

For God So
LOVED

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A Lenten Devotional



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About the Authors

For your journey through Lent this year, we've brought you a daily devotional that blends the intergenerational voices of astute leaders of the church to guide you on a meaningful pilgrimage to the cross and beyond, to resurrection.

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ASH WEDNESDAY

March 6, 2019

written by Dan Boone

Read

Isaiah 58:1–12

Additional: Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 • Psalm 51:1–17 •
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21 • 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Reflect

Seasons like Lent often have me looking for a higher spiritual gear. You know: slow down, read more Scripture, pray, and journal more often. It's as if I want to make myself better for God—as if that would somehow be impressive. The curse of a Christianity that is deeply personal is that it is often only that: deeply personal. And we have plenty “just Jesus and me” songs to reinforce the idea of this intimately personal relationship, which it is. But if personal is all it is, then God becomes more and more utilitarian, there to hear *my* prayers and meet *my* needs and tend to *my* vested interests.

Isaiah 58 could well be the antidote to this religious illness. We survived Isaiah 40–55, where the prayer of the people was, “Get us out of Babylon and back home to Jerusalem, where we can be in charge of our own lives.” God moved through Cyrus the Persian, and now they *are* back home in Jerusalem—where they find their city in shambles, the economy tanked, the government weak, the GNP abysmal, and the poor rattling tin cups on every corner. So they double down on their religious practices, expecting God to improve things for them.

Yet God has a message for them. Beginning in Isaiah 56 and continuing into chapter 58, we hear the corrective judgment of God. It goes like this: *You worship me, claiming to desire my ways. You feign righteousness. You claim a privileged nearness to me. You fast and pray but do not get what you are after. Then you wonder what I am up to, why I don't respond as you ask. So let me tell you why. You are not seeking my delight. You are fasting for your own vested interests. The kind of fast I want from you is one that will result in freedom for the poor and the vulnerable among you. They will share your bread, your homes, and your clothes. They will have more. You will have less. If you do these things, then your light will shine in the darkness of your broken city, your bones will be made strong, and you will be like a watered garden.*

Maybe a new definition of Lenten time and space should be “the place where God tells us what we need to hear but don't wish to hear.” In so many of our religious practices, we are primarily concerned with how we look in the eyes of God, with our appearance before God, with the impression we are making on God. Could it be that God is less interested in how we look and more interested in how we see the world around us? As long as “I” reside as the focal point of my religious practices, I will attend to *being seen*. But when the focal point of prayer and fasting becomes the world that God longs to redeem, then I will attend to *seeing* the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the oppressed, and the vulnerable among us. The delight of the Lord is that God's people see these. And when *they* become the focal point of our fasting and prayers, “Then you shall call, and the LORD will

answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am” (Isa. 58:9, NRSV).

As we begin our journey to the cross with Jesus—the Suffering Servant of God—it would do us well to remember that the first Lenten journey was not one of pious escape, mountain solitude, or reflective quietness. Jesus went to cities where people, along with their problems, presented themselves: an unfair taxation system, exclusive religion, poverty, sickness, self-interest, political gamesmanship. Jesus found delight in tending to the Father’s business in the broken cities filled with human need. And in the private moment that is recorded in the Gethsemane prayer, he feels the weight of this kind of worshipful living and asks for the cup to pass. Yet, in asking, he recognizes that the delight of the Father is felt by the one who tends to the work of the kingdom. He bows his head and returns to the crowd, that mass of angry humanity who only knows how to seek its own vested interest.

Pray

Gracious God, speak your truth to us as you did to our brothers and sisters in Isaiah 58. May we have ears to hear what you desire of us during this Lenten season. Amen.

THURSDAY
MARCH 7, 2019

written by Dan Boone

Read

Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16

Additional: Exodus 5:10–23 • Acts 7:30–34

Reflect

I can pretty much quote this psalm in its entirety. I heard it hundreds of times in our family devotions as a boy growing up in Mississippi. It was my dad's memorized Psalm. On nights that called for abbreviated family devotions, he quoted this text. He is now in his nineties with the full intent of hitting one hundred. And, given how stubborn we Boones are, I won't be surprised if he makes it.

Dad is a World War II veteran. He served as a medic in the Army and fought as a soldier in the Pacific Islands. Buried in his memorabilia drawer is a Silver Star for Valor on the Field of Combat. He often went into enemy fire to rescue and bring wounded soldiers to safety. It is a time in his life that he does not like to recall. The thing I heard him say most often was, "I did this so my children would not have to."

Psalm 91 went with him to the Pacific and back. He prayed it every night in a tent or foxhole. Placing it in that context transforms it into a liturgy of divine protection. The language befits impending destruction: “For he will deliver you from . . . deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions and under his wings you will find refuge; . . . You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day . . . A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. Because you have made the LORD your refuge . . . no evil shall befall you. . . . I will protect those who know my name. . . . With long life I will satisfy them” (vv. 3–5, 7, 9–10, 14, 16, NRSV). This psalm assures the one who prays it that God is looking out for them.

I understand the danger of implying that divine protection is promised to the righteous in battle while the rest are left to the luck of the trajectories of bullets. I am not suggesting a theodicy based on a magic prayer. What I am suggesting is that life leads us to places where this psalm is a gift to be uttered by those who realize that our lives are ultimately in the hands of God. My dad was there as a young man during World War II. Jesus was there in the wilderness temptations as the force of darkness used every imaginable offer to divert him from his kingdom mission.

Hungry from the fast, weakened by the wilderness, and confronted by the adversary of all humanity, Jesus did hand-to-hand combat with the devil. I wasn't there, but I like to imagine Jesus quoting Psalm 91, like my Dad in a foxhole, to remind himself that he was not alone in battle. The devil tempted him to leap off the temple into the arms of the waiting angels, quoting Psalm 91 himself (v. 11; see also Matt. 4:6). I think Jesus smiled because the devil stopped at verse 12 and did not go on to the next verse, where the faithful one of God stomps on the head of the snake.

Our Lenten journey will take us into fierce battles where the outcome is neither guaranteed nor predetermined. And we can be sure that there is darkness filled with deadly intent ahead. Psalm 91 is a good companion prayer for a foxhole or a fight

with dark powers. It is also helpful anytime we imagine overwhelming darkness and impending death. I'm sure Jesus prayed it often on his Lenten journey. Let's join him.

Pray

Gracious God, may our journey into the darkness of a world that practices crucifixion be accompanied by your assurance that evil will not have the last word. Amen.

FRIDAY
MARCH 8, 2019

written by Dan Boone

Read

Exodus 6:1–13

Additional: Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 • Acts 7:35–42

Reflect

I was burdened for a young man in our church whose life was one bad decision after another. Several times I tried to pray with him, and he allowed it because he respected me. Nevertheless, I never saw any change in him. He just continued in his ways. I shared my concern with a wise elder, who said something I haven't forgotten: "He isn't tired of being lost yet. Stay close. One day he will want another option. Some are not ready to hear the good news."

How do we travel the world offering the hope of salvation, only to find rejection from those who need it most? I would like to think that on any given day, anyone would be ready to respond to the message of Jesus, but apparently not. Maybe Exodus 6 can help us.

The people of God have been under the heavy hand of Pharaoh and his empire-building demands for so long that they cannot

imagine a different future. They have acclimated themselves to the plight of the powerless. Even though they groan for relief and complain about the bitterness of slavery, they have stopped believing that freedom is possible for the likes of them. They pray prayers of deliverance without the accompanying expectation that anything will happen.

And then God burns a bush in Midian and sends a bored sheep tender back to the dark land of Egypt, where he once made a bad decision and possibly had a rap sheet waiting for him. This is a journey Moses would prefer to skip. He wants out in the worst way, but God won't take no for an answer. After several excuses, a magic snake stick, and some promised help, Moses finally goes down into Egypt on a mission from God.

After the story has gone a few chapters, we find Moses declaring the message of God to the slaves: "I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. . . . I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD" (Exod. 6:6–8, NRSV).

I can't imagine better news for slaves. Like my bad-decision friend, you would think they'd be ready and open for this good news, but that is not so. "Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery" (v. 9, NRSV). Moses explains to the Lord that the people are not listening to him, and he even suggests the reason is that he is such a poor speaker. This is not the first time Moses has confessed his preaching deficiency. Aaron is the immediate result, a preaching sidekick who can really bring the word. But as I read through the rest of Exodus, a lack of persuasive preaching doesn't seem to be the problem. Sometimes people can't see a preferred future because of a broken spirit and cruel oppression. When the dark powers that run a dying world have done their number on you for a long, long time, believing the good news is hard.

It is interesting to compare the call of Moses to the call of Jesus. They both go on a journey for the salvation of the people of God. On the Lenten journey of Jesus, many were ripe and ready to believe that God was on the move to set them free. But there was as much blindness as belief.

Jesus invites us to be faithful on the journey, even if those we encounter are not ready for the good news. It may have nothing to do with the way we say it. It may be that a broken spirit needs tending.

Pray

Gracious God, grant us perseverance in the face of hearts so heavy and spirits so broken that imagination has been crucified. May the faithfulness of Jesus be our hope along the way. Amen.

SATURDAY
MARCH 9, 2019

written by Dan Boone

Read

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

Additional: Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 • John 12:27–36

Reflect

I had hoped my flight would be empty. I was tired and wanted to stretch out and sleep. But when you fly Southwest Airlines, your chances are slim. I was number 57 of 120. Not bad. Maybe the center seats would be vacant. I got on and went for the first window seat. It was in the front row, which faced backward. Our little two-row cubicle held six passengers, two beside me and three in front of me. Beside me was a young couple disgustingly tanned from their Florida vacation.

An elderly couple took the two seats immediately in front of me. He wore a fishing hat, blue jeans, and a green sport shirt. He was tall and had the look of a man who had worked hard his whole life. He sat with one hand over the other, trying to control the telltale shaking of Parkinson's disease. He had trouble with his Coke and peanuts. His wife had a puffy face, thinning hair, and reddened scalp. Her cough was deep. Large purple spots on

her hands and arms suggested she had seen plenty of IVs. Lung cancer, she told me—three years ago, but now it was back.

They were going home to their daughter in Louisville following a visit with their other daughter in Orlando. While they had been in Orlando, the Louisville daughter had sold their house, down-sized their belongings, auctioned off their antiques, and moved what was left into assisted-care living quarters. They would land, get off the plane, and go to a place they had never seen except in brochure pictures.

I decided to go beyond the obvious and asked, “How do you feel about this move?” They explained that they really didn’t have a choice—his Parkinson’s, her cancer, their age. They were coming to terms with what was to come. Our row got quiet. As we began our descent into Louisville, I watched their eyes as they looked out the small window and down onto the last chapter of their life. She reached over to steady his shaking hands. He returned the gesture with a smile of warm assurance that things would be okay. As they gathered their things to leave the plane, I reached over and touched his hand. “The Lord be with you,” I said.

His reply still resonates with me today. “Yes. He is.”

I saw an elderly couple facing the moment that had come to them. They could have easily wished for another time—to be young and tanning on a Florida vacation, to be raising two little girls in Kentucky, to be coming home from work, to be buying their new home in the prime of their careers. But these moments were gone and weren’t coming back. A new moment waited for them, a moment beyond their control.

In this Lenten season, we wish for a time of our own choosing, of our own making. And our prayers are that God would make it be the time we want it to be. Ecclesiastes 3 is a wise reminder that life comes at us, times come and go, and we don’t get to choose our seasons. We are temporary, fragile, mortal, dust-to-dust, ashes-to-ashes creatures. We can revolt against the reality of the time in which we find ourselves. But in so doing, we miss the

presence of God in this moment. Only God can invade time. And the only time that God chooses to invade is this present moment.

I am reminded of the words that John uses to describe Jesus at the Last Supper table with his disciples. “Jesus knew that the hour had come . . .” (13:1). The Lenten journey invites us to accept what time it is for us.

Pray

Gracious God, grant us the capacity to fully accept the present moment that we live in. Deliver us from the illusion that we can wish ourselves into a different season. Grant us grace for this day, whatever it holds. And may we be aware that you are with us. Amen.