

March 27 | John 11:32-35

Read

“When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep.”

Reflect

After denial and anger, the third “stage” of grief is bargaining. I write “stage” in quotation marks because emotions do not follow a linear path. One might ebb and flow throughout the stages after a loss. We “bargain” with death because it is hard to comprehend. Especially when it is unexpected, or we believe it could have been prevented. One moment, your loved one is here. You feel hopeful, or even certain, you will have many more days with them. The death moment is disorienting, sad, and confusing.

As a CPE intern on the Neuro unit, I have seen how unexpectedly death can approach. During my first semester on the unit, I encountered a young mom having unexplained seizures. Her husband sat by her side as the medical team poked, prodded, and tested. I saw the patient twice. We had conversations about her faith, family, and career. After a vacation, I returned to the floor and was immediately referred to her room. Expecting she might be having a bad morning, I was surprised to find her in a terminal condition, her husband still faithfully by her side. He was blindsided and couldn’t stop wondering what could have gone differently.

I imagine he felt a lot like Mary.

And unlike Jesus, all I could do was be there while he wept. But sometimes, that’s the most sacred thing.

Though it can be tempting to try and “bargain” with reality in the hopes of changing it, Mary and Jesus show us the importance of simply coming to see the pain. The power of allowing yourself, before trying to rationalize a situation far out of our own hands, to simply feel. To weep without restraint. Because our grief is only ever a product of our love.

Recenter

Release: *Breathe in: Because I love boldly, I feel deeply about things I cannot change.
Breathe out: Even though it may feel too late, I continue to love.
Breathe in: I am here.
Breathe out: I will weep.*

Author Bio

Rev. Mallory Challis is a third-year divinity student at Wake Forest Divinity School and served as First on Fifth’s pastoral intern during the summer of 2024.

March 28 | John 11:43b-45

Read

“Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”

Reflect

The miracles in the Gospel of John are called “signs” by the gospel writer. They point the way to an abundant and eternal life. There are seven signs in John, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead in John 11 is the final climactic sign. It points to the future resurrection of Jesus. Of course, the people gathered around that tomb did not know it yet, but later they will look back and understand what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the resurrection and the life” shortly before those powerful words “Lazarus, come out!”

The first sign in the Gospel of John was in Chapter 2 when Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. There is something to notice in each of these miracles. Jesus involved other people in the wondrous act. In John 2 he instructed those who were standing near to fill up six large jars with water before he then turned that water into wine.

In John 11, he told the people standing by the tomb to “unbind him, and let him go.” Think about that. Don’t you think that the one who had the power to turn water into wine also had the power to get some water into the jars? Or, even more so, could not the one with the power to raise Lazarus from the dead have made the grave-clothes disappear at the same time?

In both miracles, the first and the last performed by Jesus in the Gospel of John, Jesus chose to involve others in the working of the miracle. He did not have to – he chose to.

The season of Lent reminds us that the power comes from God. This holy season also teaches us to listen for the opportunities to join in God’s work of love. Jesus is always inviting us into this holy work of unbinding others and setting them free.

Recenter

Retune: Pray: Loving God, tune my heart to be aware of your powerful work of love in our world. Tune my ears to hear your invitation for me to join in this work with you. Amen.

Author Bio

David Hull is a retired pastor who is married to Jane.



March 29 | Palm Sunday | Matthew 21:8-10

Read

"A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

Reflect

In May of 2013, I was walking on the ancient, steep path descending from the Mount of Olives heading toward the city of Jerusalem, specifically to the Eastern Gate. This path is known as the Palm Sunday road, the same path Jesus walked and saw the crowds spreading their cloaks and waving palm branches. I tried to imagine the excitement people must have felt as they lined that road, watching Jesus pass by them.

As Jesus walked that road on Palm Sunday, it was a moment of great expectation for the people as they wondered what kind of king Jesus would be. People began asking the question that perhaps sits at the very heart of Lent - "Who is this?" The people cheering for Jesus believed they understood who he was - a king, a deliverer, perhaps even the one who would change their immediate circumstances. Their praise was loud, visible, and passionate. Yet within days, many of those same voices would fall silent or turn away. Their expectations of Jesus did not match the deeper reality of his mission.

The question of "who is Jesus?" is one that calls us to reflect on who we expect Jesus to be in our lives. It's easy to cheer and celebrate when we think Jesus will meet our expectations. The greater calling for us is to celebrate Jesus even when we follow him to the harder and uncertain places. The places that take us out of our comfort zones, places that push us to think beyond self, places where we may not ever know the answers.

Recenter

Reflect: How are you celebrating and honoring Jesus in your life? Are you willing to continue celebrating Jesus even when you are uncertain about where Jesus is leading you? Who is Jesus for you?

Author Bio

Amy McClure is the Associate Pastor for Children, Older Adults, and Pastoral Care at First Baptist Church on Fifth. She loves good theological conversations with others, especially when it involves coffee and cinnamon rolls.

March 30 | Psalm 36:5-7

Read

“Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.”

Reflect

Take a moment today and go outside. When you get outside, look up and spend a minute trying to comprehend just how far the heavens are away from us! God’s love goes from earth to the heavens! These verses tell us that God’s love is boundless and steadfast! His love isn’t dependent on what we have or haven’t done but is always extended to each of us!

I love animals, especially dogs and cats! There’s just nothing like coming home after a tough day to the sight of a dog wagging its tail with excitement at the sight of you! They are just thrilled to see “their person”! I often think of God’s love when I am greeted with that excitement because God offers His love so freely and is so excited when we spend time with Him! As I read verse 6, I’m inclined to think that God would enjoy having a dog to greet Him also! Okay, maybe that’s a stretch but I’ll just leave it to you to decide.

Maybe for you, life has been extremely challenging lately. All sorts of challenges touch our lives or the lives of ones we love and sometimes, even the strongest of us get tired. I would encourage you to post these verses somewhere you will see them throughout the day because God offers us tremendous love and protection in these verses. He promises us to be steadfast and faithful as He provides refuge when we need to rest.

Recenter

Receive: Creator of Love and most faithful God, I thank you for your steadfast love which you share freely with us! I thank you that your love and faithfulness are not dependent on anything we can do but are always present for us to receive!

Loving God, help us to rest and take refuge in you as we feel tired, challenged and just out of sorts! Give us the strength to realize we need you as we go about our lives and give us the strength to accept your strength!

Author Bio

Kim Wilkinson is a retired elementary teacher and is currently pursuing a Master of Divinity degree at Campbell University with plans of working in the ministry of chaplaincy.

March 31 | 1 Corinthians 1:18-20

Read

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

Reflect

Fanny Lou Hamer was born in Montgomery County, Mississippi, the daughter of sharecroppers. She tirelessly fought her entire life for civil rights, human dignity, and for the right to vote for blacks in an era seething with racism and white supremacy. Her own life was marked by so many losses and violence, including being subjected by a white doctor to a hysterectomy without her consent, and the tragic death of her 22-year-old daughter, who, because of her skin color, was denied admission to the local hospital following internal hemorrhaging. Fanny Lou Hamer was shot at by the Ku Klux Klan, fired from her job for seeking the right to vote, imprisoned more than once, and beaten with a billy club and sexually assaulted by police. Despite these injustices, nothing stopped her from marching and advocating for freedom and seeking the right to vote. “Sometimes,” she proclaimed, “it seems like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed. But if I fall, I’ll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom. I’m not backing off.”

Fanny Lou Hamer grew up in a black Baptist church and attended Sunday School. There she read the Scriptures. I have no doubt that she experienced Paul’s words in our passage as formative. Her life bears witness to the truth of Paul’s “message about the cross.”

And what was that message of the cross? Conventional wisdom might assume the cross to be an obvious and predictable consequence of Jesus’ bold prophetic preaching. You disturb the status quo, and you get what you deserve. You asked for it. Serves you right. The lesson: be wise, lay low and don’t cause trouble. Yet for Paul, the message of the cross is power; that life’s most painful, agonizing and unbearable experiences, even death itself, cannot be the last word. The cross reminds us that in those experiences, a spiritual strength emerges that propels us forward as witnesses of God’s power and truth. Good Friday in all its devastation, bestows soulful significance to the joy of Easter.

Recenter

Remember: Take a few moments to reflect on those individuals you know who had every reason to give in, give up, and in the words of Fanny Lou Hamer, “back off.” How has their courage in the face of pain, loss, and defeat inspired your own faith and awareness of God’s power?

Author Bio

Scott Hudgins is co-chair of the Adult Ministry team and has been a member along with his spouse, Mary Foskett, since 1998.

April 1 | Hebrews 12:1-3

Read

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Reflect

In these verses of Hebrews we are welcomed to be Christ-like and to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Life is described here as a race and it is requested of us to "run the race" of life in the way of Christ. Likewise, we are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." It is difficult to know exactly how to consider this cloud.

Should we interpret it as needing to remember that we are always being watched and we need to be wary of that? So as not to mess up and bring a bad name upon ourselves and our community? Or rather is it a reminder that we will always be seen? That we are never alone?

I have throughout my life heard this verse many times and this cloud of witnesses is often described as being those that have come before us, but might it also be those that surround us today? In the hustle and bustle of our lives today, and the expectations placed on us by society, it is easy to feel alone and to forget that we are not alone.

We are led to believe by society that we have to hide parts of ourselves and not let those parts be seen, this can be incredibly taxing. God, however, knows us better than anyone, even ourselves. We cannot hide any parts of ourselves from God and he loves us just as we are. He wants us to love each other in that same way, to be able to be our authentic selves with each other, be loved just as we are, and be seen by the incredibly great crowd of witnesses that surrounds us in our everyday lives. He knows that this makes the race of life easier, when you are seen by those around you and share the burdens of the race.

Recenter

Reclaim: God, help me to love, unconditionally, all those who surround me every day, and support them to come as themselves while bringing forward my best, true, authentic self.

Author Bio

Kara Parker is a high school student and daughter of Robert and Meredith Parker.

April 2 | Maundy Thursday | John 13:34-35

Read

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Reflect

The narrative arc of the Last Supper in John is truly remarkable: first is this radical act of de-centering hospitality when Jesus washes the feet of others. *Do as I do*, he tells them, as the guest of honor bends his knee to serve as host. Then Jesus gives a piece of bread to Judas, knowing Judas will betray him hours later. *Do what you are going to do*, he says to Judas/Satan who leaves to betray him. Finally, Jesus gives the new commandment to those who remain: love one another. *Do as I do*, he says again.

Hospitality requires at least two people: guest and host. So does betrayal: the betrayed and the betrayer. In a world where both possibilities exist, Jesus tells us to choose love, to offer communion and hospitality to each other for that will survive after we are gone.

A century ago, the First on Fifth congregants pledged to bring Jesus' love downtown to Fifth Street. We have seen through our 100th Anniversary celebrations and the ongoing work of the Community Engagement Ministry team how that love has shaped our Christian identity and the missions that have grown out of our church. Of course, we are not immune to relationships that fracture, betrayals felt deeply within and beyond our beloved community. But if we hold fast to Jesus' commandment to love each other, even after hurt happens, then we are giving future generations of First on Fifth-ers a legacy of being known as radically hospitable lovers of Jesus.

Recenter

Reach: *"When the gentleness between you hardens,
and you fall out of your belonging with each other,
May the depths you have reached hold you still.*

*Reach out with sure hands
to take the chalice of your love,
And carry it carefully through this echoless waste
until this winter pilgrimage leads you
toward the gateway to spring."*

—Excerpts from "For Love in a Time of Conflict," John O'Donohue

Author Bio

Bethany Leggett is a member at First on Fifth, where she was ordained as a minister and currently serves as deacon, co-leader of the Community Engagement Ministry team, team member of the 100th Anniversary task force (and a few other things that she simply couldn't say no to).

April 3 | Good Friday | Psalm 22:1-2

Read

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.”*

Reflect

Have you ever been in a truly dark place? A time when you could not see the next step in front of you? An unexpected diagnosis. The death of a spouse. The loss of a job. The ultimate darkness—and we all reach it eventually—is death. When Jesus found himself in just such a dark place, he called to mind a verse from Psalm 22. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As a devout Jew Jesus would have known this scripture. Perhaps he would have memorized it, holding it in his heart for just such a time as the darkness of the cross. The psalms give us a vocabulary when words are difficult to come by. The writers showed us how to be honest with our feelings and to never fear expressing the full range of human emotions—even with God.

When St. John of the Cross wrote his famous poem, *The Dark Night*, he had been imprisoned by his religious superiors for daring to call his order back to simplicity, piety, and service. For taking this stand he was locked in a closet cell for nine months, much of the time spent in darkness. *The Dark Night* was birthed in that prison cell. He wrote, “there was no light or guide other than the one that burned in my heart. This light guided me more surely than the light of noonday.” Sometimes we meet a darkness that is so pervasive that we can only go to the heart for light.

The verse which follows our scripture lesson (verse 3) begins with “Yet...” Even after expressing painful feelings of abandonment, the psalmist can’t leave it there. “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.” Perhaps Jesus remembered those words as well. Abandonment is never the final word. In the darkness sometimes there is only the light of the heart. And that is enough.

Recenter

Recall: *Memorize a single verse or phrase of this psalm or some other scripture to hold close for the time when your own words fail you.*

Author Bio

David Williamson is a beginner mystic in his 29th year of ministry at First Baptist Church as Associate Pastor for Worship, Arts, and Administration.

April 4 | Holy Saturday | Matthew 27:57-61

Read

“As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.”

Reflect

We’ve traveled through the Lenten wilderness and now all is still. What we had hoped would not, once again, come to pass, did. Death lingers in the air. We encounter the mourning stillness of Holy Saturday. If you have ever sat through those hours, minutes, days, and weeks, after the death of a loved one, what do you remember? It’s often as if time warps and waves, dragging on and then speeding up, days go by quickly, yet it seems like minutes last for hours. It is disorienting, and, often, so quiet. When those we love slip into the Mystery, there is often just the profound space – open, unfilled, new – and we aren’t quite sure what to do with it.

In a world where there are such grand injustices, such hurt and heartache, and all manner of experiences necessitating lament, from the broadest sphere to the most personal of despairs, Holy Saturday offers us space to acknowledge the missing pieces, to hold space for the empty seats at our tables, to lament the death and distance from those we wish were near, and to speak honestly about the uncertainty of how to go on living when our friends, our family, our neighbors, our loves, indeed even our God, have died. This is the night where we walk with Joseph of Arimathea as he buries Jesus, and we hold vigil as Mary and Mary Magdalene hold vigil outside the tomb. We travel into the night, hoping against hope that the morning light will soon turn darkness to dawn as the echoes from Ash Wednesday break our hearts and comfort us all at the same time, “from dust we are and to dust we shall return.”

Recenter

Remove: Offer yourself 5 minutes of silent meditation. Holding space without the need to fill it up with distractions. End your time of silence with this prayer: “God of life and death, we wait with you in the darkness of this day. Stay with us, even now, and guide us toward the dawn of tomorrow. Amen”

Author Bio

Olena Withrow is a lover of Dr. Pepper, her dog, Howie, traveling with her husband, Devin, and life at large. She serves as Pastoral Resident, Communications Manager, and Ministry Assistant at First Baptist on Fifth.

April 5 | Easter Sunday | Matthew 28:5-7

Read

“But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.”

Reflect

Writer Malcolm Gladwell says a *puzzle* is something that can be solved with more knowledge or information. But a *mystery* can't be worked out, no matter all the resources one has. “Mystery,” writes Gladwell, “requires judgment and assessment of uncertainties.” The story of Jesus is, finally and fully, the story of new life, one to be entered into like the deep dawn of mystery that stirs every sense in our body, every synapse of our spirits, every corner of our hearts. For it is a mystery that begins in uncertainty.

Each of the gospels has their own take on the resurrection story. Matthew says that the women were moving “quickly with fear and great joy.” Mark tells us they fled from the tomb, “for terror and amazement had seized them.” Of all the disciples, Luke remembers that “while in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering.” And John tells of Mary who weeps and rejoices. Among their differences, common themes anchor the Easter story: running and weeping, confusion and disbelief, fear and great joy, things beautiful and terrible, darkness and light, end and beginning, *mystery* at its most fundamental level.

For Jesus's followers, when he died, so did their hope. But in light of an empty tomb and a risen Christ, that hope is no longer dead. Fear is no longer the final word. Indeed, the mystery of resurrection is alive anywhere that people love God, love neighbors, and love self; anywhere that the thirsty are given water and the naked are given clothes; anywhere that the oppressed are liberated and all live within the Lord's favor; anywhere that sons and daughters prophesy, where the young see visions and the elders dream dreams; anywhere the barriers and dividing walls of hostility are broken down between us, for all are one in Christ Jesus; anywhere that freedom sets us free; anywhere that Love is made flesh, again and again and again. On Easter hope, the late preacher William Sloane Coffin said this: “The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death.” Oh what mystery! Oh what hope!

Recenter

Revel: *Inspired by the mystery of Easter, practice pondering a mystery that you can't solve, look up, or fix. What does it teach you about your place and posture in the world? Where does it bring you hope?*

Author Bio

Emily Hull McGee serves as pastor of our beloved community at First Baptist on Fifth, mom to Liam, Annabelle, and Silas, wife to Josh, and seeks to cultivate delight each day.