

February 15

“No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.” Luke 8:16-18

Smokey the Bear would so not be happy with the opening image here. An open flame under a bed? That is a fire hazard waiting to happen. And while we are at it, the ending is about as uplifting as Debbie Downer. So, if you have a lot, here have more the passages suggests on the surface. And if you are down to your last thread be careful because there is a pair of sharp scissors hovering perilously above you. To be clear, Jesus probably wasn't talking about money or stuff we stuff our lives with. Although, it certainly is the case that the gap between the rich and poor is widening in heartbreaking ways. Jesus was trying to talk about the truth that once you see, you cannot unsee. Once you have a thought, you cannot un-think it. You know this when you toss and turn at night.

Did you notice how Jesus says, “pay attention to *how* you listen.” There are many ways of hearing. There is the kind of hearing where the words go in one ear and out the other barely leaving a trace. There is the kind of hearing where your brain holds the words, but they don't really sink or settle or seep into your soul. There is deep listening where what you experience, encounter stays with you. Examples: when I say to my kids, “Can you pick up your sock?” Then, they walk right past it with nary a care in the world. There are also moments we don't have the energy to listen. Then, there is the kind of listening where I do hear and even comprehend, but it is surface level. For me, this happens when people read me numbers and my mind struggles to keep them in the correct order. Finally, when I hear how much pain there is in the world from those who are pushed to the fringe and fray. When I see tears of our LGBTQ friends or laments of our African-American brothers and sisters. Or when a woman, who shattered the glass ceiling and got a doctorate, only to never be referred to by her earned title. Those sit uneasy in my soul.

How do you listen? How might you lean toward those you encounter this week? On this day after Valentine's Day – to know that you are heard and giving the gift of hearing to others, is one of the most beautiful ways to love that I know.

Lord, listen to your children praying...help us listen as well to You and others. Amen.

February 16

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side of the lake.” So they put out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And he woke up

and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?" Luke 8:22-25

I have been on *that* boat this last year. The wind and waves tossing my life to and fro. Feeling like I am racing and running around in all directions. I have set sail on that ship countless times in trying to respond to the pandemic and polarization and discrimination. I have tried to manage the sails of worship with one hand while bailing water with a bucket with the other as I try to find new ways of being a pastor in this new time. I have been on that boat prior to COVID when I read about declining membership and budgets and buildings that we try to maintain. I don't have to have been there with the disciples that night to know this story is true. It is woven into my story.

When has the ship/boat of your life tried to make it through the storm? Perhaps a relationship that ends in divorce. A job where you are unexpectedly handed a pink slip. An illness that wallops you out of the blue. Or just having survived 2020, now waiting for your turn in line for the vaccine. Where do the storms threaten and cause your anxiety to spike? Where do you feel dizzy and disoriented, afraid from all that you are facing?

Our lives are vessel set a drift on the sea. Sometimes the sailing is smooth, the water like glass. Other times the waves won't quit crashing chaotically on us, causing us to feel overwhelmed and underprepared. I am a bit miffed that Jesus questions the disciples' faith. After all, I have doubts that rage and run around my head and heart, especially in the tumult of life today. I cling to my faith, but it seems so small or inadequate amid the problems that vex us in the world today. My faith barely helps me get out of bed. I am not sure I will be moving a mountain any time soon. But then again, just being up and awake and alert today can feel like a mountainous climb for so many people.

Perhaps faith isn't always confidence or certainty; faith is the willingness to keep trying and growing. Faith is acknowledging that the storm is real and I need help. I can't save myself any more than the disciples could save themselves. Mark Nepo says, "No matter what we're going through, faith in life means believing that there's always more beyond the condition of our understanding." Perhaps, Jesus wasn't so much questioning the amount of faith, but more that the disciples seemed surprised (afraid and amazed the text says), that Jesus would respond so quickly. Faith is staying open in the storm for that sacred voice saying to you, "Peace...I am here...I see you." May I hear those holy words today. May we speak them to each other. May we be willing to be in the boat with each other, weathering the storm of life today. For I believe it is in sharing our vessels of life that faith is nourished, nurtured, and we sense Christ's presence near.

Holy One, sometimes You calm the storm. Sometimes You calm the sailor. Could you do both today for all of us? Amen.

February 17 – Beginning of Lent

Today, we begin the season of Lent, which comes from the English word, lencten, meaning “spring season.” Who says you don’t learn something reading these morning mediations!

During Lent, I want to open our hearts to holy hymns that sing to our souls. In particular, I want us to pray the words of our hymns. You can pray by singing these words or listening to a version on YouTube (I have posted a link above/below). I encourage you to listen several times today.

Which words or phrases calm you? Why?

Which words or phrases leave you feeling restless? Why?

What memories does the hymn invoke or provoke from your heart? You can always post a comment.

We start with one of my favorites, Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer (or Jehovah). Here is the first verse to pay attention to:

Guide me, O my great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak, but you are mighty; hold me with your powerful hand. Bread of heaven; bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no more.

Lent is a season betwixt and between. In many parts of the country, winter still has snow falling and piling up – thanks to the groundhog who saw his shadow a few weeks ago. Lent says we are no longer at the start of something, but we haven’t arrived either. We are in the messy middle, which sometimes can feel barren. I think about the Iowa landscape I knew as a child covered in snow. Or how the grass right outside my door in Florida is not a vibrant hue of green, but rather dull and drab. When we have started something, but don’t see the finished line, we can feel vulnerable – or weak as the hymn preaches/proclaims. In my weakness God meets me with bread, manna, to sustain me. I pray that these daily devotionals as we focus on hymns will be like bread, manna, for your soul. I am grateful for you to journey with this sacred season between what is known and the unknowable future. I am grateful for the support and care. I am grateful that at Christ’s table all are welcome and fed with more than a trace of grace we need every day.

Prayer: Guiding, grace-filled God ground me in Your love and sustain me with a presence that I can call, “Peace” every day during Lent, I pray. Amen.

February 18

I invite you to listen again to the hymn, Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer. Listen, lean in, hear with your whole heart the second verse:

Open now the crystal fountain, where the healing waters flow. Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through. Strong deliverer, strong deliverer, ever be my strength and shield, ever be my strength and shield.

Healing water that washes over us – renewing and refreshing. Healing water that supports us and our souls feel buoyed by a love. Healing water that saturates and soaks our lives with God’s presence.

When have you felt that kind of water? Maybe diving into a pool on a hot summer day as a kid. Maybe when you visited the Holy Land and you actually waded in the water of Jordan. Maybe when you walked along the beach, waves tickled your toes, as you held onto the truth that Jesus called his disciples from the seashore.

Water flows through scripture. From the beginning with Genesis to being parted in Moses to a foreign river during Exile in Babylon where faithful lamented/wept to this verse of music reminding us that God loves to splash in the waters of life.

I invite you today to take water, trace the symbol of a cross on your forehead. Yesterday, Ash Wednesday, would have been traditionally – in a non-COVID year – a service of putting ashes on peoples’ foreheads. But those ashes, symbolic of vulnerability, frailty and even death, do not erase the baptismal promise of God’s love that was traced on your forehead years ago. To remember your baptism as you sing about waters washing over you; God guiding you; and God strength supporting you.

Where do you need God’s strength today? In a meeting or conversation? In dealing with something that causes your stomach to somersault. With patience or perseverance or just trying to get through the day without eating all the leftover Valentine’s Day candy?

Name that place you long for God to enter in and sing the second verse of the hymn again as your prayer for today.

February 19

When I reach the River Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside. Death of death, and hell’s destruction, land me safe on heaven’s side. Songs of praises, songs of praises I will ever sing to you, I will ever sing to you.

This is such a powerful verse. I am struck by how fears, death, and destruction are put aside awakening a song of praise within us. I think about how often fear, death, and destruction are part of our lives. We hear it all the time on the news. And now with a 24-hour news cycle, you can hear about why the world is going you know where in a handbasket any time you want. You don’t need to wait to see fear or hear about someone dying or encounter pain, there are countless channels dedicated to telling you. Or you prefer, you can just refresh your newsfeed on your computer, because the internet will find in any gaps.

I get that the world is not all ponies rides and chocolate rivers. I get that pain is real. I know that there is heartbreaking suffering and struggle. But, we focus a lot of energy there. So much that we can feel paralyzed, unable to do anything besides reach for another bag of the clearance Valentine's candy we picked up at the store yesterday. I mean, you can't pass up Godiva at that price!

I am not trying to be Pollyanna or tell you that everything is going to be fine. Struggle is real. Pain is part of this human condition. Joy is also baked and built into the mix. We just don't trust the joy is as real as the pain. If something good happens, we think it is a trick or won't last or feel guilty for enjoying a moment of grace when others are hurting. If we wait for all the fears and death and destruction to finally be ended, we might not ever sing. But if, in moments when our souls feel their full worth, we risk singing, there is a beauty in that moment. Moreover, if you risk singing out praise, someone might join you. And someone else, then someone else. To be sure, that doesn't mean everything is fine and dandy. It just means that we believe in a God who is still at work and still creating and still saying that brokenness is never the last word. And that truth makes me want to sing.

Holy One, hear my song, my prayer that comes from my heart to Your ears, trusting that You are there in the good times and difficult moments. That Your resurrection promise of life is a light to my life every day. Amen.