

Passion Words of the Old Testament

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MINE - Ash Wednesday

Exodus 20:17.

Having survived the toddler years – three different times ... the following “*Toddler Property Laws*” bring back ... memories. “*If I like it, it’s mine. If it’s in my hand, it’s mine. If I can take it from you, it’s mine. If I had it a little while ago, it’s mine. It must never appear to be yours in any way, because it is always and forevermore ... MINE!*”

Deep down, within every son and daughter of Adam and Eve, there exists this insatiable desire to look at my neighbor’s wife, manservant, maidservant, ox, donkey ... indeed, anything that belongs to my neighbor ... and long for them all to be ... MINE!

In America this hell-bent *desire to acquire* takes on apocalyptic proportions. In a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon Calvin’s dad reacts with disgust at the plethora of catalogues. He says, “*Why do I get the feeling that society is trying to make us discontent with everything we have, and insecure about everything we own?*” Mom replies, “*I suppose that if people thought about real issues and needs instead of shopping, the economy would collapse and we’d have total anarchy.*” Then Calvin comes running into the room and blurts out, “*Hey mom and dad, I just saw a bunch of products on TV that I didn’t know existed ... but now I desperately need!*”

In the midst of this society that appears to be founded on “*Life, Liberty and the Purchase of Happiness,*” Yahweh says: “***You shall not covet.***”

The word “covet” – CHAMAD – covers the entire sequence from seeing to desiring, to finally ... possessing. For example, Achan confesses in Joshua 7:21: “***I saw among the spoils a beautiful mantle from Shinar, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them, and then ... I took them.***” In five other Old Testament narratives, the word CHAMAD is used in this same sequence ... seeing that leads to desiring, that leads to ... possessing. And just ask Achan – this sequence leads to *death*. James 1:15, “***After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth ... to death.***”

When we covet our neighbor’s “trophy” wife it brings the death of our marital joy. When we covet each other’s skills, intellect, popularity, family connections, you name it; we experience the death of our inner well-being and peace. And when we covet our neighbor’s BMW, Green Bay Packer season tickets, Rolex watch, pick your poison – it brings the death our pastoral satisfaction ... and pastoral effectiveness.

When I was in fourth grade my parents gave me a bike for Christmas. Check that. They gave me ... a stingray. It had flared handlebars, chrome on the side ... and get this, it had a ... banana-seat. “*Get your motor runnin’, headin’ on the highway. Lookin’ for adventure ... I was born to be wild!*” Until I went to Greg Heistand’s house. For Christmas Greg Heistand’s parents gave him a Schwinn Ten Speed! When I saw it, my motor died!

Early in my marriage our furniture style was “*Late Garage Sale.*” So one day I splurged ... just a tad! Right after the “splurge” my wife Lisa and I visited a church member’s house. On our way home I remarked, “*Wow, Lis, did you see that furniture! It goes all the way back to*

Louie the 14th.” To which she replied, “*Ya, and if you don’t make our payments ... our goes back to Sears ... on the 15th!*”

Our sin of coveting is bringing us high levels of debt, despair and depression. Left unchecked, our sin of coveting will drive a stake into every relationship we have. Just ask Achan and he would say, “***After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth ... to relational, spiritual and eternal death.***”

So ... how shall we deal with our titanic *desire to acquire*? How can the words of St. Paul in Phil. 4:11 echo in our life ... “*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*” And just how do we live in a society that screams at us *daily* to buy things we don’t need, with money we don’t have, to impress people ... we don’t even like?

Meet the God who says at the close of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:5 – “***For I, Yahweh your God, am EL QANE***” – “*A zealous, passionate God.*” Meaning what? Meaning that Yahweh’s *desire to acquire* is infinitely greater than ours. He looks at his Israel and longs to say ... “*You are always and forevermore ... MINE!*”

It gets started in Exodus 3, I quote: “***I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt ... So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians.***”

In coming down to rescue his firstborn son Israel, Yahweh says in Exodus 12:13: “***The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you.***” Then, in righteous zeal he took “***Pharaoh’s chariots and his army and hurled them into the sea. The best of Pharaoh’s officers he drowned in the Red Sea. With the deep waters he covered them; and they sank to the depths like a stone!***” And so Israel sang, “***Yahweh is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation!***”

EL QANE’S loving *desire to acquire* Israel reaches its pinnacle when he says in Exodus 19:5: “***Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.***” “*Treasured possession*” – SEGULAH – used only eight times in the Old Testament, the word refers to a prized, priceless, possession. From the depths of his loving heart at Sinai Yahweh beams over his baptized Israel and says, “*You are always and forevermore ... MINE.*”

EL QANE came down once again in an even greater way, but not with plagues of flies and frogs. Not in a pillar of cloud and fire, not in the thunder and lightning from the “mountain of God.” “*But for us men and for our salvation ... he came down*” in the silence of a night, in the warmth of a candle, in the whisper ... of a Baby.

This Baby exchanged the robes of eternity for swaddling clothes. He exchanged his golden throne room for a dirty sheep pen. Worshiping angels singing “Holy, holy, holy” from eternity past were exchanged for bewildered shepherds. Majesty in the midst of the mundane – holiness in the filth of manure – deity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager, in the presence of a carpenter.

All ... so that at age 33 he could accomplish an even greater Exodus. As the Passover Lamb his blood wasn’t splattered on the wood of a house, but on the wood of a Roman instrument of death, mingled with spit and sweat. After this horrific execution, as the firstborn Son from among the dead, this Israel triumphantly passed through the waters of death to life on the other side. And at the final Exodus, our King, Jesus Christ, will be crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He will ride a white horse and out of his mouth will come a sharp, double-edged sword, and he will seize the beast and the false prophet and the dragon, that ancient serpent who is devil and Satan and he will hurl them all into the lake of fire – and they will sink to the depths like a stone! Then we will forever sing with all the redeemed, “***Yahweh is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation!***”

All this means that, in spite of seeing and desiring and longing to possess our neighbor's wife, manservant, maidservant, ox, donkey or anything that belongs to our neighbor, Yahweh's baptismal beam still fully cleanses and forgives. You see, with water and the Word he placed his mark of ownership upon us – "Receive the sign of the holy cross, both upon your forehead and upon your heart, to mark you as my prized, priceless possession." And so he still says to us, his new Israel, just now, "*I have redeemed you, I have called you by name ... you are always and forevermore ... lovingly, passionately, eternally ... MINE!*" Amen.

NOTHING - Lent II

II Kings 4:1-7

This is a sermon about... nothing. In fact, I must admit that because of circumstances beyond my control this will be the most nothing sermon you've ever heard. I begin with this warning !! Not to encourage blank stares, closed eyelids or liturgical listlessness. No. I say this because the text from II Kings 4 is much to do about... nothing. Specifically, from verse 2 -the widow says to Elisha – "***Your servant has nothing.***"

In verse one of the text the widow cries out. It's the same word used to describe Israelite slaves crying out because of their Egyptian bondage. Hence, the verb often means crying out because of economic oppression. The point being ... this widow is economically oppressed. She has zip, zero, zilch, nada, goose eggs, nothing. Her husband is dead - her cupboards are bare - her sons are about to become slaves. She's tried all the 1-800 quick-credit hotlines - she's been rejected at "Uncle Al's Easy Loans" on the corner - she'll never be a millionaire, and that's her final answer. She's got nothing.

The end of verse two does indicate she has a jar of oil. But the word for jar comes from a verb meaning to anoint - is used only here in the Old Testament. Most believe it is a very small jar ...indicating all she has left is enough oil for one anointing just a little bit of nothin'.

She's 0-2 against Nolan Ryan. She owns stock in the Olympia Typewriter Company. She's got a ticket on the Titanic. She's relocated her family from Main St USA to Dead End Ave. She's in the middle of diapers and bills and problems ... along with Elvis, she's all shook up all because she's got nothing.

Enter Elisha, the son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah. If you were a Milwaukee Brave fan in the 1950's your cry was "*Spahn and Sain and pray for rain.*" If you were a Northern Israelite fan in the 9th century B.C. your cry was "*Elijah and Elisha and pray for rain.*" Pray for rain because periodic drought would cause the land to become barren, dry, desolate ...filled with ...nothing.

The effects are scattered throughout the fourth chapter of II Kings. The Shunammite woman's son is dead ...the pot of stew is full of death ...100 men are famished. For the Shunammite, who has nothing but a dead son, Elisha lays on him, and sneezes seven times, gets up, alive, and his mom has everything. For those who have nothing but deadly stew, Elisha adds flour and for dinner they have everything. For the 100 men who have nothing but 20 barely loaves, Elisha multiplies the bread and for the meal they have ... everything!

But to the widow in the text, Elisha says – "*You don't have enough of nothin'. Go to all your neighbors and get their empty jars. Then go into your empty house with your empty cupboards with your empty stomachs with your sons soon-to-be-slaves and shut the door.*"

And when nothing is multiplied beyond all hope the oil begins to flow! II Kings 4:6: **"All the jars were full."** There is enough fullness to pay off the debt! From all of this nothing comes... everything!

Nothing -it's not just confined to the fourth chapter II Kings. It's all around. **"Complete nothingness,"** cries Qoheleth. *"Life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and furry, signifying ... nothing"* - opines Shakespeare in Macbeth. *"Running on empty,"* sings Jackson Browne. **"All have turned away, they have together become worthless,"** exclaims Paul. Bombs, bloodshed, brokenness. Death, decay, destruction. Tears, terror, trauma. From South Lebanon to South Africa. Bosnia to Baghdad. Calcutta to Columbine. From the abortion clinics in the major cities to the prostitute rings across the country.

Nothing -it's all around us. Nothing -it's also in us. Jesus says in John 15, **"Apart from me you can do ...NOTHING."** THAT'S US, apart from Him ... we are much to do about NOTHING. The haunting words of I Corinthians 13:2 ring in my ears - **"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love I am nothing."** Still unconvinced? Hear the word of the LORD from Revelation 3:17 - **"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and don't need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" ...to a person we are just a little bit of nothin'.**

But there stands in our midst one greater than Elisha. His first miracle was the result of partygoers looking at their supply of wine and having nothing. Then the widow at Nain, the daughter of Jarius, blind Bartimaeus, the Canaanite woman, Zachaeus, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, the familiar words - **"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish"** ...and countless others who had zip, zero, zilch, nada, goose eggs ...nothing.

This prophet, **"Being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself ...nothing."** Luther waxes eloquent: *"Not in garb of pomp or power he wore; a servant's form, like men he bore."* **"He humbled himself and became obedient to death ...even death on a cross."** Even the best Manhattan advertising agencies would be hard pressed for a catchy jingle. *"Lose it all. Imagine the possibilities!"*

Omnipotent. He cries. The owner of all things, he says, **"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."** The King of Kings, he becomes a slave. The Creator, he's spit on by the creatures. The source of truth; he's found guilty of a lie. The source of light, for three hours he hangs in the darkness. The source of Life; he's crucified, dead and buried ...From the pinnacle of praise in the universe to the ultimate absolute nothing. **"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."**

And when nothing is multiplied beyond all hope there is resurrection! Because Jesus is alive, the Holy Spirit delivers, even now, in Word and Sacrament the blessings of the rich, cleansing, forgiving blood that flows from the five wounds ...No full jars ...now full lives!!!

John is beside himself, **"From his fullness we have received grace upon grace."** Paul is amazed, **"And you have been given fullness in Christ."** David shouts, **"You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows!"** And Jesus confirms it, **"I have come that you might have life and have it to the full."**

And mark these words - there is enough fullness to payoff the debt!! It's the day's wage paid to workers who had worked only an hour -it's the father scrubbing the stench of pig off his son's back -it's a criminal in the kingdom.

"My power is made perfect in weakness." Jesus says these words. Paul writes them down And the widow in the text lives them out.! So our posture at all times and in all places is to beg, not brag. To beseech, not boast. To bend our knees, not strut our stuff. To relearn the apostolic attitude of II Cor. 4:7 – **"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the transcendent power is from God and not from us."**

I'm not a mathematician, nor the son of a mathematician ...but I'll try to answer an equation that eludes us so often, here it goes -Jesus + absolutely nothing = ...ABSOLUTELY... EVERYTHING! Amen.

DELIVERED - Lent III

Isaiah 40:1-11.

When was the last time you offered this commentary on your life? *"Deader than a door-nail... a lost cause... time to throw in the towel... sianara baby... the at lady has sung ...(or my favorite) - mighty Casey has struck out!"*

Israel offered this very commentary on her life during the dark days of the Babylonian exile. Our text has 8th century Isaiah positioning himself to speak to this 6th century lost cause. You see, already in the 8th century, Isaiah knew that the days were, coming when Israel would have no temple, no Jerusalem, no Davidic king, no annual pilgrim feasts, no commercial or political significance ...no hope! Mighty Casey will strike out! Or, to use Israel's favorite – **"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion."**

To those who had thrown in the towel the prophet proclaims compassion, tenderness ...comfort. In fact, the pericope is framed by means of ...comfort. Like bookends, there's comfort in the beginning and comfort at the end. At the beginning, Is 40 :1 ... **NACHUMU, NACHUMU "Comfort, comfort"**- The use of repetition is Hebraic way to drive home a point. In Isaiah alone we have, among others: **"Fallen, fallen is Babylon" -"Awake, awake, O Zion" -"Build up, build up, prepare the road"** -and the classic threefold, **"Holy, holy, holy."**

Then ... **AMI "My people."** No more scornful **"THIS PEOPLE"** of Is. 6:9 ...but **"MY PEOPLE."** The word explodes with comfort, for Yahweh's covenant promise is exactly this, **"I will be your God, and you will be AMI... my people."**

Then, **"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem."** Literally, **"Speak upon the heart."** The same words are used to describe a comforting Boaz speaking upon the heart of a lost cause ...named Ruth.

Comfort in the beginning. Also, like bookends, comfort at the end. Specifically with the word **KIROEH** ...Like a Shepherd. The idea of a Shepherd drives us to the conviction that all this compassion, tenderness ...comfort was needed because the exiles and their forefathers had been like... sheep!

Now sheep are not intimidating creatures. We have Chicago Bears... Detroit Lions ...Denver Broncos ...Atlanta Falcons ... St. Louis Rams. I'm not a prophet, nor son of a prophet, but there will never, ever be NFL expansion teams called the Los Angeles Lambs or the San Antonio Sheep! What would the cheerleaders say, *"Fleece em, Fleece em ba,,ba, ba!???"*

Sheep are not intimidating creatures, truth be told - Sheep are dumb. They graze on the same hills until those hills turn to desert wastes, polluted with disease. Sheep bend down to drink from a pond, get too close, allow the water to absorb into their wool, fall in, and drown! We aren't like that... are we?

Sheep are dirty. Their wool is like a magnet. It attracts mud, manure, maggots. It becomes caked with dirt, decay, disease. Sheep absorb every particle of filth in the atmosphere. We aren't like that... are we?

Sheep are defenseless. They turn over on their back to rest, but then can't get up. Canines, coyotes, cougars all know that a cast sheep is a sitting duck! But we aren't like that ... are we?

Israel had been just like that... and so it was sianara baby... Nebuchadnezzar did it, aided by Nebuzaradan. The towel was thrown in 586 all because they had been like ...sheep!

Dumb... Is. 1 - ***"The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."***

Dirty... Is. 64 - ***"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. "***

Defenseless... Is. 1 - ***"From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness -only wounds and welts and open sores."*** We're not like that ...are we??!

Hear the word of the LORD; Isaiah 53:6 - ***"We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."*** And the result? ***"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remember Zion."*** You and I are living testimonies of lost causes... of being deader than a doornail... exiled - we are so far from the Father's will and ways -so far from bearing each other's pain and burdens -so far from spouses, children, sisters ,brothers. Mighty Casey has struck out ...

So what's a Shepherd to do??? One option ...to become a Lamb. But not any ordinary Lamb ... ***"A virgin will conceive and bear a Son and you will call his name Immanuel! Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*** No ordinary Lamb - ***"He was led like a Lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."*** No green pastures. Rather spit and blood are caked to his cheeks. No quiet waters -in fact, no water at all. His lips are cracked and swollen, his throat, parched from the hot Palestinian sun He's passing through the valley of the shadow of death as pain twangs her morbid melody. There's no rod or staff for comfort. The cup overflows all-right ... he drinks from the cup of the fury of wrath of God Almighty. Surely goodness and mercy have been twisted and perverted in the most inhumane way. Had we been there we would have surely said, ***"Deader than a door nail... a lost ...the fat lady has sung ...mighty Casey has struck out!"***

But, but ...Is. 40:8 ... ***verbum Dei manet in aeternum!!! "The Word of our God stands forever."*** The WORD stands when Israel bursts forth from Babylon... the WORD stands when the Babe bursts forth from Bethlehem... climactically after three days THE WORD STANDS when Jesus bursts forth from Joseph's tomb.

NACHUMU, NACHUMU AMI... COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE ...You see, that's what the Shepherd does. When I'm lost and exiled he leaves the 99 and runs after me. When I'm confused by voices of demons and devils he calls me by name and I know that voice. When I'm dirty and full of filth he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. There is a Shepherd who gathers me in his arms until I'm better, holds me 'till I can live with the hurt, and carries me close to his heart forever!

Dumb ...dirty... defenseless We are like that ...aren't we!? One more, though DELIVERED! The Good Shepherd freely, lovingly died ... for us. And he lives to deliver compassion, tenderness ... comfort like bookends ...in the beginning... all the way through... and comfort at the end of life. So sing with me the hymn of our childhood ...the hymn of the day... the hymn composed ...just for. .sheep... who know the comfort of the Shepherd. Amen.

ENLIST - Lent IV

Judges 6:16.

They're crop destroyin', plague deployin', quite anoyin', mighty menacin' Midianites! They're fond of fightin', strike like lightnin', *man* ... they're frightnin'. Mighty menacin' Midianites! They steal, kill and destroy every man, woman, girl and boy! They are mighty menacin' ... *Midianites*. They came from the union between Abraham and his second wife Keturah. They once came to the plains of Moab to seduce Israel at the famous apostasy of Baal Peor, recorded in the book of Numbers. Now in the Book of Judges they come to the Jezreel/ Esdraelon plain and down the Mediterranean coast all the way to Gaza unleashing on Israel their new, "*top-secret*" weapon ... domesticated camels!!

Israel is spiritually, economically, politically and militarily bankrupt. People are living in villages with no walls, with no standing army, no central government and we are told four times in the Book of Judges ... they have no king. For seven years Midianites are sweeping down " ... *like swarms of locusts ... not sparing any living thing.*" Eyewitnesses to locust attacks in modern Israel testify to seeing swarms that are ten miles deep and over twenty miles long. Like swarms of locusts, Israel's enemy is crop destroyin', plague deployin', quite anoyin', they are ... *indeed* ... mighty menacin' ... *Midianites*!

Do you have any Midianites in your life, enemies that appear like swarms of locusts, ten miles deep and over twenty miles long, "*not sparing any living thing?*" Sure you do ... so do I – historically the Church has called them the *SEVEN DEADLY SINS* – anger, pride, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, and sloth. They're fond of fightin', strike like lightnin' ... *man* they're frightnin'.

The chief mighty menacin' Midianite uses these *SEVEN DEADLY SINS* to "*steal, kill and destroy*" ev'ry man, woman, girl and boy. He goes by several names – "*murderer ... a liar and the father of lies ... a roaring lion seeking someone to devour ... the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan.*" Satan is marriage destroyin', perversion deployin', and more than just a little ... anoyin'.

Today the Lord is enlisting an army to defeat Midianites. He begins with a word of ... *AFFIRMATION* – Judges 6:12 – "*When the Angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, 'The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.'*" Gideon is threshing wheat, not with oxen and sledge on an open elevation, but in the cramped space of a wine press – the guy is afraid of his own shadow! Gideon is the Barney Fife of the Bible!!

And he might as well come from Mayberry! Gideon's home town is Ophrah – in Hebrew it means PLACE OF DUST. Now doesn't that sound like a town where you would want to launch a military campaign? PLACE OF DUST! So Gideon responds, "*How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.*" So why does the LORD recruit Gideon?

Welcome to the Book of Judges! The LORD recruits Ehud, a left-handed Benjamite – Shamgar with his "impressive" ox-goat – Deborah, "*a mother in Israel*" – Jephthah, a rejected robber with a big mouth – Samson, a sex-addicted Nazarite.

St. Paul writes in I Cor. 1:26: "*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.*" And yet today the LORD is recruiting us for his army! In spite of the fact that to a person we have skeletons in our closets that, if made public, we would die ... in embarrassment. In spite of the fact that to a person we have a daily propensity to prefer darkness rather than light

– lies instead of truth – pride instead of humility. Yet hear this loving and life-changing Word of **AFFIRMATION**: *‘The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.’*”

The General of this Army is equipping us for warfare. By faith in Jesus we have “... *the helmet of salvation – the breastplate of righteousness – the shield of faith – the sword of the Spirit – the belt of truth buckled around our waist and feet fitted with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.*” Indeed, God says it – faith believes it – we *are* armed and dangerous ... mighty warriors!

But with so many Midianites around him, Gideon not only needs a new view of himself, he needs a new view of his God. So the LORD moves from **AFFIRMATION** ... **TO REVELATION** ... Judges 6:24 – “*So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it ‘the LORD is Peace.’*” On this altar “*fire consumed the meat and the bread.*” *There is nothing left* ... as the LORD reveals that he is the God of wholeness, healing ... peace ... who puts what is broken ... back together again.

On another altar called ... Golgotha the LORD reveals his ultimate gift of peace. Not meat and bread, but the Father’s only Son is consumed on a Roman instrument of death – after the kiss of betrayal and the arrest, after the thorns and the spitting, after the seven words and the bleeding ... *there is nothing left.* This total loss would last for exactly three days. For in the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ our heavenly Father once and for all reveals that through the blood of Calvary he offers you the free gift of peace – peace that the world can never give – peace that passes all human understanding.

See God in his magnificent REVELATION at the cross. Exclaim with the words of the familiar song – “*My God is so big, so strong, and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do!*” Know that his peace puts your broken life back together again!

God is raising up an army with **AFFIRMATION** ... **REVELATION** ... **now CONFRONTATION** – Judges 6:25, the LORD says to Gideon – “*Tear down your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.*” Baal and Asherah are typical ancient Near Eastern deities that promise field and family fertility to those who perform their worship rites. These rites consist of mega doses of sex and drunkenness and every form of indecency.

What’s the Baal in your backyard? What’s the idol in your life? What are you allowing to erode your relationship with Jesus? Are you addicted to internet pornography, binge spending, binge drinking, binge church gossip? Whatever it is – the LORD says, “*Cut it down.*”

That’s what Gideon does – and so they nickname him Jerubaal – “*because he broke down Baal’s altar.*” Gideon refuses to be conformed to this present age – he refuses to compromise with evil – he refuses to blend in. To all recruits today, the LORD has a direct word of **CONFRONTATION**. “*See that Baal in your backyard? Cut it down!*”

Finally ... **MOTIVATION** – Gideon begins with 32,000 men – the ranks thin to 10,000 – then the army further decreases to the “imposing sight” of 300 Abiezrites ... who lap water like dogs! Gideon’s got less than 1% of his original army! The odds are now 450 to one against the fond of fightin’, strike like lightning, *man* ... they’re frightnin’, mighty menacin’ Midianites!! It looks impossible – so he needs **MOTIVATION**. Judges 6:34 – “*Then the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon.*” Gideon is not left alone; and so clothed with the Spirit of the living God, he makes mincemeat out of **120,000 Midianites**.

It looks impossible – doesn’t it? Believing, speaking, loving and living only for Jesus. But we are not left alone. The LORD clothes us with the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who will be with us forever. Baptism delivers him – Holy Communion celebrates him – the Gospel

imparts his power – to the end that we are Spirit-led and Spirit-filled – having *MOTIVATION* to begin, continue and end victorious ... in the name of Jesus!

And you thought all Gideon did was write the Bibles in hotels! No, for all his hesitation and weakness and doubt, finally Gideon, the Barney Fife of the Bible ... stood up ... to his enemies. And so shall we, by the grace of God stand up. *“From victory unto victory his army shall he lead; till every foe is vanquished and Christ is Lord indeed!”* Amen.

INVEST - Lent V

Jeremiah 32:25.

Its 588 BC. ... and Nebuchadnezzar – the Babylonian King – is establishing his headquarters at Riblah in Syria. Having destroyed the Judean fortresses at Lachish and Azekah, his troops are beginning to lay siege to the prize, the jewel, the crown ... **Jerusalem**. All commercial enterprises are collapsing. Epidemics and diseases are sweeping through the city. Property values are plummeting. And worst of all, the words of Jer. 19:9 are horrifically and apocalyptically coming true – *“I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, and they will eat one another’s flesh during the stress of the siege imposed on them by the enemies who seek their lives.”* In the midst of all this chaos Yahweh says to Jeremiah ... *“Buy the field!”*

The field referred to belongs to Jeremiah’s cousin Hanamel and is located in the prophet’s hometown of Anathoth, just three miles north of Jerusalem. Now I’m from Denver and I would leap at the opportunity to have some Mile High turf ... but hometown or not, who wants to invest in *this* land when the Babylonians are knocking at the door?

Its 588 BC. ... and every financial investment in Judah’s future is hopeless. It’s Enron, World Com and the Chicago Cubs together. The Jerusalem stock market is roaring ... like a bear. *“Buy the field?”* Jeremiah had better get some better financial advice ... or a different real estate agent ... or he’ll lose his shirt!

“My,” we gasp, clutching our bankbooks and billfolds, *“I sure wouldn’t buy that field in Anathoth. Why it’s not worth a plug nickel! Get lost! I could loose my shirt!”*

And so it goes – by nature you and I do everything we can to play it safe. We’re not going to make any risky investments. We’re not going to roll the dice and bet on the slow horse. No way!

When called upon to invest in a local ministry when returns are not immediate, we say: *“I’ll remain aloof, disconnected, uninvolved. I’ll make them pay.”* When called upon to nurture and care for our children at times we say under our breath: *“I can’t afford that kind of time ... with them.”* When called upon to reach out to unbelieving neighbors and employees and friends we write off the opportunity, *“I’m not investing my energy in ... THEM!”*

And so it goes – oh we might lay down a penny here and a penny there, just to look good, after all, we are the type that shows up at Midweek Lenten Services – but when called to spend large amounts of sweat and blood we conveniently chose safer investments that guarantee large dividends of personal promotion and personal pleasure.

“Besides, just look at what happens to people who make risky investments in the harvest. Remember the pastor who invested mega doses of time trying to move the people forward in evangelism ... only to watch his plan go up in flames? Remember the elder of that congregation who invested so much energy in church’s educational ministry just to watch his plan go up in

flames? And then there's that guy I know who is investing so much in his walk with the Lord – his social life is ... going up ... in flames!

“Buy the field??!” – in Anathoth? When Nebuzaradan is ready to enact Nebuchadnezzar's scorched earth policy? Jeremiah – play it safe! Why ... you could lose your shirt!

Jer. 32:8-9 – **“I knew that this was the word of Yahweh so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel.”** What???????

Well ... what else would you expect from someone who buries his underwear near the Euphrates River ... and digs it up years later? (Hanes or Fruit of the Loom?) What else would you expect from someone whose nickname is **“Terror on every side”**? What else would you expect from an unmarried social outcast, an inmate serving time, from someone who is so mesmerized with his death he says, and I quote, **“Cursed be the day I was born!”** *Three Dog Night* was right – Jeremiah was a bullfrog!

Jeremiah counts out seventeen shekels of silver, signs the deed to the land, gathers witnesses to the purchase, and then gives a sealed copy to his buddy Baruch. But why would someone make such a risky investment????? I'll let Jeremiah answer that for you.

Jer. 23:6 – **“The days are coming,’ utters Yahweh, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: YAHWEH TSIDQENU.”** “I have a King who is my righteousness ... that's why I bought the field.” Jer. 29:11 – **“For I know the plans I have for you,’ utters Yahweh, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”** “I have a God who promises me a glorious hope and future, that's why I bought the field.” Jer. 32:17 – **“Ah Lord Yahweh, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.”** “I have a God who can do anything ... that's why I bought the field.”

Sure Jeremiah's call documents in 1:10 call him to be **“... over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow.”** But it also calls him **“... to build and to plant.”** Building and planting means that there will be life beyond Babylon!

“Buy the field?” Invest in God's kingdom, invest in his harvest? YOU BET!

Israel's greatest prophet once made a similar outrageous investment. To name just a few risky investments – He offers living water to the Samaritan woman – healing to blind Bartimaeus – new life to the desperate Zachaeus – and resurrection to the dead Lazarus. And skeptics said ... *“Well ... what else would you expect from someone reared in ... Nazareth ... whose nickname is Beelzebub ... who is so mesmerized with his death that he says, and I quote: ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed.’”*

Because of his investment this prophet lost his shirt ... literally. Matt. 27:35 – **“When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.”** Jesus lost more than just his shirt. He lost his friends ... in Gethsemane. He lost the skin and muscle off his back ... at Gabbatha. He lost the presence of his Father ... at a hill called ... Golgotha.

Look. Spit and blood are caked to his cheeks. His lips are cracked and swollen. His lungs scream with pain. Stretched nerves threaten to snap as *death* twangs her morbid melody.

Why would someone make such an investment and intentionally lose ... it all?? SILENCE >>>>> I'll let Jeremiah answer that for you. Jer. 31:3 – **“Yahweh says, I have loved**

you with an everlasting love.” Jer. 31:33 – “This is the covenant I will cut with the house of Israel after that time,’ utters Yahweh, ‘I will put my Torah in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.”

And let the entire world know that three days later what was uprooted and torn down, destroyed and overthrown at Calvary ... was built and planted at an open tomb ... and they saw him ... *alive* ... in Jerusalem, Emmaus ... Galilee! Let the world know that there is nothing dead about our Jesus. There is not only life beyond Babylon – but there is life beyond guilt and despair – there is life beyond the grave!

Risky investments to a person – We have been “... *purchased and won from all sin, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or 17 pieces of silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death; so we may be his own” ... FOREVER!*

Motivated by this Gospel of salvation we are empowered to invest our time and energy in this glorious ministry we call the church. Alive in the baptismal flood and the Eucharistic feast we invest in our families. Bought in the blood we are not only called, but we are delighted to lose our shirts, indeed our very lives ... for Jesus Christ! ***“And though the city will be handed over to the Babylonians you, Lord Yahweh say to me, ‘Buy the field.’”*** And he did and and we will! Amen.

FINISH - Lent VI

1 Kings 11:3.

It's easy as pie to begin -its tougher than nails to finish. Pick your pie ...it seemed that easy. Pretenders to the throne Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah had been hosed. Enemies of the throne Joab, Abiathar and Shimei had been slam-dunked. Anointed by Zakok as king of Israel at the Gihon Spring, Solomon came out of the starting blocks like a greyhound after jack-rabbits. All the money was on Solomon, this the 10th of David's 17 sons.

In I Kings 3:7 he calls himself a NAAR – a kid, ...but we would say Solomon was a kid wonder. He spoke 3,000 proverbs and his songs numbered 1,005. He described plant life from the cedars of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He gained control of two main international trading routes -the Via Maris along the Mediterranean Coast and the King's Highway that connected Elath to the south with Damascus to the north. The result was I Kings 4:25: ***“From Dan to Beersheva, Judah and Israel lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.”***

Solomon needed no lessons in Greek or Hebrew, no lectures on eschatology or angelology, no field work ...no vicarage. LWML problems? He says, ***“Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other.”*** Problem solved! Building problems? The scourge of the ministry? He says to Hiram, King of Tyre ***“My people will talk with your people”*** ...and this corporate merger brings about, among other projects, the Jerusalem temple, the royal palace and the chariot cities of Hazar, Meggido and Gezer.

If there was ever a sure-fire candidate for the ministry it was Solomon! For the first ten chapters of 1 Kings he's awesome! But... but... in the 11th chapter of 1 Kings our text says – ***“Solomon had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.”***

One summer night, the wife and I were sitting outside and there was this constant ZAP, ZAP, ZAP! It was the sound of bugs, bugs hitting a bug zapper. A light attracts them, they fly in

and get ...ZAPPED. You'd think bugs would see the tray littered with impulsive bugs. You'd think some bug would say, "Wait a minute, I'm not going to blindly follow my desires toward that light." But you know what? Bugs don't do that. And you know what? Neither does Solomon. Forgetting the words of his father David, "Yahweh is my light and my salvation" ...Solomon flies toward other lights, 1,000 to be exact. As a result... ZAP literally the text says "his wives turned his heart." ZAP goes the kingdom in I Kings 12. ZAP goes Solomon in all his glory! It's easy as pie to begin -it's tougher than nails to finish.

We're great at beginning! Unbridled enthusiasm, high energy, a never say die spirit. Like hot knives into butter, we tear into new projects, new classes, new relationships. But ...but ...as time goes on we get weary, fatigued, impatient. "It's a bore, a snore, a chore" ...until we say, **NO MORE!**" Then we zoom toward different lights, dazzling lights, deadly lights, at least 1,000 of them. Lights of pride, power, position, prestige, prominence, even pouting over poor, poor pitiful me. Then ZAP goes the joy of our salvation. ZAP goes passion for the lost. ZAP goes zeal for the Word. We all know what its like to fly toward godless lights and suddenly find ourselves lying in a tray littered with dead bugs.

Matthew 12:42 – "**One greater than Solomon is here.**" This King was also surrounded by lucrative lights. He began strong ...and he finished strong ...and for him it was tougher than nails. Because in addition to the nails, there was scourging, mocking, spitting,. beating, slapping, sweating, bleeding ...and crowing ...with thorns. Still, he finished ...in spite of his disciple's kiss of betrayal, in spite of his friends running for cover, in spite of his countrymen clamoring for his death, in spite of his Father's abandonment.

Look. Listen. The sky is dark. The other two are moaning. There he is, taking a deep breath and speaking his last word. John 19:30 records it - Tetelestai -it is finished! The veil rent. The blood poured. The curse removed. The sacrifice complete. Death defeated. Paradise restored. Tetelestia - a cry of defeat? By no means! Had it not been for the nails I dare say that a triumphant fist would have lifted toward the sky. This is a cry of fulfillment, completion, victory.

Tetelestia -perfect tense. Completed action, ongoing results. So today, just now, lackluster finishers like you and me get no ZAP from "on high." Instead, a Father's welcome. A Shepherd's embrace. A Friend's infinite love.

If the life of Solomon, David's great Son goes to show... it's easy as pie to begin ...then the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, David's greatest. Son, proves that though it was tougher than nails, he finished ...for you ...for me. Fellow beginners ..."**Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses ...Let us run with endurance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Beginner and Finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**"

In this cloud of witnesses is Moses ...Moses who registered last for classes and got Advanced Obscurity; Remedial Waiting, Loneliness 101 and Introduction to Working for Your Father-In-Law for 40 Years ...but he finished strong. At the end, Deut. 34:7 –"**Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.**"

Also in this cloud is Joshua surrounded by ten spies who needed a check up from the neck up, whose first job was a 40 year stint in the Sinai desert, but he finished strong. At the end, Joshua 24:15 –"**Chose this day whom you will serve ...As for me and my house we will serve Yahweh.**" And then these words for the ages –"**Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes minus one, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was**

shipwrecked, J spent a night and a day in the open sea." In the dark, dank, deadly Mamertine Prison in Rome Paul finished strong. II Tim. 4:7, ***"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith."***

The entire cloud of witnesses demonstrates that in the fight between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins -not through strength, -but through ~ endurance.

Finishing strong doesn't mean finishing first – it doesn't mean finishing without blood, sweat and tears. Finishing strong means daily "fixing our eyes on the world's only true Light, Jesus Christ, whose Word and Sacraments empower and guarantee – ***"He who began a good work in you, will finish it on the day of Christ Jesus."*** Amen.

REFUGE - Maundy Thursday

Joshua 20:7-9

The text is a list. Now, preaching from a list can be sermonic suicide ... a certain sleeper. Its best to avoid lists ...shun lists ...never preach on lists.

Nevertheless, the text from the book of Joshua is ...a list. Now if you are into genealogies, census reports and tabulations ... lists, then in the second half of Joshua you have come to the pot at the end of the rainbow! After the conquest, and beginning in chapter 12, is the list of defeated Amorite and Canaanite kings. Then, in staccato-like fashion from chapters 13 to 19 are lists of cities and lands and rivers and lakes and borders of Manasseh, Reuben, Gad, Caleb, Judah, Ephraim, Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulon, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, Dan and last but not least ...Joshua himself. To those lists add this, our text-Joshua 20:7-9

"Its true," you say, "Sermonic suicide ...a certain sleeper!"

Perhaps not so fast. This list of cities runs from north to south in Canaan and then south to north in the Transjordan. Spread out over all of the Promised land, they are intended to be an ever-present help in trouble. Kedesh, Shechem, Hebron, Bezer, Ramoth and Golan are certainly not household names ...for us, the uninitiated, they mean little and nothing, just a list.

But ...but ...if you were on the run in ancient Israel... this list meant, why it meant ...everything! Let me explain ...in Israelite culture if someone in your family was killed, your relatives would call a meeting and somebody would be appointed as a "blood avenger." This blood avenger was a representative from the family who was to find the killer and release his neck from the burden of having to carry a head. Admittedly, it was a bit crude, but it kept law and order. Of course, the major problem with such a system was an accidental death. Using Deut. 19:5 as an example, a man goes into a forest with his neighbor to cut wood. As he swings his axe to chop down a tree, the axe's head flies off, hits his neighbor, and kills him. Now what happens? The dead man's family calls a meeting, and they appoint a blood avenger ... and they don't choose rotund uncle Earl... no, it's fleet footed cousin Nick. And Nick's orders are clear, *"Chase the guy with the loose axe head and kill him!"*

I bet you're saying, *"That's not fair. He didn't mean to kill his neighbor. He just had a loose axe-head!"* You're right. But no one knew what else to do. No one, that is, except Yahweh, the God of Israel. It's in his heart to provide cities of refuge all over the land so that they function as an ever-present help in trouble!

In the battle hymn of the Reformation - EIN FESTE BURG INS UNSER GOTT - Luther describes the one chasing us - *"The old evil Foe, now means deadly woe ...Tho' devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us ... This world's prince may still, scowl fierce as he will... With dread craft and might he arms himself to fight. On earth he has no equal!* The avenger of

blood comes to kill and steal and destroy. We see him in the rear-view mirror... we feel his hot breath behind us ...we know what it's like to run and run and run for our very lives!!!

As tempter he's chasing after us screaming, *"Whatever it is you want to do, Just do It. Have some anger ...act It out. Have some sexual fantasies, go ahead, full throttle."* *"Have some gossip ...let it fly."* As deceiver he continues with these words, *"There are no limits, no consequences, no responsibilities ...ready, set, go!"*

We give in to these temptations and deceptions and then, as accuser he plants his foot upon our necks, saying, *"Now that you've said this, thought this, done this, drank this, smoked this, saw this... God is finished with you!"* The strategy reminds me of a girl in my high school: RUSH 'EM, MUSH 'EM, CRUSH 'EM ...FLUSH 'EM.

Now our text speaks of a refuge for those who kill accidentally, unintentionally, without premeditation. That leaves us out ...for countless times we have sinned intentionally, with premeditation, with malice aforethought... making us easy prey for the lion seeking to devour us. His strategy is clear, *"I'll chase....until I kill you!"* And the corpses of failed Christians are all around to see.

No one knows what to do ...except Yahweh, the God of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's in his heart to provide a city of refuge that is ever-present help in trouble!

The cities of refuge find fulfillment in him who is not only similar to yet greater than Joshua and Jonah, Melchizekek and Moses, tabernacle and temple ... but in the one who also similar to, yet greater than any city of Refuge. Jesus Christ is the final expression of Yahweh's heart for a safe-place, an asylum, a sanctuary, a harbor, a mighty fortress, a refuge, an ever-present help in trouble! ***"For the accuser of our brothers who accuses them before our God day and night has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb!"***

So run not aimlessly run not hopelessly run not desperately, but today, run to the Refuge. It was Luther who pounded the table at Marburg with, HOC EST CORPUM MEAM ... ***"THIS IS MY BODY."*** Our ever-present help in trouble. For the forgiveness and love and mercy and salvation that was accomplished at Calvary is now present in the bread and wine by the power of the word... real body and real blood... at the table set before us in the presence of our enemy! Now to the casual-observer... this real present help in trouble with *sursum corde, sanctus, verba, agnus dei, nunc dimitis* is a list like Shechem, Hebron, Bezer, Ramoth, Golan ... just a list!

But to the baptized, to the instructed, to repentant, to those of us who know what it's like be tempted, deceived, accused, chased, harassed, slam dunked, to those of us who know the run... this refuge, this gift, this list, means... why it means... everything! Amen

ALL - Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13 -53:12.

Kol ...In Hebrew. Pas ...in Greek. Omnis ...in Latin. Alles ...in German. Todos ...in Spanish. AII-ya'll ...in Texan. It's the most superlative word in any language. A-L-L ... all.

Siblings include ...total, complete, entire ...everything. Country cousins include ...the whole hog, the whole shebang, the whole enchilada ...the whole ball of wax.

ALL. The most superlative word for the most superlative section in the OT the fourth servant song of Isaiah ... He had it ...all.

Isaiah 52:13, "See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up." The Hebrew verbs translated "raised" and "lifted up" are used to describe only one other person in Isaiah ...and that's the King the prophet sees in 6: 1: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw Adonai seated on a throne high and lifted up."

This Adonai receives the cry of the seraphim in 6:3 "Holy, holy, holy." In 6:5 Isaiah calls him, "the King, General Yahweh." The Servant and Yahweh are one and the same ...a mystery not fully articulated until Jesus says in John 10:30, "***I and the Father are one.***" This Servant had it ...all.

He would need it ...because the fourth Servant song, composed by Isaiah of Jerusalem in the 8th century, was originally intended for 6th century exiles who were singing another song. Psalm 137, "***How can we sing the songs of Zion while in a foreign land?***"

This depressing, deadly dirge was in the same key as Israel's previous songs. Sinatra songs like, "*I did it my way.*" Billy Joel songs like, "*/ don't care what you say anymore, this is my life.*" Exiled ...in bondage ...stuck.

A few years ago a scientist did an experiment where he made cocaine available to monkeys. They would pull a lever and the feeding tray would give them a hit of cocaine. Soon the monkeys got addicted to the coke ...these were happy monkeys! But then the scientist began to hold the next fix. How many consecutive times do you think the average monkey would pull that lever to get the next fix? 12,800 times. Over and over and over and over again. "*Gotta have it ...gotta have it!*"

In like manner, our sin addicts us to. Gossip, anger, worry, laziness, excuses selfishness. Exiled ...in bondage ...stuck. Over and over and over and over again. '*gotta have it ...gotta have it ...gotta have it!*' The result? Far away from the Father in a foreign land, we sing our depressing, deadly dirge, "***How can we sing the songs of Zion while in a foreign land?***"

To such captives Isaiah sings a different song, "See my servant ...raised and lifted up." He had it all. Col. 2:9. "***For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.***" Hebrews 1:3: "***The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.***" Mary exclaims, "***I have seen the Lord.***" Peter gasps, "***We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.***" Climactically Thomas cries out, "***My Lord and my God!***"

Jesus isn't an assistant to the Father -he isn't the vice-president of the cosmos, a sort-of Dick Cheney of the universe -Jesus isn't a junior partner to the Father. No. He is a full-fledged member of the godhead, equal with the Father in every way, from eternity past. "*Homoousias ...Being of one substance with the Father.*" This Servant had it all.

This Servant gave it ...all. Jesus didn't appear on the landscape of this planet as an emperor, statesman, or investment banker. The all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present second person of the Trinity is described in these words of Isaiah 53:2, "***He grew up before him like a tender shoot.***" A tender shoot, vulnerable from the time of his birth. Bethlehem, swaddling clothes, Herod's wrath, the escape to Egypt.

"***He was despised and rejected by men.***" "***He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?***" ... "***By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.***" ... "***He ...said to them, 'Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.' But they laughed at him.***" ...And then ...the final nail in the coffin, "***They shouted, 'Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!'***"

"***Stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, crushed, punished ...led like a lamb to the slaughter ...cut off from the land of the living ...assigned a grave with the wicked.***" That's why Isaiah 52:14 says, "***Many were appalled at him -His appearance was disfigured beyond that of any man.***" This Servant gave it his all. Every last drop ...

This Servant delivers it ...all. Isaiah 53: 11, "***By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.***" The Servant delivers what captives need most... forgiveness. Forgiveness lays at the heart of Isaiah's own experience. 6:6-7, "***Then one of seraphs flew to me with a live coal in***

his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'

From the altar called Calvary our God touches us with blood-bought forgiveness. The absolution declares it. The font seals it. The table celebrates it. Romans 8:32, *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us ALL things?"* Philippians 4:19, *"And my God will meet ALL your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."* All. Total, complete, everything ...the whole enchilada ...the whole ball of wax. He had it. He gave it. He delivers it ...because it's part of the plan.

Isaiah 53:10 is marked off by the inclusio – *"It was Yahweh's will..."* Calvary isn't just a moving tragedy. It wasn't a stopgap measure. Nor was it the Father's unexpected knee-jerk response to a world plummeting towards destruction. *"It was Yahweh's will."* The cross was drawn into the original blueprint, written into the first script. Golgotha is the decisive plan of the Father before the creation of the world.

What does it mean? It means Jesus intentionally planted the tree from which his cross would be carved. It means he voluntarily placed Judas into the womb of a woman. It means he was the one who set in motion the political machinery that sent Pilate to Judea. And it means he didn't have to do it ...but he did it all ... FOR YOU ...FOR ME!

Our depressing, deadly dirge that knows only bondage, captivity, addiction ... *"How can we sing the songs of Zion while in a foreign land?"* is trumped in Isaiah's song that imparts liberation, forgiveness, freedom ...life ...abundant! When the words of the fourth Servant song enter our ears and strike our hearts ...we can't help but respond with the words of one more song. Written not by Isaiah but by Isaac Watts. *"Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a tribute far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life... my all."* Amen.

COME - The Resurrection of Our Lord

Isaiah 25:6-9.

"The Party's Over!" It can mean... *"Its 2:00am and I've got to go to work in six hours. Besides, everyone is leaving and my wife is probably still up ... you're all out of eats and drinks."* OR ...it can mean ...it's all over, the Fat Lady has sung, the curtain has gone down and Mighty Casey has struck out! It's this second sense of "The Party's Over!" -that coincides with the context of Isaiah 25:6-9, namely the cosmic judgment of Isaiah 24. Hear the word of Yahweh from Isaiah 24:8-9 – *"The gaiety of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of revelers has stopped, the joyful harp is silent ... No longer do they drink wine with a song."* Make no mistake about it ... the party's over!

And yet, after Yahweh's judgment in chapter 24, our text from Isaiah 25 states: *"On this mountain General Yahweh will prepare a feast."* Cosmic judgment will give way to cosmic mercy –fasting will give way to the feast -God's people will drink wine again... with a song! All because of the promise – *"Yahweh will swallow up death ...forever!"*

On this day we celebrate that Yahweh has done just that! You see, there is NOTHING dead about our Jesus. John 1:4 –*"In him was life and that life was the light of men."* John 6:35 – *"I am the Bread of Life."* John 6:66 – *"You have the words of eternal life."* John 10:10 - *"I have come that they may have life."* John 11:25 - *"I am the Resurrection and the Life."* John 14:6 – *"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life."* Climatically Paul throws a triumphant fist up in the air and shouts, *"Death has been swallowed up in victory."*

Far from being over... this party has just begun. And make no mistake about this either - Jesus of Nazareth is the life of this party. He's not some fable or fairy tale that we've made up inside our head -he's God and Son, he's risen from the dead!

"On this mountain GENERAL YAHWEH will prepare a feast." Its time to drink wine again... with a song! But every party brings a certain set of questions -the first one being - Who's invited?

Isaiah stresses that ALL are invited ...in the following ways. Twice he mentions the phrase **"All people."** Then **"all nations, all faces, all the earth."** Note the sequence -all people invites all ethnic groups, all nations invites all political groups, all faces invites all individuals - and, just in case we don't get it, Isaiah concludes with the words ...all the earth! All are invited!

John Carlson is a Lutheran pastor in Minnesota. A few years ago he noticed that in his town on the night of the Senior Prom only the posh, preppy, powerful, polished and popular kids went to the ...party. So he came up with the idea of holding a celebration for kids who couldn't get a date because they weren't all state and felt ...second rate! This prom was for them. Now Timex gives out watches to the kids who attend, other companies have joined in and now it's more popular than the real prom! Carlson calls it the Reject Prom.

Been rejected lately? Told you don't belong? Feeling second rate? Do you know about partner rejection? Peer rejection? Parental rejection? Parishioner rejection? Do you know about deep running... personal-rejection? All are invited.

The next question ...**"What about my appearance?"** Answer ... Come as you are. But, you say, **"My face bears the marks of worry. My shoulders are stooped from burdens. My lips are dirty from slander. My heart is hardened toward my spouse and children. My fingers are stuck accusing my brother. My arteries are clogged with bitterness and resentment."**

So you're thinking, **"What do you mean? Come as you are? I'm a spiritual mess!"** So am I ...so was Israel. Israel of Isaiah's day was clothed with this same disgrace of sin. Isaiah 1:6 - **"From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness"** in you. Their tear-filled faces bore the marks of this guilt and shame... so much so that our text says they covered their faces with shrouds and sheets.

But ...its COME AS YOU ARE! Luke 15:22: **"Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet ...let's have a feast and celebrate!"** The Father provides the proper attire for prodigals -Easter baptismal robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Come just as you are.

Third, what about party gifts?? No Gifts, Please. Let me explain it this way. I loved being a pastor in Broken Arrow, OK because, among other blessings, we had potlucks down to a theological art. The idea is that you bring some chips, she'll bring some dessert (make that pecan pie), I'll bring some salad, and make sure Robert Buffington brings the main course... Oh Robert Buffington, what a cook!

But for this celebration we can bring ...nothing. **"GENERAL YAHWEH will prepare ... will destroy ... will swallow up ... will wipe away ... will remove!"** He does it all! Luke 14:17 - **"At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready."**

No gifts, please... because our God puts everything on the table. These gifts were purchased at the cost of spitting, mocking, whipping, nailing, bleeding, sweating and dying. And now he lives to give the gifts on this table. And what awesome gifts - **"A feast of rich food, a banquet of aged wine -the best of meats and the finest of wines."** True body and true blood ...through which we receive - washing, cleansing, healing ...living ...forever!

Finally, with any party there is a... RSVP. Yahweh is so passionate about our response, he even gives us the words to respond with! Isaiah 25:9 - "*In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.'*"

That day is today, just now! So come joyfully, come expectantly, come triumphantly ... for with Sanctus and Verba and Agnus Dei the celebration begins - and with the final trumpet call it will be brought to consummation in the marriage feast of the Lamb in his kingdom with an endless, and I mean an endless... Hallelujah!

Brothers and sisters - Its time to drink wine again... with this song! "*The feast is ready. Come to the feast, the good and the bad. Come and be glad! Greatest and least, come to the feast!*" Amen.

SERMONS - For Easter Season

"Buried!" 2 Kings 13:14-21.

An old "*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*" TV show was about a woman in prison who became good friends with the prison caretaker. When a prisoner died he would ring the bell, get the body, put it in a casket ... and nail it shut. Then, placing the casket on a wagon, he would take it to the graveyard outside the prison walls and bury the corpse.

Knowing this routine, the woman devised an escape plan and shared it with this caretaker. "*The next time the bell rings,*" she said, "*I'll leave my cell and sneak into the coffin with the dead body. Nail the lid shut and take the coffin outside the prison with me in it. Bury the coffin,*" she continued, "*and because there will be enough air for me to breathe for some time, you can come back to the graveyard that night, dig up the coffin, and set me free.*"

The caretaker agreed to the plan.

One day this woman heard the ringing of the death bell. She arose, walked down the hallway, found the coffin containing the dead body and climbed in. Soon she heard the pounding of hammer and nails. The coffin was lifted onto the wagon and taken outside to the graveyard. After the dirt was poured on the coffin she began to giggle out loud, "*I'm free, free!*"

Feeling curious she lit a match to identify the prisoner beside her ... and in the glimmer of light she discovered that she was laying next to ... the dead caretaker! In classic Alfred Hitchcock fashion this final scene fades as we hear the woman **screaming** ... screaming ... screaming ... then silence.

Ever been buried like that before? Sure you have, and so have I.

We've been buried in questions – "*If God is so good, why do I hurt so bad?*" "*If Jesus is the light, why am I in the dark?*"

We've been buried in disappointment – "*You're just not like your older brother!*" "*You're just not like our last boss!*"

We've been buried in responsibilities – "*Here's a 30 page case study – be ready to discuss it tomorrow. Honey, the kids have softball and baseball games ... tomorrow.*"

We've been buried in the past – the minute we lost our temper, the hour we lost our purity, the day we lost control ... the years we lost our priorities.

And on top of it all – literally – we're buried in our daily self-assertion, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency and self-will.

Buried, boxed in, six feet under, again, right here, just now – it's dark, tight, claustrophobic and the enemy has nailed the lid shut. And if there isn't screaming, there are heavy sighs and lifeless looks and empty hearts.

Buried, boxed in, six feet under – so also the man in our text: ***“Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man’s body into Elisha’s tomb.”***

Talk about adding insult to injury. Okay, so he’s dead, right? *This is not a good thing.* Neither is the fact that the Deuteronomistic historian doesn’t bother to state his name, tribe, or even his home town. It gets worse. During the funeral procession some malicious Moabites show up looking to capitalize on Israel’s weakness during her Aramean occupation. The funeral is suddenly interrupted and the final nail is hammered into the coffin as the dead man is half-hazardly thrown away ... like a hot potato!

But, as Yahweh’s direction would have it, the pall bearers throw a strike, they hit the bulls-eye, bingo and jackpot and grand slam and yes ... the corpse lands on Elisha!

And in the 9th century BC if you were buried, Elisha was your man. He parts the waters of the Jordan, clears the spring outside of Jericho of impurities, promises a son to the barren Shunammite woman and then resurrects the child from the dead. He nullifies poisonous gourds planted by one of the prophetic guilds, feeds one hundred men with twenty loaves of barley and some fresh ears of grain, heals Naaman of leprosy, blinds a Syrian raiding party and leads the captive into captivity into Samaria. This Elisha even retrieves a lost ax-head by causing it to float upon the water!

But the most awesome work was done ... in his death. ***“When the body touched Elisha’s bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.”***

Just like his mentor Elijah, Elisha is called ***“The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”*** Meaning what? Meaning that when defeat seemed certain ... these prophets marshaled the power of horses and chariots for a stunning come-from-behind victory!

Ah ... but there is an even greater prophet in our midst, and because we’re buried, boxed in and six feet under, he’s our Man. This prophet parts the *heavens* when he is at the Jordan, clears the *temple* in Jerusalem of its impurities, resurrects the widow’s son at Nain, Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus. He nullifies the poisonous platitudes planted by the Pharisees, feeds over *five thousand* men with five loaves of bread and two fish, heals lepers, *binds* the strong man and leads the captive into captivity. This Jesus retrieves not an axe head, but a four drachma coin from a fish caught by Peter!

But the most awesome work was done ... in the frailty of this Son. It was high noon at the OK Corral and ***“the chariots and horsemen of Israel”*** ... put down his gun! *“Go ahead,”* he said, *“Take your best shot – shoot me!”* And the enemy marshaled every weapon of mass destruction. Judas, Pilate, Herod ... thorns, nails, spear ... darkness, sweat and **screaming** ... screaming ... screaming ... until there was total ... silence.

It all ended *“crucified, dead and buried.”* Nothing is as bottomless as a pit, as lifeless as a grave, as hopeless as a tomb. Smell the mildew, the odor of blood, the of stench death. See the confines, the darkness, the sealed stone ...

Witness the charred marks of a divine explosion to life! ***“The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”*** ***“Jesus Christ is Risen Today”*** – ***“I Know that My Redeemer Lives!”*** – ***“Ye Sons and Daughters of the King”*** – ***“Jesus Lives, the Victory’s Won”*** – ***“This Joyful Eastertide”*** – ***“The Strife is O’er, the Battle Won”*** ... ***“Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds!”*** **There is nothing dead about our Jesus!**

Cramped by the chaos, suffocating in the stillness, trapped in transgressions and sins, screaming in the silence, let's light a match and see who we're buried with because if we're buried with a prophet we come to life ... and stand up on our feet!

We'll get this – Romans 6:4: ***“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life!”***

Again ... Colossians 2:12: ***“Having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”***

Through water and the Word you and I have been buried *and raised* with ***“The chariots and horsemen of Israel.”*** Our certain defeat is turned into a stunning, bottom of the ninth inning, come-from-behind ... victory. And so our buried, boxed in scream is forever changed into a baptized, blood bought, forgiven, Spirit-filled ... endless ... Hallelujah! Amen.

“You Can't Keep a Good Man Down.” Proverbs 24:16

He was serene, settled, secure ...enjoying the fruits of a successful career ... when one day the bottom dropped out. He was told to uproot his family and begin a new chapter in life. As a result he witnessed increased tension in his marriage, watched his first-born son leave home, warned his nephew's wife to no avail (she died as a result), watched another son come within inches of death... but in spite of it all, the Scripture says of Abram, ***“He believed in Yahweh and he credited it to him as TSEDEKA - righteousness.”*** You can't keep a good man down.

His first call began with high hopes and courageous convictions ...when one day the bottom dropped out. His sermons were ripped up, literally... his office became the bottom of a pit, literally... his nickname was hardly one associated with pastoral success ...*Maggor Misaveev* – terror on every side. He became a limp rag doll in the mouths of snarling Dobermans. But in spite of it all Jeremiah confessed of the coming Davidic king, ***“This is the name by which he will be called, Yahweh TSIDKENU - our righteousness.”*** You can't keep a good man down.

That's exactly what our text says: ***“For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again; but the wicked are brought down by calamity.”*** The Book of Proverbs looks at life in terms of two ways. For example ... chapters 2-3 speak of the wise son and the foolish son ...in chapter four the path full of light and the way of deep darkness ...in chapter 9 Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly. In our text, reality is spoken of in the most classic of two ways... the way of the righteous -TSADIK ...and the way of the wicked -RESHAIM ... And RESHAIM are consumed with one word, one four-letter word, one word straight from the pit of hell... QUIT. ***“The wicked are brought down by calamity.”***

“It's too hard, it's too painful, it's too tough ...I won't get back up, I won't try again, I'm throwing in the towel... I QUIT!” Our inability to rise again after a calamity is seen in our abandoned dreams, our lukewarm faith, our mediocre ministries. Oh ...we know the marathon metaphors. ***“Run in such a way as to get the prize.”*** ***“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”*** ***“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.”*** But so often, expecting a quick jog rather than a marathon, when calamity comes, when the going gets rough... we quit.

As a parish pastor in this "why sweat-it society" ...I saw young people right after confirmation quit ...I saw husbands quit ...I saw elders quit ...I saw fellow pastors burn out and quit ...but worst of all... I saw myself ...quit ...so often settling for a passionless life.

Do not be deceived ...you and I are simul TSADIK et RASHA. And this RASHA, this old Adam, this unregenerate flesh looks at calamities in family life, church life, seminary life ...and screams, *"It's too hard, it's too painful, it's too tough ...I won't get back up, I won't try again, I'm throwing in the towel... I QUIT!"*

But ...but, there are two ways in Proverbs ...true, RESHAIM, but also ...in our text ...TSADIK -the root occurs 523x's in the Hebrew Bible -94x's in Proverbs alone. You see, Proverbs is not a collection of ahistorical, areligious, aliturgical pithy sayings. Its not an anthology of secular, universal, humanistic, timeless truths. Rather, the book contains ideas of prayer, vows, sacrifices, sacred lots, worship and atonement. It means even in our text, the TSADIK is in covenant with Yahweh. Just like Gen. 15:6 ... ***"Abram believed in Yahweh and he credited it to him as righteousness - TSEDEKA."*** The TSADIK standing is accounted, credited. Just like Jer. 23:6 ... ***"This is the name by which he will be called, Yahweh TSIDKANU ... OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS."*** The TSADIK standing has Yahweh as its only source from alpha to omega.

Though stylistic of Hebrew, our text does speak of the wicked in the plural (Reshaim) and the righteous (TSADIK) in the singular. Linguistically, and ultimately theologically, there is only one who is perfectly, completely, wholly and eternally righteous. ***"For though this righteous man falls seven times, he rises again."***

Defeat couldn't keep him down. Luke 22 -***"Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest."*** Ministry defeat ...Mark 14 -***"When he came back, he ~ found them sleeping."*** Relational defeat ... Mark 15 -***"They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him."*** Public defeat ...Matthew 27 -***"And at the ninth hour he cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'"*** Total defeat. The devil couldn't keep him down. He gave it his best shot ...beginning with Herod and the butchering of babies at Bethlehem. Then there were the 40 days and the 40 nights and the thricefold, ***"If you are the Son of God ..."*** Then, in staccato-like fashion, Gethsemane, Gabbatha, Golgotha. And when he cried out, ***"Tetelestai"*** all the demons of hell jumped up with glee shouting, ***"We did it ...the ultimate calamity! He's down, down and out!"*** I John 3:8 ... ***"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."*** Death couldn't keep him down. Acts 2:24 - ***"But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."*** The ultimate Mission Impossible! Hold him in the grave, lock it, seal it, guard it, secure it, man it ...there, he's down ...and out! IMPOSSIBLE!

For though this righteous man falls seven times, he rises again ...Bodily! Physically! Forever! ***"Death no longer has dominion over him!"*** There is nothing dead about our Jesus! Nothing in all creation could keep Jesus ...this GODI Man down!

The result? From St. Paul- ***"He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our ...dikaiosin righteousness!"*** From Luther - ***"That I may be his own and serve him in everlasting righteousness."*** From Melancthon in Apology IV - Not righteousness infused, earned, or deserved. But righteousness extra nos - imputed - forensic - alienum - declared - juridical - a passive righteousness. Sheer, free, total gift!

From our baptismal liturgy – “Receive this white garment to show that Christ has taken away and borne your sin and put upon you his perfect righteousness. So shall you in faith ever stand before him.”

From our hymnody – “Thy strong word bespeaks us righteous.”

TSADIK – a new standing ... a new life ... purchased in blood, sealed in the resurrection, delivered in baptism. The result? ***“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”*** For though these righteous men and women fall seven seven times rise again. We are loved and forgiven and Holy Spirit empowered to rise ... again and again and again!

The result? QUIT is no longer in our vocabulary. So take an exacto-knife and cut it out of every English, Greek, Latin, Spanish, German, French and Hebrew dictionary you own. We won't ever back up, slow up and we won't ever, ever, ever give up. He is risen ... we are risen ... ***“He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord!”*** Amen.

“The Best is Yet to Come!” – Exodus 15:10 – ***“But you blew with your Spirit, and the sea covered them.”***

It all began ... with a new king in Egypt, ***“who knew not Joseph”*** and made Israel his slaves. From Exodus 1: ***“The Egyptians put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor ... who worked them ruthlessly ... They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields.”*** With genocidal fury the Egyptians even attempt to kill Hebrew baby boys by throwing them into the Nile River.

But ... it gets worse! Because Pharaoh gives these orders to his slave drivers, ***“No longer supply the people with straw for making bricks, let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota.”*** And so the slaves – mired in the mud of the Eastern Nile Delta – are beaten with whips and begin to hyperventilate. Exodus 6:9 says the slaves are literally ***“short of breath, wind, or spirit.”*** Israel is going to ... die!

But ... it gets ... worse! Because as the slaves attempt an end run, fleeing from Egypt as fast as they can, they see Pharaoh madly chasing after them ... they spot the chariot drivers whipping their horses into a violent frenzy ... and in the distance they can hear the war cry Egypt's choicest warriors, ***“You'll have hell to pay!”***

But ... it gets worse! Breathless from the run, Israel falls down, exhausted, near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon ... surrounded and stuck on all sides. Exodus 14:11 – ***“They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?”***

It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day ... because it gets even worse! The enemy begins boasting, ***“I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy you.”***

We know this enemy ... who enslaves and steals and kills and destroys ... and leaves us mired in the mud. We've felt his accusing whip slice open our past. We've heard his war cry, ***“Because you thought this, watched this, did this, said this ... ‘You'll have hell to pay!’”*** And then, feeling his hot breath on the backs of our necks, we hear him calmly whisper, ***“I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy you.”***

Jesus calls this enemy a **“murderer and a liar and the father of lies.”** Peter calls him **“a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.”** Paul describes him as **“the god of this age who blinds our minds.”** And in Revelation 9:11 John calls him, Abaddw,n (that’s Hebrew) and Apollu,wn (that’s Greek). Both words mean **DESTROYER**. We see destroyed pastors, students and churches ... around us. We feel destroyed faith, hope and love in us.

Just now, trying to run from this wicked slave driver we fall down exhausted ... surrounded and stuck on all sides. Hyperventilating, there’s a part of us that feels as though everything we’ve worked so hard for is ... going to die!

Just when Israel was as good as dead our text from Exodus 15:10 proclaims: **“But you blew with your Spirit, and the sea covered them.”**

Water and Spirit are Yahweh’s means of salvation ... that’s why the song of the Sea doesn’t mention him as having even one instrument of human warfare. The sword Pharaoh draws isn’t opposed by another sword. The chariot he rides isn’t met by another chariot. The army he leads clashes with no human fighting force. And as the song celebrates that Israel has been born again by water and the Spirit Moses sings, **“Yahweh is a Man of war, Yahweh is his name!”**

Zechariah 4:6 gets to heart of this military strategy. **“Not by might and not by power, but by my Spirit says General Yahweh.”** As the defeat of the Hitlerian horde is total – still wet from the Sea of Reeds – Israel celebrates, **“Yahweh is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation!”**

But ... it gets better! Because there would be an even greater Exodus ... though it also begins ... with an evil king who in genocidal fury gives orders to throw *the* Israel into the butcher’s blade.

Other enemies join the assault. Pharisees plot with Herodians. Detractors say he’s demon possessed. Scribes test him with Torah trivia. His brothers ride and ridicule him. Sadducees posture with Pentateuchal pride. But the final assault begins with 30 pieces of silver ... and he’s sold away ... as a slave.

Breathless from the run, Jesus falls down exhausted in the garden. He’s near the Kidron Valley, between the Mt. of Olives and Jerusalem, opposite Bethany surrounded and stuck on all sides. And make no mistake about it – *he’ll have hell to pay!*

Once arrested he’s kissed, arrested, bound, accused, blindfolded, mocked, tried, stripped ... and they beat him into a bloody pulp. The enemy begins licking his chops saying, **“I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy you.”**

Blood-soaked and spiked to a tree ... for six hours that Friday his lungs scream for air. Israel is again **“short of breath.”** He knows he’s going ... to die!

But (and make no mistake about this ... either!) ... Yahweh would blow his Spirit ... once more ... and make a way in the sea to bring his Israel safely through death to life forevermore! **“He is not here! He has risen just as he said!”** And then, **“Rabboni!”** And then, **“I have seen the Lord!”** And then for the ages, **“My Lord and my God!”**

But ... it gets better! Because Yahweh still blows his Spirit, you and I – as good as dead – have been born again! With liberating power the Spirit of Yahweh hovered over our baptismal waters and freed us from our addictions that kill, steal and destroy. Walking wet in baptismal promises we’re no longer mired in mud because **“the body of sin has been done away with and we are no longer slaves to sin.”** That’s Romans 6.

In Romans 8 Paul is completely beside himself: **“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry,**

"Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."

Which means the best is yet to come! Because Yahweh will blow his Spirit one last time ... to sound a trumpet that will usher in the final Exodus. There will be a Rider on a White Horse – he will seize the beast and the false prophet and the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan and will hurl them all into the lake of fire – and they will ***"sink to the depths like a stone!"***

Then forever free of all slavery ... we will sing forever at the Lamb's high feast, ***"Yahweh is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation!"*** And there will be an endless, Hallelujah! In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Breaking Down the Gates!" Isaiah 45:2: ***"I will break down the gates of bronze."***

Gates, gates and more gates! Stuck in Babylon Israel is surrounded by ... bronze ... gates! Oh, sure, there are ziggurats and canals ... and they could never forget that detestable statue of Marduk. But it's the gates ... and especially the now world-renown Ishtar gate – housed in Berlin – that locked them in ... with no way out.

The gates were the brain-child of Nabopolassar – the founder of the neo-Babylonian empire – and his son Nebuchadnezzar. Herodotus and Xenophon – ancient Greek historians – write that in late 7th and early 6th century B.C. hundreds and hundreds of bronze gates were erected in and around Babylon, making it the world's most fortified city. And these bronze gates have Israel locked in ... with no way out.

Trapped, tortured and tormented by these gates, Israel has no access to the Judean hills, the Jordan River, or to the city of the great King ... *Jerusalem*. Israel can only dream of the land promised to her patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Israel will never again smell the sacrifices and sing the psalms ... neither will she celebrate Passover, Yom Kippur or Succoth. Israel appears forever locked in ... with absolutely no way out.

But ... ***"This is what Yahweh says to his Messiah to Cyrus – I will go before you and ... break down the gates of bronze"***

Meet Cyrus – Yahweh's Messiah. In Isaiah 44:28 Yahweh even calls him my shepherd. This Cyrus ... *the Second* – to be exact – in 550 B.C. gained the devotion of all the Persian tribes with ... singular ease. So remarkable was his military muscle that once he marched into Armenia and won a victory over the Lydians ... when their horses ran away because they smelled Persian camels!

But now its 539 and this Cyrus must go up against Babylon ... and her gates! The city begins bracing for an all-out battle. Inhabitants are stocking their shelves with food and water to prepare for the long siege. The military is getting armed up, revved up, psyched up and pumped up.

But when Cyrus surrounds the city, its citizens – rather than fight to the last man – rather than attempt a *"Custer's Last Stand"* – open up ... the gates. Cyrus walks in and takes the city with ... singular ease. In Isaiah 45:13 Yahweh says: ***"I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: He will set my exiles free."***

All this explains why – in Isaiah 22:22 – the prophet celebrates that what Yahweh (quote) ***"opens ... no one can shut."*** So when guilt stands in the way, Yahweh promises, ***"Though***

your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” When gloom and doom stand in the way, *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.”* When huge obstacles stand in the way, *“Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.”* When dryness and deadness stand in the way Yahweh opens, *“pools of water in the desert, and springs in the parched ground.”* When blindness and captivity and bondage stand in the way Yahweh’s Servant comes to, *“open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”*

Oh my!

But this is just Isaiah ...

For a man locked into his past – named Jacob – Yahweh opens up heaven ... at Bethel. For a nation surrounded by the enemy Yahweh opens the waters ... at *Yam Suph*. For the people who lament – *“Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone,”* Yahweh opens graves ... in Babylon. And in Malachi 3:10 with a loving gleam in his eye Yahweh promises, *“I will open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it ...”*

Do you feel as though the enemy has locked the gate to your future and thrown away the key? Do you feel possessed by your past, mired by your malaise, taunted by your transgressions and sins ... with no way out?

Oh my! Do *I ... ever!!!*

All I can see are gates, gates and more gates! There is so much more I want to be ... but, *“I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin and death.”* There is so much more I want to say ... but, *“I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.”* There is so much more I want our church to become but, *“I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there beside me.”*

Hear the word of Yahweh ... from Isaiah 43, *“Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing ...”* In these last days Yahweh has raised up his greatest Messiah to ... *break down the gates of bronze.*”

Opening day was at his baptism where one witness writes, *“... as he was praying, heaven was ... opened.”* Spirit-empowered this Messiah then ministers in Palestine to open eyes and ears and mouths and hearts ... he even opens ... *graves.*

But the grandest opening was yet to come – after Gethsemane, Gabbatha and Golgotha ... Rev. 1:18 – *“I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”*

Oh my!

John outruns Peter to the tomb. Mary cries out *“Rabboni!”* The Emmaus disciples feel their hearts burn. Thomas sees the scars and exclaims, *“My Lord and my God!”*

“The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah and he will reign forever and ever – Hallelujah!”

It is our duty and delight to shout to the world that in his Son the Father has broken *“down the gates of bronze”* ... so the tomb is ... open. His arms are ... open. And the loving heart of Jesus is open wide ... just for you!

Jesus the Nazarene breaks down gates of guilt and shame ... hurt and pain. He breaks down gates that trap and torture and torment ... us. And the gates of hell will never prevail

against the shed blood, the baptismal power, the resurrection life ... or the mission of the church of Jesus Christ! ***“If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!”***

But ... but ... but, there is one more gate that Jesus longs to break down, just here, just now ... and all the days of our lives ...

What in the world could that be?????

“O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise!”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Passion Words of the Old Testament

Mid-Week Services for Lent 2005

The theme of our Mid-Week Lenten services will be: “Passion Words of the Old Testament.” Dr. Reed Lessing, the developer of this series, explains: “The Old Testament is chock - full of passion themes - from the serpent being crushed in Genesis 3:15 to Isaiah's fourth Servant Song. Yet this workshop will look at some of the lesser-known Old Testament passion themes and focus on them by means of single words. Examples include: Gideon's call by Yahweh (ENLIST!) and Elisha providing oil for a poor woman (NOTHING!).”

Mid-Week I (Ash Wednesday) – Feb. 9, 2005

Theme: **“Mine”** (Exodus 20:17)

Mid-Week II – February 16, 2005

Theme: **“Nothing”** (II Kings 4:1-7)

Mid-Week III – February 23, 2005

Theme: **“Delivered”** (Isaiah 40:1-11)

Mid-Week IV – March 2, 2005

Theme: **“Enlist”** (Judges 6:16)

Mid-Week V – March 9, 2005

Theme: **“Invest”** (Jeremiah 32:25)

Mid-Week VI – March 16, 2005

Theme: **“Finish”** (I Kings 11:3)

“PASSION WORDS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT”
SUMMARY OF THEMES AND WORSHIP ELEMENTS

Mid-Week I (Ash Wednesday) – Feb. 9, 2005

Theme: “Mine” (Exodus 20:17)

Passion Reading: “In the Upper Room” (Matthew 26:14-30)

Hymns: LW 109/TLH 140; Communion – LW 101, 359/TLH 354, 388;

Closing Verse – LW 375, v. 5/TLH 399, v. 6

Mid-Week II – February 16, 2005

Theme: “Nothing” (II Kings 4:1-7)

Passion Reading: “Gethsemane” (Matthew 26:31-56)

Hymns: LW 361/TLH 376; Closing Verse – LW 224, v. 4/TLH 298, v. 5

Mid-Week III – February 23, 2005

Theme: “Delivered” (Isaiah 40:1-11)

Passion Reading: “Trial and Denial” (Matthew 26:57 – 27:10)

Hymns: LW 116/TLH 153; Closing Verse – LW 431, v. 8/TLH 458, v. 8

Mid-Week IV – March 2, 2005

Theme: “Enlist” (Judges 6:16)

Passion Reading: “He Suffered Under Pontius Pilate” (Matthew 27:11-31)

Hymns: LW 96/TLH 149; Closing Verse – LW 305, v. 1/TLH 451, v. 1

Mid-Week V – March 9, 2005

Theme: “Invest” (Jeremiah 32:25)

Passion Reading: “Condemned and Crucified” (Matthew 27:32-44)

Hymns: LW 98/TLH 158; Closing Verse – LW 91, v. 7/TLH 403, v. 3

Mid-Week VI – March 16, 2005

Theme: “Finish” (I Kings 11:3)

Passion Reading: “Death and Burial” (Matthew 27:45-66)

Hymns: LW 115/TLH 175; Closing Verse – LW 116, v. 4/TLH 153, v. 4

Maundy Thursday – March 24, 2005

Theme: “Refuge” (Joshua 20:7-9)

Gospel: John 13:1-17, 34

Additional Hymn Suggestion: see hymn by Tim Wesemann, in workshop materials.

Good Friday – March 25, 2005

Theme: “All” (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12)

Gospel: John 18:1 – 19:43 or John 19:17-30

Easter Sunday – March 27, 2005

Theme: “Come” (Isaiah 25:6-9)

Gospel: John 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10