



THE LAST
Week
Part One

“The Last Week, Part One”

A Lent Devotion written by Pastor Joe Meyer

Wednesday, February 14th
“Triumphal Entry!”
Read Matthew 21:1-11

I love to watch documentaries. Most of you that have known me for a while know that to be true about me. I truly enjoy watching just about any documentary on just about any subject, but I especially like those which give an account of what happened during World War II. Don't get me wrong, I don't like to see all of the horrific things that go along with any war, let alone WWII. The horrors of the Second World War seemed to be double or triple that which we'd experienced up until that moment in history. The world was “on fire,” as it has been said, and while remembering the history is important, the reality of that history is, of course, sad and sickening because we human beings can be so evil.

Nonetheless, I do love to see the black and white newsreel-clips of that time period and especially so when it came to our American forces (or the Allied forces for that matter) liberating a town, a city or even a country from the Nazi regime. You know the clips I'm talking about because if you've ever seen them, you've been moved and touched by what you've witnessed. Crowds are lining the streets and cheering while waving hankies and flags. They often hold up babies and hug and kiss one another and hug and kiss the military who have become their saviors from the forces of darkness in their land. The residents are shown coming out of their homes without fear for what, to them, must have felt like the first time in years! They slowly come out of their domiciles with tears and cheers, appropriately thanking those who had delivered them from their enemy.

Now I bring it up because, as you know, the first day of the last week of Christ's earthly life was marked by a similar scene, marked with a crowd cheering on their conquering hero and His triumphal entry into the city. The crowds came out to see Jesus, “the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” to be sure, but more than that, they came out to cheer Him on as He took His rightful place as the King of Israel. They would have likely understood that the Palm Sunday ride was Jesus' way of removing all doubt about who He was or at least who He claimed to be. Jesus made a bold statement as He chose to take up a ride identical to that which King Solomon took when He was anointed as David's successor (1Kings 1:33). They would have viewed Jesus as their conquering

hero and in the Triumphal Entry they would have viewed Him as the King who had come to save them. They were oppressed. They were in bondage. They were enslaved. And so, when their King came riding into their city, they believed He would also be the one to deliver them from their seemingly endless plight.

Of course, they had no idea how true that was. The celebration of Jesus and the attention given to Him was all merited and all correct, and even fulfilled a prophecy about Him found in God's Word (Zechariah 9:9). But seeing this ride as the ride of a conquering hero was in fact centered in a misunderstanding about who Jesus was for them. It was also a week premature! At this moment in the Christ-story, Jesus hadn't yet conquered their enemies. Don't get me wrong, He would! Jesus did come to conquer their enemies, and nothing would stop that from happening. Jesus did come to deliver them from their oppression and bondage and enslavement. And yet, what they didn't understand was that He would do so permanently and for all time and eternity. Of course, His deliverance wasn't about their earthly enemies nor about His life lived among them as their Solomon-like-King. His deliverance would instead be His death given over for them at the cross as their Savior from their true enemies, sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus would, in fact, conquer the enemies of every single human being that day, but He wouldn't do so without giving up His life in order to bring true victory to us!

And so He did. And so He died. And when He did and when He died, He indeed conquered the true enemies for those assembled on Palm Sunday, but He also conquered them for every single human being and, yes, for you and for me. Paul would write it very succinctly in 1Corinthians 15:3: *"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures..."*. Indeed, He did. He was our conquering hero, no doubt about it. He deserved all the accolades and appreciation, no question about it. While the celebration was premature that first Palm Sunday, it was nevertheless truly a "Triumphal Entry" for the Palm Sunday crowd, and of course, a "Triumphal Entry" for the entire world! But why? Well, interestingly, in and through Christ our Victorious King, we are also given a "Triumphal Entry" but a "Triumphal Entry" into His Heavenly realm!



Thursday, February 15th

“People are Fickle”

Read Matthew 21:1-11

In my line of work as one of the under-shepherds of God’s flock, I’ve often heard church-workers teasingly say, “Being in ministry is great if it weren’t for the people!” We all know that to be a true statement and a true statement no matter what line of work we’re in...yes? Church workers and non-church-workers alike know that people can be difficult at times and can make any job turn into a trial and tribulation and can do so at the drop of a hat. This truth has also been said another way, namely, “If you bring sinners together into a room, there is simply going to be sin!” Truth. When it comes to dealing with people, sometimes you’re smiling and singing, and sometimes you’re frowning and frustrated, simply because people are people and, therefore, can be difficult.

Narrowing this truth down for you a little bit, though, one of the reasons people are difficult is that they can be very, very fickle. One minute, they’re hot, and the next minute, they’re not. You succeed with a certain tactic or strategy in the moment and months or even just weeks later, that tactic or strategy is irrelevant and useless and forgotten about. If you’re in business, you know that items or ideas that are trending will ebb and flow as people latch onto a product for a time only to latch onto a different product fairly rapidly. Again, one minute, they’re hot, and the next, they’re not. People are fickle.

Now, doesn’t that seem to be what happened with the people that have become known as “The Palm Sunday Crowd”? We know exactly what happened the Sunday before Jesus was crucified since we celebrate it every single year. In fact, as we explored just yesterday, Jesus rode in on a donkey and, in doing so, gave a signal to the people that He was indeed the Messiah from David’s line and a King not unlike David’s son Solomon...but a far greater King to be sure! Because of that kingly-ride however, the crowds were hyped and hyped beyond belief. Seeing Jesus coming into the city that day, the crowds were absolutely on fire! They believed Jesus was their coming King and their conquering Hero. They believed He would be the one to deliver them from their oppression and free them from their bondage at the hands of the Romans. And so they were excited...no...very, very excited about the coming of our Lord Jesus!

So...what happened to all that excitement? Where did all the “hype” go? Why did it fade into the background?

Think about it. Where were the droves of adoring people when Jesus was secretly taken into custody in the Garden of Gethsemane? Where were the cheering crowds when He was tried unfairly, beaten unmercifully and abused horribly? Where were the palm branch-waving believers when He was pinned to the cross, dying a terrible and difficult death for the sins of the world? Just one week later and no one came to His defense or His assistance. No one stood up for Him. No one attempted to set Him free. No one stormed Herod’s residence or Pilate’s fortress to take back their Hero and defend their new King. On the part of the people assembled that Palm Sunday, there was only a noticeable absence and a palpable silence.

But was this a result of them being fickle? Were they “one minute hot and next minute not”? Well, there was probably some of that happening, fickle to a certain extent anyway...people are people everywhere and at all times...so there may have been some of that going on. But we also have to remember something very important about Jesus and equally important about the shift from the shouts and cries of “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday to the complete ghosting of the crowds and deafening silence of Good Friday... as Jesus died and died virtually all alone.

You see, Jesus didn’t want them to come to His rescue. Jesus didn’t want them to rush in to save Him. He willingly chose the solitude of His denial and death!

Jesus would say it this way in John 10:17-18, *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”* Jesus didn’t come to be revered or rescued. Jesus didn’t come to be served or saved. Instead, He came to be killed and to be crucified for the sins of the world. He came to stand in our place as He alone could do. He’d go through it all and go through it all alone...no Apostles, no disciples, no crowd crying for His release...no family members intervening...no one at all coming to rescue Him...and that was exactly what He wanted, exactly what His will and His desire demanded.

In fact, we can remember here that while we'll flip-flop back and forth and display horribly fickle behavior and do so regularly, our Lord Jesus wasn't then and isn't now fickle whatsoever! His mind was absolutely set on saving us. His actions were, therefore, focused on His task. His heart was then intent on dying for us that we might live through Him! That was His desire then and it continues to be His desire today. He's not fickle, even though we can be. He's not fickle even though we regularly are! No, He loves you with an everlasting love and that will never, ever change. His mind is set, His actions are focused, and His heart's desire is you...bringing you to saving faith and keeping you in a relationship with Himself both now and forevermore!



Friday, February 16th
“Why Hosanna?”
Read Matthew 21:1-11

Have you ever stopped long enough to listen to a crowd cheer for something? If you've been at a football or basketball game, a soccer match, or wrestling meet, you've likely participated in the cheering of some sort! But have you stopped to listen to what is said by the fans? To be sure, there will be cries for individual players, parents calling out their son or daughter's name. There will also be the occasional jeering at the refs for a lousy call or at the least, a perceived lousy call. In general, though, when you stop and listen to the crowd, you'll hear a collective and impassioned cry for their team to win. The crowd will cheer for their team in an attempt to motivate them on to a victory, one that can be celebrated by the players and the crowd together.

Of course, in order for the heart's desire of the cheering crowd to become a victory, the crowd doesn't actually have to do anything to bring that victory about. Granted, cheering doesn't hurt when it comes to motivating the players, “home-field advantage” and all, but ultimately those in the game have to do the work and pay the price for the “W” come home to roost. The players in the game or the match are the ones who have to give of their blood, sweat, and tears to bring victory for their team, including the victory for those who are only sitting on the bleachers and simply cheering the team on.

And so it was that first Palm Sunday. There was a crowd and a yes, as at a sports venue, a very excited crowd and one that was indeed cheering on the Lord Jesus. There was a crowd and as we explored on Ash Wednesday, they were chanting for this Hero-King because of what appeared to be His way of revealing to them who He really was. Matthew tells us this: *“And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!’”* They cheered and chanted and yes, “shouted” to Jesus, using the Hebrew word “Hosanna!” (basically using the words of Psalm 118). They saw their conquering Hero and wanted to encourage Him in His “hero work” and did so by cutting branches and laying clothing and yes, cheering for Him all the while shouting out in Hebrew, “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!”

Since it's one of the more well-known aspects of Palm Sunday, pretty much

everybody knows about the crowd crying “Hosanna!” From this familiar story, almost everyone knows the Hebrew word “Hosanna!” and the crowd cheered and shouted that word multiple times! But while we know that moment well and are familiar with the word “Hosanna”, why did they chant, cheer, and shout “Hosanna” as Jesus came into the city that day? Why was that word the word they chose and furthermore, why is it at all important? Because it is very important!

“Hosanna” is broken down in Hebrew this way: The word “Hoshia” and then the word “na”, which then make-up the English transliterated version, “Hosanna”. What “Hoshia” means is “Lord save us” and then “na” simply means, “please!” So they were chanting that day “Lord save us please!” Indeed, “Lord save us please!” was their cry to Jesus as He rode into the Holy City! “Lord save us please!” was their cheer as Jesus went along on the donkey! And “the player on the field”, the Lord Jesus, heard their cries for victory, “Lord save us please!” and even better yet, He would answer their cries for victory just one week later!

But as you know, the victory Jesus came to win for this crowd was not the victory the crowd expected to have happen, and furthermore not the way they expected victory to come about. In fact, they had no idea how much the victory would cost Jesus. Their cheers of “Hosanna!” would be heard by our Lord and Savior and would then be completely and truly fulfilled by Him as well. But it was not to be a victory over the Roman oppressors which Jesus would bring them. They didn’t know it, but the victory they truly needed had nothing to do with Rome or the Roman Army. The victory that Christ would bring them was freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil...the true oppressors of the Palm Sunday crowd, the true oppressors of us all.

And of course, then let’s not forget, the victory Jesus would bring the world would cost Christ everything! The crowds would cheer Him on saying, “Hosanna!” and Christ would deliver the victory, but the victory would come at a very high cost, namely, the literal blood, sweat and tears of the Lord Jesus Christ. They would cheer and chant and shout, and they would be answered affirmatively as Jesus went on to die, and went on to die a horrible death on the cross. They’d cry out “Hosanna!” and Jesus would cry out “It is finished!” They would cry out “Hosanna!” and Jesus would answer their cries by giving His life for them and for the world! Jesus would indeed “save us please”, but He would do so by standing in the place of all humanity and giving up His life

to save ours. In other words, He did all the work and we can claim the victory! He did all the work, and we then simply sit idly by, receiving and celebrating His victory, receiving and celebrating His grace and mercy and eternal life won for us at the cross!



Saturday, February 17th
“Who Do You Think You Are?”
Read Matthew 21:12-17

Often, when someone crosses a line we don't think they have the authority to cross, we'll say “Who do you think you are?” It can be something as small and as simple as siblings doing what siblings do...fighting for the pole position in the pecking order with mom and dad and with each other. It can be much larger, however, when a coworker or colleague attempts to assert authority over other coworkers and colleagues, an authority that they simply do not possess. You've likely experienced situations like these and you've likely reacted, at least in your heart and mind, “Who do you think you are?”

Since you know the feeling you get when someone crosses a line, you can then understand why the Jewish leadership was none-to-happy with Jesus when He cleansed the Temple after Palm Sunday. Of course, be sure to note that the leaders knew that what Jesus was saying about the Temple situation was correct, namely, “*It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers*” Matthew 21:13. They knew that those involved in the buying and selling of Temple sacrificial animals and changing of foreign money to Temple worthy money, were doing so at an outrageous mark-up and taking advantage of the people of God. They were profiting off of the pilgrims coming for the festivals and profiting off of them big! The people traveling absolutely needed to buy sacrificial animals so that they didn't have to carry those animals with them long distances. They also knew that they had to change their foreign money for Temple money, that's just the way it was. But those doing the exchanging and the selling were gouging them and gouging them horrifically. Kind of like selling generators at a hyper-inflated price in the aftermath of a tornado or hurricane; the money-changers and animal sellers were profiting heinously off of those who desperately needed what they were selling! And everyone knew it.

But what the Jewish leaders would have taken issue with when it came to Jesus could still be summed up in “Who do you think you are?” Jesus actually quoted Jeremiah 7:11, “*Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.*” When He quoted that chapter and verse the Jewish leaders may very well have heard Him to say “MY house...” as in, Jesus actually taking

possession or ownership of the Temple. Worse yet, He was speaking as if He were God Himself, standing in their midst and seeing their corruption with His own two eyes. They may have heard Jesus to say that His name was “the name” by which the house, or Temple, would be called. And as such, I think you can understand why they’d be asking the question in their hearts and minds, “Who do you think you are?” In fact, they could add something to that saying since it would have been exactly what they were likely thinking, “Who do you think you are...God?”

And I take you there because had they asked our Lord that exact question, the answer from Jesus would have likely been “Yes, yes I do!” Jesus did mean what they thought He meant when He quoted Jeremiah seven that day. Jesus did mean, “This is MY house, and it’s been corrupted and sullied by your greed and self-centered behavior!” Jesus was indeed saying, “This is MY house!” claiming the Temple as His own property, no question about it! Jesus was indeed driving the greedy and wicked, better said, driving the sin, out of HIS house, the Temple!

Now I take you to that truth to make a very important application to our lives in Christ...

You see, in truth, that’s exactly what Christ came to do for all of us! He came into this world to cleanse not just the Jerusalem Temple but to cleanse all of His “temples,” namely, the “temples” known as our bodies. To be sure, Jesus came as God Almighty, the owner of your “temple.” We sometimes forget this fact, but Jesus is our Creator and God whether we believe in Him or not. We may say under our breath, “Who do you think you are?” because we’re used to being independent, self-sufficient, men and women...owners of our own selves. But the Bible is clear, He placed us in our mother’s womb and gave us all the days ordained for us even before one of them came into being. But when our Creator and God came into our world, when the Lord of the Universe and owner of the temple of our bodies showed up, He did so to drive the sin out of His temples...the very bodies He made and set in motion which had been corrupted by the brokenness of this world. Said another way, He would come to us as “*The Lamb of God*” and would come to “*take away the sin of the world*” as John the Baptist would tell us about Jesus early on in His ministry (John 1:29).

Let me remind you today that the cleansing of the Temple is indeed a sad

commentary on the greed and self-centeredness of humankind, but it's also a wonderful imagery of what Christ came to do for you and for me! Jesus came into our broken and sin-filled world as our Lord, but He also came into our broken and sin-filled world as our Savior. "Who do you think you are Jesus?" He is our Lord and God! "Who do you think you are Jesus?" He is also our Lord and Savior! He came to bring the true cleansing that the temple of our sinful bodies desperately needed! The Apostle Paul would write it this way to Titus: *"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior..."* Titus 3:4-6. Our "temples" are cleansed by Christ. Our "temples" are made right by Him. Our "temples" are made cleansed and made right by Jesus...both now and forevermore!

Please note, Sundays are a Celebration of the Resurrection and not a part of Lent. Therefore, there will not be a devotion tomorrow.



Monday, February 19th
“Don’t Miss the Opportunity!”
Read Matthew 21:12-17

One of the downfalls of our society is that we’re altogether very, very busy people! Now, some of our “busy” is actually perception, thinking we’re busy when, in fact, it’s simply that we “feel” as though we have a lot more to do than we actually have to do. We crave way more downtime than we are given, and therefore, the tasks at hand seem overwhelming even though they are simply the way life is. Of course, some of it is also of our own making. Complaining about being busy when, in truth, we’ve mounded up a multiplicity of things “to do” in our life and thereby creating the problem all on our own. We sign the kids up for every possible “thing” and then have to be involved in getting them to practices, games, etc. on top of running around to purchase the things they need for the various sports and activities they’re in... on top work and home and chores and of all the other stuff we have going on! We might agree to party invitations and social engagements...we volunteer and give our time...all worthy endeavors but all on top of working a forty to fifty, or maybe even sixty-hour work week.

The real problem with our “too busy” society is that we can miss opportunities to show the love of Jesus to the people right in front of us. We race from thing to thing and do so with our head down, simply motoring forward to get the stuff done, checking the iPhone and managing the computer, dragging our heads further down, often unaware of that which surrounds us. And I’ll say it again, we then miss opportunities to see the people God brings our way and missing that moment which God has provided to show them the love of Jesus.

But...Jesus shows us another way! In our text, we see Jesus going through what could be titled “the busiest week of His life on earth”...can I get an “Amen!” to that, right? He’s just rode into Jerusalem as the crowds cried out “Hosanna” as they laid the palm branches and their outer clothing on the road. He’s just cleansed the Temple and garnered the hate and vitriol of the Jewish leaders. Beyond that, He also knows what’s coming with Maundy Thursday and His arrest and Good Friday and the beatings, humiliation, suffering, and crucifixion. Let’s put it this way, He knows what His week looks like...He knows He’s “slammed,” and yet...

What does He do? Amazingly, in the midst of what I think could arguably be one of the single most stressful weeks anyone has ever experienced ever, Matthew tells us this about our loving Lord “...*the blind and the lame came to him in the temple and He healed them*” Matthew 21:14. I know that He’s the Lord and I know that His heart of compassion is gigantic, but seriously Jesus? You’re walking in the midst of a horrible and horrifying week. You’re disgusted with the state of the Temple and frustrated with the state of the leaders of that same Temple. You know that your closest friends will sell you out and scatter from and deny even knowing you. You know you’ll be rejected and beaten and abused and crucified. You know that the condemnation of God the Father for the sins of the world will be on your back. And yet...you take time for others anyway? You didn’t miss the opportunity? Indeed, you didn’t miss it at all!

And my Christian friends, while you and I “ain’t Jesus,” we nonetheless represent Jesus in this world. As you go through your hectic schedule and peel through your ridiculous week, don’t miss the opportunity to show people the love of Jesus! Paul would say it this way in Philippians 2:4, “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*” When you’re at your kids’ practices or games, look for ways to talk to people and interact with them, and minister to them in the moment. When you’re doing that overtime shift and other co-workers are right there along with you, listen to them, talk with them, or said differently, love them right where they are. When you’re at home after a busy day, don’t shut down and then shut out, but take time to open up and minister to your family, who need you to listen to them just as much as your co-workers do. In other words, indeed manage your busy schedule, but as you do, be present in the moment that Jesus might use you to His glory! Yes, “*look to your own interests*”; you have to live your life. But as you do, as you go through your day, “*also look to the interests of others.*” Don’t miss the opportunity to let people see Jesus in you!



Tuesday, February 20th
“Children Should be Seen AND Heard!”
Read Matthew 21:12-17

“Children are to be seen and NOT heard!” Ever heard that one? Ever said that one? I am older than many in our congregation, so maybe you’ve heard that, maybe not, but it was a very popular phrase, admittedly mostly among dads and mostly dads from years and years ago. Clearly the sentiment has multifold reasons behind it. Generally, it was the dad (or whoever said it) wanting peace and calm and quiet, and children just aren’t all that good at peace and calm and quiet, so, “Children should be seen and not heard!” But it could’ve also been that the person making the statement believed that children don’t add all that much to the conversation, and wanting to have a cogent dialogue would then say, “Children should be seen and not heard!” They lack learning. They lack wisdom. They lack the ability to think critically... and...they also lack a filter, lack a governor, and lack restraint! So, knowing all that to be true, some people believed the statement and therefore proclaimed, “Children should be seen and not heard!”

That wouldn’t be how Jesus feels about children, however! With Jesus, the children should be seen AND heard...so let me explain:

One of the more amazing things that happened around the Palm Sunday ride and the ensuing cleansing of the Temple, has to do with the children that surrounded Jesus. Often, we don’t remember this part of the story, though many of our churches have the children process in on Palm Sunday, waving palms for that particular Sunday’s services. The reason we adopted that practice is that this text tells us that there were indeed children who proclaimed and heralded Jesus in the Temple that day! The children must’ve heard their parents chanting “Hosanna!” and emulated them by proclaiming the same thing about Jesus and did so within the Temple walls! Matthew tells us: *“But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant...”* Matthew 21:15. In a very real sense, the “chief priests and scribes” would wholeheartedly agree with the statement “Children should be seen and not heard”...but they’d be wrong! The children in our Palm Sunday ride and subsequent cleansing of the Temple narratives are reminding us that the Lord uses children to proclaim His glory and often

the children do so far better than we, the adults! Our text reminds us of that truth this way: “...*they said to him, ‘Do you hear what these are saying?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise’?*” Matthew 21:16. How true!

In fact, recently, when I was cleaning out my office the last couple weeks of my full-time ministry with you, I was organizing all of the stuff of my ministry collected over the last twenty-nine years. As I did, I came across “art piece” after “art piece” given to me by the children of the congregations I’ve served. Some of them were just pictures of me, drawn during worship, used by the parents in order to keep their little one active and yet quiet. Some of them depicted the front of church and would often include stained glass windows or liturgical crosses that the child noticed during the course of service. But so many of them were artwork with wonderful expressions of the Gospel message, and yes, often the Gospel message they heard while they were in worship. Their art contained reminders of God’s love and God’s provision of that love sent to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Over and over again, art piece after art piece, the children boldly and innocently tell their Pastor Joe, “God is love!” “God sent Jesus!” “Jesus is born!” “Jesus died for me!” “Jesus is risen!” “Jesus is Lord!” So beautiful, so innocent, and also so worthy of hearing and embracing...indeed, because “*out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise!*”

And these wonderful expressions of faith from children, those in my previous congregations, and those in our narrative from Matthew 21 as well remind us of what God has prepared for all of us to do. The children in the Temple didn’t care what others thought. The children in the Temple were oblivious to the tension between Jesus and the leaders. The children in the Temple weren’t interested in the world’s perception of them and only wanted to boldly and thoroughly praise the Lord. They were going to cry “Hosanna!” to Jesus no matter what, without any thought to what the world might think of them. And we’re all called to do the exact, same thing. Seen and not heard? I don’t think so. The children, and I mean all the children of God, young and not-so-young alike, need to be both seen AND heard, every day crying out the praises to Jesus until that day that we see Him face to face and do that very same thing... both seen AND heard, seen AND heard forever!



Wednesday, February 21st
“What’s with the Tree?”
Read Matthew 21:18-22; Ephesians 2:1-7

Have you ever come across something that just seems to be out of place or something that just doesn’t make sense in the moment? Might be a movie you’re watching and a scene seems out of place, a scene which at that moment has little to do with what has gone on in the movie to that point. Could be a book and the author’s attempt to insert a plot twist, but a plot twist that just doesn’t work with the rest of the story as you’ve read it thus far. Could be a story told by a friend where we’re missing something and need more information in order to see the connection with what we’re being told and the greater narrative surrounding the event.

We definitely have one of those very odd situations with our Gospel reading for today’s devotion. Jesus and the twelve are heading into Jerusalem and so you’d expect very “holy things” to be happening with the Lord and His Apostles...but that day Jesus stopped to curse and kill a poor fig tree on the way. What? Kill a fig tree? Doesn’t sound very much like Jesus to get mad about a tree with no fruit. Besides that, Mark tells us that the fig tree wouldn’t have had figs on it anyway because it wasn’t the time for it to have figs! And yet, Jesus seems to get mad and then curses the poor thing and does so with an intensity that seems odd as He proclaims, *“May you never bear fruit again!”* (Verse 19). Why in the world would Jesus do such a thing and do so in a way that seemed to be teaching His disciples something, but all at the same time confusing His disciples by His unusual actions?

Jesus was indeed teaching His disciples something! To begin with, Jesus was teaching them that He was all-powerful, able to curse a fig tree and actually have something happen as a result. He was showing His followers that He indeed had the power and authority of God. But to that point, Jesus then also taught them that through Him and through prayer, they’d be able to display the same kind of power. In effect, saying, “Through me, you can and you will do what I can do!” Mighty, miraculous things happened through the Apostles back then and, of course, can and do happen through the disciples of Jesus today. How and why? The “How?” is through the miraculous all-powerful nature of Jesus, the “Guy” who can curse and fight-tree and make it wither. The “Why?” is always to give glory and honor to Him and Him alone...as Je-

Jesus would say it in Matthew 5:16 *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”* Indeed, as was true of the Apostles, we are called to turn to the Lord in prayer for mighty deeds of mercy done by His hand and through us in this world.

But there’s something else here. That day with the Apostles, Jesus used the fig tree to be a living illustration, or should I say a “dead” illustration, of what was true about Jerusalem and its dead inhabitants. The people of God were just as withered and dried up and unproductive as the fig tree Jesus cursed. The fig tree was illustrative of what had happened to the “vineyard” of God, also known as Jerusalem, and what was true about the caretakers of that vineyard, the children He’d claimed as His own. The people of Israel were a fruitless people, dried up and dead, completely dead, in God’s sight, and the fig tree was intended to express that truth.

Having said that, we have to remember what was true of them is also true about every single one of us. In and of ourselves we were, as Paul would write in Ephesians 2, *“dead in our trespasses and sins.”* All of us together, the Jewish people of Christ’s day and all human beings who have ever lived right along with them, were withered, dead, and unproductive...not really useful for anything except for the burn pile. Jesus said it this way in John 15:6: *“If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”* In and of ourselves, that’s what’s true about us and what will be true of us at the end of our lives and/or the end of time...unless...

Here enters the greater and more important miraculous power of Jesus and a lesson from the fig tree that could be called “the unsaid-said” of the text! You see, because He is all-powerful, Jesus could easily curse the fig tree and cause it to wither and die. Wasn’t a trick. Wasn’t an illusion. Jesus is the Creator God and can easily perform the miracle the disciples witnessed that day. But pause a moment to think about the fact that if He had the power to curse it and make it die...He also has the power to raise it up and give it life again! That withered, dead tree could, by the same all-powerful Jesus, be made alive and productive and even fruitful, regardless of the season for figs! If Jesus wanted to, He could have restored life to that dead tree and caused it to give an abundance of the best figs ever known to man! And so Paul would also write in Ephesians 2:4-6 *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the*

great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...”. Through Jesus and in Jesus, we are indeed given new life! As dried up and unproductive as the Jewish people of Christ’s day were, as dried up and unproductive as all of humanity was, through Jesus and His death and resurrection, all of us can and all of us are made alive and alive forevermore! Through His life-giving resurrection power, we are not only made alive, but we are also then made to be productive “trees” for God’s eternal Kingdom both in time and for eternity!



Thursday, February 22nd
“Crushed”

Read Matthew 22:33-46; Isaiah 53:3-5

Back in the day, when I was a little boy, I can remember a gigantic stone that was placed very carefully and purposefully in our front yard. When my dad had the driveway re-done to better suit the growing need for “parking-lot management,” as my many brothers and sisters got their licenses, the company doing the work dug up a giant granite boulder that was shaped like a chaise lounge. The boulder was about eight feet long, four feet wide, and four to five feet tall. Rather than keeping it buried, Daddy decided to use it as a stone feature for the expansive front yard, and so this very large and very, very heavy “chaise lounge” then became my place to sit and think. I’d sit there for hours and spend time thinking and pondering as the world went by me at a very slow pace. When I was only about nine years old, I can remember sitting on that rock and having thoughts about the Second Coming of Jesus when a wildfire broke out on the hills around us, and the sun was turned red...it definitely looked apocalyptic to me! (Yes, I was destined to become a pastor from an early age!)

But I bring it all up because as long as I was sitting on the appropriate side of that rock, the up-side of course, I was perfectly safe and contented and supported. Not that the boulder was at all unstable, my dad wouldn’t have that, but if by chance I was so unfortunate to have that rock rollover on top of me, I’d hate to think what it would have done to my body. I further can’t imagine what would have happened to my body if, when placing it, that granite boulder had dropped from on high and landed on my then very tiny body. Had that happened, I’d have been ground into powder in an instant.

If you took the time to read our text from Matthew 22, you understand why I’m using the illustration. Jesus says in our text at the end of a parable that He is “*the stone the builders rejected.*” This is the last week of Jesus’ earthly life and yet, amazingly, He is still taking time to be the Rabbi and Teacher that everyone had grown used to. He was virtually moments away from death and yet He is making sure that those around Him understand what He came to do for them and why. He not only uses a parable, but also quotes God’s Word. In doing so, He lets them know that He is what the Scriptures called “*the stone the builders rejected.*” What He meant by that is that He “the stone” came

to His children, the Israelites, or “the builders,” and His children, the builders, nonetheless rejected Him. This was prophesied in Psalm 118, about a thousand years before it happened. Along with all of the other prophecies about Jesus’ death, such as Isaiah 53 and others, the Israelites had at their disposal God’s Word which, if read carefully, would have shown them that Jesus came to bear our sins and die on the cross at their hands...otherwise said, “*the stone the builders rejected.*”

Jesus also says here, however, “*And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.*” Matthew 21:44. This is as frightening as other texts like it, namely, Hebrews 10:30,31 “*The Lord will judge His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*” And please know that this Hebrews text actually defines what Jesus meant by the stone falling and crushing someone. The stone is Jesus; the stone falling and crushing is in fact the person who “*falls into the hands of the living God.*”

But that’s where Isaiah 53 comes into play. Isaiah 53:4-5 reads: “*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*” What an amazing Gospel proclamation for us! You see, while you and I deserve to be judged and deserve to fall into the hands of the living God or be crushed by the stone, Jesus was the one who went through judgment at the cross and, in fact, was “crushed” by the hands of God the Father instead! He chose to be the one who would go through the judgment of God for our sin and on our behalf. And so now, through Jesus and the “crushing” He underwent for us when we fall on the rock instead of the rock falling on us, we are indeed broken, but broken in humility towards Him and only to be “healed by His wounds” or His death and resurrection! Rather than being crushed and ruined, we are instead claimed and restored to our status as children of God! Through Christ and in Christ, we then live our lives on the right side of the rock, contemplating what I did as a little boy, namely the return of Jesus for those who are His!



Friday, February 23rd
“The Father’s Heart”
Read Matthew 23:37-39; Hebrews 1:3

One of the stronger feelings you experience as a parent is the deep desire to have your kids close by, or better yet, having them right next to you. Of course, as an empty-nester myself, there are also definite benefits to NOT having them close by or right next to you...right empty-nesters? But even with that wonderful-empty-nest gift we are given later in life, we nonetheless still want our children in close proximity! In fact, as you likely know, all three of our boys and their other halves live right here in Des Moines. Our daughter Abby is living away from here but only because of school since she’s at Marquette getting her Masters in Psych. I mention that because when I tell people who are my age or older that our kids live right near us, inevitably, I am told, “You are so lucky!” or “You are so blessed!” And indeed we are! Every week, this particular “father’s heart” is blessed to have his kids nearby but furthermore, actually in our home each Sunday night for Sunday dinner! Indeed, all of us, moms and dads alike, want our kids close because we have what I’m calling “The Father’s Heart” for them!

I bring that to you to remind you that our desire for our kids to be close to us is simply a reflection of our Lord Jesus! In Matthew 23, we’re told that Jesus has just gotten done speaking what is known as “The Seven Woes”. As recorded in the first thirty-six verses of this chapter of Matthew, and yes, in the very last days of His earthly life, Jesus takes time to verbally and severely discipline the Scribes and Pharisees for their bad behavior. In His thirty-six verse “dissertation,” Jesus calls them out for being raging “hypocrites” and does so over and over again. And indeed, they were hypocrites and the worst kind. And they needed this dress-down. They absolutely needed the Lord to discipline them in the moment.

But at the end of Christ’s chastisement, the fatherly heart of Jesus is truly on full display, isn’t it? Not that discipline isn’t fatherly...it is. But our text indicates that while He knew He had to discipline these errant leaders of God’s people, His heart was breaking over their brokenness and their bad behavior towards God’s people. Rather than building up the Kingdom of God, they were, by their action or inaction, tearing it down. But make sure you realize, He didn’t enjoy “busting their chops,” not one bit! He didn’t desire to

give them a verbal whoopin'. He wouldn't put up with bad behavior, but He also didn't relish the idea of having to scold them for it either. Why though? Why was that where Jesus was at? Well, because Jesus had at His core and fully embodied, again, what I am calling "The Father's Heart." As the second reading says it about Jesus, He was and is "...*the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.*" Hebrews 1:3. When Jesus came into the world He brought with Him the heart of our Heavenly Father because He was "...*the exact imprint of his nature*" as that text says it! Indeed, it's a little odd to say it that way because you understand the inextricable link Jesus had with the Father and the Spirit. Where the Spirit is, so goes the Father and so goes the Son. Where the Son is, so goes the Spirit and so goes the Father. And so on, and so on...I think you get it. But what that means for us is that when the only begotten Son of God came into our world...as one of us...He nonetheless came to show us that the Heavenly Father loves us deeply and wants to have us, His kids, right around Him. As Jesus would say of Jerusalem in our text, and in truth, could have said about all people everywhere, including you and me, "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*" (Matthew 23:37). Jesus' heart is the Father's heart and vice versa as well! And the Father's heart wants His "brood"...His "chicks"...His kids, close by!

But how do we accurately define the Father's true desire when it comes to bringing us tight to His side? What does it mean that God wants His kids close by or His "*brood under His wings*"? Well, let me remind you what is said in 1Timothy 2:3,4 "*This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*" Our Lord's heart, the Heavenly Father's heart, wants all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Our Heavenly Father's heart wants all to know His Son as their Savior and Lord!

In fact, the Heavenly Father's heart wants that so badly that He sent His only begotten Son into our world. But in order to bring us close, while Jesus was dying on the cross, He separated Himself from His only begotten Son. Jesus would ask the question, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" but He knew the answer. He was forsaken for us so that we'd never be forsaken by God. He was separated from God; we were brought to the Father's side. He was separated from God; we were brought close to the Father's heart. He was separated from God so that we could be brought near for all time and for

eternity! That was the Father's true desire. That was the Father's heart for us. And so when you have those full-heart, "brood and hen" moments with your own "chicks," stop to thank God that He feels the same about you!



Saturday, February 24th
“What’s Your Focus?”
Luke 20:27-40/Colossians 3:1-4

All of us have those things in our lives that are “most important” to us. All of us have things that we spend time thinking about more than just about anything else. Could be hobbies like golf or fishing...not that I have that problem or anything! We all know that when you have a hobby that you really love, that hobby becomes an area which you focus and dwell on. I love golf, and so when I see vast areas of green grass, my head will spin on its axis to see if it’s a new golf course I didn’t know about. As I’ve shared with you before, I’ve often found out that the “vast area of green grass” I was staring at was actually a cemetery! Same thing for me and bodies of water...my head spins quickly to see what it has to offer me and motivates me to go get the kayak and the gear and get to the fishing!

So...what is your focus? Is it your hobby? Is it your career? Is it the kids? Is it your marriage? We all have to say that there is something or some things in our lives that turn our heads and grab our attention.

For us as Christians, however, while all of that “stuff” is God-given and worthy of our attention, our focus is intended to be on our lives lived for and lived in and lived through the Lord Jesus! Our focus is, in fact, Jesus Himself and not the things of this world...hobbies, careers, marriages, and kids. Paul would write in Colossians 3, “*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*” Colossians 3:1-4. Take note of my underlines above. We are called to “*seek the things that are above.*” We are called to “set our minds on things that are above.” We are reminded that indeed, amidst all of the other things we call “life,” there is really only one “thing” that qualifies as our life and that’s Jesus!

That’s an important reminder as we look into the reading from Luke 20 and Christ’s dialogue with the religious leaders. Seems evident that the religious leaders were missing the point of our faith in God, namely, as stated above, that Christ and Christ alone is our life. Admittedly they are attempting to

trap Jesus or get Him to slip up...which never worked, so why would it now? But in their attempt to get Him to prove Himself a fraud, they betray their own broken theology. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection and, therefore, were focused more on the living of their physical lives rather than what the Lord is focused on, namely, their afterlife. Of course, they were in error over-against what the Word of God actually says. More than that, however, they were hopelessly clinging to the things of this world, focusing on the worldly or earthly blessings that God gives, rather than on the God who gives them. They saw this place, this world, this life as the end and the end-all.

But we're reminded by Jesus here that in fact, this life is but a fleeting moment and that our true life is found in Him and in our eternity with Him. Take note that Jesus gives us an amazing Gospel truth here! Jesus says that in heaven, we will be "like the angels," and we will not die! Unlike this world that is fleeting and flying and dying, our life in Christ is not only now but is forever, and is a forever of life and love found only in Him. Let me say it again: though they are good gifts from God and intended for our blessing, this world is nonetheless dying...your hobbies, your career, your family, and your friends...will, unfortunately, all die, all pass away, all end. But in and through Christ, you have a forever life, a never-ending life, with Him!

So Christian...what is your focus today? What turns your head? Indeed, enjoy the things of your life. Invest in your hobbies. Enjoy your career. Love your family and cling to your friendships. But as you do, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus every day until that day you see Him face to face. The book of Hebrews gets at that very thing when the author writes, "*...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 12:2. This verse, said another way, could read "Jesus focused on you all the way to the cross, so that you could be enabled to focus on Him all the days of your life and for eternity too!" May you be enabled to do that very thing every single day of your life...and beyond!

Please note, Sundays are a Celebration of the Resurrection and not a part of Lent. Therefore, there will not be a devotion tomorrow.



Monday, February 25th
“Actions Speak Louder Than...”
Read Luke 20:45-21:4

I have a feeling that when you saw the title of this devotion, your brain immediately filled in the saying above, the saying indicated in the title. “Actions speak louder than...”. How does it go? You know. It’s “Actions speak louder than words.” Part of the reason you know this phrase is because while it’s older, it’s still used often and profusely, but the other reason you know this phrase is that it’s one of those inarguable, truth-filled statements. This isn’t one of those moments where it might be true, it is true, and it’s true for every man, woman or child. A person can often be found saying one thing and yet doing another. Their words, taken at face value, can seem to be the truth being spoken by the person uttering those words and promises. But we cannot know for sure that what they are saying is actually true until those words are lived and lived out by them. We find out what a person is made up of simply by observing how they live their words. Because again...actions speak louder than...?

In the last week of Jesus’ earthly ministry, He comes across two incredible and stark examples of this phrase from our text above. Jesus comes across two living illustrations and, in fact, two completely opposite examples of the axiom “actions speak louder than words.” The first example Jesus mentions is the religious leaders known as “the scribes.” Likely, Jesus was mentioning them because they were walking nearby and He saw them and so it prompted the comment. The scribes were men who were experts in the law of God and not only transcribed that law, but also wrote commentaries on them. So, they definitely spoke lots of “godly words” and said a lot of “godly things,”... but their actions spoke even louder and didn’t match the things of God or the Word of God, of which they were supposed “experts.” Though they knew God’s Word and likely knew it well, they nonetheless lived as if they did not. They were prideful, and self-centered, and abusive, the exact opposite of who we, as believers, are called to be.

In distinction, Christ also sees a very poor, very quiet widow-woman putting in two copper coins into the offering at the Temple. This is a character in the New Testament, that while nameless and voiceless is nonetheless very famous. Who is she? No one knows. What did she say? No one knows. But

what she did, her actions, spoke louder than her words and have spoken for her for a very, very long time! Notice what Jesus says here: *“Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”* Luke 21:3,4. Her actions spoke louder and her actions screamed out “I love the Lord my God with all of my heart, soul, mind and strength!” Her actions proclaimed her love for God and did so to the entire world! And that’s not an exaggeration. What she did that day and her actions have spoken to countless Christians and non-Christians alike as this story about her generosity, in spite of her poverty, has been told over and over and over again for more than two thousand years now! Her actions spoke loud and they continue to speak very loudly yet today!

Okay, so what about you and me? What are our actions saying about who we are and whose we are? If someone could follow us around all day and every day...what would our words vs. our actions say about us? I have a feeling like me, you’re thinking of all those times the two didn’t match or were flat-out moving in completely opposite directions. You’re thinking of the times that you’ve lived the hypocritical lifestyle of saying one thing and doing another!

And yet, while I want to challenge you to live differently, let me also remind you today...Jesus’ actions spoke louder than His words, too. Now, He’s not like us, in that everything He said was true and truth, as well as pure and perfect. Jesus’ words were the Word of God. But remember then that He didn’t just say, “I’m going to die for your sins.” He lived the claim He made... or better said, died to prove the claim He made. He stood in your place. He died for your hypocritical moments...even if a thousand of them happen every single day. And even better yet, He sent His Holy Spirit into your hearts to not only make you His own, but grant you the power to have your words and actions come into alignment! His actions spoke. He lived and died and rose again for you! Thank Him daily. Listen to His voice closely. Follow His lead faithfully. And do so my friends, to His glory every day, until that day we see His beautiful face in heaven itself!



Tuesday, February 27th
“The Edifice Complex”
Read Luke 21:5-9

In my line of work, it's often said that there are many pastors who have, or even “suffer from,” what is teasingly called “the edifice complex.” I think you know the play on the term here, so I'll leave that alone, but suffice to say, it's a way of saying that there are some pastors that simply have the need for “edifices,” aka, buildings. They launch building project after building project with seemingly endless committees employed to put up the little “kingdom” that the pastor wants built...to be very blunt about it. In other words, the pastor has forgotten that while buildings are needed and buildings are even necessary, the buildings are not the ministry...they are only tools for the ministry to take place. Let me say that again...the buildings are not the ministry!

Not surprisingly, in His day and time, Jesus encountered a whole bunch of people who were also suffering from “the edifice complex.” The people of His day were. The “clergy” of His day were even more. In part, their focus on buildings, was because the Lord Himself made a pretty big deal about the buildings. By that, I mean that we must remember that when the Lord instructed the Israelites to build the Tabernacle, it was a rather elaborate, though movable structure, and then its permanent replacement, the Temple, would be just as magnificent, if not more so! (You can read about it in Exodus chapters 25-40...yes, sixteen chapters on the Tabernacle's design).

Having said that, as elaborate as they were, it was never about the buildings. No, it was always about who inhabited the buildings and what was offered there by God for the worshippers of God. Similarly, the Ark of the Covenant has always been seen as some sort of “magical box” that you dare not mess with or you'll get fried by it's “frightening powers”. I've mentioned to you before the ridiculous scene in the movie, “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” You know the scene: Evil man dressed as the High Priest; Nazis all around, watching and filming; Indy tied up to a post with Marion; the lid comes off the Ark and...what happens? Everyone's face melts off because of the “scary” and “magical” box with the amazingly “frightening powers!” No, Hollywood, you got it wrong. It was never about the box, it was about the God who would reside on the box as He met with His children.

To the point of today, it was never about the buildings; it was about the God of the buildings...and, indeed, what He came to offer them! And I think you know the application to our lives, don't you? You see, it's not just my colleagues and fellow pastors who have "the edifice complex", its also Christians of every walk of life. Now I'm not saying don't love your church building. I'm certainly not saying don't be forward-thinking when it comes to the hopefully judicious use of God's money in building more buildings at your congregation. Cherish your church's physical resources. Thank God for your church's physical resources. Plan well and make good use of your church's physical resources. But recognize that the God of the Universe is what matters. Recognize that the buildings are just a means to an end, and that "end" is meeting with the God who inhabits those buildings! But stop to truly cherish God's presence found in the Gospel that is preached, the Sacraments that are administered, and the saving work of the Holy Spirit that takes place in those buildings!

Just one more thought then. If you find yourself over-investing in the buildings at your church, stop and remember that the God who formerly inhabited a tent and a temple has now taken up residence where? The God of the tent and the temple now lives in you! Through our Lord Jesus and faith in Him, you have become a temple of God and a temple for God. You want to be in awe of a "building" for God? Stop and look in the mirror because the temple is now you!



Wednesday, February 28th
“The Good News—Bad News Situation”
Read Luke 21:10-18

If you've lived long enough, you'll realize that just about everything you go through in life has an up-side and a down-side. You begin to realize that the saying “Well, this is a good news, bad news situation” can apply to almost anything. There always seems to be the thumbs up and thumbs down regardless of what you're going through. You're approved for a home loan, but the interest rates are through the roof. You got into the university you wanted to get into, but you'll be taking \$80k in student loans to get through. You were hired for the position you'd hoped for, but the boss assigns you to duties far beyond what was originally agreed upon. In this world, there will simply always be a connection between good news and bad news...it's just the way this world works. And our life of faith in Jesus in this world is not different, not different whatsoever. So, what do you want to start with...the good news or the bad news?

Well, since I'm the writer here, I'll decide for you, and yes, here comes the “bad news” first. Jesus is talking about the end times here to be sure. But remember that often when Jesus does that, there are aspects of what He's laying out that will happen both immediately as well as later on. So again, He's given us the bad news section of our faith in Him. Let me just let the text speak for us: *“Then he said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.’”* Luke 21:10-12. Indeed, this is describing what will come upon Christians towards the end of time. No question, our faith lives will become increasingly difficult and frightening as time goes on.

But please understand that He's also talking about what will happen over and over again to Christians throughout time and yes, indeed, up to and including, the terrible season of trial and tribulation right towards the end before He returns. You see, God's Word reminds us that these things aren't just a “later-on” thing but will happen over and over throughout the course

of time until Jesus returns and takes us home. The Apostle Paul wrote to the young pastor Timothy these words: *“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”* 2Timothy 3:12. As I often say it, not “might be persecuted” not “can be persecuted” but what? Yes, “...will be persecuted.” Our faith in Jesus will bring persecution of all sorts of kinds our way. Jesus even said these frightening words later on: *“You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.”* Persecuted by our own family? Persecuted by our dear friends? Put to death? For my faith in Jesus? Indeed...that’s the “bad news” of this text and our faith lives to be sure.

And yet, there’s good news here too. While it’s just a single sentence and a short sentence as well, it’s a “good news” sentence that is more powerful than all the “bad news” sentences combined! Jesus says this about you and me: *“But not a hair of your head will perish.”* Luke 21:18.

Now, wait a minute! Delivered up and put to death? Parents? Siblings? Relatives? Friends? All against me and my Christian faith? All that put together...how can Jesus say, *“Not a hair of your head will perish”*?

Well...remember...when He spoke these words, Jesus knew exactly what was coming His way just a few short days later. As I’ve said many times already, this is indeed the last week of His earthly ministry! He knew He would be deserted and denied; He knew He would be mocked and beaten and tortured; He knew He would ultimately be crucified and condemned for the sins of every human being. You talk about “bad news”? Jesus knew what “bad news” was...bad news with all capital letters! And yet, Jesus also knew that the “bad news” for Him would be the amazing and wonderful “good news” for us! He would die on the cross to be sure...but listen closely...on Easter, He would then conquer death for us! He conquered death and He did so for you! In other words, whatever comes your way...however horribly persecuted you end up being or not being as the case may be...no matter what...*“not a hair of your head will perish”* because you will live forever in and through Him! Good news to be sure! By faith in Jesus and His life, death and yes, His resurrection, you will never, ever, ever die! Death has no power over you! Oh you will likely pass away, if the Second Coming doesn’t happen first, but Jesus’ resurrection conquered death for you and so when you close your eyes in this broken-bad news-place, you will open your eyes...and the best news of all? You will see His beautiful face in that very moment and for eternity.

That is true “Good News,” very good news indeed!



Thursday, February 29th
“Heads Up!”
Read Luke 21:25-28

I played a lot of baseball as a boy. I loved baseball. Spent many hours on the diamond playing the game myself and then spent many hours on the diamond coaching my sons. There are so many things that I remember about that game. The smell of a leather glove. The sound of the ball pinging off of the aluminum bats. The feel of the dirt as you slid into base. Even the concessions stands and the incredible smells that emanated from those little shacks. But today, because of this reading, one thing is sticking out in my mind as a strong memory. When you're around baseball and baseball players, you will inevitably hear and hear loudly the phrase “Heads up!” I'm sure you understand the purpose of the saying, but it's a call-out that is designed to tell you that something is rapidly coming your way; likely a baseball, but it could also be an errant bat released accidentally from the plate or a thrown helmet released forcefully and angrily from the player! “Heads up!” means that you need to pay attention, lift up your head and get ready while you also get a bead on what's coming your way to avoid its possibly painful impact.

Interestingly, in our text for today, we actually hear the voice of the Lord Jesus crying, “Heads up!” or to quote His exact words as recorded there in verse twenty-eight, “...raise your heads!” Of course, when He said this, Jesus was on a fast track for the cross and grave, walking through the final hours of His ministry years on earth. Seemingly moved by the gravity what was to come for Him, He took time to talk about what is to come for us...what is to come at the end of time that is. And to be honest, “Heads up!” is definitely my strong recommendation when I look at this text! Let me remind you what Jesus said “*And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*” Luke 21:25-27. All of that screams, “Heads up!” or perhaps better said, “Watch out!” for what's coming your way! “Heads up!” Everything you hold dear is going to be toast. “Heads up!” The world as you know it will be tanking! “Heads up!” The universe itself will be crumbling and crashing around you! And lest you think that's the worst part you're wrong! “Heads up!” Jesus is returning, the

Son of Man is coming back, and He is so with power and great glory to sit on His mighty throne and judge the living and the dead! “Heads up!” and while you’re at it...you better be quaking in your boots over what is coming your way!

Unless, that is, you are a blood-bought child of God...unless you are a Christian. Unless that is, you have Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You see the “Heads up!” from the Lord Jesus is actually a reminder to Christians that though the things of the end will be frightening and horrible and while we’ll have to go through them if we are still alive, nonetheless, our salvation is just around the corner! Jesus said it this way: *“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”* Luke 21:28. Notice that, Christian or not, the likely response to all the cataclysmic things coming on our universe will be fear and trepidation as well as running to cover and hide. For us, as Christians though, we can indeed raise up our heads in the midst of these things because we know our Savior Jesus is coming! Will the “signs in the sun and moon and stars” cause us to fear? Yes. Will the tumultuous seas and waves cause us to be afraid? Yes. Will we join the rest of humanity in “fainting with fear and foreboding”? Of course. Jesus didn’t seem to indicate that Christians would be immune to the feelings that all the other human beings are going through.

But we nonetheless will “raise our heads” because we know that our Lord is returning for us and that His power and great glory will be for us as well! Will we go through the normal human emotions in the face of great and terrible things? Certainly! But we will have in the moment what the Bible calls *“The peace of God which transcends all understanding guarding our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus!”* Philippians 4:7. We will raise our heads because our Lord was “raised” on the cross for us and furthermore “raised” from the dead on the third day. The universe as we know it will collapse; fearful things will happen; but faith will remain rock solid and the Son of Man will return for us! His life, death and resurrection were for us and His return is for us too! So...“Heads up!” but “Heads up!” the Lord Jesus is not only your Lord, but the Lord Jesus is also your Savior from this world!



Friday, March 1st
“God Does Things on Purpose”
Read Luke 22:1,2

All of us have experienced coincidental moments. Those moments where we often say something like, “It just so happened that...” and then we insert a coming together of events or encounters that are amazing and amazingly coincidental. Often, there is no real connection between the events; it just appears that there is to us at the moment. I’ve had situations where I was thinking about a certain person and within a matter of days, ran into that very same person in a public setting. Coincidence to be sure. Often in worship services, without talking about it ahead of time, the music department picks just the right song that fits my message perfectly and even uses some of the same terms or phrases that I brought into the message itself. Coincidence yet again. In fact, the “Rabbi Google” definition of coincidence is this: “A *coincidence is a remarkable concurrence of events or circumstances without apparent causal connection.*” Coincidences. I’m sure you could name many more from your experience of the very same types of things where something happens to come together and there seems to be no apparent cause!

But today, as we look into the text from Luke 22:1,2, we’re reminded that while we experience coincidences all the time, in God’s way of doing things, coincidences are very rare. What I mean by that is, as many of you have heard me say, the Lord is not happenstantial but does, in fact, do things with intent and forethought and is, therefore, a “purpose-driven God.” The Lord rarely deals in coincidences, most often if not almost always, the Lord does things with purpose and forethought, bringing a “concurrence of events or circumstances that has a Divine causal connection” to alter the good “Rabbi’s” definition above just a little. We run into that person we’re thinking of because God has a plan. We experience a confluence of things because God intended it that way. The Bible reminds us over and over again that God does things on purpose.

Let me get at that through the text. We’re told by Luke that during this last week of Christ’s life, the Passover was happening. I realize you likely know what the Passover was, but just in case, let me remind you. The Hebrews were in Egypt and by the time of the Passover were there for four hundred long years. A lot had changed during those four centuries. You see, the

reason that they were in Egypt in the first place was according to God's plan and purpose. God brought Joseph, Jacob's son, to a place of power and highly favored status with the Pharaoh so that he could rescue his family and for that matter, the world, from starvation during a severe famine. Four hundred years later, there is no Joseph, however, no highly favored status whatsoever, and the children of God are being oppressed by the Egyptians. The Hebrews are slaves. The Hebrews are being abused. The Hebrews are then also crying to God for salvation. And He hears them and He does what God does so well by saving them. Of course, He saves them through a series of plagues which were designed to discipline Egypt's Pharaoh but also designed to rescue His children in the process. And the final plague? The death of the firstborn children. All the firstborns would die...that is...unless they sacrificed a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on the doorframes of their houses. That event became known as "The Feast of Unleavened Bread" as our text says it, but it was also known as "Passover."

So let me say that again...at Passover...the blood of the lamb...saved the children of God...from certain death.

Here enters Jesus. What Festival was happening the week He died? What Festival was happening the week He spilled His precious blood? I have a feeling you're tracking with me here. Coincidence? I don't think so. Jesus was intentionally and purposefully sacrificed during the Passover Festival. Let me remind you what John the Baptizer called Jesus in John 1:29 "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" Jesus was indeed THE Passover Lamb of God and while His blood wasn't spread over the wooden doorposts of houses, His blood was, so to speak, "spread over the wooden doorpost" of the cross! Coincidence? I don't think so. God brought His Son into the world at just the right time, but God also sacrificed His Son at just the right time as well, at the celebration of Passover. And His blood, spilled at the cross, saves God's children not just in time, but for eternity. The writer to the Hebrews would pen this: "*(Jesus) entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*" Hebrews 9:12. "*Thus securing an eternal redemption*" for all who'd trust in Him because His blood doesn't just save the firstborn, but saves all who trust and receive His very purposeful and "non-coincidental" sacrifice on their behalf! Thank you, Jesus, for being purpose-driven! Thank you, Jesus, for making us the purpose that drives you!



Saturday, March 2nd
“Being a Foot-Washer”
Read John 13:1-15

One of the more heartening growth points in our society is the apparent desire on the part of most folks to make a difference in the world around them. This happens in all sorts of ways, but indeed, in my lifetime it seems to have become an expectation that you will be involved in helping people around you, both those near and those far away as well. People have developed a deep desire to reach into people’s lives and assist them or lift them up, and this is particularly true in times of great need.

We recently experienced this with the Perry High School shooting. Once again, we’re mourning the loss of students and teachers at the hands of a disturbed individual. Once again, a community is rocked to its core, and once again, lives are altered forever. But when that happens, and as has happened with this “too close to home” event, people willingly step up to the plate to be a blessing to those affected. It was wonderful to see all the ways that people were seeking to make a difference and minister to those in the Perry community and surrounding communities as well. In fact, the last report I read said that the goal is to raise more than \$100,000 to help the families, including the shooter’s family, by the way! So great to see such a heart, such a spirit for those in need.

However, not to denigrate what is being done in any way, but what really needs to happen is far more personal than raising \$100,000 through a “Go-Fund-Me” effort. Will that money help? I’m certain that there are ways in which it will. Will that money go a long way to bring some healing? Yes, I’m sure, along with all of the other things people are doing, it will certainly do much good. But let me say it again, what needs to happen is much more personal than that. What needs to happen is accomplished through very intimate and up-close connections with the people in that community. What needs to happen is a “foot washing” like the one found in our text.

You probably know this story from the last week of Christ’s ministry better than most of the events in the last week leading up to His death. We talk about this story every single year when we come to that day known as Maundy Thursday. Of course, we’ll often focus on the Lord’s Supper aspect of

this event and this day, but there is another and very important “thing” that happened that night, namely, the washing of the disciples’ feet by their Lord and Master. You have likely heard that this was a duty that needed to be done because the reclining position for eating would have brought the disciples and Jesus into very close contact. Therefore, the feet that had walked the dusty roads of the city and encountered all sorts of unclean things...like the kind that animals leave behind...needed to be washed away before reclining next to someone to eat their meal. The servant tasked with this had no glorious position whatsoever and, furthermore, had to provide a very personal, very intimate duty for the person dining at the table. The word “servant” hardly captures the depth of this duty, but it does work in the sense that the person was giving of themselves in a way that took great care and great concern for the person that they served.

And, of course, that’s what Jesus did for the disciples. Jesus served them in a very intimate fashion that night, taking great care and great concern for them. Kneeling before them. Making sure they were cleansed. Washing and drying the feet of those who followed Him. More than all of that, however, Jesus was giving them His all even though they should have been the ones serving, caring, and being concerned for His feet in the moment!

And yet, Jesus did all of this to remind them and thereby also remind us, this is the duty we’re called to as followers of Jesus as well...see verses fourteen and fifteen for that. We are called by Christ to serve in a way that is way more intimate and caring and loving than giving to a “Go-Fund-Me” account ever could be. We can certainly help people with our resources, but when we do, we are often only helping them from a distance with little effort, little output, and little investment on our part. We are instead, as Christians, called to get our hands dirty as we personally and again, yes, intimately connect with the person or persons we are serving. We are called to be foot-washers every single day of our lives. And then, quite naturally, when someone experiences a horrifying and tragic situation, we are already involved in the foot-washing duty and just have a new person to wash feet for.

But let me remind you of one more item here. It’s quite evident that Jesus washed all the disciples’ feet. Indeed, all the disciples who would, in just a few short hours, deny Him, run away from Him, and like sheep, scatter to the safety and security of their own homes while Jesus faced His terrible duty all alone. Yes, He washed their feet, He served them in the moment, even though

they would leave Him with those freshly washed feet.

But there was someone else who had their feet washed that night and his name is Judas Iscariot. Judas Iscariot who would, as the Bible says it many times, “betray Him.” Judas sold Jesus out. Judas gave Jesus up to death. Judas violated his friendship with Christ and handed Him over to die...and did so for monetary gain. And yet, Jesus intimately washed his feet that night nonetheless. Yes Christian, I think you understand what I’m saying. We are called to be foot-washers even when the person doesn’t deserve to be served. That’s our duty. That’s our calling. That’s what Jesus meant when He said, “*For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.*” John 13:15.

To that end, then, let me wrap up this devotion with a foot-washing shout-out to the wonderful community of Perry, Iowa. The parents of the young man who perpetrated this horrible crime said this: “We cannot repay the grace we have been shown in public and private.” In other words, the community of Perry “washed the feet” of the family, the community of Perry served the family, from whence this terrible tragedy sprung. Way to go Perry, Iowa! Way to go. They’ve proven themselves to be foot-washers and foot-washers who have emulated the Lord Jesus! May each and every one of us follow their example. More importantly, may each and every one of us follow our Lord Jesus’ example, washing feet of the people we encounter every single day...no matter what!

Please note, Sundays are a Celebration of the Resurrection and not a part of Lent. Therefore, there will not be a devotion tomorrow.



Monday, March 4th
“The Heart of the Matter”
Read John 14:1-6

“Get to the heart of the matter” is a saying that has endured for a very, very long time. When you want someone to tell you what they really want or really need from you, you can simply say, “Get to the heart of the matter.” When you want to succinctly understand what someone is trying to convey about a situation or circumstance, you can say, “Get to the heart of the matter.” Of course, there are a lot of other ways you can say the same thing. There are other phrases or sayings that could act like a “synonym” for this old idiomatic sentence, such as “What’s the bottom line here?” or “What’s the takeaway?” I think you got the idea.

Now, I bring up that old saying (and its kissin’-cousin sayings) because when we come to what Jesus said as recorded in John 14, we want to ask the very same things. More than that, when it comes to Jesus and His presence in our world we want to ask, “What’s the bottom line here?” “What is the takeaway?” or “What is the heart of the matter?” And by that I mean getting at an answer as to why Jesus came to us in the first place? Why did Jesus take on human flesh and why did He live on our earth for three and a half decades? Why did He die on the cross and rise from the dead? When it comes to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, “The heart of the matter is...” what?

Well, Jesus reminds us of the answer to the question in these often-quoted words: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* John 14:6. Jesus gets at what His advent into our world was all about, namely, He is the one and only path to heaven. He is the one and only true God. He is the one and only access to everlasting never-ending life. God doesn’t have a “Plan-B”. God doesn’t give us a pass if we don’t know Jesus. God doesn’t let us in just because He loves us. While our world wants to tell us that there are many roads, paths, and truths that lead to heaven, Jesus says “Nope...the heart of the matter is me...I am the one and only way to heaven!” While our world barks at Christianity saying “How dare you be so exclusivistic!”, in truth Jesus Himself says that the bottom line, the core concern, the heart of matter of salvation is found in Him and Him alone. Our world might not like it, but Jesus is actually the one making clear the heart of the matter, and the heart of the matter is Him! You can’t get to heaven

without Jesus...period!

But I'm intentionally using the phrase or saying "The heart of the matter" because I actually want to point something out to you. You see, "the heart" behind "the matter" of salvation, is God's loving and generous and mercy-filled nature. What I mean by that is that the Lord's "heart" is for you because you are the one who "matters" to Him. Notice what Jesus said here: "*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*" John 14:1-3. It's true...Jesus is the one and only way, truth and life. No one, and I mean absolutely no one, is getting to heaven apart from Him. But notice where His heart is! His heart isn't about sending you or anyone to hell. His heart doesn't delight in you and me being separated from Him in any way. No, His heart is all about having you close to Himself! God wants you and me to be where He is and where He is for eternity! His heart for you drove Him to come to this place so that He could provide you His way, give you His truth, and through His death and resurrection grant you ever-lasting, never-ending life! He doesn't want anyone to die without Him, rather, He came to provide the way for us to Heaven and furthermore goes away into Heaven to prepare a place for us! Why? So that His heart's desire could be fulfilled! And His heart's desire is, as Jesus said it, that "*where I am you may be also.*" His heart is for you. His heart's desire is to be with you and for you to be with Him!

The "bottom line,"...the "take away,"...the "heart of the matter" for Jesus...is you! He loves you. He wants you to be with Him. And His heart then drove Him to be the way, the truth and the life for you!



Tuesday, March 5th
“All Alone”
Read John 16:32,33

I don't think I'm the only one who doesn't like to be left all alone. I don't mind being alone; in fact, sometimes I genuinely desire to be alone...as long as it's my choice and as long as it's for relatively short periods. But being left behind or left all alone by someone or multiple-someones, and and feeling as if I've been abandoned by that someone or multiple-someones...well, no one wants to experience that! Safe to say nobody on the planet likes being left behind by others to fend for themselves. Pretty good bet that no one wants to be abandoned by others, not now, not ever. And when we're talking about friends who have done who have abandoned us, well, we are very touchy about that subject! Just ask someone who has been ghosted by a good friend and you'll get an earful of vitriol about what had been done to them and about the person who did it. Even if perchance, you knew ahead of time that you'd be abandoned by your friends, ghosted, or left behind, that knowledge wouldn't protect you from being hurt and hurt badly when it occurred. Even if you knew all the niggly-details and exactly the time stamp that the abandoning would take place, you'd still be feeling burning at the moment.

When Jesus spoke the words of our text, He is in the last week of His ministry here on earth. Like an ever-tightening vice, Jesus is likely feeling the press of His horrible duty here on earth. He's definitely pouring His heart into His disciples as He knows the cross is looming and His time with them is short. The disciples needed Jesus normally on a day-to-day basis. But considering what they are about to experience, the things they'll witness Jesus going through, they will be shaken them to their very core and need Him all the more. Jesus knew that they needed His reassurance in the moment because of what was to come in very short order. Jesus knew that they needed His bolstering and strength, they needed Him to prop them up now for what they would see the Jewish leaders and Roman government do to Him. Jesus knew that they needed Him...that they needed Him period.

But I over-emphasize the case in order to make an important shift here... the disciples needed Jesus but Jesus needed the disciples too. Jesus is after all, 100% God...and...100% man. To be sure, His God nature doesn't need anything. As God, Jesus is complete and total and lacks nothing...and

certainly doesn't need anything from those He came to save. Remember, however, Jesus wasn't just God, He wasn't super-human, but was a full-on, flesh and blood human being too. Jesus had every attribute and characteristic we have (with the exception of original sin of course). He was happy. He was sad. He laughed. He cried. He was hungry and thirsty. He was energized and He was tired. He hurt, He bled, He suffered, and He died. He was a bona fide human being in every way. And as a human being, He would have felt what we feel in situations like this, namely, the sting of abandonment. And unfortunately, even worse for Him, He knew all of this would happen and did so from all time and eternity. The abandonment was prophesied by God more than five hundred years before it happened "*Strike the Shepherd and the sheep will scatter*" (see Zechariah 13:7). In other words, even as He was calling to them by the Sea of Galilee saying, "Follow me!", He knew full well that three short years later, they would instead, run away from Him!

And yet, notice something here. He went through it all anyway. We don't read that since they abandoned Him that in turn, He abandoned them. Nope. He knew they'd abandon Him, but He was faithful to the very end. He knew they'd run and hide, turning away from Him, but He'd keep His eyes on the duty He came to perform. He knew they'd deny ever knowing Him, but He'd remember their names, and the names of every other human being ever born, as He hung on the cross and died in their place. In fact, though Jesus said that the Father was with Him in our text and in the moment, we know that at the cross, Jesus was indeed completely and totally abandoned, completely and totally all alone. He died there all alone...for the twelve...for us...for the world...and as He died, Jesus would say "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" He knew it all, He knew what was to come and yet, my Christian friend, He did it anyway!

And the application of that truth about Jesus is so important for you to hold close! Jesus did it all in order that you and I would never, ever be all alone. Think about it. Because Jesus went to the cross for you, no matter who leaves you, He never will. Because Jesus went to the cross for you, others may abandon you but He will remain right by your side. He did it for the disciples, He did it for you too! He did it for all time and eternity! He walks with you the whole of your life and He walks with you into eternal life as well! All alone? No, instead, in Jesus, thanks be to God, you are never alone!



Wednesday, March 6th
“He Prays for Us?”
Read John 17:1-21

Most of you that have known me for some time also know that I love being a pastor. It's a very hard job but one that comes with deep, deep privileges. By “deep, deep privileges” I mean all of the opportunities that we as pastors have to minister to you and serve you and your families. What an amazing gift God gives us as pastors that we are able to bring you God's Word and help you understand the things which God has said to us in the Scriptures. What an honor to be able to be there for you when your children are born and baptized; when your family celebrates milestones like confirmations and graduations and weddings and wedding anniversaries. What a gift to walk through the death of loved ones, reminding you of eternal life given to them. What a privilege to be able to pronounce the forgiveness of sins over you through what we call “absolution” at the time of confession and what a pleasure to be able to hand you the Lord's Supper and nurture your faith through the forgiveness of sins God promises us in that Sacrament.

One of the most amazing privileges, however, is actually a very simple one for us to do. What a joy it is to simply be able to pray for people in their time of need. Of course, people believe that we have some sort of “red-phone hotline” to God and so they'll often call us first to ask us to pray for whatever their particular need might be. There's a certain comfort in knowing that your pastor not only knows what you're going through, but is praying for you in that moment, and so I understand why people call us first and I also celebrate the fact of it.

Having said that, what if Jesus Himself was the one praying for you? What if Jesus was the one interceding with the Father on your behalf? I know you love us your pastors and are thankful for our pleas to God brought to His throne for you, but I'm fairly certain that if you could have either your pastor or your Lord and Savior Jesus praying for you, you'd choose Jesus every time...and so would I, by the way! Jesus praying for us? What an amazing thought that is and what an amazing thing that would be!

Now I bring it up because our text from John 17 is a reminder that Jesus did pray for us as recorded in this text! Our Lord and Savior, in the last week of

His earthly ministry, took time to pray for you and for me! The majority of the verses in John 17 get at His three years with the disciples and all that He did with and for them. He prays for them and as you read what He prayed, it's clear that He loved them very much and wanted them to be safe and saved once He died and rose again and ascended on high. He prays to the Father for their welfare and does so very pastorally and personally.

But in this text, called "The High Priestly Prayer," Christ was interceding with the Father as our true High Priest (see Hebrews 2:17)! Said better, He was interceding with the Father as the true High Priest for the entire world. In other words, He was standing between us and God the Father and as the High Priest did for the people, He interceded for all of us, all who would believe in Him. Verses twenty and twenty-one read this way: "*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*" John 17:20,21. Notice what Jesus says there! He's not only praying for the twelve by saying, "*I do not ask for these only...*", but He takes time to pray for all of us, all who would become Christians through the Gospel message! He prays for you and me, saying, "*...but also for those who will believe in me through their word.*"

Think about that and be blown away by your loving Lord! Jesus is about to suffer unimaginably and be tortured unmercifully, and then hang on a cross for six hours bearing the penalty of the sins of the world. He knows exactly what's coming His way, and yet, He stops and prays and takes time to intercede for the twelve and for all who would believe the word they brought! That's you and that's me!

Now, what would you have been praying for if you were facing what He was facing? If we're honest, we know we'd be praying for ourselves in that moment! We'd be praying for strength to endure! We'd be praying for God's help in the moment. And, to be sure, Jesus does do that too in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But before He got to that spot, the one who actually does have a "hotline to God" took time to pray for you!

As you walk through this Lenten Season, consider and be encouraged by that truth as well. When you go through difficult times...when you need your pastor to pray for you...remember that the Lord of Glory prayed for you

two-thousand years ago, and continues to pray for you now! Yes, I need to remind you, it wasn't just in the days leading up to the cross that Jesus prayed for you, He continues to do so yet today! Paul wrote these wonderful words about Jesus: *“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”* Romans 8:31-34. Jesus prayed for you in His days on earth and Jesus continues to do so every single day of your life!

Indeed, call me and ask for prayer. Call the other pastors and ask for prayer as well! We want to do that wonderful duty for you...we love to do that wonderful duty for you! But know in your heart that Jesus, your Lord and Savior, not only died and rose again for you, but daily intercedes on your behalf as well! He prays for us? Yes, indeed He does!



Thursday, March 7th
“He Saw It All”
Read Mark 14:1,2

When we are children, we believe that we can do things that are contrary to our parents' will and desires, and rules...and...they'll never be the wiser. We think that we can do things in secret and mom and dad will never, ever find out about it. A couple shenanigans here and a little monkey-business there, and mom and dad won't even find out. But somehow...they always do. They claim to have eyes in the back of their head and it seems as if that's actually true. They always know. They always, as the saying goes, “catch us red-handed” and seem to do so when we are up to our elbows in the “cookie jar.” How do they know? We immediately blame a sibling, thinking them a snitch. How do they know? We are confident that there must be hidden cameras. How do they know? We don't know how they know...they just do!

Well, if our parents appear to be ubiquitous and seem to be all-knowing, we all know that our Lord actually and literally is. We know that our Lord is everywhere. We understand full well that our Lord has full knowledge of the things that we do, and He knows about them far before they ever happen. We have read and understand and have even experienced the beautiful and yet frightening words of Psalm 139:1-4: *“O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.”* No tattling siblings. No hidden cameras. No eyes in the back of His head. The Lord simply knows all and sees all, and yes, knows all and sees all...that is, the good, the bad and the downright ugly stuff of our lives.

Curious then that the Jewish leaders thought that they could do something that the Lord God Almighty would not see them doing. Mark writes it this way: *“It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him...”* Mark 14:1. Of course, the act of arresting and killing Him in and of itself was horrific and terrible. Jesus had done nothing wrong. Jesus had done everything right! More than that, He had actually made people's lives better! He'd healed their diseases; He'd given them hope of

everlasting life through Himself; He'd even shown them a better and richer way to live through love and grace and forgiveness. And yet, the Jewish leaders were jealous. They didn't like His popularity or His way of doing things. They were afraid that their way of life would be taken away from them. John writes this: *"So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, 'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.'"* John 11:47,48. They didn't care about the people; they didn't care about Jesus; they only cared about themselves!

More than that, however, they were acting as if they'd never, ever read Psalm 139. These were the Jewish leaders of God's people for goodness sakes. They should have not only known Psalm 139, but more importantly understood and lived what it says. They represented God and yet they thought they could get away with doing what they wanted to Jesus and no one would be the wiser? They could kill Him with "stealth," and their Heavenly Father wouldn't even know? They would be wrong...He saw it all.

He knew it all, He saw it all, didn't He? In fact, you know that He didn't just know about it as it was happening, He knew it would happen long before it did. And you furthermore know that their heinous actions against Jesus was deeper and wider than God's foreknowledge, wasn't it? Our Lord actually orchestrated the whole thing. John tells us this amazing truth about this Christ story: *"One of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.' He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation..."* John 11:49-51. They weren't sneaky, God knew all along. They weren't crafty because God brought it all about. They weren't stealthy; God prophesied it all ahead of time. In the face of their sinfulness, God willingly gave up His Son to death...for them. In the face of their sinfulness, God willingly gave up His Son to death...for the world...for you and for me.

God knows you inside and out. God sees you for who you are and who you should be. God knows your sin. God sees your sin. He knows full well what you'll say, think and do today and every day of your life. Though our sin grieves Him, He nonetheless sent His Son for us. Though it pains Him, He

nonetheless paid the price for your sin. Caught red-handed? You can be forgiven. Up to your elbows in something? You can be forgiven. That was God's purpose and plan all along. For the Jewish leaders and, indeed, for you and for me!



