



# Mount Calvary Connected February 18, 2021

*Mount Calvary Connected is a weekly newsletter that will be sent out each Wednesday while the church is pressing "pause" on in-person gatherings. Our goal is to keep you connected to your faith and your church with messages from our pastors, health information, and ways to share Christ's love during our current national crisis.*

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## A Message from Pastor Scott

Dear Partners in Mission and Ministry,

At its meeting on Tuesday evening, the congregational council elected the officers who will serve until after next year's annual meeting. Joining Bev Coughenour as your appointed treasurer, Sean Horn will serve another one-year term as president, Mark Rychak another one-year term as vice-president, and Ray Leverknight another one-year term as secretary. Thanks be to God for them and for their continued willingness to serve!

In spite of the inclement weather and the continuing safety concerns raised by the pandemic, all of your called and elected leaders were able to be present on Tuesday evening. Those who weren't able to attend in-person were able to join the meeting via Zoom, with all participants being able to see and to hear one another. This was the latest technical achievement made possible by Brian Wechtenhiser, with a good bit of help from Pastor Jonathan as well. Thanks to both of them and to other technically-skilled persons who have stepped up over the past year. All throughout the life of the congregation we are now doing things which weren't at all a part of the plan or the playbook a year ago; making sure to balance safety and a reverence for life with the demands and priorities of our ministry in Christ's name and for the glory of God. Thanks be to God for this!

On Tuesday evening, the council also voted to add to our current safety and security system. A couple of years ago security cameras were added to our facility. Thanks to an anonymous donor the doors to my office, the secretary's office, the treasurer's office, and Pastor Jonathan's office will soon be made far more secure than they previously have been. Now all doors to the facility will only be open at preprogrammed times, with a buzzer system enabling access when those preprogrammed times have expired and staff and/or volunteers are available to respond to those at a door. The number of keys, in this case "fobs," enabling access to the building will also be more closely and conservatively monitored than in the past. It is undoubtedly sad that this has become necessary, but the news too often speaks of those who storm public spaces and endanger and/or claim human lives. This was a concern even before the pandemic and it remains one now. In separate conversations with the Richland Police Department, our Property Committee and I have previously and more recently been informed that our building, including our day care center, is not secure. Thanks to the Property Committee's research and with the unanimous consent of your called and elected leaders, this will no longer be the case in the not too distant future. Again, thanks be to God for this!

Two bids were secured for the latest updates to our safety and security system, with the lower of the two bids being selected. The cost of the project will be a little over \$7000. We can and will take the funds needed for the project from existing accounts, but would certainly welcome special, one-time gifts to defray the overall expense of installation. As always, special, one-time gifts should not reduce the amount of one's regular offering. They also should not place you or your family in jeopardy. Though she's often praised, the widow who gives away all that she has in a couple of the gospels, as the rich barely dent their savings, is actually a representation of religion gone bad. In spite of the pandemic, we finished 2020 in the black and

have managed to enhance considerably our financial position in recent years. Though we don't want to become complacent, we remain sensitive to the economic difficulties of our present and simply want to share an opportunity for generosity which you should receive as your circumstances allow and as the Holy Spirit moves you.

In a similar vein, after seven weeks, regular offerings for 2021 have been a bit sluggish. With the pandemic and our largest donor moving out of the area towards the end of last year, we expected this, but also don't want things to snowball further if at all possible. Again, no one should imperil themselves or their family through a donation and we do have reserves available to weather a dry spell. But just as surely, we don't want to grow complacent if and when it's not necessary. Because proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed is so important Mount Calvary has spent as little time in shutdown mode as possible. In fact, in some areas like worship and communications for members, we're doing more than we were before the pandemic. Thus far, we've managed to do this with no financial issues whatsoever. If it all possible, let's continue that trend until the new normal we've been awaiting finally arrives. Should you still be refraining from in-person worship at this time, please remember you can make a contribution through our website at [mt-calvarylutheran.org](http://mt-calvarylutheran.org) or by mailing a donation to Mount Calvary at 1000 Scalp Avenue, Johnstown, PA 15905.

Appreciatively,

Pastor Scott

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### LIVE STREAMING WORSHIP SERVICE INFORMATION

Mt. Calvary hosts live broadcasts of the liturgy at 8:45 AM Sunday mornings. The broadcast can be heard by tuning your radio to 88.3 FM if you are near the church. We can also stream the service live over the internet.

By clicking the following link, you can gain access to the live stream audio. <https://streams.radiomast.io/96172026-6cba-407b-9090-e150b471ae0e>

Weekly worship bulletins can be found at: [www.rebrand.ly/MtCalvaryWorship](http://www.rebrand.ly/MtCalvaryWorship)

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Valentine's Day in Honduras is known as the **Day of Love and Friendship**. It's a time when people remind one another of how much they appreciate their friendship.

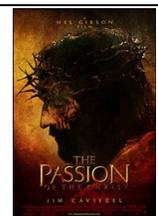
The "**Giving Tree**" is dedicating January and February donations to Pro-PAPA Missions for work done in Honduras, mainly in the town of Urraco. In the aftermath of two major hurricanes and in the midst of the Covid pandemic, progress is being made on getting the roads passable and the waterline rebuilt to get potable water to the community. Since 1997, the mission of Pro-PAPA concentrated on housing, medical and dental, and scholarship. This partnership between Honduras and Johnstown began with Brigades coordinated through Conemaugh Hospital and Habitat for Humanity. The work continues despite many setbacks and loss of some key people. We take the rest of the month to let you know how much we appreciate the people of Mt Calvary for your support and prayers!

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### The Passion of Christ,

First Four Wednesdays in March at 7 PM

Sequential Viewing and Discussion of the movie "The Passion of the Christ"



## Evangelism Committee Meeting

The Evangelism Committee Meeting will be Tuesday, March 2, at 6:30 PM.

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### Backyard Ministries Cookie Collection

Mt. Calvary has been asked to donate 200 packs of cookies per month (store bought is ok, if they are not individually wrapped packs, they can be 5 in a zip lock bag). They will pick them up on the first and third Thursday of each month. Cookies can be placed in the bin outside the church, or the labeled one inside. If you have any questions please contact Mike Kozak at 244-6880. Thank you for your continued support!

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### Flea Market

Mt. Calvary will again this Spring have a Flea Market. The Flea Market is scheduled for May 8, 2021 from 8:00 to 12:00. When you are cleaning out closets this Spring, please keep us in mind and donate all those items that you want to part with, so that someone else can enjoy them. If you haven't used an item in the last 12 months or so, and want to donate it to the Flea Market, you can bring it to the church sometime after the end of March and deposit it in the old lounge next to Sander Hall. **PLEASE NO TV'S OR CLOTHES.** If you have any questions, please contact either Janis Daily or Joan Bunnell.

### Birthdays and Anniversaries for the Week Feb. 21- Feb. 28.

**Feb. 17** - Julian Beglin, Erica Floyd, Megan Floyd, Nathaniel Mayket, Luke Raho, Megan Ross

**Feb. 21** - Austin McQuaide, Peter Zimmerman

**Feb. 22** - Deborah Finnegan, Eric Headlund, Scott Reininger, Nate Sann

**Feb. 23** - Ellen Martin, Shane McCarty, Penny Miller, Jessica Partsch

**Feb. 24** - William Eschrich, June Gresh, Jude Leonardis, Paul Pollino, Meghan Swartz

**Feb. 25** - Sandrina Gusmenott, Jordan Lonsinger

**Feb. 26** - Josh Covert, Donald Goughnour, Patricia McGraw, Nancy Robison

**Feb. 27** - Jack Daily, Joseph Dallman, Tracy Intihar

**Feb. 28** - Carla Enos, Dianne Thoburn

**Feb. 21** - Paul & Anita Brodt (59 years)

**Feb. 22** - James & Patricia Custer (57 years)

### About Our Members:

Upon exiting the congregational meeting on February 7th, it occurred to me that it was a blessing to be gathered in our house of worship again. What a journey it has been since we gathered a year ago for our last meeting. How thankful we are for the light Mount Calvary has been--always there to guide us through a path filled with uncertainty, darkness, and worry. Thank you Pastor Scott, Pastor Jonathan, council, staff, and Mount Calvary members. Your strength, leadership, and willingness to adapt has kept that light on and moving forward on a path through drive-ins, parking lots, and home worship. No play book was available, but surely one has been written. Thank you again and know how appreciated you ALL are. The Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path, (Psalms 119:105).

Brian Hiltz

Reminder to please pray for our members and their families that are affected by COVID 19.

**Remember those that prayer has been requested:**

Linda & Dick, Jamie, Don, Joanne, Shirley, Chris, Tracy, Flanagan Family, Roy, Joyce, Dolly & Chis Palm, David, Karen, Lauren, Billy, Rick, Joe, Pat Conklin, Gerald Barrick, Patti Sliko, Brooke, Balogh Family, El Warshel, Grosholz Family, Dean, Paul, Catherine Kinzey, and Heidi and Florence George.

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**Support of Mount Calvary**

Through the end of November, Mount Calvary's monthly expenses have been averaging about \$17,685. This is in the neighborhood of \$4,225 a month less than budgeted. Thanks to your generosity and the faithfulness of your leadership team, Mount Calvary has not yet had to dip into reserves in spite of all the disruption introduced by the pandemic. We're a team and the entire team deserves a thank you! Now all that's left to do this year is to top things off with another strong and robust December as we have done for many years running.

**CONDENSED WORSHIP FOR THE WEEKEND OF SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2021.**

**PRAYER OF THE DAY**

Almighty God, the light of your truth shines from the mountaintop into our hearts. Transfigure us by your beloved Son, and illumine the world with your image, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

**FIRST READING: 2 KINGS 2:1-12**

*Today's reading centers on the transfer of power and authority from the prophet Elijah to Elisha. Their travels, which retrace the path of Joshua back to Moab (the place where Moses died) and the parting of the waters, demonstrate that Elisha and Elijah are legitimate successors of the great prophet Moses.*

<sup>1</sup>Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. <sup>2</sup>Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. <sup>3</sup>The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

<sup>4</sup>Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. <sup>5</sup>The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

<sup>6</sup>Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. <sup>7</sup>Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. <sup>8</sup>Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

<sup>9</sup>When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." <sup>10</sup>He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." <sup>11</sup>As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. <sup>12</sup>Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

## **SECOND READING: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-6**

*The spotlight of Christian ministry is not on the people who carry out ministry but on the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as God made light shine at creation, God makes the light of Jesus Christ shine in our lives through Christian ministry.*

<sup>3</sup>Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup>In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup>For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

## **GOSPEL: MARK 9:2-9**

*Mark's gospel presents the transfiguration as a preview of what would become apparent to Jesus' followers after he rose from the dead. Confused disciples are given a vision of God's glory manifest in the beloved Son.*

<sup>2</sup>Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" <sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

## **SERMON BY PASTOR JONATHAN**

*Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our creator who shows us love in a new light. Amen.*

Normally, I'm someone who sees things in shades of gray rather than black and white. But there are certainly some issues that are simple either/or sorts of questions. One such issue is this: Either you believe in love at first sight, or you don't.

Frankly, I'm in the camp of non-believers. At least in terms of romantic relationships. There's just way too much involved in having a loving partnership with another person to base it solely off of that first look.

Maybe YOU DO believe in love at first sight, maybe you have one of those perfect love stories where you knew your partner was "the one" the first time you saw them. But I think you can still probably agree that your love changed and grew from that first moment, that it didn't just stay the way it was on that first day.

A few weeks ago, we heard stories of the first disciples being called by Jesus and how they dropped everything, leaving their businesses and everything they had ever known to follow him. Certainly that is a story of a kind of love at first sight. But the disciples' relationships with Jesus quickly deepened as they saw and experienced more things beyond that first impression.

Love is not just a one-time thing; it grows, it develops, there's a reason we talk about love *stories*, because in most cases, that's exactly what it is, a story of how two people came to develop a relationship between each other.

My wife Bekah and I were not a love at first sight sort of story. We knew each other when we were young and working at church camp together, and I think maybe there was a spark back then, but it was years after that

until we started dating. And when we did start dating, I loved her, but there were all sorts of moments that developed and strengthened and built that love story.

One of those moments where I knew things had changed came a year after we started dating and I moved to Cumberland, Maryland for my pastoral internship. I didn't have a lot of stuff at the time, but enough that I needed a U-Haul, and a partner. My dad was several months into the beginning of what would eventually be diagnosed as Lou Gehrig's disease and had told me he would drive the truck but couldn't do any of the lifting.

And so it was Bekah that not only helped me with the heavy lifting, but kept me sane during the stress and anxiety of that move. And maybe it seems insignificant, but it was such a deeply romantic gesture; her helping me when no one else could. That moment led me to see our relationship in a new light. It changed the way I saw her completely. Suddenly I recognized all sorts of things in our past that had been similar selfless acts of love. It changed our story.

And isn't that what the disciples experienced on the mountaintop on the day of the Transfiguration with Jesus? Here they are with a man whom they love, they loved him from day one, but the relationship has deepened and grown and changed as their story has gone on. And right when they may have wondered, "could I possibly love my Lord any more?" Something happens, the man they love is changed before their eyes, they see Moses and Elijah, and they hear the voice of God. If there was any doubt in their minds as to who was this man they followed and love, it was answered, this is the beloved son of God.

And suddenly, they see every act of love leading up to that moment in a new light. Suddenly, the course of events in the next chapters of their love story are changed.

Love is not static. It morphs, it develops, it grows, it deepens. All of that change is part of the story of love.

Right around this time of year, three years ago, I was blessed for the time as a pastor with the invitation to visit a newborn baby with their mother and father in the maternity ward of Conemaugh Hospital. And I remember talking with this couple close to my own age, and the father telling me, "you know, I never thought I could love someone more than my wife, until I laid eyes on my daughter."

You hear that sort of thing all the time, and frankly, I thought it was just something that people said, so I smiled and nodded. And then, four months later, MY daughter was born, and I understood. I discovered that I had more love to share than I could have possibly imagined. And seeing Bekah holding Annabelle for the first time, I saw our love for *each other* in a new light.

All through our lives, God gives us those sorts of mountaintop moments. Moments in which God shines a new light on the love that we thought we knew and understood. And suddenly things are different.

And believe me, this doesn't just happen for romantic relationships, it doesn't even just happen for familial relationships. Sometimes the light of God changes the way we love our neighbor.

I think that we've seen a lot of that love-changing light in the last twelve months, as the COVID pandemic has reminded us that we are all intimately linked through our communities. That being in community sometimes means prioritizing others' health and safety ahead of your own. That sometimes we need to inconvenience ourselves in order to love our neighbors.

You may have read or heard a quote sometime in the last year that's been falsely attributed to Dr. Tony Fauci, "I don't know how to explain to you that you should care for other people." As Christians, we shouldn't need an explanation. We should know that we are called to love, not just our spouses, not just our family, but each and every one of our neighbors.

And we know that over time, our love changes. Over time we see people in new light. And that new light new changes how we think about the things we've seen in the past and it alters the course of our actions in the future. It changes our love story.

So let today be a mountaintop moment in your life. Allow today to change the way you see love, allow the beautiful light of God's love shown through Christ to alter the course of your love story, and change every step you take from here on out. Amen.

### **PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**

P: Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

P: For the gospel proclaimed in word and deed, for communities of faith far and near, and for all who show the face of Christ throughout the world, let us pray.

**A: Have mercy, O God.**

P: For creation: sun, moon and stars; life forming in the dark earth and ocean deep; mountains, clouds and storms, and creatures seen and unseen, and for the Holy Spirit's guidance in our stewardship of God's creation, let us pray.

**A: Have mercy, O God.**

P: For those responsible for safety and protection: for emergency responders and security guards, attorneys and advocates, civil servants and leaders of governments, that they witness to mercy and justice throughout the world, let us pray.

**A: Have mercy, O God.**

P: For all who suffer this day (especially), that Christ our healer transform sickness into health, loneliness into companionship, bereavement into consolation, and suffering into peace, let us pray.

**A: Have mercy, O God.**

P: For companions on life's journey in this worshiping community, for loved ones who cannot be with us this day, and for guidance during struggles we face, that God's glory is revealed around and among us, let us pray.

**A: Have mercy, O God.**

P: In thanksgiving for the faithful departed who now rest from their earthly pilgrimage (especially missionaries Cyril and Methodius), that their lives of service and prayer inspire us in our living, let us pray.

**A: Have mercy, O God.**

P: Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

**A: Amen.**

### **CONDENSED WORSHIP FOR ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2021.**

#### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

Almighty God, the light of your truth shines from the mountaintop into our hearts. Transfigure us by your P: Creator of All, you love the world of your making and are always ready to forgive the penitent. Move our hearts toward true repentance so we may receive from you full pardon for our sins, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

**A: Amen**

#### **FIRST READING JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17**

<sup>1</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—<sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

<sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to

anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. <sup>14</sup>Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?

<sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; <sup>16</sup>gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

<sup>17</sup>Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

### **PSALMODY: PSALM 51:1-17**

(Read responsively by whole verse.)

P: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

**A: Wash me through and through from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin.**

P: For I know my offenses, and my sin is ever before me.

**A: Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are justified when you speak and right in your judgment.**

P: Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness, a sinner from my mother's womb.

**A: Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me, and would have me know wisdom deep within.**

P: Remove my sins with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.

**A: Let me hear joy and gladness; that the body you have broken may rejoice.**

P: Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my wickedness.

**A: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.**

P: Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

**A: Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.**

P: Let me teach your ways to offenders, and sinners shall be restored to you.

**A: Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.**

P: O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

**A: For you take no delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You are not pleased with burnt offering.**

P: The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.

### **SECOND READING 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B--6:10**

<sup>20b</sup>We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>6:1</sup>As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup>For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! <sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful

speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

### **GOSPEL READING MATTHEW 6:1-6, 15-21**

*Jesus said to the disciples: <sup>1</sup>“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

<sup>2</sup>“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>16</sup>“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

### **SERMON BY PASTOR SCOTT**

“Yet even now!” These words stand out in our reading from Joel. The prophet uses them to introduce God’s amazing grace. Before we hear, “Yet even now,” everything the prophet has said seems to suggest the die has been cast. God’s people have sinned and sinned and sinned and the wrath of God has been unleashed in response. An invading army approaches; precipitating the need to blow a trumpet so citizens might know an attack is immanent. At this point, with God’s wrath literally massing on the horizon, one wouldn’t expect the invasion to be called off. “Yet even now,” Joel says, it can happen. The grace of God is this amazing. The grace of God can slip through the tiniest of openings and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. With the Lord so gracious and merciful, so slow to anger, and so abounding in steadfast love, grace is always a possibility. Speaking for all of us tonight, Joel, in response to the amazing grace of God, says, “Who knows whether he will not turn and relent!” With the amazing grace of God, it’s always, even at the last possible moment, “yet even now.”

But’s let also not turn the grace of God into a foregone conclusion. This amounts to mocking and minimizing God. God is not all grace anymore than God is all wrath. God is both Savior and Judge; not one or the other, but both. In our reading from Joel, it’s said that God may relent from punishing. Then again, maybe God will not. The scriptures give voice to the entirety of God’s person. There’s wrath and there’s grace.

It’s the same story in our reading from Matthew. Misguided generosity, prayer, and fasting shall dry up and disappear like the treasures of earth. But generosity, prayer, and fasting that seek to renew and deepen our relationships with God and neighbor this shall travel with us into the Kingdom of God, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. Again, with God, there’s both wrath and grace and Ash Wednesday calls us to honor this tension. We don’t want to count out the grace of God, but we also don’t want to minimize our sins and the wrath of God they merit.

If there's anyone who walks this tightrope effectively, it's the criminal who on Good Friday is promised paradise by his Lord and our Lord. Crucified with Jesus, this criminal isn't buying what the other criminal crucified with Christ is selling. He knows, unlike the criminal that reviles Christ, that there's a difference between Jesus and himself. He's guilty and worthy of wrath. Jesus is not. He makes no bones about this. Yet even now, with his guilt personally claimed, the criminal who comes to Jesus' defense of Jesus does not count out the amazing grace of God. He doesn't assume this grace is his to be had, but he also doesn't discount the possibility. And in the end, his pairing of confession with faith and hope serves him well. Even as he recognizes he has no binding claim upon the grace of God, the penitent criminal, the remorseful criminal, is told that he shall enjoy paradise with Jesus. It's all a master class in how we honor and revere God's grace in a way that honors and reveres the entirety of God's person. It's through repentance and contrition, sorrow and regret, what Psalm 51 calls "a troubled spirit," that we honor God's identity as judge to the degree that the amazing grace of God might come out from the shadows to our benefit.

And so, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, and in keeping with what our reading from Joel specifies, let's rend our hearts and return to the Lord our God with sincerity, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. More than that even, on the basis of our baptism, let's live in the confidence and the trust that God shall relent from punishing; provided our sins lead us to approach God with the same remorse and reserve once manifested by a certain prodigal son who returned to his father's estate with his tail between his legs. As the baptized, we're not called or expected to be perfect. But an honest and heartfelt accounting of our sins shall be required. If we can't say and truly mean, "I'm a sinner damned beyond the point of personal repair," then Ash Wednesday informs us there's real and genuine cause for concern. God shall not be mocked or minimized. God shall not have his amazing grace turned into something as cheap as that bought at the Dollar Store. After being mocked and minimized on Good Friday and on many other occasions as well, God's patience shall eventually run out. Jesus shall eventually return to judge the living and the dead, separating the weeds from the wheat and the goats from the sheep. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, let's be ready for the day of the Lord. But let's also recognize that a troubled spirit, an honest and heartfelt reckoning of our sins, shall also serve us well as we seek to answer our Lord's call to make disciples of all nations.

As the baptized, we've been called to let our light shine before others so they might see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. This won't happen if we come across like superheroes who are a cut above the rest. What makes our light shine isn't our capacity to merit or achieve a perfect score every time. What makes our light shine is how the amazing grace of God makes us more than we would otherwise be; sometimes carrying us beyond all the other places in our lives where we've stumbled and fallen with regularity. As the Church, we're not called to inspire those who think they've got all the answers. It's those who know they won't be ending up at the head of the class who we've been called to touch and reach. And this won't happen if we position ourselves as standing at the head of the class ourselves. Our good works become notable, capable of arousing faith in others and ourselves, when they come out of nowhere; when they bear witness to the amazing grace of God responsible for them in the first place. This can't happen if we're not humble and genuinely honest about our failings and limitations. A troubled spirit, what Jesus calls a poverty of spirit in the Sermon on the Mount, won't just serve us well in the end. When paired with the amazing grace of God, it will also serve us well as we seek to illustrate why the Church matters to the doubting and the despairing.

And speaking of the doubting and the despairing, we haven't just been called to inspire them through the good works that the amazing grace of God brings forth from us in spite of our sins and our failures. Scripture also enjoins us to meet the doubting and the despairing where they are. To quote the twelfth chapter of Romans, we're to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. This can't happen and won't happen to any effect if we're light years removed from the ups and downs of human life. Sometimes we feel alone in our experiences and in the perspectives to which they give rise. The only way this can change is if someone emerges who really and truly can say, "I get at least some of what you're feeling and thinking. I've had my own version of what you're now experiencing so uniquely. I'm here as little or as much as you want me to be." Here too the merits of authenticity become more than clear. Again, it's not just in the end that an honest and heartfelt reckoning of our lives shall serve us well. The honesty and the humility that arise from a heartfelt reckoning of our lives shall also serve us well now as we seek to let our light shine in response to the amazing grace of God received through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, whether our motives are

eternal, of the moment, or some combination of the two, let's use this Ash Wednesday to say, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit." Amen!

### **PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**

P: Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

P: O God, you call your church to be ministers of reconciliation throughout the world. Inspire your church in its proclamation of the gospel and guide its ministries to build up the body of Christ. Lord, in your mercy,

**A: hear our prayer.**

P: O God, you created the earth and all its inhabitants and you declared that it is good. Protect mountains and valleys, animals and plants, and direct us to be good stewards of all you have made. Lord, in your mercy,

**A: hear our prayer.**

P: O God, you desire peace. Direct governments and leaders to work for the well-being of all people and raise up advocates to speak and serve on behalf of the downtrodden. Lord, in your mercy.

**A: hear our prayer.**

P: O God, you are our hope in the midst of despair, our help in the midst of sorrow, and our consolation in the midst of affliction. Grant comfort to all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit (*especially*) and support caregivers who attend to all in need. Lord, in your mercy,

**A: hear our prayer.**

P: O God, you are love, and you call us to love one another. Accompany with your grace those journeying toward baptism and call us all to repentance as we prepare to celebrate Christ's death and resurrection. Lord, in your mercy,

**A: hear our prayer.**

P: O God, you are our life and our salvation. We give you thanks for the righteous who have died in faith. Inspire us by their example to proclaim your steadfast love. Lord, in your mercy,

**A: hear our prayer.**

P: We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**A: Amen.**