

## Lenten Study – Binding Up the Brokenhearted

Whether it is the people of Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake or people in Afganistan, Iraq, Sudan or numerous other places of war in the world, or people both here and abroad who struggle to provide for their families or are experiencing violence, grief or illness, there are people who are suffering in various ways all around us. As the Body of Christ, God sends us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. (Isa 61: 1b). This Lenten study is written to equip us for this work.<sup>1</sup>

To say a word about my approach, it has been my experience that the solution even for issues that seem to be unrelated to the heart such as job loss or various kinds of injustice begins with healing the powerlessness and despair that accompany these issues in the heart of the one who is struggling. I have also found that the most powerful way for this healing to occur is to empower people by affirming and strengthening their own relationships with God. So this study is written for the person who her/ himself is suffering in some way. If this is you right now, you can use this study directly as it is written. If you are fortunate enough not to need healing at this time, this study can be useful in helping you clarify and articulate your experiences of God's healing in the past. So when the study asks you to think of concrete situations in your own life that need healing and this is not a present need for you, you might try thinking back to a time when you did need healing. My hope is that in addition to gaining a better understanding of how God heals, you will see in a fresh way how God has been active in your own life.

I also hope that this study will make you better able to testify to the activity of God in your life. In Revelation 12:11, it says that "they (our brothers) overcame him (the accuser) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Sharing testimonies with each other about how God has provided for us in a wilderness experience is a powerful way to help others to fight doubt, hopelessness and weariness in the midst of their own wilderness experiences. Learning how to witness to God's activity in your life is an important part of learning how "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

### \*February 17, 2010 (Ash Wednesday) – 2 Cor 5:20 – 6:10

In this New Testament reading for today, Paul reminds the Corinthian church that he has presented himself commendably through all kinds of hardships. How was he able to remain patient, kind, genuinely loving, and truthful even when he was being dishonored, treated as an impostor, punished, sorrowful, and having nothing? We might let think that he was able because he was a saint and had superhuman faith. But in 6: 2, Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8 "In the time of my favor I heard you, in the day of salvation I helped you" and explains that "now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." In your own life, when have you experienced God hearing you in a time of God's favor and helping you on a day of salvation?

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared from commentaries in the New Interpreter's Bible and other sources as noted. Readings from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which are what are used in worship, are assumed.

\*February 18 – 21, 2010 – Luke 4: 1 – 13

February 18 – We tend to focus on Jesus’ divinity rather than his humanity. But when we are going through a trial, this can backfire on us because we think that it was easy for Jesus to resist temptations and so he cannot really relate to us in ours. But the author of Hebrews tells us that it was hard for Jesus, too. In Hebrews 2: 18, it says that “Because [Jesus] himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” We know of his wrestling with the temptation to avoid suffering when he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. But according to the letter to the Hebrews, that may not have been the only time that he had to say, “Not my will but Thine.” Try imagining a situation in your life in which it is hard to trust God. Now try imaging Jesus struggling with that same situation. “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

February 19 – Jesus’ temptations can be understood at different levels and from various perspectives. One way we might understand Jesus’ temptation to turn a stone into bread might be to see it as the temptation to rely on our own power to provide for ourselves instead of trusting God to provide. For example, what do we do when we have an unpleasant or difficult emotion? Do we sit with it in prayer and wait for God to provide healing or do we numb ourselves somehow? Alcohol or drugs, including prescription drugs, might be obvious ways that people self-medicate to deal with difficult situations. But if we over-work or over-eat, if we spend money compulsively and impulsively or zone out in front of “the tube,” these can also be ways that we rely on what is within our own power to make ourselves feel better rather than waiting for God to provide healing. My own “drug” of choice is staying busy. Then I am too tired or I don’t have enough time to feel what is honestly there to be felt. How about you?

February 20 – In both the first and third temptation, the Greek word that is translated as “if” can have the sense of “since.” So the third temptation might be understood to be “*Since* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from [the pinnacle of the temple] for it is written, ‘He will command his angels to protect you.’” What was this temptation? Later in Luke 23, when Jesus is hanging on the cross, various ones mock him saying essentially, “Save yourself, *if* you can.” This opens up several possibilities for what this temptation might have been. Maybe it was a temptation to use his power to meet people’s demands for proof of God’s presence or of his own legitimacy. Although people may not demand that we throw ourselves off of high buildings, they may demand that we give them money or our forgiveness to prove that God loves them or that we are Christian. It is important to discern whether God is directing us to give or whether we are doing it to avoid a necessary but unpleasant conflict. Another possibility may be that Jesus was tempted to know ahead of time whether or not his sacrifice would be worth it. Or maybe he was tempted to test God to see if God really cared about him. What other possibilities occur to you?

February 22 – 24, 2010 – Matt 5: 3 – 12

February 22 – These are words that Jesus declares at the beginning of his ministry. They are so well

loved and familiar that it is easy to read through them without seeing how radical they really are. But if we pay close attention to the words, Jesus is either totally out of touch with reality or doing something more than meets the eye. What is more than meets the eye is that like the words of the prophets before him, these beatitudes speak into existence what they declare. Just as God spoke the heavens and the earth into existence out of chaos, Jesus speaks these blessings into existence in the lives of his disciples. Think of a difficult situation in your life right now. How does your view of this change as you reflect on the power of Jesus' words to create blessing in that situation?

February 23 – We often understand that the blessings will be given to us when we die and go to heaven. But in key verses, Jesus speaks in the present tense. <sup>3</sup>“Blessed *are* the poor in spirit for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” <sup>10</sup>“Blessed *are* those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” <sup>12</sup>“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward *is* great in heaven.” When I asked the Thursday morning Bible study if anyone could think of a time when they had experienced blessing *in this life* during a time of trouble, Cheryl Kasper volunteered a testimony from her own life: When her mother passed, Pastor Sherry suggested that she look for the blessings in her time of mourning. Cheryl says that this totally changed the way she was looking at things and not only she but her daughter also saw many, many blessings in the midst of what one normally thinks is not a blessed time. Have you had a time when you have experienced blessing during a time of trouble? If so, try listing the blessings.

February 24 – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” When a group of us were talking about the earthquake in Haiti and marveling that there were people who could give praise to God even during such a time, Teresa Price remarked, “They’ve had a lot of practice.” This is an example of the wonderfully upside down way in which the Kingdom of Heaven works. In James 2:5, it says that God chooses the poor in the world to be rich in faith. There is also 2 Cor 12 in which Paul shares that on asking the Lord to remove a thorn in his flesh, he was told “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul goes on to say, “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses ... for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” The strength of which Paul writes is not strength as the world understands it. It is instead the ability of people to say they are “blessed and highly favored” even when our society says they are “underprivileged” because they have little material wealth. It is having the peace that surpasses all understanding when your world is falling apart. You might think this sounds like people in denial. But denial has a brittle quality. This might be a “you’ll know it when you see it” kind of strength. Who do you know who is blessed in this way?

\*February 25 – 28, 2010 – Genesis 15: 1 – 18

February 25 – If God came to us and said, “Do not be afraid. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great,” how many of us would have the audacity to respond by questioning God? Yet that is what Abram does. He basically says, “You haven’t given me a son. So what reward could be so great?” Then in 15:8, he asks God for a sign as assurance that God will do what God promises. (You might also read Genesis 18:16 – 33 where Abraham negotiates with God and changes God’s mind) What do you think about the bold way Abram interacts with God?

February 26 – Abram was already 75 years old when God called him to leave Haran and go “to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1) Sarah was 65 and they had not had any children. Yet somehow Abram shifted from doubting God in 15:2 – 3 to believing God in 15:4 – 5 when God said that Abram’s own issue would be his heir. Have you ever had the experience of “knowing” something when all appearances were to the contrary? How did that happen?

February 27 – The ritual of walking between animals that had been cut in two symbolized the death that would happen to the participants of the covenant if they were unfaithful to the covenant. Notice that it is only God who passes between the divided animals and therefore only God who obligates Godself to the covenant. There is no “If you ... I will ...” That will come later (Chapter 17). But at this point, the covenant is unconditional. What do you think about a God who makes such deep one-sided commitments to humans?

March 1 – 3, 2010 – Psalm 38

March 1 – As part of learning about biblical healing, we will be studying some lament psalms. These psalms teach us to cry out to God when we are suffering. More than one third (66 by one classification system <sup>2</sup>) of the 150 psalms in the Psalter are of this type. But interestingly, 30 of these never show up in the entire three year cycle of the lectionary. It seems clear that the Church has wrestled with the idea of complaining to God, mostly leaning toward teaching people not to complain but to bear their burdens quietly. But maybe we can learn something from the Psalter, which is, after all, Jesus' Prayer Book. What do you think about the idea of complaining to God in general or of this psalm in particular?

March 2 – This is a penitential lament, a lament of a person who admits wrongdoing (perhaps the most famous of this type of psalm is Psalm 51, which we read every year on Ash Wednesday). While we sometimes do suffer because of sins we have committed or poor choices we have made, it is important to remember that not all suffering results from our own sinfulness. Many of the lament psalms are not about the psalmist's own sin but about suffering caused by the sin of others; we will study such a psalm next week. But this week, we have a psalm in which the psalmist admits wrongdoing and understands that his/her suffering is a consequence of sin. Even so, the psalmist complains in great detail about how her/his pain feels. This suggests that the psalmist believes that God will listen, that God cares and maybe even that God will relent, even though the psalmist sinned ... otherwise, why bother complaining? We are generally taught to endure our punishment patiently and silently. What can we learn about the character of God and about our relationship with God from this psalm of complaint?

March 3 – This psalm exhibits a feature that is present in many lament psalms: After complaining for awhile, there is a shift in focus, from complaint to hope. Do you see any evidence in the psalm itself of how this change came about? How about in your own life ... Describe a time when you were feeling troubled and then something lifted your heart. How did that change occur?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.crivoice.org/pslamtypes.html>

\*March 4 – 7, 2010 – Isaiah 55:1 – 13

March 4 – In this passage, “rich food,” food that satisfies, food that enables us to live is the Word of God. If you narrowly define the Word of God to be the Bible and you have not yet connected with the Bible as being full of life-giving words, this may not be an encouragement to you. But the Word of God is not only what is contained in the Bible. It is the Word that God speaks at creation and since God is still in the creation business, the Word of God is being spoken all the time. Any words that create life such as words of encouragement, words that lift your spirit or words that renew you are also the Word of God. These words do not cost money and you don’t have to labor for these words. What Word of God have you heard recently?

March 5 – A Word of God in this passage is “I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.” To unpack this a little, God made a covenant with David that he and his descendants would be the rightful kings of Israel (2 Sam 7). Then in Psalm 18:43, David thanks God for extending his role beyond Israel to be “head of the nations.” Now in Verse 5 of Isaiah 55, David’s role as “a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples” is expanded to be the role of God’s people. Isaiah was speaking this Word of God to a people who, in the world’s eyes, were hardly leaders and commanders; they were a people oppressed by foreign powers. At a time when they seemed very unimportant and probably felt that they deserved it, Isaiah prophesies that they *will be* important even to nations that they do not know and that do not know them as yet, because God has glorified them. This is an example of God’s thoughts not being our thoughts. When people are suffering, we tend to think they are being punished or that they do not matter to God for some reason. But even people who have caused their own distress by sin matter to God and so the Word of God to a seemingly unfavored Israel in this passage is that God has given them honor/splendor. As Christians, we believe that the people of God have been extended now to include us. So if you are in the midst of some kind of oppression or affliction and feeling unimportant to God, Isaiah’s Word of God assures you that God has glorified you. If you yourself are not suffering but are walking with someone who is, what evidence do you see that God has already glorified them (notice the past tense at the end of Verse 5)?

March 6 – Yesterday, we considered the Word of God to us as God’s people that God has glorified us and that therefore, we will be important to people we do not know and who do not as yet know us. Notice that having such words spoken to us especially when we are suffering means that there is meaning and purpose for our suffering. Verse 4 says that one of David’s roles to “the nations,” which is now expanded to be a role of the people of God, is to be a witness to the peoples. When God has brought us through an affliction or is sustaining us even while the affliction continues, our witness about God’s care in the midst of our need can encourage and sustain others in theirs. This is not leadership and command that bends people to our own word but empowers people to follow God’s Word, the rich food that satisfies, delights and enables us to live.

March 8 – 10, 2010 – Psalm 10

March 8 – This is one of the lament psalms that never shows up in the three year cycle of the lectionary. Some of you may find that it makes you uncomfortable because it is so full of complaint. But others may be relieved to read it because it expresses how you are feeling and gives you permission to feel how you feel in the midst of a society that pressures people to “be positive.” How about you? How does it make you feel? Monastics, among others, pray all of the psalms including this one every few months in the course of their daily devotions. Setting aside our cultural bias toward being positive, what value might there be in learning to pray a psalm like this one?

March 9 – When we are going through a storm, one thing that really adds to our pain is having no one who will hear our complaint. This is nothing new. Many of the psalmists describe the same experience (for example, Verse 11 of Psalm 38 from last week, Psalm 88:8). When people pull away from us when we are suffering, it makes us feel like we have done something to deserve our suffering. Not only do we feel alone but we feel judged. Hearing our complaints is an important way that God cares for us. Who else will put up with us when we can’t get it together to be positive and uplifting? I learned this in 1995, the year before each of my parents passed and I had a bout with breast cancer. Even with my parents’ illnesses and the abnormal mammogram, I so thoroughly believed that I shouldn’t complain that my prayer life was still totally about everyone else’s problems. But I happened to catch a piece of a Randy Travis song on the radio and I was so drawn to it that I just *had* to buy the CD. The chorus went like this:

This is me, the one who knows you inside out, the one you’ve leaned on ‘til now.  
Don’t you know I’m still here for you?  
So what do you think you’re doing? Who do you think you’re fooling?  
This is me you’re not talking to.

The fact that I do not normally listen to country music was part of what made this such a miracle for me. I heard it as God saying to me, “This is Me you’re not talking to.” For weeks, I would put this song on “repeat” on the CD player several times a day and weep and weep. To this day, the song moves me whenever I hear it because it was how God came after me and found me lost in the wilderness. (BTW I have been cancer-free for 13 years. Praise God!)

March 10 – Silencing is one way that people are oppressed. They are made to feel that what they have to say is of no consequence and this is soul-crushing. Finding one’s voice is therefore an important part of healing and that may be one value of lament psalms: to teach us how to name what is wrong and to speak up for ourselves. Does this perspective change how you feel about Psalm 10? Why or why not?

\*March 11 – 14, 2010 – 2 Cor 5: 16 – 21

March 11 – Something happened to Paul on the road to Damascus, something so profound that he went from persecuting Christians to becoming one of their most tireless and faithful leaders. Let's try to imagine what Paul means in the first verse of this passage that "even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way." We might gather from Paul's writings as a whole that he used to believe that keeping the traditions of his ancestors and getting other Jews to do the same was the way for Israel to be reconciled to God and for Israel's suffering under foreign powers to be ended. So knowing "Christ from a human point of view" may have meant that he saw Jesus to be leading Jews astray from being reconciled to God through returning to the ancestral traditions and his new point of view after his conversion was that Jesus himself reconciled us to God. Have you had an experience of looking to something or someone to get you out of a difficult situation only to find that something altogether different was what actually got you out? Do not confine yourself necessarily to "spiritual" matters; God cares about every aspect of your life.

March 12 – While we might normally understand God making "[Christ] to be sin who knew no sin" in Verse 21 as God using Jesus as the Lamb without blemish for our sins, another perspective that might broaden our understanding of Jesus' work on earth is John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." In Hebrews 2:18, it says that Jesus suffered when he was tempted and is therefore able to help us when we are tempted. So we might say that by showing us how to resist temptation despite our human vulnerability, Jesus showed us how "we might become the righteousness of God," that is, how we might be restored to a right relationship (a trusting and dependent relationship) with God. Much of what we deal with in life is not so much about wrongdoing already committed that requires atonement but our vulnerabilities as humans and our daily (sometimes hourly) temptation to make our own way instead of being led by God. So it might help us to understand God making "[Christ] to be sin who knew no sin" as God making Christ vulnerable who knew no vulnerability. (Reflecting on Philippians 2:5 – 8 might also be helpful.)

March 13 – Paul had a dramatic conversion over a very short period of time. Our own conversions may not have been compressed (or 'may not be compressed' if you are in the process now) into such a short period of time and so they may not seem as dramatic. But Paul tells us in Verse 17, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." So make no mistake. The change in you is nothing less than "a new creation." Think about when you realized that faith was important to you. How did your orientation to the world change (or how is it changing) when you made the commitment to develop your faith? "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."

March 15 – 17, 2010 – Job 19

March 15 – What we usually hear about Job is that he was patient. This is probably because of the King James translation of James 5: 11 which says, “Ye have heard of the patience of Job ...” So what Job says in this chapter may surprise you. He complains and even goes so far as to accuse God of wronging him! In an odd way, though, the fact that Job complains may show how much he trusts God at a very deep level. Think about it. If Job thought that God’s M.O. was to “set darkness upon my paths,” “break me down on every side,” and “uproot my hope,” would he bother complaining? From reading Job 1, we can get a sense that Job spent time with God on a regular basis. He seems to have known God intimately in a way that I, for one, have to admit that I do not. How do Job’s words in this chapter seem to you if you read them assuming a deeply intimate relationship between Job and God until this point?

March 16 – I have heard it said that we often read the Book of Job as if it only has seven chapters, Chapters 1 and 2 and Chapters 38 – 42. To be sure, Chapters 3 – 37 are agonizing. But if we skip from Chapter 2 to Chapter 38, we would miss one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture, Job 19: 25 – 27: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” I wonder, though, if somehow it was the honesty of Job’s preceding lament that gave rise to this deep confidence in Verses 25 – 27. What do you think? God’s ways are not our ways, you know.

March 17 – When God finally answers Job “out of the whirlwind” in Chapter 38, God demands, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” and proceeds, at least to my mind, not to answer any of Job’s many questions. But somehow after four chapters of this, Job says, “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know ... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42: 3b – 6) Some kind of healing must have occurred that Job now seems to be at peace. (While the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) has “I despise myself,” which may not sound very peaceful, the Hebrew word here seems also to mean “recant” or “retract” in addition to “despise” or “reject.” So Job may have said, “Therefore I *recant* and repent in dust and ashes.”) From the outside looking in, it is hard to understand how this happened and it is difficult for the one on the inside to describe something as indescribable as seeing God in the midst of great suffering. But God promises us never to leave us nor forsake us and this is our great hope. Describe a time that you met God in this way or saw someone else who met God in this way.

(Forgiveness can also be a part of healing. For a reflection on Job forgiving his friends for failing him in his time of need, see “Forgiveness That Turns Captivity” at [www.trinityepiscopalville.org/Spirit/ForgivenessOct09.doc](http://www.trinityepiscopalville.org/Spirit/ForgivenessOct09.doc).)

\*March 18 – 21, 2010 – Isaiah 43: 16 – 21

March 18 – It is important to remember. Remembering is an important part of knowing one’s identity. For Israel, the Exodus, of which we are reminded in Verses 16 and 17, was a foundational event. What was your foundational event? It need not necessarily have been a situation of distress like the Israelites in Egypt and the Red Sea. It might simply be the first time you had a sense of yourself as an individual person of faith distinct from your parents and others.

March 19 – As important as the Exodus was, the Lord tells Israel not to “remember the former things or consider the things of old.” After reminding them of being brought *through* water, the Lord tells them that now they will be brought through a place with *no* water. In our journey following God’s lead, God is always doing a new thing, which calls us to trust God at ever deeper levels. Think of a difficult situation you are in (or were in). Have you been looking for God to deliver you in the same way God has delivered you in the past? What does it mean to you that God says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing ... I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert”?

March 20 – “I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people.” The language of being “chosen” may trouble you because it sounds exclusionary. But from the testimonies of African-American Christians over the years, I have come to understand “chosen” to mean being seen (His eye is on the sparrow, I know He watches me) and being given a unique purpose. We can see why this might be important to people who the world often treats as being invisible and of no value. It can also be encouraging to any of us when we are overwhelmed by situations and feel alone and powerless. How does your view of your present difficulty change knowing that God sees and watches you and that God has given you a purpose that has never been given and never will be given to anyone else?

March 22 – 24, 2010 – Genesis 16: 1 – 13

March 22 – We may be used to hearing about Hagar in negative terms because of what Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians. But those of us who know what it is like to be on the outside looking in may feel sympathy for her. In this passage, we see that God does, too. God blesses Hagar in several ways in this wilderness experience. We may know that the promise of greatly multiplying her offspring was an important blessing for people in her day. But over the next few days, we will consider some other blessings here that may not be so obvious. The first is that God (actually the angel of the Lord at this point in the story) addresses Hagar by name. Abram and Sarai refer to her only as “my slave-girl” or “your slave-girl” or in the third person. It raises doubt that they considered her to be a person. But the angel of the Lord calls her by name. Also given that in Jewish tradition, names are not just labels but also symbols of the nature and essence of the person named<sup>3</sup>, we might say that in calling her by name, the angel of the Lord showed that the angel knew her nature and her essence. In a world in which people only referred to her as “slave-girl,” how do you think it felt for Hagar to be fully known and to be called by name?

March 23 – The angel of the Lord asks Hagar, “Where have you come from and where are you going?” God is all-knowing. So why would the angel ask Hagar these questions? Could it be that part of Hagar’s healing involved her naming her suffering (Where have you come from) as well as her longing (Where are you going)? When we studied Psalm 10 a couple of weeks ago, we considered how silencing is a significant way that people are oppressed. How does it make you feel that the Lord of the Universe would take the time to hear you “tell all your anguish,” as it says in the hymn *Come Ye Disconsolate*? (Notice also what “Ishmael” means.)

March 24 – In the Old Testament, Hagar is the only one who is allowed to name God (see Verse 13. Also, notice what she names God). The slave-girl, a woman outside of the people of the Promise, is allowed to name God. What does this teach you about God?

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<sup>3</sup> [www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly\\_Torah\\_Portion/bereisht\\_uahc5762.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly_Torah_Portion/bereisht_uahc5762.shtml)

\*March 25 – 28, 2010 (Palm Sunday) – Isaiah 50: 4 – 9a

March 25 – This is the third of what are called the Servant Songs in Isaiah (42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-9 and 53:1-12), which traditionally were understood to refer to the nation of Israel but which we as Christians read as foretelling Jesus. Although it often may seem like Jesus came only to die on the cross, by combining this poem with passages we have considered in the past several weeks: “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14), the temptations of Jesus (Luke 4:1-13, Hebrews 2:18), and God making “[Christ] to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21), we can also see the importance of what he did before he went to the cross. In Verse 4, the Servant says, “the Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” Because Jesus lived among us and was tempted as we are, his words have the authority of experience. He is not just a supernatural being that does not know what it is like to be vulnerable like us. He is human and he knows what it is like to be weary. What is making you weary right now?

March 26 – We may think that as long as our affliction continues, God has not answered our prayers. But this may be a blindness that particularly affects Christians who have been comfortable. We tend to think that God is with us and God has blessed us because we are safe and healthy, we have a roof over our heads, money in the bank and things are going well for us. What we can learn from Christians who have lived under various forms of oppression or affliction for a long time is that God is “a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). Trouble does not mean that God is absent. God’s presence can be felt even while the trouble continues. This is what the Servant is saying in our passage. He is being struck and insulted. But he testifies that God is present in his affliction and is helping him and enabling him to endure. If you are in the midst of a trial right now, think of what is enabling you to hold on (or if the trial is past tense, what enabled you to hold on?). It may be the love you have for your child, a word from a friend, a passage of scripture, something you hear on the radio. Be open to God reaching you from any and every aspect of your life, not just “spiritual” avenues such as scripture or a pastor. And whenever you notice something that lifts your heart, give thanks for it. There is a saying in the African-American Church, “When praises go up, blessings come down.” Giving thanks multiplies blessings.

March 27 – As we begin Holy Week, this passage may give us a glimpse into Jesus’ mindset as he entered Jerusalem: “I have set my face like flint.” He knew what lay ahead. But he was willing (“I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward”) to go so that he could truly be Immanuel, God with us, even into death. So whatever you may be going through right now, Jesus has already been there. He knows what it is like and he knows how to help you and sustain you.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

## **Holy Week**

### **March 29, 2010 – Isaiah 42: 1 – 9**

Traditionally, we have been taught that the justice Jesus established cancels the sin of the sinner. But Korean theologians, among others, urge us also to think seriously about how the justice Jesus established heals damage done to those who have been sinned against. You might think that since we are all sinners, our healing as ones who have been sinned against is covered by being forgiven of our own sins. But is this true? Take, for example, a child who is growing up in an abusive home. She may learn to lie to avoid being beaten and there will come a time when she will have to answer for her lying. But does her repentance for lying and being forgiven for it heal her of the harm done to her by the sin of her parent in beating her? I believe the justice Jesus established is broader than simply cancelling the sin of sinners. I believe his justice somehow vindicates and heals those who have been sinned against and that this opens the eyes that are blind, and brings out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. What do you think about the idea of justice being healing?

### **March 30, 2010 – 1 Cor 1: 18 – 31**

This passage is particularly helpful for continuing our reflection from yesterday on what Jesus did to heal those who have been sinned against. One aspect of this passage is that it describes what God did to address inequality of power: “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” To unpack what this might mean in our own context, take, for example, the case of African-Americans who have had and often continue to have less access to power in our country. An important part of black and womanist (black feminist) theology is to remember that Jesus was treated with contempt, discriminated, ridiculed, violated and ultimately murdered. If the Son of God himself was treated so badly, then it exposes the lie that African-Americans are going through these things because they deserve it. The power of the Civil Rights Movement is a testimony to what can happen when Jesus heals people who have been lied to. The Movement was truly a case of God choosing “what is low and despised in the world, things that are not (things or people whom the world thinks don’t matter) to reduce to nothing things that are (the powers that be) so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

### **March 31, 2010 – Hebrews 12:1 – 3**

A couple of points to consider:

How does this passage read if you think of “the sin that clings so closely” not only as our own sin but also the sin of others against us?

The verb tense of “endured” in Verse 3 may indicate that Jesus endured hostility over a long period, not just at the crucifixion.

### April 1, 2010 – Psalm 116

It is interesting to me that Verses 1 – 2 and 12 – 19 are what are read each year on Holy Thursday and Verse 3 – 11 are omitted. Were these verses passed over because of time considerations? Maybe it was because the omitted verses would make this more a psalm of thanksgiving for being delivered from one's own suffering and we are supposed to be focusing on Jesus' suffering today. But given what we have been pondering over the last several weeks about how Jesus heals us, how appropriate for us to say today as part of our praise for what Jesus did, "Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the Lord in the land of the living."

### April 2, 2010 – Psalm 22

We read this psalm on Good Friday because Jesus quoted the first verse from the cross. We see the psalmist alternating between desperation and hope through Verse 18. But calling God "my help" signals a shift and then in the second half of Verse 21, the psalmist comes down firmly on the side of praise: "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me" (although the cry for help continues for one more line in the translation of the New International Version). Notice that the psalmist praises the Lord for not despising the affliction of the afflicted, not hiding the divine face and for hearing the psalmist's cry. Since there is no mention of deliverance, the psalmist may still be afflicted. But something has changed and now the psalmist offers extravagant praise. The word translated as "poor" in Verse 26 is related to the word translated as "afflicted" in Verse 24. So the psalmist, who may still be suffering, will be feeding others who are suffering. Have you had an experience when even though your external circumstances remained unchanged (at least for awhile), something changed in you? Describe what that was like.

### April 3, 2010 – Lamentations 3: 1 – 9, 19 – 24

Although it is said that we Christians are Easter people, it is also true that we live in Holy Saturday: Although we believe that something decisive happened with Jesus, we are still waiting for God's kingdom to be made fully manifest. So it is good to develop our ability to live "in the meantime" and laments like this one are instructive. Once again, we see the pattern of complaint shifting to hope in Verse 21: "But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." What is it that you call to mind to have hope? How do you know that "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end?" For me, I know this because of what I have seen God do in my own life and in the lives of people I know. I have seen people transformed from being beaten down to having a sense of their dignity and value. I have seen people making it when the world said there was no way they could. I have seen God sustain the weary with a Word. I have seen God fight battles for people who could not fight them for themselves. I have seen God's healing in the midst of suffering. These things "I call to mind and therefore I have hope."