



**Tucker First United Methodist Church
2023 Lenten Devotional Booklet**

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Lent 2023

“A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Eccles 4:12).

There is strength in numbers. That was especially true for travelers in the ancient Near East. Although a solitary traveler could easily fall victim to robbers along the way, a traveling companion could serve as a possible deterrent to robbers. Traveling Companions could provide help in many different situations.

As we journey through this Lenten season, we look for ways to grow in our connection with God, with our community and with one another. We are stronger together.

The image of a three-ply cord will remind us of how God gives us strength for the journey. The scriptures and devotionals in this booklet will focus on “three.” Pay attention to the use of the word **three** (often in bold type).

God bless you on this journey.

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(Sundays are not a part of the 40-day season of Lent. Each Sunday listed in this booklet will contain the scripture that will be used in the sermon that day. The sermon title will be listed. There will also be a prayer focus printed in the booklet. However, there will not be a devotional for Sundays. Being present in worship (on-line or in person) is an important aspect of our Lenten disciplines.)

February 22, 2023 – ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE – 7:00 PM

(Drive through imposition of ashes under the portico: 7:00-9:00 AM)

Mt. 6:1-6,16-21 (Give alms, pray, fast) “Where Is Your Treasure?”

The United Methodist Book of Worship contains the following prayer for Ash Wednesday:

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Penance implies intentional actions which express gratitude that we have been reconciled to God. Do you need to renew any commitments to alms giving, prayer, or fasting? The traditional Ash Wednesday prayer is printed above. As you pray that prayer, list **three** appropriate actions to express gratitude for God’s gift of reconciliation.

1. In giving alms I will _____.

2. In prayer I will _____.

3. In fasting I will _____.

Feb. 23 – Yesterday in our Ash Wednesday service, the gospel lesson (Matthew 6:1-6,16-21) mentioned **three** spiritual disciplines: giving alms, prayer, and fasting. Today, we focus on giving alms.

*In Matthew 2:11, the Magi presented Jesus with **three** gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Last month we sang the carol 'We **Three** Kings.' The **three** gifts of the magi symbolize **three** aspects of Christ's future life: gold (Christ’s reign), frankincense (worship) and myrrh (mortality). (In Mark 15:23, Jesus was offered wine and myrrh at his crucifixion.)*

Christ wants to reign in our daily activities, in our worship, and in our “living as those who are prepared to die.” When Christ reigns over those **three** aspects of life, we find a connection with God which provides us with a strength similar to a three-ply cord.

Giving alms is an expression of gratitude for the ways God has blessed us in our lives. We give in the hope that our giving enables ministries which will bless other people.

List 3 times when your life has been blessed by ministries or service of others:

1.

2.

3.

Prayer: God, accept the alms I give as an expression of gratitude for blessings I have received in life. Bless others through the gifts I offer. Amen.

Feb. 24 – In our Ash Wednesday service, the gospel lesson (Matthew 6:1-6,16-21) mentioned **three** spiritual disciplines: giving alms, prayer, and fasting. Today we focus on prayer.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed **three times** about his coming death (see Matthew 26:39-44).

(1) “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (vs. 39).

(2) “If this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” (vs. 42).

(3) “And He left them again, and went away and prayed **a third time**, saying the same thing once more.” (vs. 44).

Jesus was a person of prayer. His **three-fold** prayer in Matthew 26 provided him with strength. A three-ply cord reminds us of that strength.

Three people -Peter, James and John - were with Jesus in the garden (Mt. 26:37). A regular prayer life gives us strength in facing life’s greatest challenges, but prayer partners can provide us with an even greater strength. Prayer partners do more than pray for us. They are also people who pray with us. When people meet together and pray together, they offer each other a strength which is like the strength from a three-ply cord. We are stronger together.

Who are **three** people you would like to invite to pray with you each week of Lent?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Prayer: Lord, during this season of Lent, remind me that we are always stronger together. Amen.

Feb. 25 – “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for **three** days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” Esther 4:16

Our Ash Wednesday service focused on **three** spiritual disciplines: giving alms, prayer, and fasting. Today we focus on fasting. The scripture from Esther 4:16 reminds us that fasting can provide spiritual guidance when we face important decisions in life.

Fasting typically involves giving up something from our normal, daily routines to achieve a spiritual purpose. Fasting from food is not intended to be a way to lose weight (a physical focus), but rather fasting is a way to temporarily replace our desire for food with a greater desire for God.

Fasting can be partial or total. Partial fasting omits one particular item (bread or desserts, or a favorite drink), and can be done for an extended period of time. Total fasting, such as not eating or drinking anything (as was the case in Esther 4), is usually done for a much shorter period of time (**three** days in Esther 4).

Fasting has traditionally been applied to food and drink, but in recent years fasting has also been applied to things like social media. What are you willing to give up in your daily routine as a way of connecting with God at a deeper level?

Prayer: God, increase my desire to know you more fully in my life. Amen.

February 26 – 1st Sunday in Lent

Today's Sermon – "Connecting With God"

Mt. 4:1-11 (Jesus faced **three** temptations)

¹Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. ²After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. ³The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." ⁴Jesus replied, "It's written, **People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.**" ⁵After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, ⁶"Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" ⁷Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" ⁸Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" ¹¹The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Prayer: God, help me to recognize and withstand the temptations which I encounter in my life. Amen.

Feb. 27 – "In the Ark of the Covenant there was a gold jar containing manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant." Hebrews 9:4.

The Ark of the Covenant contained **three** sacred objects. We are more familiar with the Ten Commandments and the cup with manna, but the third object, Aaron's rod, is also significant.

In Numbers 17 the people of Israel murmured against Moses. God, speaking through Moses, instructed the head of each of the 12 tribes of Israel to bring a rod into the tabernacle. The 12 rods were left overnight. Aaron represented the tribe of Levi. Overnight, Aaron/Levi's rod sprouted and produced fresh almonds, signifying that God had chosen Aaron and the tribe of Levi to be the priestly leaders of the people. Aaron's rod was to remain in the tabernacle as a testimony to the people. The word "almond" in Hebrew means "to watch over". Aaron's rod was a testimony to how God was watching over the people. Placing it in the Ark of the Covenant was significant.

Years later, God used an almond rod to remind Jeremiah that God was still watching over the people. (See Jer. 1:11-12.) The message of the almond carries a strong encouragement. Jeremiah visualized a miraculous restoration for Israel. "And it shall come to pass, that as I have watched over them, to destroy, and to afflict... so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, says the Lord." (Jer. 31:28). We sometimes need reminders that God is watching over us.

Throughout this Lenten journey, eat **three** almonds each day as a reminder of the way that God is watching over us to build and to plant.

Prayer: The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. (Num. 7:24-26). Amen.

Feb. 28. – Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me **three** times." Matthew 26:34

Our journey through the season of Lent contains more twists than are found on a 3-ply cord. We find faith in Esther inviting people to a **three**-day fast on her behalf, as she seeks courage to challenge unjust authority. We find hope in Jesus overcoming Satan's **three** temptations in the wilderness. We find love in the magi offering Jesus their **three** gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Faith, hope, and love offer a strength like a three-ply cord. However, the strength of those three qualities is challenged by the reality that denying Jesus is an ever-present danger. Such denial can tie our minds and spirits into knots.

Lent is a season of self-reflection which can twist faith and denial into a confusing journey, alternating between trust and despair. Our journey will ultimately lead us to Easter and the joy of unconditional love and forgiveness. Before we get to resurrection we face the challenge of examining our actions and our motives. Are our words or deeds placing us in danger of denying Christ?

Ask your prayer partners to pray for any areas of your life where temptation might cause you to deny Christ.

Prayer: Our Father who art in heaven ... forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen.

March 1 – "The earth will answer the corn, the new wine, and the fresh oil." Hosea 2:22

Biblical scholars have pointed out how Hosea's prophecy repeatedly uses a **threefold** literary pattern. Hosea lists **three** things that were important to Israel's economy: grain, new wine, and oil. These three items were signs of God's blessing. (In other places, Hosea condemns **three** areas of society, mentions **three** cities, names **three** tribes of Israel, and depicts the king's deceit in **three** different metaphors. He also compares the Lord to **three** animals: a lion, a leopard, and a bear.)

People have suggested that the number **three** in the Bible is a symbolic or prophetic way of talking about completeness. Thus, if destruction is mentioned in three ways, then it implies total destruction. If a blessing is described in three ways (or is repeated three times), then it implies being completely blessed.

There are numerous objects which can remind us of God. Hosea lists three common items which were reminders of God's provisions. What **three** everyday objects can you use this Lenten season to help you remember God in your day-to-day life?

Discuss with your prayer partners some common objects which remind you of God and help you to grow in faith.

Prayer: God, you give ordinary things an extraordinary meaning. Use the common, ordinary things in my life to remind me of the wholeness which you offer to your people. Amen.

Mar. 2 – “Then Balak's anger burned against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have persisted in blessing them these **three** times!" Numbers 24:10

Balak was the King of Moab. He hired the prophet Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel. However, God intervened in Balaam's life. Each time Balaam spoke, he pronounced a blessing on Israel instead of a curse. His blessings on Israel infuriated King Balak.

In James 3:8,9 we read, “No one can tame the tongue – with it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”

Taming the tongue can be difficult. Words have power. Spoken words, as well as words printed in electronic form, impact others. One important aspect of discipleship involves using our words to have a positive impact on other people. Do our words bless others, or do our words represent a curse which causes us to see people made in the image of God as our enemies?

Our thoughts impact our words, and our words impact our actions. Worship, discipleship, and service can help us focus our thoughts on the heart of God. Worship, discipleship, and service can become a three-ply cord which gives us more power to control our tongues. Likewise, our thoughts, words, and deeds can be a three-ply cord which offers God's blessing to others.

Prayer: May my thoughts, my words, and my deeds be pleasing to you, O God, and bring honor to your name, by blessing others with the grace and peace of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Mar. 3 – “Then I looked, and I heard an eagle flying in midheaven, saying with a loud voice, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the **three** angels who are about to sound!" Revelation 8:13

In the prophetic tradition of the Bible, a woe indicates the coming judgment of God. **Three** woes indicate the severity of that judgment. However, notice that “woe, woe, woe” is not the end of the story. In Revelation 8:13, four angels have sounded their trumpets, but there are still three more angels/trumpets to follow. What will those three additional trumpets accomplish? More woes? Can a pronounced woe be changed?

Revelation 10:7 says, “In the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets.” What is this mystery of God?

Ephesians 3:5,6 says, “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

The mystery of God involves a new thing God is doing in the world. People who had previously been excluded are now embraced as fellow heirs.

In a world where so much feels so wrong, the ability to distinguish “woe” and “hope” may involve our openness to welcome those who have previously been excluded.

Prayer: Like the faint dawn of the morning, like the sweet freshness of dew, comes the dear whisper of Jesus, comforting, tender and true. Darkness gives way to the sunlight, while his voice falls on my ear; seasons of heaven's refreshing, Calling to new gladness and cheer. Amen.

Mar. 4 – “So the LORD called Samuel again for the **third** time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli discerned that the LORD was calling the boy. Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” I Samuel 3:8,9

I Samuel 3:1 tells us, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Instead of doing God’s will, people were focused on doing their own will in God’s name. People were not concerned about being connected to God, connected to their community, nor connected to each other. The world was in a mess. How did God respond?

God did a very God-like thing – choosing to act through a person who did not meet society’s expectations. Samuel was only a child when he was called by God. We would expect God to choose someone who was older, more experienced, better educated, with greater qualifications, or with power, wealth and privilege.

God chose a child. God’s choice of Samuel was a prophetic glimpse into the future when God would again choose a child (in Bethlehem). God’s choice of a child also sent a clear message that human power and privilege are no match for God’s will.

God called Samuel **three** times before Samuel understood that he should respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

If we feel disconnected and think that our lives lack purpose, then we might need to pause for a moment. Have we been chasing the unattainable myth of self-fulfillment? Is it time to try a different approach and say, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

Prayer: Lord, in a world where it is difficult to distinguish what is upside-down from what is right-side-up, speak to me once again in a fresh, new way, that I will know the meaning and purpose you desire for my life. Amen.

March 5 – 2nd Sunday in Lent

Today’s sermon – “Love Doesn’t Judge”

“There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.” Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?” Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?” “Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don’t know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don’t receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. **God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world**, but that the world might be saved through him. John 3:1-17

Prayer: God, give me a greater understanding of what it means that Jesus came, not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved. Amen.

Mar. 6 – “And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.” Isaiah 6:3

“Holy, holy, holy” – **Three** holies. Why do things come in 3’s? People say “three’s company” or conversely, “three’s a crowd” or “the third time’s the charm,” or “bad news always comes in threes.”

Scientists offer an explanation about why things “come in threes.” The scientific explanation: “They don’t.” Humans tend to look for patterns in random data in a way to extract order from disorder. In other words, we tend to find what we are looking for.

What are we looking for in life? Are we looking for God? How do we understand the words, “As the One who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct”? (I Peter 1:15).

I Peter 1:13 says, “Therefore prepare your minds for action, discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you ...” The *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* contains the following note about I Peter 1:13: “Peter is well aware that ideas have legs. Skewed thinking inevitably leads to a skewed life. Learning to think well as Christians, though, will not come easily, particularly as Christ’s church lives within a foreign, toxic environment. Peter warns that without disciplined thinking and its accompanying life, the surrounding world will quickly shape Christ’s community into a foreign mold.”

What shapes your worldview? The grace of a holy, loving, and gracious God? Or the toxic gas lighting of a dysfunctional society?

Prayer (by Howard Thurman): Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart. Here is the citadel of all my desiring, where my hopes are born and all the deep resolutions of my spirit take wings... In my heart, above all else, let love and integrity envelop me until my love is perfected and the last vestige of my desiring is no longer in conflict with thy Spirit. Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart. Amen.

Mar. 7 – “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these **three**; and the greatest of these is love.” I Cor. 13:13

Paul has a focus on faith, hope, and love – **three** qualities which offer an uplifting and inspiring goal for individuals and for communities of faith. We have difficulty attaining that goal, but the ideal helps us to develop a strategic plan for ways that we grow in our connection with God, with our community, and with each other.

We are encouraged when we see examples of people putting faith, hope, and love into action in their lives. We tend to be patient when we see momentary compromises of these ideals. However, if momentary compromise is not corrected, and it becomes an engrained habit, then we face varying aspects of grief, anger, and disillusionment.

When faith, hope, and love are combined, they provide a strength similar to a 3-ply cord. Faith involves our trust in Christ. Hope involves our assurance that God holds the future. Love is an action verb which involves things we do to show our love of God, neighbor, and self.

Paul’s emphasis on faith, hope, and love is found immediately after he wrote, “We now see in a mirror dimly.” (I Cor. 13:12). A dim mirror implies that we cannot see ourselves honestly, other people correctly, nor our world objectively. Together, the **three** qualities of faith, hope, and love provide us with vision and purpose, allowing us to live as disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Prayer:

*Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down;
fix in us they humble dwelling; all thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart. Amen.*

Mar. 8 – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:37-39

“We live in a time of perfect means, and confused ends.” – Einstein

What was true in Albert Einstein’s life may be even more true today. We have more technology and information at our disposal than any previous generation. Still, society seems to be more militantly divided than ever.

Jesus offered guidance for life’s greatest challenges, but his words have largely been neglected or twisted into misinformation.

Jesus lived with a **three-fold** passion: (1) loving God; (2) loving people; and (3) a healthy self-love. Jesus’ love was a passionate love which transforms and redeems. Jesus’ love was sometimes gentle – children were drawn to him. His love was sometimes kind and winsome, such as when he first met Peter and gave Peter a nickname. Jesus also showed a love that could be tough – turning over the tables of the money-changers in the temple.

Gentle, kind, or tough, Jesus’ love was always full of passion. Such perfect passion for God and for people helped identify Jesus as the one God appointed as the Savior of the world.

When we surrender our wills to Jesus’ passionate love for God and for others, we find meaning and purpose in life. If we compromise our love for God and others, then we may find that a perfect means will lead us to confused ends.

Prayer: Lord, fill me with a passion to love you with my whole being. Redeem my will so that I will know the appropriate time for passionate love of others to be gentle, kind, or tough. Help me to apply that same love to my own life and identity. Amen.

Mar. 9 – “He said to him **the third time**, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, you know all things; You know that I love You ” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.” John 21:17

Jesus asked Peter the question **three** times: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Each time, Peter acknowledged that he loved Jesus. Each time, Jesus then invited Peter to tend to his sheep.

Tending sheep carries various responsibilities. The shepherd guides the sheep to water and grass. Domesticated sheep are dependent upon the shepherd for protection. In John 10:11, Jesus taught that he is the Good Shepherd. He continued by stating that good shepherds are willing to lay down their life for the sheep. Good shepherds are willing to make great sacrifices.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but in John 21:17, Jesus is inviting Peter (and indirectly inviting everyone who loves Jesus) to tend to his flock. We have been given a great privilege and responsibility to tend to Jesus’ flock.

Our dual role: Sometimes we are part of the flock and are in need of a shepherd to nurture and care for us. At other times, we are the shepherd who is invited to care for others in Jesus’ flock. Each of those roles allows us to express our love for Jesus in tangible ways.

Who are some of the shepherds God has used to nurture you in your life? Celebrate their willingness to be used by God.

Who are the people for whom you are providing nurture, care, and love as an expression of your love for Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Good Shepherd, as you were willing to lay down your life for your flock, give us courage to make the necessary sacrifices for the people you have entrusted to our care. Amen.

Mar. 10 – (Continued from March 9) “He said to him **the third time**, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, you know all things; You know that I love You ” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.” John 21:17

In John 13:38 Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him **three** times. Those three denials took place in John 18:17,25,27. In John 13:37 Peter had rashly and prematurely proclaimed that he was willing to lay down his life to defend Jesus.

How do you face life when you have betrayed a close friend, not once, but **three** times? Would Peter have to carry that guilt and burden for the rest of his life?

In John 21, Jesus asks Peter **three** times if he loved him. Each time, Peter acknowledges his love for Jesus. **Three** denials. **Three** questions. **Three** professions of love. **Three** invitations to serve.

For each of Peter’s three denials, he is given an opportunity to profess his love. Jesus offers forgiveness to replace our self-imposed burdens of guilt and shame.

Have we ever professed our allegiance to Jesus, and then betrayed that profession? In our church membership vows we promise to support Jesus’ church with our prayers, presence, tithes, service, and witness. When we compromise our promise, Jesus does not want us to carry burdens of guilt; Instead, Jesus offers us forgiveness. We can be grateful that love always offers us forgiveness and fresh, new beginnings.

Prayer: God of grace and forgiveness, thank you for loving us. Show us where we need to make new beginnings in our journey of faith. Give us courage to let go of our pride and to accept the invitations you give for us to embrace new beginnings. Amen.

Mar. 11 – (Continued from March 9,10) “He said to him **the third time**, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, you know all things; You know that I love You ” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.” John 21:17

This story contains an invitation to serve (March 9) as well as an invitation to repent from betrayal (March 10). John 21 also reveals how love involves our actions and not just our feelings and emotions.

The New Testament was written in Greek. In Greek, there are different words which are all translated as “love” in English. One Greek word is “agape” which involves sacrificial love, such as Jesus’ death on the cross. Another word is “phileo” which describes the natural love in a family. (Philadelphia is “the city of brotherly love.) The distinction between “agape” and “phileo” is insightful when we apply it to John 21.

John 21:15 – “Simon ... do you “agape” me? Lord, you know that I “phileo” you.”

John 21:16 – “Simon ... do you “agape” me? Lord, you know that I “phileo” you.”

John 21:17 – “Simon ... do you “phileo” me? Peter felt hurt that he said to him the third time, ‘Do you “phileo” me?’ He said to him, ‘Lord, you know that I “phileo” you.’”

In the third question, Jesus used a different word for love. The distinction clarifies our love for Jesus. Is our love a natural love that is no different than the love in normal human relationships? Or does our love go deeper and express a supernatural love that only God can provide?

Prayer: God, help us to see the world through the eyes of your love, which offers greater creativity and meaning for our service. Amen.

March 12 – 3rd Sunday in Lent

Sermon: “What Are You Thirsting For?”

“The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the Lord commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?” But **the people were very thirsty** for water there, and they complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel’s elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd’s rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. I’ll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink.” Moses did so while Israel’s elders watched. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking, “Is the Lord really with us or not?” Exodus 17:1-7

Prayer: Lord, we are thirsty. Remind us that arguing, complaining, and fighting never quenches human thirsts. Lead us to our Rock and our salvation, Jesus Christ, the Living Water, who offers healing for dry, weary, and parched souls. Amen.

Mar. 13 – “O land, land, land, Hear the word of the LORD!” Jeremiah 22:29

We have previously learned that when the Bible repeats a word or phrase **three times**, it is intended to provide emphasis. Jeremiah is emphasizing the need for the entire land to hear God’s word.

The book of Jeremiah was written during the reigns of the last four kings of Judah. The people of Judah were about to be carried into exile to Babylonia. They would never again experience life the way it had been in former days.

Jeremiah has been described as a book about transitions: an old way of life which is passing away, but the new way has not yet emerged and is still unknown. There is typically grief and fear in such uncertain times. There is a temptation to hold on to old traditions. The concern is that old traditions, which might have been relevant for the old way which is passing away, are not necessarily relevant for God’s new way which has not yet fully emerged.

Jeremiah implored the people to listen for a fresh, new, relevant word from God. Holding on to past traditions is not the same thing as holding on to God. When we cling too tightly to the past, we may be unable to embrace our God who says, “Behold, I make all things new.” (Rev. 21:5).

The year 2023 is a time of uncertainty. The pandemic increased our awareness of old ways which are coming to an end. The new ways have not fully emerged. How do we hear the Lord’s word in 2023? Until God reveals something which is definitively more effective, a three-ply cord of public worship, intentional discipleship (empowered by the Holy Spirit), and Christian service is still a solid foundation.

Prayer: God who makes all things new, give me humility to hear your fresh, new word for my life and for our world. Amen.

Mar. 14 – “For where two or **three** gather in my name, there am I with them.” Matthew 18:20

God never intended for spiritual formation to be a private matter, lived out in isolation from other people. God calls us into community, and together, we are stronger than we could ever be alone.

Life in community always has challenges. We have different interests. We have each lived through our own unique experiences in life. God has entrusted various spiritual gifts to each of us. Family traditions and social customs are diverse.

Some people see individual uniqueness as a joyful celebration of God’s rich creativity and beauty. Others perceive diversity as a threat. Ephesians 4:3 invites us to “Make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together.” “Unity,” “the Spirit,” and “peace” can be tied together as a three-ply cord. Our faith journey is strengthened through our connections with other people.

There are many ways we can respond to God’s call to community and to unity. Here is one suggestion: Find a copy of Tucker First’s most recent pictorial directory (or use our new REALM app, or whatever method you have of storing names and contacts of family and friends). PRAYERFULLY go over the names of those individuals. Recall ways that they have enriched your journey with God. If you have not recently been in contact with those individuals, connect with them to let them know how much they have mean to you.

Philippians 1:3 says, “I thank my God in all my remembrances of you.” Who are the people in your life for whom that verse applies? Take a moment to let them know.

Prayer: God, I have a closer relationship with you because of people who have nurtured me in your love and grace. Thank you for those individuals who have been a part of my journey of faith. Amen.

Mar. 15 – “I was shipwrecked **three** times.” 2 Corinthians 11:25

II Corinthians 11:23-33 contains a long list of trials and persecutions Paul faced in his life. The **three** times he was shipwrecked were only a small part of the struggles Paul faced. After describing his trials, Paul added an encouraging word he heard from God: “My grace is sufficient for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.” (II Corinthians 12:9).

Everyone goes through challenging seasons in life. Relationships, health, finances, and circumstances can all become messy and difficult. Faith offers us hope when we encounter trials in life.

Paul did not list his struggles to call attention to himself. Paul called attention to God and wanted people to understand that God is faithful, especially when life is not easy, fun, or exciting.

Down through the ages, people have echoed Paul’s witness. When people describe the times that they have grown the most in their relationship with God, many people will describe some difficulty which they encountered in life.

Paul’s witness in scripture is like one strand of a cord. Our experiences in life are like a second strand of cord. People within our faith community who show their love for us are like a third strand. When those **three** strands combine, we find a strength to say with Paul, “God’s grace is sufficient. Power is made perfect in weakness.”

For each season in our journey through life, we are either at a place where we need the support of others, or we are at a place where others need our encouragement; Which place applies to you?

Prayer: God, when life becomes a challenge and feels greater than what I can handle, remind me that your grace is sufficient to meet my needs. Guide me to people who can encourage me. Show me when and how my life experiences can be an encouragement to others. Amen.

Mar. 16 – “Let us go a **three**-day journey into the desert so that we can offer sacrifices to the Lord our God” (Exodus 5:3).

Moses’ request for the Israelites to travel **three** days to worship God was a bold request which was certain to be met with opposition.

Moses did not possess qualities which would impress a leader like Pharaoh. Moses was not an eloquent speaker. He lacked charisma, confidence, and charm. He did not have aspirations of becoming a great leader.

The call of Moses is an example of God choosing people who do not appear to be the most likely candidate for the job. Moses’ availability was more important than his ability (although his availability was rather slow in developing).

Moses combined humility with a faithful spirit and an intimate relationship with God. Those were qualities that God could use. Those qualities enabled him to speak truth to power.

The truth which Moses spoke was God’s truth. The power which he spoke against involved social injustice that was keeping people in bondage. It was a bold act which required Godly courage.

Do we live with the courage we see in Moses? Do we pray prayers so great that the answer could come only by God’s intervention? Or, are our prayers are so small that they could be answered without God?

Where is God inviting you to be bold and courageous? How could the qualities of intimacy with God, humility, and faithfulness become like a three-ply cord in your life, so that you might speak truth to injustice?

Prayer: God, give me a greater awareness of where you want me to be bold, trusting that you will provide the ability which empowers my availability. Amen.

Mar. 17 – “Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these **three** times and have not told me where your great strength is." Judges 16:15

The story of Samson and Delilah is not a love story. It is a story about deceit and gas-lighting. Samson possessed great strength which came from God, but he was still susceptible to partial truths and mis-information.

God has given each of us spiritual gifts, unique abilities, and unique opportunities. When we use our gifts to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and when we love neighbor as self, we are better prepared to detect partial truths and misinformation.

Each day we have many opportunities to show our love for God and our love for our neighbors. The more time we devote to loving God and neighbor, the less vulnerable we become to being deceived by partial truth and misinformation.

Have you ever been in a Samson-Delilah type relationship - betrayed by someone close to you? If people influence us in a negative way, and they are not willing to change, then we need to sever those toxic relationships.

We are blessed by people who show us unconditional love. Can you recall people who have shown you this Christ-like gift? How can you express gratitude for their acts of kindness?

Prayer: God, thank you for people who have enriched my life by allowing your love to be revealed through their words, deeds, and attitudes. I want to honor those individuals by allowing your love to flow through me to others. Amen.

Mar. 18 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:19,20)

The Trinity: God in **three** persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

“In the name of ...” in verse 19 means “in the power of” or “in the possession and protection of”.

Matthew’s gospel begins with Jesus being called “Emmanuel,” that is, “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). It is appropriate that the gospel’s last word is Jesus’ promise “I am with you always to the close of the age.”

During Lent, look for things which remind you of Jesus’ promise to be with you always. Some people find the words of the Apostle’s Creed to be a good reminder of God’s promise. Use this creed daily (or more often) to remember that God is with you.

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

Prayer: Holy God, faithful and unchanging: enlarge our minds with the knowledge of your truth, and draw us more deeply into the mystery of your love, that we may truly worship you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)

March 19 – 4th Sunday in Lent Sermon: “God Sees the Heart”

“The Lord said to Samuel, “How long are you going to grieve over Saul? I have rejected him as king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and get going. I’m sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem because I have found my next king among his sons.” “How can I do that?” Samuel asked. “When Saul hears of it he’ll kill me!” “Take a heifer with you,” the Lord replied, “and say, ‘I have come to make a sacrifice to the Lord.’ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will make clear to you what you should do. You will anoint for me the person I point out to you.” Samuel did what the Lord instructed. When he came to Bethlehem, the city elders came to meet him. They were shaking with fear. “Do you come in peace?” they asked. “Yes,” Samuel answered. “I’ve come to make a sacrifice to the Lord. Now make yourselves holy, then come with me to the sacrifice.” Samuel made Jesse and his sons holy and invited them to the sacrifice as well. When they arrived, Samuel looked at Eliab and thought, that must be the Lord’s anointed right in front. But the Lord said to Samuel, “Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I haven’t selected him. God doesn’t look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but **the Lord sees into the heart.**” Next Jesse called for Abinadab, who presented himself to Samuel, but he said, “The Lord hasn’t chosen this one either.” So Jesse presented Shammah, but Samuel said, “No, the Lord hasn’t chosen this one.” Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord hasn’t picked any of these.” Then Samuel asked Jesse, “Is that all of your boys?” “There is still the youngest one,” Jesse answered, “but he’s out keeping the sheep.” “Send for him,” Samuel told Jesse, “because we can’t proceed until he gets here.” So Jesse sent and brought him in. He was reddish brown, had beautiful eyes, and was good-looking. The Lord said, “That’s the one. Go anoint him.”¹³ So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him right there in front of his brothers. The Lord’s spirit came over David from that point forward. Then Samuel left and went to Ramah.”

Prayer: God, forgive me when I make judgments based on outward appearances. Help me to see other people the way that you see them. Amen.

Mar. 20 – “Concerning this I implored the Lord **three** times that it might leave me.” 2 Corinthians 12:8.

Paul prayed **three** times for the Lord to remove his “thorn in the flesh”. (The “thorn in the flesh” is never explained.) God’s response was, “My grace is sufficient for you” (II Corinthians 12:7-9).

What is grace and how do we receive God’s grace?

In John Wesley’s sermon “*The Means of Grace*,” we read: “The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon) and receiving the Lord’s Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of him; and these we believe to be ordained of God as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”

Wholeness in life can be experienced in more than one way. Sometimes, our circumstances change; other times, our attitude about the circumstance changes. In II Corinthians 12, Paul’s circumstance did not change. However, he was able to develop a new attitude, with a reminder that God’s grace was sufficient for him.

John Wesley reminds us of **three** means of grace which have withstood the test of time and human experience: prayer, scripture, and public worship including Holy Communion. Those three means of grace can provide us with a strength similar to the strength of a 3-ply cord.

Prayer: God, grace is truly amazing. Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home. Amen.

Mar. 21 – **Third day of creation:**

*“The earth produced plant life: plants yielding seeds, each according to its kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was. There was evening and there was morning: the **third** day.” (Gen. 1:11-13).*

In Genesis 1 we see the creativity of God on full display. Each day shows an exciting revelation of the Creator’s vision of goodness for creation. Day **3** presents the miracle of plants and trees.

The month of March builds up our anticipation that the cold of winter is giving way to the warmth of spring. Trees begin to bud, flowers bloom, and birds can be heard singing. Even before winter is over, we see signs of a new season emerging.

The cycle of changing seasons repeats itself year after year, century after century. No matter what else is going on in our lives or in our world, creation is a reminder of God’s unchanging presence and faithful love.

Winter is necessary for some seeds to germinate. Spring is necessary for many plants to grow. The change from winter to spring is a reminder that change does not have to be threatening nor frightful.

What changes are taking place in your life? Do you look at those changes as exciting opportunities filled with creativity and anticipation, or are they changes which cause fear and anxiety?

Take a walk in nature. Enjoy the beauty of creation. Trust that the God who is faithful over the changing seasons is also faithful to you as change occurs in your life.

Prayer: For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth over and around us lies; Lord of all, to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise. Amen.

Mar. 22 – Then Moses had Israel leave the Red Sea and go out into the Shur desert. They traveled for **three** days in the desert and found no water. Exodus 15:22

The nation of Israel was traveling a route which was new and unknown. They were navigating situations which they had never before experienced. How do people typically respond when past experience is not adequate to meet the present reality?

They were in a desert. They had no water. They were thirsty. After **three** days of having no water they began to complain against Moses (Exodus 22:24). Unquenched thirsts can cause us to focus so much upon what we do not have, that we fail to focus on the possibilities of what God can provide.

In the Shur desert the people of Israel learned that God is faithful. God led them to springs of water where their thirsts were quenched (Exodus 15:27). Years later, God's faithfulness would again be seen in Jesus coming as the Living Water who satisfies more than physical thirst.

In 1959 Richard Blanchard wrote a song which reminds us of Jesus being the Living Water: *"Like the woman at the well I was seeking for things that could not satisfy. And then I heard my Savior speaking, 'Draw from my well that never shall run dry.' Fill my cup Lord; I lift it up Lord; Come and quench this thirsting of my soul. Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more. Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole."*

Prayer: Lord, I want the living water of Jesus Christ to satisfy the yearnings of my soul, so that I might know peace and joy in my journey through life. Amen.

Mar. 23 –

"About eight days after Jesus said these things, he took Peter, John, and James, and went up on a mountain to pray." Luke 9:28

Three individuals – Peter, John, and James - witnessed Jesus' transfiguration on Mount Hermon. These three disciples formed an inner circle of spiritual intimacy with Jesus. Luke's gospel informs us that Jesus took them up on the mountain to pray.

Luke 9:30 tells us Moses and Elijah also joined Jesus and the disciples on Mount Hermon. Moses represented the law. Elijah represented the prophets. They spoke with Jesus about what he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. Among that gathering, the voice of God spoke: "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him" (Luke 9:35).

Peter, James, and John did more than pray. They heard the voice of God. They learned about Jesus' true identity as the Son of God. They gained insight into Jesus' future glory. They witnessed resurrection appearances of Moses and Elijah. These three disciples had unique opportunities for spiritual formation through their close relationship with Jesus and with each other. Is it any wonder that all 3 of these disciples wrote books which are in the New Testament?

On February 24 we were invited to gather in groups of **three** for weekly prayer during the season of Lent. How have those prayer times deepened spiritual formation in your life?

Prayer: God, thank you for people who have allowed me to grow in my connection with you, with our community, and with each other. Fill me with a spirit of gratitude so that what I have received, I might use to encourage others in their journey of faith. Amen.

Mar. 24 –

“They marched from the Lord’s mountain for **three** days ... the people complained intensely in the Lord’s hearing.” Numbers 10:33; 11:1

Complaining can become a habit. The people of Israel mastered that trait. They were on a journey to the Promised Land. However, beginning with Number 11, and lasting throughout the remainder of the book, Israel’s compliance with the Lord’s instruction was always followed by complaining or rebellion.

Human nature has repeatedly shown that if people want to complain, then we will find something to complain about. The opposite is also true: if people want to be happy, we will usually find something we enjoy. People tend to find what they are looking for.

In our journey through life, with all of the uncertainties we face, and with disappointments which eventually come to each of us, how do we allow a spirit of joy to be our guide?

There are **three** general rules of Methodism which can be helpful in overcoming the temptation to complain or rebel.

The three rules are simple:

- (1) Do no harm.
- (2) Do good.
- (3) Stay in love with God."

Use the three rules as a part of your discipleship in following Jesus. See if they help break a habit of complaining and rebelling.

Prayer: Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart and in my life. Empower me to do no harm, to do good, and to stay in love with you. Amen.

Mar. 25 –

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the **third** day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.’” Exodus 19:10,11

Moses and the people of Israel were being led by God in the wilderness. They were leaving the bondage of Egypt, and they were on the way to the land of promise. The Ten Commandments were given to the people while they were on that journey.

God spoke through Moses and asked the people to consecrate themselves for **three** days. Consecration included ritual preparations and ceremonial cleansing.

“Consecration” is a common word in the Old Testament, but it is not used in the New Testament. (There are some similar concepts in the New Testament. See Rom. 12:1,2 and I Pet. 2:9,10.)

The hymn “I Am Thine, O Lord” contains the lines:

“Consecrate me now to Thy service Lord,
by the pow’r of grace divine;
Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope,
and my will be lost in Thine.”

As we near the end of the Lenten Season, we think about Holy Week and Easter. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are a **three-day** period of preparation (Apr. 6-8). We will offer worship services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. How can those services be a preparation for you to experience a fuller celebration of Easter and resurrection?

Prayer: God, give me a greater desire for my will to be lost in your will. In all things, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

March 26 – 5th Sunday in Lent

Sermon: “Can Dry Bones Be Resurrected?”

“The Lord’s power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord’s spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry. He asked me, “Human one, **can these bones live again?**” I said, “Lord God, only you know.” He said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord’s word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.” I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them. He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, human one! Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live.” I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. He said to me, “Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.’ So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I’m opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel’s fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I’ve spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says.”

Prayer: Holy Spirit, breathe into me the fullness of life that only you can provide. Amen.”

Mar. 27 –

“**Evening, morning** and at **noon** I utter my complaint and moan, and he will hear my voice.” Psalm 55:17

Psalms were prayers (and hymns) of the Hebrew people. Psalm 55:17 is a reminder that many Hebrew people prayed at **three** specified times during the day: evening, morning, and noon. Records indicate that in the early years of Christianity, many Christians followed a similar pattern.

The primary purpose of prayer is to be in communion (communicate) with God. Communication involves both speaking and listening. Through prayer, God sometimes changes circumstances; Other times, through prayer, God changes us (or changes our attitude about circumstances). Either way, we have the opportunity to commune with God at a deeper level.

Most of us eat **three** meals a day. Each meal can be a time of prayer. In addition to giving thanks for something as ordinary as food, we can also incorporate into our prayers a desire to see God more clearly in other ordinary events and objects of life.

Prayer: God, give me a thankful heart for the blessing of food. Help me to see the ordinary things in life as reminders of your extraordinary love and grace. Amen.

Mar. 28 –

“The Lord appeared to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre ... He looked up and saw **three** men standing near him. ... One of them said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ ... Sarah laughed.” Genesis 18:1,2,9,12

The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible contains the following note about Genesis 18:

“This visitation by God in the guise of **three** strangers is among the most obscure and intriguing tales in the Abrahamic cycle. Extending hospitality to his guests, Abraham prepares a feast. Overhearing their prediction of her giving birth to a son, Sarah falls over on the tent floor in laughter – still disbelieving the promise because, given her old age, pregnancy would be impossible. Sarah gives us permission to worship God with our laughter when ours is an uncertain future. In face of the incredulity of God’s promises as we wait and wait, she offers comic relief. Up to this point, the whole story of faith and obedience has been serious business. But here at a leisurely tent-side meal, in the company of a God we can barely recognize, we are invited to laugh. Sarah will in due time bear a son, and she will name him Isaac, which means “Laughter.”

When have you been able to experience joy in the midst of uncertainty?

Prayer: Lord, remind us that joy is a fruit of the Spirit which you offer to your people. In those moments when life appears out of control, help us to stay grounded by finding the kind of comic relief which came to Sarah. Amen.

Mar. 29 –

“When it was told Saul, he sent other messengers, and they also prophesied. So Saul sent messengers again the **third** time, and they also prophesied.” I Samuel 19:21

God rejected Saul as King over Israel, and directed the priest Samuel to anoint David as king. Saul was not happy about David becoming king, and sought to have David killed. **Three** times Saul sent messengers to find David and Samuel. Each time, the messengers were met by the Spirit of God and the messengers fell into a prophetic frenzy. Finally, King Saul went to find David and Samuel. He also was met by the Spirit of God and fell into a prophetic frenzy.

This was not the first time Saul had fallen into a prophetic frenzy. The first time was recorded in I Samuel 10:9-13, when Saul was anointed as king. The second time marked the end of Saul’s kingship, following Saul’s disobedience to God.

This story is a reminder that God, not the king, is in control. God’s purposes can be opposed but, ultimately, will not be defeated. God’s purposes will prevail. God’s Spirit is still working for the ethic of love (and grace) to replace injustice in our world.

Pray for discernment to recognize messengers and messages who are from God.

Prayer: Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on our hearts that we might actively participate in your purposes of love and truth replacing injustice in your world. Amen.

Mar. 30 –

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who **is** and who **was** and who **is to come**, the Almighty.” Revelation 1:8

God’s identity is described as having **three** characteristics: “**is**,” “**was**,” and “**is to come**.” Those three characteristics speak of the past, the present, and the future. Together, they remind us that God is eternal.

The focus on the past, present, and future also reminds us that our call is three-fold: to remember, to endure, and to anticipate.

We remember. We remember that we are created in God’s image. We remember that God called creation good. We remember that in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus. We remember Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We remember that God is love. We remember.

We endure. The battle between good and evil is still being fought, but we endure because we know that the victory has already been won. We have the testimony of scripture and the witness of generations of faithful people who have experienced God’s love, mercy, and transforming grace. We endure.

We anticipate. We anticipate God’s kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. We anticipate a home eternal in the heavens. We anticipate perfect love casting out fear. We anticipate justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

God is eternal, and as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to an eternal hope: to remember, to endure, and to anticipate.

Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Mar. 31 –

“In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, went to him and said, “This is what the Lord says: *Put your house in order*, because you are going to die; you will not recover.” Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and *prayed to the Lord*, “Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, *the word of the Lord* came to him: “Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; *I will heal you*. On the **third** day from now you will *go up to the temple* of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life.” 2 Kings 20:1-6

This is an inspiring story about God answering prayer. There is an important interaction of **three** people: King Hezekiah, the prophet Isaiah, and God. The story does not attempt to explain why some prayers for healing seem to go unanswered. The story does offer hope that with God all things are possible.

This story involves prayer, connections with people, connections with God, the word of the Lord, doing what is good in God’s eyes, the temple, and “putting our house in order.” Those items are not a “check-list” or formula that guarantees God will answer prayer. They do represent important aspects of discipleship which are good and right, whether or not God intervenes in our lives through miraculous answers to prayer. This story offers hope as we place our trust in God who is always faithful.

Prayer: The Lord who heals all your iniquity bless and keep you; the face of the Lord who heals all your afflictions shine upon you and be gracious to you; the light of the countenance of the Lord who redeems your life be lifted upon you and give you peace. Amen. (From The United Methodist Book of Worship, Prayers for healing, p. 621.)

Apr. 1 –

Jesus 3rd miracle is recorded in John 5:1–9: “After this there was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethesda. It had five covered porches, and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there. A certain man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I don’t have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I’m trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.”

Jesus’ **third miracle** may sound like an April Fool’s Joke. After 38 years of infirmity, a man was immediately healed. The phrase about the water being stirred up is somewhat ambiguous. Later manuscripts of John’s gospel add an explanation that occasionally an angel of God stirred up the water. While some people wait for the punch line of an April Fool’s joke, those who have experienced God’s healing know this is no joking matter.

Jesus’ **third miracle** is a reminder that faith is often radical and mysterious. The question, “Do you want to get well?’ is a piercing question which can shatter our false illusions about reality. Like the man at pool of Bethesda, we sometimes choose excuses rather than choosing things which offer wholeness. If we insist on understanding everything with scientific clarity, then we may miss out on the mystery of wholeness which comes through radical faith.

Prayer: God of mystery and hope, grant me faith to trust you in the face of spiritual realities which are difficult to comprehend with an analytical mind. Amen.

April 2 – Palm Sunday

Sermon: “Who Is Jesus?”

When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. He said to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that their master needs them.” He sent them off right away. Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said, say to Daughter Zion, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey’s offspring.” The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them. Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. “**Who is this?**” they asked. The crowds answered, “It’s the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” Mt. 21:1-11

Prayer: God, people today are still asking of Jesus, “Who is this?” Grant us clarity to see Jesus as the one you appointed as the answer to life’s greatest needs. Amen.

Apr. 3 –

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the **third** heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.” II Corinthians 12:2-4

Paul was caught up into the **Third Heaven**, which he also called paradise. Paul admitted that he was unsure of certain aspects of this experience (or vision), and he could not find words to adequately explain it. If Paul was uncertain about what he had experienced, then it also makes it difficult for us to understand. (It is interesting that Paul used **third** person language – as though he is writing about someone else.)

In an earlier letter to the church in Corinth, Paul had also addressed the inadequacy of words in certain situations. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge ... but do not have love, I am nothing. Now abide faith, hope, and love, these **three**, and the greatest of these is love.” I Corinthians 13:1,2,13.

Words are powerful, but words are sometimes inadequate. When we lack the words to fully explain or describe our connection with God, the best response we can make is to rely on Jesus’ new commandment: “Love one another.” Love not only covers a multitude of sins (I Peter 4:8), but it also captures the essence of paradise.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you came as the word made flesh. Give me courage to use words when they are appropriate. When words are insufficient, fill me with your Spirit of love. Amen.

Apr. 4 –

“For as Jonah was **three** days and **three** nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man will be **three** days and **three** nights in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.” Matthew 12:40,41

Jonah initially rejected God’s message. Then, he experienced a symbolic death (in the belly of a fish) for **three** days. Ultimately, God’s grace was greater than Jonah’s disobedience and his near death experience. God challenged Jonah’s self-sufficiency, arrogance, and indifference. An initial message of doom against Nineveh resulted in Jonah and the people of Nineveh connecting with God in a new way.

Jonah was a prophet who was called by God. Jonah thought he was near to God. He actually needed to turn to God and to turn away from his arrogance. The people of Nineveh appeared to be a long way from God, but they responded when they heard Jonah’s message. God’s mercy is available to those who are nearby and to those who are far away. God’s grace is truly amazing.

Matthew 12 connects God’s acts of mercy in the story of Jonah to the way God was at work in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Jesus was in the tomb **three** days and nights, but God’s gift of life is greater than death and the grave. When we turn away from self and turn to Jesus, we find life.

Prayer: God, grant us your grace, that each time we stand before the mystery of death, we may see your light of eternity. Speak to us your peace-filled message of life and of death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die; And when our days on earth are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Apr. 5 – “The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in **three** days.” They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in **three** days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.” John2:18-22

Jesus had just driven money-changers out of the temple. Some religious leaders questioned Jesus about the authority he had for such an act. They even asked Jesus for a sign to justify his actions. John placed this story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It serves as the prophetic inauguration of his ministry.

Jesus referred to the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in **three** days. The religious leaders took his words literally. However, Jesus was talking symbolically about his body, specifically his death and resurrection. Jesus was the Word of God made flesh. His body was the Temple, the place where God could be found on earth. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, his disciples remembered this encounter, which deepened their faith and enhanced their witness.

People can still get confused about symbolic meanings verses literal meanings. Confusion often leads to arguments. Arguments compromise the church’s witness. I Timothy 3:16 helps us maintain a witness which is not compromised by confusion and argument: “Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.”

Prayer: Eternal God, may my words and my deeds bear witness to the redeeming work of the resurrected Christ. Amen.

Apr. 6 – Maundy Thursday

“While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after **blessing** it he **broke** it, **gave** it to them, and said, ‘Take, this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.” Mark 14:22,23

“Maundy” comes from the Latin word 'mandatum', or 'mandate'. It refers to the mandate Jesus gave to his disciples at the Last Supper. Holy Communion is a time of remembrance, but what exactly are we remembering? **Three** important words remind us of what we are remembering: “**Blessed,**” “**Broken,**” and “**Given.**”

Those **three** words signify more than what Jesus offered in the bread and the cup. They also remind us of Jesus’ life.

Jesus was the **blessed** Son of God. When Jesus was baptized, God’s voice pronounced, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus was blessed by God.

On the cross we see Jesus’ **brokenness**. Jesus’ suffering and death was a mission he embraced, which became a pathway to new life. Our times of brokenness can also lead to experiences of the fullness of life which God offers to us.

Jesus was **given** to the world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16.

The bread was blessed, broken, and given. Jesus was also blessed, broken, and given. These **three** things we remember. We also remember that we are the blessed sons and daughters of God. We sometimes face brokenness, but in our brokenness, God can give us pathways to newness of life.

Prayer: God, help us remember Jesus: blessed, broken, and given, so that we might embrace your gift of newness of life. Amen.

Apr. 7 – Good Friday

“And he said to them the **third** time, ‘Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore, I will punish Him and release Him.’” Luke 23:22

Pilate repeatedly stated his view that Jesus was innocent. Still, the crowd demanded that Jesus be crucified, and Barabbas, who was in jail for insurrection and murder, be released. Pilate eventually gave in to their demands.

Human history is filled with examples of a few individuals using fear and prejudices to incite crowds to inflict suffering on the innocent. Even those who recognize innocence can be swayed by the influence of fear.

God offers a better way. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 1:8). God’s response to prejudices against the innocent is the cross.

Upon that cross of Jesus mine eyes at times can see
The very dying form of One who suffered there for me;
And from my smitten heart with tears, two wonders I confess,
The wonders of His glorious love and my unworthiness.

The cross invites us to make a choice each day: Will we stand with the persecuted or will we stand with the persecutors?

*Prayer: Was it for crimes that I have done, he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree! But drops of
grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe; Here, Lord, I give myself
to Thee, 'tis all that I can do. Amen.*

Apr. 8 –

“Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother [Mary], and his mother’s sister, **Mary** the wife of Clopas, and **Mary** Magdalene.” John 19:25

Three Mary’s gathered at the cross. One of them was Jesus’ mother. We are never told what she was thinking. Psychiatrists indicate that the grief a parent experiences at the death of a child is the greatest grief a person can feel. We can only imagine the sorrow in Mary’s heart.

John 19 provides a touching reminder that Jesus’ true identity included being fully human. He had a mother. He was a mother’s child. Jesus’ humanity does not diminish his identity of being divine. Rather, his humanity gives us hope that he can fully identify with the greatest heartaches we encounter in life.

How do we find hope in the midst of grief? Verse 26 tells us that a disciple was standing with Mary. Mary was also joined by other women. We are not told if they spoke to each other as they gathered at the cross. What we know is that they were willing to be present with each other, to stand together.

Who has stood with you during a moment of need? Who needs you to stand with them at this moment? A ministry of presence is sometimes the most Christ-like gift that we can offer to others.

On Holy Saturday, we stand between crucifixion and resurrection. We are invited to stand with those who hurting, lonely, rejected, or abused. “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” Matthew 18:20

*Prayer: Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand; I am
tired, I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light: Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.
Amen.*

April 9 – Easter

Sermon: “With Fear and Excitement”

“After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Don’t be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn’t here, because he’s been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead. He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ I’ve given the message to you.” **With great fear and excitement**, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there.” Matthew 28:1-10

Our focus on “**three**” during Lent would not be complete without including the story of Jesus rising from the dead after **three** days. (See I Cor. 15:4.) On the first Easter, the women felt fear mixed with excitement. Living with resurrection faith does not mean that we never feel fear. It does mean that in our fears, we have the hope to sing with excitement and confidence:

Up from the grave he arose,
with a mighty triumph o’er his foes;
He arose a victor from the dark domain,
and he lives forever, with his saints to reign.
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, fill me with the excitement of living with resurrection faith. Amen.

