

MADISON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

# **CONNECTED**

2021 Lenten Devotions

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A seven-week journey  
to discover how you can  
be eternally connected  
with Christ

LENT 2021

MADISON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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# OBSERVING LENT

Over the past year, our connections with others have suffered. We've been isolating at home, maintaining social distance in public places, quarantining, and even refraining from celebrating holidays and special events with family members who don't live with us. This disconnection has taken a toll on our emotional and spiritual health. We were not created for isolation, but for connection.

The most important connection in my life is my connection with Jesus Christ. Yet the challenges, hardships, temptations . . . and just the busyness of this life . . . sometimes cause me to neglect time with Christ, which then weakens or damages this connection.

The season of Lent gives me the chance to focus my attention on strengthening my walk with Christ. Through daily Bible reading, contemplation, prayer and fasting, I have the opportunity to return to my first love – the love for my Savior that marked the beginning of my faith journey.

Lent also gives us, the body of Christ, the opportunity to join together in our pursuit of Christ. We can embark, together, on a spiritual journey to discover how we can be eternally connected with Christ. We'll see that God created us for a connection with Him that was broken by our sin. We'll celebrate God's promise to send a Savior to restore our connection – a Savior who became human like us to offer forgiveness and salvation to us so that we can follow Him in every aspect of our lives. We'll see that Jesus sacrificed His connection with His Father – at least for a short time – so that He would never lose His connection with us. And we'll be inspired to connect with Christ in ministry to this lost and hurting world.

I am excited to make this journey with you! I can't wait to hear how each of us will be renewed in our commitment to Christ and in our service to Him!

To God be the glory!  
Roberta

Dear God, we commit these days of Lent to you as we seek to hear Your voice, receive Your love and forgiveness, and join You in the work of Your kingdom here on earth. Amen.



FEBRUARY 17

## GENESIS 1:26-27

*Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

### CREATED IN HIS IMAGE

Day 6. God had created the universe, time and seasons, flora and fauna. Yet, His work was incomplete; what was missing was a companion. No other creation was made in God's image or given a purpose. We alone were created to be in communion with God. Read Genesis 2; Adam communed daily with God in the Garden until he sinned, the consequence of which was separation from God. Our communion was broken, and there was nothing we could do to restore our relationship.

Lent reminds us that we are all sinners who have fallen short of God's glory. Jesus' work on the cross is the only way we can experience perfect communion with God. I approach Lent with the expectation of a renewed, more powerful walk with the Lord on the other side of this period of self-denial – especially this year, when I have been more distracted than ever. I have allowed the noise of current circumstances to drown God's voice and cloud my vision. I have missed the mark, and I certainly don't feel "made in God's image." I want to regain that perfect communion with Him which cost my Savior so much. Today, on Ash Wednesday, I will ask God to do a mighty work in me during the next 40 days to help me give Him the sin which so easily entangles me and to restore my communion with Him – the only place where I will find true joy and peace that the circumstances of this world will not shake. Will you join me?

*Deborah Mosley is wife to Pastor Grady, mother of three, and grandmother to four. She is a Media Specialist at Osborne Middle School in Gwinnett County and small group leader at Madison First UMC.*

**Prayer:** Dear Father, please use this Lenten journey to draw me back to a deeper and more intimate connection with You. Amen.



FEBRUARY 18

## DEUTERONOMY 6:5-9

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

### PRIORITIZING TIME WITH JESUS

As we enter the season of Lent, we resolve to draw nearer to God through studying His Word, spending time in reflection and prayer, and expressing thanks to Him for His glory, mercy, and eternal promises. We commit to set aside time daily to ponder God's Word and reflect on how we can apply His teachings to our lives.

Moses counsels the Israelites: "Talk about these commandments when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." I often feel disconnected from Jesus as I am distracted by my daily routine. It is easy to become overwhelmed by life's myriad intrusions and obligations as they conspire to thwart our efforts at a closer walk with the Lord. Fulfilling Moses's commands can seem impossible in our day and age.

Moses goes on to command the Israelites to "tie these commandments as symbols on your hands." Maybe I should set an alarm on my Apple watch so my wrist will vibrate throughout the day reminding me to stop and take a deep breath to inhale Jesus's love for me, and exhale doubt, fear, and hopelessness!

Whatever Jesus-honoring measures you take, prioritizing time with Jesus helps you benefit from a closer relationship with Him. Whether it is setting your alarm an hour earlier, sweating it out to praise music on your daily run, or feeling your wrist vibrate throughout the day, time spent glorifying Jesus and leaning into His grace and mercy is always the very best use of your time.

*Courtney Thomas lives in Madison with her husband, Travis, and their three daughters, Caroline, Emily, and Mary Georgia. She is a Special Educator at Morgan County Middle School. They are active church members and can be found at or near an athletic field or cheer gym most nights of the week.*

**Prayer:** Father, thank you for creating me to connect with You. Help me to make daily connection with you a priority in my life. Amen.



FEBRUARY 19

## PSALM 139:1-6

*You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.*

### HE KNOWS ALL ABOUT ME

Who holds your juiciest secrets? Who makes you feel the most comfortable just to be yourself? I don't know about you, but when I have had a hard day, done something silly, or just have something to get off of my chest I often find comfort in a dear friend. This undoubtedly makes me feel better every time. I know this friend will listen to me and love me all the same, because she knows the true me. What more could I ask for in a friend?

King David's relationship with God was like this. In Psalm 139, David explained that God knew his every thought and every move. David knew, even though God is great He is always near to us – just like a dear friend. How great would it be if we all felt and acted on this tight connection with God. David knew God and God knew everything about him. David found ultimate comfort in this.

Like David, I strive to deepen my relationship with God. This deep friend-like relationship with God should provide us with unwavering solace – better than anything we could have felt before. The reassurance that no matter what we say, do, or think, God knows our intention and our true heart . . . and loves us all the same. We must not ever forget God's greatness, but as we grow in our relationship with God, this tight bond should provide us with reassurance of God's overwhelming love – even better than the love of our oldest friend!

*Ashley Johns is a lifelong member of Madison First UMC. She lives in Madison with her husband, Clint, and their two young children, Charlie and Harris.*

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, thank you for creating me to enjoy a relationship with You. It is comforting to know that You know me better than even my closest and dearest friends. Amen.



FEBRUARY 20

MICAH 6:8

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

## WALKING WITH GOD

Our verse today contains five key words: good, require, justly, mercy, humbly. Our understanding of these words will strengthen our connection with God.

"He has shown you, O man, what is **good**." How? First, with His creation, after which He said, "It is good." He's allowed us to be creative. Second, by being servants — "Well done my good and faithful servant." The Holy Spirit warms our hearts when we are servants to others. Third, knowing His Son — "I am the good Shepherd." We must love and be good to others, thereby strengthening our relationship with Jesus, the good Shepherd.

"And what does the Lord **require** of you?" If required, it may be like a ticket to heaven. Am I, are you, packing for that trip by following Jesus' teachings daily?

"To act **justly** and to love **mercy**." God says, "I will make justice the measuring line . . . for I, the Lord, love justice." We will only measure up if we see to justice for others. "Be merciful as our Father is merciful." The Bible says that His mercy makes us alive with Christ. The Holy Spirit is Christ in us. Have I learned the importance of listening to the Holy Spirit? In what ways am I encouraging family members and other believers to do the same?

"and to walk **humbly** with your God." God is clear. He crowns the humble with salvation. As I walk in the mornings and hear the birds singing, it reminds me that God knows when the sparrow falls. He watches over the sparrow. He watches even more over me. The birds are God's calling card to remind me to be humble, not proud, to remember that He is in control, not I.

*Jack Miles is a member of the 10-Alive Sunday School class, the Tuesday morning Men's Bible Study, and the Intercessory Prayer Ministry.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, please help me to walk with You in ways that reveal Your honor and glory to everyone I encounter. Amen.



## FEBRUARY 21

# GENESIS 3:6-7

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

### WE DON'T HAVE TO HIDE

In these Garden verses, we see how God gave us the gift of freedom to choose relationship with Him — for true intimacy requires both parties to choose the other. Prompted by the serpent, Adam and Eve chose to do the one thing God told them not to do — they ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Immediately their eyes were opened. Immediately, they were separated from God and they scrambled to cover themselves. They got the knowledge they were looking for, but it came pain and heartache.

We make that choice every day — we choose our own will over God's will. We seek what Adam and Eve sought — not **being like God**, but **being God**.

There isn't anything wrong with wisdom, with knowledge — those are good things, right? Until we want just a little bit more and they become idols in our lives. Until it keeps us from being the people God wants us to be. Until it becomes more important than our relationship with God and with those around us.

And so, just like Adam and Eve, we go get the thing that God told us to leave alone. The fruit, the knowledge, the control, the rush, the last word, the momentary satisfaction — and then, almost immediately, we find ourselves hiding from God. There is separation. We feel the need to cover ourselves. God did not create that distance, we did.

Thankfully, God provides a way back. In another Garden, the cup of sorrow, which was filled in Eden, was poured out on Jesus. There in Gethsemane, our Savior made a different choice: "**Not my will, but thine.**" The battle against Satan was won in **that** Garden. We don't have to hide or cover ourselves anymore, for Jesus has made us right with God. He chooses us, every day.

*Ruth and Rob Bearden have lived in Madison for twenty years and raised their four children here at Madison First UMC.*

**Prayer:** Just like Adam and Eve, I am often tempted to choose my will over yours. Oh Father, help me to choose you. Amen.



FEBRUARY 22

## GENESIS 6:5-7

*The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created — and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground — for I regret that I have made them."*

### GOD'S REGRET

Well, this passage was troubling to say the least. These verses mark the opening lines to the Flood story. Upon first reading, it appears that our Creator, who loves us, regrets ever creating us. Could this be so? After much contemplation, I tried relating to the passage as a parent, and what I saw was God's compassion instead of His anger. In these verses, I see God as a grieving and pained parent, highly distressed at the situation He not only created, but allowed to continue. Does God ever need a do-over? A "mulligan," if you will, for all of the golfers out there. I don't think so. I think that God is showing us that He will go to whatever lengths it takes to reconcile us to Himself. After the flood, He promises to never again destroy all of life on Earth.

Lent is an opportunity for us to pause and reflect on ALL of God's promises. As a human being created by God, I see daily how He chooses to have a relationship with me even through my brokenness . . . maybe even because of my brokenness. When I come to Him with my broken heart, my broken dreams, my broken character, my flaws, cracks, dirt, doubts, questions, and fears, He promises to love me in spite of it all. And He does the same for you. He never breaks His promises. He never needs a do-over. He is a God of fresh starts and daily renewal.

*Julie Speyer and her husband, Steve, have lived in Madison since 1999. Julie owns Pure Bliss Spa & Shop. They have two grown children.*

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace that covers the multitude of ways we fall short. Help us not to dwell in our pit, but to look up to your rainbow of promises to restore and renew us daily. Amen.



FEBRUARY 23

## EXODUS 32:1-4

*When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."*

### THE GOLDEN CALF

In this passage from Exodus, we see how quickly our connection with God can be broken. In just a short while, the Israelites had followed Moses out of Egypt, walked across dry land in a raging sea, witnessed God lead them day and night with a pillar of cloud or fire. They watched as Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to meet with God (where he would receive the Ten Commandments). Now Moses has been on the mountain a little too long for the peoples' patience, and suddenly Moses went from being God's chosen leader to being "that fellow who brought us out here." Jealousy, envy, worry, and fear opened the door for Satan. The people needed a visible symbol of God's presence, so they took all of their valuable gold jewelry, melted it down and molded it into a golden calf that they could worship. The First and Second Commandments were broken, the Israelites became disconnected from God and fell under Satan's influence.

How easy it is for us to have our connection with God broken today in a world full of envy, fear, desire, and worry. There are so many temptations urging us to try this or that. Happiness is guaranteed if we will just buy this car or take this pill. Short term there is a good feeling, but then the emptiness comes back, and we realize that the solution was not what we were looking for. Through it all, God is there, waiting, promising that only a full connection with Him will give us peace and hope. His Grace is sufficient.

*Ray Spence and his wife, Cindy, are parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of a wonderful family. They stay busy with our IPM and SPRC, as well as growing berries and peach on the farm.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, help me remain firmly connected to You by resisting the temptation to worship anyone or anything besides You. Amen.



FEBRUARY 24

## JUDGES 2:18-19

*Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for [Israel], he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.*

### THE SIN CYCLE

Do you find that you pray maybe a little bit less when things are going well? You know that God is with you, but perhaps you put Him a little more in the background than you do when you think you REALLY need Him. It's difficult to grasp that we may actually be losing our strong connection to God during the good times! Without that underlying consistently strong relationship, sin creeps in and tries to break the connection. Today's scripture from the book of Judges reminds us that God punishes sin, but He always keeps the sinner in His heart.

As we learn to rely on God, we recognize our sins, repent ("I'll never do that again!"), and work hard at being better. We praise Him and offer gratitude and try to follow the directive to, "go and sin no more," strengthening our connection with Him . . . until once again, our lives get back on track and our relationship with God becomes a little less essential (we think). Then sin creeps in again. And, again, our wonderful God delivers us! How blessed we are that, like the Israelites in the book of Judges, our God knows us so well and loves us so much that He forgives and re-delivers us so that our connection with Him is never completely broken but made stronger!

*Sarah Burbach is the daughter of a United Methodist minister. She is married to David and they have one daughter, Laura Margaret. She is co-president of the UMW and teaches adult Sunday School classes.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, please help me to never lose my connection to you — during the good times as well as in the hard times. Thank you for loving me so much! Amen.



FEBRUARY 25

## NEHEMIAH 1:5-7

*“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.”*

### WE HAVE NOT OBEYED

“We have not obeyed.” We see this again and again throughout the Old Testament. A covenant God hearing the sorrowful cries of His disobedient people. Nehemiah, a man deeply devoted to God, prayed earnestly for the chance to return to Jerusalem and help rebuild the beloved city of his ancestors that had been left in ruins. Nehemiah prayed for and on behalf of the Israelites, as he knew they were suffering because of their sins and their broken connection with God. He desperately wanted to help the Israelites but knew this would not be possible until they returned to a right relationship with God. Nehemiah reminded God of His promise to Moses to reconnect with His people when they seek to return to Him. “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name” (Neh. 1:8-9).

Our broken connection with God because of sin is just as devastating today as it was in the 5th century BC. It can cause us to live in personal ruins, surrounded by the wreckage of broken relationships and the feelings of failure and hopelessness. But this is NOT what God wants. And the promise of forgiveness and redemption God made to Moses was extended to us by the blood of Jesus Christ.

*Laree Zant and her husband, Dan, have two children, Maclane and Carolina, at the University of Georgia. Laree is director of Madison First UMC Preschool. Dan is a Family Practice doctor in Madison.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, I confess that my failure to obey Your Word breaks my connection with You. Thank You for forgiving me when I return to You. Amen.



FEBRUARY 26

## PSALM 51:1-4

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF REPENTANCE

David wrote Psalm 51 after Nathan the prophet confronted him for the sins he had committed: “You are that man.” David had sinned about as completely as a man can sin. He committed adultery and murder; he lied and abused his power; and yet, he was forgiven. Why?

He repented for what he *was rather than what he did*.

We have all sinned and we sometimes acknowledge our wrongdoing. If you are like me, you are often sorry for sin only because of its consequences. David’s confession reflected much more than regret. Everything that happened was because he chose to gratify his selfish desires at the expense of others. He did what he did because he was a sinner. David understood what he truly needed was not an attitude adjustment but a new nature. That is why he wrote, “blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”

Martin Luther taught for the Christian all of life is repentance. We can only know true peace, joy, and purpose when we focus on Jesus rather than ourselves. We must repent of any thought or action which distracts us from that calling.

*John Miles is a husband, father, business owner, and Bible teacher.*

**Prayer:** Father, I confess that my sinful nature breaks my connection with You. Thank You for forgiving my sins and restoring that connection. Amen.



FEBRUARY 27

## EZEKIEL 18:26-28

*If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin, they will die for it; because of the sin they have committed they will die. But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and does what is just and right, they will save their life. Because they consider all the offenses they have committed and turn away from them, that person will surely live; they will not die.*

### TURN FROM SIN AND LIVE

Lovers of truth are lovers of Christ. Peas in a pod. Grapes on a vine. Created for each other. Peas and grapes connect to pods and vines. Their source for life. Once disconnected, time is limited. They will surely die. Truth is connected with Christ. Any “truth” disconnected from Christ is not truth. Eventually, that “truth” will die.

Ever since the day the only two people on the planet disconnected from God’s truth to follow a lie – then, “because of the sin they [all mankind] have committed they will die.”

When disconnected from truth we connect to bondage: addictions, bitterness, unforgiveness, arrogance, sexual insatiability, and the inability to accept the struggles of earthly life – emotional, physical, psychological (which leave us susceptible to dependence upon the world’s pain relievers).

Through His great mercy, God made reconnection available. We come with our bondages. Reconnection is not likely to be comfortable or convenient. It is guaranteed to require a daily cross – and the overcoming power to carry it. It is guaranteed to come with love everlasting, joy unstoppable, and peace beyond human understanding.

Ever since the day the Savior of the world breathed His last breath on a cross – then, “that person [the repentant sinner] will surely live; they will not die.”

*Teresa Wallace is a lifetime member of Madison First UMC. She hosts a daily devotional blog geared toward teens and applicable for adults at [www.worksofherhands.com](http://www.worksofherhands.com).*

**Prayer:** Dear God, help me today to turn away from the sin that so easily entangles me so that I may surely live in connection with You, now and forever. Amen.



FEBRUARY 28

## GENESIS 3:14-15

*So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*

### RESTORED CONNECTION

My husband is a retired employee of the power company. Nonetheless we were often without electricity due to rain, snow, or ice storms. We lost the connection. I called the help line to ask them to please restore our power. Sometimes it took days. We learned to live for a time without lights, but not by choice. Our house was built to be powered by electricity and was a shell, a dead skeleton, without it.

The power company promised to restore our connection as soon as possible. Sometimes it meant power lines were replaced, but more often just a downed line was repaired. Unfortunately, my husband could not fix the problem. Power had to be restored by the electricity-creators.

Something beautiful, a serpent, distracted Eve away from God. Snakes have not always been ugly and repulsive. Satan knew he must take a form that would attract Eve, not repel her. She turned her head, looked more closely at the beautiful form, and listened to its attractive words. Then the serpent-storm hit.

Adam and Eve were swept up in the squall and the connection with their heavenly Father was broken. God had to step in and fix the problem. Eve couldn't do it. Even Adam couldn't do it. God promised to send someone to fix it completely and permanently. Only through Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World, God in flesh, is the connection with humanity eternally and perfectly restored.

How can you stay connected to God today?

*Macy Johnson is the pianist for our traditional worship service and a retired accountant. She and Jeff (Master Gardener/Composter) have 2 children and 5 grandchildren.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you loving us too much to allow our connection with You to be broken forever. Thank you for sending a Savior to permanently restore our connection with You. Amen.



MARCH 1

## PSALM 22:6-8

*But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. "He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."*

### A SUFFERING SAVIOR

David likely wrote this psalm when he was pursued by enemies determined to kill him. But the imagery matches so remarkably the suffering Jesus experienced during His crucifixion that the gospel writers point out the connection for us. Both Matthew and John said the soldiers mocked and insulted Jesus during His trial. Matthew 27:43 says those who passed by Jesus on the cross cried out, "He trusts in God. Let God rescue Him now if He wants Him, for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" What a price our Savior paid as He suffered and died for our sins.

Our sin is what separates us from a good God, but it is a good God who died for those sins to give us grace and redemption. We see sin daily; we acknowledge the sin of others daily; and we commit sin daily. Each morning we wake up with the intent to relish in the mercies of our good Lord. But as we go about our day, and let in more of the world rather than Him, we stray from those mercies more quickly than we would like to admit. Gossip, judgment, and entitlement all lead us away, YET God loves us still. He loves us so much He allowed Jesus to suffer greatly so our relationship with God could be restored. May we make a commitment each day to love as God loves and to live as God would live.

*Ginger O'Neal is originally from McDonough, GA. She and her husband, Ryan, moved here several years ago and joined Madison First United Methodist Church. They have two children, Brody (12) and Emily (11). Ryan works in Athens and Ginger is the media specialist at Morgan County Middle School.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, we know that our sins should have separated us from you forever. We're so thankful that You loved us enough to send a Savior to redeem us, a Savior who suffered so much so we could receive so much from You. Amen.



MARCH 2

## PSALM 22:14-18

*I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.*

### PAIN AND PROPHECY

Though I am not a Bible scholar, I do have faith, love our Lord, and tend to ponder and explore my feelings about Scripture as an artist and Christian. These verses make me cringe at the pain and suffering, suffering beyond imagination.

David was running for his life and felt as if he was moments from being caught and killed. David wrote many verses about his fears and asked for God's help and, often, for God to strike back at his enemies. From what I have read, David did not suffer as he described here. This description was more like the torture of crucifixion that came later (according to actual Bible scholars).

So, what is this "graphic description of suffering" that is beyond David's earlier prayers to God? I thought of Elijah in my pondering. He was lonely, hiding out in a cave, and cried out that he was the only person still loving God! God told Elijah that he was not alone: *"There are 7,000 men and women, Elijah, not bowing to Baal, and they all share the same burden as you."* Maybe God spoke to David as he did with Elijah. Maybe God gave David a "really vivid vision" of Christ on the cross to come, and then David tried to describe it to us? A prophetic vision?

Because God loves us, He kept His promise to send a Savior to save us from our sins. And this Savior, Jesus, suffered greatly so we could love Him back.

*Chris and Robyn Cook have been members of Madison First UMC for more than fifteen years. Chris is an artist, and he owns Madison Studios, a website design and marketing firm.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, David's imagery of how horribly Jesus suffered on the cross shows how completely God loves us. Thank You for sending a Savior willing to suffer for our sins so we can be reconnected with You. Amen.



MARCH 3

## ISAIAH 11:1-3A

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord — and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.*

### **A BRANCH WILL BEAR FRUIT**

Once upon a time, a fig tree grew in our backyard. From the kitchen window, I watched birds flit about its branches dining on figs far above my reach. Tired of this tree's ever-expanding ways, my husband chopped it down. I pouted a bit, but soon cultivated the spot. Hydrangeas, impatiens, and black-eyed Susans now blossom around the decaying stump. Here's the problem. The stump didn't get the memo it's dead. No matter how many chemicals I douse over the lifeless wood, shoots abound. A seedling from this lifeless tree now thrives in a friend's yard bearing fruit.

David's lineage was on life-support when Christ was born. No regal splendor remained from its Davidic heyday. But as prophesied, a shoot — "netzer" in Hebrew — came forth. A child from the stump of Jesse whom Mary and Joseph raised in an insignificant cluster of homes and businesses called Nazareth. Many scholars believe the name Nazareth sprang from the word "netzer." A nothing place, just like an offshoot from a dead stump. A weed easily uprooted. Here today, gone tomorrow.

How can we not be hope-filled knowing our Savior sprang from a girl living in a backwater, dead-appearing landscape? Death is never final. No debt insurmountable. No child too far astray. No sin too deep. No divide that can't be crossed by Jesus of Nazareth's saving power. He waits to spring forth. If you have doubts, come look out my kitchen window.

*Jamie Miles is a wife, a mother, and a lifelong Methodist. Her passions include writing, yoga, and keeping eyes trained at the gray backyard for green clumps breaking the cold dirt, and then rejoicing as each cluster bears the promise of yellow.*

**Prayer:** Father, thank You for the promise of a Savior who makes a way for me to remain connected to You. Thank You for Your "netzer" that is always just below the surface waiting to shoot upward and outward as we trust in You. Amen.



MARCH 4

## ISAIAH 35:5-6

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.*

### THE PROMISE OF A SAVIOR

**prom·ise:** /'präməs/ *noun* a declaration or assurance that one will do a particular thing or that a particular thing will happen.

A promise is a funny thing. When I really mean it, I tell people, “*pinky promise*,” to emphasize that I am going to stick to my promise no matter what.

God knew and knows EVERYTHING even before it happens, so it is curious to me why He made the promise of a Savior. His promise is mercy, and mercy is Jesus, which restores our link to eternity. The first humans, Adam and Eve, sinned and broke a connection that was intended to be perfect. God’s judgment was severe; however, because He loves His creation so much, He made a *promise* that would restore that connection. God sent Jesus to save us from ourselves.

So how does that restore our relationship with God ... well, God promised when we trust in the Savior that our connection with Him will be restored ... that brings great joy. Oh, what a joy it will be when the blind can see and the deaf can hear, the lame can walk and the mute can speak. The water will flow, no gush, forth in the wilderness and desert.

The assurance that the crucifixion covers my sins keeps me tethered to God. Faith helps me accept the promise that my sin is covered by Jesus. His death on the cross and His resurrection gives me the opportunity to experience real relationship with my Savior and that relationship is where JOY begins. Thanks be to God.

*Heather Cadle is a Career Agent with US Health since May of 2019. She has lived in Madison since 2002 and joined Madison First UMC in 2003. She has loved working with Youth, Credo, the Intercessory Prayer Ministry, Honduras Mission team, Pre-School board, Lay Leadership Committee, and in general, growing spiritually under Grady's leadership.*

**Prayer:** Father, thank You for loving me too much to allow my sins to separate me from You forever. Thank You for keeping Your promise to send a Savior. Amen.



MARCH 5

## ISAIAH 53:2-5

*He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

### **HE SUFFERED SO WE COULD BE HEALED**

“When will my job get better?” “When will the pain stop?” “Will I ever find happiness?” “Why is this happening to me?”

These are questions that I feel certain most people have asked at one time in their lives. I know I have, on many occasions. This past year has certainly raised many questions about our lives, our world, and our futures. It has been a year full of every emotion known to man: fear, loneliness, rejection, anger, hurt . . . hope, peace, anticipation, and empathy too. Imagine how God felt knowing that His son, Jesus, would walk this earth and would feel all of these human emotions as well. He knew that He was sending His Son to a broken, hurting world . . . and He knew that Jesus would suffer greatly because the world was so lost. Yet God still sent Him; His “tender shoot” to take away the world’s suffering. Oh, how hard it must have been knowing He would be despised and rejected by the very people He intended on saving.

Thankfully, as Scripture teaches us, God knew how Jesus would suffer and He knew the price that would be paid to save humankind. What an amazing love God has for His people. Jesus paid the price for our sins. He was “pierced for our transgressions,” not His own. I thank God every day that I can live in this world, with so many questions, fears, and emotions, and still know without a doubt that Jesus took all of this away for me and instead gave me the gift of everlasting love and peace in His kingdom. “By His wounds, we are healed.” We have an everlasting promise that by Him and through Him, we are saved.

*Shannon Collier is a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in her 28<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. She lives in Madison with her husband, Steve, a contractor. They have two adult children, Will and Amanda.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, I cannot imagine the price that You paid by allowing Your Son to suffer and die on my behalf. I will never be able to adequately express my gratitude for Your love and grace. Amen.



MARCH 6

## DANIEL 7:13-14

*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

### NIGHT VISION

The prophet Daniel had a dream in which he saw the Messiah and watched Him receive power and might from God Himself – power and might that will never be destroyed.

Daniel did not discount his vision and dismiss it – he shared it over and over. Daniel had served God faithfully through decades of captivity under the kings of Babylon. With this vision of the Messiah firmly in his mind, he would choose to suffer again when the king of Persia sentenced him to the lion’s den for refusing to give up worshipping God. Daniel’s assurance in God’s promise to send the Messiah gave him unshakeable faith.

Few of us must go into the literal lion’s den, but we must face our individual fears that keep us from embracing the risen Christ, the Messiah, and Lord of Lords and following His commandment to love God and one another. What is even more difficult is to allow others to love us. We may not be able to see well at night, but receiving the loving Spirit of the risen Christ enables us to see and to love ourselves and thereby love others. Daniel was a great example to us; can we therefore be an example to others?

*Jimmy Stokes is a retired college chemistry professor, high school principal, and association executive. He and his wife, Patricia, have been residents of Madison and members of Madison First UMC since 1996.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank You for the assurance that Jesus will rule over all creation forever and ever. Help me to remain committed to You no matter how I might suffer for my faith in You. Amen.



MARCH 7

## MATTHEW 1:21-23

*“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).*

### GOD WITH US

When I was a young girl, I loved putting on my Sunday dress and shoes. In the winter, I wore leggings (from a snowsuit – not what we call leggings today) and two pairs of socks in my boots. Mikey, my Sunday school friend, and I walked a couple of miles to Sunday school and church. Sometimes we skipped church and took our dime meant for the offering and went to the soda fountain.

When I was a teenager, I worked weekends throughout high school from 3-11 p.m. I slept in on Sunday mornings. As a young adult, I went to college and worked in a hospital. On Sunday mornings, I was either in bed or working at the hospital.

I believed in our Lord throughout my life, but had no personal relationship with my Savior. When I was 28, a dear older woman with whom I was privileged to work led me to giving my life to Christ. Since that moment, my life has not been perfect and I haven't always been the Christian I should be, but Jesus my Savior has given me all my needs, love, and guidance through the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps even the prophet Isaiah did not fully understand how far-reaching the meaning of Immanuel “God with us” would be. Jesus means “the Lord saves.” Jesus came to earth to save us because we can't save ourselves from sin and its consequences. No matter how good we are, we can't eliminate the sinful nature within us. Only Jesus can do that. New life begins when we thank Him for giving His life for our sins and accepting Him into our lives.

*Sue Harris is mother of more than just her one son, grandmother of more than just her two granddaughters, and great grandmother to more than her three great grands. She is a greeter for our Wesley service and teaches 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays in the Heritage SS class.*

**Prayer:** Dear Father God, thank you for sending Your Son to earth to experience life as a human being. He is truly Immanuel, God with Us, who came to save us from our sins. Amen.



MARCH 8

## JOHN 1:29, 32-34

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" ... Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."*

### THE LAMB OF GOD

Jesus was a village carpenter. Could He really be the Son of God? But what better way to connect with people than to truly be a "commoner"? Someone completely different than what some people might have expected: a boastful king or tyrant ruler. Jesus came to earth as the child of humble parents. He has lived our life of strife and hardships, felt our pain. He has felt our love, joy, and happiness. He knows us and loves us and desires us to seek a relationship with Him. Why else would He, the Lamb of God, endure the cross so that we may have eternal life?

One of my favorite hymns is "In the Garden." The lines of the chorus speak to my heart: "And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own." The song reminds me and comforts me with the assurance that Jesus does know me and love me. I think we are often too distracted to truly see how much God loves us. So today, take a few minutes to walk in the garden, breathe in fresh air, and listen to God.

*Amy Miller is a Staff Accountant with Stoltz Business Services, Inc., in Watkinsville. She is married to Matt, a CPA and partner with Treadwell, Tamplin & Co. They have lived in Madison since 2012. In their free time, they love to travel and spend time with family and friends.*

**Prayer:** Father, thank you for sending Your precious Son to earth as the Lamb who shows the world how great Your love is for us. Amen.



MARCH 9

## MATTHEW 4:1-11

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God" . . . Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

### DEFEATING TEMPTATION

The first sentence tells us the **Spirit (God) sent Jesus to be tested** by the devil. We assume God knew that Jesus would pass these tests because ... well, He's God. He can't sin. So why would God send Jesus to be tempted? What is the point of these tests?

We have to assume that God created this situation for **our** benefit – to show us that humans can (and will) be tested by the devil, and that we can pass these tests. Jesus' answers to each test showed that He knew God and what God wanted from Him. So, how can we better know God and be prepared for things that will test us?

- **Read the Bible.** The more we study God, the more familiar we will be with Him, how He talks to us, and the things He asks of us.
- **Pray.** It's the best way to build our relationship with God. In talking with Him, we open our heart to Him and will hear more from Him. It's a two-way street, so we need to continue our side of the conversation to better hear Him.
- **Worship.** Nothing better to fight off temptation than a good day of worshipping God. We can worship Him anywhere and anytime!

Although Jesus is God, He was also fully human. He experienced temptation, yet He did not sin. His example is for our benefit. We, too, will be tested. When we are prepared for those tests, we can also resist temptation.

*Kathryn Cardwell is a wife, mother, believer, teacher, and life-long learner. She is married to Joe, and they have two children, Mary Claire and John.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for teaching us, through Jesus, that we can defeat temptation. Amen.



MARCH 10

## LUKE 4:16-21

*He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

### PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS

I've caught myself countless times pulling up my phone in the evening with the intention to read one of the studies on my Bible app, and instead clicking on a social media app, checking emails or reading the news. When I catch myself doing this, it reminds me how easy it is for us to give into the temptations around us. These may be considered "small," but for me these distractions cut into the time I had set aside for and need to be spending in the Word.

As I read through Luke Chapter 4, I was reminded that Christ knows the temptations and distractions that we face, and He has given us the knowledge and power and grace to overcome them. He uses the words of Isaiah to relate to us. Having just come back from 40 days of temptation by the devil in the Judean Desert, these verses show that Jesus understands us as he used the words of Isaiah to let us know that He has set us free from the captivity of bad habits and earthly distractions. By having faith in Him, the spiritually blind will see the light of Christ. He knows the temptations and distractions that we face on a daily basis, but He also has given us the ability to overcome them. Christ desires to connect with us - it is up to us to continue to put Christ first and not give in to the earthly distractions around us!

*Brooks Pennington is a lifelong member of Madison First UMC. He and his wife, Cecily are the parents of a son, Maddox and leaders of a Young Adult small group that meets on Wednesday nights.*

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Your Son to experience human life so that He could set me free from sin by restoring my spiritual sight. Amen.



MARCH 11

## MARK 9:2-7

*After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"*

### THEY SAW HIS GLORY

Christ's transfiguration takes place in front of Peter, James, and John. This happened right after He had told them about His coming death and resurrection. Christ, in all His glory, which was revealed briefly at this transfiguration, still chose to remain with them . . . to continue along the human path leading to His death. He chose to face all the humanness ahead of him . . . fear, trials, physical and mental anguish, friends abandoning Him, His father turning His back on Him, and ultimately the end of His human life. What love for us He shows by following this path . . . to understand exactly how we all feel in our humanness.

These verses give us an understanding of Christ's power to change His circumstances, but because He doesn't, it shows His great love for all of us as well as obedience to His Father's plans for Him. This passage also reveals God's great love for His Son to the disciples and encourages them to listen and continue to follow Jesus. Jesus' whole life is full of human experiences just like ours . . . love of parents, love of siblings, love of friends, sadness at issues all of us will face, such as hunger, temptation, weariness, impatience, anger, grief, joy, laughter, happiness, love of companionship, and love of our Heavenly Father. What a blessing to know Christ understands us 100%!

*Cindy Spence and her husband, Ray, are parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of a wonderful family. They stay busy with the IPM and SPRC, as well as growing berries and peaches on their farm.*

**Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for choosing to live on earth as a human being. I can take comfort in knowing that You understand the many joys, challenges, and sufferings I may experience in life.



MARCH 12

1 JOHN 4:9

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*

## **GOD'S LOVE SHOWN THROUGH JESUS**

The love we share with each other testifies to the nature of God. He **IS** love; He invented it. He gave us the ability to love. He did this by sending His only Son to us, freely out of love for humanity, to atone for our sins. Jesus showed us what God's love looks like, in human form, from a godly perspective. He taught us that our love for all must be authentic and merciful. And everything we do, we must do out of love. For all life comes from God, out of His love for humanity.

When my children were younger, we would play a game. I would tell them I loved them and they would tell me they loved me. I would reply, "I love you more than that." They would reply, "Noooo, I love **YOU** more than that." We were expressing a joyful, authentic, and life-giving unconditional love. A love that oozes from the heart bursting out through a smile and with a twinkle beaming from the eyes. The love we share with each other testifies to the very nature of God, which is love, and yet God's love for us is so much more than what we could possibly imagine.

So, the next time you pray to Jesus tell Him, "I love you." Take a moment and quietly listen. You might hear these words from Jesus, "Oh Noooo, I love **YOU** more than that My child."

*Sharon Wood lives in Buckhead with her husband, Tommy. They have two sons, two daughters-in-law, and two amazing grandchildren. Sharon is a Realtor® with Coldwell Banker Lake Oconee Realty in Madison.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for the love you've shown to me through Jesus. Help me to show His love to others in everything I do. Amen.



MARCH 13

## PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!*

### CHRIST HUMBLLED HIMSELF

Which one of us hasn't pondered how our Lord and Savior could possibly have walked our walk, could possibly have suffered the abuse we have taken from our so-called friends and strangers who ignore us or outright confront us. Philippians 2:7-8 tells us that Christ "made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross." It goes without saying that Christ offered Himself for each one of us. How can we do anything other than offer ourselves to Him and to those with whom we daily come in contact.

My all-time favorite Scripture is Isaiah 41:10:

So do not fear, for I am with you  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God  
I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

His righteous right hand has held mine countless times under countless circumstances. I'm convinced that this is true because of the love the Lord has for me. I am also convinced that He is walking with me and you — every step of the way. I'm further convinced that my hand should respond by reaching out to others — some of whom I know and some of whom are complete strangers. I need to trust Him to show me who they are and how I can serve them — wherever I might be.

*Nancy Miles is a member of the 10-Alive Sunday school class, the United Methodist Women, and the Intercessory Prayer Ministry. She is the granddaughter of a Methodist minister and a retired English teacher.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, we are thankful for a Savior who humbled Himself to suffer and die on our behalf. Such a Savior can truly walk with us, for He understands both the joys and sorrows of our human experience. Amen.



**MARCH 14**

**LUKE 19:10**

*“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

## **JESUS SEEKS US**

Most of us knew the song about Zacchaeus, the “wee little man,” before we were old enough to read about him in the Bible. Today’s verse is from that familiar story. Zacchaeus, Jericho’s chief tax collector, was so intent on seeing Jesus that he climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus as He passed through town. We don’t know what Zacchaeus was thinking when he climbed the sycamore tree. Maybe it was as simple as, “How can I get a clear view of this excitement?” Maybe he was feeling guilty about his past of stealing and greed and believed that Jesus was his only hope for change. What we do know is that from that day forward his life was changed.

Like Zacchaeus, our time with Jesus should affect not only our thoughts and words, but also our actions. After his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus offered to return money to anyone he had defrauded and to give half of his possessions to the poor. He experienced a change of heart and a change in his life’s direction because of his time with Jesus.

Our connection to Jesus changes us. How has your faith in Jesus shaped your relationships, your approach to your job, and your attitude towards others? During this season of Lent, may our connection to Jesus grow deeper, leaving us changed.

*Brian Martin has been a member of Madison First UMC since moving to Madison nine years ago. He and his wife, Melissa, are parents to James, Charlie, and Thomas.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to seek and to save the lost. If Jesus did not seek us, we would never find our way back to You. Amen.



MARCH 15

## JOHN 3:16-17

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

### FOR GOD SO LOVED ME

When I first became a child of Christ, the first verse I committed to memory was John 3:16. I still have the small burgundy Bible with this verse highlighted. It was a verse that served as a reminder at how amazing our Lord is and how great a gift He has given to us. Now, as a parent, I read these verses and am reminded at how astounding and sacrificial a price was paid for my sins: God gave His only child. As a mother, it is an unimaginable sacrifice. And God did this not to condemn us, but to save us.

God did not create the world to condemn it. He created people as a reflection of His image and likeness, created to glorify and serve God forever. But sin entered the world. God could have sentenced us then, but instead He chose to send a Redeemer to rescue us. This Redeemer was His Son – His one and only Son – sent to live, die, and rise again for us! What an amazing gift to know our God loves us this much!

*Talarie Hayes serves on the Council of Ministries as the nurture chairperson. She works as a Kindergarten teacher for Putnam County Primary School. Her husband, John, works for Longview Wealth Management as Chief Compliance Officer. They have two children, Natalie (10) and Coalson (6).*

**Prayer:** God, Your love for me is so amazing that I can scarcely comprehend it. Thank you for loving me so much that You have given me eternal life! Amen.



# MARCH 16

## JOHN 10:7-10

*Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

### TRUSTING THE SHEPHERD

Sheep are interesting animals. They will not follow someone or something they perceive as a threat or do not trust. However, they will follow their shepherd and allow him to lead them. The shepherd has shown that he can be trusted, so his flock follows him without question. The owner places sheep in a pasture with a gate, maybe not to keep the sheep in, but to keep all the bad out.

So many people come through our lives with false promises: If you do this or that, all your wishes, fantasies, and dreams will come true. And most of the time, when we follow man and those false promises, no good comes out of it. Like the sheep, do not listen to these thieves. Listen to Christ, our shepherd. We do not have to run from Him. Christ came and said, "Follow me and I will give you not just life, but abundant life." He allows us into those still, green pastures. He makes sure that not only our needs are met but He gives us more! All we have to do is trust Him. Christ is the gate. He leads us to those safe pastures and guards against the thieves. All we have to do is follow.

*Anna Ross has attended Madison FUMC since 2005 and serves as Children's Music Director and Assistant Children's Director. She has been a teacher for 18 years and is currently the ESOL teacher at Morgan County Primary and Morgan County Elementary Schools. She lives with her husband Randy and their 15-year-old daughter, Natalie.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, this world is full of false teachers who make false promises. Please help me recognize the voice of my Shepherd, listen closely when He speaks, and follow Him as He leads me each day. Amen.



MARCH 17

## JOHN 14:6-7

*Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."*

### JESUS IS THE WAY

Jesus tells the disciples He is going to His Father's house to prepare a place for them. Thomas asks Jesus, "How will we get there?" Jesus responds by telling Thomas, "I am the way." Jesus reminds His disciples that their faith and trust in Him is the key to salvation. At the time of this conversation, Jesus' disciples were unaware of the events that would unfold when Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected. They were not aware of the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus would make so our sins would be forgiven. Jesus tells His disciples "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." In this huge statement He gives them all they need to know about following Christ.

When we think about how we can apply Jesus' response to our daily lives, it seems the answer is quite simple. As followers of Christ, our belief in Jesus is all we need. As easy as that may seem, it can be quite complex, and for most people there is some sort of journey involved. This was no different for Jesus. He walked alongside us here on earth to show us that He is here with us throughout each moment. I pray this passage brings you peace and hope. We can be certain that, through our journey, Jesus is with us every step of the way if we simply choose to follow Him.

*Brighton and Jesse Patrick made Madison their home in 2012. Their young daughters, Ava and Claire, keep their days full and exciting.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, in this conversation with His disciples, Jesus clearly states that He is the only way for people to be reconnected with You. Thank you for the gift of salvation, found only when we trust in Jesus. Amen.



MARCH 18

## ROMANS 10:9-10

*If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*

### MY CONNECTION WITH CHRIST

If you are not absolutely, positively sure that you are saved, please read the verse again. Close your eyes and meditate on it for a few minutes. Seriously, this is super important. Sounds simple doesn't it? Just say that you believe it, then go on back to living your life as before, right? Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it's not that easy. Many people have difficulty accepting this wonderful free gift from God.

Confessing that Jesus is Lord shows you understand there is no other way to be reconciled to God the Father. Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we can be saved." In other words, doing good, or being baptized, or even going to church cannot save you. Only Christ can save you. By confessing this, you are trusting Him alone to justify you and to bring you into fellowship with God.

We must also believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. It is incredibly important that we understand and believe that by dying for our sins, Christ defeated the power of sin, and that His resurrection proved the penalty for sin had been paid. If His sacrifice on the cross wasn't enough to cover our sins, then He would still be dead. But, He was raised from the dead and lives, demonstrating His sacrifice was perfect. This fact you must believe in your heart.

Salvation is as close as our lips and hearts. If we believe in our hearts and say with our mouths that Christ is the risen Lord, we will be saved. Trusting and believing, this is exactly what salvation is all about.

*Don and Patty Krup have lived in Rutledge for two years. Patty is a retired middle school teacher and Don retired from the sales department of Federal Express. Both enjoy raising and training their dogs.*

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we look to You alone, we trust in You alone, for eternal life. Live in us and through us this day and for the rest of our lives. Amen.



# MARCH 19

## ROMANS 5:8

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

### **GRACE AND MERCY TO SINNERS**

Oh, how often I make a mess of things! When I was much younger, I surely believed that by the time I turned forty I would have it all together. That I would have learned to forgive and move on, to curb my temper, and maybe even to swallow my pride.

But no, I remain firmly in the category of Work in Progress. On days when this brings me low, I often think of Romans 5:8. That even as I strive to be more like Him, our perfect and holy God loves me just as I am and just as He made me — human and therefore imperfect. When I feel disappointed in myself, He is there with me and loves me no less.

One thing I have learned as I get older is that feeling the weight of my own sin — and the humility that brings — often is what draws me closest to God. I live in awe of His grace and mercy in my life, and that inspires me to extend the same grace and mercy to others. Thank you, Lord, that you bring purpose to every part of our lives!

*Emma Boulware and her husband, Ron, and their four children moved to Madison this past summer. They absolutely love it here, and a big part of that has been the warm welcome from the staff and congregation at Madison First UMC.*

Prayer: Dear God, I am so thankful that you loved me while I was still a sinner, with a love so great that You sent Christ to secure my salvation by paying the price for my sins. Amen.



MARCH 20

# 1 CORINTHIANS 15:54B-57

*“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

## VICTORY OVER DEATH

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he addresses the high cost of sin and the importance of our commitment to Christ. He also discusses the resurrection. As we approach Easter Sunday, we are reminded of the resurrection of Jesus and how He died for our sins.

As I have gotten older, I think of death more often. I have reached the age that both my mother and my sister were when they passed away. To me this is a scary feeling. Neither one of them were sick for long when they were taken to their heavenly homes. For me, death itself is not frightening, but it is the way I will die that is unsettling.

As a Christian, I think about Jesus and the fact that He died for us in order to free us from our sins. When I think of this, I find much comfort. The sting of death is removed by the resurrection of Jesus. What a victory that is! We are given victory over our sins when our earthly bodies are transformed into our heavenly bodies and we then have eternal life.

This one-of-a-kind death and this one-of-a-kind resurrection was carried out by this one-of-a-kind Person who offers something more valuable than anything we could possess. He offers eternal life to us all. “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

*Theresa Johns has been married to Hank for 40 years. She is the mother to Stewart and Clint, and the grandmother to four girls and one boy. She enjoys gardening, boating, and spending time with her family.*

**Prayer:** Thank you, Jesus, for conquering death through Your victory over sin. Thank you for the gift of eternal life, guaranteed for me when I trust You have paid the cost for my sins. Amen.



MARCH 21

## MATTHEW 4:18-22

*As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him.*

### FOLLOW ME

Imagine yourself sitting on the bank of river or lake with a friend or relative on a warm morning. Then, along comes a man who says, "Come and follow me, I'll make you fishers of men." Are you ready to take off? Or are you asking questions like, "Who is this person? How does He know us? How long will we be gone? How much clothing do we need to pack? What about food? Are we dressed right? What will our friends think? Is this guy socially acceptable? Do we need to pick up our gear? Who is going to notify our families?" We have thousands of questions without answers. Sometimes we have to step out of our comfort zones and trust what comes our way.

Jesus calls us to follow Him, yet so many times we are so busy living life that we do not take time to hear Jesus call. Or we are so consumed with controlling our lives we will not relinquish any control without grabbing control back. During this time of Lent, as we prepare for Holy Week, I encourage each of you to take a step back from daily life. Invite Jesus into your life, share your specific concerns with Him, ask Him how you need to deal with daily issues. For those circumstances you cannot handle, give your concerns to Him knowing He can handle all situations. Then settle down with the confidence that when we follow Jesus, and give our concerns to Him, all is handled.

*Sam Ring is a retired accountant who lives with Joanne, his wife of forty-six years. They live in Madison Lakes, have two grown children, and three grandchildren.*

Prayer: Dear God, help me to become more aware of the times that Jesus invites me to follow Him. Make me willing to set aside the things that concern me so that I can follow Jesus. Amen.



MARCH 22

## MATTHEW 11:28-30

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

### **JESUS WANTS US TO FOLLOW HIM**

I am so excited to celebrate the Lenten season in 2021, the season when Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation, self-denial and spiritual discipline. The purpose is to set aside time for reflection on Jesus Christ – His suffering and His sacrifice, His life, death, burial, and resurrection.

The pandemic has taught us to meditate on Scripture passages and readings to guide us from day to day. I understand if I dwell on Scripture long enough and apply it, then I will get through the situation. There is a bridge over troubled waters and Jesus will always be that bridge.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, “Come unto me and rest: lay down, thou weary one, lay down, thy head upon my breast.” I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad. I found in Him a **RESTING PLACE**, and He has made me glad.

At every stage of our lives, will we not hear the gracious invitation that falls from His lips? He asks the struggling sinner to make himself or herself acceptable to the Holy God. How? Jesus does not say come to the church, to a pastor, or denomination, but to Him. Jesus wants us to have a personal relationship with Him and depend on Him at all times.

It seems that seldom a day passes that we do not hear the words from someone: I am just so tired of life’s difficulties. We are in a state of crisis and challenged through health, diversity, and political adversities. We all have burdens to bear. The teachings of Jesus are always simple and direct. He says very simply, in Matthew 11, for all who carry burdens to come to Him. Jesus took the weight of our sins to the cross, paid with His life that we might be free.

*Terri Hurt is the proud mom of Trey. She is a clerk at Hitachi Automotive Systems.*

**Prayer:** Some of the challenges of this past year have almost been more than I can bear. Thank you that I can give my burdens to Jesus, and then find rest for my soul. Amen.



MARCH 23

## MATTHEW 19:28-29

*Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.*

### FULL COMMITMENT

Our Scripture for today contains a promise from Jesus. A promise of rewards to come, not today, but in the future, at the time of regeneration, new birth, or restoration to a better state. Jesus shall be the king and judge of the world and those who follow Him will be rewarded with authority and glory.

The next verse tells followers, the greater the sacrifices, the greater the rewards. These followers, I believe, are Jews AND Gentiles who follow Jesus and His preaching. While I don't believe verse 29 is to be taken literally, we do need to put Jesus first and love Him with all of our hearts. We need to be willing to drop everything worldly and follow our faith. It is about our focus, our mind set, and determination.

We have to turn from gossip. We need to be honest in our business dealings (give money back to the cashier when you are given too much change). Help our neighbors even when they have wronged us. Treat others with kindness and dignity, even when we do not agree with them. It reminds me of the old WWJD bracelets that we had when our kids were young, "WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?" We know we should live our lives as if everyone is watching! Our reward will be peace, joy, and everlasting life. I know what I choose; what do you choose?

*Betsy Briley and her husband, Steve, moved here ten years ago from Huntsville, Alabama. Originally from North Carolina, they both went to college at UNC in Chapel Hill. They have been married for over 42 years. Betsy is a pharmacist and Steve is a CPA. They have two sons: Ryan lives in Atlanta with his wife Melissa and their 2 children, Hayden and Maddie. Tyler lives with his wife Katie in Denver, Colorado.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, Jesus has called me to follow Him, to put Him first in my life above all other things. While this might sound easy, it's one of the hardest things to do. Help me to commit as completely to following Jesus as He committed to redeeming me. Amen.



MARCH 24

## LUKE 9:23-24

*Then He said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily to follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it."*

### TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

To "take up the cross" meant to carry one's own cross to the place of crucifixion. As part of their punishment, many in the first century who were crucified by the Romans were forced to literally carry their cross from the place of flogging to the site where they would be crucified, usually outside of the city. And we know Jesus did this, too.

In His teaching, Jesus uses this very real act of carrying one's cross to portray a clear picture for us who choose to follow Him. He came in the flesh to our broken, hurting, sinful world to die so that we may live — so that our sins may be dealt with, drawing us nearer to the Father and giving us life eternal.

As disciples, followers of Christ, we are called to shoulder our selfish ways and worldly desires, taking up our "cross" each day in order to follow Him. In doing so, we are able to live more purposefully, serving Him and bringing glory to His name.

What is on your cross? May you be encouraged today!

*Sarah Ball and her husband, Sam, have lived in Morgan County the past nine years and have been members of our church since 2016. They have two little ones, Evie (4) and James (2). Sarah currently serves on the SPRC and the Coffee Bar Decorating Team for Sunday morning worship.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, I confess that denying myself does not come naturally to me. Help me to change my focus to serving Your mission instead of my own.



MARCH 25

## JOHN 4:13-14

*Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

### LIVING WATER

How many times have you said, or heard someone say, "Man, I'm dying of thirst," or "I just can't get enough to drink!" Perhaps this was due to an extensive exercise session, work in the yard on a hot day, or better yet — too much pizza! Sometimes it's just hard to quench our physical thirst. Even if we drink lots of fluids today, that won't satisfy our needs for water tomorrow. What if the water we drink provided a perpetual quenching?

That is what Jesus promises in the Scripture verses for today's devotion. The spiritual "water" He provides becomes a perpetual spring in those who choose to follow Him — "watering" them spiritually for eternal life. While physical water evaporates away, His spiritual nourishment is everlasting.

Each day often brings new challenges in our lives. Stress at work, school, home, health issues or concerns for others. These challenges often require a "spiritual refreshing," much like our garden needs a fresh shower of rain. As we accept His invitation to follow Him, isn't it refreshing to know He will forever quench our needs for spiritual thirst.

*Eddy Crumbley has been married to Cathy for almost 48 years. They have been members of Madison First UMC for 4 years, and are the proud parents of Jennifer (Ryan) Braswell, Jessica (Michael) Crawford and Alicia (Kim) Braswell, all of whom attend Madison First UMC with their combined six grandchildren.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, we thirst for many things in our lives—water, certainly, but also purpose, significance, relationships, and love. Help us to realize that our thirst will never be satisfied until we turn to You for living water.



MARCH 26

JOHN 8:12

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*

## **A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS**

Most little children want to sleep with a night light on at night. It's almost like a security blanket to them. I will admit, even as an adult, I don't like to be outside in total darkness. There is just an uneasiness that comes with not being able to see what is hidden in the darkness.

When I think about our world today, sometimes I feel like that little kid in a dark room. It can get pretty scary and a little depressing if we let ourselves get consumed by the darkness around us. Thankfully, Jesus tells us in the Bible that HE is the light of the world and if we know Him, we will never walk in darkness. When I remind myself of this truth, and take time to focus on Jesus and His promises, it's a lot like turning on a light. The darkness tends to fade, and I can remind myself HE is in control. All He asks is that I follow Him and trust Him to guide me. What a gift! If we only choose to accept it and allow Him to shine His light in our lives, He'll be there even on the darkest of nights.

*Jennifer Braswell is a Sales Trainer for Varsity Spirit Fashion. She is married to Ryan Braswell and the mother of Gunner (11) and Brennan (10) Braswell. They have lived in Madison for almost 5 years.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, like everyone else, there are times in life that I feel like I'm stumbling along in near total darkness. Thank You for being the guiding light that I can count on at all times.



MARCH 27

## JOHN 12:25-26

*Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.*

### **FOLLOWING = SERVING**

The metaphor of the seed and all things agrarian were what the people understood so well during Jesus time on earth. Jesus is the single seed of life. He died that we may sow the seed of His love in our own hearts. In our Scripture today, I don't think Jesus meant that we should hate our lives or long to die. Rather, by releasing our life to God and giving Him control, we are promised eternal life and true happiness and joy.

Let's put it in context. Jesus knew His crucifixion was near and His followers were just beginning to have a deeper and better understanding of His purpose. So Jesus challenged the disciples – and us – to think about what needs to die in us so that we can live more fully in Him. If we let go and let Him be in control, then and only then, we are promised eternal life. The contemporary phrase, “let go, and let God,” is perfect. When we plant Him in our own hearts, we can become fruitful examples of Christ. We can grow more in love and spread His love, just as He has taught us to do.

Jesus welcomes all of us. Everyone is offered the ability to follow Him, serve Him, and have eternal life. It is simple for us! Love and obey Him, and we will bear the fruit of salvation. During Lent, I pray we will continue to feel Jesus' promise of love, to feel His comfort daily in our hearts . . . and that COVID will go away, we all need a hug!

*Judy Gilbert is married to Bruce, and they have three grown children and seven grandchildren. Judy has been a member of Madison First UMC for 53 years.*

**Prayer:** God, help me to become a servant of Christ, willing to aside whatever hinders me from serving Him in every way. Amen.



MARCH 28

## MATTHEW 26:26-28

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."*

### THE COST PAID ON THE CROSS

In the last evening before His arrest, Jesus shared the Passover Meal with His disciples. In these last hours, He explained that His blood would be shed "for the forgiveness of sins." The sin which had broken humanity's connection with God could only be overcome by His sacrifice on the cross. Our connection with Christ was restored on that cross where He suffered and died.

I often wonder how people get through tough times without trusting in God. There are so many restrictions, burdens, worries, judgments, etc., in our current climate. Whenever I feel discouraged, tempted, or down-trodden, I go back to the simple phrase, "What Would Jesus Do?"

I feel Christ broke bread, poured wine, and declared those elements as a representation of His body and the blood He shed for us. It was a simple, nourishing gesture, but it was symbolic for what lay ahead. The crucifixion, while horrific, was so selfless and promising.

Christ lives in us. He reminds us of His sacrifice every time we participate in communion. He gives us courage to know we are not facing challenges alone. As His disciples, we are summoned to go OUT and make disciples. It is easier to accomplish this if we are more Christ-like and have faith rather than being consumed with ourselves and the secular.

*Catherine Simmons is the Volunteer Director at Madison First UMC. Her husband, Jason, owns Middle Georgia Timber. Both graduated from the University of Georgia and enjoy the outdoors. They have three children: Nolie, Ruth, and Cal.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, when I take of the Lord's Supper, I am reminded anew of the price Jesus paid so my connection with you could be restored. May I cherish the gift of salvation that cost Jesus His life. Amen.



MARCH 29

## MATTHEW 26:38-44

*Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.*

### JESUS PRAYED

Jesus knew how this evening would end. He had just shared with His disciples during the Passover meal that His blood would be poured out for the forgiveness of sins. This struggle in the garden of Gethsemane shows the humanity of our Savior. Though He knew His death was necessary to accomplish His Father's will, He prayed for another way. But knowing another way wasn't possible, He submitted to God's plan.

Jesus was at a turning point in His life and had great sorrow in His heart. He turned to the Father in prayer as He struggled with all that was swirling around Him. He sought comfort for what was to come. He stopped, however, in this time spent in the Garden of Gethsemane and went to His disciples asking for consideration and vigilance in prayer.

This scene in the Bible is one that challenges us in our prayer life. Many of us really don't know how to pray. Prayer involves more than just petitioning for when times get tough. As believers in Christ, we must fall to our knees before God, with no one around and all distractions aside, as we go straight to our heavenly Father for His answer and will for us. Just as Jesus did that night in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the most terrifying night of His life, He showed us that prayer is the answer for winning true victory over the struggles in our lives.

*Brian Johnson is a teacher at Morgan County High School. He and his wife, Kelly, live in Valley Farm with their three children.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for a Savior who submitted to Your plan to pay the price for our sins. Though it cost His life, Jesus willingly suffered so we could be saved. Amen.



MARCH 30

## LUKE 23:33-34

*When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.*

### FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

Do you know what Jesus was thinking during His final time with us? Not of Himself or how short His life had been, but of others and their salvation. Most certainly, not His own. Jesus was always filled with empathy for others, even for those who crucified Him. Even when Jesus was on the cross, He prayed and asked for forgiveness for His enemies when they reached out to Him. He constantly looked up to His Father for guidance and saw those around Him as people who could be redeemed through salvation, never sinners without hope.

The last moments of Jesus' life were consistent with His entire time on earth. He was always looking to God and thinking of others. He could have easily focused on Himself in this dire situation. The cruel irony of this passage, though, is that our sins brought Jesus to the cross, because the forgiveness we seek is only possible through His sacrifice. And even on the cross, He showed us that deep in the valleys, in the mundane nuances of life, even when it's easier to simply walk among others and silently follow the crowd, we must always look up to Him and not around at them.

*Shanna Addison and her husband, Drew, have two children, Caroline (4) and Drake (2). She is on the Intercessory Prayer Team and serves as Secretary on the Madison First UMC Preschool Board of Directors.*

**Prayer:** Thank you, Jesus, for loving me so much that you willingly paid the price for my sins and pleaded with Your Father to forgive me. Amen.



MARCH 31

## MATTHEW 27:45-46

*From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").*

### MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

We have experienced pain and great loss. Tragedies happen that we cannot explain. Evil seems to win.

Crucifixion was recognized as the most horrible type of execution; however, Jesus did not cry out to God because He was in physical agony. Jesus cried out because His fellowship with the Father had been broken. This spiritual separation from God was worse than the physical torture. Jesus gave up His life as an offering for our sin. The darkness that covered the earth that afternoon was not only a physical darkness, but a spiritual darkness as well.

Jesus knew the moment He took the sin of the world upon Himself that He would be temporarily separated from God. While nailed to the cross, Jesus bore the punishment for our sins in the past, present, and future. Jesus bore the sins of the whole world so that forgiveness and salvation would be available to all through Christ. He was forsaken for a time so that we do not have to be forsaken forever.

It is up to us to accept the gift of God's of eternal salvation.

*Lisa Wilson is married to Mark, and they are the parents of Anna and Ellen. A former media specialist, she now serves as the director of the Morgan County Historical Society managing three house museums in Madison.*

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, I cannot imagine how devastating it would be to know You had turned away from me. I'm so thankful that Jesus died for my sins so that I will never have to experience the loss of Your love and grace. Amen.



APRIL 1

## EPHESIANS 1:7-8

*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us.*

### THE BEAUTY IN THE RUGGED CROSS

As we were flipping channels a couple nights ago, we came across Alan Jackson's Gospel Special at the Ryman. The hymn he sang was one of my grandmother's favorites, "The Old Rugged Cross." I can still hear "Ma" playing it on her piano as she sang my sisters and me to sleep when we'd spend the night with her. The words in verse 3 strike me as a beautiful reflection of Ephesians 1:7-8.

*In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,  
A wondrous beauty I see,  
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,  
To pardon and sanctify me.*

Jesus came, paid a price as He took on our sin, bought us, and restored us to usefulness. Our missteps have been dismissed and forgiven – not just the day we became a Christian, but each and every day.

Jesus is the Savior who wants to give us the gift of friendship with God, the grace of forgiveness, and a rich, eternal life with Him. He saved us from death and despair and, instead, made it possible for us to have confidence we will live with God someday, and the desire to live for God here and now.

This is a free gift, of God's grace, to those that call upon Jesus' name and trust Him for salvation. May we humbly, graciously, and happily receive this gift and respond as Jesus calls us to connect with Him on "The Old Rugged Cross" today and forevermore.

*Alicia Braswell and her husband, Kim, have a son, Cad (13), and daughter, Cate (11), and they have been at Madison First UMC for five years.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, I cannot imagine a more costly and extravagant gift than the gift of salvation given to me by Jesus Christ. May I cherish that gift every day. Amen.



APRIL 2

## EPHESIANS 2:8-9

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.*

### THE GIFT OF SALVATION

The Lord loved us so much that He sent His only Son down to earth to save us: sinful, broken people living in a sinful, broken world. Christ loved us so much that He was willing to go through a tortuous, painful death on our behalf. There is no greater love than this, the gift of salvation.

We are to respond by giving our thanks and praise, showing gratitude and living joyfully for the immense *gift* we have been given. It is just that. A *gift* from God, the greatest gift imaginable. It can be difficult to grapple with a love like this. How many of us feel we have to try to "work" our way to God? The words in these verses tell us differently though -- they are a powerful reminder to me this morning. We are incredibly blessed to all be equally loved and cherished, not because of the works we have done (or the things we haven't done to "measure up"), but because God loves us and desires each of us to spend eternal life with Him. Let that sink in.

*Sam Ball and his wife, Sarah, moved to Madison in 2012. They have two children, Evie (4) and James (2). Sam has served on our Lay Leadership Committee. He works for Madison Realty and is currently president of the Madison Kiwanis Club.*

**Prayer:** Help us, Father, to not live boastfully, but instead exemplifying grace and deep thanksgiving for this very precious gift from You. Amen.



APRIL 3

## HEBREWS 2:14-17

*Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels He helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason He had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people.*

### JESUS MADE FULLY HUMAN

In the verses above, the author explains how Jesus became flesh so that He could die a human death. It was through His resurrection that He broke the power that death has over us. We are victorious through His blood when we accept Him as our Savior.

Jesus took a human body to save our bodies, and a human mind to save our minds. He became man in full, so that He might save us in full. He is truly a marvelous Savior. While I find this to be nothing short of amazing, I also have a hard time grasping such a sacrifice made for me and for you.

Every day I am so thankful that Jesus loves me so much that He became sin for me and died for me. I am thankful for everything that He has blessed me with in my life. Sometimes it is hard to comprehend the sacrifice that He made for me, a sinner, so that I could have eternal life through Him.

*Christian Williams is married to AJ Williams. They have 3-year-old twin girls Charlotte and Chandler. Christian is a Morgan county native and is happy to be back in Madison raising her family. She is a long-time member of the church and also serves on the Madison FUMC Preschool Board.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, the abundance of Your love, demonstrated through Jesus Christ, who died for my sins to overcome the power of death, completely astounds me. Thank You for such an extravagant gift. Amen.



APRIL 4

## MATTHEW 9:35-38

*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

### THE MINISTRY OF COMPASSION

Jesus responded to the realities of His time with compassion. He had compassion for the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. It was this reality that prompted Jesus to tell His disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers, because the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

We are indeed living through difficult times. It is a reality that invites us to act with compassion and justice.

There are times when I have felt like the people Jesus tends: harassed and helpless, longing for the guidance and help of the Good Shepherd. But as I read this passage again, I am mindful that there are plenty of other times when I am called to be another laborer, to work with the Shepherd to tend His flock, to gather in the harvest of broken people by offering whatever I have that might meet their needs. Do you see the people around you? Jesus challenges us to look, for when we see the needs of those around us, that leads to compassion . . . and compassion leads to action.

Who are the harassed and helpless in our time? How can we be instruments of peace? Let us be a beacon of compassion in times of comfort and in times of controversy.

*Sarah Robertson is a school counselor at Morgan County Middle School. Sarah and her husband, Perez, are the proud parents of Davis (13), Reagan (7), and Porter (3).*

**Prayer:** Father, in these difficult times that we are living, may you give us the strength and courage to proclaim and live the values of your kingdom, so we can build a better society. Thank you for your steadfast love and your mercy toward us. Amen.



APRIL 5

## MATTHEW 25:34-36

*"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me.'"*

### **DO NO HARM; DO GOOD**

The Lord graciously gives of Himself to those who receive His teachings. He inspires us to live with caring, love, and charity. We are blessed to be chosen as the conduit, the connection from Him to others who often need mercy. Reach out with an open heart, free of judgement, and without seeking recompense.

We do not have the ability to look into the depth of others' needs. Only the Lord truly can. It is often easy to make snap judgments and step away. But we can act on the Lord's behalf and extend grace. Take in that stranger, if just for a moment. A kind word, a hug, a gift, a helping hand, a simple smile, knowing that the causes of others' needs are not always seen.

Remember the verse, *Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.* On the surface this thought is NOT an act of mercy, nor is it a barter. It is one-sided — your side without the need of return. If a smile is returned by a scowl, smile harder, and send love with it, and let the joy of trying fill your heart.

The Lord's is pleased when we extend His love, for He has given us the gift of salvation. The Lord sacrificed His only Son freely for our eternal inheritance of His Heavenly Kingdom. When we share His love with others, He is filled with joy.

*Carol MacAllister is wife to John, mother of two sons, and grandmother of four grandchildren. She is a teacher, and loves sharing her songs, artwork, and writing.*

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, help me to be an instrument of Your caring and love. Help me to extend mercy freely with no thought of myself, but only of You. Amen.



APRIL 6

## MATTHEW 28:18-20

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

### Where Will We "Go"?

In this Scripture, the disciples met with Jesus on a mountain above Galilee, overlooking the sea where many of them began their journey with Him. I like to believe this location was intentionally chosen. From here, perhaps there was an expansive vista, reminding them of their travels together and their earlier commitment to follow Jesus. What a great place from which they would "go."

Jesus made no exceptions on the basis of age, race, gender, or ability. As Christians, we are commissioned to disciple, baptize, and teach. Today, believers are found just about everywhere, in all walks of life. Regardless of station or rank, they "go" about their usual days, managing their earthly responsibilities and hopefully, observing the Great Commission.

Perhaps like me, you have been privileged to witness it. A year ago, I had the opportunity to meet Meckson. Despite a language barrier, me struggling with Swahili and he with English, we managed to share our personal faith with each other. That is how we learned we are brothers in Christ. As a believer, Meckson shares the Gospel with those visiting his country while on an expedition. Likewise, we have unique opportunities in our community to "go" and share the Good News of Jesus.

Although most will never meet Meckson, believers everywhere share a common pedigree and charge with him. Are we discipling, baptizing, and teaching? Could a Christian brother or sister see our effort to increase Christ's Kingdom? Why not begin seeking opportunities to "go" today?

*Todd Watson is an Executive Officer for the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia and an adjunct professor. Roberta, his bride of nearly 35 years, is the Director of Education at Madison First. They have two grown children.*

**Prayer:** Lord, You have commanded that we "go" and share our faith with people from all nations, yet sometimes we hesitate to share our faith at all, even right here at home. Grant us courage to be bold witnesses for You everywhere we go. Amen.



APRIL 7

## ACTS 1:8

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

### OUR HELPER

After Jesus came back to Earth, following His resurrection, He appeared to the apostles several times over a period of forty days. I’m sure each time was an unreal experience for these men. After witnessing His death on the cross, still in awe of His resurrection, they probably wondered what He might say or do.

In our Scripture for today, Jesus is preparing these men for the Holy Spirit to “come on them.” He asks them to be His witnesses to “the ends of the earth.” It is one thing to be asked to be a witness in your own town, but throughout the earth. What a request!

Jesus did not leave them on their own, however. He shared with them that they would receive **POWER** from the Holy Spirit. Jesus knows that we cannot do all that He asks and desires alone, which is why He has equipped us with a helper, His Spirit, to enable us to share His message with others. Alone, we are not capable of being all God desires us to be, because “we all fall short of the glory of God.”

Because of the Holy Spirit, we are all connected with Christ, and, as a result, we are able to serve and tell others about Jesus during our time here on Earth, whether we stay local or travel to “the ends of the earth.”

*Jessica Crawford moved to Madison in 2016 with her husband, Michael, and their two daughters, Brooke (10) and Blake (8). They are been members of Madison First UMC for several years.*

**Prayer:** Father, wherever I live and wherever I go, give me the opportunity, and the courage, to boldly tell others of the gift of salvation Jesus has given to me. Amen.



APRIL 8

## PHILIPPIANS 2:3-5

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.*

### SERVING WITH HUMILITY

These verses in the Bible are very challenging, and like many, are very difficult to achieve. Verse 3 tells us to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than ourselves. While it's hard to admit it, this runs contrary to my pride and self-interest, and I dare say, to most of humanity.

Then verse 4 tells us that each of us should look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. Again, this verse challenges our natural tendency to take care of ourselves with, oftentimes, little concern for others.

Verse 5 points out that our attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ, who came to die on the cross for the redemption of our sins. This is a gift from God made possible by accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior and allowing the Holy Spirit to live within us daily.

So, bottom line, we can choose to live a servant life by gratefully and joyfully being involved in many areas of our church, such as intercessory prayer, neighborhood missions, Methodist men's and women's groups, JH Ministries, and the Children and Youth Ministry programs. In our community, we can serve others by participating in the work of The Caring Place, Morgan County Food Pantry and youth programs like Boys and Girls Clubs, FCA, and Young Life.

In the final analysis, by serving others with the attitude of Jesus Christ, we have a win-win situation because when we serve in this way, we often receive as much or more as the people we serve.

*Dan Lowring and his wife, Sharon, have been active at Madison First UMC since moving to Madison in 2007. Previously they were members of St. Luke's UMC in Indianapolis where they lived for over 45 years.*

**Prayer:** Father, help me to find joy in serving others by setting aside all desire to take care of my own needs without first considering the needs of others. Amen.



APRIL 9

## HEBREWS 12:1-2

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

### **RUNNING THE RACE**

The life of a believer begins when Christ's gift of salvation and eternal life is accepted. But that's not the end of the journey; it's the beginning of a journey that lasts a lifetime. Even though we've trusted Christ with our lives, do we allow the weight of doubts, unpleasant situations, or some worldly accepted action to get in the way of a life we never thought possible?

The world tells us to seek lofty goals of position, wealth, achievement, etc., that interfere with the goal that God has for us. He wants us to become the exact person we were meant to be by seeking to mold ourselves in the image of Christ in all areas of our lives while becoming one with Him. The world's goals make us exhausted, lonely slaves striving towards unguaranteed goals. Molding ourselves in Christ's image joins us into the greatest love relationship there is, removing the heavy yoke of the world and lighting our path. As we move ahead and grow in Christ, we're still a part of this world; but our growth naturally replaces the temptations of the world with God's utmost desires for us.

Several years ago, I realized I wasn't living like I believed all of God's promises all of the time. What do you have to lose by truly believing all of God's promises? How could you grow in your walk with Christ and work with Him to minister to others?

*Gay Morris is an extraordinarily blessed wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother and friend.*

**Prayer:** I want to embrace the faith journey You have designed for me. Help me to cast off the obstacles around me so that I can fully mold my life to Your plans. Amen.



APRIL 10

## 1 JOHN 3:16-18

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

### **A LOVE THAT CARES FOR OTHERS**

Willingness to sacrifice our life in Christ's name is something we are all commanded. For most of us, the sacrifice may be fairly easy to visualize for someone close to us, such as a spouse, children, grandchildren, and maybe some close friends. Some of you have already faced this choice either by chance or through your chosen profession. We would like to believe we would be "willing," but I guess no one really knows how they will react until that time comes.

For most of us, the daily opportunity is much less costly. We are told to have compassion for others in need and take action. For this, we must be observant of those around us, recognize their situation, and act to address their issues. As part of that ministry, we also need to share with them that God's love in us is the reason we are giving assistance.

I personally have a tendency to focus in the wrong direction and let attention to my own issues cloud my awareness of others. Without first recognizing the needs of others around us, we miss the opportunity to serve Him with both our words and actions. Lord, help me stay vigilant for the opportunity to share your ministry through my actions to help others in need.

*Tommy Wood is currently retired and lives in the Buckhead area with his wife, Sharon. They have two sons and daughters-in-law and two grandchildren, ages one and three.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, these verses remind me that Christ loved me so much that He gave His life for me. Help me show His love to others by giving my time, talent, and resources to meet their physical needs while also sharing how Jesus can meet their spiritual needs. Amen.



# MADISON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH INTERCESSORY PRAYER MINISTRY

The mission of the Intercessory Prayer Ministry is to bring to God, through Jesus Christ, the concerns of our congregation, our city, our community and the world by the prayers of individuals and groups. Madison First UMC is a praying church. This ministry, which began with 37 volunteers in 1998, has grown considerably over the years. The prayer warriors are everyday men and women much like you. Most pray alone. Some pray as couples. Some pray as entire families. The volunteers range in age from preschool to ninety-two. Some are retired. Many are employed. Though not everyone writes notes, during a typical week, these volunteers write approximately 100 cards and letters to persons who need comfort, consolation and support.

The ministry has realized some awesome answers to prayer – some miraculous healings of body and spirit. God doesn't always answer prayers in visible, altogether understandable ways. Intercessory prayer is, however, a powerful resource. In spite of prayers that appear to be unanswered, intercessory prayer does work! It is the greatest gift we can give to another person. As one volunteer said, "We're standing in the gap for others when they either cannot pray or desperately need our prayers."

If you would like to be a part of the Madison First UMC Intercessory Prayer Team, or if we could pray for you, contact our church office at 706-342-3325 or visit our website, [www.madisonfumc.com](http://www.madisonfumc.com).



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