

## Introduction | Step Up Close to Jesus.

“We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You, because by Your holy cross,  
You have redeemed the world.”

This is the refrain recited annually by reverential parishioners of the Roman Catholic Church while walking the *Stations of the Cross*— a collective tour and devotional that recounts fourteen key moments during Jesus’ journey down the Via Dolorosa to Calvary.

These reflections, often bound in paperback and colorfully illustrated, pale in comparison to the stained glass, mosaics, and reliefs lining the walls of a typical Catholic church. As the priest and altar boys arrive at each station, they, and all able congregants kneel as a modest voice reads:

*Step up close to Jesus. See Him trying to get up. He wants to keep carrying His cross. Everyone around Him is yelling and poking at Him. But Jesus does not get angry. He offers all this hurting to His heavenly Father for us because He loves us. Then He pulls Himself to His feet and walks forward.*

What a bold request; such gripping imagery: *Step up close to Jesus.*

Put yourself in Christ’s place as He trudged the Path of Sorrow to die in yours. A powerful invitation that we must accept not only during the Lenten season, but continuously.

This devotional series – written by Mt. Zion’s leaders – is another invitation: whether new to the narrow road or a seasoned sojourner, we must always pursue the Cross.

As we take a collective tour of God’s living Word, may the prophecies of the Old Testament and the Gospels in the New, lead you to the Cross; for it is only in stepping up close to Jesus, that we can walk in the light.

Amen.

— Sister Althea René Miller-Sims

## 01 | God Exalts When You Live in Humility.

**Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.**

I Peter 5:6 (NKJV)

Miss Ann is so excited and brimming with pride, as it is that time of the year. It's time for the Fulton County Fair. Now Miss Ann doesn't want to brag, but. Everyone in Fulton County knows that she makes the best peach cobbler on this side of the Mississippi River. As Miss Ann puts together the ingredients for her peach cobbler, she can't help but think, "What a waste of time for all of these lowly housewives to spend baking; everyone knows that I will win!"

The day of the Fulton County Fair has arrived. As the announcer steps to the podium to announce the winner, Miss Ann thinks about how her picture will look in the local newspaper when she accepts this year's trophy. She's also thinking about where she will place the award in her home. However, she is in for a rude awakening. The announcer speaks, "and this year's winner for the best peach cobbler in Fulton County is Miss Priscilla Brown."

Poor Miss Ann – do not exalt yourself above others. A proud and haughty spirit does not look good on a Christian or, for that fact, anyone. In this Christian walk, it would be wise for all of us to humble ourselves or be humbled by God. Don't forget, God is omnipotent, and he can cast down the proud. Also, be reminded that being boastful and arrogant when making something as simple as a peach cobbler can carry over into other areas of our lives. Some of these areas could include our attitude on our jobs, our homes, or our behavior in our church.

Additionally, let's ask ourselves, do we always have a hierarchical position? Do we always have to be right? How about us including God in everything that we do. How about acknowledging that we don't know everything and aren't always the best. But let's do our best and trust God.

Likewise, it is okay to take a position of servitude and learn from others. Let's humble ourselves, release our anxiety, tension, and conceit and watch God work. Let's put our total faith, trust, and dependence on God and make Him the head of our lives. After all, he did create us, giving us all our talents and gifts, and in due time, his time, he will exalt us. Until then, let's wait on the Lord.

— Minister Viola J. Miller

## 02 | Put Feet to Your Faith.

**6Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?  
7Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?**

Isaiah 58:6-7 (NKJV)

Currently, there is a lawsuit against the National Football League submitted by Brian Flores, who was fired from being the head coach of the Miami Dolphins for racism. This racism has been against African descent players for decades. Brian Flores is putting his feet to his faith by filing this lawsuit against the NFL for the future integrity of the league and for those coming after him, even if it costs him his career. There is what is called a "Rooney rule" put in place by the NFL. The Rooney Rule, named after Dan Rooney, the former Pittsburgh Steelers owner and chairman of the NFL's diversity committee, was adopted in 2003 and requires teams to interview diverse candidates for coaching jobs. After they accepted the rule, he said, the rate of coaches of color hired rose to 20 percent. The treatment of African descent football players would be compared to the enslavement of African descent people here in America. The action of Brian Flores would be like that of the abolitionists such as Frederick Douglas. Both men of whom sacrificed for the good of the African descent community.

In Isaiah 58:6-7, I believe that God is speaking to us as followers of Him to be willing to give up our agenda for the greater good of others. To remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly, free those who are abused, share your food with everyone who is hungry, share your home with the poor and homeless, give clothes to those in need, and do not turn away your relatives. When fasting, we say *no* to our agenda and *yes* to God's.

Even though justice, equality, and truth are still a struggle for people today, and when it is so clear that we should remember we are our brother's and sister's keepers as a way of life, it will be much simpler than continuing with injustice, inequality, and untruth that causes continuous conflict between people. With the help of God through fasting and praying, we can accomplish this together.

— Minister Pamela Soward

## 03 | Grandfather Knows Best.

**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?**

Psalm 42:2 (NIV)

Susan spent the days of her summer vacation with her grandparents. Her grandfather owned a construction business. He and his sons often started work early in the morning and worked long hours, which lasted throughout the heat of the day. When Susan's grandfather would return home from those long days in the sun, he would drink a large glass of water filled with ice as he sat in his rocking chair on the front porch. Unlike their father, Susan's dad and uncles often chose sweet tea or lemonade. Susan's grandfather knew best - only water can truly quench your thirst.

Like the psalmist, there may be times in our life when our souls are parched from the absence of God. We found ourselves in a dry place, longing to feel the presence of God. We are diligently trying to be in or sense the presence of God because we understand that only God can fill the longing.

Although God is omnipresent (or everywhere), obstacles can prevent us from feeling or sensing his presence. For example, time spent at work and/or on family obligations can compete with spending time with God.

How are you organizing your day or schedule to be in the presence of God? Just as only water can genuinely quench our physical thirst, only God's presence can fill the longing in our soul and is essential to our spiritual well-being. Don't forget to be intentional about choosing to spend time in His presence.

— **Minister Stephanie M. Harris**

## 04 | God Can Still Use You.

**14 So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. 15 And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."**

Genesis 3:14-15 (NKJV)

Many theologians suggest this is the protoevangelium- the first gospel because these words spoken by God contain the first promise of redemption in the bible. Everything in the bible flows from these words of God's plan for salvation.

This verse introduces two elements previously unknown in the Garden of Eden, elements that are the basis of Christianity—the curse on humankind because of Adam's sin and God's provision for a Savior from sin who would take the curse upon himself.

The protoevangelium speaks to the woman's offspring, which is Jesus the Christ, born of a virgin woman named Mary.

The "enmity" or hostility and hatred spoken of here is between Satan and Christ. The seed of the serpent, evil men, and demonic forces struck at the heel of the Savior when Judas betrayed him when Peter denied him when Pilate washed his hands when the crowd shouted crucify Him when the Romans condemned Him and hung Him on an old rugged cross. He died it only bruised His heel. But His wound was not the final act. He rose the third day, having paid the price for the sin, and He crushed the head of the serpent, which was satan himself, removing forever his rule over humanity.

Eve would testify that I messed up what I couldn't clean up on my own, but thanks be to God that it was only through me that the Savior would come. God was still able to use me.

In Genesis 2, Adam gives her the name of woman; however, after the fall, Adam names her *Eve* because she was the mother of all living things.

This story teaches us that God can still use us despite our sins. So, I want to encourage you that your failures are not final. God can use you to make a difference in this world.

— Rev. Dr. Marcus Allen

## 05 | It's Never Too Late.

**<sup>12</sup> The Lord said: It isn't too late. You can still return to me with all your heart. Start crying and mourning! Go without eating. <sup>13</sup> Don't rip your clothes to show your sorrow. Instead, turn back to me with broken hearts. I am merciful, kind, and caring. I don't easily lose my temper, and I don't like to punish. <sup>14</sup> I am the Lord your God. Perhaps I will change my mind and treat you with mercy. Then you will be blessed with enough grain and wine for offering sacrifices to me.**

Joel 2: 12-14 (CEV)

Harriet Tubman wanted all the enslaved to be free, not just some. If anyone decided to turn back—thereby endangering the mission—she reportedly threatened them with a gun and said, "You'll be free or die."

Harriet Tubman had a heart for the enslaved and freedom for all. Known as the "Moses of her people," Harriet Tubman was enslaved, escaped, and helped others gain their freedom as a "conductor" of the Underground Railroad. Harriet displayed extraordinary courage, persistence, and discipline, which she enforced upon those that wanted to be free. Harriet sacrificed her life for others to be free.

Many people cried out to her to be free from the bondage of enslavement, just as we can cry out to God through repentance for freedom from sinful ways. It is never too late to be free from the bondage of slavery, just as it is never too late to return to God in humility.

In the book of Joel, God is letting us know that it is never too late to cry out to Him and repent of our sins. God wants it to be from our hearts and not from outward appearance. God wants us to truly deny ourselves and depend on Him for everything. We should not rip our clothes to show sorrow but instead turn back to Him with broken hearts. God is merciful and kind when we turn back to Him with true repentance, just like Harriet, who had the courage, persistence, and discipline to help the enslaved to freedom. God is waiting for us to turn from the bondage of sin to freedom from sin by crying out to Him by returning to Him with a heart of repentance, and He will bless you to be a blessing.

— Minister Pamela Soward

## 06 | Be a Smart Investor; Don't Invest in Fool's Gold.

**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

Matthew 6:21 (NASB)

In this scripture, Jesus is teaching us an important spiritual lesson. He's teaching us that we should not store up treasures on earth that are temporal. We should focus on the eternal and store treasures in heaven.

Christ gives us a metric so we can determine where our hearts are. He instructs us to examine where our treasure is and tells us that where our treasure is, our heart will be there too.

What is a treasure? A treasure is anything or anyone that we value and don't want to live without. It is something that we treat as precious. Anything that we spend all our time and money on mentally or physically is what we treasure.

When Christ refers to our hearts, he is not talking about the organ in our body that circulates blood. Instead, he refers to the center of our emotions, our feelings of joy, sorrow, fear, hate, love, etc.

Often when we are going after the things we treasure, we will go after things ultimately worthless as they relate to eternity. For example, during the gold rush of the 1840s, many inexperienced miners believed that they would hit the mother lode. They worked from sunup to sundown in the hope of striking gold. They left their countries and families and even sacrificed their health to pursue literal treasure. Along the way, any miners mistakenly believed that they did strike gold. They found a cache of iron pyrite, which was flashy and resembled gold but was ultimately utterly worthless. It was "fool's gold."

We must ask ourselves, are we mining for fool's gold? Are we working day and night seeking wealth, position, possessions, power, associations with the "right people," or are we treating our homes, cars, or our attachment to social media like a God giving these things first place over God?

Are we daily seeking to be transformed by the renewing of our minds? Are we daily seeking to abide in the vine and develop the fruits of the spirit? Don't be tricked by fool's gold. Only the things we do for God will last.

They are eternal investments.

— Minister Brenda Brown

## 07 | He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not.

**You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

Romans 5: 6-8 (NIV)

Whitney Houston asked the question, "How will I know if He really loves me? And Patti LaBelle declares, "If only you knew how much I do love you." Both songs and a host of others remind us that there is often doubt about the existence and/or magnitude of another's love. Some people have used a flower to answer this question. In this approach, one pulls the petals off the flower and states (s)he loves me, (s)he loves me not. For the sake of this illustration, let's pretend that a woman met a man on a dating app, and she uses this method to determine his feelings for her. She would pull off a petal and say, "He loves me," then she would pull off another petal and say, "He loves me not." The answer to the question is whatever phrase is said as she pulls off the last petal. So, if she pulls off the last petal and says He loves me, she should probably swipe right. But if she says He loves me not, she should probably swipe left. Admittedly this is a very haphazard way of determining someone's affection. Yet, we can all acknowledge that there is no foolproof way to determine someone else's love.

God showed His love for us in unequivocal terms. At a time in our life when we were not interested in following God when our sins caused a rift between God and us, God still sent Jesus to die for us. This sacrifice allows us to draw near to God.

It is hard to understand and accept God's love because it boggles the mind from a human perspective. Few people are willing to suffer for someone who doesn't love them or pays them no attention. Yet that is precisely what God did. We never have to question, doubt, or wonder about God's love.

God's love for you is sure and irrefutable. The final petal on the flower always says He loves me. Will you believe it? Swipe right!

— Minister Stephanie M. Harris



## 08 | An Obvious Choice.

**"Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. <sup>31</sup> Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!**

Ezekiel 18:30-32 (NIV)

***"You want candy or a whoopin?"***

In his standup comedy special, "American Hustle," Katt Williams makes fun of his friend, NBA Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal, and his son. He says that Shaq's son lacked basic speech skills and only repeated back the last thing said to him. Trying to be funny, Katt Williams asked him, "You want candy or a whoopin?" The boy's limited speech only allowed him to request the spanking, which sent Williams' crowd howling in laughter. Though one option clearly was better than the other, the young boy still chose the option of pain and torment.

Katt Williams' audience laughed because they knew the better option was the candy. Why would anyone choose a whoopin?! However, our text shows us that most people choose the worst option when it comes to God. Through His prophet, Ezekiel, God shows His people that they can choose to rebel in their selfish, sinful life or recommit themselves to God. His question to them is simple. If you could choose life, why would you die? The wages of sin is death, yet God offers a new heart and a new spirit, something that only He can give.

Living and sinfulness or walking in righteousness is a choice, and God leaves this choice up to each one of us. We won't do everything perfectly, but that's where repentance comes in. Repenting is us turning from our selfishness and returning to God. We can walk in the right direction when God is our focal point. We can choose the blatantly obvious best choice, which is to allow God to do in our lives what we cannot do ourselves.

Choose life today. If you could live, why would you die? It's not a fair comparison. Candy or a whoopin? I think I'd rather take the candy.

— Minister Richard Jones Jr.

## 09 | The Lord is Good.

**The LORD is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him.**

Lamentations 3:25 (NIV)

Thank you for calling. Yes, yes, we will wait to hear from you, goodbye. Sheila turns to her husband and begins to cry. "Lord, I don't understand. The agency said that we were the perfect family for this child. What else do they want from us! Why are they denying us a child? What did we do wrong? Were we too desperate for a child? Did we choose the wrong attorney? Were we too friendly to the expectant Mom? Did we not educate ourselves enough about the process? Why is this happening? We are good people! Why Lord, why..."

Please be reminded that we serve a good God, who has unconditional love for us, and his compassion for us is unending. So, as we are waiting for the salvation of God, let's continue to seek and wait on the things that he has in store for us in this life. After all, he has a track record of being faithful.

Now, back to Sheila and her situation. Sheila's husband Frank pulls her to him and speaks, "Shelia, baby, please calm down. We have been down this path and in this valley before when things didn't look too good. But didn't God come through? Look around us. It wasn't too long ago when we lived in our parents' basement, and now, we have our own home. Remember when we both worked part-time jobs and full-time jobs just to pay our bills, and we had no money to save or spare. Remember when our only car didn't even have air conditioning or heat, and we had to make sure there was antifreeze in it every morning before we were able to drive it."

"Shelia, we have been through too much to give up our hope, our faith, or doubt God, especially when he says wait. Our God is not an ATM (Automated Teller Machine) God, who honors our request, right now, our way, and what we say. Also, (think about this) even with an ATM, you must make deposits before you can make a withdrawal, and most ATMs" make you wait before you can make that withdrawal. In this life, our deposits are spending time with the Lord, studying His Word, and seeking His will; these are our deposits, and our withdrawal is his abundant blessings and more."

Therefore, don't forget that our God is a good, good God whose mercies are new every morning. So, let's just continue to seek and trust in the Lord, keep our faith, and hope and wait expectantly on the Lord and be amazed at how He continues to bless. In other words, continue to make deposits and be astonished at your withdrawals.

— Minister Viola J. Miller

## 10 | God is Gracious, and He Waits.

**Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!**

Isaiah 30:18 (NKJV)

I can hear Jr. in his room screaming, "This is not fair." Let him throw one more thing, and I will show him fairness and injustices. He doesn't want me to come up to his room." Now, his father and I told him, "Do not take that car out of the driveway without one of us in the passenger seat. You do not have a license. You have a permit. You cannot drive without adult supervision; wait for us. But, his 17 years old self thinks he knows everything. Lately, Preston doesn't listen to anything we tell him. We tell him to go left, and he goes right. But he gone learn today.

Anyway, he took the car out of the driveway that his father and I promised he could have once he got his license. So, he decides to go joyriding with his friends, and he gets pulled over, and these are the consequences of his disobedience. He got a ticket, the car was towed and impounded, and all of that will cost money, mind you, money that he doesn't have. His Dad and I don't need another car. That car can rot in the impound, for all that I care. I am not paying for his repeated rebellion and disobedience. We told him to wait, listen to our words of wisdom, and he could have my 2021 Jeep. See, I just got a bonus that includes a new car, again I don't need a car. I think that we were being gracious. Obviously, he doesn't believe that fat meat is greasy. But he gone learn today.

Our disobedience and suffering are the motives for God's mercy, and he patiently waits for us to turn to him, he waits for us to correct our behavior, and he waits for us to repent. But, while he is waiting for us, he is exalted; he is glorified, in his power and strength, because we need God. God waits to save us from ourselves in all his grace, mercy, and compassion. Again, we need God. Also, God's judgment is his wisdom in how he will handle us for our disobedience, as he knows what's best for us. Finally, those of us who wait on the Lord to help us out of our mess are blessed. Remember, he doesn't have to help. However, he does because of His grace and mercy while he waits on us.

Therefore, in all our circumstances in life, we should place our confidence in God and not in ourselves, as he is waiting. When we put our confidence in God, we will find comfort as he is waiting for us to turn to him. However, when we place confidence in ourselves (like Preston), by thinking that we are wiser, those decisions will lead to our destruction, as we can't save ourselves. Remember, placing confidence in God is where our faith and trust grow. So, as we go through this life with all its afflictions, trials, or tribulations, be reminded that God is happily waiting for us to turn to him, and because of who he is, when we turn to God, we are blessed.

Our confidence in God will provide us comfort. When we place confidence in ourselves, it leads to destruction. However, God is ever waiting to be gracious to us, when we come to him by faith and happy are we, when we wait on him.

— Minister Viola J. Miller

## 11 | God Got It, No Doubt.

**Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.**

Psalm 27:14 (NKJV)

Have you ever been waiting for something you knew was coming soon? Whether it be a movie release, that fish fry you get every Friday, that paycheck after a long two weeks of work. We are all waiting and expecting something; now more than ever, we must have patience and trust what God has told us and showed us in the Word.

In this passage, we find David waiting on God to rescue him, yet again. He is telling himself to be strong in the Lord wait on Him. David spoke about being CONFIDENT in seeing the goodness of the Lord while still living and breathing down here.

The fact of the matter is we are all waiting for God to come through and drop off those blessings, often we think it'll come on our time. But we all know that's not how God's will works. "He may not come when you want Him, but He'll be there right on time. He's an on-time God, yes, He is!"

Have trust and belief that God keeps His promises, even when you are in the darkest parts of your life. Remember that He promised never to leave or forsake us, to always be there as a comforter. Be like David and be CONFIDENT in God's power and His ability to do just what He said He'd do, just as He's proven time and time again. Not just in our lives, but look at how God has come through for those in the Word, your family, church family, etc. You can trust and believe that God can do what He said He'd do!

— **Minister Jeremiah Covington**

## 12 | Whose Attention Are You Seeking?

**"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>17</sup> But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.**

Matthew 6:16-18 (NKJV)

All of us are born with the desire for attention. From infancy, to adulthood, and into our seasoned years we will experience moments when we absolutely need it. Lack of attention leads to feelings of disconnection and low self-worth. However, too much attention will lead to extreme self-centeredness and can lead to an attention-addiction, where no amount of attention will ever be enough. In this scripture Jesus challenges us to confront the purpose behind our actions. Whose attention are you seeking?

Jesus used the actions of the Pharisees as an example of what not to follow because they were hypocrites. During these times a hypocrite referred to an actor in the theater, a pretender, or someone who wore a mask. The Pharisees appeared to be suffering while fasting, but their actions were not genuine. They were just actors using fasting as a platform to draw the attention of people.

How often do we use certain situations to draw the attention of others? Jesus challenges us to apply critical thinking to what influences our actions. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that was meant for us to draw closer to the Lord. By giving up food and replacing it with the word of God and prayer we are intentionally seeking His attention. Fasting to draw attention to ourselves is a bit like taking God off the throne and placing ourselves there. It's no longer about Him, it's all about me. That's exactly what the Pharisees were doing. We cannot twist the objective for fasting, make it about us, and expect to be rewarded by God.

When it comes to fasting, Jesus teaches that secrecy is the foundation by which this spiritual discipline should be established. The secret place is a place of intimacy where it's just between you and the Father. If we fast in secret seeking God's attention above all others, God will reward us in full view for everyone else to see.

— Minister Billy Fletcher

## 13 | I Can't Wait For...

**But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.**

Isaiah 40:31 (NIV)

We've all said it. "I can't wait for..." The words that come after that opening declaration might be, "summer" or "my birthday," or "the big game." We don't literally mean we CAN'T wait; it means we are anxious for some event or thing or person to arrive. We are excited and expectant for something we have been anticipating. For little children, waiting for a special day such as a birthday or Christmas can feel agonizing. Even waiting to arrive at a travel destination is peppered with the phrase, "Are we there yet?"

However, all waiting is not about anticipatory excitement. Some waiting is shrouded in fear and trepidation. We wait for the results of a medical test. We wait for a judge's sentencing decision. We wait for enough money to pay our bills. We wait for a relationship to be restored. That waiting can be agonizing and frightening. But there is some good news about waiting. This devotion comes from the book of Isaiah where the prophet Isaiah comforts the people of Israel by reminding them who God is. He declares, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the creator of the whole earth. He never grows faint or weary; there is no limit to His understanding." (40:28). And Isaiah ends chapter 40 by reminding us that, "those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

As you consider the many promises of God, we are rarely prepared for the wait involved in realizing them. We may have to wait for a clearer understanding of the working of the Holy Spirit. We may have to wait for an understanding of our spiritual gifts. We may have to wait to rightly discern the Word. Whatever God promises us may not come right away. Noah waited for years for a devastating flood. The children of Israel waited for more than 40 years to enter the Promised Land. Joseph waited a lifetime to reign in Egypt and save his family. The world waited for four centuries for the promised Messiah—Jesus Christ. But, in every instance those who waited on the Lord did renew their strength. They mounted up with wings like eagles. They ran and were not weary. They walked and did not faint. So will you!

Prayer: Father God, give me the strength of an eagle. Help me to run and not grow weary. Show me how to walk and not faint.

— Deacon Gloria J. Ladson-Billings

## 14 | **Waiting in Hopeful Expectation.**

**We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. <sup>21</sup> In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. <sup>22</sup> May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you.**

Psalm 33:20-22 (NIV)

No one likes to wait but we spend a lot of time waiting. We wait for the elevator to arrive, for the red light to turn green, for our turn at the checkout counter, for the test results, for the Amazon package to arrive, for our next promotion, for the takeout to be delivered, for the last snowstorm or for winter to turn to spring, for the COVID numbers to decrease. We wait for God to answer our prayers, to hear our cries, and for His instructions in life. The difficulty of waiting is trying to determine what to do while we wait. Magazines and televisions in medical/dental waiting rooms are strategically placed there as a distraction from waiting. Uncertainty about the wait or what may occur after the wait can cause anxiety and makes it seem like time is moving in slow motion which causes the wait to feel longer than it really is.

The psalmist provides some insight on what to do while waiting for God. Waiting for God is a time of hope because we know that God is our help and our protector. Trusting in God allows us to be able to rejoice because we understand that He loves us and will provide us with what's best.

Waiting on God does not have to be uncertain or uncomfortable. We can wait with excitement and hopeful anticipation that God will provide all that we need including the answers and direction that only God can provide.

What do you do between the time when the prayer is asked, and the prayer is answered? During this time, do not lose hope. Consider rejoicing about what God has done with a forward look of what God can or will do. You may not know how or when God will answer but you can trust that God will come through for you.

— **Minister Stephanie M. Harris**

## 15 | **Now Faith, it's in ME.**

**But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.**

Micah 7:7 (NIV)

My goodness can life be hard! We live in a world where doing wrong, treating people wrongly, lying, cheating, the list goes on, but it seems as though, it is beneficial to sin and follow your own path. What real benefit is there from doing things our way? We put ourselves in deeper holes trying to lead when oftentimes we neglect using the road map that God provides us. But we as Christ-followers, have a different charge over our lives.

In a world where it's easier to fit in rather than stand out, we must stand on God's Word, be the light that this dark world needs. Be bold in your faith, look to inspire others with that faith, LIVE, and WALK by your faith. In our scripture, we see that Micah is seeking God's comfort, during struggle in Israel and their sin. He speaks about no one being upright among men, people are falling to sin, yet Micah explains that he is looking elsewhere. He is not trying to be like everyone else, he is seeking something better!

We should be like Micah, seeking God amid trouble. Not leaning to our own understanding, to our own intuition, our own "gut feeling". We need to seek out the Lord, in His Word, there is comfort, rest, peace, healing. The world wants us to try to gain these things through selfish actions when God has them readily available for the FREE.

We must learn to wait on God, look to Him for all things. God is not one to leave us behind when we sin against Him. That is the blessing in being a Child of God, despite our own faults, He wants to give us more, He promised to forgive us and have compassion, and will upkeep His promises of which He told Jacob and Abraham. HE IS FAITHFUL, therefore WE ABIDE in Him, so that FAITH will carry you through those seasons when nothing seems to go right. God hears you when everyone else turns off their ears. People all around you are failing, no end to struggle in sight, remember that faith is in you, and that God promised that everything will be alright. Our salvation and rest, resides in God.

— **Minister Jeremiah Covington**



## 16 | Behave like a Christian... While You Wait.

**Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.**

Romans 12:12 (NIV)

Pastor, let me make sure that I understand clearly what you are saying: So, on my job, I completed all my training for a certification and my supervisor paid the tuition for the entire staff, who completed the training, except mine. Also, I am a part-time employee, working 20 hours a week and my supervisor dropped my hours down to four a week, without an explanation. Also, we have celebrated everyone on the staff birthday, with ice-cream and cake, except mine. However, my supervisor said, "It was an oversight." But I still didn't get any cake or ice-cream. Finally, everyone in the office has gotten a promotion, except me and get this, my supervisor and I attend the same church. Now let me get this right, you want me to be joyful, hopeful, patient, and pray for this man, while I am suffering? You got me twisted and you have got to be kidding me.

As Christians, we should imitate Christ in all that we do, even with our attitudes and thoughts, we should always reflect on God and his goodness, for within Christ is hope, and that is why we pray. Therefore, when someone is persecuting, let's not focus on those things which are bad. Don't give other people's negative actions a lot of thought or space in your mind... don't let people occupy free rent in your head, instead, focus on God and pray for that individual and or circumstance. During any time of suffering, while we are waiting, that is our patience being developed. Our hope is maintaining a spirit of expecting something good to happen, as we are trusting God. Our state of being is joy for you know what the future holds, and we don't stop praying. In other words, behave in the way that Jesus would behave.

So, during difficult times exhibit the attitudes of Christ: hold onto your hope, display your joy, wait on God, and never stop praying.

Therefore, let us serve God with enthusiasm during a difficult time of affliction, put on the full armor of God, pray and trust God. Let's take control of our emotions, to rejoice in the future, and to be patient in our present situation. As Christians, we can't stoop to a level of evil and misrepresent Christ.

— Minister Viola J. Miller

## 17 | How Long is the Wait?

**But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.**

Hosea 12:6 (NIV)

Waiting is a fact of daily life. As you prepare to check out of the supermarket you typically wait in line. When you call customer services at the bank or an airline or to make a doctor's appointment you often hear a recorded message telling you that there are other callers on the line ahead of you. Sometimes the recorded message will tell you approximately how long the wait will be and ask if you are willing to hold on or would rather receive a call back when it is your turn. If you've ever gone to a popular amusement park you may have seen a sign that says something like, "The wait is 15 minutes from this point." We not only know waiting is inevitable, but we have also come to expect and accept it.

There are over 70 instances in God's Word that refer to waiting. However, we demonstrate incredible impatience when the God of all creation tells us to wait. In this devotional scripture, the prophet Hosea tells Israel that it must return to God, be merciful and just and WAIT on God. God's Word tells us to "Wait on the Lord and be of good courage" (Ps. 27:14) and "They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength (Isa. 40:31).

Some of us are waiting on the Lord for a healing. Some are waiting on the Lord for the restoration of a relationship. Some are waiting on the Lord for a job. What are those things for which you are waiting? Try this. Write them down in a journal and date them. Continue to pray and study God's Word. Show mercy and promote justice. By the end of this year, check to see if God has responded to your patience. And make sure you share what you have learned from that patience. The Apostle Paul told us that patience (or endurance) produces character (Romans 5:4).

Our maturity as Christians is revealed in our ability to wait. Someone new in the faith is watching to see how you wait. God is forming you in the crucible of His "waiting room." And you know that waiting on God is NEVER waiting in vain.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to show mercy, do justly, and wait on you continuously.

— Deacon Gloria J. Ladson-Billings

## 18 | Don't Put the Cart Before the Horse.

**But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

In this scripture, Jesus is telling that there is a Kingdom and if there is a Kingdom, there is a King who rules and reigns over the Kingdom. We became part of the Kingdom of God when we accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. When we look at these words of Jesus, we know that He is telling us what to do and how to do it. It's like a prescription on a medicine bottle. It tells us what it is and how to do it. The script on the bottle also warns us what some of the side effects are if we do not follow the directions. The direction provided in Matthew 6:33 gives us our order of operation. It says seek first the Kingdom and then everything else will be added. The inference is that if we do not seek first the Kingdom then we are putting the cart before the horse.

Our problem is we reside in this world and have been trained to be responsible and independent. We want to solve our own problems using our own power and strength. Hence, we are putting the cart before the horse. We are operating in self.

God is saying, I want to be first in your life. Seek/strive after Me, do my work and imitate righteousness on earth. I know your needs and I am your provider, seek me first, trust me and then all these things shall be added unto you. God wants us to have and enjoy nice things BUT He demands to be First in our lives. He does not want us to be in love with the created thing, but he wants us to be in love with Him.

Therefore, we must change our self-reliant habits and here is how we do.

Implementation Plan: Make God a priority, schedule time with Him first thing in the morning. Pray to God and admit that you need help putting him first. Ask Him to help you in this area. Spend time in God's Word every day. Pray before you do everything. If needed, get an accountability partner.

"There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it."

— Minister Brenda Brown

## 19 | You Can Jail a Revolutionary, But You Can't Jail The Revolution.

**Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,<sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." righteousness for which we hope.**

Mark 1:14-15 (NKJV)

A Revolutionary is a person who advocates or engages in a revolution. A Revolution refers to a forcible overthrow of a government in favor of a new and improved system. Twenty-one-year-old Black Panther Party member Fred Hampton spoke the above quote just hours before his murder by the hands of the Chicago Police Department and the FBI. History is filled with the imprisonment and execution of revolutionaries.

John the Baptist was a revolutionary of a new revolution called the kingdom of God. 700 years ago, Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah, God's Anointed King, would one day come and establish God's eternal kingdom on the earth. John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord by preaching the message "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" One of the last prophetic messages John the Baptist spoke was, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

After John the Baptist was imprisoned, his ministry decreased and in turn Jesus' ministry increased. Jesus stepped on the scene continuing John's message saying, "Now is the time. The kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the good news." This was truly an exciting time! At that time, it was believed that the Messiah would overthrow the Roman government. However, unaware to the Jews the Messiah's first advent was to establish the kingdom of God within us, then during His second advent He would establish God's kingdom on earth.

Repent and believe are calls to action. Repentance is more than words. Just saying sorry and feeling bad isn't true repentance. True repentance takes place in the heart. It's from within where we decide to stop living our lives dedicated to our sins. Instead, we turn and start living our lives dedicated to our Heavenly Father. Maintaining a life of repentance is an inward and outward sign of true belief. Those who believe in God's revolutionary message are those who effect change in their own lives and then in the lives of those around them.

— Minister Billy Fletcher

## 20 | I Can Do Without It!

**There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. <sup>22</sup> I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." <sup>23</sup> So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.**

Ezra 8:21-23 (NIV)

Sheila loves coffee and everyone who knows her knows exactly how much she loves coffee. Family members and friends have given her coffee makers, coffee blends, coffee mugs, gift cards to coffee shops. Her coworkers gave her a cup that says, "No coffee no talkee". Her staff often joked with her saying, before we talk to you about this problem, have you had your coffee today? Yes, indeed Sheila loves a good cup of coffee. What is it that you enjoy as much as Sheila enjoys her cup of coffee? Can you imagine life without it? Would you believe that Sheila chose to temporarily stop drinking coffee because she needed something more than her coffee?

In our passage of Scripture, the exiles were returning to the Promised Land from captivity in Babylon. They were facing a dangerous journey where they could encounter enemies as they traveled. They understood that to succeed in this endeavor, they needed God's protection. So, they decided to fast (abstain from something enjoyable) and pray (talk to) God about it.

As we travel through this journey called life, we may face various difficulties - sickness, financial difficulties, death of loved ones, etc. We need God to help us succeed through any challenge we may face. Through fasting and prayer, we invite God to move on our behalf.

Just as Sheila abstained from coffee, have you considered abstaining from something enjoyable and talking to God about an upcoming difficulty in your life, a decision that you need to make, his plans for you? Life without coffee (the thing you love) is tough. But the absence of coffee (the thing you love) is worth the presence, power, and protection of God.

— Minister Stephanie M. Harris

## 21 | Higher Expectations.

**For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from Him.**

Psalm 62:5 (ESV)

The time is 4:45 pm, Thursday. You have fifteen minutes of work remaining before you can finally clock out for the day, go home, grab your suitcase, get to the airport, board that plane, and start that vacation you've been waiting for six months. You had been expecting to be kicking your bare toes through the sand, soaking up that good Sunlight, refreshing under God's blessings. Have you been there? Have you been expecting something that you know would bring you happiness like no other? That would provide you with the security and peace of mind you've been seeking?

That can all be found in God. David was speaking about his confidence in God being his rock and his salvation. His defender, his refuge, his glory. Whatever you are needing, it is in God. David had Higher expectations. He didn't put his faith in man, he didn't look to his armies for protection, he didn't look to his counsel for direction. All the things we expect out of people and things when it can easily be found in God.

Often, we're told not to put all our eggs in one basket, I'm here to tell you, you can give all your trust and faith in God alone. Like David did and wait and see how God will take care of you. Trust in He that can do all things, knows all things, and wants to give us the desires of our heart, only if we put our all in His capable hands. Let Him lead you, let Him guide you, let Him protect you and give you comfort.

What things are you needing to turn over to God? What is holding you back from truly trusting in Him and removing fear, and doubt.? When you turn things over to God then you will receive that which God promised us.

— **Minister Jeremiah Covington**

## 22 | I Want to Be More than Just Another Side Piece!

**Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. <sup>5</sup> Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.**

Psalm 25:4-5 (NIV)

A side piece is a man or a woman that's in an ongoing secret affair with someone who's already in a serious relationship or married. Some know that they are side pieces while many others aren't aware that they are one. Does God consider you a side piece? Do you consistently wonder, "Why doesn't God answer my prayers? Why doesn't He show up when I really need Him?" In general, these are the same types of questions a side piece asks when they don't know that they're a side piece.

If God considers any of us a side piece, it's always due to our lack of commitment to Him. King David wrote seventy-five Psalms. They reveal his prayer life and his unending devotion to the Lord. Within these two verses we see the type of relationship David desired to have with God. "Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths." God isn't visible to our natural eyes, but His presence is everywhere. David desired that God would reveal Himself so that he could learn who God is.

"Guide me in your truth and teach me." Truth doesn't originate from self. David knew that truth originated from God. Truth is a virtue that also sets God apart from all others. David wanted to experience intimacy in his relationship with God the way a child would walk hand in hand with a Parent.

Who is God to you? David believed that God was who He said He was in his life. God was his deliverer, his rescuer (his hero), his place of refuge, his source of protection, victory, and increase. Although David was the king of Israel, each and every day, all day long, David put his hopes in no one else except God.

If we desire to be considered more than just another side piece to the Lord, we need to stop treating God as if He was just another side piece. Quality time is essential for those who are in committed relationships. How much time do we spend with God by reading and studying His word? How much time do we spend maintaining Godly relationships beyond the four walls of the church? Do you want to be more than just another side piece?

— Minister Billy Fletcher

## 23 | Trust the Relationship.

**At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness,<sup>13</sup> and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.<sup>14</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.<sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"**

Mark 1:12-15 (NIV)

Many employers use a team-building exercise game to build trust among the employees. In this game a person deliberately falls, trusting the members of the group to catch them. There are several versions of the game. In one version the group stands in a circle, with one person in the middle with arms folded against his chest and falls in various directions, being pushed by the group back to a standing position before falling again.

In this pericope of scripture, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and live among the wild animals during which time he was protected by the angels. When trying to not yield to temptation it can leave you frustrated, depressed, and questioning if God still loves or cares about you.

Trust is not an easy thing and in our relationship with God trust is key, because often God gives us direction without details. Like in the trust game our faith requires us to blindly trust and lean not to our own understanding. If God brings you to it, he will see you through it.

Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you and trust that regardless of the situation or the circumstance he will protect you.

— Rev. Dr. Peggy M. Williams



## 24 | Unbreakable.

**Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to Him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" <sup>5</sup> Then the devil took Him to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup> "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup> "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left Him, and angels came and attended Him.**

Matthew 4: 1-11 (NKJV)

Temptation is a powerful seductive force which Satan uses to appeal to our desires. Giving in to this force may offer temporary fulfillment of pleasure, however, it will also cause us to betray our core values and lead to devastating consequences. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was tempted in "all points" which reveals that He was tempted with every kind of sin and to the highest, maximum degree of temptation but He never gave in. Jesus was unbreakable.

One of the awe-inspiring benefits of studying the word of God are the revelations we receive when looking deeper into the Hebrew and Greek translated words of the Bible. The word translated hungry reveals that Jesus was suffering from extreme hunger to the point that He was starving to death. Even at the ultimate point of hunger and temptation Jesus quoted scripture. The Word of God made flesh used the written word of God as the source for His survival.

After Jesus was baptized, as soon as He came out of the water the Spirit descended on Him and the Father spoke from Heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. In Matthew 4:6 for the second time Satan tempted Jesus saying, "If you are the Son of God..." Satan attacked Jesus' identity, trying to get Him to doubt who He was. Satan also attacked the word that the Father proclaimed about Him. With His reply Jesus reinforced His identity and His Lordship over Satan by saying, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God."

With the final temptation Satan displays the depths of his insanity. Satan wants God to bow down and worship him. That is the true definition of insanity! Satan tried his best, but our Lord and Savior refused to give in. Jesus is the Son of God, and He is the Son of man which means that He is a full-fledged human being like the rest of us, but He is the only human being that never gave in to temptation. Jesus was unbreakable. Finally, I leave you with this promise of victory over temptation. 1 Corinthians 10:13 NIV "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

— Minister Billy Fletcher

## 25 | What's in a Name?

**I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.**

Philippians 3:10-11 (NIV)

In the Yoruba culture in Nigeria, Togo, and Benin, presently both genders are named on the seventh day. The names of the children are traditionally found by divination performed by a group of Babalawo or traditional priests, but in recent times names can also come from those of ranking members of the family, including the father, mother, grandparents, or next of kin.

The meaning of names is important, it says a lot about your character and what you want to project to the world about you. It can be a gateway to intimacy with the person you want to get to know. The name Jesus in Hebrew means Adonai which means Lord, and Jehovah is generous. In Spanish Jesus means God will help, and in Yoruba, His name is Oruko Jesu Kristi which means the reputation of Jesus Christ. If we are to get to know who Jesus is, it can help if we get to know some of the meanings of His names of which there are many and better understand His suffering. We can experience Jesus' resurrection power in this life in the midst of every challenge because He is with us. He must be Lord and master of our lives.

In Philippians 3:10-11, Paul is letting us know our focus should be on who Jesus Christ is and to identify with His sufferings. When we focus on Jesus' names and what they mean it is a way of getting to know Him better. Throughout suffering, we can relate to Him going through it with us and that suffering is a call to getting closer to Jesus. We get to experience His resurrection power in this life to overcome every challenge joyously. In Jesus' name, there is advocacy, abundance, and resurrection power to overcome any challenges this life brings our way.

— Minister Pamela Soward

## 26 | Life in Abundance.

**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.**

John 10:10 (NIV)

In the movie Black Panther in the final scene, T'Challa and Kill Monger are fighting to the finish to see who the King of Wakanda will be. T'Challa was considered among the top intellects in the world. Using Wakanda's advanced Vibranium technology and his own abilities and fortune, he pledged his life to the service of all humankind. Killmonger was bitter due to his father being killed by His uncle Zuri because he wanted to use the Vibranium technology for his own selfish purposes. Killmonger was left in America to be in foster care due to his family not coming to claim him. Killmonger became successful to get revenge and claimed his heritage as a possible heir to the throne of Wakanda.

Killmonger tried to usurp the leadership by challenging T'Challa's leadership in ritual combat. T'Challa was the rightful heir but Killmonger came to steal, kill, and destroy. T'Challa's goal was to bring life and abundance to Wakanda. Killmonger was an enemy of the state of Wakanda and wanted only to steal, kill, and destroy. In the end, Killmonger is killed by T'Challa and T'Challa regains the throne and brings life and abundance to Wakanda and the world.

In the Book of John, Jesus reminds us that the enemy is always lurking to steal our joy, our peace, our love, our strength, and all that God has in store for us. Jesus also reminds us that He came that we might have life in abundance.

Jesus sacrificed his life for us so that we can live an abundant life with peace, love, joy, and richness as they did in Wakanda with a good king and not an evil king. Jesus has won as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

— Minister Pamela Soward

## 27 | Reunited and It Feels So Good.

**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.**

II Corinthians 5:17-19 (NIV)

The musical duo Peaches and Herb released a song titled "Reunited". Some of the lyrics are "reunited and it feels so good, reunited cause we understood, there's one perfect fit...We are both so excited because we are reunited"

The population of Corinth was diverse in ethnicity and spiritual beliefs. Paul's message of reconciliation was two-fold. First God is the author of RECONCILIATION. He reconciled us to himself through his son Jesus the Christ. Secondly, Paul wrote to promote unity among the diverse population.

Reconciliation is the act of causing two (2) people or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement. More specifically, is about reuniting with the one perfect God and his imperfect people. The fall of man resulted in a broken relationship between God and God's creation. God sent his son Jesus to restore this broken relationship. Reconciliation.

We can be excited that we are reunited with God. It is a perfect fit and that is something to rejoice about!

— Rev. Dr. Peggy M. Williams

## 28 | You Have Value.

**Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup>and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' <sup>7</sup>I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.**

Luke 15: 3 -7 (NIV)

The actions of some people may make you feel worthless. However, the actions of someone else may make you feel priceless. It is important to not forget your worth.

The Pharisees were criticizing Jesus for socializing with sinners, so Jesus told them the parable of the lost sheep. In this parable, he talks about a sheep that has strayed away from the fold. When the sheep is not under the watchful eye of the shepherd it is defenseless and in danger. In like manner, Jesus views any person apart from him as lost.

Jesus leaves the flock of ninety-nine to go get the one lost sheep. This parable teaches us that God values you so much that when you are missing, it matters so much to him that he drops everything to find you.

It doesn't matter what you have done. God loves and values you. J Moss put it this way "you loved me through my good, you loved me through my bad you didn't erase my future because of my past." Never forget that You have value.

— Rev. Dr. Peggy M. Williams

## 29 | Did They Tell You About the Troubles?

**I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.**

John 16:33 (NIV)

Do you remember when you made your public confession of faith? Do you remember walking down the aisle of the church? Do you remember the minister greeting you and welcoming you into the body of Christ and the local church family? I bet you can remember each of these things. But do you remember the minister or the deacons or other members of the church saying to you, "Welcome, you are about to experience all kinds of trouble?" I don't think you remember it because it probably didn't happen. If we greeted people with, "Now you're about to have some real trouble," I think we would lose even more new converts.

However, Jesus was not afraid to tell his followers that trouble or tribulations were certain to accompany their Christian journey. He buffeted the upcoming problems they would experience with the assurance that He had overcome the troubles of the world. Our Christian faith does not make us immune to troubles. It teaches us how to deal with those troubles in ways different from those who do not know Christ. Christians will not be exempt from the storm; we will trust God to bring us through the storm.

Do you remember when Jesus' disciples were aboard a boat with him when a storm arose (Matt. 8:23-27)? They were WITH Jesus and the storm still occurred. They grew fearful and went to Jesus who was sleeping during the storm. Jesus awoke and told the storm to calm... and it did! What we learn from this episode is that even when you are with Jesus a storm can arise. However, calling on Jesus is the way to calm that storm. In this world we will have troubles, but Jesus has overcome this world. And that's good news!

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray that I will seek you in the midst of life's troubles. Be with me always as I negotiate the storms that come my way.

— Deacon Gloria J. Ladson-Billings

## 30 | Our Mighty God Saves.

**The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.**

Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV)

To my loving child, from the moment I felt you move in my womb, I have loved you. For countless times, you kicked me in my side, at 2:00 am, stood on my bladder, causing me to run to the bathroom, and you made me physically sick with just the smell of food. I have loved you. Even after 24 hours of serious labor, I loved you. Through all the sleepless nights you kept me up because you wanted to play, I loved you. Even with your dirty diapers, the unexpected projectile from your mouth, and the constant crying, I have loved you unconditionally and you bring me so much joy. Yet, even more, is my love for you, when you express your sorrow for something that you have done, in which you know I disapprove. In the moments that you are sorry for your wrongdoings, my love for you overflows and it's renewed. There is nothing that I wouldn't do for you. But only God can save you, from yourself, and the world and His love is unconditional. To my loving child...

A Mother's love is powerful. But God's love is indescribable, for God is a warrior, and He's our shield, preserving us from our enemies attacks. Yet, He is mighty to save us, when we return to Him, from a life of sin and He no longer rebukes us. But He delights with gladness and embraces us with a loyalty that reflects a mother's love. However, God's love is relentless, for he has provided the ultimate act of loyal love, with the sacrifice of His life, His death, and His resurrection. Yes, a mother's love is unconditional, and our mothers will always be with us in spirit, and she will defend us to the end. But, God's love saves, for God is our provider, and our protector, caring for us, even when we stray from him, He triumphantly saves us. He is our omnipresent God.

Therefore, if you are caught up in this world, repent and take refuge in God, for He is our warrior, on the battlefield, defending and protecting us when we are wounded, emotionally and physically. But most importantly, remember His love, how he saves, and not once will he rebuke us when we return. But He rejoices and openly receives us. To God's loving child...

— Minister Viola J. Miller

## 31 | Ring the Alarm!

**Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand—<sup>2</sup> a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.**

Joel 2: 1-2 (NIV)

At about noon of every first Wednesday, a blaring loud sound spreads across the sky in Madison. The interruption may cause you to stop what you're doing and look to the skies in confusion. Though the sound may be piercing, there is no immediate alarm. Dane County's Emergency Management is just testing their severe weather warning sirens. They are making sure the alarms work in case of a real emergency.

Unlike Dane County Emergency Management, God doesn't need to practice. God sent His warnings through His prophets, and this time He used His prophet, Joel. He told Joel to *"Blow the trumpet of Zion and sound an alarm in My hold mountain!"* The children of Israel knew that the sound of the trumpet was meant to grab their attention and should be followed by their action. This was not a test. This warning was imminent, for the Day of the Lord was coming, and the great danger was approaching the city.

I find comfort in the fact that even though there was great trouble approaching, God was the One who sent the warning. He cared so much for His people, that He wanted them to know what was about to happen, even though they didn't commit themselves to Him as they should've. God demonstrates His love for His children in this text by looking ahead for them. Since we are also God's children, know that He loves us just the same. He looks out for us just the same. God is looking ahead for you. Though you can't always see what's coming, we serve a God who not only sees but loves us enough to tell us what we need to know.

Listen for the trumpets God is sounding in your life. He will never lead you wrong. Commit to reading His word and growing in your knowledge of God. Commit to prayer, so that you can communicate with your Creator. Take time in your day to hear God because He is speaking. We just have to be willing to listen. Severe weather is a guarantee in our lives. I'm thankful that Management will sound an alarm just for us.

— Minister Richard Jones Jr.



## 32 | Just To Be Close.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.<sup>2</sup> Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.<sup>3</sup> Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.<sup>4</sup> But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected,<sup>5</sup> "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."<sup>6</sup> He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.<sup>7</sup> "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial."<sup>8</sup> You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me."

John 12:1-8 (NIV)

President Barack Obama came to UW- Madison in 2010 and the whole city made their way to hear him speak. People stood in massive lines downtown, but I didn't want to do that. Because I was a college student, I'd learned some shortcuts around campus and a group of my friends decided to take them. We ended up sneaking into a building and sliding down the side of another, and our effort got us as close to the stage as humanly possible. Being present wasn't enough for us. We wanted to be at the president's feet.

I had to ask myself, "why was Mary pointed out in this text?" It's not that the others were doing wrong. Martha was serving and Lazarus sat at the table with Jesus being hospitable. What made her different from her siblings? I see two things: her posture and her present. Mary anointed Jesus' feet with oil and used her hair to do so. This task could only be accomplished by sitting on the floor, in a posture of humility. Martha was serving so she was standing and walking. Lazarus was sitting with Jesus, but Mary had to humble herself to the floor to accomplish her task. Second, she stood out because of her gift. Martha served food and Lazarus gave a conversation. These two things are easily returned or replaced. Mary, on the other hand, surrendered precious and expensive oil. As Judas pointed out, it could have been sold to feed the poor. 300 denarii would equal almost a year of wages. How many people could we feed with your salary right now? Mary gave something she can't get back easily, and her investment had nothing to do with the return.

Many people like to be around Jesus. They like to claim Christianity, go to church, and say churchy phrases, but few people take the time to sit at Jesus' feet. Few people give themselves to Jesus without expecting a return. Many people will sit at the table, or even do some service, but our text is showing us that it's not enough to be in the room. Our connection with Jesus is the most important. We should live our lives at Jesus' feet, spiritually. Our goal should be to get as close to Him as humanly possible.

— Minister Richard Jones Jr.

## 33 | The Lord Needs You.

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. <sup>29</sup> As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, <sup>30</sup> "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup> If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Luke 19:28-31 (NIV)

What a wonderful feeling to know that the Lord needs you. As a husband, father, son, brother, and pastor it's good to know when people need me to perform in these roles. Even if it is as small as opening a jar that seems too tight for my wife, giving words of wisdom to my children or praying with a member of the church who is experiencing tough times. Often, when individuals feel underappreciated or unwanted, they assume they are not needed, therefore, they lose their purpose causing them to quit producing, leading them to perish away. But in this narrative, we can learn a few lessons from this Colt.

1. **We must be always available to be used by Jesus:** the colt is in a place where the disciples can have access to him. The problem many encounter today is we want the blessings of God but not the burden of being available to God.
2. **We must be obedient to Jesus:** "the Lord has need of you." The fact that the colt had never been ridden and yet submitted to Jesus indicates Jesus' sovereignty over his creation. We all need to stop bucking against God. Stop telling God what you won't do, where you won't go and follow whatever the Lord is telling you.
3. **We must lift Jesus up.** There is nothing worse than showing up to a parade and you are unable to see the honoree. The colt puts Jesus in a place where the crowd can see Him. Every day, we live our lives as Christian men and women. We should focus on lifting the Savior.

The hymn writer got it right:

*"How to reach the masses, men of every birth, for an answer, Jesus gave the key: "and I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." Lift him up, still he speaks from eternity: "and I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."*

— Rev. Dr. Marcus Allen

34 | **The Good News in the Bad News.**

**When the hour came, Jesus and His apostles reclined at the table. <sup>15</sup> And He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." <sup>17</sup> After taking the cup, He gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. <sup>18</sup> For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." <sup>19</sup> And He took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." <sup>20</sup> In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. <sup>21</sup> But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. <sup>22</sup> The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!" <sup>23</sup> They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.**

Luke 22:14-22 (NIV)

In *The Wiz*, Evillene warns all the workers in her sweatshop: "If we're going to be buddies, Better bone up on the rules, 'cause don't nobody bring me no bad news". Much like Evillene no one wants to receive bad news. Yet sometimes, there is a silver lining in the bad news. The silver lining in a losing season for a professional sports team is priority in the upcoming year's draft. COVID-19 has presented us with many challenges, but it also has provided some benefits. In 2020, COVID was credited with reducing the carbon footprint. Similarly, the initial social distancing mandates allowed families to spend more time together and many parents who became temporary 'teachers' probably gained a newfound appreciation for educators.

Jesus and the disciples are celebrating the Passover, a time set aside to reflect on God's past deliverance. Amid the joyous moment, Jesus shares the sad news of His upcoming suffering and betrayal. Yet, his betrayal and suffering are necessary for the new covenant where Christ is the ultimate sin sacrifice.

I imagine that as the group of disciples were wondering who would betray Jesus, they also wondered how someone could choose to betray a friend. On the surface, both Judas' betrayal and Jesus' death sound like bad decisions. However, both decisions had a positive impact - the opportunity for eternal life for everyone.

Bad news is hard to accept. It is even harder to find something good in the bad news. The broken bread and the cup symbolized the upcoming horrific death of Jesus. We know the death was followed by a mighty resurrection. Upon reflection on receiving some bad news, can you find a silver lining?

— Minister Stephanie M. Harris

## 35 | You're Still My Friend.

**While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. <sup>48</sup>Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." <sup>49</sup>Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. <sup>50</sup>Jesus replied, "Do what you came for, friend." Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested Him.**

Matthew 26:47-50 (NIV)

Betrayal may just be one of the toughest pills to swallow. When I was a teenager, I would run home after school just to watch the Maury Povich talk show. Maury will often bring couples on the show who are unsure if the baby belongs to the father. They would talk about the history of the relationship and at the end of the conversation, Maury would state these words: "When it comes to four-year-old Johnny you are NOT the father." These words reveal betrayal. The person they assumed they were in a committed relationship has betrayed the other's trust and love.

Betrayal can be a traumatic event with life-altering changes. Causing the offended to experience loss and grief, anger, or damaged self-esteem.

However, we see Jesus handle the kiss of betrayal with confidence and assurance that what Judas did could not prevent Jesus from completing his purpose for coming to earth. Jesus being fully aware of the betrayal does not attempt to stop Judas, but he calls him a friend.

This is one of the most interesting portions of the crucifixion story. Jesus still considers Judas as a friend even after his betrayal that would cost Jesus his life. Let's not judge Judas too soon, because many of us have betrayed Jesus when we commit sins that we know are wrong. But we can stay connected to Christ as a friend because of his grace.

Don't allow your betrayal to be your demise. Repent, return and try it again. Jesus still considers you to be his friend.

— Rev. Dr. Marcus Allen

## 36 | Crossing Paths with Christ.

**Pilate answered and said to them again, "What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?"<sup>13</sup> So they cried out again, "Crucify Him!"**

Mark 15:12-13 (NKJV)

When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for their time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for their performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for their long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, unable to win a prize, and deserves no award—yet receives what they don't deserve—that is a perfect picture of God's amazing grace.

Barabbas is guilty of all crimes he had committed but he is set free because Jesus takes his place and gives him grace. The place where Barabbas was in prison was about 2000 feet away from where Jesus was on trial. Pilate asked the crowd, "Who do you want Jesus or Barabbas?" All the people gathered that day were demanding punishment – not on the one who was a robber but the one who was a giver.

In a dark jail cell, Barabbas who was a convicted criminal hears only the words of the crowd: Pilate asked them again, "Which man do you want me to release?" The crowd shouts Barabbas." Pilate says, "What shall I do with Jesus?" The crowd shouts, "Crucify Him!"

From what Barabbas can hear he may think he is about to be crucified because all he hears is Barabbas! Barabbas! Crucify him! Crucify him!

Barabbas is at the point when he realizes that his life is over. He drops his head in disbelief to what is about to happen to him; however, someone comes with the keys to the jail cell, unchains him and sets him free, telling him, "Jesus is taking your place."

Can you imagine the emotions Barabbas experienced? The excitement for being free but the concern for the man who took his place. Can you imagine the look of disbelief on the face of Barabbas as he exited his cell wondering what just happened?

Today Barabbas proves to us the effects of what happens when the path of a murderer and the messiah crosses. He showed us the benefits of the sinner crossing paths with the Savior.

Barabbas shows us that when we cross paths with Christ, He will exempt us from the chains of sin and exchange our punishment with paradise.

— Rev. Dr. Marcus Allen

## 37 | A Deceptive Gift.

**The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. <sup>17</sup> They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. <sup>18</sup> And they began to call out to Him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" <sup>19</sup> Again and again, they struck Him on the head with a staff and spit on Him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to Him. <sup>20</sup> And when they had mocked Him, they took off the purple robe and put His own clothes on him. Then they led Him out to crucify Him.**

Mark 15:16-20 (NIV)

During the holiday season, I saw a video of a young man opening a Christmas gift. He unwrapped a box to see in big, black letters, "PS5". He was so excited to get the newest PlayStation that his hands were shaking, and his teeth were clenched together. Also excited, his parents encouraged him to open the box. Instead of finding a game console, he unpleasantly found textbooks instead. His father said boldly, "Oh you thought you could bring home F's and think you deserved a PS5?! You better get to them books buddy!" The boy was clearly devastated. The box was there, but the gift was deceptive.

We see deceptive gifts here in our scripture for the day. Jesus was arrested, convicted, and sent to be crucified. What were His charges? Being a self-proclaimed Christ and "King of the Jews". When Jesus is turned over to the soldiers, they take advantage of the presented opportunity. They beat Jesus out of obligation, but they mocked Him for sheer enjoyment. The soldiers dressed Him in purple, a color of royalty, and gave Him a crown of thorns. After physically dressing Jesus as a lowly king, the soldiers mockingly worshiped Him while simultaneously injuring Him. They took worship, the only gift we can give to God, and used it to taunt Him. They got on their knees, they gave Him worship, they called Him King, but the gifts they gave were deceptive.

Though we won't physically harm Jesus, we must be careful not to offer Him deceptive gifts or worship. Genuine worship comes from sincerity, Spirit, and truth. It must be more than performance. We can say the "right" things and not mean them in our hearts. We can harmonize with the praise team, do our fanciest footwork during a worship service, and have it mean nothing. God has given us so much, and because of it, we owe Him true worship. It's the only thing we can give back to Him. Anything less is a mockery.

I encourage you to examine yourself, and only yourself. Ask yourself if you ever act a certain way because those around you expect you to act like a Christian? Do you ever give God praise at church out of routine, or because you are truly grateful? Does the gift inside match the box you've presented it in? God deserves genuine worship, and we should be the ones giving it to Him.

— Minister Richard Jones Jr.

## 38 | Creation Mourns the Death of Its Creator.

**It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,<sup>45</sup> for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.<sup>46</sup> Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When He had said this, He breathed his last.**

Luke 23: 44-46 (NIV)

During the fourth day of creation, God created the sun, the moon, and the stars which also includes the other planets. We use the sun and the moon to mark days, nights, seasons, and years. For the most part we use the stars and other planets simply for stargazing. However, God's original purpose of these celestial bodies was that they would be used as signs. God uses the stars and the planets as a source to display His supernatural hand at work, affecting the natural world in ways which science and reason cannot explain.

"Darkness came over the whole land...for the sun stopped shining." Some assume this was an eclipse but scientifically speaking this was not possible. An eclipse takes place when the moon is between the earth and the sun, blocking the sun's light to the earth. During Passover, at noon the moon was on the backside of the earth which means there was nothing celestially speaking that blocked the sun's light to the earth. Therefore, calling this darkness the result of an eclipse was absolutely false. Christian philosophers and scholars during the first, second, and third centuries agree that this darkness was a mystery that could only point to a celestial miracle.

When it comes to the veil, the dimensions were thirty feet high, thirty feet long, and thirty feet wide. The veil was created to separate the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. This was where God talked with the priest. If the priest didn't follow all the steps to purify himself before entering behind the veil, God's presence would have killed him. The ripping of the veil symbolized that the very presence of God Almighty was now available to all by the death of His Son.

Finally, at the point of breathing His last breath, Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." How many of us would have stayed committed to God amid betrayal, false accusations, verbal and physical insults, His own people yelling for our execution, get beaten almost to death, carry the instrument of your execution for half a mile; suffer on a cross bearing the sins of the world, though you were completely innocent? Would you have been able to stay committed to God even with your last breath?

— Minister Billy Fletcher

## 39 | Give Me Jesus.

Now behold, there was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. <sup>51</sup> He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God. <sup>52</sup> This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>53</sup> Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before. <sup>54</sup> That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near. <sup>55</sup> And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. <sup>56</sup> Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.

Luke 23:50-56 (NKJV)

Jesus has completed his mission. He has endured the shame and the humiliation of the cross. The cross is the climax of the redemption story. It's the cross that represents victory in death. It's the cross that reminds us of a gruesome murder scene of an innocent man who was willing to be the ultimate sacrifice for humanity.

The evening has now come. Jesus is dead. However, the custom of Romans was to leave the bodies on the cross and allow the birds and wild animals to devour them. But Luke introduces us to a rich man named Joseph who had become a disciple of Jesus. He goes to Pilate and requests the body of Jesus.

Joseph was a part of the Sanhedrin council that found Jesus guilty and demanded that he be crucified. He was rich so he could have commanded his servants to go get Jesus, but he goes himself and demands; **GIVE ME JESUS!**

Joseph says, "**GIVE ME JESUS!**" Joseph could have done whatever he wanted but he wanted Jesus. Joseph proves to us that if you don't have Jesus, money doesn't mean a thing. You can live in the biggest house, drive the best car, and wear the most expensive clothing but if you don't have Jesus, it means nothing. **GIVE ME JESUS.**

When you know that it was Jesus who changed your life, you will want Jesus more than anything. When you realize that it was Jesus who picked you up out of the pit, healed your sick body, kept you when you lost a loved one, kept you from losing your mind, woke you up this morning, started you on your way, and gave you health and strength, you will testify, "I don't need anything else, just **GIVE ME JESUS!**"

If I can get Jesus, I know I will have peace, joy, happiness, and deliverance. I'd rather have Jesus. **GIVE ME JESUS!**

— Rev. Dr. Marcus Allen



## 40 | Hope in the Empty Tomb.

Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. <sup>2</sup> But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. <sup>3</sup> Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. <sup>4</sup> And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. <sup>5</sup> Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup> He is not here, but is risen!

Luke 24: 1-6 (NKJV)

A book, titled "Left Alone" by Dr. Ralph West tells a story that gives us hope for this season of emptiness in which we are living.

During World War II, hundreds of thousands of people lived with the daily threat of starvation, a single mother was left alone to provide for her children. The meals were small, the food was thin, and the children lived on the edge. Sensing their anxiety, the mother placed a tin box on top of the family icebox. Many times, she pointed to the box and told the children, "If worse comes to worst, we can always open the box." The little children were too short to reach the box, but they always wondered what was in the box.

After the war, the oldest son brought everyone together when their mother had passed. They gathered around the icebox once again, looking at the ancient tin breadbox. As the son opened the box, he passed it to the others. Each one saw that the tin box was empty. Their mother had pointed to an empty box to give them hope. Today we are pointing to the empty grave to give us hope.

Like these children, we must confront the empty aspects of our faith. We face an empty altar, an empty cross, and an empty tomb.

Our hope is not in empty promises. Instead of empty altars, we struggle against empty homes, some of us are challenged with empty bank accounts and live with what seems like empty hearts. Instead of empty tombs we daily live with empty futures and empty plans.

Though currently, things may be empty, I am confident that God can fill empty spaces. He filled Abraham's altar with a ram. He filled the widow's jar with oil, he filled the stone pots of water with wine, he filled the 5000 with two fish and five loaves, he filled the children of Israel with manna from heaven. And though things may be empty now, thank God, he can give us hope in empty areas of life.

As the Black Baptist preacher often declares, "Early!" Sunday morning, He got up with all power in His hands!

— Rev. Dr. Marcus Allen