

# Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem

## Introduction

*“For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord, your Redeemer. — Isaiah 54:7-8*

This past year has been an extremely difficult one. Between the pandemic, the political turmoil, and social unrest it appears that there are powers at work seeking to uproot and shatter our lives. However, there is no power greater than God. These things have happened because God has either allowed them to happen or he has ordained them. But this begs the question, “Why would a loving God allow such tragic events to take place?”

The prophet Isaiah said, “‘For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,’ says the Lord, your Redeemer.” But again, why would a loving God ever desert his people? In Psalm 81, the psalmist quotes God saying, “My people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!” God is calling! “Oh, that my people would listen to me!”

Saint Paul reminds us in his epistle to the Romans (15:4) that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction.” What instruction is God giving us through His Word, and through these contemporary events? He is calling, but what is He saying? Throughout the Old Testament, and through the history of the Church, we see a clear pattern in the relationship between God and his people. For example, when God's people refused to listen to Him after their deliverance from Egypt, He allowed them to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Later, when His people abandoned true worship, and sought after false gods, He allowed Babylon to overthrow Jerusalem and to destroy the temple. He cast His people into exile for 70 years, making them slaves to a foreign power. And throughout the history of the church, we see evidence of God breaking down our manmade institutions, and repeatedly rebuilding the church in His image.

God loves His people, and He wants a close, deep, intimate, personal relationship with us. “His steadfast love endures forever!” When we stray from His Way, and walk in the ways of the world, the flesh, or the devil, in His love He breaks us, so that He can remake us in His image. And when we turn to Him, He will have compassion and draw us back into that living relationship with His Son. Again, Isaiah the prophet says that when God's people follow in his

way, "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the Earth, for the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 25:8).

The things that have happened over this past year, and the things that we are walking through right now, are for our good. God is dismantling the Church as we know it. If we are honest, we can admit that we have become complacent, divisive, and self-sufficient. We have abandoned His ways for the ways of the world. The pattern that we see in the Scriptures and Church history are being repeated in our day. God is taking away the things of this world in which we have trusted, and He is calling us back into relationship with Him. He is rebuilding His Church in His image.

After the destruction of the Temple, and the Exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC, the Lord inspired Nehemiah to seek to rebuild Jerusalem and the Lord's Temple. The prophets who were active in that time made it clear to the returning exiles that the primary focus of their work was to be the rebuilding of the Temple. The exiles, upon their return, had started rebuilding the walls of the city, but met with stiff opposition from without and within the city. Ezra the priest and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah called the people to repent and restore the Temple first, putting God at the center of their lives and work. The walls of the Temple must first be rebuilt! What instruction can we discern from this for our present situation? What are the walls in our day that need to be rebuilt? What will those walls look like? And of what material will they be made? What are God's instructions for us in rebuilding the walls of His Church?

In these Lenten Meditations, let us walk through the Scriptures together, knowing that "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction." God has done a dismantling. If we will listen to Him, and walk with Him through these difficult days, He will guide us in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, the walls of the Temple—His Church—that we may be remade in His image.

## **The Week of Ash Wednesday Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021**

### **The Dividing Wall of Hostility**

*"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility..." — Ephesians 2:13-14*

Saint Paul tells us, in the scripture quoted above, that Jesus has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. Walls divide people. Robert Frost, in his poem "Mending Wall", quotes the aphorism "Good fences make good neighbors." Then he proceeds to ask the question, "Why do they make good neighbors? Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out. And to whom I was like to give offense."

Walls divide people. However, as we saw in the introduction to these meditations, God desired that His people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But he also commanded that they rebuild the walls of the Temple first. The walls of the Temple hold up the roof, His covering over the worshipping community.

There has been a dismantling of the familiar things in the church--things that have brought us comfort in the past. For example, on this Ash Wednesday, we will not be in a position to receive the imposition of Ashes. We have gone an entire year without being able to hug one another at the passing of the Peace. We cannot take the Lord's blood from a common chalice. And there are many other things that we have grown accustomed to which have been taken away from us. God is dismantling our "familiar structures" and rebuilding His Temple according to His purposes and will.

God is calling upon his people to rebuild the walls of the Temple of his Body, the Church. But what will these walls look like? Of what will they be constructed? These are not to be walls that divide people. They are to be walls of virtue, to hold in righteous hearts and to keep out works of the world, the flesh, and the devil. These walls will need to have open windows through which those outside can peer into the righteous workings of Christ's body. These walls will need to have wide, welcoming gates to heartily receive those who desire to come in. These walls will need to look like the Lord himself, for he says that He Himself is a wall of protection around those who belong to him (cf. Zech. 2:5).

God does not want us to build walls to shield us from those outside the body, to separate us from the world. On the contrary, Jesus said that we are to be in the world, that the world may know him (John 16:33; 17:15-18). Jesus prayed that the Father would keep us from the evil one, not from one another. The walls we are building are walls of virtue, walls that keep us in right relationship with God, safe from evil but not isolated from the world.

Jesus is breaking down the dividing wall of hostility, and calling upon us, His body, to build walls of virtue and righteousness, that the Temple of his Body may be a covering over all people.

## **Thursday After Ash Wednesday February 18, 2021**

### **The Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets**

*"And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." — Ephesians 2:17-22*

In the passage quoted above, the household of God, the Temple of the Lord, is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. But it is interesting to note that the whole structure "grows into a holy Temple in the Lord." This structure grows. It is alive. The walls of the Temple God is rebuilding are a living entity, and we are the building blocks of these walls if we stand on the foundation of Jesus, together with His apostles and prophets. We are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit. In the past, we may have been strangers and aliens to God, but in His mercy He has brought us near and knit us together by his Holy Spirit into one Body. And He has incorporated us into this household where he has built a foundation in the Church, firmly established on the apostolic and prophetic ministry of the Body of Christ. This structure only

holds together if we remain in relationship with the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ. And if we remain in Him He will continue to build us together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

In Isaiah 60:18, the prophet gives us a vision the New Jerusalem that he has received from God. In that vision, the prophet tells us, “You will call your walls salvation, and all of your gates will be praise.” There is no salvation outside of this living Body of Christ’s Temple. And when we live together, fashioning our lives as a righteous dwelling place for God by the Spirit, our lives will redound to the praise of His Glory. It is an inviting image, and one that we hope the world will witness and desire for themselves.

This new Temple that God is creating, is a living entity, and it will only work if the building blocks stand firmly rooted to the foundation, and stick closely together. St. Paul says in the passage above that “You (that is a plural: “y’all”) also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” As we make our pilgrimage through this Lenten Season, let us remain open, humble, and repentant, so that He may build US into that holy structure.

## **Friday After Ash Wednesday February 19, 2021**

### **Binding All Things Together**

*“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” — Colossians 3:12-17*

As we noted yesterday, we are being built together into a holy structure, a dwelling place for God. But if we are the building blocks of this Temple, what are the things that hold us together? Saint Paul tells us in the passage above that “love...binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Love is, as it were, the mortar that holds the bricks together in the walls of the Temple. For it is love which does the binding. It is love that cements the bricks together one to another. St Peter tells us in his first epistle (2:5) that we, “like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The walls God is building are a living entity. We are the “living stones” in these walls. Our love for one another is what will make this structure sound and whole.

If we are honest with ourselves we will recognize that we are incapable of fulfilling this task. But St Paul also recognized this shortcoming in the people of God, so he says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” We are to do everything “in the Name of the Lord Jesus.” If these walls will stand, then we must be “In Christ”! If we are living in Jesus Christ, in His Name, then we are in right relationship with Him. It is the relationship we have with Him and with the apostolic and prophetic Body of His Church that will give form to the structure of the walls. And when we are in right relationship He will be at work in us and will manifest His love through us that others might to be drawn into the fullness of his holy Temple.

It is love that “binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Love for God and love for one another is the key virtue of the masonry work of the Temple walls. Living out that love is what will give form and structure to the Temple that God desires to build for the worship of Him and for the life and protection of His Body.

## **Saturday After Ash Wednesday February 20, 2021**

### **New Life in Jesus Christ**

*“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” — Ephesians 4:25-32*

As we said at the beginning of this week, walls divide people. But the walls that God would seek to build for his Temple are not designed to keep people out, rather they are intended to divide virtuous and righteous living from the unrighteous behavior that is manifest in the world. Saint Paul commands that “all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away” from us. These walls would seal out these unrighteous ways from the hearts of those who dwell in Him. The walls that He would have us build would divide the righteousness found in Christ Jesus from the unrighteousness found in the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Paul tells us in his Second Epistle to Corinth (5:16-17) that we are to regard no one from a human point of view but that we are to become a new creation in Jesus Christ. He says that if anyone is in Christ—if anyone dwells in his holy Temple—they are a new creation. And the apostle reminds us in his epistle to Rome (6:4) that we are to continue to walk in that newness of life.

How is all of this supposed to happen? Paul instructs that having put away falsehood we are each to speak truth with his neighbor for we are members one of another. It falls back on what God told us yesterday. It is love that binds us together one with another, and when we walk in love and speak the truth one to another He will build us up into a holy Temple for His praise and His glory, and for our protection from all evil.

It is now time to begin to listen to God and follow His plans for the rebuilding of the walls of His Holy Temple. With Jesus as the cornerstone, the apostles and prophets as the foundation, the members of the Body of Christ as the building blocks, and love to bind us together, we can begin construction. The walls of the Temple of God are built with virtue and righteousness. Over the weeks of this Lenten pilgrimage, let us listen to the instruction found in God’s Word, for as we have been reminded by St. Paul (Romans 15:4), “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” We all need a dose of hope right now, and we need clear direction as we move forward in that hope. Let us listen and obey, and watch God build us up “into a holy Temple...a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

## **The First Week of Lent Sunday, February 21, 2021**

### **Pursuing Excellence**

*Philippians 1:9-11* “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

We are being built into a dwelling place for God. It is very important, therefore, to use the most excellent building materials for both brick and mortar. Saint Paul reminds us in the passage quoted above that love is the key component to binding the building blocks of these walls together. He says that it is his prayer that our “love may abound more and more... so that we may approve what is excellent.” The bricks of these walls must be made of the finest clay, being “pure and blameless...filled with the fruit of righteousness.” And that righteousness can come only through Jesus Christ. Excellence, therefore, is living in right relationship with Jesus Christ “to the glory and praise of God.”

St John talks about the walls of the Temple, but uses a different metaphor. The Temple, that is the Church, is the bride of Christ. St John, in the book of the Revelation, refers to the bride making herself ready. He says, “it is granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev. 19:8). If we are going to build a temple worthy of our God, we must pursue excellence. We must use the finest building materials: “bright and pure—the righteous deeds of the saints.”

As we begin construction of these walls let us examine what materials we are incorporating into the bricks. Each week we will examine five Christian virtues as described in the Bible. Then on the Saturday of each week we will pause to reflect on those virtues, take a moment for self-examination, and repent for our shortcomings in putting those virtues to practice in our own building process. We can then ask God for the grace to amend our lives that we may come into right relationship with Him.

So, let us pursue excellence that we may be “pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

## **Monday of 1 Lent February 22, 2021**

### **Mercy**

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” — Matthew 5:7*

*“For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” — James 2:13*

*“But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.”*

— Jude 20-23

In Shakespeare's play, "The Merchant of Venice" (Act 4, scene 1), the character Portia says, "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven. Upon the place beneath, it is twice blessed: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes." Portia is declaring a biblical truth. Mercy flows freely from heaven, and where mercy is practiced there is a double blessing. The one who receives mercy is blessed, but also the one who has shown mercy is equally blessed. This is what Jesus was proclaiming in the beatitude quoted above.

Mercy is in God's very nature. The Scriptures repeatedly proclaim that God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 103:8). And we are told that "His mercy endures forever" (Ps. 118; Ps. 136). Those who are found in him will do the things that he does, and grow more and more like him. When we are in Him, and receive His mercy freely, we learn to pass that mercy on. As St Jude indicates in the passage quoted above we are expected to build ourselves up in faith, praying in the Holy Spirit. We are exhorted to keep ourselves "in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ." Whereas mercy comes naturally to God, as fallen creatures we need God's grace to practice mercy toward one another.

And it is important to note that God is a just God. In God's judgment our sins deserve punishment, and therefore, we must be punished accordingly. However, as St. James declares in the passage quoted above, God is merciful and His "mercy triumphs over judgment." We need to follow His example, "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy." When wronged, we want either justice or vengeance. But the model of mercy found in the Jesus Christ is to forgive, and show mercy. And in doing that we will receive mercy in return.

As members of the Body of Christ—the building blocks of the Temple—we live in covenant with God, and with one another. In that relationship we covenant to "respect the dignity of every human being." And we promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves" (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305). As God loves us, we are to love, respect, and show mercy to "every human being." And Jesus lays out for us the practical implications of this covenant in Luke's Gospel (6:27-36):

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

None of this is an easy task for us as fallen creatures. But by God's grace, and in relationship with His Son, Jesus, we are being continually transformed into His image. The commandment is clear, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful", for in doing so, you shall receive mercy.

## Tuesday of 1 Lent February 23, 2021

### Peace

*“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”  
— Colossians 3:15*

In the final episode of the television series MASH, in the operating room the doctors are performing surgery and a speaker on the wall broadcasts the report of war correspondent Robert Pierpoint. You can hear the explosions from artillery fire and some small arms fire in the background. It is almost 10:00 a.m. according to the clock nearby. Pierpoint stops speaking, and seconds later the sounds of war cease. A look of disbelief passes over the faces of the medical staff, then Pierpoint says, “That is the sound of peace.” No one smiles. There is no joy on their faces. They return immediately to the bloody work at hand. The ceasefire of July 27, 1953 did not institute an era of peace for the Korean peninsula. It has now been over 67 years since that day, and the two Koreas are still in a state of war. The DMZ is the most heavily defended National border in the world. The tension between the two countries is tangible.

In classical Greek the word for peace denotes an interlude in a state of hostility, much like what was enacted in that episode of MASH. The whole concept of peace, though, changed on the day that the Son of God became man. The Prince of Peace was born into the world, and peace became incarnate. At the birth of Christ (Luke 2:14), the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!” Peace is, at its heart, unity with God. The Prince of Peace came to reign. As St. Paul exhorts in the passage quoted above, we are to let “the peace of Christ rule in our hearts”.

Peace originates in God and is made present in our covenant relationship with him. As the psalmist said in Psalm 85:8, “He speaks peace to his people, to his saints”. And two verses later it says, “righteousness and peace kiss each other”. When we live in our covenant of peace with God, we are in right relationship. This is not some psychological readjustment of our thinking; nor is it the institution of a self-help program for getting along with other people. The peace of God is a manifesting of Christ in our lives, allowing Him to direct our thoughts as well as our actions.

The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, is much more than just a greeting. The word appears 250 times in the Old Testament. It is an important principle. The word implies a sense of completeness and harmony with the world, with God, and with others. It implies an unimpaired relationship in covenant with God and each other. When *shalom* is used as a greeting, there is an implied blessing of holiness upon the other. *Shalom* is evidence of God’s covenant and a right relationship with him.

The Greek word for peace, *eirene*, ties closely to *shalom*, and is completed in the Incarnation. Peace is intended to become the normal state for those living in Christ. We are called to manifest His will and display His glory, being at peace regardless of our circumstances. Those who are in the Body of Christ are to make God’s peace present, incarnate, in the world.



## Wednesday of 1 Lent February 24, 2021

### Truth

*“Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another...”*

— Ephesians 4:15,25

*“Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?” — Galatians 4:16*

Blaise Pascal, a 17th century philosopher and theologian said, “If all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world.” Sadly, Pascal’s seemingly cynical comment holds some truth. We do not always speak the truth to one another. When we do speak the truth, it is not always spoken in love. St. Paul's exhortation in verse 25 above is that we “put away falsehood and speak the truth with our neighbor”. And he gives us a sound reason for doing so: “for we are members one of another.” Walls that are built with shoddy material will crumble. Falsehood will make for brittle bricks, and the mortar of love will have nothing to cling to. But speaking the truth in love will enable us to continue to grow. And when we practice the virtue of lovingly telling the truth to one another, we will encourage each other into being remade in the the image of Christ “who is the head.”

The Greek word that Saint Paul uses in verse 15 for speaking the truth is a word rich in meaning. It has the meaning of “being true” or “being sincere in love”. This word is used by Saint Paul only here and in Galatians 4:16. In this latter verse, St Paul asks the Galatians why they might think that he is not being loving in telling them the truth. He was telling them something that they did not want to hear! Sometimes the truth hurts. However, the way of truth is found in Jesus Christ, and that way leads to spiritual maturity. By walking in the way of truth, and speaking the truth in love to one another, we are brought more deeply into unity in our common life in Christ. And by being willing to hear and accept the truth, even when it seems unpleasant, we can become more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what Saint Paul means when he says “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him.”

Not only will building the walls in truth bind us together, once these walls are fully constructed we will be protected from the lies and deceptions of the world, if we are standing firm in Jesus Christ. The walls of truth will hold in that which belongs to Christ, and shield us from the efforts of the enemy on the outside to sow seeds of falsehood and deceit.

**Thursday of 1 Lent**  
**February 25, 2021**

**Kindness**

*“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” — Ephesians 4:32*

Be kind. This is a simple command, but for some inexplicable reason in today’s culture it is seldom obeyed. Josh Wilson, the Christian singer and songwriter, in his song,

“Revolutionary”, says,

Maybe you’re not like me,

Maybe we don’t agree,

Maybe that doesn’t mean we gotta be enemies.

Maybe we just get brave,

Take a big leap of faith,

Call a truce so me and you can find a better way.

Let’s take some time, open our eyes, look and listen, yeah.

And we’re gonna find we’re more alike than we are different, yeah.

Why does kindness seem revolutionary?

When did we let hate get so ordinary?

Let’s turn it around, flip the script,

Judge slow, love quick.

God help us get revolutionary

Notice that St. Paul lays the groundwork for the exercise of kindness in the one verse quoted above. To be kind, we are to be “tenderhearted, forgiving one another”. And we have been given the pattern for what that looks like: “as God in Christ forgave you”! That should not be revolutionary. It should be our default behavior as one whom Christ has forgiven.

Kindness, in the biblical sense, is not an occasional act. It is a lifestyle. It is a daily practice. It is a choice. As Christians we are to grow in the fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – and growth takes time. A seed does not transform into a tree overnight, but with careful watering, tending, and patience, a seed will slowly grow day-by-day into a strong towering tree. It is the same with kindness. We must be faithful every day to bear the good fruit of kindness. Being kind should be our default mode. Paul’s lists of virtues in his epistles are not a formula for a general humanitarian effort. In them the apostle is expressing that God’s love which is revealed in Christ is to be nurtured in the hearts of His people by the Spirit, then manifested in them as kindness towards their neighbors.

If kindness needs faithful practice every day, kindness also requires intentionality. Kindness is not when we feel like it or a random act here or there when we happen to think of it. Kindness requires a seeking out, a looking for the needs of others. How often do we miss opportunities to show God’s love to others?

Let me share a personal example. On my way to church one very rainy Sunday morning, I passed a man walking. I was preoccupied with thinking about the upcoming service and sermon. About a block later I thought, “I could have picked that man up.” I turned around and drove back, but the man was gone! Where could he have gone? There were no houses there.

He just vanished! The verse from Hebrews 13:2 passed through my mind: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” I missed an opportunity to show kindness, and God taught me a lesson.

Slow down and open your eyes, look for opportunities to minister to the needs of others. Be intentional in showing kindness. So, what does Biblical kindness look like? It looks like Christ. It is Christ at work in and through you. It’s a habit, a lifestyle, a continual practice.

## **Friday of 1 Lent February 26, 2021**

### **Righteousness**

*“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” — 2 Corinthians 5:20-21*

In this week of pursuing excellence we have been looking at some foundational virtues for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. As we have examined the previous four virtues there has been a specific action associated with each: show mercy, declare blessings of peace, speak truth in love, and be kind. But righteousness does not sound quite as interactive as these others. And yet, it is truly a foundational principle for those who are in Christ. But how do we “do” righteousness?

There is a key in the passage quoted above. Paul says that “in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Righteousness cannot become a reality in our lives unless we are “in Him”. And Paul speaks of us “becoming” the righteousness of God. Pursuing righteousness means we become a work in progress. It is perfected over time through our obedience to Christ, and it slowly reveals itself as evidence of our faith. To pursue righteousness we must work at it every day.

In the current climate in our nation it is essential that those who are in Christ do not succumb to the ways of the world. Sadly, many have compromised their faith and relationship with Christ. We have looked for an expedient solution to problems we are facing and have relied on our own wisdom and insights, allied with political factions or social causes, and broken our reliance on God’s Spirit to direct us. The practice of righteousness means having the courage to maintain our integrity regardless of the circumstances. We cannot compromise our righteousness because we fear the outcome of an election or what a change in political leadership might mean. “Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked” (Prov. 25:26). We must never be so desperate that we turn our backs on our values. Remember that Christianity has most often flourished and grown stronger in times of trial rather than in times of prosperity. Our God will supply all that we can ever need (Phil. 4:19), and He alone can deliver us out of all our troubles (Psalm 34:17).

Righteousness is about “becoming” like Christ. The Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). St. Athanasius in the fourth century stated that principle even more strongly. He said, “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” And St. Thomas Aquinas said that “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to

make us sharers in His divinity, assumed our nature, so that He, made man, might make men gods.” God wants us to be remade in His image, to make us “partakers of the divine nature”, and “sharers in His divinity”. That is the goal of our pursuit of righteousness, that we walk in a right relationship with God.

We have been looking at verse 21 in the passage quoted above, but the context of that verse is extremely important for us in understanding how to pursue righteousness, and how it impacts the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. In verse 20, St. Paul says, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Ambassadors represent the one who sends them, and as ambassadors for Christ we re-present (present again) Him to those both inside and outside the walls. God is at work in those who are in right relationship with Him, and “God [is] making His appeal through us.” We have not always walked faithfully in relationship with Him. As Paul says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (Romans 3:23). Therefore to pursue this right relationship with God “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” The beginning of righteousness is reconciliation with God through repentance of sin and reception of God’s abundant grace and mercy. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Righteousness IS interactive. We are called in righteousness to an intimate relationship with God in Christ, to be reconciled to God in Christ Jesus. And when we are walking in that right relationship with Him we can faithfully re-present Him to our brothers and sisters in the Lord, and to those who are not yet part of the Body of Christ. The world is looking for the righteousness of God to be revealed. St. Paul told the Church at Rome (8:19) that “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” When we walk in righteousness, as ambassadors for Christ, we become more and more like Him, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,” and the world will see His righteousness “revealed in the sons of God.”

## **Saturday of 1 Lent February 27, 2021**

### **Confession**

Throughout this week, God has exhorted us to pursue excellence. We must admit that we have not always been faithful in that pursuit. As we review the virtues examined in these meditations we can honestly acknowledge, as the confession of sin in the *Book of Common Prayer* declares, that “we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” It is, therefore, a good time for us to pause and examine our lives in light of the Word and do as the invitation to a Holy Lent encourages us:

“I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and selfdenial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

So let us take a moment for “self-examination and repentance.”

Each of the virtues we examined this week flow from the heart of God. It is His nature to be kind and merciful, the fount of peace, and the Truth incarnate. Righteousness abounds in

those who are in right relationship with God. But in our pride we want to be in control, trust our own wisdom, and pursue our own paths. We want to right perceived wrongs against us or our family, and we refrain from speaking the truth for fear of what others might think of us. In the self-examination found in *Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*, it says that "Pride is putting self in the place of God as the center and objective of our life...It is the refusal to recognize our status as creatures, dependent on God for our existence..." And in the list of the ways pride is made manifest in our lives Augustine offers these prompts:

- Deliberate neglect of the worship of God every Sunday in His Church
- Dependence on self rather than on God
- Refusal to recognize God's wisdom, providence and love
- Rejection of God's known will in favor of our own interests or pleasures
- Insisting that other conform to our wishes

So, let us pause and reflect. Then take a moment and thank God that provision for the forgiveness of our sins has been granted us in Jesus Christ. Again, in *Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*, we have this prayer of thanks: "I thank thee, my God, for giving me the forgiveness of my sins, through the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ my Savior. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His Holy Name."

Now let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor:

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

## **The Second Week of Lent Sunday, February 28, 2021**

### **Christlikeness**

*"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." — Philippians 2:5-11*

The English author and theologian, John Stott, said, "There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from His fruit, and no effective witness without His power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead." Christlikeness of character comes when we are yielded to the Holy Spirit, when we allow the Spirit to mold us into the image of Jesus Christ. This is not a matter of imitation, of reading Scripture and then trying to be like Christ. This is a matter of trusting God to transform us, ridding our lives of that which is not of Him, and instilling in us His character, His Spirit. C.S. Lewis, in the book

*Mere Christianity*, said, “Putting on Christ...is not one among many jobs a Christian has to do; and it is not a sort of special exercise for the top class. It is the whole of Christianity. Christianity offers nothing else at all.” Putting on Christ, becoming Christlike, is “the whole of Christianity.”

We see a wonderful example of this in Acts 4:13. Peter and John have been arrested for preaching Jesus Christ in the Temple. The elders sent soldiers and the two were taken prisoner before the High Priest. “Now when [the elders and High Priest] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.” The goal of this transformation into the image of Christ is that our lives, like those of Peter and John, would manifest Jesus to the world. But what does this Christlikeness look like?

In the passage quoted above, St. Paul says that Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant...” To be Christlike is to take on “the form of a servant.” Jesus declared this to His disciples as He issued His call to the twelve. “And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all’” (Mark 9:35). We are to be remade in His image, taking the form of a servant. We are to take on the characteristics of Christ Jesus. Again, not trying to imitate Him and remake ourselves into what we think that He should look like, but allowing Him to make us become like Him. As C.S. Lewis said, “putting on Christ...is the whole of Christianity.”

When the whole Body begins to seek Christlikeness then we will have a sound structure, sturdy walls for the Temple of God. We will all be pursuing the same goal, singing the same tune, and striving for the unity that comes from being one in Him. A.W. Tozer, in his book *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine*, said, “Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”

This week we will look at the virtues characterized in the servanthood of Christ. When Christ begins to remake us in His image, and we become more and more Christlike, the walls of Jerusalem can begin to be rebuilt as one unified whole.

## **Monday of 2 Lent March 1, 2021**

### **Gentleness**

*“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” — Ephesians 4:1-3*

*“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” —Philippians 4:5*

*“Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.” —Titus 3:1-2*

*“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”  
—Matthew 11:29*

“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me...for I am gentle and lowly in heart” Jesus said. A yoke is something that a beast of burden has fastened around its neck so that it can be driven and guided by someone else. A yoke is for one who serves the purposes of the other. That is the character of Christ. He lived to serve. He bore the yoke of His Father, carrying out the work that the Father directed Him to do. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). Christlikeness is servanthood, and that is manifested in gentleness.

A common misconception is that gentleness is weakness or passivity. True gentleness, however, is just the opposite. It requires great strength and self-control. A gentle heart comes from having love for others, a desire to serve the other and to minister to his or her needs. This is shown in our thoughts and in the way we interact with those around us. Gentleness comes from a state of humility, a lowliness in heart. It is a willingness to lay aside our agenda and look to the needs of those around us. That is not something we can do in our fallen nature. We need to be remade in the image of Christ. We need to become Christlike. Through prayer, we can ask God to give us a spirit of gentleness and take away any feelings of self-righteousness. We can ask Him to reveal ways we can show gentleness to others so that we may reflect His character.

Paul tells the Church at Ephesus in the verse above that we are to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness...” Worthiness is not something that we can attain by effort. To be worthy is to be in the One who has ultimate worth. The word worship comes from the Old English word “worthship”—showing worth. To be “worthy” of the calling requires us to be in relationship with God who is the One who is worthy of our worship. When we are walking in our calling then, we are in right relationship with God, worshiping Him, and in right relationship with our neighbor “with all humility and gentleness.”

As we rebuild the walls, in gentleness we accept the yoke of Christ and allow Him to place us where He determines we belong. And in gentleness we accept God’s plan and work closely with those who are around us. This is what Paul was emphasizing when he said that we are to walk in our calling, “bearing with one another in love eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The walls of Jerusalem will stand only when we are at one with God and with one another.

## Tuesday of 2 Lent March 2, 2021

### Honesty

*“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” —2 Timothy 2:15*

*“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” —Colossians 3:9-10*

*“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” —Philippians 4:8*

“Whatever is honorable...think about these things.” It is important to practice honesty; that is what a Christian is expected to do. But to be honest, to be honorable, requires that our character be changed into the likeness of Christ. St. Paul says, “think about these things.” He is exhorting us to make these virtues a part of our very being. Honesty or being honorable therefore, is not simply a matter of speaking truth, it is a heart transformed into the likeness of Christ. In the parable of the sower, Jesus explains that the seeds sown in the good soil “are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15). Honest men and women hold the Word fast in their heart, and from that honest heart will flow the good fruit of God’s grace.

In his letter to Colossai, St. Paul says, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Paul is pointing toward the transformation that we each need in order to truly live the truth in Christ, and practice honesty one with another. It means having a “new nature” that is made “after the image of its creator.” We may think that a “white lie” will win a victory, but it would be pyrrhic at best. In Shakespeare’s play, *Henry VIII*, Cardinal Wolsey has been conniving to encourage the king to divorce his wife in hopes of establishing a marriage alliance with France. His dishonest dealings with the king lead to disaster, and in a moment of humble revelation he says to Cromwell, “I charge thee, fling away ambition. By that sin fell the angels; how can man then, the image of his Maker, hope to win by it?...Corruption wins not more than honesty.”

The practice of honesty in our interactions with others manifests the quality of our heart. It bears fruit. It leaves a legacy. As St. Paul instructed the young clergyman Timothy in the passage above, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” We are servants of Christ, workmen called to rightly handle the word of truth. We are expected to be honest in our dealings with one another. The walls of the Temple will not stand if they are built on dishonest dealings. Think on these things.



## Wednesday of 2 Lent March 3, 2021

### Faithfulness

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”*  
—Matthew 23:23

*“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”* —1 Corinthians 4:1-2

Four times a year we renew our baptismal covenant: on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, at the Easter Vigil, on the Day of Pentecost, and on All Saints’ Sunday. In that covenant renewal we profess our faith by reciting the Apostles’ Creed, then we make a series of five vows (BCP p. 304). We promise that “with God’s help” we will:

- continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers
- persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord
- proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ
- seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves
- strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being

Faithfulness is keeping the promises and vows that we make. Are we keeping these vows that we renew quarterly each year? Or are we slipping on a few, making excuses for why that might not be a problem? A husband or wife who slips on the vows of matrimony to “be faithful to him (her) as long as you both shall live” (BCP p. 424) is considered an unfaithful spouse. We are the Bride of Christ. Are we being a faithful spouse, keeping the vows we have made?

Faithfulness is not easy when we try to do it in our own strength. That is why the Apostles’ Creed is contained in the Daily Office services of Morning and Evening Prayer. We renew our covenant four times a year, and we renew our commitment to God twice a day! We need to make a commitment daily to remain in faithfulness in our walk with Jesus Christ. Faithfulness is to be loyal, dependable, and true to one’s commitments.

The Greek word for faithfulness means dependability, trustworthiness. Can those around you depend on you to keep your word? Are you trustworthy? Do you do what you say you will do, when you said you would do it? Jesus said, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much” (Luke 16:10). True faithfulness begins with your commitment to Jesus. Are you faithful in keeping your commitment to worship, to the breaking of bread, and to your daily prayers? Without that relationship with God all other commitments will falter.

We are striving to be Christlike, servants of the Most High God. Our Christ is the God who keeps covenant, and He is faithful. Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 2:13) that even “if we are faithless, He remains faithful—for He cannot deny himself.” And in 1 Thessalonians 5:24 he said, “He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” Literally, faithfulness is the state of being full of faith in the sense of steady devotion to God and to those around us.

If the walls of the Temple are to stand we need to know that those around us are going to stand with us. And the other “bricks” in the wall around us need to have the confidence that we will stand fast in the faith regardless of the circumstances. Will we continue in the worship and prayers of the Church? Will we resist evil, proclaiming and living the Word, loving our neighbors as ourselves? Will we strive for justice, and respect the dignity of every human being? In a nutshell will our hearts be knit to the One who has called us into covenant relationship?

To be Christlike we must be in Christ. That is the covenant that we profess and renew four times a year. Are we living in that covenant relationship?

## **Thursday of 2 Lent March 4, 2021**

### **Goodness**

*“Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” —Ephesians 5:8-10*

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...” —Psalm 23:6*

In Genesis 1:31 it says, “God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good.” Everything that He made was good because it is in God's nature to do what is good. His goodness became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and any person who is in Christ will pursue that same goodness.

The Greek word for goodness conveys the sense that the thing, or the person, who is good is wholly pure and righteous. Literally, goodness is godliness. It is being who and what God created us to be. He made us, and it was good. It is important to note that none of us are currently in a state of perfection, of being perfectly good. We are fallen creatures, and we are in dire need of being remade in His image. Goodness, therefore, is part of the process of becoming holy, of pursuing excellence in our relationship with God. It is not merely a matter of moral behavior, but of transformation in our character. It is not something that we can accomplish by our own will or power. To be truly good we must rely upon God's grace.

Don Moen sings that “God is good all the time, He puts a song of praise in this heart of mine.” God is good, and he puts not only a song of praise but His very being into us by the Holy Spirit. When we are walking in the power of the spirit, the nature of God will become more and more evident in our lives. We can exhibit the goodness of God in our relationship with others when we let God do His work through us. Saint Paul exhorts the church at Ephesus to “Walk as children of the light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” The fruit of light is the fruit which comes from the One Who is the Light of the World. That is why we find “goodness” in the list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

An essential characteristic of Christlikeness, therefore, is goodness, because God is good, and everything He made is good. So for us to live in God's goodness we must live in such a way that if people should see us they will see God's goodness in us. Another way to describe this type of virtue is to say that goodness is the love of God put into action. Bishop Desmond

Tutu said, “Do your little bit of good where you are; it is those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.” As noted before, none of this originates in us, because we are fallen creatures. Goodness originates in the One Who is Good. When we are walking in step with Him, then He will look on all that He has created through us and declare, “behold it is very good.”

## **Friday of 2 Lent March 5, 2021**

### **Graciousness**

*“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”  
—Colossians 4:6*

*“For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.” —1 Peter 2:19-20*

At the beginning of this series of meditations it was noted that this past year has been difficult for everyone globally. There has been much turmoil, suffering, sorrow, and death. How has the Church handled these crises? In truth, not well at all. Though St. Paul declares that we are to obey the governing authorities (Romans 13:1), many local churches defied the government’s restrictions during the pandemic, and some individual Christians claimed unjust suffering at the hands of the government. Many Christians have struggled with depression, despondency, and doubt. Families have severed and marriages have broken. But St. Paul says in the passage above that the “gracious thing” for the Christian to do is to endure sorrow and suffering. “This is a gracious thing in the sight of God.” But how?

The Greek adjective “gracious” comes from the noun for grace. The way the adjective is used in the New Testament gives the sense that one who is gracious of heart is someone who is “full of grace”. Something that is full has no room for anything else. The one who is full of grace has no room for self, sin, or the devil. There are three people in the New Testament who were declared to be “full of grace.” In John 1:14, it says of Jesus, the Word, that He “became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Of His mother Mary, Luke recounts the angel’s greeting: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). And in Acts 6:8, Luke describes the ministry of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, saying, “Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.” But what about us? In John’s Gospel, after declaring that Jesus was full of grace and truth, the evangelist says that “from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace” (1:16). And that this “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). When we are in Christ, we receive “grace upon grace.”

In building the walls of the Temple, we must, as has been stated, use the most excellent building materials. There must be no impurities in the clay, or the bricks will crumble and the walls will collapse. The process of becoming Christlike requires our humility. We must be willing to recognize that there are things in our lives which are not of Christ, and these impurities must be removed, burned out by the fire of the Holy Spirit. It is not something we can accomplish by our own efforts. As St. James declares in his epistle, “He gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (4:6). This is

not a one time experience. We must continue to grow into that Christlikeness. St. Peter exhorts the saints to, “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). We must grow in grace.

When we have grown in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, then the fullness of that grace will be self-evident in our lives and our dealings with others in the Body and with those outside. Paul exhorted the church at Colossae (4:6), “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” And when we have grown “full of grace” then we can, as Paul told young Titus (2:7-8), “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works...and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.”

## **Saturday of 2 Lent March 6, 2021**

### **Confess**

As we reflect upon the virtues of this week, we can recognize from the Word that God is calling us to be remade in the likeness of Christ Jesus. This remaking is a matter of transformation, a purifying of our character, allowing God to burn away that which does not belong, and filling our hearts—our lives—with Him.

When we are honest, we can admit that we are not always Christlike in our actions. And even when we, on occasion, behave in a manner worthy of Christ, our motives are not always pure. We may appear gentle, honest, or good, but our hearts are not always in line with our actions. We can become envious of others, dissatisfied with our place in the walls of the Temple. We become jealous of another, and in our hearts holding others in contempt, and ridiculing them behind their back. However, our God is gracious. Through prayer, we can ask God to give us a spirit of gentleness and take away any feelings of self-righteousness. We can ask Him to work His transformation in our hearts, and to reveal ways we can show the virtues of this week to others so that we may reflect Christ’s character.

But it all begins with repentance. We have strayed from His way like lost sheep, following our own devices and desires. When we hold on to those desires, God will not try to overrule us and force Himself upon us. When we humbly admit our need for His grace, He will flood our lives with His love, filling us with His grace and truth. Then the transformation can begin.

So, let us confess our sins, and ask God to begin transforming us into the likeness of His Son Jesus Christ, filling us with the virtues of His character.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. O Lord, have mercy on us. By your grace cleanse and purify us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and grant, O most merciful Father, for His sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. *Amen.*

## **The Third Week of Lent Sunday, March 7, 2021**

### **Living in the Moment**

*“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” — Matthew 6:34*

The Episcopal Church of the Ascension, Dallas, my home parish, was established in a farmhouse on Central Expressway in 1960. At that time, this area of north Dallas was totally undeveloped. In 1964, we bought 3 acres of land on the other side of the highway for \$30,000 and built a very nice sanctuary. Less than 20 years later the city of Dallas had expanded and the corridor of Central Expressway became prime real estate. The diocese received an offer to relocate the church to Greenville Avenue. The capital investment company would buy the new property for us, and would pay \$3,000,000 to purchase our current building. The Sunday Bishop Davies came to the parish to tell the congregation that he had accepted the offer, he said, “Every person in this room has visions of what the new church will look like. Some want us to rebuild the church on the new site exactly as it is here. Others have visions of a gothic cathedral. And others want an ultramodern, multi-use facility. What we should all be asking is, ‘What does God want?’”

These are anxious times. Over the past year many have asked, “When will things get back to the way they were?” We want our lives to return to “normal”. We want to return to church as it was. That is not going to happen. God is dismantling the Church. There are things about the Church that have needed changing for a long time. There are new things that God wants to put in place. And we all have visions of what we want the Church to be. But God is in the process of rebuilding the Church in the image of Christ. We should be asking, as Bishop Davies exhorted my home church, “What does God want?”

God is rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem; He is reconstructing His Temple. The old walls are being dismantled, and construction on the new walls has begun. We can hope to revisit the past; we can long for some brighter future; or we can live in the moment, fully trusting that God is doing better things for us right now than we can either ask for or imagine. Jesus said in the passage quoted above, “do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” These are troubling days, but Christ is sufficient for the day. Time and eternity intersect in this moment. When we live for the past, or have our eyes fixed on the future, we miss the visitation of Christ in the present.

The rebuilding process may be long and it will require of us patience. We must give God the time and space to do His work in us, remaking us in His image. We don’t know what needs to be done. We need to humbly submit to His plan and purpose for our lives and the life of His Church moment by moment. For those who are in Christ, there is “fullness of joy”, just as He promised (John 15:11; 16:24). To know Christ is to be confident in His ability to provide for our every need in every circumstance. St. Paul wrote to the Church at Philippi from prison during a very troubling time of persecution. He could not be with the Philippians face to face (and Zoom wasn’t available at that time). They faced the prospect of losing everything, even their lives. But Paul assured them, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and

count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him..." (3:8). These are words of hope for today.

So let us look at the virtues to which God is calling us in our present circumstances. And let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem with the materials that He has chosen, according to His plan for His Temple.

## **Monday of 3 Lent March 8, 2021**

### **Hope**

*"For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." — Romans 8:22-25*

*"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."  
— 1 John 3:1-3*

When St. Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy, he opened his first letter with these words: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope..." When we think of hope, we usually think in terms of expectation. But what Paul is saying here is that Jesus is "our hope". He is the incarnation of all of the virtues upon which we are contemplating in these meditations. He is the incarnation of the virtues we are pursuing in our calling to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. To acquire these virtues we need the One who is the very manifestation of them. Do we want a large dose of hope in these troubled times? Look no further. Jesus is our hope.

We have been exhorted to pursue excellence, and to be remade in the image of Christ. And now we are being encouraged to live in the moment, for it is in the present that God meets His people. He has given us instruction in the past and the promise that "when he appears we shall be like him", but it is in the present moment that our hope in Him will purify us. For St. John says, "everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure." If we are going to be built into the walls of His New Jerusalem, we must be purified. The dross must be burned away, and the bricks fully cleansed.

This is what we have been talking about. God is purifying His Church—His people. We are God's children now. And He is transforming us to be fully like Him! Paul tells the Church at Rome that we ourselves have the firstfruits of the Spirit. When our lives are purified by the Holy Spirit we can begin to manifest those fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

It is not easy to walk in hope when things are coming against us from a multitude of directions. And right now, between the pandemic, political turmoil, and social unrest, many have lost hope. Schools are reeling, students are struggling, jobs have been lost, businesses closed, and people are dying in record numbers. Where is the hope? And how does one manifest the "firstfruits" in these uncertain times? When our focus turns to the things of this world it is easy to lose hope. But here is the truth for those who are in Christ: Jesus is our hope.

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews said, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:1). That word substance can also be translated as “assurance”, or “reality”. When we stand in Jesus, who is the incarnation of hope, we know that His promises are sure, and that there is NOTHING that can come against us that He is not capable of carrying us through. It is a temptation to try to take control and make things happen, to correct the problem ourselves in our own strength; but in HIM we have hope that He will triumph over our circumstances. That is why St. Paul repeatedly tells the Church at Ephesus to “stand”. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil...and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore...” (6:11-14). We don’t stand in the past or the future. We stand in the present moment, fully covered in the armor of God.

Jesus is our hope. When we stand in Him we can be purified, strengthened, and encouraged. There is no need to be afraid of the past, the present circumstances, or the future. Our hope is in Christ Jesus, and He will clothe us in the full armor of God.

## **Tuesday of 3 Lent March 9, 2021**

### **Joy**

*“And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” — Nehemiah 8:10*

*“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” — John 15:11*

*“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance...” — Romans 5:3*

*“Rejoice always” — 1 Thessalonians 5:16*

*“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.” — Philippians 3:1*

The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” The next three verses on the list of shortest verses are 1 Thessalonians 5:16; 5:17; and 5:20. Paul had a lot to say, and wanted to stress his point with short, concise, emphatic statements. He gives fifteen imperatives in ten verses. “Rejoice always!” is the shortest verse, but not in any way the least in importance. He doesn’t tell the Church to be happy. He says, “rejoice always.” This is a choice that we make regardless of the circumstances: to find joy—the joy of the Lord—in the moment.

The Joy of the Lord is your strength. It is the Lord’s joy. And He wants to pour that joy into us. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” This joy that we are being exhorted to embrace is a two way experience. We are commanded to rejoice and to live the immediate moments of our lives in the joy of the Lord; but the Lord also experiences joy in our relationship with Him. When God looks at us, He rejoices. We are the Bride of Christ. We are loved! And the Scripture promises that He rejoices over us as a bridegroom rejoices at the sight of his bride. The prophet Isaiah said, “...as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (62:5). We want the current suffering to end, but joy is not dependent upon temporal happiness. Joy is not the absence of suffering. Joy is the presence of Christ in our lives. When we have the risen Christ in our lives we have assurance of God’s redeeming love. Mother Teresa said, “A joyful heart is the

inevitable result of a heart burning with love. Never let anything so fill you with sorrow as to make you forget the joy of the Christ risen.”

We cannot conjure up this type of joy. We cannot do this in our own power. We rely on God’s grace to carry us when temporal events conspire to discourage us. This is why Paul tells the Church at Rome during a time of persecution that, “Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings...” And why is all of this possible? “Because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (5:2-5).

There is an old house just off of Dryman Mountain Road. Over the past fifteen years I have watched this abandoned home slowly collapse on itself. It is uncared for and as I described it to someone one day, it is “a sad old house”. As I meditated on joy and the walls of Jerusalem, the Lord reminded me of this home and of how I described it to my friend. The Lord does not want a sad old house for His Temple. He wants walls filled with joy. The joy of the Lord is our strength. A temple built in joy will be strong. “Rejoice in the Lord”. And may His joy be in us.

### **Wednesday of 3 Lent March 10, 2021**

#### **Humility**

*“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” — Micah 6:8*

*“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” — Philippians 2:3-4*

To walk humbly with our God is a daunting prospect when we recognize that there was no one born of woman who was more humble than Jesus. He was God, but was willing to take our human form. As St. Paul says, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). He came to serve (Matt. 20:28). He entered Jerusalem riding on an ass (Zechariah 9:9). He washed His disciples’ feet (John 13:5). The Son of God did not choose to be born into luxury or even in the capital city of Jerusalem. He chose Bethlehem. As the prophet Micah says of the city of David, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel...” (5:2). Rich Mullins, in his final album entitled “The Jesus Record”, says of Jesus that “the hope of the world rests on the shoulders of a homeless man”, and that “He was a man of no reputation.” How can I walk humbly with the One who is humility incarnate?

The key to this humble walk is living in the moment. Too often, we guard our hearts and our reputations. When we think that we have been slighted, overlooked, or otherwise humiliated, we tend to contemplate comebacks to the slights, or plan ways to rescue our hurt emotions. That is living for the future, while trying to redeem the past. That is not living in the moment. Or we make plans for ways and means to get noticed, for our talents to be put on display. Again, looking to the future, not living in the moment. St. Paul, in the passage quoted above



says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Living in the moment means that we need not be afraid of our past failings and sins, for they have been redeemed in Christ. We need not fear the future, for if we are following in the footsteps of Jesus we will not falter. That is what Micah declared when he prophesied that we are to “walk humbly with our God.”

The walls of the New Jerusalem cannot be built on pride. For “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6 cf. Prov. 3:34). A proud brick will crumble under its own weight. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). We each have a place—a ministry—within the Church, within the Body of Christ, that we are called to fulfill. It may not be as glamorous as someone else’s. It may even be a behind-the-scenes ministry which accrues no notice. But, in the overall scheme of the Body, there are no unimportant parts. What you bring to the Church—the walls of this Temple—is absolutely essential to the whole. As St. Paul exhorts, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...” (Romans 12:3-6). We need each other. We need to work together in humility, to stand firm on the foundation of Jesus and the apostles and prophets. Then, alone, will the walls be plumb and the New Jerusalem secure.

## **Thursday of 3 Lent March 11, 2021**

### **Patience**

*“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” — Romans 12:12*

*“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”  
— 1 Thessalonians 5:14*

One of the most difficult verses of Scripture for me to understand is Romans 8:25 “But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” I find this passage difficult because it is not something that I experience readily. If I do not see the things that I hope for, I become impatient. In my fallen nature I want it NOW. Many of you have heard me say, “Don’t pray for patience because God will give you opportunities to practice it.” This past year has been a never-ending opportunity for all of us to practice patience. And we need to pray for more.

In the Romans 12 verse quoted above, the apostle commands that we be “patient in tribulation, [and] be constant in prayer.” Living in the moment calls for a daily appeal for patience. St. Ambrose said, “Patience is greatly approved of by God, for by daily waiting it desires the coming of the kingdom of God and does not doubt just because it delays.” The practice of keeping the Daily Office either in the Prayer Book or the Liturgy of the Hours grounds us in the practice of patience. It helps us recognize the need for God’s presence throughout the hours of the day to meet the challenges of the day.

But patience is also an interactive exercise. Miranda works with the public and I must interact with people both within and outside of the Church. For both of us, particularly as introverts, this can be challenging. We sometimes sigh to each other and bemoan that “This job would be so easy if it weren’t for the people.” Then we remind each other that this job wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for the people. We need to be patient with others in order to take our part in the walls of Jerusalem. St. Paul reflects this truth in his appeal to the Church at Thessalonica to be patient with each other. The walls of the Temple will only stand if the bricks of the wall fit smoothly together. Paul, therefore, says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:12-14). We may not always agree with those who “are over [us] in the Lord”, and we may find it difficult to deal with the idle, fainthearted, and weak among us. But we are called to be “patient with them all.” That can be a difficult prospect. But with God “all things are possible.”

I do not always find it easy to “hope for what we do not see, [and] wait for it with patience.” But with daily prayer, and God’s grace, I can live more closely to the ideal of living in the moment. Prayer is work. The word liturgy means “the work of prayer” or the “work of the people”. Walking in patience can be hard work. St. Chrysostom said, “Hope is feeling confidence in things to come...The name of *patience* belongs to hard work and to much endurance. But even this He grants to the one who hopes in order to comfort the weary soul.” We may have weary souls, but by God’s grace we will “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, [and] be constant in prayer.”

## **Friday of 3 Lent March 12, 2021**

### **Excellence**

*“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence...” — 2 Peter 1:3*

During the first week of Lent we examined the pursuit of excellence in living our lives in Christ by putting on godly virtue. What we are examining here is the virtue of excellence which is the “knowledge of Him”—His power at work in us through our intimate relationship with Him. This virtue is the exercise of “His divine power [by which He] has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to His own glory and excellence...” God has called us, and has granted us “all things that pertain to life and godliness.” Excellence, therefore, comes from Jesus. It is the gift of His glory.

It is interesting to note that this verse from St. Peter’s second letter is the only place in Holy Scripture where “glory” and “excellence” are used together. Peter is telling us something new and refreshing about living in the moment in Christ. We are called by Him to participate in His excellence for His glory. The virtue of excellence is not an achievement of our effort—it is a gift! To participate in the excellence of God’s glory, His splendor, His radiance, His love, is a gift of God’s life giving grace given to us in Jesus Christ.

St. Paul refers to the virtue of excellence in Philippians 1:9-11, where he says, “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Paul exhorts us to “approve what is excellent”. The word excellent comes from the root meaning something strong or powerful. To approve of something excellent is to cherish the power and sovereignty of God at work in us in this present moment. The excellent things we are called to approve are the things that are essential to the Church. When Paul describes the gifts of the Spirit to the Church at Corinth, he says that he will show them “a still more excellent way” to use those gifts (1 Cor. 12:31). The excellent way is the more powerful way to employ the gifts. And that way is the way of love described in 1 Corinthians 13.

The virtue of excellence, then, is the virtue of God’s strength at work in us for His glory. And that virtue is manifested in His love working through us for the building up of the Body of Christ. As Paul says in that passage in 1 Corinthians, we exercise the virtue of excellence “for the common good” (12:7). Jesus not only revealed the glory of the Father in His ministry, He revealed His excellence in power over sickness, demons, and nature. By “His own glory and excellence” He performed signs and wonders; He spoke with authority; healed the sick; raised the dead; and forgave sin. And the power of the virtue of His excellence has been granted to us by the Holy Spirit. St. John declares in the opening chapter of his Gospel that “to all who received Him, who believed in His Name, He gave power to become children of God” (1:14). This is the virtue of the “knowledge of Him”. As a bride is “known” by her bridegroom so we are called to know and be known by Christ. That is the grace of living in the moment with Christ, touching and being touched by His glory and excellence.

## **Saturday of 3 Lent March 13, 2021**

### **Confess**

*“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...” —Romans 12:4-6*

We are called to rejoice in hope, be filled with the joy of the Lord, and to practice humility and patience. We have been called to the exercise of the virtue of excellence. And we have not always done well in this calling. When things do not go as we hoped and when our patience is tried, it is easy to get frustrated and angry. That is our self-seeking desire rearing its ugly head. We want these obstacles to disappear. We want to retaliate against these threats to our will. And left unchecked, we begin to live outside the moment attempting to take control of the situation.

During this year of tribulation we have all been called upon to make sacrifices. We have each been faced with a variety of difficulties. And sadly, many who profess the Name of Christ, have rebelled against these limits on our freedom in Christ, and have sought to force our will upon the situation and upon others around us. Annoyance at the contrariness of things has led to cynicism and grumbling. God is not in favor of His children grumbling (Exodus 16:1-12; John 6:43; 1 Cor. 10:10; Jude 16).

So, let us pause and reflect on the virtues we have examined this week. And let us ask God for the grace to lay down our will, and to forgive our grumbling hearts. Let us seek the God who loves us with unquenchable love, and ask for renewed joy and hope, the patience to persevere, the humility to accept our place in His renewed Jerusalem, and the gift of His glory and excellence.

O God of Glory, forgive us for our impatience and doubt, our despair and grumbling hearts, and grant us the true grace of your love, that we may know the joy of your salvation, and the hope of glory in Your Son Jesus Christ. May we know You and the power of Your Spirit working in and through us for the building up of Your Church, the rebuilding of Your Temple in the image of Christ. Help us, by Your grace to live in the moment and to see You at work in our lives and in the lives of those around us. And may You receive all of the praise both now and forevermore. Amen.

## **The Fourth Week of Lent Sunday, March 14, 2021**

### **Becoming Holy**

*“He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” — Ephesians 1:4*

*“...as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”  
— 1 Peter 1:15-16*

*“For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” — Leviticus 11:44  
“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”  
— Leviticus 19:2*

As we come to the halfway point in this Lenten season it appears that we have been called to a formidable task. How can we even begin to meet the demands of being built into a holy Temple for the Lord? We would inevitably come up short if we were to attempt to meet the challenge of pursuing excellence and becoming Christlike in our own power. Without God, we would fail. However, we know that with God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26; Mark 9:23; 10:27).

The reconstruction of God’s Holy Temple, then, can only be achieved when we are submitted to God’s purpose and plan for each one of us. Each brick must be made of the right material, and any impurities must be burned away. It is important, therefore, for God to cleanse and purify us that we may be built by Him into His Holy Temple. In the Ephesians passage quoted above, we are told by Paul that “we should be holy and blameless...” We are to be set apart by God, for His Kingdom. Another way to state that is found in the Rule of St. Benedict (4:20-21): “Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways. The love of Christ must be preferred to all else.” When we put Christ first, we will behave in a way that differs from the behavior of those who are in the world and without Christ. This process of becoming holy is what we will examine as we study the virtues of this coming week.

Today is known as “Laetare Sunday”. The name comes from the introit (the beginning of the liturgy) in the Latin Mass for the Fourth Sunday in Lent. As the clergy enter the sanctuary, these verses are sung:

Rejoice, O Jerusalem; and gather round, all you who love her; rejoice in gladness, after having been in sorrow; exult and be replenished with the consolation flowing from her motherly bosom. I rejoiced when it was said unto me: ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’ (Isaiah 66:10; Psalm 122:1)

The Lord wants us to be “replenished” and to persevere. There is more work to be accomplished in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. So “Let us go to the house of the Lord” for it is there that we will receive the encouragement, provision, and replenishment necessary to do the work that God has called us to do.

As we move forward through this pilgrimage of Lent, let us look at what God desires of us in becoming holy, and let us rejoice! For God is doing His work in us that we may be remade in His image. As St. Peter reminds us in his first epistle (2:5), “you yourselves like living stones are being built up into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” God is doing the work and we are being built up. He is making us holy so that we may be built into a “spiritual house”. For it is “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6). All of this does appear to be a formidable task if we move our focus away from Him. But as Jesus declared to His disciples, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27).

## **Monday of 4 Lent March 15, 2021**

### **Love**

*“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” — 1 John 4:7-8*

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” — John 15:12*

As we rebuild the Temple of the Lord, we are being remade in the image of Christ. A crucial part of that remaking is the purifying of our lives that we may become holy as He is holy. It is a process. We are being set apart from the world; not removed from the world, but becoming different from those around us, and wholly belonging to Christ. The world no longer has any claim upon us. But though the world may no longer lay claim to us, we are called to be in the world and to love those who are still mired in its clutches.

But how do we do this? The learning is in the doing. We learn to love the unlovable. C.S. Lewis said, “The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.” This is exactly what Jesus told us in Luke’s Gospel: “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (6:27-36).

Truly it is difficult to love some people, but as we see from the example of Jesus and the truth of God's word we can do it. He gives us the power through the Holy Spirit to demonstrate compassion and spend time with social outcasts just as Jesus did. We can do a multitude of things that we think we cannot do if we just call upon the Holy Spirit to work in and through us to do it. God loves the unlovable and He loves us ... even though we are sometimes unlovable too. This is how Jesus loved, and He commanded us to do the same, saying, "just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). Jesus was willing to die for us when we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). Can we not be bothered to make simple sacrifices for those unlovable ones around us? We are to love one another so that the world will see Jesus manifested in our lives—to see that we are different. Why would they want to be part of a Church that looks no different from the institutions of the world?

As was noted in the meditation on Thursday, February 18, love for one another is the mortar that holds the bricks of the Temple together. But just as mortar which is applied correctly not only holds the bricks in place, but also enhances the finished look of the structure, so our love holds the members of the Body together and makes a Temple attractive to the world. The world is looking. But what are they seeing? In the second chapter of Peter's first epistle he talks about the "living stones" being built up into a "spiritual house" and that we are to "keep our conduct among the Gentiles honorable..." He explains, "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Peter 2:15-17).

There has been a lot of talk this past year about freedom. People have argued that their freedom is being taken away by the government. There have been Christians who refused to obey the authorities and have gathered in large crowds, and there were those who refused to wear masks, enabling the spread of the Covid virus. The world is watching! Are we using our freedom as "a cover-up for evil"? Jesus said that we are to love others "as I have loved you." He sacrificed everything to give us the opportunity to have eternal life. To be Christlike is to sacrifice ourselves to give life to another.

We are called to be set apart, to be different from the world. "Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways" (Rule St. Benedict 4:21), "that we should be holy and blameless before Him" (Ephesians 1:4). It's about relationship. Yes, we are called to love one another in the Church, but we are also called in Christlikeness to love the unlovable: the refugees, the racially different, political opponents, and our unruly neighbors. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). Love in action is the beginning step of becoming holy.

## Tuesday of 4 Lent March 16, 2021

### Thankfulness

*“...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:18*

*“...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful...And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”  
— Colossians 3:14-17*

*“...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” — Philippians 4:6*

*“...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” — Ephesians 5:18-21*

“Betsie, there’s no way even God can make me grateful for a flea,” said Corrie. Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie were sent to a Nazi concentration camp during World War II for hiding a Jewish family in their home. They were able to smuggle a Bible into the camp and had just read the Thessalonians passage quoted above. “Give thanks in *all* circumstances,” Betsie corrected. “It doesn’t say, ‘in pleasant circumstances.’ Fleas are part of this place where God has put us.” So they stood between the stacks of bunks and gave thanks for fleas. A few weeks later Betsie said, “Well, I’ve found out. The supervisor wouldn’t step through the door and neither would the guards. And you know why?” Betsie could not keep the triumph from her voice as she exclaimed, “Because of the fleas! That’s what the supervisor said: ‘That place is crawling with fleas!’”

In this troubling year past, have we been “giving thanks always and for everything” as Paul commanded the Church at Ephesus? It is difficult in the midst of a crisis to see the bounty of God, just as Corrie couldn’t at first see the blessing of the fleas. But as Paul reminded the Ephesians, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Ephesians 1:3-4). Becoming “holy and blameless” is a process. We may not see the fullness of His blessings in the moment, but in our learning how to live a life of holiness we are called to “not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” The temptation is to make our supplications to the Lord with grumbling about our circumstances. But “in everything...with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Giving thanks to God in difficult situations is contrary to the way of the world. Paul says, in the Colossians passage quoted above that “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” That’s different! We can only do that if we are “filled with the Spirit”. D.L. Moody wrote that “Before we pray that God would fill us, I believe we ought to pray Him to empty us.” That is the purifying process. To be remade in the image of Christ our fallen human nature must first be removed. We must be emptied of ourselves, our worldly ways, and open ourselves to be filled “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”

**Wednesday of 4 Lent**  
**March 17, 2021**

**Forgiveness**

*“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor; for we are members one of another...Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another; tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” — Ephesians 4:25-32*

*“If one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”  
— Colossians 3:13*

Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, knew the power of forgiveness. Once, a friend brought up a cruel deed someone had done to Clara. Barton claimed she did not remember the deed done. Insistent, her friend exclaimed, “Don’t you remember the wrong that was done to you?” “No,” Barton answered, “I distinctly remember forgetting that.” This is the intent of St. Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesians in the quote above. He says, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” We cannot hold onto these wrongs. We must “...forgive one another as God in Christ forgave [us].” If He hold onto the wrongs done to us, it doesn’t hurt the other person, it is a burden that we will continue to carry, keeping us separated from the other members of the Body of Christ. The walls we are building for the New Jerusalem are not walls of separation from each other. These walls are built to separate the virtues of Christ from “all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander”. Impurities must be kept outside the walls.

Jesus told the crowd gathered for the sermon on the mount, “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15). We set the example for how God should forgive us! When we hold onto unforgiveness of another, we are keeping that brokenness within ourselves. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22). The sin is not retained by the other, but by us. And that dividing wall of hostility is once again raised, separating the members of the Body one from another.

In the 40+ years that I have been in parish ministry I have often found it helpful to apologize for things that I have never done. It certainly does me no harm to say, “Please forgive me”. To protest my innocence would only lead to an argument. The goal of forgiveness is not to set the record straight; it is to heal the brokenness of the relationship. The walls of the Temple will not stand if the bricks cannot reside one with the other. It is not enough to say, “I’m sorry” when someone confronts you with a wrong you have done to them. Saying “I’m sorry” maintains your control of the situation. It is far more efficacious to ask for forgiveness. When we say, “Please forgive me” we give to the other the control of the situation. We give them the power to say, “I forgive you”, or to reject your apology. Seldom in my experience do people simply reject out of hand a request for forgiveness. Requesting the grace of forgiveness from the other leads to reconciliation and healing in the relationship.



The challenge was stated by St. Paul in the Colossians passage above: "... as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." Jesus was willing to die to forgive us. Can we not die to ourselves and ask for the grace of God to forgive one another for the wrongs done to us?

## Thursday of 4 Lent March 18, 2021

### Purity

*"He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend." — Proverbs 22:11*

*"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."  
— 1 Timothy 4:12*

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the tradition in the West is that a bride wears white at her wedding because "white has long been associated with purity and virtue." We are the Bride of Christ. We are called to present ourselves pure and holy to the Lord. As St. John tells us in the Revelation (19:8), the Bride of Christ makes herself ready, and "it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure". And St. Paul tells the Church at Corinth, "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband" (2 Corinthians 11:2). But alas, the Bride has shown herself to be less than pure. One of the greatest threats to the walls of the Church is syncretism. When we blend non-Christian ideas with the Christian faith, the faith becomes impure. The walls of the Temple that God is rebuilding must be pure and undefiled. We must be different from the world, not tempted to bring the things of this world into the Temple.

The problem of syncretism has been profoundly displayed in recent events here in America. Stanley Hauerwas, Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke University, in an article entitled "The End of American Protestantism", said

America is a synthesis of evangelical Protestantism, republican political ideology and commonsense moral reasoning. Americans were able to synthesize these antithetical traditions by making their faith in God indistinguishable from their loyalty to a country that insured them that they had the right to choose which god they would or would not believe in...Protestantism came to the land we now call America to make America Protestant...

But in the process the church in America became American.

What we have seen is an obscuring of the Gospel by focusing on single issues which are important but not the totality of the Gospel. When we become so singularly focused we lose sight of the greater picture of what the Church is and begin to allow unrighteous behavior to infiltrate the walls of the Temple. Instead of creating pure bricks, the end result of this incipient syncretism is a false gospel that becomes a stumbling block. Ed Stetzer, Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, said, "When anything is added to the message of the Gospel, the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ is compromised and another gospel can be created that is, well, actually not *the* gospel." (*Christianity Today*, July 15, 2014).

The process of becoming holy requires us to allow the Holy Spirit to bring His fire and purify us, to burn away the things that do not belong. As was noted in the first paragraph above, the Bride of Christ makes herself ready by clothing "herself with fine linen, bright and pure". The solution to ridding our lives of the impurities brought about by syncretism is not adhering to a singular theological litmus test. St. John tells us that "the fine linen is the righteous deeds of

the saints” (Revelation 19:8). We are called to be Christlike in our behavior as well as our theology. Again St. John says, “...we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

It’s about relationship. As the bricks of the wall, we must be in right relationship with the Cornerstone, living in covenant with Him. We are to “seek and serve Christ in all persons... and respect the dignity of every human being.” But the purity we seek is not simply about having a right theology or dealing morally with one another. It is about being intimately wed to the Bridegroom. Then, He will clothe us, His Bride, in “fine linen, bright and pure”.

## **Friday of 4 Lent March 19, 2021**

### **Beauty/Loveliness**

*“Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.” (Peter is speaking of women here, but this applicable to all who make up the Bride of Christ)*  
— 1 Peter 3:4

*“I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.”*  
— Song of Solomon 1:5

Laura Krauss Calenberg is a fashion model. She is often seen on the runways of Europe and often graces the covers of magazines. She is famous, beautiful, and rich. She was also utterly miserable walking the runways of the modeling world. She had met the Lord as a teenager, but over time she bought the lie of the world which described beauty and happiness as outward trappings. Then she hit bottom. She returned to the Lord and is now a witness to the modeling world. She says, “*What is beauty?* It is not physical appearance. It’s what’s found inside, what’s in your heart...Knowing God personally brings beauty, because knowing He loves you and accepts you brings security and self-esteem to your life. That enables you to be free to accept and love yourself and your shortcomings.” She rededicated her life to the Lord, and found true beauty in Him.

I am often teased because I greet women as the beautiful and talented, or men as the handsome and talented. We have been conditioned to believe beauty is on the surface. That is simply not true. When I look at one who is in Christ, I see Christ in them. I see Christ, the perfection of beauty, made manifest in them. Our beauty is not found in what we put on, or what we acquire, or how physically attractive we are. Beauty is found, for both men and women, in who we are in Christ Jesus. Christ alone makes us beautiful in God’s sight.

The passage from Song of Solomon above is one of Bishop Jones’ favorites. On his Aslan Roars site he said the following:

We have enough battles to fight in the Christian life without fighting the windmills of a false identity. Knowing who we are in Christ is imperative in our journey. It is true, that darkness does dwell in my flesh, but it is also true that I have a new heart that longs for God’s presence and God’s will. As a matter of fact, my heart is fashioned to be a dwelling place for the presence of Christ in the person of The Holy Spirit...The Hebrew word “lovely” in

verse 5, means “to be fitting, to be a right fit, something comfortable and inviting.” It carries the idea of “Home.” God created you and me to be a Dwelling Place for Him. We are all fighting windmills right now. But we need to know that when God looks at us, He sees the depth of beauty within us. As Solomon says later in his song (4:9), “You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes...”

But it is not only imperative that we recognize that we are found beautiful in the eyes of the Lord. In our covenant with Christ we are to “seek and serve Christ in all persons”, and to “respect the dignity of every human being”. Mother Teresa lived that covenant vow. She said that she saw Jesus in every man, woman, or child she met, and she treated them accordingly. To her, all the broken people whom she served were “Jesus in His distressing disguise”. The prophet Isaiah said of Jesus in the fourth Servant Song (53:2), “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” But the majesty and glory of God was found in Him. When we are in Christ, that same majesty and glory can be found in us. It is a process to be remade in His image. But it begins with accepting who we are in Christ Jesus. May our hearts, as the bishop said, be “fashioned to be a dwelling place for the presence of Christ in the person of The Holy Spirit”.

## **Saturday of 4 Lent March 20, 2021**

### **Confess**

We have been given the challenge this week of becoming holy. Though it may seem an impossible task, it is not. In the power and grace of God, and the working of His Holy Spirit, all things are possible in Him. So, let us pause and ask the Lord for His cleansing and purifying of our life that we may be remade in the image of Christ. And let us take a moment for self-examination of our lives in light of the virtues we have studied this week.

In this troubling year past have we been “giving thanks always and for everything” as Paul commanded the Church at Ephesus (5:20)? Of have we looked around and wondered why others are not having the difficulties that we are having and taken offense? When we pray, are we making our petitions and supplications to the Lord with thanksgiving or with grumbles about the difficulty of our circumstances? The process of becoming holy is an on-going work: God at work in us to purify us and make us holy in the image of Christ. Have we cooperated with Him?

In the self-examination in *St. Augustine’s Prayer Book*, we are asked if we are dissatisfied with our place in God’s order of creation. Are we willing to accept our place in the wall of the Temple? Or do we look jealously at the gifts and talents of others? Are we loving our neighbor as Jesus loved us? Jesus was willing to die for us when we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). Can we not be bothered to make simple sacrifices for those unlovable ones around us? Are we quick to defend ourselves when we are wronged, or are we willing to accept the challenge stated by St. Paul in Colossians 3:13? “... as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Jesus was willing to die to forgive us. Can we not die to self and ask for the grace of God to forgive another for the wrongs done to us?

Are we holding on to a false image of the Gospel and of Christ, or are we allowing the Holy Spirit to bring His fire and purify us, to burn away the things that do not belong in His Temple? Are we letting the Bridegroom clothe us, the Bride of Christ, “with fine linen, bright and pure”?

Having examined our lives in the light of these virtues, let us confess our sins and shortcomings and ask God for the grace to transform us into the image of His Son.

Heavenly Father, your Word commands us to, “be holy as You are holy”: we pray, therefore, that You would send your Holy Spirit into our lives to carry out a life-transforming work in each member of your Body. May we, by your grace, say as Paul did, “my old self has died and been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” We ask that You would continue to root out anything that is counter to what You desire for your Church, and we pray that You would increasingly transform us into the image and likeness of the Christ. Give us we pray, the desire and grace to become a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto You, to Your praise and glory. This we ask in Jesus’ name. *Amen.*

## **The Fifth Week of Lent Sunday, March 21, 2021**

### **Putting on the New Self**

*“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” — 2 Corinthians 4:8-9,16*

*“...put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” — Ephesians 4:22-24*

*“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” — Colossians 3:9-10*

“We do not lose heart.” It has been a difficult year. “We have been afflicted in every way.” But in Christ we are “not crushed”! So, we do not lose heart. God is remaking us in His image. We are to “put off the old self, which belongs to our former manner of life...and be renewed in the spirit of our minds”. We need to change the way we think. We need the mind of Christ. Our perspective on the world, on the Church, on life in general must be transformed by the wisdom from above. Then we can “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God”. But as St. Paul tells the Church at Corinth, “our inner self is being renewed day by day!” This transformation into the likeness of Christ is a work in progress. We may get impatient when we do not immediately see the fruits of our labors, but God is at work in us as long as we persevere in our efforts to walk in His way. That is why St. Paul exhorted the Church at Philippi to “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). We must work at letting God do His work in us.

God has dismantled His Church, and is building a New Temple for our worship of Him. And this work can only be completed when those who are in Christ allow Him to transform our inner nature. Our way of thinking, and seeing, and acting, must be brought in line with Christ. The virtues we will examine this week are a challenge to us to see the world around us not

with the eyes of our “old self”, but with our mind’s eye transformed to see with the eyes of Christ. It is a challenge to practice the wisdom from above, and to practice self-control and justice toward others both inside and outside the walls of the Temple. But these finishing touches, as it were, are a necessary part of the excellence Christ is pursuing in making us into a Holy Temple (Ephesians 2:21).

The work of building the Temple is not easy, and we can expect to be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and even struck down because of our affiliation with Christ. But in Christ we can stand fast and persevere to see His triumph in us who are His Body, the Church. “We do not lose heart.” And we learn Christ. We learn to desire what He desires. We learn to yield our will to His. We learn a new way of living and ministering that is truly like Christ, because it is Christ who is at work in us. We put on the New Self. We put on Christ.

## **Monday of 5 Lent March 22, 2021**

### **Transformation**

*“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” — Romans 12:1-2*

*“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” — Philippians 3:20-21*

*“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” — 2 Corinthians 3:18*

It is easy to become convinced that any transformation into a “new self” will take place after death. We are told that we will receive a new body when we are resurrected with Christ. But St. Paul says, in the passage quoted above from 2 Corinthians, that we “are being transformed...from one degree of glory to another”. This is not some future event; it is a constant process taking place in the here and now, for those who are in Christ. And Paul tells the Church at Rome that we are to present our bodies “as a living sacrifice”. Again, that is something that is happening in the moment. This transformation that God wants to work in us must be done in the present because it is not about us—it’s about the Body, it’s about the building of a New Jerusalem! The world is literally dying to know Christ. When we pray “Thy Kingdom come”, God says, okay, let me transform you now into the likeness of My Son. We can no more bring about this transformation in our own power than a caterpillar can will himself to become a butterfly. “For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” We “present ourselves” to God, and we are “transformed by Him” into the likeness of His Son.

In recent events, particularly here in the United States, we have seen much of the Church adapting to the culture and compromising matters of the faith for utilitarian and political ends. But the transformation to which Paul points begins with our decision to “not be conformed to this world”. The Scottish theologian, John Knox, said “One must not live appropriately to the present age, but must live as though the new age had already come. To do this involves a complete reorientation which only the Spirit can bring about. He does this by ‘renewing our mind’—i.e., by giving a new life and power to our mind.” We must decide that we want what Christ wants for us, for His Church, and for the conversion of those outside the walls. The

author, Gerald R. Cragg, said, “There is no greater weakness in the Christianity of our day than the fact that so many church members accept without question the dominant intellectual and social atmosphere of the age. The corrosives of secularism have eaten away the imprint of grace. We ought to live in the new age with the power of a risen life; instead we are content to conform to conventions which our society dictates.” That type of wall will not stand!

As noted, we cannot transform ourselves into the image of Christ, but we must be willing to allow God to work His transformation in us. And we must guard our minds and our hearts against the incipient efforts of the world to impose its agenda on our lives. “Our citizenship is in heaven.” Yes, it is good for us to be “informed” about what is going on in the world, but it is extremely important that we do not allow ourselves to be “conformed” to the image of the world. We need to carefully filter what we listen to, and guard our hearts from becoming obedient to the voices of this world. As citizens of the New Jerusalem we are to be obedient to the One who rules that Kingdom. Paul says of Christ, in Colossians 2:9-10, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” Jesus is the “head of all rule and authority”. To Him we must listen. To Him we must submit. And in Him we will be transformed “to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

## **Tuesday of 5 Lent March 23, 2021**

### **Justice**

*“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” — Isaiah 1:16-17*

*“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” — Luke 11:42*

*“But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” — James 1:25-27*

Many years ago, a man came to my office to complain that he was offended that I had allowed a gay man to take communion. He said, “According to the Bible that man should be stoned to death.” I replied, “I agree. I think, though, that you should let him stone you to death first.” He sputtered, “What, why? What are you talking about?” I said, “According to the Bible you should be stoned to death because you are living in adultery.” Again the sputtering reply, coupled with indignation. “I am not!” “Are you divorced and remarried?” He nodded. “Jesus said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.’” (Mark 10:11). I continued, “And the Bible says that the adulterer should be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10). He left my office shaking his head. Heaven help us if we get the justice we deserve! “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

It is because of Jesus and His work on the Cross that we can be justified and made right with God. Jesus showed far more care for the outcast, and reaching out with compassion to help those most often overlooked, than He did for legal retribution. Take for example the woman

caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). The law said she deserved death. Jesus forgave her. In His earthly ministry, Jesus pursued justice. He physically and spiritually rescued those in need. He healed lepers, raised the son of a widow, restored sight to the blind, and fed multitudes of hungry followers. Our call is to fully embrace the cause of Christ. The end goal of biblical justice is seeing lives reconciled to God and eternally transformed.

But when and how do we “act justly” (Micah 6:8), or “give justice to the weak and the fatherless, maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute” (Psalm 82:3)? The learning is in the doing. In Mark 9:39-41, Jesus said, “no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.” And St. James said in the quote above, “the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” We learn by doing, and we will be blessed in our doing. James concludes his thought with this exhortation: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” The command is simple: we are to reach out to the least, the lost, and the lonely. We are to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8).

Do we ignore the Word, and turn a blind eye to those who disobey the Scriptures? Not at all. We show the love of Christ to them. We treat them with the fruit of the Spirit. We display God’s mercy for “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

## **Wednesday of 5 Lent March 24, 2021**

### **Self-control**

*“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” — 2 Timothy 1:7*

*“A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.” — Proverbs 25:28*

*“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.” — 2 Peter 1:5-7*

Solomon writes, “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls” (Proverbs 25:28). For the walls to stand in the New Jerusalem, the living stones must be capable of controlling their self-will. They must practice self-control. Paul tells young Timothy that self-control is a gift of God that has been conveyed to him by the sacrament of the “laying on of my hands”. But it is also a decision that we must make. We must desire to submit our will to the will of God, to learn to want what God wants. The spirit that Paul says is conveyed is a spirit “of power and love and self-control.” Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit that is at work in all who are walking in Christ (Ephesians 5:8; Galatians 5:23).

The Greek word for self-control derives from the word for power. To have self-control is to have the inward spiritual strength, the power of God over selfish desires. If we are honest, we will admit that most of us lack self-control over our appetites. We want what we want, when we want it. So, a man (or woman) without self-control will be caught in these selfish desires.

But for the walls of the Temple of God to stand, the living stones must be able to work closely with the other stones in the wall. We are to do “nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). And Paul takes this one step further, noting that we cannot exercise the power of self-control without the grace of our Lord Jesus. God gives the grace, but we must desire to receive that grace, and be willing to change. He adds, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). We must choose, by grace, to deny our worldly desires, and seek the mind of Christ. St. Peter explains it this way:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. (2 Peter 1:3-7)

We must make every effort to receive “all things that pertain to life and godliness.”

St. Peter’s word in the quote above is essentially a summary statement of the virtues we are called to pursue this week. We are to put on the new self, the one being renewed in knowledge after the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10). We must desire to be transformed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then we can pursue justice, practice self-control, and persevere in God’s will and the wisdom of God.

## **Thursday of 5 Lent March 25, 2021**

### **Wisdom**

*“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him...Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”*

— James 1:5;3:13-18

*“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption...” — 1 Corinthians 1:27-30*

When describing government by consensus, Bishop Adler would refer to a time when St. Michael’s was facing a financial crisis. The Rector’s Council met and discussed the situation, then went to prayer. The Bishop then polled the council, beginning with the youngest. Each of the young men said that they should borrow the money to alleviate the situation. But when Bp. Adler polled the two eldest members, each said that if they borrowed money “it would grieve the heart of God.” Bp. Adler asked the younger ones why they had counseled to borrow, and each said that it was the only way they could see to solve the issue. They were



looking at the problem and applying worldly wisdom. The elders were seeking the wisdom of God. They didn't borrow, and the following Sunday there was a check for \$10,000 in the plate.

St. James said, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." Wisdom comes from above, and God is generous with His gifts. We need only ask, seek, and we will find (Matthew 7:7). James goes on to say that "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." He contrasts the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God. Godly wisdom results in morally upright behavior: "By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." But the one who relies on his own wisdom fosters strife and discord: "This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."

The Old Testament authors personified wisdom. For example, in Proverbs 1:20, Solomon says, "Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares..." We can see the close connection between this person of wisdom and the Person of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Spirit who gives us the Wisdom of God. At the birth of Jesus, God's wisdom became incarnate, and made that wisdom readily available to all who are in Christ. St. Paul says, "you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God." And in his prayer for the Church at Ephesus, Paul prays, "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him..." (1:17).

Wisdom has been described as the conjunction of knowledge and experience. And there are many worldly wise men and women whose experience in the temporal world, and their knowledge of things earthly, have propelled them along the way. Most have acquired worldly wealth and stature, often coupled with heartbreak. What we are seeking is the knowledge of God and His Word, His will, and His ways, and to experience the power and presence of His Son through the Spirit in our lives that we may walk in His wisdom. That is why the Psalmist prayed, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long" (Psalm 25:4-5).

For the walls of the Temple to stand we must practice the gift of wisdom for the building up of the Body. Yes, God does give wisdom to us individually, but that wisdom will be confirmed by the Body. We are called to work and to stand together as one in Him. God will not give to one member of the Body a word of wisdom that contradicts the consensus of the whole Body. When Bp. Adler heard the young elders of the church tell him something that he had not heard from the Lord, he knew something was amiss. After confirmation from the eldest members that they were to wait on the Lord, he knew he had heard the Word of the Lord. The Body was built up. Stand fast in the wisdom of God, and He will lead us in His truth.

## Friday of 5 Lent March 26, 2021

### Perseverance

*“But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” — James 1:19-25*

*“...pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...” — Ephesians 6:18*

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” — Hebrews 12:1-2*

There are two meanings for the Greek word that is translated perseverance. When it refers to our relationship with God, it means to “wait on Him”, or “to cling closely to Him”. When it refers to world, it means to “endure”, “stand fast”, or “wait patiently”. The New Testament uses the word in both ways, but the overall sense is that as Christians we are to endure the hostile and unbelieving world where we currently live, and to persevere in our life in the Kingdom of God which is our eternal home. What this means is that perseverance is a precondition for attaining salvation and eternal life in Jesus Christ. We stand in faith, and hope in Christ. To do otherwise is to lose our way and fall out of relationship with Him. We are able to endure the suffering in this world because we are found in Christ, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross...” And for us, standing fast in Him, and through perseverance in His Spirit, we will reign with Him, as He “is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Over this last year we have had numerous opportunities to practice perseverance. It has been a year in which we have all been called to endure many hardships. But just as we have seen in the other virtues we have examined, the learning is in the doing. St. James says in the quote above that “the one who...perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” It would be so easy for us to hunker down and try, like Elijah did, to run and hide in a cave (1 Kings 19). But as the author of the epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, we are to “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

There has never been a more important time for those who are in Christ to persevere. The world is watching. Are we going to point to Jesus, and put our trust in Him to carry us through these troubled times. Or are we going shy away from the challenges and rely on our own resources to deal with the difficulties. We persevere by waiting on Him, clinging closely to Him. So let us stand fast in the knowledge and the love of God, and wait patiently for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. “To that end, [let us] keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...”

## **Saturday of 5 Lent March 27, 2021**

### **Confess**

We do not lose heart. We do not give up. We persevere. We act justly. We practice self-control. Or at least that is what we are called to do. But are we conscientious in seeking that newness in Christ? Have we put off the old self, that the new self may be created in us? God is building a new creation, a new Temple in His New Jerusalem. Are we cooperating with Him in that construction process? Are we open to learn Christ and His ways? Do we want to see the world around us as He sees it? Do we want to learn to desire what He desires; to yield our will to His?

In the self examination in *St. Augustine's Prayer Book*, he offers these prompts for us to consider:

- Have we refused to respond to our opportunities for growth, service, or sacrifice?
- Are we concerned over injustice done to others?
- Are we mindful and responsive to the suffering of other parts of the world?
- Have we ignored the needy, lonely or unpopular persons in our community?

So, let us pause and reflect on these questions. The Great Commandment reminds us that we are not only to love God, but also to love our neighbor. And who is our neighbor? Jesus tells us in the parable of the Good Samaritan that the one who loved his neighbor was "The one who showed mercy..." Then Jesus said, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). So, let us confess our negligence in loving God with our whole heart, and failing to love our neighbor as Christ loves us.

O God of mercy, You are just in all Your doings and have commanded that we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with You. We confess that we have not always loved You with all of our heart, with all our strength, and all our mind, but have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed. We have not done all that You have commanded, and we have done things that were not of Your will. We have also not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. Have mercy on us, we pray, and forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life. Amen.

## **Holy Week Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021**

### **The Lion and the Lamb**

*"The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain," says the Lord.* — Isaiah 65:25

In the mid-1980s, I was leading a retreat for the vestry of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. At the retreat, I read the passage from Isaiah 65 that contains the verse

quoted above. I asked the various members of the Vestry to comment on that passage. One of the women in attendance said that she had no comment. She pronounced that she did not believe in fairytales, and as a successful businesswoman she could not waste her time thinking about things that obviously could never be true.

The Scriptures that we have studied through this season of Lent reveal to us that God has a plan and purpose for the rebuilding of his Church. It is a comprehensive plan, and as has been pointed out it can be a daunting prospect. It's not that we don't believe God's Word, like that dear parishioner at St Thomas, but we recognize that it is a difficult calling. For many it will be a challenge to take the risk to do the things God demands of His people. And thus, it will be hard to fully embrace this rebuilding process. It will require an effort and decision on our part to yield our will to His. The Theologian and author, G.K. Chesterton, said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried." What the Lord is calling us to do is difficult. But now is the time for us to step up to the challenge, to not leave the plan and purpose of God for His Church untried.

In Isaiah 65, the Lord gives a vision to his people of what he desires to provide for them. It is a vision of the New Jerusalem. Here is the entire quote from verses 17-25:

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain," says the Lord.

Why would we not want to take part in the rebuilding of this Jerusalem that God wants to create? The prophetic word is sure: God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. And He is preparing the ground NOW. The New Jerusalem is a present reality being realized in us, in our day. And we are "living stones" being built up into His Holy Temple.

As we enter this Holy Week, let us remember the words that we prayed on Ash Wednesday. In the litany of penitence we prayed that "those things may please him which we do on this day, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy, so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord." God is creating a pure and holy Temple. And John's vision in the Book of the Revelation tells us that Jesus is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and the Lamb that was slain. He is the Lion and the Lamb, and He has conquered every foe by His sacrifice (5:5). Let us walk with the Lord through the days of this Holy Week, and experience the promises made sure through His sacrifice.

## **Monday of Holy Week March 29, 2021**

### **Promise of Forgiveness**

*“Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” —Mark 1:14-15*

When Miranda and I lived in Mesquite, Texas, we had a neighbor who attended a Baptist Church. He came by one day to talk about their new pastor. He said he was doing his best to support this new leader, but it was difficult. This pastor measured his success by the number of people who would walk the aisle each Sunday. There were some Sundays, my friend said, when no one would walk the aisle and this made him uneasy. He confessed that he would occasionally come forward, even though he had been unmoved by the sermon, just to support the pastor. “I have repented for my sins so many times,” he said, “I am looking for new ways to sin, just so I can walk the aisle and support my pastor.”

When I thought of that conversation as I was writing this meditation, I had the image of a Whirling Dervish. The word repentance means “to turn around”. Once we have turned around, we don’t stay where we are and keep turning; we need to move forward. When we are sinning, we are walking away from God. To repent is to turn around and move toward God, to walk in His Way. We are to “walk in right pathways for His Name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3).

When Nehemiah heard the call to rebuild Jerusalem, he immediately repented on behalf of the nation of Israel. Then, he turned his eyes toward the Holy Land and pressed forward to fulfill God’s call to rebuild the Holy City. The walls would never have been rebuilt if Nehemiah had not accepted the remission of sin that God was offering. He received God’s promise of forgiveness and moved forward in the power of a redeemed life.

At the beginning of our Lord’s earthly ministry, St. Mark tells us that “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’” (1:14-15). The “time is at hand” simply means NOW! The Kingdom of God is present now, in this moment of time. It is time to believe the Good News. He has told us during this Lenten season what we need to do. He has forgiven our sins and called us to newness of life. We have accepted that call. Now is the time to move forward in “right pathways for His Name’s sake.” There are new walls to be built!

Many people have a hard time accepting that God’s forgiveness is assured. They spend their energy repenting of the same sins over and over again. We made a vow in our baptism that we would “persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord”. And we must honor that vow. But we must also respect the Lord and His gracious gift of forgiveness of our sins. We do not honor Him by repeatedly repenting of the same sins! His Word is sure. His promise is secure. We are forgiven. We need to accept that forgiveness and move forward in His grace, His love, His power.

As we move forward in this Holy Week, and look toward carrying out God’s call to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, let God remind us of His loving redemption. His promise of forgiveness resonates throughout both covenants in the Bible. We need to accept that forgiveness, put away the old self, and put on the new self in Christ. Here are a few Scriptures promising

forgiveness. Take a few moments, read through these promises. Receive and cherish God's gracious forgiveness.

Psalm 103:12

"...as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Isaiah 43:25

"I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

Jeremiah 31:34

"For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Micah 7:19

"He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities underfoot. He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."

Mark 2:10

"...the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..."

Ephesians 1:7

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace..."

Hebrews 10:17

"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

1 John 1:9

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

## **Tuesday of Holy Week March 30, 2021**

### **A New Heaven and A New Earth**

*"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind....I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness...Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear." — Isaiah 65:17-25*

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." — Revelation 21:1-3*

*"And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'" — Revelation 21:5*

Jesus makes all things new. St. John tells us in the prologue to his Gospel that "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (1:3). He is making us new. He is rebuilding His Church. He is creating a new heaven and a new earth, "and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind..." Many people have been crying out during this pandemic that they want things to "get back to normal", to get back to the way things used to be. That is not going to happen. "Behold," Jesus says, "I am making all things new." God has been dismantling the Church, and turning our world upside

down. His plan and purpose is to remake His Church, His Holy Temple, His people into a new creation. Without putting away the old, we cannot put on the new.

Revelation 21 picks up the promise given in the prophecy of Isaiah 65. God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. But notice that “the first heaven and the first earth have passed away.” This is the loving work of our gracious Father, for His desire is for us. He created us to dwell with Him, but we chose in our fallen nature to separate ourselves from Him. Now, with the creation of a New Heaven, and a New Earth, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

We may grieve the loss of what was familiar, but “Behold”, says our Lord, “I am making all things new.” And all that God creates is “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Many years ago, as I came home from church, my former neighbor was standing in her driveway crying. We had a long talk, and she was grieving “the loss of her life.” Her daughter had just started first grade, her car had just died and would need to be replaced, not repaired. Her husband had a new job as a delivery man and would have to leave home before dawn, and her son was weaned, out of diapers, and “didn’t need her any more.” Sadly, a few weeks later, she tried to slit her wrists. She was unable to put off the old to receive the new. We may not be ready to commit suicide, but many of us grieve the loss of so many familiar and comfortable things.

Take heart in the words of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress” (65:18-19). God is creating something so much better than any of us can conceive. We need only cooperate with Him to see the magnificence of His new creation.

## **Wednesday of Holy Week March 31, 2021**

### **The New Jerusalem**

*“And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel...” —Revelation 21:10-11*

*“And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.” —Revelation 21:21*

The creation of the New Jerusalem is happening right now. We have already been exhorted to live in the moment, for it is in the present moment that time and eternity intersect. God is rebuilding His Church right now. He is creating a new heaven and a new earth. And in that new world He is placing His new Jerusalem. This great city will have “the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel...” and we are part of this new creation. We are the living stones being built up into His Holy Sanctuary. And His Holy City will be sound, strong, and secure, built on the firmest of foundations—“a most rare jewel”.

Precious stones and jewels are measured for hardness on what is called the Mohs scale. Jewels are rated on a scale of 1 - 10, with the hardest stones, like diamonds, measuring 10,

and the softest, like talc, rating a 1. All of the stones which will form the foundation of the New Jerusalem are on the harder end of the Mohs spectrum. They all rate between 7 and 10. John tells us that the New Jerusalem will have a foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone. And in this vision given to John in the Revelation, he sees the twelve stones of the apostles. The foundation stones of the Apostolic Church are hard, strong, unbreakable. This foundation is firm. Martin Luther was right when he wrote the lyrics to his familiar hymn: “How firm a foundation...is laid for your faith...Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed...When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.”

As has been pointed out earlier in Lent, the walls built on this foundation are not to be dividing walls, but will have open welcoming gates. There will be twelve gates, with three gates on each of the four sides of the city. The fact that there are gates on all sides of the city shows that God wants all people, everywhere, to come and dwell with Him in His New Jerusalem. “And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl” (Rev. 21:21). I have often joked that I would like to see the oyster that produced the pearls of that size. But in ancient times, pearls were a symbol of truth. They are the only precious jewel that cannot be shaped by a jeweler. They are unchangeable. In Matthew’s Gospel (13:45-46), Jesus refers to the pearl in a parable. He says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.” There is only ONE pearl for each gate. You can only come into the city through the One Truth—through Jesus. He is the unchangeable One, and it is worth selling all we have, leaving the old self behind, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

God is creating the New Jerusalem. It is a rare jewel. Those of us who are in Christ are being built up into the walls of this Holy City. Isaiah prophesied that God is creating “Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness” (65:18), and He will rejoice over us. What a joy it is to be part of God’s great plan for His Church. Rejoice and be glad.

## **Maundy Thursday April 1, 2021**

### **The New Temple**

*“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” —Revelation 21:22*

On this Maundy Thursday, as we celebrate the Body of Christ, receiving His Body and Blood in the Eucharist, we are reminded of the Love of Christ. Even as His time grew near to be crucified, He strengthened and nourished His disciples with His Body and Blood. We are being built up into the Holy Temple, and as St. John reminds us in the verse quoted above, “the Temple is the Lord”. We are being built up into the Body of Christ. God is creating a new heaven and a new earth, He is rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and all of this begins with the rebuilding of the Temple, the Body of Christ.

But there will be opposition. As Nehemiah and the Jews began to rebuild the Temple after the exile in Babylon, Sanballat and others opposed their efforts. Nehemiah reports that, “when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel...they jeered at us and



despised us..." (Nehemiah 2:10,19). While Jesus broke bread with His disciples in the upper room, "Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees" conspired to arrest Jesus (John 18:3). And we should not be surprised if there will be those who oppose us as we "seek the welfare of the people", serving one another and loving our neighbors. When those opposing Nehemiah "plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it..." Nehemiah and the Jews "prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night" (Nehemiah 4:8). Jesus, knowing Judas had gone out to betray Him, instructed His disciples to "Pray that you may not enter into temptation..." and He, Himself, "knelt down and prayed, saying, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done'" (Luke 22:40-42). We must be earnest in prayer against the powers that would oppose us, that "nothing unclean will ever enter [the Temple], nor anyone who does what is detestable or false..." (Revelation 21:27). We must choose, and pray as Jesus did, for the Father's will to be done and not our own.

This is Maundy Thursday, "Command Thursday". On this night Jesus gave His disciples three commands: "Do this in remembrance of Me..." (Lk. 22:19); "wash one another's feet" (Jn. 13:14); and "love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 13:34). We are to cling closely to Jesus "in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers", to serve one another, and to love as Jesus loved us. God is creating a new heaven and new earth, a New Jerusalem, and it all begins with the rebuilding of the Temple of God. In this New Temple, the "glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it..." (Revelation 21:23-24). The dismantling and rebuilding of the Church is not about you, and it is not about me. It is not about our parish or the CEC. It is about the Kingdom! It is about bringing the light of the Lamb to the nations. St. John says that the gates of the Temple will always be open, and the kings of the earth "will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations" (vs. 26).

On this Maundy Thursday, as we continue to be rebuilt into the Temple of the Lord, let us draw strength from the Body of Christ. Let us be cleansed by His Blood. Let us serve one another, washing one another's feet. Let us love one another as Jesus loved us. And Let us worship Him in His Holy Temple, "for [the] temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

## **Good Friday April 2, 2021**

### **The River of Life**

*"Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east...And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live...And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing." —Ezekiel 47:1,9,12*

*"On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water."' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive..." —John 7:37-39*

*"But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water." —John 19:34*

*“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” —Revelation 22:1-5*

“The Temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Revelation 21:22). From His Temple flows the River of Life, “And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live...” (Ezekiel 47:9). On this Good Friday we are reminded that the Lamb that was slain reigns. Jesus reigns. He reigned from the Cross. From this throne He forgave those who crucified Him. He promised salvation to the penitent thief. He made provision for His mother and beloved disciple. He prayed to the Father, and commended His spirit to Him. And from the throne of the Cross the river of cleansing blood and water flowed (John 19:34). Even in His death, new life flowed from the One who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). From the life of Jesus comes new life, and He promised that the River of Life will also flow from those who are in Him. Jesus said in the quote above, “He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now this He said about the Spirit, which those who believed in Him were to receive...” And just as Jesus reigns, all those who are in Him share in His reign “forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5).

We are coming to the end of this season of penitence, and as was pointed out on Monday of this week, we need to move forward. We have repented, and God is faithful to forgive. We need only to receive that forgiveness, turn and be renewed in the River of Life. The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple in her midst is an ongoing process. We must continue to be built up, equipped, to reach the nations and bring others into the fulness of Christ’s Kingdom. The tree of life from which Adam and Eve were barred in Genesis 3:24 has multiplied, and now it lines either side of the River of Life. The tree of life, “with its twelve kinds of fruit” are for “the healing of the nations.”

Jesus died upon the cross that His life might flow forth in power and grace for the healing of all mankind. He has called us to share in His life, and we do so by sharing in His death. The old self must die that the new self may live. For, “one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (Romans 6:7-8). Now that the rebuilding has begun in us, may God release the Spirit in each one of us, and let the waters of Life flow from His throne through us to all the world.

**Holy Saturday**  
**April 3, 2021**

### **Absolution and Newness of Life in Christ**

God has been at work throughout this Lenten Season rebuilding the walls of His Temple, the Body of Christ, the Church. He has taken us, “living stones, rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious”, and now we “are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:4-5). We have repented for our past sins, shortcomings, and failures, and have been forgiven. He has refreshed and renewed us by His life-giving Spirit. Now it is time for us to walk in newness of life in Christ. We have put off the old self and put on the new, and we have

begun to be built up in walls of virtue and righteousness. We have received His pardon and absolution. Now is the time to move forward in the power and grace of His Holy Spirit.

As the sun sets this evening we will transition from the 40 days of repentance in the Season of Lent to the 50 days of joy in the glorious celebration of the Resurrection. We are resurrection people! We have been redeemed by the Blood of the Lamb. The tomb is open, the grave has no power to hold us. For “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-39).

The world is watching. The nations are hungering for the sons of righteousness to be revealed. As St. Paul declared, “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19). Will we accept the call of God to continue to be built up into His Holy Temple? Will we let the light of Christ shine forth from this new Temple? Will we “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2)? He has called us to a new life in Him. Let us walk together in the joy that is set before us, and stand together in virtue and righteousness in the Walls of the New Jerusalem.

*Soli Deo gloria* — To God Alone Be Glory!