, that we may not despair of their finitude, but rejoice that they and all beautiful things are ultimately found in your eternal love.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 1st  
Read: Psalm 49  
Reflection by Rev. Sam Jones, Associate Pastor

For many centuries, power has often been concentrated in the hands of dictators, tyrants, oligarchs, monarchs, and a variety of autocratic leaders. This is just as true today as it was some 3,000 years ago when the psalms were first recorded. In fact, it is estimated today that nearly 1/4 of all sovereign nations are governed by one form of autocracy or another.

Yet, the psalmist here is describing why God's people should fear no person. And it doesn't matter what socioeconomic category you may find yourself in, because the audience for this psalm includes not only average people, it also includes those who are oppressed. In other words, it includes ALL people. The psalmist is giving us ALL a powerful reminder that the things of this world will turn to dust. We must not give way to fear of evil and wicked people. The time is coming when Christ will prove to the world that God's Kingdom will never perish. The time is coming when the full majesty of God through Jesus Christ will be realized by all people. And, yes, the time is coming when Christ's death and resurrection will display the ultimate threat to the power of tyrants and dictators. So, knowing this, I ask: Whom shall you fear?

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for speaking to me when I am afraid. Although I find myself afraid of the things of this world, I know your love will never perish. Give me the courage to accept your love for me. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 2nd

Read: Psalm 50

Reflection by Rev. Stephen Sparks, Senior Pastor

This Psalm begins with a beautiful and majestic description of God's glory and Zion, the dwelling place of God. We see the imagery of devouring fire before him and storm swirling all around him. It sets the picture of God as even the authority over the storm and destruction. It sets the stage of his power and majesty, as a backdrop of what is to come. This Psalm however is not a song of praise of glory, nor is it a lament of the people, but instead lays out God as Judge. While this archetype is utilized in the Psalms from time to time it is usually juxtaposed with a lament of the people or some other dialogue with God himself and his people.

We are immediately ushered into the imagery of God as Judge of all. "He summons the heavens above, and the earth, to judge His people". For the Psalmist "His People" would be the chosen ones, the successors to the covenant of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob renewed over and over throughout their history. While at other times, in other Psalms, God has called Israel into account for their failure to keep the covenant and having abandoned the sacrifices here. In this Psalm God himself makes the argument that he will not judge them at this time, presumably the end of days and final judgment, upon whether or not they have kept the outward symbols of the covenant. God makes it clear that he requires a different kind of sacrifice, one of inward devotion and a CHANGE of our inward nature. He wants a people that will offer thanksgiving, inward devotion, and a reliance upon him in their times of trouble, not themselves nor the things of this world.

God is equally concerned with the wicked because he rebukes them for pleading the words of the covenant in calling upon him when they fundamentally reject and do not understand the nature of the covenant. These "wicked" are from the "chosen people" else they would not recognize Him as God or call upon him and plead the covenant. They however have failed to keep the covenant, not because of their failure in external sacrifice but the way they live and the inclination of their heart.

The most damning phrase may well be "YOU THOUGHT THAT I WAS JUST LIKE YOU". God is not like us. He is fundamentally different. He wants US to be more like HIM instead of us trying to remake HIM in OUR image. He has a different set of values, a different understanding of covenant. However much we reject this idea, there will come a day of Judgement. It is inescapable and sure. Yet as always with God there is HOPE!!

**Prayer:** Lord, help me not to forget you. Set my way properly, toward your Son Jesus as my Lord and Savior, so that I might see the salvation of YOU, O God.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 3rd

Read: Psalm 51

Reflection by Lisa Lynn Treadway, Member of the Leadership Team/Connections  
Worship Team

Today's Psalm is Number 51, "A Psalm of David when Nathan the Prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." David wrote this Psalm from a sin-stricken soul, with full awareness of the wrong nature of his actions with regard to Bathsheba, and he was feeling the weight of what he had done.

So he wrote this Psalm, in which he comes to God asking for forgiveness, not based on any merit of his own, but on what he knows of God's kindness and mercy. He owns his misdeeds and has completely given up on excuses and self-justification. He trusts that God is able to wash his sins away, and that forgiveness would be gracious far beyond what David deserves. He thanks and praises God in advance for his bottomless grace, and asks for joy and a renewed desire to obey. The whole psalm is an example of repentance brought into focus. At the end we are left with a roadmap of redemption, and a deep understanding of our own need for renewal.

But here's the beauty of this Psalm as it relates to our journey through Lent: David was not merely chronicling his own journey in seeking and anticipating forgiveness, but he's also foreshadowing the cleansing and forgiveness that Christ would provide. David was only able to work within the framework he knew, that of the Old Covenant, but possibly he was given a glimpse of the New Covenant, the new creation, that was to come. Christ's sacrifice would change the process, the mechanics, of redemption. No more animal sacrifices for one person's sins, but instead the sacrifice of the one perfect Lamb, for the forgiveness of all the world's sins.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, please lead us through the journey of redemption, as it was written by King David, and as it was lived by King Jesus. Bring us through our sinful actions and our sinful nature, and ever back to the right spirit you offer. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 4th

Read: Psalm 138

Reflection by Ethan Lott, College Student/Connections Worship Team

The theme for Psalm 138 is simple: Thanksgiving for answered prayer. God works out his plans for us and for our lives and will bring us through the difficulties that we face. Psalm 138 is David singing to God his praises and his thanks. He says "I give you thanks ,O Lord, with all my heart. I will sing your praises before the gods. I bow before your holy temple as I worship. I praise your name for your unfailing love and faithfulness; for your promises are backed by all the honor of your name." It goes on and on about him giving him endless thanks to God for everything. Just a single read through of the Psalm immediately makes me think of 10,000 Reasons, or Blessed the Lord by Matt Redman. The entirety of that song is about blessing The Lord for all that he has done. When the sun comes up and a new day dawns it's time to sing his praises again. He's rich in love and slow to anger. His name is great and his heart is kind. For all his goodness I will keep singing with 10,000 reasons to bless the Lord. Even when my strength fails, I shall still praise the Lord and bless his name. After all that the Lord has done for us, the least we can do is praise and thank him and bless his great and holy name.

**Prayer:** Lord , I thank you for your freest acts and love for us. As each day dawns and fades to black, let me still be singing your name.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 5th

Read: Psalm 24

Reflection by Allen Sanders, Organist/Connections Worship

Who can seek God? Answer: ALL who trust in Christ. The Lenten season is a time of reflection and repentance. It starts with Ash Wednesday where we are reminded to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Repent and Believe the Gospel. Many people choose to fast, or give up certain things for a time, to focus on Christ. So, why should we take this time to focus on Christ and His death, burial and resurrection? How should that change us?

Psalm 24 tells us that only those with clean hands and pure hearts can truly seek the Father. Sometimes, we feel as if we do not measure up to these standards and if so how can God use us? There is no Christian in all of church history who does not ask this question at some point and the answer is very clear. We don't measure up and can not measure up. That is the Glory of Christ! You needn't worry about measuring up, Christ has already done that for us. We are just to seek Him by reading His Word and doing our best to live out our faith around the people God has placed in our lives.

Most of the heroes and saints of the faith were a mess. You can't look at the life of Matthew or Paul and not think, wow look how God used them in spite of their flaws! That is the almighty, transforming power of the Holy Spirit. He takes us as we are and completely transforms us and it is ongoing as well as everlasting. We never stop the process of sanctification. So, when God calls us to do something for His Kingdom, we needn't question whether we are good enough. The answer is we are not...BUT Christ is. That is where our righteousness comes from, it is not ours but His.

In verses 7-10, there is a liturgy that could have been used for the bringing in of the Ark of the Covenant into the sanctuary after a battle. The bearers of the Ark are telling the gate keepers and door guards to open up and allow the Glorious King to enter. Then the question is asked "Who is this Glorious King?" The psalmist goes on to elaborate on who the Lord is and what He has done. May this be our question during this time of reflection and repentance. May we take time daily, to remember who we are in Christ because of what He has done for us. We can never allow thoughts of imperfection to hinder us from serving God when He calls us. Our imperfection is Christ's Glory! So, may we open up our hearts and minds so the Glorious King can enter as we seek Him daily.

**Prayer:** Eternal God, we praise you for sending a Glorious King in Jesus Christ, to be our righteousness. Clean our hands, minds and mouths. Create in us pure hearts that seek you, Amen

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 6th  
Read: Psalm 56  
Reflection by Beth Henry, Chancel Choir Member

This Psalm, in a “nutshell,” is about trusting in God’s care in the midst of fear. We as humans often face anxiety on a daily basis. We worry about such things as personal illness, job loss, financial troubles, lest we forget the Corona Virus and it’s far reaching effects throughout the world. As we face fear, we often find ourselves seeking an outside solution. A relationship with God, however, is an inside job. It is only when we place our fears in Christ’s hands, do we find assurance and peace.

It is during Lent that we contemplate and prepare for what Jesus really did for us on the cross. Ultimately, however, Lent points us in the direction of hope for the Resurrection. The phrase “Fear not” is mentioned 365 times in the Bible. Therefore, in all things, may we daily acknowledge God and seek His guidance.

As Martin Luther once said, “Pray and let God worry.” During this time of preparation, let us remember to place our fears at the foot of the cross. For it is only through His grace and mercy, that are we blessed with everlasting salvation.

**Prayer:** Dear Heavenly Father, I know you are not the source of my dismay. You are a God of peace. I pray, when fears and anxiety appear, that you will help me to remember you are faithful, and will replace my worries with love and assurance. In Jesus Name, Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 7th

Read: Psalm 62

Reflection by Ben Larsen, Associate Worship and Youth Pastor

*"Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from Him."* -Psalm 62:5

Great confidence in God who is strong and who can deliver is the mood of this Psalm of David. It is a reassurance to one who is going through difficult times to put his/her trust in God alone. There is an unshakeable faith that shines through the Psalm that gives hope to the reader. Why do we find such exuberant trust in God coming forth from the lips of the Psalmist? God's attributes that create such trust are found in the Psalm itself:

1. *He is the One who saves* (Psa 62:1): Where can one find safety in the world we live in? It is not just the physical danger we see all around us, but the danger of being betrayed, forsaken by fellowmen (even seen here in Psa 62:3-4) that looms so large in today's world. In such uncertain times, we can confidently say "My being safe... rests with God." (Psa 62:7 NLV). Even in the midst of life-threatening situations, we can confidently say, "He alone is my salvation!"

2. *He is a Rock and a Fortress* (Psa 62:2): two symbols of strength- a place we can run to in danger. Ps.32:7 says, "You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance."

3. *He is our Refuge* (Psa 62:8): Psalm 46:1 says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Under His wings, we find refuge (Ps.91:4)- an image that brings to mind how the chicks find safety under the wings of the mother hen.

4. *He is strong* (Psa 62:11): Psalm 89: 13 (NLT): "Powerful is your arm! Strong is your hand! Your right hand is lifted high in glorious strength." His arm of strength is mighty to save in any/every situation.

5. *He is loving* (Psa 62:12): God's love towards His own gives us all the more hope in difficult times- confidence that He will not let down the one He loves. Psalm 63:3 says, "Your unfailing love is better than life itself..."

All these attributes make the Psalmist put his unwavering trust in God alone- to rest confident that God is in charge and He will deliver!

Troublesome times are when we tend to fret and become distressed. But like the Psalmist, can we "rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him?" (Psa 37:7). Can we find that stillness of quiet trust and confidence in a God who will come to save? Then you will find that "in quietness and trust is your strength!" (Isaiah 30:15).

**Prayer:** "Dear God, I calm my heart in You knowing that You are my fortress and my refuge, and You will save."

My Response/Thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_  
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March 8th  
Read: Psalm 72  
Reflection by Dr. Joey Lott, Worship Arts Pastor

In Psalm 71 we read David's recollections of God's faithfulness from his youth to old age. In this Psalm we have David's doxology; his final prayer to God. And what a doxology it is!

David looks into the future proclaiming, *His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun.* He then goes beyond time when he states, *And men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed.* We live in a time when this is certainly not the case. Well, actually God does call men to himself from every nation, but at the end of the ages the time will come when all nations will call Him blessed and all men, Christians and non Christians alike, will bow the knee to the Lord God of Hosts.

After a final blessing, Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things! And blessed be His glorious name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory, he states, Amen and Amen. The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.

Is it no wonder why God called David a man after his own heart?

**Prayer:** Pray today that you will live this day in the knowledge that the Lord God of Hosts is the triumphant King over all the nations, and that when time has ended, all people will bow the knee to Him.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 9th

Read: Psalm 70

Reflection by Kyle Heath, College Student

Throughout our lives, conflicts get presented to us in many forms. Sometimes it's financial struggle, having trouble in school, or even little things like your car not starting on a work day. When these conflicts are presented to us we tend to think, 'Why me?'

The author in this psalm is having conflict with other people that try to tear him and his beliefs down. While his enemies are seeking to do him harm, he is seeking God. He knows that in order to let this problem be forgotten, he must sanctify his trust with God.

We all have hard times that we must get through, and most of the time, it can feel like we are alone, but I always think of this one saying when it feels like we are alone, "If you ever feel like God isn't there, remember that the teacher is always silent during the test." Life is a test in some way, and it's a very confusing test to say the least. We might think 'this is all to get to heaven and I need to be a good person to do so.' While the end result might be heaven, that's not why we are here. We are here to show people the love of Christ. As Christians, our duty is not to get ourselves into heaven but to get others in as well because Jesus didn't come to save just us, he came to save the whole world.

We can either respond to trials by blaming God; or we can turn to Him in prayer and faith, looking to Him for help and strength. The purpose of trials and conflict is to grow in strength, however we are not asked or left to do it on our own. Sometimes we might fail; sometimes we might let the conflict get the best of us, and if we do fail, we need to know that God loves us and wants us to learn from our mistakes, to repent, and to grow in our trust of him.

**Prayer:** Let us pray; Heavenly Father, allow us to overcome conflict when it is presented to us. Allow us to trust in you and be the light that shines in the darkness. Remind us that if we feel lost or hopeless, that you are with us all the way. Give us strength and endurance when hard times comes. In your name we pray, Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 10th

Read: Psalm 126

Reflection by Caysee Sanders, Children's Music Director

Psalm 126 is a song of gratitude and hope. It's a promise that weeping and sorrow can be turned into laughter and shouts of joy. After reading commentary on this Psalm, I found that this was written after God set His people free and restored them to Zion. We can view their journey through the same scope of our Lenten journey. During this time we remember and reflect on the sacrifice of Christ; the pain He endured, the sorrow His Father felt. However, we know the joy that is promised to us on Easter morning. A quote from Charles Spurgeon says "When there is no joy in the present, you can know that there is infinite joy in the future." Verse 6 says, "He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him." No one ever said that our journey would be easy, or pain free. There will be many times that we sow seeds of sorrow. There will be many times that we water those seeds with tears. However, we know the product of that harvest will be abundant joy.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for this season of Lent. We thank you for Jesus and his sacrifice. We pray for patience while we wait for our seeds of sorrow to turn into joy.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 11th

Read: Psalm 23

Reflection by Andrew Sparks, High School Student

Psalm 23 is what i think is the most well known Psalm. I think that in this Psalm God is telling us that he will always be with and protect us no matter where we go or what happens and will try to lead us in the right direction. In my life I had to move to a completely new place. I had to move schools, church, houses, and friends. Everything changed but one thing that stayed the same was God, he never left me. I could always talk to him and he always listened, anytime I was nervous or scared. I think that people need to understand God is always with us. In the Psalm it says "He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." This quote shows that he is leading us in the right direction, and then it says "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." This is God comforting us even when we go away from him and his word. I think that The Rod and The Staff are symbolic of God and his love. They comfort us even when we go astray. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." I think God can provide goodness and mercy and this passage says that it will follow us all the days of our life.

**Prayer:** Dear God, help us know that you will be there with us no matter what happens. Help us know we can talk to you and you always listen. Comfort us in our hard times please Lord. Give us peace. In Jesus name Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 12th

Read: Psalm 96

Reflection by Jane Downs, Retired Administrative Secretary

Why should we sing a NEW song to God? Can't we just sing the melodies and words we already know? Don't we all fall into that trap from time to time, comfortable with our understanding of God and our response to his word? I love this Garrison Keiller quote: "We don't go to church to hear lectures on ethical behavior. We go to look at the mysteries." We worship to see past what seems unchangeable; to have faith in the wonders that are possible with God. Psalm 96 says, "he is coming; for he is coming to judge the earth...with righteousness and truth" or as the Message translation says, "he comes to set everything right on earth." Does this hint at the promise of the Messiah, who will show us a fresh aspect of God-a majestic Lord who will humble and sacrifice himself in order to save us? If we can even partly understand the wonder and mystery of such a God, we should be willing to continually evaluate and renew our discipleship. I confess that studying this passage and, heaven help me, hearing Stephen preach about Oikos made me re-think some of my own responses. After many years of responding to requests for benevolent help, I had begun to think of it a necessary interruption of more "important" work. I listened, I sympathized and prayed with supplicants and doled out checks, but never considered that these might be people placed in my path "supernaturally." I still follow the same steps, but with a new attitude that I hope opens some hearts to know and glorify the Lord of Lords. I think of this as my "new song" to God.

**Prayer:** Oh God, you are greatly to be praised! We believe you can set everything right on earth! Help us to watch and listen as you reveal yourself and lead us to know how we can serve you in new ways. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 13th

Read: Psalm 77

Reflection by Brennan Ballard, Former Director of Media Ministries

I chose the New Living Translation of the Bible for this reading over the NASB or NLT versions because the simple language takes the message here from high prose to pure, raw, empathetic emotion. Because Psalm 77 is a pure emotional lashing out from times of suffering. Here, like most of the psalms of Asaph, the text is from the point of view of trying to remain faithful in times of great trial and anguish.

For me, these words perfectly capture those times where my faith defense falters and the darkness worms its way in through the rotted wood. "Has the Lord rejected me forever? Will he never again be kind to me?" I've cried out that energy before. I screamed that into the open air when Covid locked down the world, I screamed that into my empty car countless times after job applications would fall through and I was stuck delivering pizzas yet again, and I've certainly screamed that into my pillow after my mom passed away. The text captures those times of trial where you try praying, you try sleeping, and you try seeking the Lord, and nothing is working.

However, the example laid out here is the perfect resolution to this darkness. The text specifically draws upon the imagery when the Red Sea was parted on the exodus from Egypt. How the waves raged, and the storms bellowed, and the enemy was closing in quickly, and doom was surely nigh. And then, a new pathway opened up that no one knew was there!

This is what God is trying to get us to do in these times of darkness. Take peace with the fact that a pathway will open up through the sea, when we need it most. We will be able to be guided through by the shepherd if we simply put our faith in him. It is difficult, as expressed by the early half of this psalm, but it is the only way through. So if we have faith that God is not gone, and in fact, will return to us, then we need not lament the encroaching darkness.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, guide us. Our souls cry out in need for you. We have denied your promises and have lost our way. Open a path for us so that we may navigate the storm. In your name we pray, Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 14th  
Read: Psalm 81

Reflection by Cindy White, Worship Committee Chair/Chancel Choir Member

CELEBRATE! In Psalm 81, Asaph calls out to the choirmaster to blow the trumpet to gather the people of Israel together so they might shout, play instruments, and sing songs of praise to God for His deliverance of the Israelites out of slavery. After the people gather, God reminds His people how he tested Israel and ultimately delivered them from their troubles. God reminds His people that He hears those who cry out to Him and relieves their burdens! God goes on to tell His faithful people to “open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.” In other words, if the people have faith in God, He will provide for their needs. At the end of the Psalm, God laments the rejection of Israel when the people rejected God for their inability to open their hearts to Him. God states He would have provided for His people, if only they had listened to Him and obeyed.

The last few months have proven difficult and challenging. Our traditional gatherings and celebrations have been few and far between due to the physical constraints imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic. There are underlying currents of fear, weariness, distrust, and anger permeating the stream of our society. It IS hard to fathom a reason to celebrate. Yet despite our current circumstances, Psalm 81 reminds us to gather and celebrate the unending presence of God in our lives! While we may be limited in physical gatherings, we have the technological gift of gathering online to celebrate! You can celebrate together as a family in your home. We can look forward to gathering again as a people for worship and fellowship with one another. God is ALWAYS with us! All we need to do is open our hearts and minds to His will and trust Him to provide. What a gift and a great reason to CELEBRATE!

**PRAYER:** Dear Father: Please remind us each day of Your Presence in our lives. Help us, as your people, to open our hearts to your Will. Grant us the faith to ask and receive Your gifts. Open our eyes to see the reasons to celebrate! In Christ’s Name we pray, Amen!

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 15th

Read: Psalm 82

Reflection by Rev. Sam Jones, Associate Pastor

A few years back, I remember a political campaign for a local official which boasted this slogan: "Do What's Right." I always thought that was rather self-explanatory. But then I began to wonder why the slogan wasn't "Do the Right Thing." I even went so far as to ask the candidate privately why he chose that first slogan. His answer was "because 'doing what's right' means that with everything we do we are called to act justly and ethically, instead of focusing on just one thing. See, it covers everything."

God is in the business of rescuing, delivering, and providing justice to the weak. The psalmist tells us that God condemns those who find themselves in a position of power while failing to help the weak, the poor, and the orphaned. God is condemning those who fail to "do what's right" caused by "judging unjustly and showing partiality to the wicked." When Jesus was sentenced to die by crucifixion, Pontius Pilate must have wondered if by ordering the sentence to be carried out, he was guilty of just such an injustice. Did he wash his hands because he felt this guilt? Isn't it true that we as Christians are called to act justly to all people, but especially to those who are needy? Isn't Jesus always on the side of the oppressed? Do we "do what's right" to our fellow human beings, regardless of their circumstances? And since God indeed rescues, delivers, and provides justice for us, it is clear that we as Easter people are called to do likewise.

**Prayer:** O God, teach me to not walk in front of, but alongside all whom I encounter. Teach me to be a beacon of light to those living in darkness, a torch of wisdom to those who lack knowledge, and a voice of justice in a world that often does not "do what's right." Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 16th

Read: Psalm 85

Reflection by Leigh Ellen Doddridge, Youth Girls Small Group Co-Leader

The Lord will indeed give what is good.

Psalm 85 (NIV)

8 I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants-but let them not turn to folly.

9 Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

12 The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.

13 Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.

Do you ever consider how your actions affect those around you? In the 85th Psalm, God is showing favor as he brought his people out of exile. Much like the people in this Psalm, we know that our God brings us out of the things that tend to hold us captive. I know God loves me and his people. He wants peace for us as well he desires we not turn to folly. What comfort I find knowing he gives what is good not only to me but my whole land. This comfort grows stronger as I draw nearer to him by reading and studying his word and by listening to him. I do believe my actions affect those around me, and I pray that my actions will be full of love like Christ loves and not folly. It is so reassuring that the Lord goes before me and makes His footsteps my pathway.

**Prayer:** Thank you for loving me and guiding me in all situations! May I always listen and follow your guidance. Amen

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 17th

Read: Psalm 90

Reflection by Rosemary Jones, Youth Girls Small Group Co-Leader

According to Psalms 90:10 Seventy Years are given to us! Some even live to be eighty. But even the best years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear and fly away.

Life on earth is just a blink compared to our eternity in Heaven with Jesus. God gives us this time to glorify him. To make each day count and meaningful.

I know that my gift is connection with others. I strive to find God in my relationships and how I can serve others and show his love through me. I always pray that God would show me how to hear the things I need to hear and see the things I need to see so I can love others like He loves me.

This past week one of my students asked me, "why doesn't my dad love me?" I always try to find the words, but I know they have to come from God. I told him that he cannot control what others choose to do and that he must try to focus on the good and the positive in his life. That he is a good person, raised by a wonderful mother who does love him and care for him. That is what is important. He started to tear up and I hoped my words gave him some comfort. This student is tormented by many losses and his own fears and insecurities that seem to haunt him in his young life.

When I read Psalm 90:14-15 Satisfy us each morning with your unfailing love, so we may sing for joyful the end of our lives. Give us gladness in proportion to our former misery! Replace the evil years with good. God reminds me that we must focus our hearts on him and his love for us. We must show others that reflection of his love in our actions and our words.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, I pray that you would show me what is important each day. Help me remember to make each moment count and to focus on the love of Jesus. Help that love reflect out towards the people you have chosen to be in my life. In your name I pray, Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 18th

Today lets do something different. Take the time to read Psalm 91, sit and let it resound in your soul.

**Psalm 91: God’s Impenetrable Prayer of Protection**

**1** Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. **2** I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” **3** Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. **4** He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. **5** You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, **6** nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. **7** A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. **8** You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. **9** If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling, **10** no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. **11** For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; **12** they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. **13** You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. **14** “Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. **15** He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. **16** With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

Now use it as your prayer. He loves you! You are not alone!

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 19th

Read: Psalm 66

Reflection by Rev. Stephen Sparks, Senior Pastor

As opposed to Psalm 50, Psalm 66 is a psalm of praise. We don't know from the psalmist what particular circumstances or when this psalm was penned. We do know that the psalmist is preparing to offer a sacrifice to God that he swore to do when he called on God to deliver him in his time of distress and obviously God did in deed deliver him. This Psalm can be seen as a worship liturgy for the occasion of the sacrifice of worship. It can really be broken down into four movements, an opening one of four verses—a simple rendering of praise (Psalms 66:1-4); then a short three verses, celebrating God's might against his enemies (Psalms 66:5-7); next a statement in general terms of the deliverance experienced, and a description of the sacrifices to be offered for it (Psalms 66:8-15); and finally an address to the people, calling on them to "hearken"—together with a protestation of sincerity, and an appeal to God as witnessing to it (Psalms 66:16-20). The Psalm is not accredited to King David so it was likely written by a later psalmist or king.

Yet like Psalm 50, the Psalmist has an innate understanding that his heart must be honest and sincere, free from the great transgression and that God in answering his prayer has affirmed his character and his right relatedness. This again emphasizes the temple/sacrifice based understanding of God and his relation to his people, as their patron whose actions could be influenced by their "right heartedness" and their proper acts of worship. This is entirely a works based relationship, wherein the people must do the proper things to gain God's favor. Yet this must be juxtaposed with Psalm 50 where the Lord himself responds and inverts the relationship and overturns expectations by setting up a system that foreshadows Jesus himself where the right behavior, the right acts flow out of the sacrifice of God himself. This Psalm while a praise of God for his mighty acts done on the psalmist behalf, is still set in the Temple/Sacrifice paradigm of salvation, where as Jesus, as part of the great reversal, supplants this works based righteousness with one where God is the primary actor, the primary sacrifice, the primary priest, the primary King and our "right heartedness" or our ortho-praxis (right behavior) flows out of but interestingly just as the psalmist out of our recognition of and gratitude for the great things God has and is doing in and for us.

**Prayer:** O, Lord, help us to always remember that your goodness is never dependent upon us and you have already done all that is necessary for salvation, that we are but recipients of it. O Lord help us to exclaim like the psalmist here, "Blessed be God, Who has not turned away my prayer Nor His favor from me."

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 20th

Read: Psalm 97

Reflection by Donna Zaino, Co-Chair of the Pastoral Care Committee

We don't know who wrote Psalm 97. Some attribute it to David. Others say that it was written after the exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. It occurs in a group of psalms (93-100) that joyfully emphasize God's kingship. **Psalm 97** foreshadows the messianic era when God will reign supreme over the earth. Its verses reference God's sovereignty, his enactment of justice, and the widespread rejoicing that will ensue. There are so many words that should perk up a Christian's ear! Rejoice, righteousness, justice, Most High, light shines, and joy.

In the first part (97:1-5) the glory of God is revealed. The Lord called the world into existence, governs it, called the Universe into existence and reigns over all.

The second part of the Psalm (97:6-9) shows how nature and human beings respond to the revealing of God's glory. Nature's response is simple and clear: the heavens proclaim God's righteousness. But among human beings, the response is mixed. The Psalm frankly admits that not all people worship God. And so when His glory is revealed, ALL will bow down.

The third part of the Psalm (97:10-12) sounds like wisdom from Proverbs. It speaks to the question, *"How do God's people live in a world where not everyone recognizes God's rule?"* Verse 10 reassures "those who hate evil" that God has their back: There is a promise to God's people the wicked will not prevail and His Light WILL shine.

**Prayer:** Abba, Father, help us Lord to align our lives with your perfect vision for us. You are the one true God. There is no other. Teach us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 21st

Read: Psalm 100

Reflection by Meghan Galtelli, Nursery Coordinator/Connections Worship Team

Psalm 100 is a chapter filled with joy: joy in our creation, in God's faithfulness, and in God's love. But what is pure joy? What does it look like? My first thought is how excited my dog is when I get home, wagging her tail faster than a hummingbird's wings. I think of a baby laughing while playing with a parent, smiling with the widest eyes. But joy isn't always happiness. Joy is an inner peace within us.

Some days bring us to our knees. Sometimes those days turn to weeks. It seems like it's just one thing after another and I am anything but happy. In those darkest of times, that's when it is most important to find joy. I don't mean to stay positive and act like life is a breeze. I mean finding joy in the first cup of coffee in the morning. Being thankful for time with loved ones. Closing your eyes during worship and being moved by the Spirit.

God has given us life and chose to make each and every one of us. "It is He who made us and we are His." He made you. He created you. YOU specifically. Not only that, but He knows you and loves you. There is so much joy, true joy, to be found in that relationship with Christ. Grow in it and welcome His love into your life. Praise Him and thank Him for all that you are. If you are struggling to find joy, look to Him. Know that He is looking for you. Always.

**Prayer:** God, we praise you for this life you have given us. Help us to know and find inner joy, so that in the difficult times we can find peace and rest knowing that you are in control. Thank you for your love and faithfulness. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 22nd

Read: Psalm 101

Reflection by Aggie Doddridge, Graduate Student at Ole Miss

Psalms 101 offers us a beautiful representation of how we are to live our lives as children of God. In this Psalm, David presents formative pieces of advice that will all in all influence our character and perception of life for the benefit of His Kingdom. I love how he begins this chapter with, "I will sing of your love and justice, Lord." Not only does David allow himself to center his heart in worship and sit in the presence of Our Savior, but also he recognizes the Lord's great love and justice actions He has for His creation.

The Psalm highlights several resolutions He takes to guide His steps in this life on Earth. Someone told me that the longest journey one may take is the journey from your head to your heart. We can realize that we want to live a blameless life and keep our eyes on our treasure in heaven, but one must believe and trust with their whole heart in the goodness of God. We must actively learn to conduct a life of humility and truth. Our words also possess such a profound impact on the people around us, so in everything, encourage one another. I hope that when you do not know what to say or when your in a situation where words can get the best of you, take a step back and sit in silence. During this time, we are able to have the opportunity to listen to God, which can be such a marvelous thing.

What influence do you wish to have on the people around you and the world you live in? Will you continue to live of this world or to walk side by side with the Father to a beautiful eternity with Him? I pray today you spend time listening to what God has to say to you, and trust the Author of Life in every season.

**Prayer:** God I give you thanks for everything blessing you have given me. Help me to live a life worthy of Your love. Guide me in my words and in my actions that people see the goodness of You in me. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 23rd

Read: Psalm 16

Reflection by Dr. Joey Lott, Worship Arts Pastor

Theme Parks. It was the very first Youth Choir Tour. We chose Atlanta, Ga and so we went to Six Flags. We enter the theme park and survey the rides.....that seems okay, that's way too high there's no way I'm getting on that rollercoaster. Then Christopher, one of my youth, looks at me and says "Mr. Joey come ride this roller coaster with me." I did. Imagine it.....strapping in and not able to get out until the ride is over, palms are sweaty, heart is racing, and we make our ascent to the top. Now for anyone who has ridden a coaster with me, I tend to scream..a lot...like high pitched, well projected tones of great fear! (The youth have always ridden with me to laugh at my outbursts.) The coaster is rough....banging back and forth then abruptly ends all to do it over and over again until you reach the end.

The Psalmist writes in Psalm 16:7,8: *"I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me: I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."* When we are bewildered and in trouble - where is the rollercoaster going? - God gives us his counsel. When I feel completely lost and abandoned God knows where I should go and shows me the right path (v 11). How does God counsel and advise us in difficulties? In many ways, but most of all through his Word which teaches us in our hearts.

In difficulties, it is easy to be self-absorbed. But our eyes must look up, not down, and look to Jesus. And as we look at him through his Word suddenly we realize he is not just someone to look at, but someone who is with us - at our right hand. If in ancient Israel you wanted someone to protect you, you would place a mighty armed warrior on your right side. You would be invulnerable. It's the same with us. As the rollercoaster of life takes another lurch up or down, we have seated next to us someone who "sticks closer than a brother".

Now maybe someone at this point thinks that this is typical of a weak human being who needs an imaginary friend in distress. We may feel happy but is he real? The Psalmist goes on to say "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (vv 9-11)

**Prayer:** Lord, we thank you for the Christophers in our lives as they remind us we are not alone! Show us your path and may we be filled with joy knowing you are with us.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 24th

Read: Psalm 14

Reflection by Beth Henry, Chancel Choir Member

Psalm 14 speaks to the fact that there are people who reject God. This chapter also notes God's sadness for His people straying from His word and ultimate salvation.

Exodus 32:2-4 NIV, proves that we are not the first people to deny God. Much like the Israelites and the golden calf, we often become impatient. This behavior can lead to corruption and demoralization among God's children. It has the potential to create an internal struggle in which those that worship the Lord are surrounded by those who do not.

Verse 14:4 states, "Do all these evildoers know nothing? They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the Lord." This reading is synonymous with the unholy taking over those that seek His word. This can become an uncomfortable and spiritually dangerous situation.

In today's world, there are more and more people becoming followers rather than leaders of the times. Both young and old seek popularity among their peers, but at what price? Some seek worldly peace while others seek worldly degradation. No matter the situation, God's will is not always questioned, but rather, things are taken into our own hands. In doing so, we seek earthly answers from man rather than spiritual ones from God.

According to Martin Luther, "We must make a great difference between God's Word and the word of man. A man's word is a little sound, that flies into the air, and soon vanishes; but the Word of God is greater than heaven and earth, yea, greater than death and hell, for it forms part of the power of God, and endures everlastingly."

During this season of Lent we prepare for the selfless sacrifice of God's only son. We contemplate what actually happened when Jesus was crucified, and what it means for us as Christians. As His people, we await with the hope of His resurrection, and His ascension into Heaven. Let us, then, seek God and His unending love. May we cast our cares on the Lord and leave them at the foot of the cross. For only through seeking Him will we find everlasting salvation.

**Prayer:** Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for all your many blessings. Thank you for the abundance that awaits me in heaven. As your child, help me to seek you first. Teach me to expand your kingdom, not my own. Help me to walk by your word, and not by my own selfishness. In Jesus Name, Amen

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 25th

Read: Psalm 32

Reflection by Rev. Sam Jones, Associate Pastor

Former Wyoming senator Alan Simpson once remarked that "hatred corrodes the container in which it is carried." With all due respect to the former senator, I believe the same is true for sin. Sin corrodes the container in which it is carried. What does this mean? It means that as we continue to carry around our sins, we are weighted down by this unnecessary burden. The psalmist laments this in verses 3: "*When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.*"

The writer of this psalm knows all too well what it is like to carry this burden around (see 2 Samuel 11-12). He instructs us in verse 11 to "*be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy; all you upright in heart.*" This means that the key to living a joyous and blessed life is to allow God to take your burdens away. How do we do this? Well, this is where the Resurrection of Jesus comes in. We sometimes live in a way that suggests Jesus' death on the cross is the end of the story. But it isn't. Jesus died and rose to offer us forgiveness; a chance at a new life! He died and rose to re-establish God's covenant with humanity. For this, yes, let us be glad in the Lord!

Pray for the will and strength to take your burdens and place them where they belong: at the foot of the cross. It is the place where containers don't corrode, a place where death is defeated, and a place where life eternal reigns.

**Prayer:** O God, thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ down to save us. May we be given the strength to not carry unnecessary burdens anymore. May we be freed from our self-imposed captivity and give ourselves wholly to you. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 26th

Read: Psalm 145

Reflection by Jennifer Bland, Chancel Choir Member

In one church, the organist plays forcefully to lead the worship; the pianist plays the grand piano as well and then the people's voices join them to "ascribe to the Lord glory and strength." It is our effort as Christian people to worship God in a Christian church anywhere. There may not be the great organ and piano and many voices, but it is what we do as we worship the Lord and "ascribe to the Lord glory and strength."

Then the psalm moves into verses that show nature as an example of how powerful the voice of the Lord is. Seven times "the voice of the Lord" is said to be over all the earth in all kinds of difficult weather. Most of us will remember a thunderstorm from this past week, or recent weeks, when after the lightning flashed, the thunder came and shook the windows wherever you were. At times it seemed like the thunder was above you ... and at times it seemed like it was very close to the ground. But whenever it was heard, it helped us to see the storm was very powerful. A story shows how some understand the thunderstorm as being "God of the Storm." Three men worked as laborers in a small town. They were actually digging the foundation to a factory that was to be built. There was one young man, 19 years old, and two "older" men who had families and were working. All three heard an approaching thunderstorm. The only place they could get out of the rain and storm was in the young man's car. The young man was very excited to show off his stereo in his car, so he started a song and played it very loud. One of the two older men was sitting in the front seat with the young man and he said, "Cut that off! That's the Lord talking!" It was a good lesson to be learned how the God of the storm can be shown very powerfully in nature. We may have had storms that have hurt us or others. Still, the Lord showing himself in a storm is something that can help us realize the power of God.

Then, the psalmist writes that the Lord sits enthroned over *everything* and "as King forever." God is above *everything, the storm included*. The psalm helps us by showing the result of our dependence upon God. These two things: "May the Lord give *strength* to His people!" *We need strength*. And the second is, "May the Lord bless His people with *peace*!" *We need peace*. It is God's strength and God's peace which He gives to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 27th

Read: Psalm 29

Reflection by Rev. John Kramer, Retired UMC Pastor and Chancel Choir Member

In one church, the organist plays forcefully to lead the worship; the pianist plays the grand piano as well and then the people's voices join them to "ascribe to the Lord glory and strength." It is our effort as Christian people to worship God in a Christian church anywhere. There may not be the great organ and piano and many voices, but it is what we do as we worship the Lord and "ascribe to the Lord glory and strength."

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My Response/Thoughts:

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March 28th

Read: Psalm 20

Reflection by Kelly Peel, Leadership Team member

In Psalm 20, David prepares for battle by offering prayer and sacrifices, and trusting in God for victory. He speaks of God saving His anointed and the triumph of those who trust in him. The people of Israel ask God to protect David and to give him success.

David's request in the first verse is for protection. That is certainly something we have all prayed for during the past year of uncertainty. Many times, I have given in to fear and not trusted God. In Psalm 20, David reminds us that God will protect us, sustain us, and give us strength to get through difficult situations. If we are dependent upon God daily, then when the tough times come, God will help us and give us what we need. We cannot trust in ourselves, our power, or our strength. We can only trust in God to answer us in our times of trouble.

In Verse 4, David speaks about our hearts' desire and plans. We must never doubt that God hears our prayers, but we must make sure that our desires and plans line up with God before we can expect Him to respond to our prayers. As we make plans for the future, we must do that within the boundaries of the word of God. And, we must do that with a clear focus on God as the only One who provides for us what we need in this life.

During this Lenten season of self-examination and reflection, let us never forget David's example, his trust in God, and his confidence in the Lord's grace and goodness as we prepare ourselves for the unfolding year ahead.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 29th

Read: Psalm 8

Reflection by Denise Treadway, Little Food Pantry Coordinator

Psalm 8 so accurately describes the beautiful creation of God's masterpiece. I picture the most amazing scenery of the sky with fields of frolicking animals while reading this descriptive imagery. David's words of thankfulness to God for creating all of these things resonate with me. However, I think sometimes we forget that we - people - are part of that awesome creation. God created us in His image "a little lower than the angels" ....A little lower than angels?! Wow!

"You see that building?" Is a question I would often hear riding through Memphis with my dad growing up. "That building" sometimes could be a beautiful church but most of the time it was nothing particularly special like a gas station or an office building. However, my dad, who is a building contractor, would proceed to reminisce with great fondness over the details on building the structure including how hot or cold it was and funny stories of things that happened over lunch. Regardless, it never failed that my dad would look at that plain old building like it was the Taj Mahal.

I'll be honest, I don't think of myself as "a little lower than the angels". I would consider myself more of a simple gas station than a beautifully adorned church. We can easily give God the glory for the beauty we see in rainbows, flowers, and cardinals, but we forget about the maybe not-so-beautiful people around us especially the ones that don't have our same beliefs. God looks at each of us with such pride and joy. I wonder if God gets frustrated that I am overly critical of myself. How annoyed He must get with the lack of patience or kindness I show those I may not agree with. How differently would I treat myself and others if I viewed the world through the loving eyes of a Creator who so carefully and purposely made us all?

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your creation and all your many blessings that we do not deserve. Please help me to remember how loved I am and that I am called to love others unconditionally.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 30th

Read: Psalm 5

Reflection by Dave Kirchhoff, Joy/Seekers Sunday School Teacher

Have you ever been with a group of “friends” and feel pressure to confirm to what they wanted to do, talk the way they talk, or look the way they look? I remember as a young teen, one of my best friends was a guy named Jimmy. We were in scouts together and did lots of stuff together. We didn’t go to school with each other, so when we got together to do stuff, it was for the fun of being together and enjoying life. As we grew older, we ended up at the same high school together and even had a few classes together. It was as we spent more time together, I began to see a different side of him, that I really wasn’t fond of. I saw traits that I didn’t want to be a part of. After our 1<sup>st</sup> year of high school together, I had seen enough and we ended up parting ways. I wanted to be around people that acted more like me and believed more like me.

I think Psalm 5 kind of characterizes how I felt about being with my friend and eventually parting ways and finding people who believe the same way, who can support you as you go forward in life. God hates wickedness, liars and deceivers. He will bring down the wicked. We as believers need to pray for discernment, to understand when people or life is trying to take us down a path, we don’t need to go down. If you focus on God, he will surround you with love and shield you.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, grant me the gift of discernment. Reveal to me the path you want us to take. Help me when temptation comes, to listen for your voice to guide me in life’s journey. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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March 31st  
Read: Psalm 1  
Reflection by Patrick Jones, College Student

Psalm 1 gives a clear contrast between the "righteous" and the "Wicked". We see that ones who do not walk in the steps of the Wicked nor those who stand in the way of sinners are the ones who are a delight by the Lord. But what does it mean to be "Wicked"? There are several ways one can interpret this label, but they are described as people who are not watched over by the Lord. With that said, how does one know whether or not their actions are wicked? Just as one who is righteous "yields the fruit from the tree", the righteous also yield the word of God to their soul. They walk in the way of Christ, live by his word, and recognize the evil of sin. By doing this, the righteous lives eternally in Heaven with God, while the wicked, those who do not recognize the evil of sin, only lead down their own path of "self-destruction". The wicked can be redeemed, but only if they recognize the evil in their sins.

**Prayer:** Father God, we ask you to watch over us, as righteous followers of Christ, so that we may continue to walk with you and live by your word. We ask that you also help us guide the wicked to see the evils in their sins, so that they may be redeemed and can live with you eternally instead of leading to their own destruction.

We ask this in God's name, and all God's people said: Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 1st

Read: Psalm 4

Reflection by Gail Ross, Administrative Secretary

Did you know that insomnia is sometimes referred to as a public health crisis? Millions of Americans may lay their heads down but they do not get the rest that restores.

It's no surprise that people have trouble sleeping, just look around. We are overworked, always multi-tasking, worried about illnesses, finances and the state of our country and world just to name a few. These worries do not have to control us.

The enemy would love to rob us of our peace and security by keeping us stressed out but we know a power greater than all the worries in the world. A power that can calm any raging storm. We need to learn to give our storms to God. If you can't sleep tonight just open your Bible to Psalms and seek shelter there.

When we are going through tough times, it is easy to become discouraged. We can feel all alone and that God has forgotten us. But Psalm 4 reminds us to trust God even when things are tough! He is always with us and will never abandon us.

When we put our trust in the Lord we can find strength and comfort.....and a good night's sleep!

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 2nd

Read: Psalm 131

Reflection by Lucia Nelson, 5/6th Grade Sunday School Teacher

David has always been one of my favorite Biblical figures because he faced a whole range of human experiences and God was with him through them all, through his triumphs and his failures. David was a musician and a poet, an artist with words. For me, the words he wrote in Psalm 131 are ones to follow and take to heart in this age in which we all live, now more than ever.

When we look at each of the three verses, one at a time, his meaning is clear. The repeated word or idea in verse 1 is to not be proud and haughty in how we live our lives. I think this relates not only to feeling superior to others, but also, for me, in comparing myself and what I do with what others are doing, and trying to curate what the world perceives to be a perfect life. Instead, we should strive to be humble. James 4:10 says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up." We need to seek humility, be content and know there are things that we can't make perfect, things that are out of our control, and things that we can't know. As difficult as this may be, we have to be okay with that. Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may all do the words of this law." We need to be satisfied that we cannot know everything, and that is part of the design. In verse 2, just as the mother gives the child the gift of self-sufficiency and independence, so too, has God given us all that we need. Because God was within him, David was able to choose to calm and quiet himself. It is a choice and it is ours to make. We must *choose* contentment every day. God is with us, He is sufficient, and He gives us all we need, both now and forevermore, as in verse 3. We have hope in the Lord and we trust that He will take care of us now and forever. I have found these three verses to bring me comfort and encouragement in these uncertain times when things are out of my control more than ever. Instead of worrying about the things that I can't control, I will remind myself to choose contentment daily and trust God to take care of me.

**Prayer:** Lord, please help me to be humble in my heart and help me choose contentment every day. Let my soul be calm and quiet as I draw closer to You. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 3rd

Read: Psalm 31:1-24

Reflection by Dr. Joey Lott, Worship Arts Pastor

As a child growing up in Mississippi, I experienced many storms, weather related storms specifically. In the Spring/Summer it seemed like every Wednesday evening, my mom would gather my brother, sister and I and put us in the closet because there was a tornado spotted. There were big booms of thunder and bright flashes of light. The entire house would vibrate from the booming thunder. There we were...huddled up taking refuge, in my closet, from the storms.

Psalm 31 begins with David saying, "In you, O Lord, I take refuge." The Hebrew text in this passage carries the meaning of fleeing for protection, to put trust and confidence in a fortress, or to seek a house of defense. David needed such a place of refuge. He was facing a plot against his life. His friends had all abandoned him. He's drained and weary—at the end of his rope. David feels forgotten.

Despite this stormy season, David has deep trust in the character and abundant goodness of God. He did not ask God to rescue him because he thought himself to be good, but *for You name's sake* (v3). David was confident that God would be as faithful as He had been in the past, so He will again.

This Holy Week we remember the final steps of Jesus before the cross. I can only imagine, not really sure I can imagine but none the less, I try to imagine how lonely that could have been. Jesus will reach the garden and pray and even ask for this to be taken from him and then say "not my will but thine." Jesus knew he would not be alone. He knew God would be with him.

You know....those storms in my childhood. They were very intense. There were times I felt alone and afraid and then I would remember that my dad was standing at the door keeping watch.....relaying to my mom what was happening outside. Finally, the storm would pass. We were back in our beds safe and sound, giving thanks!

God has never changed. He is still faithful today. We can confidently expect Him to act on our behalf as well. Do not the enemy undermine your confidence in the goodness of God's character and the faithfulness of His steadfast love. This psalm began with a desperate plea but ended with unbridled praise—an unyielding declaration of trust in His God. He wants us to find refuge in Him. He meets us in that place where we feel forgotten and alone. Take courage as you seek to abide in Him, beloved.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 4th

Read: Psalm 36:5-11

Reflection by Andy Pressman, Sound Tech for Traditions Worship

Today's reading speaks of God's love for us and the immenseness of all that he created. From the deep sea to the endless sky to the highest mountain, we are all welcome to partake of all of these simply by recognizing God and His awesome existence! The fountain of life-the light we all seek is right before us. How overwhelming His greatness IS! In Him we find the light-the fountain of life because in Him and through Him we have everlasting life. In the Lenten season we "give up" something or somethings that we like or enjoy...to acknowledge the sacrifices that were given for us. The Lord takes away our sins so that we can be free of them. So for us to sacrifice chocolate or football or shopping or whatever for 6 weeks seems like an awful small price to pay compared to what he's done for us! I am certainly NOT a Biblical scholar, but I have found that the Psalms were written to be SUNG. They were intended to be SONGS! Now, for an old radio guy, this hit home for me! Before moving here to NW Mississippi, I lived for many years in NW Pennsylvania, a stone's throw from Lake Erie. As we called it, America's "North Coast"! I was and am in awe of the magnitude of that Lake and thus, with God's vast creation. I could drive East on I90 2 hours to Buffalo and another half hour to Niagara Falls or drive West 2 hours to Cleveland and on 2 more to Sandusky or Toledo and I would be looking at the SAME body of water! A 6 hour or more span of the smallest of the 5 Great Lakes! Amazing!! So for us to even contemplate the grandeur of the oceans or mountains or endless sky- is to feebly grasp at God's goodness for us!

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, thank you for your many gifts you have given to us. From the magnificent to the minute!! Let us remember each and every blessing you lovingly provide. In your name we pray, Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 5th

Read: Psalm 71:1-14

Reflection by Ben Larsen, Associate Worship and Youth Pastor

If the Word of the Lord is powerful and effective, what is your response to that?

Too often, we as Christians hide our "Gospel light" under a basket, waiting for someone else to tell others about Jesus. We believe in the word's power, but don't use that power in our daily lives or share that power with others. We trust that the word saves souls and changes lives, but we leave our Bibles on the shelf and reserve one hour on Sunday mornings to gladly hear and learn it.

Psalm 71 tells of a much different attitude toward God's powerful and effective Word. God's Word has an incredible capacity to change the way we think and interact with the world. It provides safety and shelter from all of this sinful world's darts and arrows. It strengthens us and braces us against anything this world can throw at us. It provides a clear path and a promise that there are better days ahead. Our God loves us, will protect us, and wants us to be forever with him in Heaven.

In response to those promises of God, what else could we do but share that word with others. We daily study and hear his Word and proclaim it to our families. We seek out the lost who do not have those promises that the word may change their hearts as well. We pass it on to our children that they may pass it on to theirs as an everlasting inheritance.

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, come to be daily through your word, reminding me of your promises and of your love. Keep me safe from everything that would seek to drive a wedge in between me and your word. Empower me to share your word with others and let me never be ashamed or embarrassed to proclaim you to the many who badly need you in their lives. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 6th  
Read: Psalm 116:1-2,12-19

Reflection by Brennan Ballard, Former Director of Media Ministries

The major theme of this psalm is intentionality. It presents the great works of God and our acts of worship as a direct call and response. The verse wants us to fill in that phrase we all look for when we're reading along with communion out of the hymnal "And So." God hears our voice, our cries for mercy, and turned his ear to us, AND SO we lift up the cup of salvation, fulfill our vows, and serve faithfully. And we do so intentionally. It isn't something we just fall into, or can just do without thinking. We must fulfill our vows to the Lord, in the presence of his people, in the church, and in the city.

The season of Lent is a time for intentional, responsive action as outlined in this psalm. God has heard our cry for mercy, has given it to us through the dying of his son AND SO we make vows to him and uphold them. We give up habits, worldly goods, or time spent not upholding our vows and turn it them into intentional actions to respond to this amazing action.

For Lent, outside of communion, the only thing I'm going to have to drink is water. I am making a vow with God that, because he's willing to give up so much for me, I am willing to give up the things of the world that I have become dependent on in order to spend that time and energy intentionally responding to him. Every time I have to slap my hand away from the Keurig, it will be a reminder of my vows to him, and, in turn, what those vows are in response to. So in this season, as you uphold your vows, do so with intentionality as to why you are upholding them, and what you are responding to by doing so.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, please help us act with intention. You have given us so much with your blessings of mercy, and we seek to give what thanks we can. Please give us the presence of mind to remember that we are your servants. In your name we pray, Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 7th

Read: Psalm 22

Reflection by Gloria Ballard, member of the Worship Arts Committee

David believed God would deliver him from his suffering to the day he would be filled with great joy. In his suffering, he called to God to rescue him from the lion's mouth, and don't we do the same when the suffering becomes unbearable? Even Jesus cried to God using the very words David spoke at the beginning of the Psalm, 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?'

In my own life, there have been times when the suffering was so great my heart felt torn, and each time I called on God to pour his strength into me, his will not my own, and for him to lead me through the difficulty. At some point in life everyone feels they are alone, but they are not. God hears your cries, and when you put your trust in him you will not be disappointed.

We read how David sings God's praises, and if you know the hymn *I Serve a Risen Savior*, the third verse says "Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian, Lift up your voice and sing. Eternal hallelujahs to Jesus Christ the King!". So sing his praises because he is our hope and our joy.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, thank you for being an awesome God; thank you for coming to save me when I was unworthy; thank you for the blessings and for bringing me through the trials. Allow me to rejoice in all things, so I might bring glory and honor to your name. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 8th

Read: Psalm 148

Reflection by Anna Fortenberry, Chancel Choir Member

How amazing, what a gift, to be overwhelmed by the beauty and majesty of God! The writer of Psalm 148, for 14 verses, seems to overflow with adoration and praise. The writer does not describe the current state of things- they only point toward the never-failing promises of God. Our Lord's abundance does give us all reasons to celebrate, no matter our present situation.

I have always hated the "forced-perspective" method of Christian consolation. The "There are people starving across the world" reasoning for cleaning one's plate. If someone is feeling buried beneath their own situation, introducing guilt as a solution will only add another shovelful of weight!

Instead, when someone is hurting- gently remind them that they, too, are part of God's divine creation. That they also, even in their struggle, were the result of the "he commanded and they were created" words of verse 5.

Perhaps you are feeling less than awe-struck today. Instead of reading this Psalm with guilt in your heart, try it again through the lens of compassion. We do not have to be worthy of praise at every moment, because we serve a Creator who is!

Flowers that wilt are still declaring the glory of God, and so are you.

**Prayer:** Father God, teach me today to focus on your beauty and goodness. Keep me from only thinking of my own failures, and allow me to see myself as a part of your beautiful creation. Give me awe and wonder that can spread to others. Forgive me when I fail you. Amen.

My Response/Thoughts:

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April 9th

Read: Psalm 150

Reflection by Rev. Stephen Sparks, Senior Pastor

The book of "Praises" *tehillim* ends here with a crescendo of praise! Repeatedly in this final chorus we see the hebrew imperative verb *hillel* call us to praise God. This song is a festival Hymn, and chiefly it answers the questions: where, why, how, and by whom is the Lord to be praised?

**Where is the Lord to be praised?** In his sanctuary. But the sanctuary of the Lord on earth (the temple) is no more, as Jesus said, it will be torn down and He would rebuild it in three days, except it's not a sanctuary built by human hands but is eternal in the heavens, Christ himself.

**Why is the Lord to be praised?** Clearly for His "mighty deeds". In creation. In history. For His "redemptive acts in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

**How is the Lord to be praised?** With wind, stringed, and percussion instruments; and the human voice! As each instrument is added to the call the cacophony of sound rises and become the mighty chorus.

**By whom is the Lord to be praised?** Everything that has breath, *neshama!* This is the breath of life from God (Gen 2:7). All humans have life by God's gift of this breath. In the end it is the one true possession of human beings and it comes only from God. As such no other use of breath could be more right and true than PRAISE! The whole of God's creation is one great temple in which all of his creation is called to worship him!

The volume of praise would increase at the addition of instruments and voices until it reached a thrilling final crescendo, a fitting conclusion to *TEHILLIM, the book of PRAISE!*

**PRAYER: Lord, let us with all our *neshama*, our breath, Praise YOU!**

My Response/Thoughts:

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