

ON THE ROAD TO THE CROSS
WEEK #1 – THE ROAD IS FULL OF GOD’S PROMISES IN THE GLOOM
February 23 – March 1, 2009

MONDAY – February 23rd

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Help me to travel...in the light of your promise.

God of promise, I enter into your presence full of hope because of your promises. May we travel together with the understanding that I will walk in the light of your promises and will strive to fulfill the promises I make with you. You are my light and my salvation and I praise you for them both. In your abiding name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 9:8-17

KEY VERSES: Genesis 9:11-13:

(11) “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’
(12) God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: (13) I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth’” (NRSV).

We stand on the brink of Lent, yet technically it is not yet begun. Lent officially begins on Ash Wednesday, 40 days before Easter (not including the Sundays in between). We are caught in no man’s land between the Transfiguration of Christ which we celebrated yesterday and Ash Wednesday, the ending of Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. It is the time of Mardi Gras, Carnival, Carneval, Carnevale, Fashing, Fastnacht, Fastnet and Karneval. These are all names of celebrations held around the world prior to the Lenten season with its emphasis on abstinence and penance. Lent is considered a season for repentance and reflection, a time to share a little of Christ’s suffering for us. But it is also a time of hope, a time to remember God’s promises, especially the promise of salvation. The pre Lenten celebrations mentioned above are a raucous forum before the more sober Lenten season, a time to let loose before turning inward. They came out of the Shrove Tuesday tradition of removing fat and meat from the household since these were forbidden to be used during Lent. Since eating these items was preferable to throwing them away, elaborate feasts were held which evolved into the frenzied celebrations now held around the world. Though these celebrations can take place throughout Epiphany, the most elaborate and raucous of them take place during these last four days prior to Ash Wednesday.

So, let’s celebrate these last two days of Epiphany by remembering a couple of the promises, the covenants, of our God with us. Today’s promise comes after the great flood. The chaos of the flood has been replaced by the order of dry land and the promise of never again. Its promise is not just to humanity, but to the whole earth and all its creatures. The rainbow, with its prism of colors is a reminder of God’s promise. It is not contingent on our behavior. God’s promise comes because God chooses to make it. The same is true for the promise of salvation given through Jesus. We can never deserve it; it is not contingent on our actions. It is the hope which the rainbow gives, seen only when the air is heavy with the threat of rain and the catastrophe it can and often does bring, reminding us that there are places where the darkness will never reach. The promise of never again symbolized by the rainbow is far more than a promise that the earth will not be destroyed through a flood again. It is a promise that God will redeem all of creation. There will always be a remnant who can hear

from God and bring God's love into the world. Christ's redemption carries the same hope and promise for a broken world. During the coming Lenten season we will explore some of the ways this hope and promise are carried out by those of us who have proclaimed Jesus as the one who can bring healing to our wounded and broken world. I would invite you to bring the symbol of the rainbow into your Lenten journey. If you choose to create a worship space for the journey, I would invite you to use the symbol of the rainbow as a part of that space, letting the promise of hope it signifies permeate the Lenten season. Jesus is the hope and the fulfillment of hope inherent in the rainbow, not just for floods, but for all the circumstances of life which might seem hopeless and destructive in our lives. As we prepare to enter the reflective season Lent brings, let us cling to the hope which lies at the center of salvation itself. Yes, we shall take up our cross and follow Jesus on his journey to the cross. Yes, we may find repentance and abstinence as a part of the journey. But it is a journey full of hope, a hope given by God, just as the promise signaled by the rainbow.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. As I prepare for the journey through Lent, what promises of God come to my mind?
2. How does the promise of hope symbolized by the rainbow impact me today?
3. What other symbols of hope might I find to use in my faith journey during the upcoming season of Lent?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Create a special worship space for the Lenten journey. Include the cross, but also include some symbols of hope such as the rainbow or others you found in your reflection time. You may wish to include a cross of candles or a single purple candle. Remember, even during the shadows of Lent the light of Christ still shines.
2. Think about how you will spend your time during the season of Lent. If you wish to let go of something for the season, decide what would be of the most benefit to you. If you wish to add a new spiritual discipline or prayer form, decide what you will do. Be ready when Ash Wednesday arrives.

O Lord, as I prepare to enter the season of Lent, I remember how much you have promised to your people. I remember the hope that the coming of Christ brought into the world and how much I rely on the hope he brings into my life. I claim your promise of salvation and I thank you for the promise of hope. In your loving name, I pray. Amen.

TUESDAY – February 24th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Create in me...a clean heart.

God of my salvation, I come today looking for a fresh start. As we prepare to enter the Lenten season, I need to begin again. Work in my heart to refresh my spirit and restore the joy of your salvation. May we travel the road to the cross together in loving memory of your Son, my Savior. In your cleansing name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 51:1-17

KEY VERSES: Psalm 51:10-12:

- (10) “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
(11) Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
(12) Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit” (NRSV).**

The promise of Lent is in the overcoming of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus in our place. This is a powerful promise, and one which was fulfilled nearly two thousand years ago. We honor that sacrifice by repentance and reflection and sometimes by abstaining from something which is dear to us. Traditionally this was eating meat and/or fat. The words “Mardi Gras” mean “Fat Tuesday” in honor of the using up of fat in one’s household before Lent begins. Carnival means “without meat.” Both have turned into major festivals around the world, but had their beginnings in the preparation for the fasting of the Lenten season. Shrove Tuesday is the common English name for the day before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. The term Shrove comes from the old English verb “to shrive” which means to acknowledge one’s sins, such as in confession, and to perform acts of penitence in order to receive absolution. One of the ways that Christians shrieved themselves in preparation for the Lenten season was to rid their households of all fat and meat, items that were traditionally abstained from during Lent. In England, a custom began in which lard was disposed of by cooking dishes that would help to use it all up (rather than wastefully throwing it away). Pancakes used quite a bit of lard. So, Shrove Tuesday became synonymous with pancake suppers. In many English churches, the congregation would gather and hold pancake feasts. Such gatherings were also forbidden during Lent, and the pancake suppers were the last celebrations before the Lenten disciplines began. The English custom was brought to America by Anglican settlers so that today, almost every Episcopal Church holds pancake festivals on Shrove Tuesday. If your church holds pancake festivals today, this is where it came from.

Whether you choose to abstain from something during Lent is certainly up to you, but acknowledging our sins, either in confession to others or privately to the Lord is an important part of the Lenten season. We, like the Psalmist, may pray for God to create a clean heart within us and to place the Holy Spirit within it and to sustain a willing spirit in us. As we come to the eve of Lent it is good to ask for a refreshment of our spirits and the presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit. Many people find the season of Lent a gloomy and solemn one without joy. God’s promises let us move beyond the gloom and bring the joy of the Lord into the season without belittling the reflective nature of the season. We can face our sin and walk on the road to the cross without abandoning Christ’s Spirit who dwells within. Before we enter Lent tomorrow, let us seek to set out fresh with a clean heart filled with the Spirit. Let us be willing to enter the season with purpose, making the most of the opportunity to walk beside our Lord on the most important road he walked, the one to the cross. He was abandoned during the journey in his lifetime on earth. Let us not abandon him again because we find the season too gloomy and sad. Christ suffered the cross for the joy set before him (Hebrews 12:2). We

can surely spend time in confession and reflection for the joy of the Lord and the glory of his atonement.

So enjoy this last day before Lent. Go to your pancake dinner or masked ball or other entertainment. But, open your heart to the Lord for refreshment. Open your heart to the presence of the Lord through the Holy Spirit. Be willing to receive the cleansing the season of Lent can bring. Receive once more the promise of the Lord fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ. Prepare to walk beside him on the road to the cross.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Hebrews 12:2-3

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What is my attitude toward the season of Lent which begins tomorrow?
2. What celebration have I held prior to Lent? Why?
3. How shall I spend my last day before the Lenten season begins? Why?
4. How can I open my heart for God's cleansing and filling with the Holy Spirit?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Go to a pancake dinner, or just have pancakes today in honor of Shrove Tuesday.
2. Begin to prepare a list of those things in your life you would seek to change through repentance during the season of Lent this year.
3. Choose something from which to abstain during Lent or something spiritual to add to your life during Lent.

Dearest Savior, as I prepare to enter into the Lenten season, I ask that you would stay close to me. Show me how I may better prepare to walk on the road to the cross along side you during this special time of year. Cleanse my heart so that I am ready to receive your word and make me willing to follow you no matter where it leads. In you saving name, I pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY – February 25th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May your promise of hope...be my guiding light

Dearest Savior, as we begin the season of Lent, I ask you to fill me with your hope, even as we wrestle again with your sacrificial love, pain and suffering. Open my eyes and renew my spirit as I seek understanding. Enlighten me with your word as I explore once more the debt I owe you. Let this time be full of hope even as we delve into the depths of your darkest hours and the remembrance of the great sacrifice you made for us all. In your most holy name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 58:1-12

KEY VERSES: Isaiah 58:4b, 6-8:

(4b) “Would that today you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high! (6) This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; (7) Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. (8) Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly be healed; Your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard” (NAB).

Today we begin the season of the church year considered by many to be the gloomiest time of the year. In the orthodox churches it is accompanied by fasting and self privations aimed at giving us a taste of the suffering which our Lord endured on our behalf. This is not all bad, since it, at the very least, helps us to realize that our Lord and Savior did indeed suffer for the sins which we have committed. Lent sometimes coincides with some of the worst weather of the year helping to contribute to this gloomy feeling. In many worship services great emphasis is placed on the suffering of Christ, with the singing of slow, mournful songs and sermons based on that same suffering. Though this emphasis is not wrong, it is not the way I view the season of Lent.

Like most of you, I love the season of Advent. It is a time of great anticipation and joy as we prepare for the birth of the Christ Child. Worship services are well attended and that joy and anticipation builds toward Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. There is an air of great celebration. It is a waiting time, but is so full of activities and fun festivities that the waiting goes quickly and is rarely painful (other than the stresses of trying to fit everything into the short span of time allotted). Lent, too, is a waiting time. And, like Advent, it ends in a time of great celebration, that is, Easter. But, unlike Advent, Lent is not full of parties and joyful celebrations. It is more of a reflective time. Because of the emphasis on the suffering Christ, many choose to ignore the season of Lent, moving through it perfunctorily. The services of Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are often poorly attended as many choose to skip directly to Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Yet, Lent can be a wonderful season, a reflective and peaceful time of hope and even of joy if approached in the right way. I think that most people who avoid Lent often do so because of their desire to avoid fasting. Perhaps, if we look at fasting in a new way, the season of Lent may be seen in a new light as well.

Most of us are very familiar with the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 in which Jesus relates the judgment of who enters the kingdom of heaven with those who treat one another with compassion, feeding those who are hungry, giving water to those who thirst, shelter to the homeless and visiting the sick and imprisoned. Jesus equates doing these

things for others as the same as doing them to or for himself. This may appear to us as a unique perspective by Jesus, but it actually has its roots in our scripture passage for today. As we read the passage from Isaiah, we find that the Israelites were attempting to please God by fasting, yet doing so in a manner which was repugnant to God, quarreling and fighting amongst themselves and exploiting those who serve them. They fast to be seen by God as righteous when they are nothing of the kind. Then, in our key verses we find a new pattern for fasting, not refraining from eating or drinking, not sitting in sackcloth and ashes, but caring for one another. Just as we found in Matthew, God outlines a pleasing type of fasting, one which places the needs of others before our own. So, how is this fasting we may ask? Fasting is abstaining or refraining from doing something. Perhaps, in this kind of fasting we are abstaining from placing ourselves first in our thoughts and actions and placing the needs and desires of others before our own. That seems like a very simple and less threatening way to fast on the face of it. But the reality, if we were truly to fast in this manner, would be much more difficult than giving up meat or sweets or even all food for a short period of time. Truly placing the needs and desires of others before our own would require far greater sacrifices than giving up certain foods, etc. But the rewards are far greater as well. If you choose to give up something during Lent as a part of your preparation for Easter, far be it from me to stop you. Just be sure you do it unto the Lord and not to look good before man or God. If you would choose the kind of fast that the Lord reveals in our key scriptures, then be prepared to look for opportunities to be of service to others as we travel through this Lenten season. And you will find your heart filled with the promise of hope in the midst of the gloom.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 25:31-46

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What does the season of Lent mean to me? Do I see it differently now?
2. What does the concept of fasting mean to me? Are there other ways to view it?
3. What do I want to accomplish this Lenten season?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Begin whatever observance of Lent you have chosen, give up some enjoyed food or activity, add some new spiritual practice or spend some time each day meeting the needs of someone around you.
2. Create or continue a journal to use through the Lenten season to record some of your thoughts and desires. Record things you will want to remember.
3. Record some needs and desires of those around you which you might help with during the Lenten season.

Heavenly Father, as I begin this Lenten season, open my eyes to see the needs around me and fill my heart with a desire to work with you to meet them. Help me to bring your promise of hope in the gloom that life often brings. Kindle a flame of compassion within me that will continue to burn long after Lent is over. Help me to remember the lessons which you have taught, even as I am reminded of the sacrifices which you made on my behalf. In the name of Jesus, my Savior, I pray. Amen.

THURSDAY – February 26th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May my heart...be filled with God's promises

Eternal God, who remembers all promises, I open my heart to you this day. Fill it with the promise of hope as I face the living of this day. Show me your ways and fill me with desire to please you in all that I do throughout the day. Awaken the hope which can dispel the gloom of the season. Give understanding to my mind and renew a right spirit within my heart as I move forward into these devotionals. In the name of the Savior, whose sacrifice brings the fulfillment of God's promises, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 9:8-17

KEY VERSES: Genesis 9:13 & 16:

(13) “I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my permanent promise to you and to all the earth. (16) When I see the rainbow in the clouds, I will remember the eternal covenant between God and every living creature on earth” (NLT).

Rainbows and promises. If there is a better symbol of hope in the midst of gloom than a rainbow, I certainly don't know what it is! Rainbows tend to bring smiles to our faces even when we are feeling at our lowest. Our heads may know the scientific principles behind rainbows, but the beauty and surprise of them bring joy and we look for them anytime there is even a little sunshine in the middle of rain. Though it may seem strange to begin the season of Lent looking at the flood and its aftermath, there is a certain element of sense to look at one of the best known promises of God as we begin traveling through the season of the year which culminates in the fulfillment of the most important promise God ever made. We read this same scripture passage on Monday, but the promise is too wonderful not to revisit before plunging into the rest of our Lenten scriptures. The cover for our Lenten series echoes both the cross to which we journey and the rainbow of promise linked together by the name of our Savior, Jesus. In a year which has seen massive flooding and destruction throughout the world, the promise of the rainbow becomes even more significant. So let's explore this lovely symbol and its promise of hope.

The Great Flood. Nearly everyone knows the story. Many do not believe that it really happened at all. Others believe that it was a local event rather than world-wide. Still others look at it as symbolic of God's anger with a sinful and evil population. And they were a sinful and evil population. But could they have been any worse than that of our own generation? I sincerely doubt it. Rape, torture, murder, domestic violence, fraud, prostitution and sexual immorality of all kinds abound in staggering numbers and greed is rampant. Even in the most loving of families there are misunderstandings and contention, hurt feelings from unthinking words and strife over many issues. Within our churches, the places where we come to seek God and worship, we find issues which divide and cause us to treat each other with anger and selfishness instead of love and understanding. Surely we are just as guilty of the sin and evil which called forth the destruction of the Great Flood and deserve the wrath of Almighty God. I find it amazing that God can forgive and love enough to patiently wait us out, letting us come to belief in our own time instead of washing his hands of us altogether and starting over with a more loving creation. Yet, like Noah, we have received promises from our God. God's covenant with Noah is remembered by the rainbow. The rainbow is included in the descriptions of God's throne in Revelation as well, a part of the promises in the second coming as well as the promise in Genesis. God's covenant with us is remembered in the love, mercy and forgiveness culminating in the sacrifice of God's own Son, Jesus, our Savior and our Lord.

Instead of the destruction which we so greatly deserve, God sent Jesus to take our place and redeem us for all eternity. This season of Lent is our time of reflection on the sacrifice of our Lord and just how much hope it brings to us in the gloom that often fills our lives. And the rainbow carries God's promises to our remembrance over and over again.

In the last few years we have seen the tremendous devastation and heartbreak which is the result of massive flooding. Whole towns and even cities have been completely destroyed and the rebuilding of them will take years. Though the loss of life may have been minimized by the evacuations, many still died and hundreds of thousands became homeless overnight. Though many government agencies have worked tirelessly to help these people, the greatest hope they have had has come from volunteers who have given unstintingly of their time, energy and resources. Moving beyond themselves, these people have brought hope with food, shelter, jobs, clothing, and a personal touch to reach family and friends for these displaced people. The needs have been overwhelming, but so has the response. These loving, caring individuals make up the rainbow which lights up the world for those who thought themselves without hope. I have seen a fasting of actions which rises triumphantly to our Lord who must smile and say, "They are finally getting it!" Our scriptures today tell us of a promise which has been kept and the rainbow, a sign to remind us all. The greatest promise of all is the Savior. Jesus suffered so that we could live in harmony with God for eternity. We have many symbols that remind us of what Jesus did, the greatest of which is the cross. It is important to remember the suffering he did as well as the resurrection. The cross, like the rainbow, is a symbol of hope. I know that the next time I see a rainbow, I will remember God's promise not to destroy, but I will also remember the promise of redemption instead of destruction which was bought for me on a cross.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Revelation 4:1-3; Revelation 10:1-7

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How does a rainbow lift my heart? Do I find a sense of hope from the experience?
2. What promises of God bring me hope?
3. What actions might I take to bring hope to someone in need?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Find a service project which is helping flood victims – make clean-up kits, help rebuild a home, find a job for those displaced, hold a fund raising event to help flood victims, give financial support for an agency working with flood victims, etc.
2. Find someone you know who needs hope and help to bring it into his or her life.

God of promises, help me to cling to your promises as I move through the gloom which surrounds this Lenten season. May I find hope in the promises you have given for me and all your people. May the rainbow in the sky remind me not only of the promise not to destroy the earth by flood, but all the promises which you have given us. Help me to see the cross in a new way, as the symbol of hope given for me. Show me actions which I can perform which will serve your people in love just as your Son, Jesus, did for me. For it is in his name, I pray. Amen.

FRIDAY – February 27th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Teach me your ways...O Lord of promise.

Once more, dearest Lord, I come before you to learn more of your ways and remember my Savior. There is still so much about you that eludes me. As I move along this Lenten journey, I pray for my heart to be filled with faith so that I turn to you for all my needs. Strengthen my spirit today so that I might be more like your Son, Jesus, in whose name I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 25:1-10

KEY VERSES: Psalm 25:4-7:

(4) “Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; (5) guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. (6) Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. (7) Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O Lord” (NIV).

Lent is a time of waiting. It is a time of reflection. It is a time of remembrance. It is a time of learning. It is a time of faith. It is a time of building our trust in God. And it is a time for renewing our hope when the gloom of life would threaten to destroy us. Yesterday we looked at a symbol of hope which reminds us of the promises of God, the rainbow. Today we are in the Psalms, songs which touch the deepest emotions of our hearts. Your Psalm today reminds us that our hope is linked with God’s ways, which we have often been reminded are not the same as our ways. Just as our nature is not the same as God’s nature, we do not accomplish things in the same way or by the same means by which God does. Learning more of the nature of God, of God’s ways of working with us, helps to renew our hope and inspires more trust in our Lord. Like the Psalmist, we, too, have committed sins in our youth and have rebellious ways which require God’s love and mercy. It is the reason we need a Savior and it is the reason Jesus was sent to us. It is also the reason we celebrate this season of Lent and focus on the sacrifice made on our behalf. God is indeed good and love and mercy, the very nature of God, allowed Jesus to endure his sufferings so that we could share in God’s presence and in God’s very nature, so contrary to our own. So, how do we learn God’s ways? Our Psalmist entreats God to teach him and guide him because God is his Savior and he hopes in God all day long.

Often, when I am studying a particular Bible passage, I like to read it in several different translations. Different translators have some latitude in which English word to use for the original Hebrew or Greek word. In this passage I find the word which in the NIV translation reads *hope* has been translated as *wait* in several translations and as *trust* in at least one other translation. Waiting, hoping and trusting do not all convey the same meaning to me. Yet, it is possible that the original Hebrew word had a meaning which contained some of the elements of all of these English words. By looking at all the translations, one can get a more complete picture of what the writer was trying to say. I have said that Lent is a time of waiting, one of the words used in this passage. During Lent we wait for the completion of God’s plan of salvation, the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus the Christ. While we are waiting, we can study and learn more about our Lord and Savior. The promise of hope comes from understanding God’s nature and the reality of why Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself in our place. Trust is built on this knowledge and our own experiences of God’s love manifest in our lives. Though waiting, hoping and trusting are not exactly the same, they intertwine and work together within

us, building a foundation for faith which can continue to grow. While we are focusing on God's promises throughout this week, hope, waiting and trusting work hand in hand with the knowledge of God's nature. Since life is not always sunny and bright, and gloom often surrounds us, having hope to sustain us is a very real need. Knowledge of God's nature and understanding of the events which surround Jesus during the last days of his physical life and, more importantly, how Jesus handled those events can build that hope into a certainty which will sustain us when the gloom of our own physical life begins to wear us down. Hope can be a fragile thing, but the stronger the trust we have in God and the more we learn to wait on God for our guidance, the brighter hope will shine and that is, indeed, good news from the Lord whose love knows no limits and who always fulfills God's promises.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Isaiah 8:17; Romans 15:13; 1 Timothy 4:9-10

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. Do I find a relationship between waiting for the Lord, hoping and trusting in God?
2. How does knowledge of the nature of God build my hope?
3. How strong is my hope in the Lord? What can I do to build my hope in my relationship with the Lord?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Do something special today for someone who is in need of hope.
2. Pray a special prayer for those you know who are facing difficult trials in their lives.
3. Send a card, an email or make a phone call to someone who is hurting.

Loving Lord, who brings me hope for all my gloomy days through fulfilled promises, be with me throughout this day. Teach me how to trust you more and guide me into the truths that will change me from my sinful, human nature into a new creation molded into the image of Christ, my Savior. As I continue this Lenten journey towards Holy Week and the final triumph over death, help me to serve those around me as Jesus did throughout his lifetime. Help me bring your promise in the midst of all the gloom I encounter. In your wonderful name, I pray. Amen.

SATURDAY – February 28th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: **Reveal to me...the kingdom of God.**

Holy God, as I come before you today, I ask your guidance and understanding. Show me your kingdom and teach me how to live within it. Use this special time we have together to tune my spirit to yours so that I might become more like you today. In your lovely name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:9-15

KEY VERSE: Mark 1:15:

“He said, ‘The right time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News!’” (NCV).

The kingdom of God. Lent is all about the kingdom of God and how we get there. Right from the beginning of Christ’s ministry on earth he places great importance on God’s kingdom and teaches that the time has come for the kingdom of God and that we have access to it. Then over the course of his ministry he continues to teach lessons about that kingdom so that we might understand what it means to be a part of it. The first lesson he teaches is that to enter we must change our hearts and lives and believe in the good news. In other translations changing hearts and lives is translated as repenting. I like the version I have used above because it outlines just what repenting really is. We tend to think that repentance means to be sorry for past actions. But, that is only the beginning of what repentance really means, because if it is not followed up by a change in our lives, then it is not completed. Sorrow for actions is not the same as changing those actions. Without this kind of repentance, our belief in the good news is not complete. I recently gave a sermon on this passage of scripture using this same verse as my focus. It is interesting to me that at the time I wrote the sermon, repentance was the most important part of this scripture to me. We tend to jump straight to belief without any thought for repentance. So, my focus in the sermon was the fact that believing is not enough, repentance is also important. Though I have not changed my mind about this important part of this scripture, after all it is a very important teaching which needs to be heard, the words which jump out at me in this reading of the scripture are the kingdom of God and the statement that it is near.

We might be tempted to ask how the kingdom of God could be near 2000 years ago and yet not be present now in our lifetime. All we have to do is look at a newspaper or at the events which surround us everyday to understand that God’s kingdom does not reign here on earth! Or does it? Perhaps we are looking in the wrong place to find the kingdom of God. When Jesus stood before Pilate he said his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). A word about the kingdom of God – often we read “kingdom of God” and other times we read “kingdom of heaven” and here in John we read “my kingdom” from Jesus. Though there may be some difference which is subtle and I don’t understand, for me these terms are interchangeable. So, if the kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom, where is it and how is it near? In Luke 17:20-21 we are told that the kingdom of God is within us. That’s pretty near! In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 we are told that *“the Lord is the Spirit.”* So, if God is Spirit then it would follow that God’s kingdom would be a spiritual kingdom. We have also been given God’s Spirit to live within us, therefore the kingdom of God is also within us just as Jesus said.

Having established the basic nature of God’s kingdom and where it resides, let us look further into how we enter into that kingdom. As has already been observed, the first lesson Jesus taught about entering into the kingdom of God is changing one’s heart and life and

believing in the good news. Other lessons were taught throughout Jesus' ministry, often in the form of parables. These lessons often begin with the kingdom of God is like...or the kingdom of heaven is like...and a parable follows. Often these parables give us examples of how God rejoices when we turn away from our sinful nature and return to God (another way of telling us to change our hearts and lives?). Other lessons teach us how we should treat one another. My main thought here is that Jesus desires us to enter into the kingdom by treating one another the way God treats us; with love, mercy and forgiveness. It is easy to assume that if the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom alone, then our earthly lives do not affect our entering this spiritual kingdom. Christ's teachings about the kingdom being tied into how we treat one another remind us that we cannot enter this kingdom without regard to our earthly lives. How we live on earth is directly linked with our spiritual lives. Though we are sometimes living lovingly in the presence of God in the kingdom, we are also earthly creatures and it is God's desire that the two kingdoms, earthly and heavenly, unite. The only way that will happen is if we choose to bring God's kingdom principles into our earthly lives. So, Jesus teaches us those principles throughout his ministry and demonstrates them in his earthly life. Without Christ's sacrifice which we freely explore during this season of Lent and which culminates in the celebration of his resurrection, we would not be able to enter his kingdom. He provides the key to enter. But living there requires change. We are blessed to be able to enter and are empowered through Christ's Spirit to make those changes. Let's strive to embrace the changes which Jesus desires to make within us so that we might see the ultimate victory, the uniting of the spiritual kingdom and our earthly one. It will be a wondrous event when we can hear the words *"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever"* (Revelation 11:15b NIV). What a promise for our gloomy world!

**ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Luke 17:20-21, 13:18-21; John 18:33-39;
2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Revelation 11:15**

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What kind of understanding do I have of the kingdom of God?
2. How can I become more open to living within this kingdom?
3. Where do I need to make changes in my heart and my life?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Research the kingdom of God/heaven in the scriptures.
2. Review the lessons you have learned about the kingdom and compare your life with them.
Are there areas which need improvement?

King of kings, bring your kingdom into my heart in all its fullness. Open my eyes to see the needs around me that I have neglected. Fill me with your compassion and open my heart to the changes you would make. Use my life as a testimony of your kingdom here on earth and bring it to fullness here. In your mighty name, I pray. Amen.

1st SUNDAY IN LENT – March 1st

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Lord of Light...bless me with peace.

Lamb of God, who suffered and died for me, I come humbly into your presence once more. I praise the promise that your sacrifice brought. As we move further into this Lenten season, I ask nothing more than to bring your promise to those around me and bask in your glorious presence. Dispel all my gloom and shine through me in your great mercy. With a thankful heart and in your name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: 1 Peter 3:18-22

KEY VERSE: 1 Peter 3:18:

“Christ also suffered when he died for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners that he might bring us safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit” (NLT).

Suffering and death – gloom indeed! The one inescapable fact of Lent is the suffering and death of Jesus. Christ did suffer and die for us. There is no getting around it. Not only did Christ suffer and die, but he told us that as his followers we would also be persecuted and have suffering as well (John 15:20). Added to this prediction, we are part of the finite, physical world in which suffering is a natural part. By accepting Christ as our Savior, we have not been promised that there would be no suffering. Instead, we have been promised a counselor, the Holy Spirit, in some translations called a comforter (John 15:26-27). With this presence of God living within us, we have more than a little hope to see us through the gloom of life no matter how difficult it becomes.

Many people dwell on Christ's suffering. They want to describe it in all its hideous details. Witness the movie a few years ago, *The Passion of Christ*. Its gory detail had great shock value. If the desire was to create guilt and pain in its viewers, then it succeeded admirably. As an aid to evangelism, I question its value. The importance of Christ's Passion is not in his suffering, but in his love. Naturally, it makes me sad to remember Christ's suffering for my sake, but to dwell on it and spend all my energies on Christ's suffering instead of the reasons behind it is not edifying. The word *Passion* has been used for centuries to describe the suffering and death of our Lord. It is not a bad word for this description since it is Christ's passionate love for us which allowed him to endure the humiliation, pain and agony of the crucifixion for us. And this is where the hope comes into the suffering and pain. Jesus took the place of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament. It was his passionate love for sinners like you and me which held him on the cross. And it was his purpose to bring us *“safely home to God.”* The old sacrifices had to be done over and over again and did not have the power to change sinners. Christ's sacrifice was done once and for all time for all sinners. Beyond the sacrifice was the empowerment to change and become like Christ himself. Then the greatest hope of all came with the resurrection. We have been given the gift to live in God's presence here on earth and also in eternity.

So, of what value is it to explore the suffering of Christ? First is that passionate love which Jesus has for us. Jesus, himself, told us there is no greater love than to give one's life for friends (John 15:13). We all understand the concept of dying for something or someone though few of us really expect to be called upon to do so. Self preservation is a very strong instinct and takes real passion to overcome it. Christ also taught us that to save one's life is to lose it and to lose one's life for his sake is to find it (Matthew 16:25). Christ himself could have saved his physical life, yet it would have gained him and us nothing. It was in the giving of his

life that we have been saved. So, the first reason to look upon the suffering of Christ is to understand that he did it out of his great, passionate love for us.

A second reason might be to understand the compassion our Lord has for us. Only someone who has suffered him or herself can truly understand the suffering of others. By suffering the humiliation, pain and weight of our sins, Jesus can truly understand us and have true compassion for us. As we begin to understand this, we can also have compassion for those around us. And, perhaps, this is why we must suffer also, so that we can have compassion for others in their suffering. Sometimes it is not fun to be a Christian, but the rewards will be well worth it later.

Finally, it is important to see Christ's suffering to understand in what manner he endured it. Jesus was an example to us in everything he did and that includes his suffering and death. He faced his humanity and the fears and desires for self preservation which are so strong in the garden at Gethsemane. After giving those human desires to the Father, he accepted God's will instead of what his physical self might choose. He faced his arrest, trials and ultimate death with calm acceptance and even compassion for those around him, promising triumph for the repentant thief and asking for forgiveness for those who are killing him. By looking at all these we gain a better understanding of the nature of God, giving love, compassion and forgiveness in the face of our suffering and pain, even while in the midst of it. Thus we can bring a promise of hope in the midst of our own gloom as well as receive hope from our Lord. That's good news, indeed!

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: John 15:9-27; Matthew 16:24-28

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What do I learn about God from Christ's suffering and pain?
2. What do I learn about myself from the manner Christ endured his suffering and pain?
3. What do I see as the ultimate hope gained from studying this part of Christ's life?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Give support for someone who is suffering: visit the hospital, send a card or email, offer food for the family, baby sit while family visits the hospital or nursing home, spend extra time in prayer, etc.
2. Support a service organization which helps people who are suffering such as a hospice program or medical clinic for the poor, etc.

Lamb of God, who suffered and died for me, I seek your wisdom today. As I move through this Lenten season, I would understand better just what you suffered for me and how you endured your suffering. Fill me with the passionate love which you hold for your children and help me to show that love in everything which I do. Give me a compassionate heart to spread the promise of hope throughout my day to each one I meet. In your loving name, I pray. Amen.