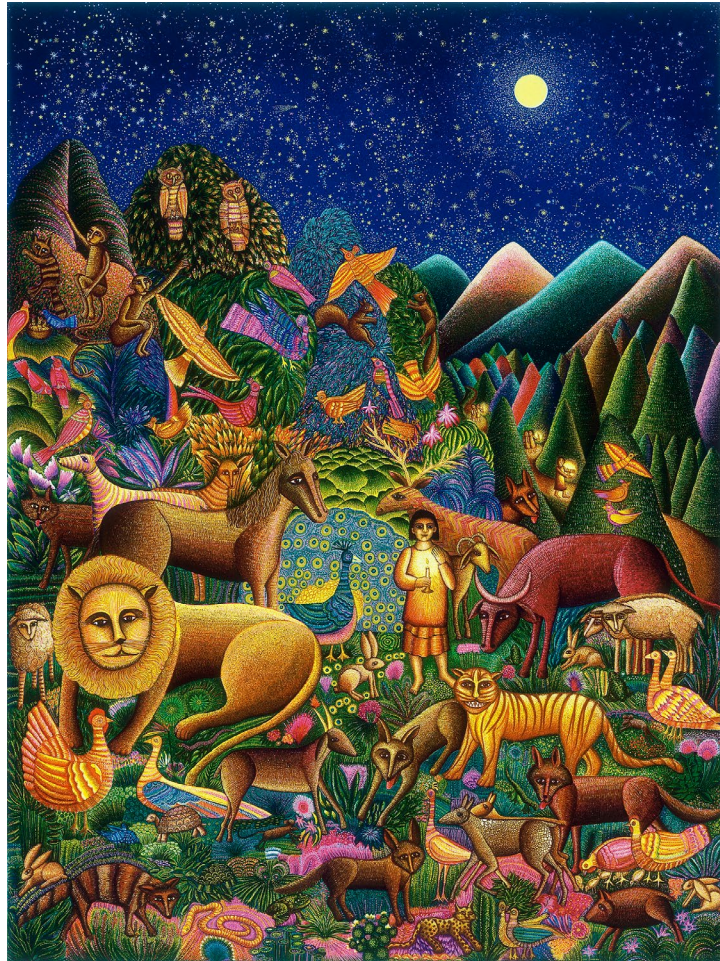


# 2024 Lenten Devotional

BRYN MAWR PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

KINDNESS AND TRUTH SHALL MEET



Peaceable Kingdom © 2023 John August Swanson | Eyekons

John August Swanson, born in 1938, is an American artist celebrated for his vibrant and intricate works that blend faith, culture, and social issues. Renowned for his mastery of serigraphy, Swanson's art reflects a deep commitment to justice and compassion. Inspired by his Mexican heritage and a diverse range of influences, his paintings and prints have been exhibited globally. Swanson's unique ability to convey profound messages through visually stunning compositions has established him as a respected figure in the contemporary art world.

**Cover Image:** *Psalm 85* © 2023 John August Swanson | Eyekons

It was not uncommon in the history of Christian worship for the Ten Commandments to be included in the weekly liturgy of the community gathered. Just as worshipers would recite the Apostle's Creed and pray the Lord's Prayer in unison, they would also stand and speak together the Ten Commandments, often adjacent to the confession. These early church worship traditions developed when most Christians were illiterate, so repetition of the faith, the essential prayer, and the law of God was an effective way to teach the people in the pews the basics of Christianity.

For the generations of Presbyterians who were taught the faith through the Westminster Catechism, there are 43 separate questions and answers that students were expected to memorize, helping them to not just know but understand the significance of the Ten Commandments. My favorite is question 82, which is honest and blunt in its assessment of our capacity to follow God's laws:

**Q. 82. Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?**

**A. No mere man, since the Fall, is able, in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them, in thought, word, and deed.**

This Lenten season 2024, we will spend our days hopefully not reflecting on all of our inability to keep the commandments of God but instead on the ways that the laws of God, Specifically found in the Ten Commandments, point us toward a higher calling, a stronger community, and a more faithful devotion to our God.

In this devotional, you will find reflections from staff, pastors, church members, and youth considering not just a particular portion of the commandments but the ways that the life and teachings of Jesus served as an embodiment of faithfulness to God's laws.

As we all walk the path of Lent towards Holy Week together, may our collective reflections in this devotional, in our common worship life, and in our classes and conversations guide us in every way to love God more fully and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In the Peace of Christ,

The Rev. Rebecca Kirkpatrick  
Associate Pastor for Adult Education and Mission

### Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Thursday, February 15

I am very thankful to be with the Pre-K and Kindergarten class every Sunday morning in the Worship Center in the education building. When we teach the 10 Commandments, they are called the 10 Best Ways to Live. These commandments are divided up into the four laws about how we love God and the six laws about how we love others. We have these laws because God loves us. These laws form a heart because that is where we keep them. We learned about how the 10 best ways to live used to be kept in a beautiful ark, but they are now written in our hearts and are with us at all times and in all places. This is the simple and concrete way that we “teach” this lesson to our little ones. Many of the children in the worship center do not read yet – simple visuals help them to learn and to anchor the story into their memory and heart. Our children do “read” our lives and actions. The way that we show love to God and to others in our lives and actions is what consistently teaches and reinforces this lesson. God does love us so much that he gave us the 10 Best Ways to Live to help us to know how to live a good life and follow him. The story does not end there. God then sent his only begotten Son. That is the biggest gift of all. How do we respond to a God who loves us so much to send these gifts to us? We receive them, we try to follow them, we live them, we teach them, we are thankful for them, and we share them with one another. May we always keep these gifts forever in our hearts.

~ Kiki McKendrick



## DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9

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Friday, February 16

When our son Owen was becoming a teenager, we had the same conversations many parents and children have about what he was wearing and how he was presenting himself to the world. To be clear Owen was dressed exactly the same as his classmates, and he would often tell me that he was dressed more tidily than many of them. It was a classic struggle between a parent who has given up the strict control of the daily decisions of their child's life and a child who is trying to find and articulate how they want to present themselves to the world. It is an age-old dilemma, ancient, in fact.

I would often try to persuade Owen to look a little less disheveled and a little more pulled together, by arguing that I was worried that anyone who saw him in the world would think that he was unloved. For sure this was my attempt at emotional manipulation, but it genuinely represented my love for him. I wanted the world to know that he was cared for, provided for, that there were people in his life who noticed the frayed cuff of his beloved hoodie, or the bedhead that didn't quite find a comb that morning.

Love is a complicated thing, and the ways that we demonstrate it to others are just as complicated.

In this passage in Deuteronomy, God and his beloved people are in a similar struggle. It is the struggle to demonstrate love and devotion in a relationship that allows in an element of freedom, of choice, of self-expression. God instructs the people to be devoted, to love him with all that they are. God expects that the ways they live their lives will be visible expressions of that love so that the world knows that they are committed to this kind of loving covenant, that they have made the choice to love. They don't show it in their neatly pressed shirt, or their combed hair, but by inscribing God's words on the most valuable parts of their lives – their homes, their bodies, their gates, and especially their children.

What if this is how we always understood the laws of God – not as rules to get right so that we can be right with God, but as ways to demonstrate our love for God to the world? God has bound himself to us in love and asks us to choose to offer not just our love in return, but a love enacted in the world so that no one doubts that we are beloved children of God.

~ The Rev. Rebecca Kirkpatrick, Associate Pastor for Adult Education and Mission

## DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9

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Saturday, February 17

The Shema (which means Hear!) is God's commandment through Moses to his people just before they entered the Promised Land. Moses wasn't crossing over with them and he wanted to impress upon them the importance of loving God with all your heart, soul, and might. In his exhortation, he said do everything you can to remember to love God always. He was creative and thorough with his instructions, saying, "Keep these words in your heart, recite them to your children, talk about them with each other, bind them to your hand, fix them to your forehead, and write them on your doorposts and gates."

Moses knew firsthand how the people could turn away from God and forget him. Remember how he went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, and when he returned, the people had built a golden calf. After all they had seen of God at the Exodus and in the wilderness, they foolishly turned away. Hard to believe, but aren't we a little like them sometimes? Here, in Deuteronomy, knowing the human tendency to wander, Moses is emphatic in encouraging his people to remember to love God.

Here love means a sense of loyalty of action toward God and more than a mere emotion. They were to return his covenantal love by keeping his commandments and doing his will. Never to go astray but to remember that the Lord alone, even amidst all the other gods, is your God.

One of my efforts to love God is to memorize a verse of scripture most mornings. It usually stays in my mind all day long, and I am training myself to love God. I believe that if we remember Him, as the commandment says, WE SHALL love Him because He is love. What can you do to remember to love God? Be creative like the ancient Hebrews and take on a practice that will shape your heart and help you love God. This love will become the journey and joy of a lifetime.

~ David Heaton

### ***Exodus 20:1-7***

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

### ***Mark 1:9-15***

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

### **Monday, February 19**

In comparison to the New Testament, the Old Testament has always seemed too “eye for an eye” in its approach and difficult to apply to my life. I was particularly unmoved by the Ten Commandments.

However, something struck me when I reread Exodus 20:4, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” When I reflected upon the idea that an idol could be anything, well, that started to veer into dangerous territory!

I moved away from the literal sense of the word “idol” and thought about the many “idols” I have in my life. I have erroneously bought into certain idols of our American culture such as an overemphasis on being independent, a stress on being terribly efficient and effective, and a definition of myself based upon what I do rather than who I am. Taken to an extreme, all of these “idols” go from being reasonable goals to being barriers to a relationship with God.

This Lenten season, I invite you to look back to the Old Testament so you can in fact live fully in the good news of Christ’s resurrection. It should be a liberating message that we don’t have to fall prey to the idols in our culture that seem normal to us because of our upbringing. Instead, we can move away from the constant striving in our society and simply bask in the gifts that God has given us through his son Jesus.

~ Lisa Kimbro

## EXODUS 20:1-7 AND MARK 1:9-15

Tuesday, February 20

Every Sunday morning since I was very little, I have been taught the same thing in many different ways: being Presbyterian allows me to forge my own faith journey and follow God. For example, in third grade when I was given my own Bible, I excitedly brought it to Sunday school to talk about what I thought of the stories we were reading. As a part of BMPC, I have witnessed firsthand the inclusion and acceptance that God admires in all of his disciples, including myself. I listen to God, having no idols above him, and show him my steadfast love in the way that my faith commands me. This means that choosing how I wish to communicate with God has led to a comfortable relationship with him as well as a comfortable relationship with my faith. I have found ways to worship God at BMPC through volunteering to tutor young kids, serving as an Elder on the Session, and finding my unique faith journey as my sisters have simultaneously discovered theirs. Being Presbyterian has minimized any pressure to advertise my faith because, through my uniquely forged relationship, I am confident that God knows that his place is above all in my worship.

The commandments that God has given us, including the one stated in Exodus to not bow down or worship any idols above him, are guidelines for us to follow as we live our lives. Being raised Presbyterian has allowed me to follow this commandment to its fullest potential and establish a relationship with God where I willingly and with trust have no other gods or idols above him.

~ Harper Hoffman, Youth Elder

## EXODUS 20:1-7 AND MARK 1:9-15

Wednesday, February 21



## EXODUS 20:1-7 AND MARK 1:9-15

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Thursday, February 22

Every time I sat with the passages assigned for this week of Lent, I kept feeling a pull to Mark 1:12 (“*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.*”)

I’m so taken by the phrase *immediately drove*. Other translations substitute *drove* with *brought*, *compelled*, *forced*, *impelled*, *led*, or *carried*. Replacements for *immediately* include *at once*, *straightway*, **and** *directly*. Whatever translation, the phrase suggests two things. First, Spirit, not Jesus was in control. Second, Spirit’s movement was not a gentle “*Please follow me.*” Rather, it was more like “*Go! Now!*”

Have you ever experienced the Spirit moving you with urgency? I have, twice in my life. But more often, Spirit is subtle, one of many threads tugging at me in the moment. Urgent or subtle, I believe such movements are the clearest inward sign of God’s presence in my life, inviting me to find time and space to explore them in prayer.

For Jesus, I wonder where that *immediately drove* came from in him? During the “hidden years,” was the call towards his ministry always tugging at him? Or did it grow over time? I imagine he experienced it in prayer with his Father and in the response of others to what he said and did. But why the “*Go! Now!*”? Was something holding him back — his family, friends, or a responsibility to provide for others? Then perhaps, in a minute with John’s baptism and his Father’s approving voice, the years-long struggle resolved, driving him *straightway* into the desert and the rest of his life.

What Spirit tugs are you feeling now? What’s holding you back from acting on them? Have you spent time with them in prayer?

~ Paul Burgmayer

## EXODUS 20:1-7 AND MARK 1:9-15

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Friday, February 23

Where does the story begin? It’s a simple question I ask each time I dive into a text. In the Gospel of Mark, most of the stories begin “in motion” as Jesus is immediately moving from one task to the next—a breakneck gospel that doesn’t have time to pause. In the first five books of the Bible, there’s more variety: naming ancestors, setting the context and time, or simply bursting off the page. This season we begin two incredible stories: the story of the law and the story of the Gospel, but where do they begin?

Exodus 21 begins with God summarizing the preceding 21 chapters into one statement: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt...” The law begins with a relationship, a context, and an assurance. The people have already experienced God’s covenant lived out in parted seas, manna raining down, and water in the desert. Before a single commandment is given, the story is inexorably entwined with that rescue, with that relationship.

In the same way, Mark introduces Jesus as a man who has done nothing of note except arrive to be baptized. The Gospel begins with God’s proclamation that Jesus is already beloved. It begins with a relationship between God, the creator, the Spirit poured out, and the Son standing in the waters of the Jordan.

Scripture gives us an unprecedented insight into the way God sees the world and how God chooses to interact with each of us. Here at the beginning, we meet our God who chooses to be in relationship with us before anything else. Before a rule is given, before a ministry begins, before the story has a chance to be told, it begins with a God who chooses to be with us and speak to us.

~ The Rev. Rachel Pederson, Associate Pastor for Children and Family Ministries

## EXODUS 20:1-7 AND MARK 1:9-15

Saturday, February 24

Idolatry is harder to recognize today than the golden calf idolatry described in Exodus. These days idolatry seems to be the commandment we break most frequently, but usually without even realizing we are doing so. How easy it is to put something, someone, or maybe even ourselves, above God. Eventually, of course, the consequences of idolatry become painfully apparent and make us aware of our sin.

Proud. Greedy. Stubborn. Resentful. A prisoner of desires or habits that control one's life. We can become slaves to these sins. Slave to our pleasures or pursuit of material items or human relationships. A slave to persistent memories that refuse to be controlled or cause us to freeze up with rage or regret.

What to do? I find the answer is to get into the word of God, give up to God, and let the Lord set free. Jesus tells us, "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed; you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Many of us give up to ourselves, to our habits, to our emotions, to our selfish desires, and our temptations. But don't we find that we are most at peace when we give up to the Lord? When we admit our failings to God, we are freed from our devotion to earthly things and from the burdens we carry. Free from dead works. Free to be a blessing, to be fruitful.

When we put God before everything else, God frees us from the desires and attachments that controlled us. Jesus makes us free indeed.

~ Stephen McConnell

## 2ND SUNDAY IN LENT - FEBRUARY 25

### *Exodus 20:8-11*

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

### *Mark 2:27-3:6*

Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.'

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.



## EXODUS 20:8-11 AND MARK 2:27-3:6

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Monday, February 26

When I think of the fourth commandment, Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, memories flow back from my childhood. Growing up during those years, you always knew what to expect on Sunday. The agenda for the day was church, no television or playtime until after 1 p.m., and a big spread with all the trimmings for dinner was the biggest highlight of the week. All the stores, including the supermarkets, never opened until noon. Even the Sunday newspaper was something that everyone looked forward to. Whether you were religious or not, Sunday was a special time different from the Monday through Saturday routine. As years have gone by, between work demands, extracurricular activities for youth, people playing catch up with house chores, and the ongoing competition from store sales, the Sabbath is starting to look like every other day. The section in Exodus 20:8-11 stating you shall not do any work has become a thing of the past. What we need to remember is that “The sabbath was made for humankind,” Mark 2:27-3:6. God felt it was important for us to rest, rejuvenate, treasure time with family, and be restored to do our commitments for the next six days. The world, even with all the technology we have, continues to move faster and we find ourselves cramming more responsibilities into our schedules, which unfortunately, is not going to change. However, we must be mindful not to throw away our gifts from God by speeding through life just to complete another day. For me, time is more valuable than money because, without it, you cannot accomplish anything. God created heaven, the earth, the sea, and humankind. Let’s learn to appreciate it.

~ Lawana Scales

## EXODUS 20:8-11 AND MARK 2:27-3:6

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Tuesday, February 27

Jesus often confronted the Pharisees’ interpretations of God’s law. To the Pharisees, observing God’s Sabbath meant honoring God by not doing anything that could be considered work, including healing, as in this week’s gospel (or Luke 6:6-11); picking grain to eat (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-16); or tending livestock (Matthew 12:11-12). Yet Jesus condoned and frequently participated in all these activities on the Sabbath, saying, “[...] it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” [Matthew 12:12]. Jesus seems to be saying, “Yes, observe the law, but...”

I can only believe that this attitude of “Yes, but...” applies equally to Jesus’ own admonitions. Immediately after preaching the Beatitudes, for instance, Jesus expands on “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” saying, “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” [Matthew 5:39]. Does any of us believe Jesus wants victims of domestic violence to submit to further violence? I doubt it. “Yes, but...”

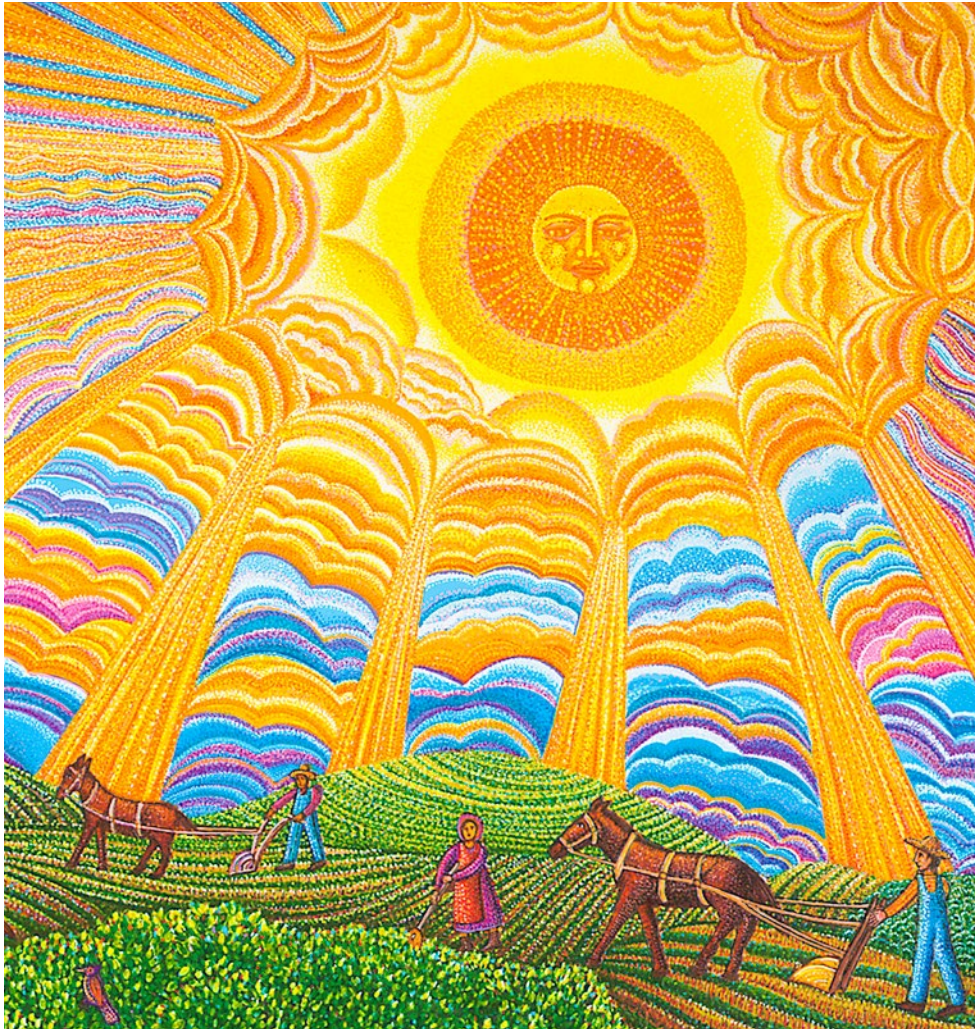
Last October I had an opportunity to turn the other cheek. I have rented out a room in my house for some years. On more than one occasion, my tenant has made bad decisions around his behavior in my home, resulting in inconvenience to me and costly repairs. The latest incident involved nearly \$2000 in plumber’s charges plus damaged ceilings and floors in two rooms. When the plumber told me the cause and extent of the issue, I decided to remove the renter. Turn the other cheek? I don’t think so, not after doing so many times before. “Yes, but...”

Nevertheless, I was in emotional turmoil. Jesus charges us to be selfless, and to treat others with love and compassion. And here I was, coming down on the side of selfishness instead of compassion and understanding. Or, as more than one wise friend has reminded me, on the side of self-care and self-preservation, instead of largesse and even foolishness. “Yes, but...” Now, in December, I am less in turmoil and more at peace, remembering that loving others begins with loving myself.

~ Brian Middleton

## EXODUS 20:8-11 AND MARK 2:27-3:6

Wednesday, February 28



Psalm 85 © 2023 John August Swanson / Eyecons

## EXODUS 20:8-11 AND MARK 2:27-3:6

Thursday, February 29

I grew up in a family where Sunday was set aside for church in the morning and then time together as a family for the rest of the day. In fact, some of my earliest memories are in the pews of St. James Episcopal Church in Lancaster. When I was nine, I entered the St. Thomas Choir School in New York City. Weekday services were a part of the routine as well as three services each Sunday (9 a.m., 11 a.m., and 5 p.m.!). Because I was in an environment that allowed me to focus on music and my life in the church, it rarely seemed busy or stressful. Services were perfectly crafted with high liturgy and inspiring music...and the allure of being in midtown only added to what made those years of my life transformative.

Years later, I found my way into the life of a church musician; not a surprise to anyone who knew me as a child! But now as an adult, a parent, and someone (like many of us) who needs social engagement as well as moments of quiet and solitude, it can be challenging to find that sweet spot to feel connected to my faith and my vocation. Sundays are busy days, but also incredibly fulfilling as the time and effort that goes into making Sunday happen pays off when the services take place, and when conversations and time together with congregants and friends happen.

Much is done in the days leading up to the seventh day. And in the case of working for the church, much is still done on the seventh day. But it is the reason for being the musician that I am and part of BMPC. And it all stems back to those early days with my family in church.

~ Edward Landin Senn, Assistant Director of Music

## EXODUS 20:8-11 AND MARK 2:27-3:6

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Friday, March 1

As a child, I knew that Sundays were for church and Sunday School. Sundays were also a time for big midday family dinners, with animated conversation around the table, music, endless games, and sometimes a long car ride together in the country. Sunday was always a special day to be a family – a nuclear family, a church family, and a community family since so many of our neighbors also attended our new church at the top of the hill. Church was a second home to me. It was my church and I belonged there, singing in the youth choir, square dancing on Tuesdays, roller skating on its brand-new sidewalks, or trying to listen to a sermon on Family Worship Sundays.

Keeping the Sabbath holy was not a duty to me because it was something I wanted to do. I felt sorry for the kids who were not part of a church family, and I feel the same way today. Many children—and their parents—miss out on all the extra learning and loving care so needed in today's world. Sunday services are an intrinsic part of being a Christian and provide a spiritual map for navigating the rest of the week.

Jesus was accused by the Pharisees of healing a man on the Sabbath, and they had a valid point. It went against their strict rules about commandments, and death was the punishment. But Jesus risked his life to show us that loving our neighbors is the most important commandment. None of us has the power to instantly heal a withered hand, but we all have the power to show our love to others. We don't have to risk our lives helping those in need, but we do have a commitment as Christians to care for and love our neighbors, whoever and wherever they are, and whenever they need us. Even on Sundays. Maybe especially on Sundays.

~ Clare Mackie

## EXODUS 20:8-11 AND MARK 2:27-3:6

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Saturday, March 2

As a runner, I can't help but think of Olympian Eric Liddell when I read this Exodus verse. Liddell chose to withdraw from the 100-meter competition during the Paris Olympics in 1924 when he learned he would have to compete on a Sunday, as running a race would violate his commitment to keep the Sabbath holy (a moment immortalized in the film *Chariots of Fire*).

When I consider both of these passages, the imperative from Christ that strikes me is to listen for God's call, always and on all days. I try to remember that God is in command of all things, that He has given each of us abilities to bring his coming kingdom a little closer on earth; Liddell himself liked to quote Paul: "Every man hath his proper gift from God." I like to think that a Sabbath well-spent is one where we act to return to God the sacred time and potential with which He's blessed each of us.

I find it compelling that Liddell's final chapter hewed closer to the story from Mark. Liddell joined a mission in China and was interred, along with two thousand others, by the Japanese during World War II. For the kids of the camp, "Uncle Eric" was an inspiration, and he helped break up the interminable detention by organizing sports. But Liddell initially refused to allow competition on Sundays. However, he reconsidered when he saw the effects of the day without any activity upon the children of the camp. He allowed games after church and even refereed them. Eric Liddell died, still a prisoner, in 1945. "Everything he did was for the greater good," said one of the former child internees years later: a noble example to us all.

~ Eddie Higgins

### ***Exodus 20:12***

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

### ***Mark 7:1-16***

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

### **Monday, March 4**

The question arises: Has going to church become a mere adherence to a familial tradition, or have I encountered God in a way that affirms spending time with His people that rejuvenates my faith and contributes to others' spiritual growth?

Do I aim for perfect attendance, or do I desire God's word to profoundly impact and transform my life? Do I engage with the lyrics of the songs I sing in the choir, contemplating their meaning, or do I merely enjoy the melodies they bring? When listening to the sermon, do I focus on how I can apply it to improve my life, or do I get distracted by minor details like a typo in the bulletin?

Am I authentically extending greetings and fellowshiping with other believers before, during, and after worship, or am I more concerned with taking selfies or observing their fashion choices for personal inspiration?

Do I exhibit patience by waiting in line for coffee at the atrium, or do I hastily skip the line and stand on the other side of the table?

These decisions — both major and minor — pose a challenging balance between adhering to the principles of God and succumbing to human traditions, between true fellowship and the hurried nature of coming and going.

At times, I may lean towards one direction of these questions, and at other times, I find myself on the opposite side. My ongoing effort is to consistently align my thoughts with the principles of God rather than human traditions.

For someone growing in faith, what better way to do so than to be surrounded by others on the same journey? Undoubtedly, more questions will arise, but I find assurance in not facing them alone.

~ Ibukun Ogunjimi

## EXODUS 20:12 AND MARK 7:1-16

Tuesday, March 5

This passage highlights for me the importance of focusing on inner intentions and values rather than mere external behavior. Knowing well that I am flawed (ironically put, a creature of hard habits and a rule-follower who welcomes distractibility, temptation, and frustrated procrastination), I take comfort and direction from Jesus when He says that a pure and compassionate heart must be heeded. It has more to do with righteousness than rituals.

As an educator, I interpret this holy lesson in how I treat others and align my heart with my leadership. Relationships and holistic excellence have more to do with my teaching priorities than content. The good news of Jesus' take on the Commandments encourages me to put students at the center of my curriculum, time, and efforts. In pedagogical theory, this can be transformational, but in practice, it's no less powerful and relevant. Students too often measure their success by adhering to a fixed mindset, mandated rules, formal customs, and teenage traditions devoid of virtue. While they're not spiritual soiling on the surface, these misguided motivators can be easily internalized. I have found that cultivating kindness, empathy, and understanding within myself yields many benefits: efficacy and engagement in teaching, personal fulfillment in work that's never glamorous or finished, and, most importantly, meaning and purpose in students' experience.

Looking at today's passage from a student's perspective, I perceive the significance of moral integrity and personal responsibility. When I served as the dean of students, carrying out disciplinary codes in the face of racial discord, institutional instability, and rapid societal change was awkward. At the tense intersection between school rules and student misconduct, I privately turned to Gospel texts for guidance and serenity. I leaned on my school's faith-based mission, which advocated for the values of mercy and justice. Collectively, transgressing students and I achieved restoration by turning inward, reflecting on our thoughts and intentions, and recognizing the impact of our words and deeds. Even defensive parents – those who loved to argue the proper boundaries of our community's norms and policies – profited from a Jesus-inspired approach. Honoring each other's "undefiled" dignity through the process was key.

Jesus' message reminds any lifelong learner to prioritize inner purity and moral righteousness, as these qualities shape one's character and influence their interactions with others.

~ Seth Pidot

## EXODUS 20:12 AND MARK 7:1-16

Wednesday, March 6



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## EXODUS 20:12 AND MARK 7:1-16

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Thursday, March 7

What exactly did God have in mind when he gave us the fifth commandment? It is our duty to honor our father and mother. It requires commitment, but God does not want it to become a chore to be rewarded. This “honoring” is born out of love, respect, and gratitude for the life we have been given by our parents.

How do you honor your father and mother? The story of Naomi and Ruth comes to mind. Naomi has lost nearly everything. Her husband and sons have died. She is destined to a life of poverty and loneliness. She gives permission to her daughters-in-law to return to their families, but Ruth embraces Naomi and refuses to leave her alone. Kate Bowler, in her Advent devotional, *Bless the Advent We Actually Have*, says, “The Hebrew word *hesed* describes a sense of love and loyalty, of taking action on behalf of someone who is in need.” This is exactly what Ruth does, thus honoring her mother-in-law Naomi, bringing her comfort, relief, and hope for the future. This is what God means by honoring.

To me, it is a privilege to honor and care for the older generation. My father and mother have passed. I pray that I was obedient in honoring them as they grew old, no longer able to do everything for themselves. It was not always easy and took patience and time. I am fortunate to know many older members of our congregation. They are all to be honored. I enjoy visiting them and hearing their stories. My reward is always love.

Now my husband and I are the oldest generation in our family. It feels a bit strange. I wonder, “How will I be honored? How am I honored now?” The answer comes to me in a sweet smile and the words, “I love you, Gamma!”

~ Susan Thorkelson

## EXODUS 20:12 AND MARK 7:1-16

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Friday, March 8

As we hear the commandment about honoring our parents, the question comes how we are to do so as they and we age? Toward the end of her life, my mother suffered from Alzheimer’s. Part of honoring her called for providing for her care and trying to understand what she was experiencing and trying to express. Our family watched sadly as she lost many of her memories that helped to define who she had been. As her illness progressed, she didn’t always remember the name of her number-two son, but she still knew she had given birth to me - that was part of her core identity. When I would see her, she would point at me and say, “You came out of me. And when I saw you, I said, ‘Hot chalolly!’” She grew up in Texas and her expression may have been a derivative of ‘Hot tamale!’ but she used that expression of delight throughout my life, and I was so glad that phrase hung on a good while as part of her vocabulary.

I have to imagine our heavenly parent looks at our body of believers, this body of Christ, and reminds us, “You came out of me. I gave you birth. You are my beloved. You can best be fulfilled through following my commandments and what I have modeled for you.” As we move through our lives, the context will change as we try to apply God’s commandments and follow God’s lead. It is an ongoing challenge to live out our spiritual identity as the body of Christ in the world today. However, as God sees us make that effort, I have to imagine that heaven itself exclaims something akin to “Hot chalolly!” Thanks be unto God!

~ The Rev. Dr. Kirby Lawrence Hill, Interim Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care and Senior Adults

## EXODUS 20:12 AND MARK 7:1-16

Saturday, March 9

How often have you found yourself shaking your head and wondering, “What are ‘they’ doing?”

That’s not how it is done, or should be done! That is not how we used to do it, etc. Change is hard. It’s like putting on a new pair of shoes, they pinch, they bind, and are often uncomfortable. A lot has changed in my lifetime and a lot of that change seems to have happened in the last three years. But is that a bad thing? Hard, yes, but bad, no. Maybe I am a little less comfortable, but again I ask, is that a bad thing? Someone once told me, “Today’s heresy is tomorrow’s traditions.” The people of Jesus’ time were living through a major cultural shift, much like us. Jesus was asking them to walk away from centuries of tradition (cue the Fiddler) and try something new, a new set of sandals if we want to continue the metaphor. For eons, they survived and sometimes thrived as a people because they stuck to a very strict set of rules, much like us. But Jesus said there is a better way, don’t get hung up on the rules of the community, instead just focus on the community. People could not imagine the world he was trying to envision for their future. They were scared, some were resentful and/or even hostile. They wanted to stick to what was safe and known, what was comfortable! But are we called to be comfortable? When I read this passage, I hear Jesus asking me, like he did to the men at the lake’s edge... “Pick a new path and come, follow me. I will show you how to care for one another, show kindness to your neighbor, and provide a better world for the next generation.” The funny thing is, those are the lessons my parents taught me; compassion, kindness; and leave the world a better place than you found it! So ironically, by not following the expected path, and trying on a new, not-so-comfortable way of living, I am actually following the fifth commandment and honoring my parents, just not in the way they expected.

I have no idea where our world is going, but every day my new shoes get a little more comfortable as I learn to live in and work to create that better world God wants for all of us. How do you honor your parents in ways they may not have expected? What traditions have you let go of in order to create new ones? What is something in your heart you know you want to do, but it is a little off the expected path? What is stopping you?

~ Meggin Capers

## 4TH SUNDAY IN LENT - MARCH 10

### *Exodus 20:13*

You shall not murder.

### *Mark 7:17-23*

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

## EXODUS 20:13 AND MARK 7:17-23

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Monday, March 11

These passages are stark reminders of my responsibility for my words and actions. As I read the verses, the awareness that my judgment of others is quick — while I avoid critically reviewing myself — grew. An experience in early November provided a needed challenge to this avoidance. I found myself in the middle of a protest outside of 30th Street Station on my way home from work. A large group of people from different faiths and ideologies was rallying for civilians caught in the Gaza crossfire. Most of the station doors were locked to keep the protesters out. To find an unlocked door, I made my way through the loud, though nonthreatening, crowd. A police officer questioned me before allowing me in the open door that I finally located. Once on the train, I was furious. I would like to say that the anger stemmed from compassion for the children and other innocent victims that the protesters were advocating for. However, it was from the inconvenience of the locked doors when I wanted to go home. I realized that this self-centeredness was connected to the evil that is referenced in the readings and that there was a call for change.

Shortly thereafter, I accepted two unexpected invitations. One was an interfaith workshop about nurturing non-divisive dialogue related to the Israel-Hamas war. The attendees inspired me with their knowledge and commitment to love-informed action. The other was a public Hanukkah observance in a setting that was grappling with antisemitism and fears of violence. The event had a visible law enforcement presence, a sign of our times. Changed by both experiences, I aspire to remember the needs of strangers daily and to act accordingly. I have taken small steps and hope and pray to sustain and grow the commitment.

~ Anita Iyengar

## EXODUS 20:13 AND MARK 7:17-23

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Tuesday, March 12

If the Ten Commandments are meant to be the foundational guidance on how to live in alignment with God's desires for us, rather than telling us what not to do, I am looking for some more positive encouragement toward attitudes and actions we can aspire to beyond honoring the sabbath and our parents. It's not until later when Jesus is preaching that he adds to his recitation of the commandments: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:18-19).

So how might we read the prohibition against murder more as an extension of the call to love? Is there a way to "murder" someone without destroying their physical body? Can you effectively kill someone's soul or spirit without harming the body? The only thing that destroys love is hate. As Jesus has warned in his Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." As it explicitly states in 1 John 3:15: "Whosoever hates his brother is a murderer."

Whenever we create "the other," distinguished by some artificial boundary — different race, different political views, different tribe — we are well on our way to justifying why it is okay to hate that person, those people. Love can flip that view by listening to understand that person rather than listening to mentally prepare your snappy counter to their views. Listening through a lens of love just might allow you to see that other as a true child of God.

Thou shalt not murder another's spirit.

~ Phoebe Sheftel



## EXODUS 20:13 AND MARK 7:17-23

Wednesday, March 13



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## EXODUS 20:13 AND MARK 7:17-23

Thursday, March 14

The law commands us “You shall not murder” (NRSV) or, as I learned the commandment from the RSV, “you shall not kill.” Although “you shall not kill” has a nice ring to it, there is no question that “you shall not murder” is better. The commandment uses a Hebrew verb, *ratsach*, that appears in only 40 or so verses in the Hebrew Scriptures. With all the killing that goes on in the Old Testament—killing of sacrificial animals, killing of enemies in war, killing of wrongdoers, etc.—that may surprise you. But these acts of killing are described with other verbs, and they are not forbidden by this commandment. The verb *ratsach* is used for killing that is seen as illegitimate.

Some of the verses using this verb have to do with the “cities of refuge.” These were designated cities where someone who kills without intending to can flee from the avenging family of the deceased until such time as a formal trial can be held. I bring this up to show that the Mosaic law is not all about prohibition and punishment. Intention is important. The Israelites are commanded not to *ratsach*, but there are allowances made if someone does so without meaning to.

In the scripture from Mark, Jesus places the importance not on proper eating, but on the intentions of the heart. Many of the things that come from the human heart are related to the Ten Commandments: not just theft, murder and adultery but also avarice and envy (do not covet), deceit and slander (do not bear false witness). “First clean the inside of the cup,” Jesus says elsewhere (Matt 23:26). Intention is important.

~ Joshua Yoder

## EXODUS 20:13 AND MARK 7:17-23

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Friday, March 15

When I was Associate Pastor for Community Ministry at Central Presbyterian in downtown Atlanta, church volunteers taught a Bible study in the nearby juvenile detention center. I would accompany them sometimes so that I could learn about the dynamics and importance of this outreach of our congregation. What I remember most was checking in at the prison, and then walking down multiple corridors through thick steel doors that closed and locked behind us. I am not generally claustrophobic, but it was one of the most intense experiences I have ever had of feeling physically anxious. The girls who lived inside those heavy doors were not murderers, but their situation of being locked away comes to mind when I hear this commandment, “You shall not murder.”

God gives life and wants us to preserve life so that every human person can be free. To take the life of another counters the purposes of our Maker, and the murderer is also deprived of the abundant life God intends. Whether found guilty and imprisoned or not, when evil takes up residence in one’s heart, according to Mark’s gospel, life is diminished and the law of God is broken.

We live in a time of extraordinary violence and unnecessary loss of life. Gun violence has become our national epidemic. We may not live behind thick steel doors, but there is something about this life-depriving rage that imprisons even us. Are we complicit in injustices that lead to violence or cultural mores that value gun ownership over human life? As we continue our journey toward the cross, may our Lenten devotion heed the call of Jesus in Mark’s gospel to recognize that evil intentions may reside in the human heart, pray for release of anything that may defile us, and join Jesus himself in seeking to overcome evil with good and violence with justice and peace.

~ The Rev. Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet, Senior Pastor

## EXODUS 20:13 AND MARK 7:17-23

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Saturday, March 16

You shall not murder seems more specific than the way I learned the Commandment: You shall not kill. To murder is to kill without justification or excuse. It is the most contentious of the Commandments. What forms of killing constitute murder? Just war, where other options have been exhausted and the sanctity of non-combatants is respected? Public justice (capital punishment)? Self-defense? Now our society wrestles with other, expanded rationales for ending lives: abortion and the impassioned discussions about it on both sides, mercy killing, including euthanasia and assisted suicide, where thoughtful laypersons and professionals come down immovably on one side or the other. I have my own opinions: reluctant yes, to just war if all the conditions are met, no to capital punishment, conditional yes to abortion with oversight, and no to euthanasia, but recognize that my opinions are mine alone. In my work as a physician and clinical ethicist, we have difficult discussions with patients’ family members who interpret recommendations to limit treatment or to not treat to the bitter end as “wanting to kill Mom.” Defusing and redirecting these conversations are challenging and summon all our patience and negotiating skills. We attempt to ensure that the life which remains is as comfortable and devoid of suffering as possible and to assure family members that we are not covertly allocating resources, or intentionally killing their loved one. And withdrawing life support is not deliberately ending a patient’s life, but rather is the termination of treatment that cannot alter the patient’s inevitable finitude. Still, suspicion remains.

This brings us to the passage from Mark, where Jesus essentially admonishes his listeners to not sweat the small stuff like dietary proscriptions but to avoid the big sins, murder among them. He leaves it to us in our daily lives and actions and reflection to wrestle with the details that life’s messiness hands us.

~ Rich Allman

### ***Exodus 20: 14-20***

You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

### ***Mark 14:66 - 15:5***

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Monday, March 18

I am beginning this reflection by confessing that my efforts to compare and contrast the Ten Commandments with the teachings of Jesus have my head spinning. The ninth commandment directs us not to bear false witness, yet Jesus foresaw that his disciple Peter would do just that. Still, Jesus said in Matt 16:18, "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church." Despite Peter's weakness, Jesus loved him unconditionally, forgave him, and centered him in the future ministry. What was true for Peter is true for all of us. The Good News is that despite our flaws and shortcomings, we have a role in God's kingdom.

Handed down on stone tablets, the Ten Commandments were God-given guidelines to build a righteous life in community with others. These external laws were absolute and unforgiving. At least eight of the ten are negative, directing what we were not to do. Living three thousand years later, I look to the New Testament, where Jesus summarizes the Commandments, emphasizing what to do: Do unto others as you would have them do to you; love your neighbor as yourself. And repeatedly, Jesus affirms that he has come not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it.

While the Commandments were first carved on stones, Jesus emphasizes that now the laws are written on our hearts rather than in the public arena (Heb. 8). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes a higher and more challenging standard. With this standard, fortunately for us, comes the gift of grace. Now our internal behavioral motivation comes from love, not duty. God first loved us, as Jesus tells us. We obey, because we love God and want to follow the model that Jesus lived and ultimately died for us.

~ Anna May Charrington

## EXODUS 20:14-20 AND MARK 14:66 - 15:5

Tuesday, March 19

Of all the commandments that govern our relationships with others, I violate the tenth most often. These violations go mostly unnoticed because, unlike the other commandments that prohibit actions, the tenth prohibits mere thought, regardless of whether it leads to action. One possible rationale for banning covetous thoughts is that they may lead to bad actions. I believe that we are warned against covetous thoughts because they harm our own peace of mind, even if we never act on them to inflict physical harm on others.

Interpreting “coveting” as envy, even if never voiced or acted on, can be sufficient to erode our contentment and joy in life. Envy undermines gratitude for what we have. In the words of 13th-century mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart: “If the only prayer you said was: ‘Thank you,’ that would be enough.” Conversely, if coveting becomes obsessive, we live into the truth of the adage “Compare and despair.” In this age of social media, continual comparison leads to despair and desperation. Less extreme, coveting the possessions or attributes of another fosters resentment, undermines empathy, and blocks our potential for love and connection. It seems impossible to love someone while simultaneously coveting something they have because in coveting we focus on differences, envy, and ultimately resentment that they have what we desire. So even if we never act out the covetous thoughts, they still harm our own peace of mind and our ability to relate. If we shift our focus from coveting to gratitude, we experience contentment and peace of mind.

The tenth commandment seems particularly relevant to our culture, where interpersonal comparisons are often encouraged to stimulate competitiveness. In fact, the tenth commandment seems to draw a fine but critical line: it bars coveting possessions that belong to someone else while leaving open the possibility that we may be inspired by the achievements of others to work hard to attain something similar for ourselves. But it must be ours, not theirs. This still leaves open the possibility that our endemic tendency to compare ourselves to others can bring good if we focus on being inspired by the good qualities of others to improve our own lives in ways that fit who we are each meant to be.

~ Patricia Danzon

## EXODUS 20:14-20 AND MARK 14:66 - 15:5

Wednesday, March 20



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## EXODUS 20:14-20 AND MARK 14:66 - 15:5

Thursday, March 21

It is the ultimate chicken and egg problem: Is a person good because he or she does good things, or does a person do good things because he or she is good? It shouldn't be surprising that this question was at the heart of the early Christian church and then again at the heart of the Reformation. The Ten Commandments tell us what to do and what not to do, but they don't really tell us why, except that God wishes it so. Of course, from the standpoint of social organization, we can understand how adultery, theft, and perjury would be destructive. But the tenth commandment is the outlier. What's wrong with just dreaming about it? What's wrong with a little bit of coveting? After all, to invoke what seems to be the only modern standard of conduct, doesn't really hurt anybody. I believe that Jesus gives us the answer when he, in essence, explains the Ten Commandments in his Sermon on the Mount. I believe that Jesus is saying that the point is not, as the Pharisees insisted, to get the specific actions exactly right, to make sure the right thing is done, and to make sure to avoid doing the wrong thing. The point is to act like what we are, children of God. Lying, cheating, and stealing are not tripwires, rather they are actions that disclose a fundamental denial of who we actually are. As children of God, we do not act in a certain way because we will be rewarded or punished, but because that is how God acts, and we are God's sons and daughters. It is the divine way, and so it is meant to be our way. So, the answer is that we do good things because God has created us for that. That's who we are. When we act against the good, we not only deny our Lord, but we deny our true selves.

~ Bill McKee

## EXODUS 20:14-20 AND MARK 14:66 - 15:5

Friday, March 22

At first glance, this collection of Commandments seems easier for me to ignore. The litany of prohibitions is composed of those I haven't committed and do not see in my future: adultery, bringing false charges, longing for someone else's wife, or slave, or donkey. Growing up on a farm, I know a handful of donkeys and they are nothing to write home about. So, this reflection felt easy enough to write without too much soul searching.

Yet here I was one day this fall, mindlessly scrolling through social media when I came across an interview clip with Adam Grant, the Wharton professor and organizational psychologist. Speaking for a podcast he remarked, "For a long time I believed the mantra that 'comparison is the thief of joy.' I don't believe it anymore. I think envy is the thief of joy." Grant went on to note that he doesn't disagree that social comparison is invaluable. We often look to other people for inspiration and learning. We can be shaped by their behaviors and ethics and instructed by their own professed virtues. Where we run into problems, Grant says, is when we stop simply admiring those people and we start wanting what they have. Comparison doesn't steal our joy, since it's human nature to look at the lives of others. What steals our joy is deciding that we need what someone else has. What steals our joy is determining that we simply don't have enough.

The reality is always more nuanced, to be sure. Comparison spurs competition, and competition can be good and healthy. But envy is more than comparison and appraisal. Envy is believing that in a world of limited resources, I need what another has in order to be happy. Ironically, nowhere is this truth more pronounced in our current day than on social media, where the alluring imagery of what others have or are doing is what keeps us scrolling. Stumbling upon Grant's short clip was enough to give me pause. Is my own use of this particular platform fueling my own envy? Do I look longingly at the vacations my friends take, the cars that celebrities are purchasing, and the college classmates' family photos where the kids look well-adjusted and the parents look rested? Is envy stealing my joy?

Maybe this isn't about stealing donkeys after all. Maybe this is the word I need. Maybe you do too.

~ The Rev. Dr. Franklyn C. Pottorff, Associate Pastor for Congregational Life and Stewardship

## EXODUS 20:14-20 AND MARK 14:66 - 15:5

Saturday, March 23

When I was in elementary school, I learned the commandment, “You shall not steal” in a hard way. It all started with the piggy bank sitting on top of my parents’ closet. Its snout seemed to taunt me from the high up. After stealing a look a few times, I decided to rise to action. After moving a chair against the closet and piling up pillows on top, I finally reached the piggy bank. This time, I wasn’t just stealing a look; I was stealing coins. I took one at first, then a few more, and then a handful. Eventually, I was discovered. I denied it at first but soon confessed because I had learned from Sunday school that I shall not steal. Even in my young mind, this commandment was loud and clear. I was punished harshly. To this day, I know clearly that I should not steal.

Is then following Jesus as easy as knowing or practicing not to steal or not to lie? Is the act of loving God the same as the practice of the SHALL-NOT statements? If so, why did the rich man of Matthew 19, who was so confident about his meticulous following of the commandments, sheepishly disappear when Jesus commanded, “DO give away your wealth and DO follow me”? I wonder if Peter’s story is not about following the commandment of “You shall NOT lie.” Instead, it’s about “DO love God and DO follow Jesus.” After all, following Jesus is more than merely keeping the commandments of “shall not.” It does challenge us to step up to the level of “DOs.” Many decades have passed since my shall-not-steal lesson. I’m still learning and wrestling with the commandment of “DO Love God and Neighbors” because it is less clear and harder to do.

~ Heewon Chang

## PALM SUNDAY - MARCH 24

### **Mark 12: 28-34**

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

## MARK 12:28-34

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Monday, March 25

As parents of five grown children, we took seriously our role as parents and teachers of scripture and theology to our kids. We think bad theology is worse than no theology, and so we went out of our way to emphasize that which we found important, and especially that which we were fortunate to inherit from our parents and grandparents. But as you know, life comes fast and sometimes at odd angles. We were constantly on our toes. Never wanting to be overbearing, always open to long conversations around a fire, we felt strongly that it was our job to “raise up our children in the way they should go” (Proverbs 22:6). So when the questions started coming after years of Sunday School and Deerfoot and Tapowingo summer camps, years of friends asking things like, “How does God...,” “What does God...” “Who is God,” “What about this and what about that and why this and why that and what do you think, Dad?” “Why do you think that, Mom?” We stayed up late nights and often tried to dissect great tidbits of theology to help make sense of it all. The kids had friends with other family traditions and sometimes other faiths. We found ourselves time and time again, drawing from the great roots of our tradition.

After all is said and done we would remind our kids, after all the catechisms, all the majestic creeds of our faith, Jesus was asked, “What is the first and greatest commandment?” He replied, “The first is this... ‘Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “This is much more important,” the scribe responded, “than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” I would often say, let’s unpack just this...nothing more. And we spent years talking, praying, praying and talking some more about what it means to love God like this...and we found there was no time left to think about the differences that are built between us, but just what it is to Love God with ALL of our heart, with ALL of our Soul, with ALL of our Mind and ALL of our Strength, and how the only outcome from this incredible love is to love our neighbor and love mightily. This promise in us planted by our Creator burns truth, and will not wither and fade.

~ Rob Bickhart

## MARK 12:28-34

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Tuesday, March 26

I have always been drawn to be closer to God. From an early age, I felt his presence in my life. I was raised in a Jewish home where my family was outwardly active in the life of our synagogue. I progressed from Sunday School to Bar Mitzvah and then confirmation, frequently reciting the Hebrew prayer “Hear, O Israel..” and the commandment to “Love the Lord my God...” But, I was spiritually unfulfilled, as these faith practices did not “speak to me.” After I was married, my wife and I started attending Quaker Meeting for Worship, where the silent meditative form of worship taught me to pray and to be in conversation with God. My faith deepened, as I experienced God’s presence and voice, firsthand, in corporate worship. Yet, my journey was not complete. God brought me through the doors of BMPC where I learned and internalized what Christ’s second commandment... loving my neighbor as myself... really meant, which was the spark that connected my abstract love of God with the concrete call to put my love of God, my faith, and love of neighbor into action. So, now, in the silent portion of Confession in worship, I prayerfully recite the commandment to love the Lord my God with all of my heart... and pray to have the courage to discern and follow God’s call; to connect my love of God with my love of neighbor, as God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit command me.

As we approach Easter, and our reflection upon Christ’s struggles, death, and resurrection, I pray that we are enabled by God’s love of us to return God’s love with all of our heart, soul, mind, and might, and to quietly listen for God’s call, so we can rightly obey our Christian duty to love and serve our neighbors, as we would want to be loved and served.

~ Jeffrey Libson

## MARK 12:28-34

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Wednesday, March 27

The greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” We believe it, and we try ever so hard to live it. We also believe that when one loves God, as commanded, the response should be to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” as Jesus also commanded. On a personal level, we are good neighbors: we take soup to an ailing friend; we shovel the sidewalk of the widow; we pray for the afflicted; we contribute to the church and our favorite charities; we’re kind to others. The list goes on. As a church, we open our doors to all people, we prepare casseroles for the hungry, and we give significant sums of money and time to organizations and communities with fewer resources. The list goes on. We’re good neighbors because we love God.

Over the last few years, through BMPC’s anti-racism initiative, I’ve been challenged to re-think what it means to love God and thus your neighbor as yourself. Is it really all about prayers and good works, or is it also about digging deeper to let that love of God flow from me more perfectly? Although I will never be able to walk in the shoes of the marginalized, I’m challenged to study and understand the injustices, systemic racism, and implicit biases that are so pervasive and normalized that I don’t even recognize them as such. I’m then challenged to love God so much that I must do my part to right the wrongs, as Jesus would have us do. What a daunting charge, but BMPC at 150 has claimed its “faithful engagement in a changing world.” Let me, let us, be engaged in a whole new way, in a world that demands more of us than just the “feel good” commitment of the past - one that truly exemplifies our relationship to and our love of God.

~ Peggy Gregg

## MARK 12:28-34

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Thursday, March 28

It is a privilege and joy to write about these verses I consider the most important in scripture.

Jesus created an “Old Testament Trinity” from two important passages. The first, from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.”

Jesus makes an addition by adding “and all your mind.” We understand the need to add the mind so that the whole person is to “love God.”

To this Jesus adds Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

We remember Jesus’ teaching “The Good Samaritan.” Who is my neighbor? Everyone.

We can visualize that as an isosceles triangle with God at the top and self at lower left and other at lower right. All three lines represent a two-way love connection.

If this is a surprise to you, we need to add Paul’s comment in Romans 3:22-24, “...For there is no distinction; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift...” Or, God loves everybody!

Christians seem to be divided over the question of how much God loves us. Some think God’s love is conditional. If we don’t measure up then he sends us to hell forever. Others gravitate toward the idea that “his steadfast love endures forever.” This quote is from Lamentations 3:22,23:

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,

His mercies never come to an end;

They are new every morning;

Great is thy faithfulness.”

I understand that humans give up on God. But, for me, God never gives up on us.

~ The Rev. Dr. Paul MacMurray



## MARK 12:28-34

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Friday, March 29

A scribe asks Jesus a question. Jesus answers. The scribe affirms the answer, and then Jesus tells the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom of God. Jesus asked the question, but the scribe got the affirmation of a correct answer. It is fascinating how, when we ask questions of Jesus, we find that we ourselves are so often asked the same question in return. Lately, I've been struggling again with the question of suffering, how God can allow such profound anguish in our world, such pain and needless violence and death. Where is God when thousands die daily? Where is Their faithfulness to all generations when we see such seemingly pointless agony in our world? And Jesus, in his typical exacerbating fashion, turns the question around on me, on how I can allow such suffering.

It's hard to be hopeful sometimes during Lent, during this time of intense self-reflection and conviction. It's hard to be hopeful when we feel like nothing we do can effect change. It's hard to be hopeful when the world is on fire. And yet, that hope is what we are invited into by Christ. The kind of hope that isn't just optimism that things will get better, but the actions accompanying it—love with its boots on. We wait with bated breath for the resurrection, the moment when all of history changed so that we might know that violence and death can no longer separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It would be nice if Jesus answered all our difficult questions clearly and precisely. But we get this instead - a calling to answer our own questions, being the hero we long to see in the world. So, family of God, in this time of waiting, of examination, I ask you, how can we allow such suffering in our world? And how can we be a part of God's salvific action to bring release to captives, food to the hungry, home to the alien, and comfort to the weary, as the greatest commandments command us?

~ The Rev. Leigh DeVries, Associate Pastor, Youth and Their Families

## MARK 12:28-34

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Saturday, March 30

Though shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

For years, I put other people, and situations first. I made relationships and career more important. I had to learn through betrayals, divorces, and disappointments that it's got to be God first.

For years, I got caught up in the heady excitement of career success, which included world travel and exposure to people and places I could never have dreamed of given my background. I became intoxicated with the external.

As hard knocks and heartbreaks piled up, I was literally brought to my knees. There was only one way to turn. I was blessed with a sister who was a "way shower," and through her I began to realize there was only one way to live – a God-focused life. This wasn't a Saint Paul moment. It was a gradual awakening. It took years of seeking and studying across a variety of philosophies and religions to commit more deeply to a God-centered life.

I have great respect for all people who love and seek God. I see that as the great unifier. This was driven home during the BMPC choir trip to Israel in 2022. As I was standing on the plaza in the Holy City with the Mosque behind me, the Wailing Wall on my right, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in front of me, I had a heightened awareness that all the many people there had one thing in common – their love of God. It wasn't about religion. It was about God.

Gratefully, I'm beginning to recognize that the hard knocks were gifts. God was beckoning me to come home.

I love Mother Teresa's quote: "...In the final analysis it is between you and God."

~ Terry Charlton

## LAST SUPPER



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## HOLY WEEK WORSHIP SCHEDULE

### **Ash Wednesday, February 14**

5:30 p.m. Family Service with Imposition of Ashes, Chapel  
7:30 p.m. Service with Imposition of Ashes, Sanctuary & Livestreamed.  
The Rev. Rebecca Kirkpatrick preaching.

### **Palm Sunday, March 24**

8:00 a.m. Worship with Communion, Chapel  
9:45 a.m. Children ages 2 - Kindergarten meet in classrooms and children grades 1 - 5 meet in Chapel for Palm Sunday Procession  
10:00 a.m. Worship with Children's Palm Procession, Sanctuary & Livestreamed

### **Maundy Thursday, March 28**

8:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m. Labyrinth Walk, Gymnasium  
5:30 p.m. Family Service with Communion, Chapel  
6:00 p.m. Simple Supper, Congregational Hall. Free-will offering.  
7:30 p.m. Worship with Communion, Sanctuary & Livestreamed  
The Rev. Dr. Franklyn C. Pottorff preaching.

### **Good Friday, March 29**

8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. Labyrinth Walk, Gymnasium  
12:00 p.m. Worship led by BMPC Youth, Sanctuary  
7:30 p.m. “Tenebrae: The Passion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer”  
featuring the Bryn Mawr Chamber Singers, Sanctuary & Livestreamed.  
Composed by Hugh McElyea.

### **Easter Sunday, March 31**

6:30 a.m. – Sunrise Service, Front Lawn. The Rev. Rachel Pedersen preaching.  
7:00 a.m. – Continental Breakfast, Education Building  
9:00 & 11:00 a.m. Worship with Choir and Easter Brass, Sanctuary. 9:30 Service Livestreamed.  
The Rev. Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet preaching.

