

Lenten Devotionals

Based on the Daily Gospels Reading from
the Revised Common Lectionary



Part 6: April 8-13, 2019

**Knox Presbyterian Church, Listowel
Rev. Don McCallum**

Monday, April 8

Don't Shame, Acclaim!

Reading: Hebrews 10:19-25

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.”

Our culture is pretty good at shaming. We tell children not to do it to other kids, but if anyone does anything remotely wrong many jump on board to blame and shame. Think of the Maple Leaf player who was accused of using a racial slur a few weeks ago. Although found to be innocent, he was instantly pilloried as homophobic in the press and on social media. Is such shaming supposed to change minds? Make people more loving and accepting?

How can we spur one another on to love and good deeds?

First, cast a vision of a preferred future. Things are tough now but what would they look like if we banded together to make things better? What does it look like when kids get off the streets in Africa or people have better housing?

Invite them to join in. On our own we often can't make much of a difference. Being part of a team accomplishes a lot more. We build friendships, a sense of belonging and encourage one another when we might want to quit.

Inspire to pay it forward. In the little book of Philemon, Paul reminds his friend that he has been blessed by Paul's ministry for Christ. He urges Philemon to pay it forward by extending forgiveness to the slave, Onesimus, who had run away.

Highlight the good things others have done. Paul points to the generosity of the Macedonians and encourages those in Corinth to follow their lead.

And be that example. People like General Booth, Mother Theresa and especially our Lord Jesus modelled life changing service. We can do the same.

Tuesday, April 9

The Leadership we Deserve

Reading: Judges 9:7-15

*“...let fire come out of the thorn-bush
and consume the cedars of Lebanon!”*

Judges 9 is a complicated chapter. It describes the days following the time when Gideon (Jerub-Baal) was the heroic Judge of Israel. Though a nobody, God had raised him up to free his people from Midianite oppression and afterward he led Israel for many years. Gideon left his rather large progeny to watch over the nation. The people of Shechem chaffed under their less than perfect leadership and so supported Abimelek when he rose up to make himself king, slaughtering almost all of Gideon's sons to secure his hold on power.

Today's passage is a curse on the people of Shechem by Jotham, the lone survivor of Abimelek's purge. He reminded them that Gideon (the 'wild thorn bush') had risen up to lead them when all others with more prestige had been looking after their own interests. Their ingratitude was abominable and now the reign of Abimelek would be their punishment.

We often bemoan the quality of our political leaders and that of other institutions. We look back to earlier generations when people believed in public service and see our current leaders as just out for themselves. We elevate party feeling to the highest priority and decline to see any good in the other side.

Perhaps this is our punishment for treating good leaders and public servants poorly? If things are not as they should be perhaps we are getting the leadership we deserve?

God calls us to honour the good that those in leadership do while resisting wrong. Doing this fairly and consistently may improve the moral tone of our country.

Wednesday, April 10

Beyond our Ken

Reading: Psalm 20, Habakkuk 3:2-15; Luke 18:31-34

*“May we shout for joy over your victory
and lift up our banners in the name of our God.”*

The three lectionary readings for today track a progression from confident expectation to thoughtful reflection on how God’s ways of answering our prayers may be very different from what we expect.

Psalm 20 is a wonderful prayer that optimistically looks for God to bring victory to his people. It expresses the wish that God would give the King the desires of his heart and overcome Israel’s enemies. When most of us read it we find encouragement that God would answer our prayers with a solid ‘thumbs up’!

Habakkuk was a prophet who bemoaned the moral and spiritual decadence of his time. He prayed that God would act to revive the nation and overcome Israel’s historic enemies. While God assured him that this would eventually happen, in the meantime God was raising up Assyria to invade Israel. It was not the solution Habakkuk desired.

And in Luke 18 we have Jesus’ third prediction of his coming death. Once, again the disciples are unable to understand what he is saying. How could the Messiah possibly be tried, beaten and killed by the Gentiles? It was completely contrary to their expectations.

God calls us to pray with confident hope, but always to do so in submission to his will. His means of answering our prayers may be very different from what we expect. We may feel that he is denying our pleas, but God may, in fact, be accomplishing what we desire in his own time and by his own means.

Thursday, April 11

Through Suffering to Victory

Reading: Isaiah 53:10-12

*“Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,”*

Historically, soldiers and sailors fought for the ‘spoils’ of war. A military leader was only successful if he could ensure victories that would enable his men to capture money or goods that could be taken back home to purchase homes or land or business opportunities. Someone like the Duke of Wellington or Admiral Nelson enabled officers and enlisted men the chance to make fortunes and live well in peace time.

In a way, Isaiah 53 sees the Suffering Servant as this sort of champion. He willingly went through hell and back. He suffered and died but came back to triumph. And he does not return alone. He returns with a great throng of those set free from the bonds of sin and death. These are the spoils of his victorious battle. These merit his station above all the ‘great’ in heaven.

This is a somewhat different perspective than we usually have of Good Friday. We see Christ as the passive victim of spiritual evil and human cruelty. He appears to be alone, defeated and above all, weak. That appearance was why the crowds who had believed him to be the Messianic king felt they had been duped.

We look forward to Jesus returning as the conquering king at the end of the age. But in fact he was the conquering king at Calvary. This is the perspective of heaven. This may enhance our understanding and worship during Holy Week.

Friday, April 12

From Slaves to Siblings

Reading: Hebrews 2:10-18

“In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.”

In Biblical times (and later), many of the inhabitants of a conquered territory became slaves of the victor. The conqueror would return to the capital with many men, women and children in his victory parade who would become servants in the homes of his soldiers or sold in the slave markets.

The Suffering Servant, as conqueror of sin and death, brings home a host of captives, but their fate is far different. Instead of being slaves, we are adopted into the family of God. We become “sons and daughters”, members of the royal family. God the Son is “not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters”!

When we become part of the Kingdom of Heaven by faith in Christ, we do not become slavish servants. Our worship is not abject homage to a tyrant filled with his own self-importance. Rather we become junior ‘royals’. Our Lord is the selfless Suffering Servant who gave his life for us on the cross. Our God is the Father who pursued us and rescued us when we were in arrogant power of sin and death.

It is said that the protocols of our Royal Family are very strict as to how one should dress, speak and behave. The expectations of the Heavenly Royal Family are far more lofty. We are called to emulate Christ in all we do. We are to love others, including those who don’t love us. We are to act with humility. We are to give of ourselves and our substance.

We are captives of the King of kings’. Our royal status is seen as we him as suffering servants of God.

Saturday, April 13

Ominous Overtones

Reading: Luke 22:1-13

*“As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you.
Follow him to the house that he enters.”*

The Celebration of Passover was and is both a solemn and joyous family occasion. The ‘script’ of the Seder, the special foods and the manner of its eating are a symbolic reliving and retelling of God’s deliverance on the night in which the Angel of Death killed all of the firstborn in Egypt who were not ‘under the blood’ of the lamb. It is a solemn and powerful event, but also one of celebration. In the remembering of danger long past it is experienced as a party for God’s people.

But Luke tells us that the Passover celebrated by Jesus and his friends in the Upper Room had an atmosphere of real and present danger. Judas had already cut the deal to betray Jesus. To avoid him knowing the location of the meal Jesus gave Peter and John instructions that sound like something out of a spy novel. They will meet a man at the gate carrying a jar of water. They are to follow him to an undisclosed location. This is not the usual sort of party they attended with Jesus. This feast has ominous overtones.

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday. We usually experience it as a party celebration. Christ enters Jerusalem in the midst of a vast throng of supporters. The children cry, ‘Hosanna’! Palm branches greet the King of kings and the disciples anticipate Jesus’ coronation.

But it has also has ominous overtones. Jesus ‘rides on in majesty’ not to a crown but to the cross. In a few days ‘hosanna’ will turn to ‘crucify’!

How fickle was their faith. Very often, how fickle is ours?

