

EMBER KELLEY, MDIV STUDENT

Lent 2018 – Week 5

Reflection on Psalm 51:1-12

Reflection, Self-Criticism, and the Fight for Justice

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Psalm 51 holds a special place in my life. It was used in a morning prayer service I put together and ran in my undergraduate years. I find the words “purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean” still stick out to me all these years later. As I read the words of this psalm, I cannot help but think of the need for self reflection.

Throughout the season of Lent, we are encouraged to reflect- on our lives, on our sins, on our relationship to the divine. I find that I enjoy this added focus on reflection, as it encourages me to take a step back and take a look at myself. In our society, that encourages quickly moving on to the next thing, it is vital to stop for a minute and seek to better understand ourselves.

As may be expected of a student of Chicago Theological Seminary, my theology is grounded in fighting for a more just world. Theology must be lived out in practice. So I find that this opportunity for reflection is a time to think not only about my inner self, but also about my broader connections in society.

Taking the time to reflect and understand the complex web of connections we inhabit is key to the fight for justice. We need to understand the ways that we are involved in power systems- systems built on racism, sexism, ableism, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. We need to understand

these systems, and our connections to them, so that we can begin to dismantle them. We must take the purging hyssop, and apply it to the ills of our society.

Fred Hampton once asked, "Why don't you live for the people? Why don't you struggle for the people?" As we live and struggle for justice for the people, we need to learn to practice self-criticism. We must be able to acknowledge the ways that we harm others, and then turn and struggle for a better world. We must be able to see the ways the we benefit from oppressive systems, and seek to remove ourselves from them. We must be able to acknowledge when we are wrong. We must be able to stop centering ourselves, and be able to take feedback from others. Reflection and self-criticism are crucial tools in helping us along the long road of the fight for justice.

Purge us with hyssop lord, so that we can better fight for the people.

REV. WAYNE MACPHERSON, CTS MDIV 1991

CHICAGO METROPOLITAN ASSOCIATION, ILLINOIS CONFERENCE, UCC

Lent 2018 – Week 5

I made my first church presentation when I was fourteen. In a Sunday evening worship service, I had to explicate the first verse of the hymn “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.” “Beneath the cross of Jesus, I fain would take my stand.”

Even though I was a hymn nerd, I didn’t know how to begin. The obvious being a good starting point I looked up “fain” in the dictionary. Its flowery mid-19th century hymn language was not my language.

To my surprise it meant “with pleasure, gladly.” My guess had been “with reluctance, hardly gladly.” The hymns I knew kept the cross at a safe distance. “On a hill faraway stood an old rugged cross.” “There is a green hill far away without a city wall.” I wasn’t prepared for a personal encounter with “the old, rugged cross.”

But, even at a distance, I experienced the cross as judgment. How could I live up to crucifixion? My teen-aged self, full of doubts and confusion, was glad I didn’t get verse three: “My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.”

When I was a child, I spoke and thought like a child. When I became an adult, well, the world was not what I could have imagined (in dream or nightmare) fifty years ago.

Our communication devices may have changed but Black Lives Matter, mass incarceration, the continued murder of transgender persons, our nation’s obsession with guns, deportation and hatred of the immigrant, #metoo, backpedaling on previously-won rights - all of these plus the election of 45 transforming barely beneath the surface hatreds and fears into violence mean Jesus’ words in John, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world be will be driven out” are the gospel good news we need.

The crucifixion judges the corrupt systems we have created. Are we complicit in the systems which thrive? Are we resisting systems that condemn the innocent, deny basic human rights to those who need them, split families apart or kill people who dare to be who they are?

The overly personalized 1868 language of “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” has been replaced by the 1929 hymn “Before the Cross of Jesus” with words by Congregational pastor Ferdinand Blanchard. “Before your cross, O Jesus, our lives are judged today; the meaning of our eager strife is tested by your way.”

The cross is not on a hill faraway. It is here and now judging our sin-filled systems and inspiring us to find new life-giving ways in these days of hatred, ignorance, fear, and violence.

**LYNN YOUNG, MDIV STUDENT
CULVER, INDIANA**

***Lent 2018 – Week 4
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22***

Psalm 107 begins with an impassioned reminder to give thanks to the Lord, because God is good and God's love, unlike the love of any other, endures forever. This psalm is more than a joyous reminder to give thanks to the God who delivers us. This psalm praises God's restoration and rescue! We are reminded that just like the wind visits the 4 corners of the earth and we know not from whence it comes nor where it goes, God visited the east and the west and the north and the south redeeming those in need. Let those who have been redeemed from the four quarters of the earth say so, and tell their story of redemption.

Even though some were sick as a result of the way they lived their life, and because of this had endured affliction. These afflicted souls loathed food and drew near to the threshold of death, yet even these called out to the lord in their distress. At the very words of their beseeching, God saved them from their anguish and destruction, healed and delivered.

Prayer: *Gracious God of Many Names – you heal us from our afflictions, and deliver us from our troubles. May we never forget the troubles from which you saved us, and may our prayers of praise and gratitude never cease. Give us the strength to walk the soft earth healed and transformed, following the path you lay before us with gratitude in our hearts, and songs of joy rising from our renewed spirits.*

In all of your beautiful names, Amen, Amin, Ashe, Aho!

SHEA WATTS, MA 2016
CURRENT PHD STUDENT
COLUMBUS, OH

Lent 2018 – Week 3

It is no accident that the Gospel of John places Jesus' Temple cleansing at the beginning of his ministry. For John's readers, this is the first public act of Jesus. Here comes Jesus, fresh off of his first miracle, wielding a whip of cords—quite an introduction! Yet, Jesus' anger displayed in this physical altercation seems to be justified, even warranted. I'm reminded of the words of Gloria Steinem: "The truth will set you free. But first it will piss you off."

Jesus was Jewish and was fighting to save the soul of his tradition. In his view, the Temple was a sacred place where divinity and humankind coalesce. During Passover, the festival week-long festival to celebrate liberation from oppression (i.e., divine salvation, past and future), he finds the Temple littered with opportunists that were exploiting the people by turning the Temple into a marketplace. Such a scene displayed the corruption of his religious values, exacerbated by the exploitation of the people.

What happens when our sacred places are profaned? In the era where evangelical Christianity has seemingly been co-opted by religious opportunists and nationalists through an ungodly alliance with the Trump administration, churches have become marketplaces. Pastors have propagated empire's agenda.

As people of faith, people that seek to honor the liberative and salvific nature of our faiths, where is our anger? Will we use our anger towards cleansing our places of worship? For those of us that claim to follow in the way of Jesus, we must take this story—and its contemporary implications—seriously.

In this Lenten season, what do we need to let go of? As we prepare for the journey of death and resurrection, may we not be afraid to let harmful religion die. Sometimes this means laying down our own security and picking up the tools of liberation.

REV. DR. GLORIA HOPEWELL, MDIV 1996
RECTOR, GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH, GALENA, ILLINOIS

Lent 2018 – Week 2
Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-17

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” If there was ever an untrue childhood adage, this is it. Names matter. A lot. They identify us, and maybe even reflect who we are. Think of how you feel when someone mispronounces or misspells your name. It seems like a lack of respect—of not caring enough to get it right.

Parents-to-be pore over name books or family trees, searching for just the right one for their new child. I remember that neither of my boys had names until they were several days old. We thought they were going to be girls, so we had not bothered to choose any boys’ names. The hospital staff was annoyed at the delay in their paperwork. But I needed to hold those tiny boys and study their little faces for a while before I knew what they should be called. As they grew older, though we resisted, their given names were shortened by their friends. Daniel became “Dan,” Richard became “Rich.” And now, those seem right. As for me, no shortened first name ever stuck, but I do cringe whenever someone calls me “Hopwell!”

I wonder what Abram and Sarai thought when God chose to change their names. This was truly a change of identity—from Abram, “exalted father” to Abraham, “father of a multitude.” From Abram’s “princess” Sarai to Sarah, “princess of the nations.” It was also a sign of a call to a new life. Not bad for two old geezers who had been unable to conceive. No wonder Abram fell on his face and laughed! And yet, it was his faith in God and in God’s faithfulness that earned him the new name and allowed him to live into it.

What about you? Did your parents’ name for you have a dream attached? Have you lived into it or have you gone in a different direction? Has God called you into new life? Are you living into that?

**LEIKA LEWIS-CORNWELL, MDIV STUDENT
MILFORD, DELAWARE**

***Lent 2018 – Week 2
Mark 8: 31-38***

In reflecting on Mark 8: 31-38, the question that struck my heart and mind was verse 37, “For what can a man give in return for his soul?” In a recent sermon, I reminded our congregation that those we look up to in history were not monoliths to themselves, but rather people trying to do the best they could. The same was true of the people reflected in the pages of the bible, and of us today. We are none of us perfect. Who does not know the bitter taste of shame at failing to stand for your beliefs, even for a moment, like Peter? And yet, this verse reminds us that silence is more costly than any consequences that may come when we live out our values.

We are all, right now, favored or cursed to live in “interesting times.” Many of us face some of the same challenges as those in the first century of the common era. And yet, when I look around me at CTS, I see people who are refusing to pay the price of a soul. People who are leading resistance, speaking truth to power, using privilege to amplify the voices and stories of those who are unheard or unseen. In this season of reflecting on death and rising, let us continue to refuse the price of a soul by rejecting the death of oppression and heralding the rising of equality. I will leave you with the words of one of the 5th century Desert Elders, reminding us that one “who keeps death before [their] eyes will at all times overcome [their] cowardliness.” Amen and blessed be.

REV. DR. BEVERLY DALE, MDIV 1985, DMIN 1988
FOUNDER AND CHAIR OF THE INCARNATION INSTITUTE FOR SEX & FAITH

Lent 2018 – Week 1
Reflection on Mark 1:9-15
The Ups and Downs of a Spiritual Journey

Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his ministry sounds like a real "high." It had to be a profound experience to see the heavens parting and the Spirit descending as a dove, or to hear an audible affirmation of God's blessing that God was pleased, and to be called "Beloved." (Mark 1:9-15) How wonderful it is to feel confident our path is the right one. Oops! Immediately following this "high," he is thrust into a "low" - a wilderness with wild beasts and the satanic power that instills doubts and tries to make us question our values. "Are you sure this is what God wants? What are you getting out of this?"

Isn't that just the way it is? Just when we feel confident, life takes us someplace we don't want to go, to hear things that we don't want to hear. Yuck! Metaphorically, we all prefer to live on the mountain tops with bright sunshine and beautiful vistas communing with the presence of God and, preferably, far removed from the nitty gritty daily grind in the valley below - for valleys can easily turn into a wilderness.

Some suggest that having doubts shows a lack of faith. It does not. Doubts, temptations, and trials are simply part of the natural ebb and flow of moving through life's journey. Sometimes we are confident and, at other times, we find ourselves in the wilderness, by our own choices or by the twists and turns of life itself.

Lenten season is akin to walking through the wilderness - a time to consider our tests and temptations to yield to the cultural despair or personal despondency or, to check in if in resisting powers and principalities, we are being sucked into the ever-present temptation of the vortex of cynicism. Some days we find ourselves on the mountain tops yet other days we are smack dab in the wilderness. But, Mark says even in the wilderness Jesus communed with angels. In our times of testing and doubting we can trust in the resurrection promise that Love cannot be defeated. Whether on a mountain top, in a valley or wilderness, what matters is to keep plodding through our circumstances trusting in the Power of Love: "I am never forgotten or abandoned." "God's grace is sufficient." "Love never fails." Think on these things.



MELISSA MCLEAN, MDIV STUDENT WARREN, PA

Lent 2018 – Week 1

Focus Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” – NIV Mark 1:9-11

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned in my life comes from the recesses of my teenage years. In the midst of some teenage angst and rebellion, I quite vividly remember my mother saying to me:

“I will always love you, but I might not always like you.”

Over the years that saying has played constantly in the recesses of my memory. It is often a comforting reminder of the enduring and lasting quality of love.

“I will always love you, but I might not always like you.”

As we move into the season of Lent, I am reminded of another journey between parent and child that we will watch unfold in the days ahead. The journey is fraught with missteps and parallels that we can see coming, and yet are powerless to change.

Despite this knowledge, we return year after year to walk these steps together. In the darkness, we wait for the light that we surely know is coming.

“I will always love you, but I might not always like you.”

As we begin our walk towards the cross together this year, I urge you to remember that you are never far from the love which you seek. We all make missteps from time to time: say things we wish we could take back, do things we wish we hadn't done, or don't things that we wish we had.

Despite the missteps ahead and the crosses to bear, go forward into this season of waiting knowing that you are not alone. As a parent never really leaves a child, so too are you not alone in this wilderness.

Despite the missteps behind you or ahead of you, step forward know that you are unequivocally loved and cherished, even in the darkest of times:

“And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the knowledge and comfort that you love us and see us, even when we fail to love and see ourselves. May that love and comfort continue to baptize our hearts and minds and carry us through even our darkest times. Amen.



REV. MARK WINTERS, MDIV 2009
PASTOR, FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC NAPERVILLE, IL

Lent 2018 – Week 1
Reflection on Psalm 25:1-10

There are times when scripture just seems so far away, so distant from who I am, or where I live. And then there's Psalm 25. This prayer leaps across the centuries into my heart—pulling on my needs and hopes for God to lead me, as I wait, all day long. (I'm not good at waiting.) The psalmist confesses a need for mercy and love, a hope that God will forgive and forget past sins, prayers which all of us can understand, I think.

But the psalmist also speaks to some real frustration with other people, asking God to “not let my enemies exult over me.” The psalm talks about those who are “wantonly treacherous”, and hopes they too will come to sufficient self-awareness as to be “ashamed”.

The Christian call to love is strong—love our enemies, love our neighbors as ourselves, love one another. Especially as a pastor, I'm supposed to love everyone and always see the image of God in them, right? Beautiful as that rhetoric may be, the reality is so...much...harder. Enemies do exult over us, whether it's in church politics, sports rivalries, all the way up through vicious abusers and oppressors. That exultation is real, and it hurts. And there are people who are wantonly treacherous, putting their own selfish desires ahead of their responsibilities to others, sometimes causing incredible harm.

So, what are we to do? Sometimes the only thing we can do—pray for them, like the psalmist. We can pray for God to stop their exultation, to let them be ashamed, not as schadenfreude, but so that they too might someday truly know the awesome, humbling power of God's steadfast love.