

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 24, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, speak to me, for I am listening. Through your Holy Word, convict, challenge, and comfort me. Open my mind to new insights and fresh perspectives. Open my heart to the moving of your Spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Note: throughout our Holy Week journey, this GPS will share a devotional offered by the United Methodist Church. Each day is written by a different UMC pastor. Journey now with us toward a beautiful Easter morning.

Monday, March 25

Scripture: Mark 11:15-19

They came into Jerusalem. After entering the temple, he threw out those who were selling and buying there. He pushed over the tables used for currency exchange and the chairs of those who sold doves. He didn't allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He taught them, "Hasn't it been written, *My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?* But you've turned it into a hideout for crooks." The chief priests and legal experts heard this and tried to find a way to destroy him. They regarded him as dangerous because the whole crowd was enthralled at his teaching. When it was evening, Jesus and his disciples went outside the city.

Devotion

Frequently, Jesus intentionally went out of his way to truly see those who were often invisible to the establishment. He saw people, like the Samaritan woman and the little child he invited us to be like. Christ made a point of welcoming those whose presence in the community was forbidden. The bleeding woman and the leper were among those he allowed to touch his divine essence.

In the Temple that day, Jesus again saw exclusion. A place of worship, holiness, and community-building had become "a hideout for crooks," because only some were welcomed while others were kept out - penalized for being foreigners, in transit, and poor.

Jesus reminds them, and us, that God calls us to include not exclude. He quotes scripture that says God's house is to be a house of prayer for *all*.

Jesus's intervention disrupted their order. His good news exposed the wickedness of their hearts and the sin hidden in their practices that kept people out.

Baptismal grace welcomes all to the waters. It demands that we examine our values and stop any action that kills the soul. We are not the ones with authority to determine who is ritually clean and worthy; that is defined by the eternal Love, the same One who turned over the tables. The One who sees all of us and declares: "It is very good!"

One has to wonder if the Church is still being a prophetic voice. Are we watching and claiming the Church as a house of prayer for all people? Because God certainly is!

Reflection

Who am I excluding today?

Why has acceptance become the exception and not the norm?

Am I willing to disrupt the status quo that perpetuates systemic oppression, even if that leads me to question my own value systems and traditions?

For whom is the Gospel good news?

Prayer

Loving Creator, as I welcome you into my life, I invite the presence of the Holy Spirit to reveal those spaces in my life where I need to be in solidarity with those who have been oppressed and marginalized. As you call me to repent, give me strength and humility to genuinely examine where, in the depths of my soul, my words and actions remain far from you. Show me your mercy, so I can stand before you and be safe. Grant me the courage, so I won't feel weak when you invite me to be a prophetic voice that denounces the wickedness of the powers to be but announce your Shalom and the hopes of a new and just system for all. In the name of the One who taught us how to love, Jesus the Christ... So be it!

Pastor VJ Cruz-Báez serves La Plaza United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, California.

Tuesday, March 26

Scripture: Mark 11:12-14; 20-25

The next day, after leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. From far away, he noticed a fig tree in leaf, so he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing except leaves, since it wasn't the season for figs. So he said to it, "No one will ever again eat your fruit!" His disciples heard this...

Early in the morning, as Jesus and his disciples were walking along, they saw the fig tree withered from the root up. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look how the fig tree you cursed has dried up."

Jesus responded to them, "Have faith in God! I assure you that whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea'—and doesn't waver but believes that what is said will really happen—it will happen. Therefore I say to you, whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you will receive it, and it will be so for you. And whenever you stand up to pray, if you have something against anyone, forgive so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your wrongdoings."

Devotion

Jesus' cursing the fig tree is a strange event which elicits questions about what Jesus intended to communicate after he entered Jerusalem. Mark likes to write using a sandwich approach to convey the passage of time, changing locations and overall meaning. Jesus saw the fig tree and cursed it for not bearing fruit. Then he went to the Temple and drove out the money changers. The following morning, Peter pointed to the fig tree again and noticed it had withered.

The barren and withered fig tree and the commerce-oriented Temple are meant to inform each other. In each instance, they were not living their purpose. Despite displaying lots of leaves, this fig tree bore no fruit. And despite all the activity going on in the Temple courts, worship and prayer were not the primary focus. Jesus used both instances to teach how important it is to live on purpose.

Living on purpose strengthens faith and gives power to our words because they are linked to God's purpose for us. The lesson of the fig tree raises the question for us: What does it mean to live on purpose today?

Reflection

Living on purpose comes from following God's inner compass.

Prayer

Purposeful God, we seek to be true to your calling for us today. We want to be about what matters in the world. Guide us and give us courage to be the people you call us to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Rod Miller serves [Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church](#) in Baltimore, Maryland.

Wednesday, March 27

Scripture: Mark 14:3-9

Jesus was at Bethany visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease. During dinner, a woman came in with a vase made of alabaster and containing very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke open the vase and poured the perfume on his head. Some grew angry. They said to each other, "Why waste the perfume? This perfume could have been sold for almost a year's pay and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her.

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. You always have the poor with you; and whenever you want, you can do something good for them. But you won't always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body ahead of time for burial. I tell you the truth that, wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her."

Devotion

All four gospels speak of a woman anointing Jesus. Mark simply calls her "a woman" who owned a jar filled with costly perfume while Luke calls her a "sinner," implying sexual immorality. Was she someone of means who could easily afford to waste such a valuable substance with one extravagant gesture, or was she a woman whose financial situation was precarious but who nevertheless prodigally anointed Jesus? Either way, when the disciples scolded her, Jesus proclaimed that her act of generosity would be remembered whenever the gospel was proclaimed.

Sarah Ryan and Mary Bosanquet were early Methodist preachers who were very different from one another. Sarah was an uneducated servant who was "married" three times without being divorced; Mary was well-read and belonged to a well-to-do family. From the Methodists, Sarah discovered that Christ's grace was freely offered to her, too, and recognizing God at work in her, John Wesley appointed her housekeeper of the New Room.

Later she mentored the younger Mary Bosanquet, and they formed a household with other Methodist women to nurture and educate the poorest children of their area. Similar to the disciples, Mary's family felt her inheritance wasn't being used wisely, but with Sarah's help, Mary continued to pour out her resources freely on others, reflecting in her journal: "*I would be given up, both soul and body, to serve the members of Christ. My firm resolution was to be wholly given up to the church, in any way that he pleased.*"

Reflection

What treasure do I possess that I want to recklessly share with Christ and with others?
How can I honor Jesus with that which means most to me, despite objections or misunderstandings?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God, you freely poured out your precious life for us after first joyfully accepting the extravagant offering of the woman who anointed you with expensive nard. Fill us with your Holy Spirit of generosity so that we, too, may give without counting the cost, being motivated by nothing but love of you and of neighbor. May it be so! Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Donna Fowler-Marchant is an elder in the North Carolina Conference currently serving a circuit just outside London in the Methodist Church in Britain.

Thursday, March 28

Scripture: Mark 14:66-72

Meanwhile, Peter was below in the courtyard. A woman, one of the high priest's servants, approached and saw Peter warming himself by the fire. She stared at him and said, "You were also with the Nazarene, Jesus."

But he denied it, saying, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't understand what you're saying." And he went outside into the outer courtyard. A rooster crowed. The female servant saw him and began a second time to say to those standing around, "This man is one of them." But he denied it again. A short time later, those standing around again said to Peter, "You must be one of them, because you are also a Galilean."

But he cursed and swore, "I don't know this man you're talking about." At that very moment, a rooster crowed a second time. Peter remembered what Jesus told him, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down, sobbing.

Devotion

When we talk about Peter's denial of Jesus, the question that often comes up is "Why did Peter deny Jesus?" The simplest answer always seems to be that Peter was merely fulfilling the prediction that Jesus had pronounced over him at the last supper. Or, to say that Peter lacked faith. Though Peter was an apostle, we must remember that he was human and had human emotions such as fear. Let's also remember that Peter was dealing with the impending death of his friend and mentor, so he was also dealing with anger and grief. It might be easy to be dismissive of Peter's denial but we must remember that we might well react in the same way if we are honest with ourselves.

And what about Jesus? Would He be angry at Peter's denial? Think about this: When Jesus made this prediction, Peter was sitting at the table for the Passover meal and he fed Peter anyway. Perhaps it was this example of grace and mercy that kept Peter going, allowing him to continue the work he had been tasked with even after Jesus died on the cross. Peter's story does not end at the denial. Peter went on to be forgiven and to be the very foundation of the church. Likewise, our stories do not have to end when we deny Christ through our living. What joy, this wondrous mercy and grace brought! Thanks be to God.

Reflection

How can God redeem my denials?

Prayer

Good and loving God, thank you for stories like Peter's that remind us so much of ourselves. Give us strength to follow you, and overcome any fear. Holy Spirit, help us to follow the examples of both Peter and Jesus, in staying the course and in showing others the grace that we want shown to us. Amen.

The Rev. Jonathan Tullos is the pastor of [Salem UMC](#) and [Pleasant Hill UMC](#), in Lucedale, Mississippi.

Friday, March 29

Scripture: Mark 15:33-41

From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark. At three, Jesus cried out with a loud shout, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani," which means, "My God, my God, why have you left me?"

After hearing him, some standing there said, "Look! He's calling Elijah!" Someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, and put it on a pole. He offered it to Jesus to drink, saying, "Let's see if Elijah will come to take him down." But Jesus let out a loud cry and died.

The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly God's Son."

Some women were watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James (the younger one) and Joses, and Salome. When Jesus was in Galilee, these women had followed and supported him, along with many other women who had come to Jerusalem with him.

Devotion

A dimmed light in theater cues the ending of a scene. The darkness signals the curtain to close. A part of the story has ended. If the protagonist is dead at this end, then we know it is a tragedy. Jesus' death is a disappointment for those who hoped that he would rise as a new political leader to overthrow the oppressive colonial power of Rome and rebuild the nation that would protect them. For those who executed his death sentence, it is a clear victory against a rebel. This seemingly failed attempt closes the curtain on the story, at least for many human eyes.

From the wider viewpoint of faith, however, it is not. It signals something totally otherwise. At the moment of Jesus' loud cry and his last breath, there the curtain in the temple is torn in two. This is the curtain that the God-fearing and Law-abiding Jewish people had put up to keep some out. It is torn "from top to bottom" (v. 38) because God breaks the division between the holy and the ordinary and erases the line between what is acceptable and unacceptable.

The death of Jesus is an opening. God opens the closed curtains that we so often put up and walks into our lives. God is not only within our reach, but also reaches out to all humanity with the redeeming grace of the cross. God treasures our ordinary life as a part of eternity. God turns the ends of human tragedy into new beginnings because God's redemptive story always eradicates any human-made divisive binaries we put up on earth. God follows neither the Roman Empire nor the Jewish Law. God builds a new kin-dom on earth according to God's all-embracing love. God is... and God does.

Reflection

"New beginnings are often disguised as painful endings." by Lao Tzu.

Prayer

O God, help us feel your presence in our daily lives, in our pain and our despair. Open our eyes to see your new beginnings in our endings. Guide us to live as a part of your redemptive story. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Hannah Ka is Pastor of Discipleship at [First United Methodist Church](#) in San Diego, California.

Saturday, March 30

Scripture: Mark 15:47-16:3

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was buried. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?"

Devotion

There is a tradition in African American communities called tarrying. It is when friends, family, and church family gather around the body of someone who is sick and sometimes near death—and the community begins to sing and sometimes pray with the hopes that the one who is infirmed might be restored or received with open arms by a loving and redeeming God. Can you imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome watching from afar as Jesus died on the cross and not really knowing what to do, not knowing if they could cry out, not knowing what song to sing to bring him comfort at his most painful hour?

Tarrying is not simply about bringing comfort to the one who is sick or dying; it is a willingness to enter into the pain of the community. These women dealt with their grief together. They probably wiped each other's tears and held each other's hands. They knew they could not change the fact that their Lord had died but, they could commit to not suffering alone. You see, many of us are suffering in silence because we are too afraid to be vulnerable, too afraid to let our images slip. But maybe in the sharing of our pain, we might find others who are grieving too, others who are singing our songs, and praying our prayers. And maybe as we find our collective voice of pain, we can discover our collective hope of resurrection.

Reflection

Sawubona is the Zulu greeting that means "I see you." How are you seeing, acknowledging, and responding to the grief around you?

Prayer

God in Heaven, tarry with us as we sing songs of lament, cry tears of grief and pain, and pray with expectation that weeping may endure for a night, but joy does come in the morning. Remind us, O God that Sunday is coming. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Tori C. Butler is Lead Pastor of Good Hope Union UMC in Silver Spring, Maryland.