

Foolish Wisdom: The Way of the Cross



**Lenten Devotions
From St. Stephen's Lutheran Church**

Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012
Through Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012

Foolish Wisdom: The Way of the Cross

Welcome to St. Stephen's first Lenten devotional booklet. It has been a joy and privilege to invite and encourage others to participate in this ministry. I thank everyone who took the time to share their thoughts and a bit of themselves in their writing. The results are both thought provoking and inspiring. I especially thank Chris Gantz who graciously offered to use her skills to format the devotions into this booklet. I would have been hard pressed to do it without her.

Our theme, *Foolish Wisdom: The Way of the Cross*, seems a bit of an oxymoron. How can wisdom be foolish? Yet, we have to acknowledge that God's ways are not our ways. The Apostle Paul writes, "My [God's] grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor. 12:8-10) Yet we do not enjoy the feeling of weakness. Nor do we very much like being insulted, despised, rejected or persecuted. Foolish wisdom can be a difficult concept to ponder.

An invitation to engage in God's Word: As you undertake your daily devotions during Lent, you are invited to read the scripture passage several times, both out loud and to yourself. Then read the devotion. Take a moment in silence to ponder what you have read. Afterwards, end with the prayer. As you finish your prayers, you might want to include a word of thanks for, and blessings upon, the person who wrote the devotion. You may also wish to broaden your net of prayer to include others who may be joining you in experiencing the day's reflection.

May the eyes of your heart be opened as you contemplate God's Foolish Wisdom and the Way of the Cross.

Soli deo Gloria (to God alone the glory)
Meg Nielsen, AiM



Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, And put a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence, And take not your holy spirit from me.
Psalm 51:10-11*

A good place to start

This Psalm verse is a good starting point for Lent, an important reminder in beginning these daily reflections we share together.

Wednesday Morning Bible study was looking at “All the Spirits, spirits, and ghosts of the Bible,” and we discovered that the Holy Spirit is named only three times in the Old Testament. This verse from Psalm 51 is one of those three times.

And it seems this verse jumps into the middle of a life story. “Take not your holy spirit from me.” It calls to mind a line we heard on Sunday morning a few weeks ago: “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit!” (Acts 19:2) When this Psalm verse comes up, there has been no definition or explanation of who the Holy Spirit is or what she does, what it’s like to be without her. The Holy Spirit is just present with you.

See, too often we go looking at our own lives for evidence of God, for God’s blessing, for the presence of the Holy Spirit. We expect by looking in a mirror or spending time in self-reflection that we’ll be able to discern some proof of whether God is with us, and maybe worry whether we’ve got enough or how to get more of the Holy Spirit.

But we get it backward and the Psalm has it right. In this verse, God’s presence and Holy Spirit are a given, with you already as a gift. It doesn’t ask what a Holy Spirit is or what it feels like to have it. It simply begins with the word that God is with you. And that is a good thing.

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, be present with me, with us, this season. Instead of looking only at our strengths and weaknesses, give us faith that we may rejoice in your salvation, through Christ our Lord. Amen*

Pastor Nick Utphall did his internship in Wenatchee, WA, where a woman named Faye complained to Luther Seminary that students (and pastors!) should be more willing to talk about the Holy Spirit. Even if he doesn’t talk enough about it, Pastor Nick relies on the Spirit with every breath!

Thursday, February 23, 2012

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 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." Genesis 9: 8-11

The splendor of God's great work

A few years ago my husband and I transformed our tiny front yard into a wildflower garden. Each spring our garden becomes a sanctuary for bunnies, birds, squirrels, chipmunks and insects. To my husband's great dismay, I feel the strongest affinity and sense of responsibility towards the insects that inhabit our yard – the damsel flies, honey bees, butterflies, moths and so many more that I cannot identify them all.

A friend of ours, who happens to be a conservationist, marvels at the biodiversity that exists in our small yard, saying: "There must be hundreds of insects within just a few square feet." It really is amazing. What is even more amazing is that insects are not the least bit curious about my family and me. They are completely content enjoying the sweet nectar of the Columbine, Sunflower, Sweet William and Bee Balm.

The health of our earth, in many ways, is dependent upon these magnificently productive tiny creatures. Just as my children and I rely upon insects to pollinate trees, grasses, flowers and vegetables, insects depend upon me to ensure their safety as they go about their important work. And, larger insects, reptiles and animals depend upon an abundant supply of healthy insects for their daily nourishment.

Therefore, I feel a responsibility to create a space where these tiny creatures can go about their business free from the threats of pesticides, bug swatters and heavy boots. Each time I look at the multitude of insects in my garden, drinking the delicious juice of a freshly opened flower or covered in the fuzzy blanket of pollen, I am filled with awe at the splendor of God's great work and attention to detail.

Prayer: *Magnificent Creator, we give you thanks for the abundant beauty of our Earth and the life-affirming covenant you made with Noah, his children and the animals for whom he cared. Through your generous covenant we are forever united with creation, our futures are intertwined. Form us into faithful stewards of this covenant revering and caring for all that you have created. Amen*

Throughout the past 10 years **Christa Fisher** and her family have felt that the St. Stephen's community has significantly shaped their daily lives and spiritual health. Christa expresses her gratitude to the entire congregation for the inspiration, encouragement and support that is enabling her to pursue her vocational calling at Wartburg Theological Seminary.



Friday, February 24, 2012

I will remember the works of the Lord, And call to mind your wonders of old.

I will meditate on all your acts, And ponder your mighty deeds. Psalm 77:11-12

A chapter in a love story

As a young boy in Catholic School, I attended Mass every day with my class. On Sundays and “Holy Days of Obligation” I went to Mass with my family. Six days a week I saw displayed in the sanctuary art representing the Way of the Cross – with Jesus hideously hanging on the cross.

During Lent a Catholic ritual called the 12 Stations of the Cross was re-traced and remembered. These particular Stations stick in my mind: “Jesus was condemned to die on the cross,” “Jesus had to carry his cross,” “Jesus falls while caring the cross,” “Jesus meets his Mother along the way with his cross,” “Jesus gets help from Simon with his cross,” “Jesus gets nailed to the cross and later dies on the cross.” At that time, the Way of the Cross was, for me, anything but good news. The cross was terrifying.

Later Teri entered my life and we began going to Lutheran worship services. The first thing I noticed was an empty cross. Where is Jesus, I wondered. The answer was, “He is no longer here. Sure, he died on the cross, but he rose from the dead and will be back another day.” A transformation began for me. The Way of the Cross was no longer terrifying. The cross became a chapter in a love story, a story of the risen Savior.

When I tell my friends, neighbors, family and acquaintances that I sing and play Christian rock music every Sunday for going on six years, it seems somewhat foolish to them. My experience has had its moments of detractors and doubters. But, the Psalmist in Psalm 25:2-3 says, “I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame.” I am humbled by God’s abundant grace and steadfast love. God has taught me the way.

Prayer: “Lord teach me to understand that your grace is sufficient for me and when I am weak I am strong.” Amen

Jim O’Connor is married to Teri. They have two sons, Kevin and Mike. Jim plays guitar and sings with Steadfast, providing music and worship leadership for Emerging worship at St. Stephen’s for going on six years.

Friday, February 25, 2012

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. 1 Peter 3:18

Success in small ways

Lent is a good time for reflection. Thinking about 1 Peter, I started reflecting on all my own ups and downs. Most of us have grand ideas about how our life will go when we are young and what success in life means. I had those ideas too. However, for various reasons, I suffered many ups and downs and never achieved the success – that kind of success.

Unfortunately, I can no longer fully function professionally because of disability from diabetes, arthritis and lower extremity edema (swelling). To be sure, reflecting on this could easily lead to self-pity and despair. That is certainly not my goal. It would also not achieve anything worthwhile to make odious comparisons of the degree to which one has suffered. In any case, as a righteous man taking on our sins, it is clear that Jesus' suffering on the cross is much greater than anything we could ever endure. Rather my goal is to reflect on the lessons I have learned through the vagaries of life.

I have learned and am still learning (because I so often slip up) patience. I hope I have learned a lot from the example of the faith of Job, sitting with his sores on the dung heap, or of the lepers, outcasts because of a poorly misunderstood disease. I see just a little more clearly how Christ is with us always – often in subtle, unannounced and even miraculous ways.

And most important, I hope that I have learned that success is not really measured in those grand accomplishments, but in the small ways in which we show the love of Christ and God's amazing Grace to others. It is through those small ways that we are able to follow Christ's path and through which Christ remains alive in spirit!

Prayer: *Lord, teach us to practice the way of Christ's love in all that we do. Help us to live our lives, no matter what life's experience may bring us, so that your Amazing Grace and Everlasting Love always shines through us. Amen!*

Phil Kober has been a member of St. Stephens for nearly 11 years. He has training in law, medicine and biomedical science, but because of illness, is now totally disabled. However, Phil continues to do some writing on various subjects and has sung with the choir and as a soloist at St. Stephen's.

Sunday, February 26, 2012

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:9-11

I need practice

Why this washing from John? Jesus is, after all, THE incarnate face of God and breath of Spirit. Does He need the practice? Come and see (practice) - foolish (stupid/absurd) wisdom (understanding/knowledge)?

What do we see "practiced" here by Jesus? John's baptism was, it says in Mark 1:4, "*of repentance for forgiveness.*" In Matthew 3:15, baptism, "*(Jesus said was)... to fulfill all righteousness.*" In Mark 1:10 God calls Jesus "*my... Beloved.*" After being baptized, Jesus goes "*in the wilderness 40 days.*" (Mark 1:12) He who needed no forgiveness or righteousness received it. Beloved and pleasing before anything was anything, Jesus was torn from heaven being without temptation. That day John must have thought his practice looked a bit absurd. Neither you nor I would have been fooled, right? Thank God I wasn't there to be called upon to 'get it' that first day! I need practice.

Two thousand years and a Reformation of practice later, I can proclaim a miracle of faith for me and mine: **I am Baptized!** The mystical understanding of Jesus taking me into His baptism is for me. He does the perfect "practice" that I can't approach, no matter how I try. The wilderness temptations get me off rhythm every time.

This old band director prided himself in setting the tempo of the tune and controlling the baton of the rehearsal. But, the “show” really isn’t about our “practice” making perfect. The most beautiful, perfected intonation is God’s melody of fulfilling righteousness and forgiveness. Beginning his public ministry here, with baptism, we see all this revealed in Jesus’ practice. Why? So having seen and heard, we may believe.

Our own practice can be so simple – humble the pride and live in the Beloved’s name.

Prayer: *Dear Lord Jesus, praise and thanks to you for coming after me in your practice and signing my time card as completed every day. Amen!*

Lester Mahaffay, a retired school band director, and his wife, *Cheryl Ackley*, moved to Monona in August 2011 from Luverne, MN. Worshiping at St. Stephen’s while visiting two daughters and their husbands living here made joining easy, natural and most welcoming. A third daughter, husband and three grandchildren live in Cedar Rapids, IA. The perfect move, no practice necessary!



Monday, February 27, 2012

I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. Psalm 77:11-12

Awesome gratitude

My oldest son and I had been looking forward to this trip for some time. He would be leaving for college soon, so at the end of the summer we packed our bags, loaded up the tent and camping equipment, strapped the canoe on top of the car and headed north. Four hours down the road we were unloading our equipment and paddling to our campsite. After a great meal we watched the sun set, listened to the loons and dozed off to sleep.

Day two was spent exploring, fishing and just doing nothing – until the weather changed. Big dark clouds were moving in from the northwest. A storm was coming. Should we stay or try to beat the storm and leave early?

We decided to make a run for it. By the time we packed up and launched our canoe we were in the midst of a major storm. We had to cross the lake to get to the portage trail and then canoe across an even bigger lake to get to the car park. I was scared – would we be able to cross the lakes with the strong winds and what about the thunder and lightening all around us?

See Psalm 77:17-18 *“The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook.”*

We crossed the first lake and stopped and camped on the portage trail, and waited out the storm. The next day we finished the trip as planned, but with awesome gratitude in our hearts for God’s protection through the storm.

Prayer: *“I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.” Amen*

Terry Peterson has been a member of St. Stephens since 2010. He is a retired pastor, second career piano teacher, father of three adult children, grandfather of two granddaughters, widowed and lives in McFarland.

Tuesday, February 28, 2012

*How happy is the one whom God reproves;
therefore do not despise the discipline of the
Almighty.*

*For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes,
but his hands heal.” Job 5:17-18*

Open mind, open heart

How many times have I said, “Been there, done that. Got the T shirt!” Or, “Let’s not go there!” Sometimes the former makes me feel happy, that after six times I don’t have to go there again – and, I am full of compassion and understanding for my fellow who may be learning and growing in a similar situation. As for as the latter, I am grateful, more and more, for the small reproving voice that cautions me to step lightly or not at all.

Where do these prompts come from? I experience them in the parts of my life where I have been able to listen and surrender to God’s correction (and perfection). A saying I once heard stays with me: “The will of God will not lead me lead where the Grace of God cannot keep me.”

I embrace the concept that though I may make mistakes and tongues may wag, my understanding can be struck by a healing thought in each situation as long as I keep my mind and heart open to the care and guidance of a Loving God who is capable beyond measure.

Prayer: *Lord, help us all to continue to trust beyond our own understanding and to be ever mindful of the incredible beauty of all creation. Oh ...and, thank you, Jesus, for agreeing to walk the hard path chosen for us! Amen*

Karen Baier became a member of St. Stephen’s four years ago and has sung in the choir ever since. She participates in Ruth Circle (sacristan), Gosbells, the Knit/Crochet Ministry and Women’s Spiritual Formation. Karen also serves as an Assisting Minister.

Wednesday, February 29, 2012

Who has ascended to heaven and come down?

Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand?

Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is the person's name?

And what is the name of the person's child?

Surely you know! Proverbs 30:4

God's wonderful works

As a grandmother and a mother, I can attest to the helplessness and dependency of babies – babies of all sizes and shapes. Puppies, lambs, kittens, humans and any newborn creatures depend on others to meet all their needs. I never cease to be amazed at the incarnation, that God chose to send His Son to be born in a stable under conditions that were less than desirable. It's the story of a vulnerable little baby who became Jesus, Our Savior, Our Lord and God. His life was a paradox. His was a life of humility, love, vulnerability and compassion. He was an itinerant preacher with dust on his sandals, following God's foolish wisdom.

Proverbs 30:4 is considered in some circles as a riddle and speaks of the other side of the paradox that is our Lord. It asks questions which no one could ever answer, with the exception of Jesus. It speaks of the greatness of God. Man is nothing in comparison to God and our human understanding of Him is so small as to be insignificant. Only God can do these awesome works and the wonder of it is that God loves us and wants to have a relationship with us. Just the thought of it should boggle your mind! Almighty God, the Creator of the earth wanting to have a relationship with you! It will forever change your life. Why not try it?

Prayer: *Gracious God, we thank you for your faithful love and care. Help us surrender to your wisdom and guide us as we journey through the days of Lent. In your name we pray. Amen*

Barb Kepler works with Bethel's Homeless Ministry Program and is a long time member of St. Stephen's.

Thursday, March 1, 2012

“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.” Genesis 17:4-5

Called, named and chosen

Abram was OLD when he had this conversation with God! He was ninety-nine – as old as a shriveled up prune, a dried husk, an empty shell. Until, that is, God made a covenant with him, put a twinkle in his eye and called him by a new name. How could this ancient desert wanderer, his wife nearing ninety, become the father of a multitude of nations? Only God knows.

Abram had already followed God’s call to leave home and family. His relationship with God was on firm footing. Yet, even he must have felt like laughing at God’s promise to give him and Sarai a child. But, his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. New names for a new journey.

We, too, receive names. We are called, named and chosen by God in and through the act of baptism. I was baptized Margaret Francine. Throughout my childhood and high school years, I was called Margaret – a cumbersome long name, I always thought. Only one friend, who’d also read *Little Women*, ever called me Meg.

Then I went to Luther College. During my first hour in Brandt Hall, my animated roommate with the blond pixie cut quipped, “Margaret, do they ever call you anything else, like Peggy or Meg?” I answered that one of my friends had called me Meg, as in *Little Women*. I don’t believe she’d ever read the book, but she liked the name, and I have been Meg ever since.

A new place. A new name. A new calling to follow. A new future to invent. Each day we are made new as we remember our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. What has gone is washed away – forgiven and forgotten. What adventures lie ahead! We have been baptized – called, named, chosen – set free to love and serve as God’s people in the world.

Prayer: *God of water and spirit, set us free each day to start fresh. Free us to love and serve however you may call us. Even, or perhaps especially, if it makes us laugh. Amen*

Meg Nielsen and her husband, Glenn, met while playing in the World Famous Luther College Concert Band under the direction of Prof. Weston Noble. They have three grown children, all of whom attended Luther College, and two grandsons.



Friday, March 2, 2012

*For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,^{*}
but heard when I^{*} cried to him. Psalm 22:24*

God listens for us

It's hard to find "Foolish Wisdom" in a Psalm that goes on to shout praises and adoration to the Lord. How foolish can it be to show God's grace and love to those of us who are hurting, depressed, ill or disabled? Haven't most of us, at one time or another, cried out, "why me," as we prayed for Jesus to help us out of our sorrows and pain?

I can't help but think of the day that Jesus revealed himself to me. Filled with pain and confusion, shame and doubt, I cried to the Lord to help me through this dark passage in my life. He did not despise my shame nor abhor the doubt and pain within me. He led me through the confusion and the sweep of emotions I was feeling.

Now,

"I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;^{*}
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." (Psalm 22:22)

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, through your love may we not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted. May we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, tend to those so afflicted and listen with compassion to those who find it difficult to carry on because of depression or a sense of guilt. We know in our hearts that You listen for us and we listen for You. "He did not hide his face from me,^{*} but heard when I^{*} cried to him." (Psalm 22:24) In Your name we pray. Amen*

Fred Hoff is the father of three, Hannah, David and Amanda. He grew up in Monona and now lives in Stoughton. He is employed at American Family Mutual Insurance as a Computer Testing Engineer. Fred is involved in worship leadership for Emerging Worship, plays electric guitar and sings with our Christian rock band, Steadfast.

Saturday, March 3, 2012

Hoping against hope, Abraham believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” . . . Therefore, his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Romans 4:18 & 22

Tracing God's promises

Who doesn't marvel at Abraham's faith? Abraham holds fast to the promise, “I have made you the father of all nations.” Although he has become an old man and Sarah's womb is barren, nothing deters him from giving glory to God and knowing that God always keeps God's promise. Certainly Abraham was ridiculed for clinging to the belief that he would someday have a son. But, he didn't care. His faith was his greatest asset, and rightfully, it was “reckoned to him as righteousness.”

What is God's promise to us? Aside from the great biblical promises such as forgiveness of sins or life everlasting – just to name a few – I believe God has slightly different promises for each of us for our lives. Just as Abraham listened to God's promise that he would be “father of many nations,” so we need to listen to God and learn what promise he wants to give us. It's up to us to stand by God's Word and focus on living up to God's promise just as Abraham did.

When I was a confirmation student in Germany, each of us got to pick out a Bible verse which was then printed in the inside cover of the Bible we received. I felt drawn to: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” (I Peter 5:7) While I lived a relatively sheltered life, there were a multitude of things that frightened me in my personal life and in the world. That verse reminded me that God understands my anxiety and wants to free me from worries. He wants me to tell him about the things I'm frightened of so he can take these things from me.

Although I frequently pray invoking this particular verse, there was one situation when I felt God's promise regarding my anxiety most clearly. When our son, Alexander, was three weeks old, he was diagnosed with spinal meningitis. The attending physician made no bones about the danger our son was in and prepared us for the worst. God's promise

carried me through this difficult time. We were blessed that our son fully recovered. But, God's promise also stands when things don't go as we want them to. It is then that our faith, hopefully, will be reckoned to us as righteousness.

Prayer: *Dear God, please make your promises clear to us. Remind us how Abraham lived his faith against all odds and that you always fulfill your promises to us. Amen*

Angela Heyworth has been a member of St. Stephen's with her family for 13 years. She sings in the choir and feels blessed to be part of this congregation. She hopes to be an active member for years to come.

Sunday, March 4, 2012

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Mark 8:34

The best form of giving

"For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" Recent figures have come to light that most of us here in the USA are in the **top one percent of the world** in income! Yet we seem to need and want even more. Are these words of Christ directed at us?

How do we turn ourselves around from "getting" to "giving?" By our understanding, first of all, that we are blessed beyond belief. We are in the top one percent! And all that we have comes as God's blessings in life.

And Christ shows us what to do next. By giving to others we still remain strong and "rich" in God's eyes and in the eyes of the world.

It's easy to forget that "volunteering" is the best form of giving. Not just money, but time and caring help us connect with the needy among us.

Christ gave his very life. We aren't as perfect as He, but striving to serve and care for our fellow sufferers here on earth will extend his kingdom and enrich our lives.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help us to see how blessed we are and how we can serve you by sharing with others. You are our model for giving; give us strength to imitate you with a caring heart. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen*

Jim Knutson was the band director at LaFollette High School for many years. He and his wife, Ruth, are seasoned travelers who have visited 25 countries and have been involved with the Friendship Force. Jim sings in the Sanctuary Choir and is St. Stephen's resident tuba and tympani player. They have been members for 14 years.

Monday, March 5, 2012

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. Hebrews 1:1-2

Really listen and love

In a recent meeting about a report I needed to update, I suddenly found that I was not listening. I was thinking of something else and realized I had totally missed the suggestion someone made. With a great deal of embarrassment, I admitted I had not been listening and asked the person to repeat their suggestion.

Too often, we don't listen to what God is trying to tell us. Sometimes, the topic is obscure – it's just too hard to grasp such difficult concepts. Sometimes our own pride or stubbornness gets in the way. Jesus teaches us again and again to forgive, but we harbor grudges. Sometimes what we are asked to do goes against our feelings of fairness. Why shouldn't I steal this? That person over there steals all the time and I'm more deserving than he is!

But sometimes what God is trying to tell us is very simple. Love. Love yourself. Love your neighbor. Love your family. Love God. God gave us Jesus to teach us to love. God sacrificed his son on the cross so we could experience this love.

God put Jesus at his right hand. He's the ultimate authority figure. Why do we have such a hard time listening to what he has to teach us? Of all the authority we could listen to, He is it. He wouldn't lie to us or mislead us. He only wants us to love. We need to listen, really listen, to what God is trying to tell us.

Prayer: *Gracious God, you have talked to us in so many ways, but we continue not to listen. Open our ears so we can hear your message. Open our hearts so we can live your message. Help us to admit that we have trouble paying attention to you. Guide us to live as Jesus lived and to walk in his footsteps. Amen*

Lisa Manion works at WEA Trust as a reporting specialist. She is married to Mark Werda. They have been members of St. Stephen's since the 1980s and frequently attend the 11 a.m. worship service.



Tuesday, March 6, 2012

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
(Hebrews 11:1)*

Living and breathing our faith

We live in a society that places a lot of emphasis on proof. In a day and age where “seeing is believing,” today’s Bible passage may appear particularly foolish because it’s about a promise and a certainty of things we can neither see nor prove. We frequently talk about having faith, losing faith or making a leap of faith. But how often do we really contemplate faith’s role in our everyday relationship with God?

We get a clearer idea of what faith is by closely examining Paul’s words and their meanings. Faith is a confident belief in God’s promise. It’s a promise that God is *always* with us, no matter what. That’s a big promise. In fact, it’s the biggest promise of all time! As Christians, it’s a promise we know to be true, even though we can’t prove a word of it.

When my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, I fervently prayed for strength and faith. I read this verse from Hebrews and Psalm 121 over and over again. Sometimes I felt stronger and more hopeful. At other times I was plagued by doubt. But I kept praying. When we received a great prognosis, my very first thought was to thank God. It was then I realized that perhaps faith was supporting me more than I had realized.

Living and breathing our faith every moment of every day gives us the wisdom and hope of things to come and the strength to deal with whatever real or foolish troubles we encounter.

Prayer: *Lord, grant me a faith that brings me peace, unites me with you and those around me and strengthens me to meet any challenge. Please help me to share that faith with others every day. Amen*

Julie Buss lives in Fitchburg and has been a member of St. Stephen’s for approximately six years. She is a member of the Ministry Board, Sanctuary Choir and GosBells.

Wednesday, March 7, 2012

*And you shall be my people,
and I will be your God. Jeremiah 30:17-22*

Keep on listening

The people of Jeremiah 30 had gone through a difficult and dangerous time. They were listening for God's assurance. Did God love them? Was God paying attention? Would God provide?

We ask the same questions today. Where is God in this? How can I feel God's loving assurance in spite of loss, hardship or loneliness?

This verse reassures us that yes! God is our god. We hear it from our pastors, through music, from our neighbors and at church. We can hear God's voice in God's Word or in the silence of meditation and prayer. Perhaps a book will spark an understanding of what it means to be people of God.

The idea of being God's people is challenging. We are called to obey and share, to love (no matter what), to be ready and alert – a tall order when life seems comfortable in front of the TV on a cold night.

What does it mean to be people of God? What if we are called to do something uncomfortable? What if we are asked to do more than we think we can? Can we really forgive others – **no matter what**? What we need to do to "love" others? How do we feel God's love for us?

Aha! You may think I have answers for these questions. Alas, not me. I'm like you. Hard things happen that I don't understand. So, I rely on you and your words of comfort and support. I keep reading and studying and praying and listening and asking questions. I feel God's love and power, and I keep moving forward.

The book "29 Gifts" reminds us that the simple act of giving and receiving gives us the opportunity to connect with each other in a spiritual way. Intentional giving and receiving makes a big difference. I was grateful to be reminded of this at the Women's Retreat and to spend the day in the community of women who make up the People of God.

Prayer: *Creating God, thank you for the community you offer to help us be the people of God. Help us not only remember that you are our God, but that we are called to be your people. Amen*

Nancy Morris and her husband Roger moved to Madison two years ago to be near their grown children. Nancy is one of the founders of the Women's Spiritual Formation group. She also attends women's Bible study. Both Roger and Nancy sing in the choir.

Thursday, March 8, 2012

*I am the Lord your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me.
(Exodus 20: 2-3)*

Soli deo gloria

At first this verse seems like a contradiction. On one hand we think of God as the most loving and compassionate Being. So what is He talking about here, in the very first rule or commandment He gives us? Is He being conceited and self-centered? Is it "all about Him?"

It is central to our Christian belief that God is at the center of everything. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We might think of this as rude and self-centered – but it is not. It's more like a loving parent who makes rules for his children. We all know that, although children may appear not to appreciate rules, those who have them enforced actually do better in life. A parent who enforces rules is MORE loving than one who does not.

Likewise, we can find it an incredible comfort that God is the center of everything. Nothing else matters but our relationship with God. What we wear, what we drive, what grades we get, what our annual review reveals, what our house looks like, what our bank accounts total – none of those things matter to God. We don't need to waste our time worshipping those things or worrying about them. We can enjoy our hobbies as long as we remember to keep them in perspective. God is above all.

I went to Luther College and still love it there. One of the things I love best is going there during the Christmas season and seeing on one of the tallest buildings, in very humble four-foot block letters with simple white lights, the words SOLI DEO GLORIA - To God Alone Be the Glory.

I am the Lord your God....you shall have no other gods before me.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us to always remember to glorify you only. Help us to enjoy life being comforted by the fact that nothing else is really worth worrying about. Amen*

Jill Ruffridge has belonged to St. Stephen's for nearly 10 years along with her husband, Brent, and daughters, Abby and Molly. She loves being involved here in as many ways as time permits and is most recently passionate about yoga, Bold Café and the Stone Soup Kitchen.



Friday, March 9, 2012

But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Psalm 19:12

Forgiveness through God's love

I am a lifelong Lutheran who grew up in a Christian family where weekly attendance at Sunday School and worship was assumed. I still remember some lesson titles from elementary age, and to this day sing many "old" hymns from memory that I learned as a child. These are very pleasant memories. They provide the foundation for who I am today.

Confirmation years brought a broader view of God's law, and his blessings. One of the lasting impressions for me was the realization of "sins of commission and sins of omission." Until I learned about that, I had never really thought about wrongdoings happening through lack of action.

We fight the constant battle of "committing" wrong acts and "omitting" desirable actions. God's law is our guide for daily living. His commandments are clear - yet we wander from them. But we do know that with repentance comes forgiveness through God's love and grace in his "foolish wisdom." May we always rejoice in that knowledge.

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, to be more aware of our wrongdoings and instill in us a desire to improve our behavior on all levels. Guide us to observe your law more faithfully. Amen*

Jan McChesney and her husband, Gordy, have been members of St. Stephen's since 1963 and have been choir members ever since. They have been involved in a wide range of church ministries over the years. They have a son, a daughter and three granddaughters. Jan retired from her job as office coordinator for the insurance agency of the State Medical Society in 1997.

Saturday, March 10, 2012

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. I Corinthians 1:18

Fools for Christ

An unlikely friendship – a 14-year-old African American boy and an older white man in his 70's – but a testament to the power of God's love. The older man, known by his nickname, "Sarge," was short, balding, sort of frumpy-looking and odd – a very unlikely person to develop a relationship with a teenage boy. Both formed what their peers might consider a foolish relationship.

Sarge took the initiative to reach out to our son, Matt, during coffee hours at church – certainly a foolish act if judged by usual social norms. But Sarge was genuinely interested and actually listened to the young man. Matt responded to the caring older fellow by sharing his interests in collecting things and in photography. Unexpectedly, one day Sarge brought an extra 35 mm camera and case and gave it to Matt. Matt was overwhelmed by this act of kindness and generosity.

The apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a response to reports of factionalism and moral laxness among members of this fledgling Christian community. In this letter Paul seeks to bring the Corinthian people back to the anchor for their lives – Jesus' death and resurrection. According to Bible interpreter, Eugene Peterson, Paul's letter is "unswerving in the conviction that God among them, revealed in Jesus and present in his Holy Spirit, continued to be the central issue in their lives..." (*The Message*, p.1564)

Sarge understood the message of the cross – the message that seems foolish to each of us when we stay in our comfort zones and don't risk crossing social barriers. If God followed human wisdom, he would not have sent transformative love in the person of his Son who died on the cross. But that was God's foolish wisdom, which offers us new life through Christ.

The power of Jesus' life and death to transform our lives is illogical and makes no sense – just like the caring friendship between Sarge and Matt. Sarge and Matt were fools for Christ and each of them had a deeper experience of God's love as a result of taking the risk to cross barriers.

Prayer: *We pray for inspiration from the Holy Spirit to take the risk of encountering and caring for people who are different from us. Amen*

Rolfe Nervig and wife, Mary, recently transferred to St. Stephen's from a Lutheran church on the west side of Madison in order to have less travel time from their home in McFarland. Rolfe has worked primarily in sales for several companies and currently does marketing part time for an audio/visual rental company.



Sunday, March 11, 2012

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for 46 years, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking of the temple of his body. John 2:19-22

A violent Jesus?

This reading can be uncomfortable for us. In our minds, Jesus is calm and serene. We have a tough time imagining the Prince of Peace making a whip of cords and stirring up chaos and disorder in the temple. Even we know you're supposed be quiet and on best behavior in church, dressed appropriately, no running, not talking out of turn, sitting up straight with head bowed and hands folded. This is what it is *supposed* to look like to be pious and religious, right? If we know it, how can Jesus get it so wrong?! He's in the holiest place and acting like a holy terror.

But if the story is too jarring, too upsetting, maybe we shouldn't first picture Jesus as violent, as rushing in to kick some butt like an action hero. It isn't just that he's ornery, cantankerous or belligerent.

Maybe we should first think of Jesus as passionate, as whole-heartedly upset – as in love. And we can ask ourselves what in our lives gets in the way of Jesus' love. What would he kick out to make more room for our relationship with him?

And a next question, when should we be getting upset? What sorts of things in our world end up blocking love – even good, holy, religious, authoritative things?

Prayer: *Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav'n, to earth come down! Fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown. Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation, enter ev'ry trembling heart. Amen (from ELW Hymn #631)*

Some of the things that get *Pr. Nick Utphall* upset include climate change, the Israeli separation barrier, lettuce and cheese sent from California and church folk who forget we have such a gracious God.

Monday, March 12, 2012

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness." I Corinthians 3:18

Trust the Master Builder

Recently, we installed some new kitchen cabinetry and a countertop. Having looked at diagrams, instructions and a video, I gleaned some knowledge of cabinet installation – enough to know, “I could do that.”

I suspected, however, that it wasn’t going to be as easy as the Master Builders on “This Old House” make it look. I had the knowledge though, and... well, in truth, I had just enough knowledge to be dangerous. When it came time to install them, I called some friends. I knew I was going to hit some hang-ups, and when that inevitably happened, I was going to be stuck and not know my head from the hole I just made in the wall.

Fortunately for me, one of my friends is also a Master Builder, at least when it comes to kitchen cabinets. We got started, and he just sort of took over the job. He worked fast. I had to trust that he knew his business. When we ran into the inevitable hang-up, he knew just how to get around it. The moment we discovered it – zip, the fix was at hand. He didn’t even stop to think about it. It seemed more like instinct than knowledge. We weren’t working with gold or gemstones, but we got the job done lickity split. And it was solid.

In the end, the knowledge I took the time to acquire beforehand didn’t really do me much good. It didn’t prepare me for the inevitable hang-up. I wouldn’t have known what to do without my friend. Now, the finished product looks good, and if it won’t literally withstand a fire, it will take a certain amount of abuse.

This passage could be analogous to “The Three Little Pigs.” I’m certain it has been said before – choose your materials carefully and when “the fire”/wolf huffs and puffs, if you’ve built well, it will stand. But more than that, it’s about trusting the Master Builder, even when our own knowledge tells us, “No. That’s not how it’s supposed to work.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for building us a firm foundation. Help us choose the building materials wisely. Keep us from over-engineering it, and give us trust in your plan, whatever it may be. Amen

Stephen Redmann is a new dad and a carpenter of questionable skill. He tries to choose his friends wisely and mostly succeeds at that.

Tuesday, March 13, 2012

*Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young,
by the side of your altars,
O Lord of hosts,
my king and my God. Psalm 84:3*

God's astounding creation

One of my favorite hobbies is photography. I enjoy it so much that, despite driving a 20+-year-old car and eating beans and rice most evenings, my economic thriftiness flies out the window when a new camera filter is needed or a lens needs to be replaced. I'll do anything to purchase the item I need, so content am I to snap photos and spend hours editing them to the point of aesthetic perfection.

The main reason I love taking pictures is that it frequently gets me out into the world of nature - into the creation God has given us. I'll photograph almost anything, but my favorite subjects are things I see on hikes: woodlands filled with light, flowers dusted with pollen, a deer or bunting I've spooked from its eating place. What a beautiful world, yes! And, oh, by quiet observation the simple things I've learned.

What time of day do the Sandhill Cranes emerge from hiding? At what moment do the crickets start to sing? How long does it take a spider to build a web? What month do the mushrooms sprout and when do wild roses bloom? Where, indeed, does the sparrow build its nest to lay her young? Were it not for my camera and the development of my favorite subject matter, I probably wouldn't take time to meander outdoors and discover these awe-inspiring things.

When I think of the astounding ways in which God created this complex universe, whether through creation or the following years of learning and adaptation by all its creatures, what awe I feel! But even beyond the awe, I can't help but wonder how God came to do it...and further still, why? Foolish questions perhaps, because I will never know the answers. Regardless, I can't help but imagine the wisdom it took on God's part to ensure that we are all loved and nurtured and provided for. Humans with friends, community, church, family...or the spider with its instincts or the flowers with their purposes...or yes...even the sparrow upon its nest. Most of all, I can't help but question God's judgment at God's entrusting such a wonder to the care of such harmful beasts as humans have proven at times to be. His wisdom must be great.

Prayer: *Dear loving Lord, thank you for the beauty you have bestowed upon us... over our heads and out our doors in the forever altar of the natural world. Please help us to be better stewards of all you have provided. Grant that we all take time to smell the roses, and thank you for your trust and grace. Amen*

Kimberly R. S. Han has spent most of her life as a member of St. Stephen's. She is married to Mishan Han, sings in the Sanctuary Choir, is an avid gardener in the Community Gardens and is a member of the Green Team.

Wednesday, March 14, 2012

"He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching." Mark 11:17-18

Captured by God's Word

Have you ever spellbound by a speech you heard, or by a particular speaker? What was it about that teaching that captured you? What made you not want to think about anything else but being captured by the moment and the hope and the possibilities?

I remember the first time that I heard a spellbinding speech was at the 1985 Lutheran Youth Gathering in Denver, CO. The speaker was former President Jimmy Carter, who lived his faith on his sleeve. While it often got him into political trouble, he was true to his faith. His convention speech was about living our faith in the world. President Carter encouraged us to live for others and serve for and with others that God's love might be a tangible gift for the world. It was spellbinding.

I have heard others teach with authority throughout the years, too, from Archbishop Desmond Tutu to Coretta Scott King, from Elie Wiesel to Bono. The crowds who were captured by Jesus were a threat to the religious leaders of that day. Why? Their fervor and excitement about Jesus' teaching were a threat to the status quo.

Why does the world – and by that I mean political, economic, and military leaders – hate such teaching? What is it about Jesus' authority that threatened them enough to kill him? What happens to us when our status quo is threatened? I find it interesting that the same crowd who is spellbound by this teaching so quickly turns on Jesus by Good Friday. Where do you find yourself today?

Prayer: *Dear Lord, capture us again and again with your Word. Strengthen our faith. Embolden our witness. Lift us up when we fall short. Amen*

Pr. Tim Hansen has had the opportunity to participate in quite a few National Lutheran Youth Gatherings. He finds them terrific experiences, even for those youth who can't figure out what they're doing there, adding, "Faith is not just for those who have it figured out, but rather for those who are on the way." Tim lives in McFarland with his wife, Lisa, and his family.



Thursday, March 15, 2012

From Mount Hor they set out by way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses. . . Numbers 21:4

Crossing borders

Traveling can be difficult. The trials of the road can make one impatient and often even worse. Once husband Glenn and I joined a Pilgrimage to East and West Germany with pastor and author Herb Brokering. We were behind the Wall in East Germany for 14 days. The day we left Coburg in the West, was not our finest hour. The border crossing took longer than expected. Soviet guards in olive grey uniforms loitered over our passports and poked about the luggage compartments of the bus. There was no place to stop for lunch, so we motored along with our fellow pilgrims to Eisenach where the Wartburg Castle topped Thuringian hills.

When we got to Eisenach, hungry and tired, we were less than cordial. I went immediately with some others to seek the solace of a bakery. Glenn feigned disinterest - which only irked me more. There was nothing in Eisenach in 1985. No open restaurants, no shops - just dirty streets with piles of coal waiting to be shoveled into bins.

Finally we got to our evening's destination - the Mutter Haus (Mother House) populated by a frail group of aging deaconesses. The room smelled dank. The supper was meager - bread and cheese and sausage served with tepid tea. Then we launched into a worship service in German! I, for one, was NOT happy.

But, during the worship service, something happened. I began to realize that at the end of our travels we could return to our nice clean houses, eat a vast variety of foods and hug our children. These women were stuck. They couldn't even cross the border to visit. Their journey was far more difficult because they couldn't GO anywhere.

We crossed two borders that day, one with barbed wire and machine gun turrets, another not so easy to describe. In the Mutter Haus we began to

realize the gift of hope and presence we brought to those who could not leave. We thought we had come to see castles and cathedrals, but learned we had come to meet people, to pray with them, to share their lives and to become their friends. We learned that, even when we become impatient, it's the journey that's important.

Prayer: *Lord of people on the way, listen as we humbly pray. Be the road we walk today. You who called yourself The Way. Amen (From **Pilgrimage to Renewal** by Herb Brokering)*

Meg Nielsen is an Associate in Ministry. She and her husband, Glenn, joined St. Stephen's two years ago. She sings in the choir, serves on the Green Team and is the editor of this booklet.

Friday, March 16, 2012

*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.
Psalm 107:19*

Lifting our voice in prayer

Key words in this passage may be translated “prayer,” “trouble” and “salvation.” No matter how difficult, painful or unfair life unfolds for us, the psalmist gives reason for praise and thanks to God. And while well-meaning expressions like “God is great, God is good – all the time!” may occasionally sound empty, they can express the psalm writer’s sheer joy and thanksgiving for salvation from many troubles.

It is true: when we are hurting most, we turn to God crying, “Lord, have mercy; Christ have mercy.” And when we cry out for help, when we pray, we become very God-conscious. We become open to some word from the Lord – any word – of encouragement, of solace, of healing. We seek something that will pronounce deliverance from our troubles.

Prayer addressed to God from the heart, however brief or long, brings about dialogue with God; prayer allows us to stop and take note of our situation, to access our need and the blessings we have, even during our

troubles. God is present. Often we are just too preoccupied to listen, to see or to feel the Presence of the Divine. Crying out, lifting our voice in prayer to God leads to an awareness of the One who saves us from our fears.

It is not good for us to give in to self-pity or to give up. I remember noted newspaper columnist Erma Bombeck once quipping, “If life is a bowl of cherries, what am I doing among the pits?” We aren’t promised a bowl of cherries. At the same time, however, God, through Jesus, wants us to have life and to have it abundantly. The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is life in the eternal realm of God.

And some day the whole world will thank and praise God for God’s love and marvelous works of salvation! For God ever proves to be great and good all the time!

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, Son of God, save all people this day who suffer in any way – who are abandoned or separated from you and their loved ones. May they, in calling upon you, discover light, the route to healing and reconciliation. In your holy Name, I pray. Amen*

Edward Johnson is a retired United Methodist pastor who enjoys his ministry here at St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church. He and his wife, Lorraine, live in McFarland.



Saturday, March 17, 2012

But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved. Ephesians 2:4-5

God's ongoing Grace

I don't know about you, but it seems that every time I try to find out more about something, I just become more confused. Take the word, Grace. When I was asked if I would write something pertaining to Eph. 2:4-5, I thought it would be very simple. After all, what else can you say about Grace – it's a gift from God! Grace cannot be earned by good works.

First I looked up the word in Webster's Dictionary. It gave a lengthy definition including: "pleasant quality, good will, a short prayer, title of respect, time granted, the unmerited love, favor of God toward mankind, a special virtue, gift or help given to a person by God."

At a recent women's retreat, I asked a few people what Grace meant to them. Some of the replies were:

- God saving me from myself
- An undeserved gift
- Forgiveness is Grace and we're all endowed with God's Grace
- God's Grace unites us because it's for all people.

Then I found this quote in some materials Pastor Tim gave me to read:

"Grace is on the loose and even though I am searching for it, I am forever surprised when it shows up. Grace has a mystical quality that cannot be expected, contrived or created, rather 'grace' is most often experienced as a reflection like a subtle change in wind direction. God's grace unites us because it's for every person. It's an ongoing Grace, has been since the creation, is now and will always be."

Awesome, isn't it!

I still only understand a little part of what Grace is all about. However, I do know and trust that God's Grace is for everyone and that it unites us.

I also know I've become more aware of God's Grace in my own life. Think about what God's Grace means in your life.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, you give your Grace to us with love. Help us to receive it with love and thanks and to always be aware of your Grace surrounding us. Amen*

Jo Hanson is married to Gene. They have 4 children, 11 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. Jo taught emotionally disturbed children for many years and volunteered as an EMT for 23 years.

Sunday, March 18, 2012

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. John 3:14 (3-20)

Lift high the Cross!

This verse, set in the context of a gospel summary and coming at the conclusion of a dialogue with the respected Nicodemus, is rich with imagery and meaning. It is contrasted with God's saving the Hebrews in the wilderness during the Exodus. When Moses lifted the bronze likeness of a poisonous snake, those who looked upon it were saved from death; so in Jesus' crucifixion we are saved from the poison of our sinfulness.

This same passage from John surely inspired one of my favorite hymns, written by George Kitchin and later revised by Michael Newbolt; it is found in the Lutheran Book of Worship on page 660:

*"Lift high the Cross,
the Love of Christ proclaim,
till all the world adore
his sacred name."*

This verse and hymn picture for me a procession of Christians moving through time. I think of a processional at the beginning of worship, led by the crucifer, carrying and elevating the cross for all to see. Indeed, when the cross is lifted up, people in the assembly cannot help but see it. The same is true with the stationary blue cross that is located in the

center of St. Stephen's nave. In like manner, when a cross is placed at the top of a tower or steeple, the world cannot help but take notice.

Yes, when the symbol of Christ crucified for all, God's love, is lifted up, the world will see and know; many will come to believe through the lives, the witness, of those bearing the cross.

While Christ Jesus crucified and risen may be "foolishness" to those who do not believe, St. Paul quickly added, "It is the power unto salvation to those who believe." (I Corinthians 1:18) We must not underestimate the power of the visual. The cross yet towers over the disasters of time; it leads the procession of God's people into the future. Lift high the cross!

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you have shown and continue to show me the way, in my earthly journey. With the cross ever before me, may love and service to you and humanity be my goal. I ask that the power of the cross, your love, sustain me now and always. Amen*

A retired United Methodist pastor of 50 years in good standing, **Pr. Edward Johnson** could not give up the Church. Thankfully, the Spirit and St. Stephen's called him here to Senior Visitation Ministries.



Monday, March 19, 2012

Let them give thanks to you, Lord for your steadfast love and your wonderful works for all people. For you shatter the doors of bronze and break the bars in two. Psalm 107:15-16

God's gracious nature

Having been a member of St. Stephen's for 48 years, I have been guided and nurtured by many, both members and pastors. I have seen God's steadfast love in all of these people. All have taught me to know God's steadfast love endures forever! Many times in my life I have forgotten this, but always someone reminds me to "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for steadfast love endures forever." (Psalm 107:1)

Pastors Tim and Nick are doing an excellent job of bringing this message to all of us, especially the children. May God help us to listen!

This verse tells of God's gracious nature. So many at St. Stephen's have showed and are showing this in the lives they lived and are living! My best memories are of two special people, Jeanne Lippert and Betty Krueger. They were role models for me for sharing God's steadfast love and thanking God for his "steadfast love." Thank you, God, for having them in my life!

Prayer: *Thank you, God, for all the St. Stephen's saints who have gone before us. They all knew that God's steadfast love was with them. They passed this message on to us. Help us to keep that message going – for ourselves and for those who come after us. Amen*

Sylvia Reinholt has been a member of St. Stephen for 48 years. For most of that time, she has been a member of one or more of the women's groups, attended Bible study and sung in the choir. She also helps serve funeral lunches when asked. Sylvia is married to Richard. They have five children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. I Corinthians 10:12-13

We all fall down

*Ring around the rosies,
Pockets full of posies,
Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down.*

Seated on the floor, the baby sees a brightly colored toy on the other side of the room. Unable to stand unassisted, he grasps his mother's hands tightly with his chubby fingers and pulls himself upright. A fearless smile dances across his face, and without hesitation, without planning and without balance, he takes a few wobbly steps. Then, BOOM! As suddenly as his journey began, it ends back on the floor again.

He glances toward the object of his desire – the toy – and crawls toward it happily. Not only is he blissfully unaware of his “failure” to stand, he does not look at crawling as a foolish habit that he needs to break in order to learn to stand, walk or run. Nor do his parents reprimand him when he falls or crawls; instead, they comfort him if he lands too hard, and provide loving encouragement and support when he is ready to make his next attempt.

We all stand. We all fall down. No matter how hard we try, or how much experience we have, we fall. Whether it's our own foolish pride or poor planning, we find ourselves in the old trap of thinking that we stand alone, unassisted, and BOOM!

But thankfully, we're never alone. God is there when we fall – to encourage us, to comfort us and to pull us up again. With His help, our unsteady steps grow stronger, and we are able to undertake the journey. God does not let us go. He does not reprimand us for falling – no matter

how many times we do. And if we find ourselves crawling for a time, He does not brand us failures or fools.

Prayer: *O Lord, thank you for being with me when I walk, when I run, and when I fall. Help me to keep my eyes on your beloved son's cross, so that I may continue my journey. Though I fall along the way, I know that you are with me, even if I have to crawl for a time before I lean on you to take stronger, steadier steps. Amen*

Rebecca Redmann is the Director of Music Ministries at St. Stephen's, though you might know her better as the lady who dances in front of the Choir and the GosBells with a baby in her arms. She and her husband, Stephen, recently celebrated their 15th anniversary by gazing foolishly at their son, Ned, who was born last September.

Wednesday, March 21, 2012

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life," John 8:12

And the conversation continues . . .

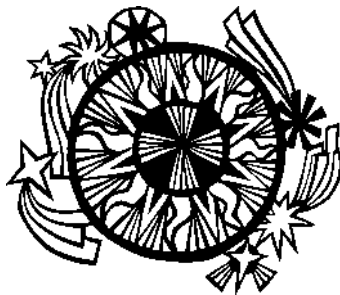
In these verses Jesus is speaking about being the light of the world. Whoever follows will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. The scribes and Pharisees challenged Jesus. They tested him by bringing forward a woman caught in the act of adultery. Their hope was to have this woman stoned using a quote from the Law of Moses. Jesus said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." The crowd dispersed without even a single stone being thrown.

Jesus' final words to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." Jesus uses his power of forgiveness. The Pharisees continued to challenge Jesus' authority. Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

The conversation between Jesus and the Jews continues in Chapter 8. Jesus said to them "When you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will realize that I am he, and that I do speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." Further dialogue between Jesus and the Jews included instructions about following in God's Word: discipleship, truth, being descendents of Abraham, never being slaves to anyone, but being slaves to sin, demons and death.

Prayer: *Dear God, as we continue through this Lenten season, let us be ever mindful of Jesus' journey through life that led to His dying on the cross for our sins. We also remember the words earlier in the book of John which said: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Let us be forever thankful. Amen*

Bob Hansen works half-time as a courier at Meriter Labs. He has a son and a daughter and is married to Monica, who also has a daughter, since 1982. They have been members of St. Stephen's since 1980. Bob serves on the Finance Committee and the Gifts and Resources Committee.



Thursday, March 22, 2012

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.” Jeremiah 31:33

God lives within my heart

God promised to make a new covenant with His people, both Israel and Judah. The “new” covenant would be different from the covenant God made with Israel’s forefathers at the time of the Exodus – a covenant they had chosen not to uphold.

God’s new covenant would give His people the inner ability to obey His righteous standards of conduct and therefore enjoy the generous nature of His blessings.

God personalized and internalized His Law by “writing” it on His people’s hearts. Not only were they “His” beloved people, but He also was their “personal” God who loved them, cared for them, protected them and guided them. Similarly today, we who wear the name “Christian” on our hearts walk with God in a covenantal relationship guided by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

When I am troubled about something, I am comforted knowing God is my “personal” God, I am “His” and He lives within my heart. God keeps His promises and He is always faithful and dependable. Thanks be to God that He loves each of us as if we were the only person on the earth.

Two of my favorite verses that illustrate God’s love within us are: *“Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee,” (Psalm 119:11)* and *“...choose this day whom you will serve...; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)*

Prayer: *Thank You, our God, for Your abiding presence with us each day and for empowering us through Your Spirit to obey Your standards of conduct. Thank You for being a personal God and giving us courage, confidence and humility in our daily living. Thank You for Your goodness and helping us to express gratitude for all You do for us. Amen*

Jane Voss has been the Office Administrator at St. Stephen's for the past 11 years and really enjoys it when people stop in to say "hi." Jane is married to John. They have a son, Jason, a daughter-in-law, Trish, and grandsons, Christopher and Liam. Interests include singing on the Praise Team of Door Creek Evangelical Free Church, small group Bible study, preparing/serving suppers for after their Saturday night worship services, helping out at Boomerang's Retail Shop and going to antique malls and garage sales.

Friday, March 23, 2012

Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me, and would have me know wisdom deep within. Psalm 51:6

Waking up to God's presence

Deep within, there is God. When I can feel this, breathe this, act from this, speak from this, rejoice in this, I truly know God. Yet, how many barriers of busyness and discord, woe and fear our minds put up, blocking us from being with God's wisdom and love that reside deep within.

My husband, Erik, is the drummer for St. Stephen's band, Steadfast, so we have quite a collection of Christian rock CDs. This recent Christmas season my daughter often played Michael W. Smith's "It's a Wonderful Christmas" CD. "The Promise" from this CD became a favorite song of mine. I always feel a glow as my soul stirs to its words: "God is for us, God is in us, we will sing . . . We're singing Allelulia. We're singing Allelulia, Emmanuel, our God is with us."

I am thankful for the many teachers and guides throughout my life who have had and continue to have a role in waking me up to God's presence within me. These include all of nature, my father and Appletree Rodden, that wildman of God who created amazing performance art pieces with the teens when my sisters were that age. I am also thankful for Herb Brokering and Sam Keen, author of *To a Dancing God*, and to the many people I've worked with as a dance/movement therapist. In spite of the

traumas of their lives, they have shown me God within them through their powerful movement, dance, drumming, creativity and resilience. I also count among these Diane Brakarsh and all the dancers from her class, “Dancing with the Divine.”

Today, give yourself time to notice how you experience God within. Is it through the sight of beauty around you? Is it through the touch of a loved one’s hand? Maybe it is through the smell and taste of the daily bread God provides. Or, maybe it is through the rhythm of life as your body moves and acts for the glory of God.

Prayer: *Dear God, this season of Lent please help us to fast from self-pity, resentment and fear and to feast on the joy of your wise and loving presence within us. Many thanks! Amen*

Ann Nielsen is married to Erik. She is a dance/movement therapist. The couple has one daughter, Juniper.

Saturday, March 24, 2012

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. Hebrews 5:8-9

Jesus journeys with us

Earlier this February, I stood in a large empty space in a neighborhood in Port au Prince, Haiti. We were hearing about ongoing ELCA efforts to build back a better Haiti. A few days before, there had been a ground breaking on the very spot for 200 new homes with water and solar electricity, a community center and a play area for children. As we listened, I looked over my shoulder and saw a young boy carrying a container of water on his head and in his arms. Most Haitian children carry 25 pounds of water up hills and through crumbled streets for many miles to bring water for their families to drink and use in their home each and every day.

At that moment, I was reminded that this is how God works in the world through Christ: not by being the high priest, not by overpowering his enemies with violence, but by suffering. Christ became human to accompany us on our life's journey. The foolish wisdom is that in our suffering – in relationships, with our health, through economic struggles, in addictions and trials – we are accompanied by Jesus.

And, we know this is not the end. There is more than suffering. There is hope and promise of eternal salvation in the Resurrection. There is more than the suffering of a young boy carrying pounds of water for his family. There is the hope of the Resurrection as we see a glimpse of it now with the ELCA Model Village in Haiti – a glimpse of the foolish wisdom of the cross that there is both suffering and hope.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for accompanying us in our suffering. May we continue to hope in the foolish wisdom of the way of the cross that you have for me, for Haitian boys and for all humanity. Amen

Rev. Sara Yotter is a member at St. Stephen's and on Synod Staff as Assistant to the Bishop and Synod Stewardship Specialist. Due to her synod responsibilities, Sara is often unable to worship at St. Stephen's, but her husband, Justin, and their toddler son, Nickolas, often attend.



Sunday, March 25, 2012

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12:24

Seeds of life and caring

I choose this passage because, as lifetime gardener and professional Horticulturist, it resonates. My parents instilled in me an interest in growing plants and food. For most of my life, with my parents and at my own home I've grown some of my own food in my own garden. I continue this at home and in St. Stephen's Community Garden where my son, Steve, his wife and my grandchildren join in producing our own food.

As a professional Horticulturist I have worked many years with seeds. I have seen how, when sown, seeds germinate and are no longer seeds but a plant that can produce many seeds. I read the passage where Jesus refers to himself as the "seed" that will soon die but will turn into many more seeds through his disciples. I suggest that this is a challenge to us to become his disciples, his seeds, and spread the word of God in our world. Let us take up that charge Jesus gave to his disciples and us and reach out to spread his word of love and caring in our community.

Was God foolish to allow his son to be nailed to a cross? No. Jesus' death is dramatic. We pay more attention to the Passion story because it is a passion story. It is a story of death but also a story of life, giving and loving – a demonstration, by God, that He loves us.

Prayer: *God, we thank you for giving the life of your son to redeem us from the reality of our lives of sin. Help us to be the seed to spread your word of forgiveness and love. Amen*

John Esser and his wife, Joann, are long time members of St. Stephen's. They raised two children here and now bring their granddaughter, Samantha, to Sunday school. Grandson Ivan is anxious to start. St. Stephen's is an important part of their lives, providing them with religious support and education, friends and a way to reach out to those in need in the community.

Monday, March 26, 2012

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2

Corinthians 3:4-6

Competence through Christ

Confidence in my competence – that’s what we want! We strive for competence – in our work, in athletic pursuits, in academic achievement, in our roles as parents or spouses and on and on. We try a little harder, stay up a little longer, read another book or search the internet for more information, push our limits just a little more to try to do it right, improve our performance, be a bit more effective – and then the next day we try again.

Then this text comes at us – “our competence is from God, who made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant.” First, our competence just IS – it’s already given – we already have it, no work required! And then, it’s a NEW covenant – not of the letter (following the rules, the right protocol) but of the life-giving Spirit! There is life in relationship!

God, who is the all-perfect, came to us in Jesus and walked with brokenness, healing and ministering and forgiving. We don’t have to get it right by doing all the right things. We are free to live in relationships. This Spirit gives life and it is both freeing and challenging. We don’t have to worry about the details. And we have the challenge of living in all the messiness of relationships.

We hurt in ourselves and with others who suffer because of sickness or untimely deaths. We feel the pain of addictions and the sense of hopelessness. We feel the degradation and fear in abusive relationships. We struggle with systemic injustices in our country and our world. And the life-giving Spirit of the new covenant says we can pay attention to those relationships. We have the competence to live in this new covenant or relationship. We know about relationships because God through

Christ has a relationship with us. We can live in soulful connections that truly bring life and joy.

Prayer: *Gracious God, Life-giving Spirit, give me the courage and humility to follow the path of Jesus who taught us your way of relationship with brokenness and pain and the promise of resurrection. Amen*

Mary Nervig and her husband, Rolfe, lived, worked and raised their family in Milwaukee until recently moving to McFarland. They have four children and five grandchildren, including Ava, who led them to St. Stephen's. Mary continues to work in Milwaukee in a private psychotherapy practice where she focuses on attachment and adoption issues. Because three of their four children are biracial, Mary has felt led into paths that have shaped her perspectives and values forever. She thanks God for her journey.

Tuesday, March 27, 2012

. . . this man [Jesus], handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. Acts 2:23-24

Voluntary foolishness

God knew where the focal point of his consciousness had to be – right there in the body of the man, Jesus – there with Jesus in the midst of us, in our peculiar state of being, as creatures banished from the Garden. The Spirit of God had to be there to connect us to our redemption and salvation.

Those who followed Jesus saw him as the One with the miracles, wisdom and power. Who could conquer this One? But, ultimately, God's plan appeared foolish to them. Why wouldn't God just rule with His power and justice and make all succumb to His rule? But love and obedience cannot be forced. Charity is voluntary or it's not charity. Love is

voluntary or it's not love. Just as charity is true love for one's fellow man, and a friend cannot dominate and still be a true friend, neither could God be a true loving God by applying authoritarian rule over us. God can only be God in and through the power of love!

God intended that the hearts of humankind come to him voluntarily. At the same time God reaches our hearts in ways that seem foolish – yet are perfect and imperfect at the same time. Even those who were threatened by Jesus might find their hearts reached by his “foolishness.” Jesus became a victim of betrayal, humiliation, brutality, malice, denial, torment, crucifixion and death – all so that he might capture our hearts and we would call upon him for our salvation.

God's spirit could not be contained by death. It lives around us, with us and in us. God called himself “I AM.” Just as we are made from the stardust of God's universe, God is the consciousness of the universe.

Prayer: *O God, how peculiar and conspicuous is our existence on your Earth. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for our unique place in the universe and for the your loving special attention and presence with us in and through your gentle Spirit. Amen*

Monte Clifcorn is married to Kathryn. They have two sons, Javier and Dakota. Monte is a member of the St. Stephen's Green Team.



Wednesday, March 28, 2012

Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. John 12:44-46

In the light of God's love

How many times have life experiences gotten you down? Health concerns, financial hardships, family problems, the list goes on. We can never plan when the darkness of life's concerns might overcome us.

When I was still teaching, I came down with an illness that was hard to diagnose and treat both physically and mentally. It affected my teaching to the point that I had to take some time off from the classroom. Foolishly, I thought that I was in complete control of my life and that I should be able to overcome this darkness on my own.

As time went on, it was obvious that the situation was out of my control. Depression started to set in. Soon the physical symptoms abated, but the mental anguish and uncertainties continued. It was then that I sought spiritual counseling and gradually the darkness turned to light. The Holy Spirit started to work in me and my whole body started to heal. His wisdom prevailed over my selfish foolishness and showed me the way.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth. (Ephesians 5:8-9) Dark times are so much easier when we walk through them in the light of God's love no matter what we are dealing with!

Prayer: *God bless you with the light and love that is Jesus! Amen*

Glenn Nielsen retired from public school teaching in 2005. He now directs the New Horizons Bands for people age 55 and better. Glenn also shares his musical gifts by singing in the choir and playing clarinet during worship at St. Stephen's.

Thursday, March 29, 2012

“He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?” Isaiah 50:8-9a

Suffering through serving

This passage is often referred to as one of the suffering servant songs from Isaiah. There are some who speak of these songs as a foretelling of the Messiah – the one who suffers for all of God’s people. In many ways, it is difficult to relate to such a servant. Why? Because most of us do not suffer for our faith, nor do we want to. We are fortunate to live in a country where we can worship in freedom. We hear stories of those who can’t, especially those who are not Christian or maybe even Jewish, and we wonder how the winds of religious oppression can blow so mightily.

So what does it mean to hear these words from Isaiah in 2012? While we find it difficult to think of ourselves as servants suffering for our faith, we might instead imagine how we suffer in our ministry. What does it mean to stand with those who live on the fringe? How are we affected when we speak on behalf of those who have little or nothing? What do we give up in order for others to have something – whether it is physical things like food, clothing and shelter, or things like dignity, compassion and strength?

I suspect that this is how we suffer for each other as God’s children. The world can’t begin to imagine that people would do this for each other – to stand as friend, as brother and sister. Yet, this is how God’s love and mercy work in our world – through fallible and suffering servants who become the hands, feet and voice of God for others.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, Your love for us is amazing. Through the great depth of your love for humanity you have redeemed us. Move us to love others as your servants. Amen*

One of *Pr. Tim Hansen’s* vivid memories of serving at Our Savior’s Lutheran on Wisconsin Ave. in Milwaukee was the people – the clients of the food pantry. Their stories were hard to believe, and yet, he saw first-hand their struggles to get by – real people, real issues, real love – and a ministry that had impact through serving.

Friday, March 30, 2012

Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble;

*my eye is consumed with sorrow,
and also my throat and my belly.*

For my life is wasted with grief,

and my years with sighing;

*my strength fails me because of affliction,
and my bones are consumed. Psalm 31:9-10*

The receiving end of a promise

It is often, in times of trouble, pain or suffering that we “remember” God. I’m not sure why this is. It isn’t as though God has forgotten us (although it can feel like it some times). Maybe we remember God at these times because we realize we need more strength than we think we have in ourselves. We remember we aren’t alone, that we don’t have to carry the burden by ourselves, that we are loved and cared for regardless of what we are going through. We hear God saying, “. . . It was then I carried you.”

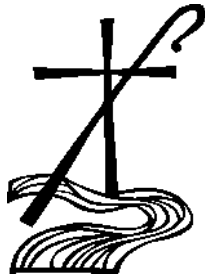
And, let’s face it, so often we are in trouble of some kind or another, full of sorrow, grief, doubt and fear. It takes a lot to remember how good things have been and will be again someday. Life is constant change, but God is with us through thick and thin.

Sometimes we take things for granted until we suddenly “remember.” It isn’t always just in the bad times, but sometimes also in the good times, too.

The psalmist’s cry, “Have mercy on me, O Lord,” isn’t just a question, it isn’t a plea of desperation (although I suppose it could be). It is the receiving end of a promise. God’s steadfast love is always with us – always was, always will be. Words of comfort. Words of hope. Rock on!

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Amen*

Erik Nielsen is married to Ann Nielsen. They have a daughter, Juniper. Erik plays drums with the band, Steadfast, during the Emerging Worship service.



Saturday, March 31, 2012

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness,
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross. Philippians 2:5-8*

Freedom from self

Paul writes to the Philippians from his imprisonment. The Philippians are poor and Paul is in jail. Yet this is one of the most joy-filled and loving of Paul's letters. What on earth, we might ask, does Paul have to be happy about? Talk about Foolish Wisdom!

The poet William Wordsworth wrote,

*The world is too much with us. Late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers*

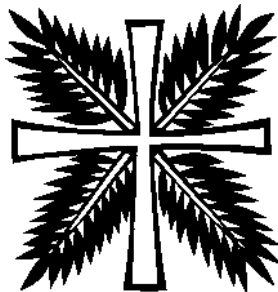
I work as a financial counselor. I have been convinced, by the witness of thousands of clients, of the folly of getting and spending, of chasing more money as a route to happiness. We make ourselves crazy striving for whatever status we think will make us safe or important or loveable. This discouraging statistic indicates our folly: the U.S. has one of the two or three highest rates of clinical depression in the world.

Paul's words about Jesus' emptying himself in service point us to God's Foolish Wisdom regarding freedom from self. In fact, God knows something about us that we don't know: the gift of serving our neighbor is a gift of relief from our relentless focus on ourselves.

The second challenge for us as diligent, conscientious Lutherans is to allow our neighbor to serve us. We are so good at 'doing' that our service becomes a one-way street. When Jesus said, "*Love one another as I have loved you,*" He meant to give us to one another. He knew how much we need each other to be mentally, emotionally and spiritually whole. In order to live out our creation in the image of God, we need to receive as well as give. Not only does my neighbor need me, *I need my neighbor*. My neighbor needs me to need her and to accept her service in the same graceful way Jesus accepted food or a broken jar of perfume. Loving and serving one another is a circle, not a one-way street. And it can happen anywhere, even in jail.

Prayer: *Jesus, help me empty myself of me so that there is room in me for Thee. Amen*

Connie Kilmark has two children. She has been a member of St. Stephen's since 1996. Connie's calling is to work as a financial counselor. She is also vice president of the ELCA South-Central Synod of Wisconsin. She is a member of St. Stephen's foundation board and has served the congregation as a council member and president.



Palm Sunday, April 1, 2012

So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him [Jesus], shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel!" John 12:13

Faith to carry us through

I am a coward. I admit it. I cannot fathom the emotions that Jesus would be experiencing in entering Jerusalem, the city in which he would die. Could I ride in through that gate? Or would I point the colt's nose in the opposite direction?

Jesus had just raised his friend from the dead in Bethany, and now, as he rode through the gate of Jerusalem, he knew he would die and no one would be around to do the same for him. Or would they? Perhaps it is Lazarus' resurrection that reinforces for Jesus that he will experience a similar resurrection.

When my father died, we all gathered around his hospital bed and watched the heartbeat slow further and further until it stopped completely. It was sad to watch my father's life end. But, I was completely filled with the knowledge that this wasn't the end – that I would see my dad again. It was a conviction I felt in the very pit of my soul. I can't explain it – I just knew that there would be a reunion with him someday. That faith carried me through that terrible experience. Perhaps Jesus had a similar feeling as he rode into Jerusalem?

The faith of the resurrection can carry us through all times. Once I heard a pastor explain that, if we were aware of it, we wouldn't have wanted to be born. Birth means a new experience. We are happy and comfortable in the womb. But we are all born and do just fine. Death is a similar experience. Again, we are going into the great unknown. Why shouldn't we do just fine?

***Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we only know our current world. Only you know what is before us. Help us to move bravely through our life so we may experience the greatest gift you can give us – everlasting life. Guide us to live as Jesus did – with obedience to your will. And finally, be there with us when we do finally enter your kingdom. Amen*

Lisa Manion is married to Mark Werda. She works as a reporting specialist at WEA Trust and frequently attends the 11 a.m. worship service. She and Mark have been members of St. Stephen's since the 1980s.

Monday, April 2, 2012

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

A myrrh-acious event!

People love the Gospel of John. But they also say that, compared to the other Gospels, it's seems less real, less physical, less earth-y. It can seem like there's not enough angst, not enough suffering – that Jesus floats above the ground separated from real life.

But here's this passage, coming at a huge turning point in the story, with a Whammo! I enjoy John's clear bias – that he's obviously on Jesus' side. So much for fair and balanced reporting! When we think that maybe Judas really was concerned about the poor, John says, "Nope. He was a thief who stole from his friends." A kleptomaniac disciple?

But it's not just that Jesus' closest friends and followers were crooked. The strong words are also against the religious establishment. Back in John 11:50, after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the high priest said it was worth killing one man rather than having him create a stir, a revolution. So they planned to put Jesus to death.

In this reading today, they realize that's not enough. The good news has been spreading. To stop it, they'd have to kill not only Jesus, but also Lazarus. They begin figuring out what an uphill battle it is to stand against the will of almighty God!

Yet Mary knows something better! In this death, God's mission will be revealed and fulfilled. To risk a pun, it is myrrh-acious! What beautiful earthiness – the whole house is filled with the aroma of this anointing for burial. What an amazing thing to recognize in this death for us!

Prayer: *Thanks be to you, O God! In Christ you always lead us in triumphal procession, and through us spread in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life! We are sent from you, O God, and stand in Christ's presence. Amen (from 2 Corinthians 2:14-17)*

Pastor Nick enjoys the Gospel of John. His favorite chapter of the Bible continues to be Romans 8 because it is so emphatic on how wide God's reach extends. He has no interest in the book of Proverbs, which wastes all of its time focused on our behavior.

Tuesday, April 3, 2012

*"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."
John 12:32*

Love wins!

Did you ever have that feeling – it's TIME! Wherever this is headed, I have to trust that it will turn out just fine, because it is TIME.

The Light of the world KNEW when it was time and that He would be exalted! How awesome to know the mind of God! I hear Jesus telling me in John that not only would He be exalted, but also, the ruler of the world would be judged and defeated NOW. And, it has blessedly been so for 2,000-plus years!

As long as I look for God's Light and let it lead me, as long as I love Jesus with all my heart and all my mind – for just so long – things will turn out right, no matter how it may look.

Prayer: Abide in my heart, O Jesus, making me forever grateful for your Love and Light on this path of life in you. Thanks for your Word, assuring me that, indeed, LOVE WINS. Amen

Karen Baier has sung in the choir ever since becoming a member four years ago. She participates in Ruth Circle (sacristan), Gosbells, the Knit/Crochet Ministry and Women's Spiritual Formation. Karen also serves the congregation as an Assisting Minister.

Wednesday, April 4, 2012

"After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." John 13:21

Turning points

There are a few moments in the gospels that strike me as points where the whole story could turn one way or another. Would Jesus fall prey to the temptations by the devil in the wilderness? Would Jesus actually let Lazarus die when he could heal him? What might that mean for his followers? What is the transfiguration all about and what does it do to the disciples?

In the story for today, Jesus is at that moment when he looks at his followers with the honest truth that no one wants to see. "One of you will betray me." How could any of them want to do such a thing? They have witnessed amazing miracles and have seen the glory of God revealed in this Jesus of Nazareth. How could one of them betray him? And yet, through a simple act of dipping bread and handing it to Judas, the wheels are set in motion for an excruciating 18 hours, during which Jesus will be arrested, tried and crucified.

In John's gospel, the glory of God is most clearly seen in Jesus' death, where the Son of Man is lifted up. But what is it that causes Judas to betray Jesus? Where do we find ourselves in the story? What are the points in our own lives that move us to betrayal of Jesus? What tempts or seduces us into betrayal?

Before we turn the entire fault upon Judas and his reasons for such a betrayal, maybe we need to look in the mirror. When do we find it easy to walk away from our Lord? When does God inconvenience us? When does God get in the way of our ambitions or desires? This is what makes the passion story interesting for me – and a bit haunting.

Prayer: *Gracious God, forgive me for the times when I betray you. Give me confidence to follow you, to be your servant. Amen*

Pr. Tim Hansen has always found the passion story captivating. From his earliest memories of a "real life" Roman soldier at the three-hour Good

Friday service to preaching one of the “last words” of Jesus while on internship, he sees the darkness of our remembrance today as a reminder of the powerful and undeserving love gifted to an unsuspecting world.



Maundy Thursday, April 5, 2012

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. John 13:34

We never run out of love

This Bible verse has led me to spend a lot of time thinking about the word Love – trying to summarize how this powerful word has affected my life. I was born and raised by a loving family. The first song I learned in Sunday School contained the words, “Jesus loves me, this I know . . .” I have been married 61 years to a great guy and after four children, eleven grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. Still it amazes me how my heart never runs out of love!

I’ve been fortunate to be able to go on several mission trips – one with a health team to Mexico where we provided care to those living in poverty. Another trip took me to Palestine to help with the olive harvest. Many of the people there had few material things, some had lost their homes, many their freedom, but the power of their love for God and their families was an inspiration to all of us. We went to help, but received far more in return.

One Palestinian man talked to us about seeing his daughter killed. He had become bitter and ended up in prison. While there, he found God and finally forgave the man who murdered his daughter. He started talking to the other prisoners about forgiveness and love. After his release from prison he talked to others about forgiveness and love.

Jesus said: “love one another as I have loved you.” That kind of love is a perfect love, unconditional, with no strings attached. Is that possible for us? I don’t think so. We let so many things get in our way: jealousy, greed, selfishness, power and material things. But we keep trying to love as Jesus wants – to love one another as he loves us. And, our hearts never run out of love.

Prayer: Dear Lord, let your spirit fill our hearts with your kind of love. Show us ways to pass that love on to others. Thank you for your gift of perfect love. Amen

Jo Hanson taught emotionally disturbed children for many years and served as a voluntary EMT for 23 years. She has been part of St. Stephen’s since the congregation began meeting as a “house church” in the mid-1950s. Jo has been a Sunday School teacher and a member of the church ministry board. She is married to Gene.

Good Friday, April 6, 2012

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture). “I am thirsty.” A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:28-30

Love so amazing, so divine

While working on my Ph.D., I did research on the pathophysiology of circulatory shock and trauma. My church choir director, a professor of history at Loyola University of Chicago, was interested in the Shroud of Turin. As a result of a talk he gave, I became interested in what materials have been written on the pathophysiology of crucifixion. While to some extent that literature is somewhat out of date, it provided a picture of cruel suffering used by Roman soldiers with an in-depth practical knowledge of what they were doing.

The passage from John 19 illustrates that knowledge. After suffering on the cross for several hours, Jesus reports his thirst. Instead of giving him

something that might quench that thirst, the Romans gave him sour wine, vinegar, acetic acid – adding to the acidosis, the low pH, of a person in shock – a condition which causes the heart to contract more weakly and that contributes to the slow death of every cell in the body!

Even the hyssop probably was meant to be harmful. While there are a dozen or more plants in the Middle East known as hyssop, and it is difficult to know which one was involved here, these plants have essential oils that cause potentially fatal convulsions and other pharmacological effects. No wonder that Jesus succumbed to the trauma of the cross right after sipping the sour wine.

My brief study gave me new insight into Christ's suffering. That anyone would accept such a heinous and painful death solely out of love is incredible. What amazing love to have done this for my salvation, for me a poor miserable, undeserving sinner!

Prayer: *Thank you heavenly Father for your amazing grace and love that your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, would suffer such an ugly death that we might live with you forever! Help us to live a life here on earth that reflects this amazing love. Amen*

Phil Kober has been a member of St. Stephens for nearly eleven years. He has training in law, medicine and biomedical science. Phil continues to do some writing on various subjects and has sung with the choir and as a soloist at St. Stephen's.



Feast of the Passover, Saturday, April 7, 2012

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” John 20:11-13a NRSV

Why are you weeping?

When Mary Magdalene encounters the angels, they ask what seems like an obvious question, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Seriously? Mary just lost her teacher, friend and probably the only guy who (in a time and culture where women were little more than possessions) ever treated her like a human being. He died a horrific, brutal death, and now his body is missing. So, who wouldn’t be weeping?

When my dad died, we spent the days before his funeral looking through pictures to display at the visitation and funeral. It’s a common practice, but I didn’t realize until then how therapeutic it is. The pictures brought out our stories about my dad, his life and our relationships. It helped to put into perspective why we were weeping. Sadness is a feeling, but grieving is a process. Sharing our stories helps us process our grief as we journey the healing road.

Our hope and healing come from Jesus. His whole life is an example of how we should care for each other. Supported by his steadfast love we are called to be his hands that hold, his arms that carry. We bear the words that encourage and the understanding that listens. “Why are you weeping?” A simple question filled with wisdom.

We stand weeping outside Jesus’ tomb, overwhelmed in our own grief. The angels ask, “Why are you weeping?” Our stories unfold and healing begins. Jesus stands with us, though we may not recognize him. He does not count our tears as foolishness, and does not rebuke us for not knowing him, but rather with patience he encourages us to continue the process of healing, “Why are you weeping?”

Prayer: *Jesus, you show us how to love and care for each other in all situations. When others are grieving, remind us to ask, “Why are you weeping?” Then help us to listen. Amen*

Christine Gantz is married to Dewey. They have two children and two grandchildren, and have been members of St. Stephen's for 16 years. Chris is a member of Steadfast, and involved in Emerging Worship. She is a rostered Associate in Ministry, called by the South-Central Synod of WI-ELCA to Communications Ministry serving multiple congregations.

Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. John 20.18

A secret that can't be kept!

A few years ago a colleague and I were driving home from a conference in Northern Wisconsin, when something terrible happened and I become responsible for my colleague's emotional and physical safety. Not knowing where to go to ensure her safety, I considered a downtown church, but dismissed it for numerous reasons. Feeling helpless I prayed to God for guidance.

Within a few seconds a car merged in front of me with a "Jesus" bumper sticker. Noting the coincidence, I passed it by. Miles later I prayed again and immediately a car with three homemade crucifix decals on the rear window merged in front of me. Again, noting the coincidence, I sped past the car. A dozen miles later I saw the silhouette of a cross in the distance. Finally realizing this to be an intentional set of experiences, I drove towards the cross (which happened to be a broken street sign) praying for God's guiding presence and promising to follow God's lead.

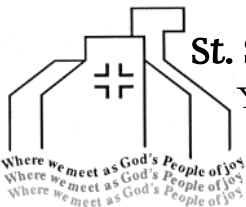
Immediately the car with the "Jesus" bumper sticker pulled in front of me. With an overwhelming sense of wonder, I followed this car to its destination, anxious to learn where God was leading us. To my astonishment, the car parked in front of the church I had originally considered as a potential safe space. Even though it was late Friday afternoon, the church was open, a pastor was available and the church offered the specialized ministry my friend needed.

God had indeed led us to a safe place. Having witnessed God in the midst of our crisis, I, like Mary, have told everyone: “I have seen the Lord.” News like this cannot be kept secret. God responded to my need before I ever formed my prayer, encouraging me to seek refuge in a church that I had never attended. God continued to guide me to my destination, never acquiescing to my lack of faith. How do you see or hear God’s presence in your life? Could God be speaking to you through a bumper sticker?

Prayer: *Jesus, Make me a witness to your presence. Amen*

Christa Fisher and her family have felt blessed by the St. Stephen’s community for the past 10 years. Christa is married to Andre. They have two children, Jacob and Immani. Christa expresses her gratitude to the entire congregation for the inspiration, encouragement and support that is enabling her to pursue her vocational calling at Wartburg Theological Seminary.





St. Stephen's Lutheran Church

You Are Welcome Here!

Please Join Us For Sunday Communion Worship

8:00 & 10:00 a.m. Hymn-based Worship

11:00 a.m. Christian Rock Worship

Tim Hansen and Nick Utphall, Pastors; Rebecca Redmann, Director of Music;
Edward Johnson, Senior Visitation Ministries

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