

# **St. Paul's Episcopal Church**

## **Lenten Devotional**

### **2021**

**Written by the Parishioners of St. Paul's**



***"Remember that from dust you came,  
and to dust you shall return" - Genesis 3:19***

## **Welcome to Saint Paul's Lenten Devotional!**

While Lent might look different this year, St. Paul's continues to gather around scripture in this holy season of Lent. This Lenten Devotional was created to help us read God's word and reflect on how it applies to our lives today.

This booklet has been created to serve as a companion to you this Lent. Each day you will read a passage of scripture that is pulled from the Lectionary text. Spend some time reading the scripture, then read the reflection written by a member of our parish community.

*Thank you to everyone who offered to write a reflection. It requires great boldness to offer a personal reflection on Holy Scripture and all of your contributions have been such a blessing to read.*

Sincerely,

The Reverend Laura Di Panfilo

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Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

## **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

[Matthew 6:21] "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Today is the first day. The first day of the season we come to again each year to examine our lives, recommit to our faith, and to return most importantly to knowing that we are loved and cherished by God. Just the way you are today.

It may seem counterintuitive to begin a season of repentance by knowing that God loves you just the way you are today. Does God really love us in the ways that we are broken? In the ways that you do not live in God's ways? In all the ways that we have failed? Well, the answer is – yes. God loves you so completely, so deeply, so unconditionally – that nothing can take that love away.

All of the activities of the season of Lent are a response to the unconditional love of God. Because we are loved, we examine our lives, we recommit to our faith and we seek to share more fully the love of God has already given us with the world.

This first day, know that you are loved. Loved perfectly, completely, unconditionally. Knowing that you are loved is the real treasure.

*The Reverend Noah H. Evans has served as the Rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church since 2017.*

Thursday, February 18, 2021

## **John 1:29-34**

[John 1:34] And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.

John's witness stands that Jesus is the Son of God, nothing less. Jesus either is or He isn't. There are no half measures here. John didn't declare that Jesus was a wise man, or a well-versed Rabbi or an excellent carpenter. John presents the answer to the question that each of us must answer for ourselves. Do I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God? I must admit that I struggled with this question for many years. And if I am completely honest, I dodged it and went about my business of trying to be a good person and hoping for the best when it came time for the sheep and goats thing. In the end, I was exhausted because the entire operation was powered by my will, not God's. I had the Christian equation backwards. I acted first and believed (sort of) second.

When I finally confronted my relationship with Jesus, I saw that my faith had been limited to my personal experiences, my prayers and my meditations. My limitations constrained my ability to believe. Thankfully, I learned that faith includes trusting the people that came before me and those that are with us now. I learned that by trusting John the Baptist, Dorsey the Bishop, Noah the Priest and You in the Pew, I didn't need to carry the burden of belief alone. As a result, the burden of belief has been

transformed into the freedom of faith. And that has made all the difference because I am now able to declare and witness that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

*Ansley Westbrook has been a member of St. Paul's since 2011. For the past 7 years, Ansley has been one of St. Paul's confirmation class teachers and is emphatic that he learned more from the students than they learned from him. He is also a member of the Episcopal Church's Constitution and Canons Committee. Ansley is married to Sarah and they have three children, Trip, Brady and Parker.*

Friday, February 19, 2021

## **John 1:35-42**

[John 1:41] The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah."

Sometimes, sharing the good news of Christ's love is easier said than done. As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors—no exceptions. This is a beautiful thing, as following this call enriches our lives with diverse perspectives, worldviews, and beliefs that empower us to question, research, pray, and grow in faith.

But we are also called to welcome others into the embrace of Christ's love, as Andrew did. In fact, the Gospel of John tells us that this is the first thing Andrew did after he followed Jesus. Without hesitation, Andrew retrieved his brother Simon and said, "We have found the Messiah."

I struggle daily to reach out to friends and family as Andrew reached out to Simon, for fear that my words will fall on deaf ears, or that I'll anger, upset, or alienate those who haven't opened themselves to the gospel. How do I share Christ's love with a friend who identifies as an atheist, without making them feel judged? How do I welcome a family member into my church, when they are scarred after being ostracized from their own?

We cannot articulate the depth of Christ's love through our own human words or deeds alone. The right words and the right deeds are beyond human; they are gifts from the Holy Spirit, found through prayer, fasting, and humbly coming before the Lord to ask that He instill within us the wisdom to find the right words, and the humility to really listen, understand, and love.

*Carley Adams was raised Antiochian Orthodox, her faith journey brought her to St. Paul's Episcopal Church in 2018. She has since become a visiting eucharistic minister during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has also participated in the young adult reading groups.*

Saturday February 20, 2021

## John 1:43-51

[John 1:46] "Come and see."

These verses in the Gospel of John describe the beginning of Jesus' active ministry, the calling of disciples. Looking back a few verses for context (John 1:35-39), we hear Jesus extend an invitation to two unnamed disciples who ask him where he is staying, and Jesus invites them, "**Come and see.**"

In the verses for today (43-51), we see the exact same words, **come and see**, used by Philip, who has already said yes to Jesus. Philip tells Nathaniel, I imagine with much energy and excitement, that they've found the Messiah, and Nathaniel replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip's answer uses the exact invitation we hear Jesus use in the previous verses. "**Come and see,**" he says, beckoning Nathaniel forward. And Nathaniel goes.

At their first encounter, Jesus makes it clear **he** knows Nathaniel from top to bottom, says Nathaniel is "an Israelite with no deceit." Nathaniel is astounded, asks Jesus, "How do you know me?" and Jesus says, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." You can almost feel Nathaniel's jaw-dropping, chest-slapping, knee-bending belief in his response, "**Rabbi, you are the Son of God!**" God *knows* us, even before we know ourselves, as Jesus knew Nathaniel (and as we know from the Old Testament as well-- Isaiah 43:1, among others).

The invitation "**come and see**", used by Jesus and also Philip, is *relational* at the start. When we say "come and see", we're already connected to the other person, we *know* them, beckon them further into relationship. We recognize the gestures Philip must have used to bring Nathaniel along--no dry, motionless statement, but more likely a laugh (sure, out loud!), a quickened turn toward Jesus, a couple of hearty waves toward him, a shout to bring his friend along.

There's divine energy in that call which is *invitation*, an energy which reminds me of the "call and response" practice used in so many traditions--music, jazz and gospel, storytelling, responsive readings, in preaching. You know the feeling--music *talks* to you and somehow you have to *move*. Something is said that hits you in the middle--and you find yourself nodding vigorously, maybe moving your body forward a little. Clapping. Maybe inside you want to stand up and shout "Yes!". Be it muted or right-out-there, whatever you're doing, it's a *response*.

The same is true of God's constant, consistent invitation to us, through Christ. We're *called to respond* to this divine invitation with the same kind of energy Philip used with Nathaniel, mind, body and spirit--**Come and see!**

*Jill Gordon is a writer, teacher and retiree from 25 wonderful years of work with the residents at Friendship Village. Mother to three daughters, step-mom to a son and daughter, and Grammy to eight grands, two step-grands and one great step-grand, she lives with her husband, David Boyd, in Monongahela, PA.*

Sunday, February 21, 2021

## **Mark 1:9-15**

*[Mark 1:11] And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

The world still feels dark and heavy at times. In this passage, however, we are reminded of the love and peace that God brings as we walk with Jesus.

To begin, a voice speaks to Jesus (1:11), but also to us: *You are my beloved child*. As God's children, we are beloved too. Jesus's belovedness is the armor he takes into the wilderness. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, he is not alone; the angels take care of him (13).

What is it like to be in the wild -- hungry, thirsty, lost, weather-beaten and blistered -- for forty days? I imagine it feels frightening, lonely, and utterly exhausting, but also, at times, empowering as you keep putting one foot in front of the other. In the wilderness, a place defined by the unknown, all you can do is take another step. And another. That's what we've been doing over the past year, and not without stumbles. But every day, we take another step through this expansive unknown, and, like Jesus, we are not alone. Angels take care of us. Who are your angels?

Lastly, Jesus commands, "Repent, and believe in the gospel!" (15) Our journey in the wilderness continues, but we walk on as God's beloved children, our path illuminated by the Good News of Jesus Christ.

*Tricia Bair lives in Upper St. Clair with her husband, Pat, and her 4-year-old daughter, Audrey; their second child is due right around Easter! They began attending St. Paul's in 2018.*

Monday February 22, 2021

## **John 2:1-12**

*[John 2:3] When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."*

Jesus promises a better future, even during this time of difficulty and scarcity. We have suffered in uncountable ways. The effect of the pandemic has made many uneasy. Some are questioning our future. Yet in Jesus our future is guaranteed - a future filled with the spirit of joy.

Jesus and his disciples have been invited to a wedding. It is an occasion that is about to turn dark and chaotic. The wine has just run out. Storm clouds are descending upon the celebration. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, knows what to do. She turns to Jesus and asks for help. Jesus transforms the water used for purification into a fabulous wine. With that simple action, Jesus allows the party and joy to continue.

At the Wedding at Cana, Jesus' miracle is a reminder that God is always with us. Jesus desires to make things better, even when life is not working out as we hoped. Jesus does not promise that life will always be easy, but with the miracle, Jesus reminds us that He is always with us.

The first part of this scripture is symbolic of the world as it is - broken. This scripture reminds us that life does not always work out as we hope. But when we call upon Jesus, He will make things right.

In Jesus, we have God who loves us. Jesus will bring us home to be with God at the Heavenly Banquet where there is only joy. The struggles of life are left behind as we embrace God in faith and love.

*The Reverend Ted Babcock is a Priest Associate at St. Paul's.*

Tuesday February 23, 2021

## **John 2:13-21**

*[John 2:18] What sign have you to show us for doing this?*

Jesus shows anger about what is going on in the Temple and reveals that He is the Son of God. What He really means is that the Temple signifies his body and He will die and rise again in three days.

Often, anger is how we react to fear.

What this passage means to me is that I often only hear and see what is on the surface. If I listen carefully, do not judge, and realize there are other things going on, I will understand what is being revealed. Jesus, in His words and actions, was revealing what was coming.

*Ann Bart joined St. Paul's in March of 2020. She has taken the Learning to Pray, Sacred Ground and St. Ignatius Journey classes. When it is safe, she plans to serve in some of the outreach activities.*

Wednesday February 24, 2021

## **John 2:23-3:15**

*[John 3:3] "Very truly, I tell you,"*

Some of the most fascinating stories in the Gospels involve Jesus' miracles. Who isn't amazed by tales of multiplying fish and loaves, healing the sick, or raising the dead? Nicodemus was captivated by these events as well, but he waited to approach Jesus in the relative safety of nighttime to express his belief that Jesus must have come from God because of the signs He is able to perform. Rather than an encouraging response, Nicodemus appears to catch Jesus in a moment of frustration...I can't trust you, because I know mankind...we testify, but you don't believe...you can't understand earthly things, how can you possibly understand the heavenly...you are Israel's teacher, yet you still don't understand?

Like Nicodemus, we try to express our faith, but sometimes wait until we feel "safe" to do so. At other times, we can limit our faith to awe and thanksgiving for what God has done for us. We're trying, but we're still holding ourselves back. God wants more; he's seeking nothing short of our transformation. *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."* It's not just about what we say, it's also about who we are becoming. With the Spirit's help, our hearts know the way.

*Tony Brady has been a member of St. Paul's with his wife, Cris, for two years, and is a member of the St. Paul's Finance Commission.*

Thursday February 25, 2021

## **John 3:16-21**

[John 3:16] For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.



For sports fans this verse is certainly familiar. The signs pop up behind home plate, or in the crowd behind the field goal posts. I remember seeing the signs but since I had been raised in another faith from birth, did not have much experience reading the scriptures, and wasn't even aware it was a reference to a Bible verse. When I finally looked up the verse, I realized what a succinct and powerful verse it was. I remember wondering what the motivation of the sign holders were - Proselytism? A good luck charm to insure a game win? A reminder to those in attendance that there are more important things than

sports?

Going back and reading the verse with fresh eyes, I was struck by how rich one verse could be. God so loved the world, not the planet, but ALL the people on the planet, who he made in his likeness. He loved each and every one of us so much that he gave us his only begotten Son. For me, this brings up the subject of the Holy Trinity. Yes, he gave us Jesus incarnate to carry his message to us and to redeem us. But since there is the mystery of the Trinity, didn't he also give the Spirit, and Himself?

There are people in the world today who have never heard of Jesus. Some have been taught from an early age to love their own version of God. I'd like to believe that all mankind, all made in God's image, whomever they worship, will be saved if they live a good and holy life in the service of others.

The next time you see this sign at a game, post pandemic of course, take a moment to remember this verse and what it means for us. ALL ARE WELCOME.

*Carolyn Cornelias and her husband Andy joined St. Paul's last fall. She is active in the Sacred Ground ministry, a film and discussion program dedicated to Racial Equality. She also participates in two Bible studies, and the church Book Club.*

Friday February 26, 2021

## **John 3:22-36**

*[John 3:30] He must increase, but I must decrease.*

John the Baptist had a strong following and his disciples were upset that Jesus was beginning to get larger crowds, perhaps at the expense of their reputation. But John was clear from the start that his purpose was to prepare the way and point toward the coming Savior. I have thought deeply about his simple response "He must increase, and I must decrease." John's decrease was an act of humility but also done with abundant joy, as his purpose was playing itself out just as prescribed.

As I reflected on the increase and decrease, I discovered that it is fairly easy as a Lenten discipline, to consider the importance of an increase in Him. Increase my adoration in Him, increase my time in His

word, increase my faith in Him, and increase my reliance on Him. But I am challenged when I consider areas of decrease as well because the decreases are far more difficult for me. To decrease my faith in my own works, to decrease my attention on material things, to decrease my judging of others, to decrease my ill-aimed thoughts, and to decrease my pride and humble myself with joy at His increase. The decrease is definitely a challenge for me and I clearly need God's help. Which takes me to another example of Lenten increase and decrease - the cross. God sent his Son down to take on our sin, he was humiliated, beaten, and abandoned on the cross – ultimate decrease, so that we might be raised up, justified, forgiven, accepted, loved beyond our deserving – ultimate increase, ultimate grace.

*David Sharbaugh became a member of St Paul's in 1987. He and his wife, Eileen raised their four children at St Paul's and were active in the youth group at the time. He is currently a member of the Finance Commission.*

Saturday February 27, 2021

## **John 4:1-26**

*[John 4:13] Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.*

When I was in my twenties, after many years of searching, I discovered my true self. In doing so I started to go to church less and less as I realized that because of who I was, I didn't feel welcomed anymore. But as I was getting older I found that something was missing in my life-I had a thirst for something but not sure for what. I wasn't a very religious person but I felt that I wanted to get back to church-not the church I belonged to many years ago, but a church that I would feel welcomed in. I started saying my prayers every day, but it wasn't enough, I was still thirsty.

I started talking to people about my feelings. I started researching different churches. It was a venture that I wasn't used to and it took me a while. I was searching for something, but I didn't know what exactly. How would I know if I found the right well to drink from?

The Episcopal church was always at the top of my list, it was just a matter of which church. From my research, St Paul's seemed to be the church that was suited for me. Finally, out of the blue one cold Saturday evening, almost four years ago, I thought I would give it a try, just once. The service was in the chapel and I felt welcomed the minute I walked in.

That one night turned into another and another and I found that I was going to church on a regular basis. I then found myself attending St. Paul's 101. I was received into the Episcopal church in November 2019, a day that ended up meaning more to me than I thought it would.

I know now that I was thirsty for many, many years and I didn't know how to quench that thirst. But, like the woman that went to the well, Jesus found me and helped quench my thirst.

*Donna Prata has been attending St. Paul's for the past four years. She is currently participating in Sacred Ground.*

Sunday February 28, 2021

## **Mark 8:31-38**

*[Mark 8:35, Good News Translation] For if you want to save your life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it.*

In 1971 as a young US Army Infantry officer, I was dispatched to the war in Vietnam. Soldiers think they know how they will react in their first combat experience, but a common reaction is to become frozen with fear – hunkering down in hopes that, somehow, you will live. The reality is that this magnifies the risk of death.

Other combat-experienced soldiers abruptly bring the combat “newbie” back to reality - to return to action. The fear remains, but now an awakened willingness to risk your life paradoxically increases the chance of saving it, and the lives of comrades.

Civilian life certainly has its own life struggles to name a few - be in control of your destiny, work hard to receive rewards, measure success by accumulated wealth, position, and power. All too soon, “enough” becomes “never enough”, and “I don’t own things – things own me.”

The Spirit begins to transform your life. Your heart truly feels the pain of the less fortunate and poor; of those hurting due to loss of employment, health, or relationships; of those experiencing discrimination of ethnicity, race, age, gender identity. You begin to stop trying to “keep your life” - your desire for wealth or physical comforts; and you begin to “lose your life” – to care for and to bring hope to those desperately needing to know the Good News that God loves and cares deeply for them.

Do you recall the phrase “Finders Keepers, Losers Weepers”? In the message to his followers in Mark 8:35, Jesus transforms that phrase to “Keepers Weepers, Losers Finders”.

Prayer: O Lord, help us to not lose our lives by trying to save them, but to save our lives by losing them for you and for the Good News of your Kingdom. Amen

*In February 2020, Wayne Williams joined St. Paul's and the Chancel Choir, the Stephen Ministry team, and a book study group - continuing 44+ years singing in church choirs, 5 years as a Stephen Minister, 4 years as a Stephen Leader, and a life-long student. He is happily married (51+ years) to a recently retired United Methodist deacon/pastor.*

Monday March 1, 2021

## **John 4:27-42**

*[John 4:38] Others have labored and you have entered into their labor.*

This passage reminds me of two times when Jesus spoke to me.

First was about 40 years ago when I was about 40 years old. I was confirmed by and became a candidate for Holy Orders during the strong leadership of The Rt. Rev Wilburn C. Campbell, 4<sup>th</sup> Bishop of WV straight from the Diocese of Pittsburgh. I felt he knew me and loved me anyway. I thought of him as my Father in God. He was always looking for people to help him with his work. He even wanted ME to help him. He became known as the "Come Labor On" bishop. He requested and always got Hymn #541 at the close of his worship services. "Who dares stand idle!?"

Another was only a year ago, last Lent, when I was sitting pretty idle in comfortable retirement. Along came "Lenten Devotional 2020," written by the St. Paul's Community. I used to know that community well, but found mostly new names, young people who could be my children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, who could be my children in God. They heard Jesus in Scripture and told me their thoughts. I heard the same message from St. Paul's 2020 as I heard from my bishop back then and I hear from this passage right now. Sow faith, hope and love and keep doing it! Reap rewards that never will end. Dear ones, thank you.

*The Rev. Mary Weatherwax served St. Paul's as Assistant Priest from 1987 to 2011. Some of her colorful squares with circles and crosses hang inside the third outside red door from the parking lot. They need to be straightened or fixed now and then.*

Tuesday March 2, 2021

## **John 4:43-54**

*[John 4:48] Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you[a] see signs and wonders you will not believe."*

"There YOU are." A dear friend's mantra after what ultimately became a terminal diagnosis for her. The mantra she left behind for us to remember to look for God in everything.

"Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe." Verse 48 basically tells us to open our eyes and look at the world around us. To see the small, everyday miracles.



"There YOU are." The absolute belief that God was all around her, even as her world slipped away.

The past year was unlike any other we have experienced in the last 50 years. Our faith has been tested in ways many of us have never faced before. And yet, in many ways, our belief in God got stronger. We began to see the small miracles that we had previously overlooked. We began to see 'signs and wonders' around us. We found ways to help others see the little miracles. So, as we prepare for

Easter Sunday, and that greatest miracle, Jesus' resurrection, we need to keep our eyes open. . . to have those "Aha!" moments when we see God's signs and wonders. We need to keep our eyes open to see God in things and think to ourselves, "there YOU are." And to believe, just simply, believe.

*Paige Russell has been an active member of St. Paul's since moving here 7 years ago. She began in Children's Sunday School and Vacation Bible School and moved into various commissions for the church. She is currently part of the Confirmation Class teachers, leading the 7th and 8th graders who will be Confirmed next year.*

Wednesday March 3, 2021

## **John 5:1-18**

*[John 5:14] See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.*

A mystery is presented in the events of the miracle at the pool of Bethesda. A disabled man encounters Jesus, is restored to health, is accused of breaking Sabbath law, and, later, is told to sin no more. To define the mystery, let's examine what is explicit in these events through the mind of Saint Augustine.

St. Augustine describes the nature of the man's crippling disability as a *physical evil*. As humans are meant to have mobility, this evil is not a sin requiring forgiveness but is an opportunity for healing and Jesus to be made known. Jesus instantly and completely heals the man's affliction of physical evil. Having destroyed this guiltless evil of privation, why did Jesus tell the healed man to "sin no more?"

St. Augustine would reply that the man was also healed of *moral evil*, which he defines as a sinful act probably committed in self-interest with the intention of good but harming others. Therefore, the man's sin was not breaking the Sabbath while walking, carrying his mat as accused by the Jewish leaders. This man was healed from and forgiven for an unknown sinful act of fallen human nature which Jesus made known to him with a caution to "sin no more."

According to St. Augustine, the mystery is solved. Jesus' miracle is a restoration of complete wellness, a healing of two evil afflictions, one guiltless and the other guilt laden. Implied is the man's God-given inheritance in his healing. Did he then make Jesus known to others?

St. Thomas Aquinas says that “God makes us to be causes (e.g., Aristotle’s Four Causes of existence)” whereby, after receiving Grace, we become agents of that Grace in thanksgiving for and in praise of His glory. Given the healing Grace of salvation that we received in Baptism, how are we to be agents of and causes for sharing that Grace?

*Doug Starr has been privileged to be St. Paul’s Director of Music since March 1993. As you can see from the above narrative, his agency of God’s Grace is not in writing but in his musical vocation. If he were not a musician, he might be an historian. His parents were pastors and, raised in a church family, he learned these Bible stories at an early age. As he studies early Church philosophers, he enjoys learning a new perspective of these stories based on our Church fathers and mothers such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Teresa of Avila.*

Thursday, March 4, 2021

## **John 5: 19-29**

*[John 5:24] Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

In the reading for today, Jesus is establishing His authority as the Son of God. He is speaking to the Jewish religious leaders and the crowd gathered at the Pool of Bethesda, where Jesus has just healed a paralyzed man. He acknowledges that His power to perform this miracle comes to Him from the Father and says that even greater “astonishing” works lie ahead, perhaps prefiguring His glorious resurrection.

He begins to speak about death in two ways—spiritual death and the literal one. He describes that “anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and . . . has passed from death to life.” These powerful words speak not only to our life to come, but also to our life now. Notice that *no one is excluded*: by believing in Him, *all* are able to receive the inheritance.

This Lent, I feel called to explore the places in me that may not have “heard and believed”: whom have I excluded, intentionally or unintentionally? Someone whose skin, whose faith, whose sexual identity, whose politics are different from mine? How can I more faithfully accept the promise of redemption and take a giant step from the world of the dead to the world of the living in Christ Jesus?

Gracious Lord, help me to open my mind and my heart. Lead me to react with indignation when I see evil; to feel grief and a call to action when I see sorrow and suffering; and to be an advocate for reconciliation when I see injustice, that I may be truly spiritually alive. Amen.

*Pat Dunkis was a member of St. Paul's in the 1980's and—together with her late husband Joe Werlinich— returned to St. Paul's in Spring, 2018. She participates in the Rector's Bible Study, Claudia Circle, and the Good Book Club, and in several small ministries. Recently, Pat co-facilitated a discussion Circle for "Sacred Ground," the social justice and reconciliation curriculum of the Episcopal Church.*

Friday March 5, 2021

## **John 5:30-47**

[ John 5:44 The Message ]"How do you expect to get anywhere with God when you spend all your time jockeying for position with each other, ranking your rivals and ignoring God?"

After a difficult year that seemed to perfectly illuminate the human condition, putting all our failings, including political division and rivalry, on full display, this line particularly affected me. Jesus's words to the political leaders of his time reveal not only that our present situation is not a novel phenomenon, but that people everywhere, for millennia, have struggled with human imperfections while ignoring the calling of God.

I can relate to the people to whom Jesus is addressing, as I find myself questioning how my actions will be perceived by my fellow men and women instead of the much more important question: "Is this what God wants?" I find Jesus's words to be a beacon, calling for a renewed dedication to finding and following what God truly asks of me rather than focusing on my earthly position.

*Jillian Stephey has been a member of St. Paul's for 3 years and has been involved with the St. John's food program partnership, racial justice discussions, and has served on the board of the St. Paul's Nursery School. Last year she was also supported by the parish in her 24 hour run with donations going to the church's Covid-19 Response Fund.*

Saturday March 6, 2021

## **John 7:1-13**

[John 7:12-13 ]Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, "He is a good man." Others replied, "No, he deceives the people." 13 But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the leaders.

This reading shows Jesus resisting an invitation by his disciples to go to a ripe mission field during a holiday yet sends them. When Jesus finally does go, he sneaks in without fanfare and, as in other

descriptions of his public ministry, he begins to attract attention though not all the desirable kind. No wonder this passage did not make it into our Lectionary.

So, are there situations where we should temper our own ministry out of concern for the reaction of the authorities or the opinions of others? Perhaps, but only to the extent the larger goal, spreading knowledge of God's love, is not abandoned. There's a right time and a right way to be the most effective for the audience at hand. I think our work is to discern what these may be, not give up in frustration or out of fear. A very wise friend counseled me that when you are doing the Lord's work, you will get all the help you need. I have found this always to be true.

And, spoiler alert, if you continue reading Jesus does go on to teach and amaze. And he credits not himself, but the one who sent him.

*Geoff Hurd and his wife Pat have attended St. Paul's for 39 years and have been active in many areas of ministry.*

Sunday March 7, 2021

## **John 2:13-22**

*[John 2:16] He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"*

The first thing I questioned in this text is why are Jesus and the disciples in the temple in the first place? A lot of the Bible is more episodic than serial in my experience. Things just sort of happen. Jesus was just at a wedding, and now he's at the temple. I like to think that Jesus and his disciples were just sitting down telling stories, and then Jesus said "I think something is amiss in the temple!"

This is the first time in John we see Jesus doing something that's not teaching. He's something like a teacher who loses it with his students in this scene. I don't think it matters whether this happened or not for us to make meaning of it. Jesus makes a connection between the Temple and himself. The people selling cows and birds represent those who use Jesus or religion incorrectly. They represent the people who use Jesus to turn a profit or justify hatred. They think, "There are a lot of people already going to the temple; why not set up shop!" Or, "a lot of people like this Jesus, why don't we make money on this?" I think it's intentional that we don't know what religion the money lenders are; anyone can try and use religion for profit, or for hatred. We need to ask ourselves if we are doing this too. We might not realize it.

*Aram Dickson-LaPrade has attended St Paul's for 8 years, and is involved with senior EYC. He was also confirmed last year.*

Monday March 8, 2021

## **John 7:14-36**

*[John 7:24] " Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."*

In this Biblical passage Jesus is teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem. This teaching is near the time of His Passion and Crucifixion, however the passage states that "His time has not yet come."

Many who heard His words "marveled" and others questioned Him. It is the response that Jesus made that was, to me, the most outstanding part of what I was reading. The response is: "Do not judge according to appearances, but judge with righteous judgement."

To me this statement is extremely challenging. Every day we all make judgements: judgements of other people and judgments of situations. Often our judgements lead to decisions, some important and some trivial, some wise and others not.

During this Lenten period of reflection, this text will challenge and motivate me to try to judge people and situations more "righteously."

The key question is: What is a "righteous judgement"? I believe Jesus gives us an answer when He speaks of not making judgements according to appearances. Appearances can mean many things, but to arrive at a truly righteous judgement, we must seek the truth. Prayer is important here, when we have an important decision to make, or find ourselves not sure of what to believe about someone or something, we can turn to Him who gave us this advice about judgement and surely we will find the help that we seek.

*Pat Sphar has attended St.Paul's for about 20 years now. She is a Stephen Ministry leader, and she has been involved with a refugee family, teaching English. Currently, she is enjoying Zoom classes.*

Tuesday March 9, 2021

## John 7:37-52

*"If he would just. . ."*

*"where was he born. . ."*

*"surely you are not also from Galilee."*

Odd responses from the people, the Pharisees, and the Temple police - don't you think?

Jesus said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Clearly they are after him before giving Jesus a chance. It doesn't matter what he wanted to say. Even something as beautiful as what he did say. "Come to me, I'll fill you up, believe me and you'll be giving living water too."

So quickly we jump to conclusions or judge others. "There are those people knocking on my door again. I don't want to hear what they have to say. Quick, hide, don't let them know we are home." "Oh no, there is that cashier from 'who knows where?' I can't understand what she is saying. Why did they hire her?"

If we believe with a believer's heart, we have to listen with a believer's heart. Maybe the best thing I hear all day will come to me through the words of a person I might have avoided.

"Come to me Jesus through the power of your Living Water, and help my heart to let it flow through me, too."

*The Reverend Catherine Munz is a Priest Associate at St. Paul's. In 2019 she retired after 25 years of ministry, 21 as a rector. She, and her wonderful husband Bill chose to resettle in Pittsburgh because of their children and grandchildren.*

Wednesday March 10, 2021

## John 8:12-20

*[John 8:15] You judge by human standards, I judge no one.*

Jesus clearly differentiates between humans and God when He refers to "human standards." Does He mean we are off the hook, or should we make more of an effort to be more God-like? The year 2020 offered no shortage of human judgment. Whether it was the "Black Lives Matter" movement, political campaigns, or the COVID-19 pandemic, it seemed that everyone had an opinion and position, and

others were in total opposition. Everyone had specific reasons for their beliefs: safety, livelihood, religion, economics, inequality. Did you recognize that when you were judging others, they were judging you at the same time? How do we refrain from judging when we have strong convictions? Is it humanly possible to do so?

Just over a year ago, Dr. Michele Borba visited St. Paul's and the South Hills to speak about the importance of raising empathetic children. The stories she shared were moving. Her focus was on young children, but I have often wondered if, even though we humans will continue to judge, our judgment can be tempered by practicing empathy. As many of us learned at a young age, you don't know what others are going through unless you walk in their shoes. Everybody has a story. Just knowing that will help us practice empathy even if we don't know their stories. We do know Jesus' story.

*Jan Toth has been a member of St. Paul's for over 30 years and currently serves as treasurer on the Vestry, deputy to the Diocesan Convention, and Trustee on the Endowment Committee. She is also a member of the Altar Guild, Usher team, and has gratefully participated in several remote programs that have been offered during the pandemic.*

Thursday March 11, 2021

## **John 8:21-32**

*[John 8:28] When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.*

"We tend to look at Jesus through resurrection-colored glasses." I heard this in a sermon long ago and it stuck with me. The point was that we tend to think of Jesus' death in terms of his resurrection, knowing that it will all come out well in the end. But this kind of thought can lessen Jesus' sacrifice in our own minds. How often do we look at a crucifix and not realize the depth of His passion?

I wonder at times what was going through the minds of Jesus' followers as He was lifted up on the cross. They certainly did not have the benefit of resurrection-colored glasses. Did they have faith in His word that He would be raised? If I placed myself in their shoes 2,000 years ago, would I?

The passage from John, and this sentence in particular, reminds us that it is Jesus being lifted up on the cross that we come to realize that he is one with the Father, our Lord, and our Savior.

May we remove our "resurrection-colored" glasses this Lenten season and focus on the great love Jesus showed for us in his suffering on the cross.

*Paul Golebie started attending St. Paul's in 2015 and was received into the Episcopal Church in 2018. He has been involved in Music Ministry, the Sound System Crew, Morning/Evening Prayer Groups, Liturgy Commission, Taize Planning, Small Group Discussions, Phone Call Outreach, and Covid Safety Greeting.*

Friday March 12, 2021

## **John 8:33-47**

*[John 8:33] We are descendants of Abraham," they answered him, "and we have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say "You will become free?"*

In this chapter in John, we see Pharisees come to believe Jesus as he is teaching in the temple. Jesus tells them they will be free by knowing the truth of who he is. The Pharisees challenge this by saying:

*"We are descendants of Abraham," they answered him, "and we have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say "You will become free?"*

We get a glimpse in this passage of how proud they were to be associated with Abraham. They were proud to be his descendants. Proud of him as an intricate part of the narrative of God and his people of Israel. But, as Jesus lays out in this passage, being Abraham's descendant could not set them free. The rigid religious guidelines they followed, could not set them free.

Jesus proclaims that the only thing that could set them free is he.

As we look to Easter, let us remember that there is no greater freedom than the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God.

Just Jesus.

What is it that we are looking to in our current cultural moment to free us?

*Ariel Wicker has served as the St. Paul's as the parish administrator for 2.5 years. She resides in the North Hills of Pittsburgh with her husband John, and daughter Elsie.*

Saturday March 13, 2021

## **John 8:47-59**

*[John 8:58] Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am."*

This verse captures the whole of what Jesus is saying to the people. He is speaking of his connection with the Father. This explanation is actually coming from Jesus to the people.

In the previous verses Jesus answered the questions the people were asking, but they were not grasping his answers. They had already decided that God is not what Jesus is saying to them. They had decided for themselves sometime else. They were not seeing as Abraham saw.

Jesus is acting through the father and obeys the father. Jesus is expressing the Word to the people. We, if we want to have the Lord feel close to us in our humanity, must be open to the Word of God, receive it, accept it, love it. This can be difficult, however,, as we 'read and digest' the words of Jesus.

In this verse, Jesus even explains the timetable of this earth in relationship with God. Time, in this verse, is a time for all people. It is an eternity. Even in the following verse, when the people throw stones at Jesus to kill him, Jesus hid himself, because it was not his earthly "time" to leave them.

Saying that he is the "I am," is a reminder that he is always with us, in the forever of forever. This is what Jesus is saying to me, and I pray that I, a sinner, am daily walking in his path.

*Elaine Mycoff has been referred to as a 'cradle Episcopalian.'" Over the years she has attended Calvary Camp, taught Sunday School, and when her husband was here on this earth, they delivered flowers from the altar for some 35 years. She has been a member of St. Pauls since 1988 and finds it to be a place of prayer that is delightful.*

Sunday March 14, 2021

## **John 3:14-21**

*[John 3:17] Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

"Jesus saves." Have you ever seen this phrase plastered up on a billboard? Maybe on a bumper sticker? For many years, this statement sounded more to me like propaganda than a religious belief. A catchy slogan full of snake-oil promises. I really and truly did not understand what people meant when they said "Jesus saves." I needed some more concrete examples.

In the meantime, I simply resisted the whole idea. My resistance to the concept of salvation took on many forms. Usually, I was skeptical. (*What's the catch? Jesus loves me just as I am? Ok. Sounds too easy.*) Often, I was deliberately obtuse. (*Saved from what? Like a fire or a shark or something?*) At my worst, I was arrogant. (*I'm a good person. I follow the rules, I'm an accomplished musician, I recycle. For crying out loud, I teach music to children for a living. If anyone is causing suffering in this world it's probably NOT me!*) Yikes. Do these thoughts resonate with you?

Well, ironically, what I most need to be saved from is thoughts like these! These thoughts don't sound like the thoughts of a loving person at all! They sound like the thoughts of a scared person. Surrendering to God's wondrous love is scary. It's scary because it requires you to detach from the ego, from the world's arbitrary definitions of success. It requires you to be humble. It requires you to be open. The work is hard, but it's worth it. How have you experienced Christ's salvation in your own life? For me, I experience salvation through God's invitation to choose love every day, in every moment, with each life-giving breath.

*Christin Cooper has been on staff at St. Paul's since September 2017. In her role as Assistant Music Director for Children, she directs the children's choirs, youth praise band, and handbells, and completes other various and sundry musical tasks. She lives in Lawrenceville with her husband, Seth.*

Monday March 15, 2021

## **John 6:1-15**

*[John 6:5] When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"*

The biblical account of the 'loaves and fishes' is one of the few stories that are found in all four of the Gospels. It is a story full of meaning and messages demonstrating Jesus' compassion for his people, his desire to feed us abundantly, and his divine power in the miracle. Besides Jesus and the 5000 thousand, Philip, Andrew, and 'a boy' are also present in John's Gospel version, and Jesus calls on them to 'solve the problem'. Philip seems to be overwhelmed and in other Gospels suggests that they send them all away to find something to eat; while Andrew at least tries to come up with a solution, but even he doubts that it will work; and the boy of course, gives all he has.

How often do we feel like Philip, overwhelmed by the problems in our lives, in our community and in our country? And in response we try to send our problems away for someone else to solve? Or like Andrew, we lack faith that God will provide, even when we try to offer a solution. The message that comes alive for me in this reading, is that Jesus wants us to be like the boy, offering whatever we can, having faith that in the hands of God it will be enough to feed thousands. We only need to say 'yes'.

*Mark Lamendola and his family have been members of St. Paul's for 12 years. He has been involved in teaching Sunday school and Confirmation, the Sunday morning men's group, St. Ignatius Journey, and Vestry. He is married to Aimee and our children are Michael, Mark, Charlie, and Kate.*

Tuesday March 16, 2021

## John 6:16-27

[John 6:26] Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

Here we encounter a group of people who set out to find Christ. Witnessing the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, some of that number set out upon the sea to find Jesus. When they do, Christ surprises them by interrogating their motivations, questioning what it is they're *really* after: are they looking for him because they recognized the feeding of the 5,000 as a sign of who he is, or because they ate their fill of bread? Are they seeking earthly food that spoils and rots, or the bread of eternal life?

The Christian life is often likened to a pilgrimage. During Lent, that road winds through the wilderness, culminating in the Christ we find on the cross. Like those who crossed the sea to find Jesus, we may be surprised to find *our* motivations and intentions for seeking Jesus out questioned. The grace of this part of the road we call Lent, however, is that it calls us to take stock and reflect. This is why many of us let something that weighs us down go or take something helpful on when we approach this section of the road. So, let's pause today and assess why are we on this road, reflect on what we seek, and reorient ourselves to where the road leads: Christ himself.

*Luke Zerra serves as Youth Minister at St. Paul's. When he's not at St. Paul's he's reading, playing guitar, or walking his pug Gus.*

Wednesday March 17, 2021

## John 6:27-40

[John 6:35] Jesus replied to them, I am the Bread of Life. The one who comes to Me will never be hungry, and the one who believes in Me will never be thirsty.

Throughout scripture, there are countless examples where Jesus is pictured as an excellent storyteller. No wonder, he can draw his audience in, often using familiar items or circumstances, only to turn things upside down, likely leaving the listeners with more questions than answers. The crowds of people in many of these biblical stories frequently seem to be left scratching their heads, undoubtedly wondering "Wait, what did he just say?". Despite what we may see initially as confusion, I believe Jesus masterfully uses stories, analogies, metaphors, and parables as clever ways to convey a deeper and more lasting meaning.

In this story, Jesus compares himself to bread, a common and familiar item viewed as a staple or an essential item. Everyone knows without bread (food) survival is not possible. As the *bread of life*, Jesus is basically saying to this group gathered; I am what you need to survive. I am what is essential, I am the *bread of life*.

This catchy and clever approach seems lost on this crowd. They continuing looking for the physical bread, and ask for more signs. He had, after all, provided bread for them only the day before, when he and his disciples miraculously fed the crowd of five thousand. When pressed for another sign, Jesus simply offers himself instead, simply stating, that he is all they truly need. Jesus is the *bread of life* and he provides all that we need too.

*Eileen Sharbaugh has been a parishioner for 30+ years and a nursery school staff member for nearly as long. Eileen and her husband Dave have four adult children who grew up at St. Paul's and now live locally, in D.C and in Atlanta. Eileen became a grandmother last May to Bennett Steven. She looks forward to when she can travel to Atlanta to visit him and cannot wait to take him to Calvary Camp's Ready-Set- Camp in July of 2026.*

Thursday March 18, 2021

## **John 6:41-51**

*[John 6:45] It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.'*

Who does Jesus mean when he says 'They will all be taught by God'? I like to think that 'they' is referring to us, the earthly followers, the children of God. When you are a child, in addition to God, you have many teachers such as your parents, your school teachers, your Sunday school teachers and others. As you grow older, you may have fewer and fewer 'teachers' in the traditional sense, but the teacher who always remains present in your life is God. Reading John 6, I considered everything God has taught me personally. As someone who read very little scripture early in life, I am learning from God with every passage read. I learn from God every day what it means to be a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a friend. Instead of writing off the year 2020, I am choosing to instead consider all that I have learned. Last year, like everyone else, I learned what it was like to work and experience human connection remotely. I also learned to be content by myself. Like many others, I was called on by God to wake up and pay attention to the racial inequality around me... to the fleetingness of human life...to the ways in which we are harming our planet. I have, indeed, been taught by God. In what ways has God taught you?

*Jess Rimel has been attending St. Paul's since 2019. She is a mom and kindergarten teacher. This year she is teaching Sunday School virtually.*

Friday March 19, 2021

## **John 6:52-59**

*[John 6:55] For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.*

Foreshadowing the Last Supper, this passage reminds me that Jesus is quite literally the “real food” and “real drink” to sustain and fulfill us. We quietly convince ourselves to chase fleeting fulfillment from building a career, to being involved in our community, raising perfect children, or becoming an adoring spouse. However, I continue to reflect, year after year, that my highest euphoria or my deepest shames revolve around my faith - at the forefront or background of my life. Jesus’s love is all that any of us need, and once that epiphany happens inside us, everything else is compared against the “real” thing. Over twenty years later, I am still chasing the pure, gratifying faith of church youth groups and reading C.S. Lewis for the first time, before life became more distracted with a job, kids, and a mortgage...

Jesus is always, ALWAYS by our side and waiting for us to feel him again. As we return to Christ, let us remind ourselves of the Eucharistic words from BCP Rite I: ... be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.

*You may know Lee Tilghman and his family from the three blonde kids tearing up the back pew(s) on a Sunday. Thank you for your patience.*

Saturday March 20, 2021

## **John 6:60-71**

*[John 6:60] When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"*

Has God ever said a hard thing to you? In the NIV translation of this passage, the phrase in verse 60 is written "this is a hard teaching;" and in the Message, "this is tough teaching; too tough to swallow." Whether it is a long-held theological doctrine, a "cultural norm" in our church or denomination that we don't understand or agree with, or even the loneliness of an unanswered prayer, we have all had to face "difficult teachings" that have challenged, or even shaken, our faith.

When faced with the difficult teaching of Jesus declaring that he is the bread of life, and that unless they eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, they have no life in them.... well, I would probably be confused too! And according to John's account, they are hearing this teaching from Jesus the day after many of them had likely witnessed one of Jesus' greatest miracles: The feeding of the

5,000. And some may have even heard that later that evening, Jesus walked on water to reach his disciples who were out in a boat at night. They came to find Jesus because they were hoping to witness another miracle, but instead they got a lesson. And we read that most of them stopped following Jesus at that point. But the disciples stayed. And when Jesus asked them, they said they would not leave him because "You have the words of eternal life." The disciples had a close relationship with Jesus by this point, they loved him, and they knew that the love he offered was eternal. Instead of looking to Jesus for miracles, they had come to know and trust Jesus by walking side by side with him. And that relationship is what kept them from leaving.

May this be a lesson for us modern-day disciples, that when faced with the inevitable hard teachings of life, we will turn towards God instead of away, finding comfort in God's eternal goodness and affection for us.

*Andrea Kamouyerou is the Director of Engagement at St. Paul's. When not working with the Newcomers or Outreach ministries at St. Paul's, she enjoys spending time with her family and new puppy, and of course watching Rev. Laura's TikTok videos.*

Sunday March 21, 2021

## **John 12:20-33**

*[John 12: 25] Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

At first, when reading this Bible passage it was confusing. And I didn't really get what the passage was trying to say. But after reading it over and over again I realized that Jesus was trying to say: Unless we fail and die, we remain one person that's not as delighted as someone who succeeded would be. But if we succeeded and die, we produce many good things, and live a good life that we would always cherish forever.

To succeed you can follow Jesus, by going to church, worshiping Him, singing songs about Him, praying to Him, and so on. You can also serve Him by helping the ones who are less fortunate than you. You can donate your clothes, money, and food to them.

*Juliana Harris is ten years old and is a fifth grader at Jefferson Elementary School. She enjoys playing with her sister, Averie, and also likes taking her dog, Sadie for walks. She is a member of the children's choir at St. Paul's Episcopal Church and also attends fifth grade Sunday School Classes.*

Monday March 22, 2021

## John 9:1-17

*[John 9:4] "I am the light of the world."*

Jesus continues to be a tremendous beacon of hope and love amidst the challenges we have faced this past year. No one escaped 2020 without being touched in some way by its events. We as individuals and as a community are left raw, wounded, and mourning. Our world feels angry, divided, judgmental, and some days just plain hard. Occasionally, we might find ourselves either feeling, dwelling, or acting on these negative sentiments. It is as if we have forgotten what Jesus told us: "I am the light of the world."

It is challenging some days to see the light of Jesus amidst all this, but if you look for it, I KNOW you will see it. Jesus walked the earth seeing people who needed help everywhere he went – stopping to help those in need even at the most inconvenient or tough times, regardless of what they looked like or believed. He noticed a man blind since birth, who most people in the town likely had long overlooked. Jesus really saw him. Jesus stopped to speak to him. Jesus healed him. The formerly blind man became a light for Jesus.

Ironically, instead of recognizing this beautiful moment of healing, the Pharisees were quick to judge Jesus for doing work on the Sabbath. Sadly, we and our community have fallen into the trap of the Pharisee in this story – judging our neighbors, being quick to anger, and seeing only the negative. What if we all STOPPED and tried to be like Jesus instead? What if we chose to seek to understand a neighbor with differing views from us, and still sought their friendship despite the difference of opinion? What if we chose to see the pain in others and compassionately love them even if they are hard to love? What if our actions were contagious to others who might be stopped in their tracks by our undeserved kindness?

In showing the compassion, love, and mercy of Jesus, we can change the tone of the community where we live. I pray we all STOP the negative whirlwind of emotions that so easily befall us and try to be the LIGHT amidst a dark time, just like Jesus, and look fervently for His light to help guide us. This light might just be caught by others around us who keep spreading it...so

*Kayse Burke, Member of St. Paul's since January 2020; wife to Parker Burke, mom to Mary Alice (7), Fred (5), St. Paul's Nursery School Student, and Nelson (3), also a St. Paul's Nursery School student. Kayse is an active member of Alexis Sheehan's Sunday School Class at 9:30 AM.*

Tuesday March 23, 2021

## John 9:18-41

[John 9:30] The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.



Chrissy drew "the blind man and his parents surprised that he could see." And she wrote, "If you trust God then you can see."

*Chrissy is a first grader who loves to read and draw. Her family – Tony, Kat, Chrissy (6), Keira (4), and Jake (2) – have been at St. Paul's for a year now. The kids have loved attending children's chapel and Sunday school and the family has enjoyed getting to know the St. Paul's community!*

Wednesday March 24, 2021

## John 10:1-18

[John 19:9] I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture ... I am the good shepherd.

Jesus explains to the Pharisees who He really is. The Pharisees see themselves as experts on the law. But Jesus rejects these legalisms and teaches with a metaphor using a familiar picture: Follow me just

as sheep follow their shepherd knowing their shepherd's voice. I, Jesus, am the good shepherd and I am also the gate, so enter through me to safe pasture.

So, where am I in this picture of a sheepfold? Jesus clearly says that He is the gate through which we enter the Kingdom. I imagine myself as one of the sheep, carefully listening for the shepherd's voice. What about the gatekeeper? The Pharisees may see themselves as heavenly gatekeepers, knowing the secret passcodes. But in God's Kingdom, there are no secrets, and here I think of the gatekeeper as helping the shepherd. So could I be a gatekeeper who helps to hold the gate open? And then, of course, there is the shepherd. Jesus clearly says that He is the good shepherd. But can I be a shepherd as well? Even if it is the good shepherd's voice that the sheep know best and will follow, is there a way for me to help?

So, where am I in this picture? I want to be there somewhere, because this is a living picture of a very personal and loving God.

*Jan Stewart has been a member of St. Paul's for three years after moving to Pittsburgh. She serves as a LEM, and she likes to be active with outreach projects, study groups, Claudia Circle, and Book Club.*

Thursday March 25, 2021

## **John 10:19-42**

*[John 10:37] If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me.*

My shepherd will supply my need, Jehovah is his name. (Hymnal 664)

We meet Jesus here, at the end of his public ministry, walking in the portico of Solomon, adjacent to the temple. A crowd of exasperated Jews gather around demanding straight talk from him. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus says that he has told them, in words and in deed, but they do not "hear" him because they "do not belong" to him. "My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me", and "The Father and I are one". They gather up stones to stone him because of the "blasphemy" of his words – and we know that as this story unfolds, they will crucify him for his blasphemy.

But here Jesus steps back and points at his works: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me" – go ahead and stone me to death. But if I do the works of my father, "even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father". In other words, even if they can't hear his words because they are not his sheep, they have witnessed his works that testify to the truth of his words. The miracles are a public declaration of his identity and love.

We are on this journey with Jesus to the cross and resurrection. We have also witnessed his works, and we have learned from these that Jesus and the Father are one, loving, compassionate, and sovereign. I love knowing I am one of his sheep – I am profoundly aware that the security of my life, on this side of the veil and beyond, rests in my shepherd. Let us listen and hear the voice of our Shepherd and follow his example in word and deed. (BAAAAAA)

*Jacqui Thomas Och is a long-time parishioner of St. Paul's whose past parish service has included teaching Confirmation, leading retreats, overseeing St. Paul's acolyte corps, serving on vestry and on Diocesan committees, and cooking, cooking, cooking, cooking. She is currently a Spiritual Direction intern associate affiliated with the West Virginia Institute of Spirituality.*

Friday March 26, 2021

## **John 12:1-10**

*[John 12:8] "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

Unfortunately, this passage is one that is as relevant now as it was in Jesus' time. The poor are part of our society now as they were of old. We as Christians are taught that our mission in life is to give to those less fortunate, that they may be relieved. This was Jesus' main message to us, "it's better to give than to receive." We are given a lot of purpose in doing this and a hope that in helping another person we may come to see that we are all children of God. We must reach out to those around us. In this way the relief to those less fortunate is an ongoing thing and a hope that one day we will all be equal in the eyes of God.

*Susan Wilcox is a cradle Episcopalian who grew up in Michigan. She first came to St. Paul's in 1972, moved to Cleveland in 1985 and came back in 1998. She has been here ever since and has been active in the choir, ECW and chair of the Altar Guild for 22 years.*

Saturday March 27, 2021

## **John 12:37-50**

*[John 12:46] I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.*

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like the light inside me is in danger of being snuffed out by all of the darkness in the world. The pandemic. People are sick and dying, and even with the light at the end of the tunnel—the vaccine—it's clear to see that we're not at the end yet. The riots at the Capitol building. How do we respond to this? How do we heal the political divisions and reestablish trust in our government leaders? And then the law enforcement response, which was so starkly in

contrast with the law enforcement response over the summer during the Black Lives Matter protests? These are just some of the things weighing on my heart today, endangering my light. The darkness is so very thick. It's so easy to feel like it's about to crash over us, like a wave.

Where is that light?

In this passage, Jesus is at the end of his ministry and is summarizing it—though he had performed many signs, the people still would not believe in him. He had come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in him should be relegated to darkness.

I think the most important thing to remember is that it only takes a tiny amount of light to make a difference when it's pitch black out. Sometimes it's easy to think "the light that I can shine won't be enough." When you think that the light you can offer isn't enough, you can try this. Sit in a room that is completely dark. Wait until your eyes adjust to that darkness. You really can't see much of anything! (Note, I hate the dark.) Then, light a candle. It's almost as if the darkness is pushed back, and the light is moving forward, replacing the darkness—even with that one, small light. The light inside of each one of us is the same—it is totally capable of pushing back the darkness, no matter how "small" we think it might be.

We receive the Light of Christ at our baptism. The Holy Spirit is put into each one of us. Jesus is that Light.

"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness." Jesus the Light IS in our world today. Still. He Was, He Is, and He Will Be. His light is in each of us. It's up to us to share it with the world.

*Kristen Morgan has been a member of St. Paul's since 2009. She is currently the Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry and enjoys nurturing the faith of the "flock" of children at St. Paul's. Kristen is married to Doug, and they have two children (Dylan and Noah) and two dogs (Chloe and Benji).*

Palm Sunday March 28, 2021

## **Mark 11:1-11**

[Mark 11:9] "...Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Jesus, the humble King, seated on a colt, enters the Holy City, while the crowds cry out, *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!* He fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9-10), and establishes that His Kingship is different from the rulers of this world.

Jesus is always looking to the Cross, and expecting his disciples to do the same. As He says before Pilate, *My Kingship is not of this world. If my Kingship were of this world, my followers would fight.... But my Kingship is not from the world.* (John 18:36)

Follow Him, in your mind's eye: this awkward man enacting a half-remembered prophecy, a country rabbi on a little mule, the crowds all agog at the sight, at what He showed them: love is stronger than hate, life than death, the least of these than the great ones of this world.

They spread their garments, palm branches on the road. *Yours, O Lord, is the Kingdom!*

The Son of God.

And soon He is dead.

Or is He?

Follow Him again, in your mind's eye, through the fury at the Capitol: the religious flags, the false crosses, the hate, the fervent misguided prayers.

He rides through them, in the midst of them, beyond them, whispering, *My Kingdom is not of this world*, hoping someone will hear.

Will you hear?

*Dorsey McConnell is the eighth Bishop of Pittsburgh. He is still trying to hear.*

Monday in Holy Week March 29, 2021

## **John 12:1-11**

*[John 12:3] Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Before Jesus entered into Jerusalem on his final days on earth, he stayed with his friends, Martha, Mary and their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus had just raised from the dead. A dinner, a banquet, was held in his honor. That night, an extreme act of love was performed by one of Jesus' followers that could not be overlooked by the large gathering because "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." The gathering was large because people from the near region had heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover, and that Lazarus was with him. Jesus had performed many signs to gain the peoples' interest; healing the sick, the lame, giving sight to the blind, but the miracle of raising someone from the dead was reserved for the Messiah.

So, this was a big deal. It was a tipping point. Many people of the church "were deserting and believing" in Jesus because of this sign. So many that the church elders and chief priests wanted Jesus destroyed along with the evidence of this miracle, Lazarus. This was no surprise to Jesus' followers because he had been foretelling his end to them. Mary knew this and had in her possession an expensive jar of perfume to be used at Jesus' burial; "she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial,"

Jesus said. Of course it was the finest perfume because it had to be worthy of her Lord. And, overwhelmed by the spirit of the moment, this last opportunity to be with Jesus, in person, and because of her deep love for him, Mary anointed Jesus that night. Her extreme act of love for Jesus was sensed by all; some saw it, some heard it, all could breathe it in. The criticism of her act was swift. Judas spoke but many were thinking the same; what a waste. They could not get past the worldly, material attachment to the perfume. Jesus answered the criticism softly and in a way that seems to return Mary's love; "leave her alone."

As believers and lovers of Christ, have you not experienced similar criticism? When you spend days preparing a meal to share with our hungry neighbors, or long hours serving our church outside in the cold, or you spend your vacation week on mission trip serving and working with neighbors in more need than yourself, or you give a ten dollar bill to someone with a cardboard sign asking for help of any kind, we're told that we are foolishly wasting our time and resources and that that ten dollars could be better spent on lottery tickets. If serving the Lord comes with many sacrifices, is it worth it? When you are moved by the spirit to act out with extreme love for Christ and the least of these, then the answer is always yes! Yes, because this is what Jesus teaches us. Yes, because this is how we share God's love with each other. Yes, because the love that we show in these acts has no material value attached to it. Its value is in its power to lead people who see it, hear it and sense it into a deeper understanding, belief and love of God.

*Paul Barker has been a member of St. Paul's since 2006. Previously, he served as the Director of Youth Ministry and is currently a Candidate for ordination to the Diaconate.*

Tuesday in Holy Week March 30, 2021

## **John 12:20-36**

*[John 12:35] Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going.*

Recently my wife Jill and I went camping and arrived at our campsite at Ohioyle State Park as evening approached. It was one of those wonderful sites that were back in the woods away from the parking area and we needed to carry our equipment back into the site. We had gotten a late start from home and when we arrived at the campsite the sun was just about to set. As we were finishing setup when our flashlight died a quick death. If we turned it off and on it would only last for a second and then nothing. We still needed to make several trips back to the car where there were additional batteries – in the dark. Yes, it was poor planning on our part, a full moon would have helped, but walking on the small single person path was near impossible. We missed the parking lot, but after wondering around for a little while walking very much off the path and through briars, we located the lot and our car.

In each of our lives there are people who provide light into our life helping us see clearly, helping us define priorities, helping us walk in a straight line towards God's will. Jesus was and is such a person, but each of us as Christians can shine as a beacon for others to see the way as we shine the light of Christ for others.

*David Boyd joined St. Paul's in November 2019 along with his wife, Jill Gordon. David served as an officer in the US Army, worked as an engineer, and has been a church organist for over 50 years.*

Wednesday in Holy Week March 31, 2021

## **John 13:21-32**

*[John 13:21] After he said one of these things, Jesus was deeply disturbed and testified, "I assure you one of you will betray me."*

The thought that popped into my head when I read this was that we may all be guilty of betraying Jesus in one way or another. One definition of **betray** is to be false or disloyal to someone. One could say that we, too, are betraying Jesus when we do not love our neighbors as ourselves. This is actually something we may do without even thinking about it. This would include things such as getting angry in traffic, being rude with unwanted solicitors on the phone, saying or thinking critical things to or about others, being selfish with our resources, being stinting with praise, passing by a homeless person asking for a donation or not doing more for others. I know that I am guilty of having done things such as these. Keeping in mind "On my own I can serve God's law only with my mind, while my human nature serves the law of sin"(Romans 7:25) I pray for forgiveness and help in doing better in the future.

*Barbara St. Clair Lenkey has been a member of St. Paul's since 1985 and has worn many different hats including vestry, church treasurer, church librarian and as Co-chair of the Adult Education Committee. At present, she attends Bible study on Zoom, is a money counter, participates in Claudia Circle and is a shelver at the South Hills Food Pantry.*

Maundy Thursday April 1, 2021

## **John 13:1-17,31b-35**

*[John 13:8] No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet".*

I can hear myself in Peter's words. "No thank you - I will wash my own feet". Actually what I'd probably say is "Let me take over doing the foot washing...".

It's much more comfortable for me to be the helper than it is for me to be the one who accepts help. I like to believe that I am independent and self-sufficient - even though I've learned over and over again

that I am not. While John's story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is often used to illustrate our need to be cleansed from sin - it speaks to me of the deep healing offered to us by God. We are invited to allow Jesus to cleanse our wounds and we are also invited to give up our illusion of self-sufficiency and receive the gift of being able to trust and rely on God.

Jesus the Christ is kneeling in front of you offering you healing. What do you say to him?

*Deacon Jean Chess began serving at St. Paul's in the Spring of 2020. She assists with the eucharistic visitation ministries of the parish.*

Good Friday April 2, 2021

## **John 18:1-19:1-42**

*[John 18:38] Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"*

How do you answer Pilate's question of "what is truth?" His question echoes throughout our Good Friday passage. Jesus is questioned by the authorities time after time, as they wonder who he is and on what authority he claims to be the Messiah. Notice that we do not read Jesus' reply to Pilate's question 8. Perhaps it is not recorded, but I suspect it is because Jesus knows there is no single phrase that will convince the skeptics of his truth.

When we look at the life of Jesus, it is not lectures that convince people of his truth but rather his love and power over death. Jesus does not transform lives through brutal force, but by invitation. He knows he cannot strongarm anyone into following him and so instead he offers us little glimpses of his love and life to help us believe. When did you know Jesus was the truth? How did you know?

*The Reverend Laura Di Panfilo is an Assistant Rector at St. Paul's Mt. Lebanon.*

Holy Saturday April 3, 2021

## **John 19:38-42**

*[John 19:39] Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.*

I have always been amazed by the individuals who came to claim the body of Jesus. His apostles were nowhere to be found, the individuals who had experienced his miracles and beneficiaries of his wonder working power were absent, and the exuberant crowds from earlier in the week were nowhere to be found either. We were "familiar" with Nicodemus but Joseph of Arimathea was unknown to us. Others

were unaware that he was a disciple of the now lynched teacher and prophet. Joseph was prepared to put all that he had acquired in peril for the sake of his Savior. Here is a man who had hidden his identity as a disciple of Jesus and was willing to risk his respectable position in society, his business interests, and his relationships with earthly power and military might to tend to the lifeless body of his Savior and prepare the body for proper burial.

My amazement with the text is that far too many of us are not prepared to do what Nicodemus or Joseph did. We are too comfortable being like those who were absent. What are you prepared to sacrifice as a sign of your discipleship? How often have you been complicit by your silence? Why are you comfortable not to speak out when you know the truth and allow for lies to be proclaimed? And what are you prepared or willing to lose to be true to your identity as a follower of Him?

On this Holy Saturday, I encourage you to reflect upon our responsibility and your identity as a follower of Jesus. Do not seek comfort when the task might be uncomfortable. Regardless of the cost, do not cower when Jesus needs you. Do what is right by fulfilling your duty and do what others are unwilling to do. Remember that tomorrow will provide the answer for why it is all worth it. AMEN.

*The Rev. Charles L Fischer III is a Priest Associate at St. Paul's.*

Easter Sunday April 4, 2021

## **John 20:1-18**

*[John 20:20] "So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the Tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'"*

In our faith many may think that Jesus isn't here just because you can't see him, or just believe that he is here because of church. But you have to try harder than that to find the bigger picture. There are many things, even things in our faith, that may seem easy to do, find, or accomplish, but aren't because they are put where we have to work harder to find, and it isn't just given to us. There are many things in our everyday lives that may seem easy to reach or accomplish if you try hard enough. There is probably an easy way out, but Mary didn't just sit there and give up on finding Jesus, she went to the disciples and asked and looked for him in hopes of finding him.

Many of us go to church in hopes of tightening our bond with Jesus. Of course we have the bible as a resource, but just reading the bible over and over isn't going to bring Jesus/God closer to us. Church, and all the ministries/activities we get involved with will help bring him closer and help us find

him. Some people may believe that since we can't see him or have no photographic proof of his being alive then he doesn't exist and stop going because they don't want to put in the work to find him. But by being involved in our church, even it just means confirmation class, Sunday school, EYC, you are working towards enriching your bond with Them and by going to church as much as you can will also help you deepen your journey in finding God/Jesus.

*Olivia Moore has been going to St. Pauls since she was 11 and is currently in 5th grade. She participates in Senior EYC and went through confirmation class.*

## St. Paul's Episcopal Church

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