

2022 **LENTEN**

DEVOTIONS

A SEASON OF SACRIFICE AND REPENTANCE



WRITTEN BY
MEMBERS OF
MADISON FIRST
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



LENT 2022

Madison First United Methodist Church

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Madison First United Methodist Church
Madison, GA

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Lent

A Season of Sacrifice and Repentance

Lent is a forty day season (not counting Sundays) beginning on Ash Wednesday and concluding on the Saturday before Easter. In the early church, new converts spent these days fasting and praying as they prepared for baptism. We observe this solemn season of reflection as the means for growing closer to God, strengthening our relationship with others, and giving selflessly to those in need. Several other traditions have also become part of the Lenten season.

In biblical times, people who tossed ashes on their heads or clothing were expressing deep sorrow over their sins. In a similar sign of penance, on **Ash Wednesday**, pastors impose the symbol of the cross on the foreheads of their parishioners, using ashes generated when the palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration were burned.

In their sanctuaries and worship centers, clergy display paraments and banners made from the deepest **purple** cloth, the color associated with repentance. They may also remove other decorations, leaving these areas solemn and barren.

Individually, we may practice one or more spiritual disciplines.

Fasting creates an opportunity to set aside the distractions of daily life to become more attuned to God's presence. As our sins and failures are revealed to us, through **prayer and confession** we can seek God's forgiveness and draw near to Him again. **Meditating on Christ's sacrifice** encourages us to rejoice in our salvation and to share the way of salvation with others. Reflecting on Christ's suffering may also open our eyes to the suffering experienced by people in our community and around the world. When we respond with **charity (almsgiving)**, our financial gifts and acts of service allow us to meet their needs while sharing with them the love of Christ.

Our **Scripture readings** during this Lenten season will be from the Gospels, focusing on the last months of Jesus' life and ministry. Each day's reading is supported by a devotion written by someone in our church. We'll be encouraged to contemplate the intentional sacrifice Jesus made so that we might find forgiveness for our sins and eternal life with Him. We'll become more aware of the ways we have drifted away from our Lord. We might feel compelled to repent—to turn away from living by our own terms and humbly returning to God and committing to live according to His will. Father God, we pray this season of sacrifice and repentance will strengthen our faith in You and deepen our love for each other.

Ash Wednesday, March 2

Jesus Returns to Jerusalem

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 17:14-23, Mark 9:14-32, Luke 9:37-45

Devotion Focus: Mark 9:30-32

Jesus, nearing the end of His ministry, is making His last sweep of Galilee before He turns His face toward Jerusalem. Peter, James, and John have just witnessed Jesus's Transfiguration. Time is precious, and Jesus needs to prepare His disciples for what is to come. If they stay out in public, Jesus won't be able to speak freely because crowds will overtake them begging for miracles and healings. When Jesus gives the disciples His three-fold message—I will be betrayed; I will be killed; I will rise—they are so terrified that they cannot comprehend what Jesus is saying! How can this be true? Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior! Surely not, Lord!

Would we react differently? Whenever we receive devastating news, our ears deafen to the whole message because our minds race to the distressing end. Fear is a liar and a thief. It sucks the life and joy from us, keeping us from the truth. Jesus offers us the same liberation He offered His disciples: follow My plan; joy will come in the morning.

As we enter this Lenten season, in a world that is powered by fear, I invite you into a time of self-denial. Offer your crippling fears to the Lord and accept His peace. Allow Him to work within you for the next forty days so that you will emerge a victor. The only way is to trust Him and His plan. Turn your face toward Him and allow Him to lead. Perhaps these forty days will change the rest of our lives.

Deborah Mosley is a wife, mother, grandmother, and educator. She and her husband, Grady, have been members of Madison First UMC for twelve years where she is a Sunday School teacher and small group leader.

My Response and Prayer:

Thursday, March 3

Jesus Returns to Jerusalem

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 17:24-18:14, Mark 9:33-41, Luke 9:46-50

Devotion Focus: Mark 9:33-37

Defining Greatness

How do we measure “greatness” in today’s world? What words come to mind when you think of “the greatest”? Some responses might include CEOs, celebrities, athletes, and winning teams. Some might mention the elevated status of social media influencers or YouTubers. And while these things are not inherently bad, they do not encompass the biblical perspective on greatness that was set by Jesus’s words recorded in the gospel of Mark. The disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest. They desired recognition and honor in the earthly kingdom. Jesus reminded them that His heavenly kingdom was counter-cultural.

Today’s passage requires us to humbly consider Jesus’ words: “If anyone would be first, he must be the last of all and servant of all” (v. 35, ESV). Jesus told His disciples that greatness is not about elevating your status; greatness is about valuing service to others above all.

During this Lenten season, as we draw closer to Jesus with repentant hearts, may we be reminded of Jesus’ counter-cultural definition of greatness, then examine our hearts for the places where we have failed to be obedient to the call of service over self.

Melissa Martin has been a member of Madison First UMC since she moved to Madison 10 years ago. She is a YogaFaith instructor in the community and at Madison First. Melissa is married to Brian, and they are the parents of James (19), Charlie (16) and Thomas (13).

My Response and Prayer:

Friday, March 4

Jesus Returns to Jerusalem

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 18:15-35, Mark 9:42-50, Luke 17:1-10

Devotion Focus: Matthew 18:21-35

Forgive as You Have Been Forgiven

This passage reminds me of the portion of the Lord's prayer related to forgiving debts. I sometimes paraphrase the verse to say, "Please help me forgive others as you have so graciously forgiven me."

In verse 33 the king asked, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" If God only forgave me as I have sometimes (not) forgiven others, I would be in a world of trouble! If my forgiveness was based on repaying the debt I owe for all my transgressions, it would amount to much more than \$10,000,000! (This was the value of the debt in v. 24 according to *The Living Bible*.)

This Scripture also points out the debt was forgiven or "canceled" (v. 27). There's a big difference in repaying versus canceling. Sometimes we might only want to forgive others if they first forgive us. The passage concludes with Jesus' instructions to first "forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (v. 35).

Another point in the parable is the size of the debt. The master forgave a huge debt, yet the servant would not forgive one much smaller. Contrary to some popular belief, in the case of forgiveness, size does NOT matter. Let us forgive all transgressions—large or small.

Thank the Lord for forgiveness based on grace and mercy as opposed to behavior and attitude. May God guide us to forgive others based on the example He set for us.

Eddy Crumbley and his wife, Cathy, have been members of Madison First UMC for five years. Eddy serves on the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and chairs the Council on Ministries.

My Response and Prayer:

Saturday, March 5

In Jerusalem for Feast of Tabernacles

Scripture Reading:

John 7:1-24

Devotion Focus: John 7:1-13

The Life of One Man

Can one person experience as much earthly life as Jesus did? Put yourself to the test.

Had your name at the top of a hit list? Jesus did. Had it there when you were totally innocent? Jesus did.

Had your siblings believe you were a fake? Jesus did.

Had a heart full of mourning for the people you love because of their choices for bondage? Jesus did. Shared with them truth to find their freedom? Jesus did. Had them hate you because if freedom required truth they didn't want to hear it? Jesus did.

Had to walk about in shadowy places? Jesus did.

Had the prominent power leaders spread vicious lies about you? Jesus did. Had your friends fear to speak your name because of the power of political correctness? Jesus did.

Perhaps this is why multitudes followed Him. One person could not experience all of this, but one by one among the crowd were those who did. Each one finding an identification, an understanding, a hope. Because one man sacrificed everything to give it to them. One man knew the essence of genuine love lies in self-sacrifice. And He gave it. All the way to His death.

Now He prays for those who call themselves disciples to follow His example.

The path to love is self-sacrifice. Greater love has no man than this.

Teresa Wallace is a lifetime member of Madison First UMC and associate member of Rutledge UMC. She hosts a daily devotional blog geared toward teens and applicable for adults at www.worksofherhands.com.

My Response and Prayer:

Sunday, March 6

In Jerusalem for Feast of Tabernacles

Scripture Reading:

John 7:25-8:11

Devotion Focus: John 7:33-44

With You for a Short Time

The Feast of Tabernacles was a celebration of God's preservation of Israel when they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Jesus waited until halfway through the festival to go to the temple courts in Jerusalem, where He began to teach. While many people were amazed at His teaching and believed He was the Messiah, others said He could not be the Messiah because they knew where He was from. Some wanted to hurt Him, but couldn't lay a hand on Him.

Jesus told the people He would be leaving them and going back to His Father in heaven, where they couldn't find or follow Him. They misunderstood and thought He might be going to teach the Jews who lived among the Gentiles. Jesus' speech was full of tenderness. Even though some of the people sought to kill Him, He told them He knew this and He would be with them only as long as God allowed. Jesus told them to seek Him while He was present so they might profit by it. On the last day of the festival Jesus offered to work a life-giving change within them by sending the Holy Spirit after He returned to His Father. Although these events occurred six months before His crucifixion, Jesus was already explaining the wonderful gift of the Spirit that would come our way. Praise God.

This passage seems to be full of timing. Jesus spoke His messages at just the right time. He trusted His Father for the timing of His sacrifice and return to heaven. How much more should we trust in His sacrifice and purpose for our lives?

Betsy Briley is a wife, mother of two boys, and grandmother of two amazing grandchildren. She enjoys cooking, gardening, crafts, sewing, and living in Madison. Originally from NC, she is a UNC alumni: GO HEELS!

My Response and Prayer:

Monday, March 7

In Jerusalem for Feast of Tabernacles

Scripture Reading:

John 8:12-59

Devotion Focus: John 8:21-30

Who is Jesus?

“Who are you?” The question followed Jesus everywhere. His answer: “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning” (v. 25). Can’t you hear the frustration in His voice? Jesus had just told the Pharisees, “Where I go, you cannot come” (v. 21). They would die in their sin without believing He was the Son of Man. He added, “You are of this world; I am not of this world” (v. 23). This made no sense to the Pharisees. Claims made by this son of a Nazarene carpenter were preposterous.

I once read an account of the afterlife by a commercial pilot who, as a teenager, had crashed and was pronounced dead. He said earthbound humans cannot conceive how pride, lust, greed, and self-centeredness pervade every aspect of earthly life until they experience heaven and the absolute absence of sin.

The Pharisees rocked all 613 Judaic commandments. Basking in the holy spotlight, life was good. “Who are you, Jesus, to judge us?” When we scroll through Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram feeds, what goes through our minds? “Okay. We know you have twelve-pack abs. Enough of the string bikini.” “Seriously, spending Christmas in Vail when your business is failing?”

The Pharisees bet incorrectly that their righteous behavior brought eternal security. But what about us? If Jesus walked down the aisle next Sunday would we ask, “Who are you?” Would we look up from our phones long enough to listen to His reply?

Jamie Miles is wife, mother and lifelong Methodist. Her passions include writing, yoga and watching out for feathered friends at her bird feeders.

My Response and Prayer:

Tuesday, March 8

In Jerusalem for Feast of Tabernacles

Scripture Reading:

John 9:1-41

Devotion Focus: John 9:35-41

Blind, Not Blind; Judged, Not Judged

Jesus healed many blind people, often in different ways: by word, by touch, even spit. The blind person in these verses regained his sight only after he left Jesus and washed his eyes as instructed.

When Jesus asks the blind man if he believes in the Son of Man, he answers, "Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him" (v. 36) He responds with an admission of his own ignorance, but with an open heart—the total opposite of the Pharisees.

In this encounter, nearby Pharisees hear Jesus say, "I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (v. 39). The Pharisees laughingly answer, "What? Are we blind too? (v. 40). A rhetorical question meaning, "*You're not saying I don't understand spirituality!*"

The ending is fascinating. Jesus seems to say, God does hold all people accountable—but based on what you know, right? (*Verse 41a: "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin."*) Those who come to God in humility, admitting weakness and seeking truth, are met with grace and forgiveness. The proud, who are wise in their own eyes and claim to have spiritual sight (*Verse 41b: "but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains"*) will be judged accordingly.

We are all sinners, called to repent with humility as Jesus' sacrifice has paved the way for our acceptance in Heaven with Him for eternity.

Chris Cook and his wife, Robyn, have two sons, Carter and Elijah. They have been members of Madison First UMC for more than 16 years. Chris is an artist, and he owns Madison Studios, a website design and marketing firm located in downtown Madison.

My Response and Prayer:

Wednesday, March 9

In Jerusalem for Feast of Tabernacles

Scripture Reading:

John 10:1-21

Devotion Focus: John 10:11-18

Trust the Good Shepherd

If there has ever been a time that the world is in desperate need of a Good Shepherd to keep His sheep safe, it is now. When we stop and really think about what is happening all around us, it is very frightening to realize what a scary place our world is right now. So much hate, violence, fear, and division has overwhelmed so many individuals. It seems we have lost sight of what is really important in life—love, compassion, kindness. These were all things that Jesus taught His disciples as He walked with them, and He continues to teach us today through His word.

Now is the time we need to rely on the promise that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and He will not allow the wolves to overtake us or harm us. All we have to do is have faith and believe what Jesus tells us—He laid down His life to protect us and to give us hope for an eternal life. All we have to do is trust Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and then follow Him wherever He leads us. I am grateful that I have a Good Shepherd to lead me through the bad times, all the while guarding me with His unconditional love.

Shannon Collier lives in Madison with her husband Steve. They have two adult children, Will and Amelia, and lots of fur babies at home!

My Response and Prayer:

Thursday, March 10

From Galilee to Judea

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 19:1-2, Luke 9:51-56 and 17:11-19

Devotion Focus: Luke 9:51-56

A Sacrificial Resolution

Do we resolutely walk towards the hard things, even matters of life and death, knowing that Jesus is by our side? In this passage from Luke, Scripture clearly states, “As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (v. 51). *The Message* translation says, “He gathered up His courage and steeled Himself for the journey to Jerusalem.”

I do not think this implies a “bracing,” but a sacrificial determination to fulfill His calling. Jesus is our role model for daily life. As we seek to know Him, understand Him, and follow Him more closely during this Lenten season, may we not brace and cower in the face of life’s challenges. Instead, let us have His courage, resolution, and sacrificial determination to go where God leads us so that we can fulfill our purpose, knowing that He is by our side.

Jesus resolutely and sacrificially walked towards His final days on earth. May we have His courage, determination, and strength to face all of our days and all of the unknowns with Him by our side. His ultimate sacrifice for us gives us the blessed assurance that the Living God is with us always.

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

My Response and Prayer:

Friday, March 11

From Galilee to Judea

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 11:20-30, Luke 10:1-42

Devotion Focus: Luke 10:21-24

Rejoice!

The definition of rejoice is to give or feel great delight. This passage shows all three members of the Trinity rejoicing. Why are they rejoicing? God is revealing His grace for all who choose to believe in Him. When Jesus sees this, He rejoices in the Holy Spirit for His Father saving people whose only hope is free grace. God's call for repentance is not for a certain "class" or prophets and kings, but for all those who hear and believe. How powerful!

Jesus points out to His disciples that Israel's priests and kings from centuries past had longed to see and hear the many things Jesus had done and said, but those things had not been revealed to them. In contrast, Jesus' disciples were greatly blessed to see and hear everything they witnessed as they walked with Him.

God's grace has been revealed to us, and we know we are among His chosen children. We, too, can join in the rejoicing by repenting and returning to God. During this Lenten season, let's reflect on our own repentance and rejoice in the Lord and rejoice with the Lord.

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.

My Response and Prayer:

Saturday, March 12

In Jerusalem for Feast of Dedication

Scripture Reading:

John 10:22-42

Devotion Focus: John 10:22-32

Conflict Over Jesus' Claims

Jesus' interaction with the Jewish leaders of the day was testy at best. They made constant attempts to lure Jesus into saying something that they could use to destroy Him. Without doubt, one of the most demanding situations that Jesus had to face was constantly being asked by the leaders if He was the Messiah, telling them that He was, their refusal to believe Him, only to be asked the same question again. Frustrated with not getting what they wanted, the Jewish leaders threatened to stone Jesus only to have their threat turned back on them.

We all lead frustrated lives because our friends and acquaintances refuse to believe as we believe and refuse to accept the plain truth. Living a life of love, kindness, and compassion can certainly be challenging when we are confronted by those who continually question our motives. Jesus' encounter with the Jewish leaders provides a template of how we should respond: persistence, kindness, and reiteration of our commitment to following the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The Easter story demonstrates that we do not always get what we want from those around us, and that we may in fact suffer for our actions, but there is always Easter and the resurrection and the life everlasting. It really does not get any better than that.

Jimmy Stokes is a retired college chemistry professor, a retired high school principal, and a retired association executive. He and Tommy Richardson teach the Easter Sunday School class.

My Response and Prayer:

Sunday, March 13

Ministry Beyond the Jordan River

Scripture Reading:

Luke 13:22—14:35

Devotion Focus: Luke 14:25-33

What is the Cost of Being a Disciple?

Jesus tells the crowds pursuing Him that to be His disciples, they must “hate” their own life, including their family, and they must give up everything they have to carry their cross and follow Him. Jesus uses this harsh description to make sure those who sincerely want to be His disciples really understand the cost of following Him.

Jesus is not telling people to despise their loved ones or to loathe themselves. He is telling them that they must have complete faithfulness and love for Him. Their allegiance will no longer be to their family or even their own self interests. Being a disciple of Jesus means giving up all their selfish desires and pursuits, and devoting their lives to the desires and pursuits of Jesus. He implores them to really consider the costs before they make the decision to follow Him.

Isn't this such a small price to pay considering the sacrifice Jesus made to pursue us? Are we willing to put our love for Him above our love for all others? Are we willing to seek His will for our lives instead of our own desires? Are we willing to discard anything that distracts us from following Him? Jesus knows that being a disciple comes with a cost. But He also knows that the reward for following Him is far greater than any love or desire or distraction we would have on our own. Making the decision to follow Jesus is the most important and the most fulfilling decision in the life of a believer.

Laree Zant has lived in Madison for 20 years with her husband, Dan, and their two children: Maclane (24) and Carolina (23).

My Response and Prayer:

Monday, March 14

Ministry Beyond the Jordan River

Scripture Reading:

Luke 15:1-32

Devotion Focus: Luke 15:1-10

Lost in the Crowd

When I was seven or eight years old, our family went to Disney World during the summer. If you've ever been to Disney, you know how crowded it becomes before the parades begin. As the crowds formed and everyone moved in the same direction, we were separated from my older sister, Alicia. She was waiting for my dad, who was behind us, and she missed him somehow in the flowing stream of people. She was lost for probably a good hour (it seemed like eternity)! We were all so relieved when my dad finally came walking through the crowd, with Alicia sitting on his shoulders, after diligently searching for her.

I thought of this Disney trip because this passage describes the shepherd joyfully putting the lost sheep on His shoulders and heading home, after leaving the rest of the flock to search for the lost one.

This passage humbles me when I think of Jesus and His longing to bring each one of us who are lost back "home." He and the Father don't ever stop searching for each of us when we are lost in a crowd of other believers and non-believers. Don't we all, many days, just follow the steady stream of people, without paying attention to where we are going or if we are being separated from our Father. Since He is constantly searching and trying to find us, we should all do our part to repent and be found. As we ask forgiveness and find our way back to our Father, we may also help bring other lost sheep in the crowd home with us for eternity.

Jessica Crawford is married to Michael, and they have two daughters, Brooke (11) and Blake (9). They have been members of Madison First UMC since 2016.

My Response and Prayer:

Tuesday, March 15

Ministry Beyond the Jordan River

Scripture Reading:

Luke 16:1-31

Devotion Focus: Luke 16:19-31

Will You Believe?

In this parable, Jesus spoke to His disciples about the heart, not about money. I remember one time long ago when my youngest son received \$20 from his grandparents. The next Sunday he placed the bill on the offering plate. My oldest son said to his brother, "What did you do that for?" I chuckled at the comment then, but later realized children have much to teach us.

The parable shows two contrasting life circumstances and two places of eternity. The rich man appears to have all the luxuries of life, while Lazarus (the beggar), settles for the rich man's crumbs. From a kingdom perspective, our life circumstances are not always what they seem. The rich man had many opportunities to help Lazarus as he begged outside his gate, but he chose to ignore Lazarus' need for help over and over again. When the rich man is in Hades, he begs for his brothers to be warned of their impending doom. He asks to have a dead person brought back to life to help his brothers believe. Jesus makes it known if they don't believe the Scriptures now, they won't believe a dead man resurrected.

This parable is a call to repentance—a 180° turn in the opposite direction from our sin. The life of self-indulgence, greed, and rejecting God leaves us with an eternity separated from Jesus and His love. There is no crossing over once our earthly life is over. This is a call to turn from our sin and care for those in need. God has been so incredibly generous toward us. Let us do the same for others.

Tammy Nealy and her husband, Barten, are both in education and enjoy being empty nesters. They have lived in Madison for four years.

My Response and Prayer:

Wednesday, March 16

Ministry Beyond the Jordan River

Scripture Reading:

Luke 17:20-37 and 18:1-14

Devotion Focus: Luke 18:9-14

Trusting God's Mercy

In today's gospel reading, Luke recounts a story that Jesus told about the difference in the prayers of two men. The parable begins with the words, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness . . . Jesus told this parable (v. 9)."

One man prayed publicly and spoke of his good deeds. This Pharisee told God, and anyone else who might be listening, how he didn't cheat or steal. He wanted to make sure that he got credit for his fasting and giving too. The other man, a tax collector, simply bowed his head and asked God for mercy for his sinfulness.

In addition to the Pharisee's obvious lack of humility, another difference in the prayers of these two men is that the Pharisee was trusting in his own good deeds for God's approval. He was confident of his "own righteousness." The tax collector knew that God's mercy was sufficient. Standing on this side of the resurrection, we are even more fully aware that God's mercy is enough. We recall the words spoken by Jesus on the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30). The season of Lent offers us the opportunity to be like the tax collector and to consider our sin and repent, humbly thanking God for His mercy. And Easter is coming, reminding us once again that Jesus paid our debt once and for all.

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

My Response and Prayer:

Thursday, March 17
Ministry Beyond the Jordan River

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 20:1-16

Devotion Focus: Matthew 20:1-16

Salvation is for All

The world can be uncertain some of the time, which is why Jesus told us this parable. These days we can easily get too busy with our daily tasks, stopping only to look around at the world and see that there are others who seem to be doing better than us. This observation can leave us feeling envious, just like the workers in the parable, who were hired first. They didn't think it was fair that the ones hired last should be paid the same amount and be the first to receive their wages.

Jesus wants us to see that even those who are "first in and last out" must make sure we don't put ourselves on a higher level than those who have come late to the Lord's employment. We should check ourselves to make sure our heart is focused on Jesus and His mission. If we find we are envious of other people, then it is time to repent.

In the parable Jesus also reminds us that in life there are some who are waiting—to be hired, to be invited, or just to be included. They may be the ones hired later and last, but they are not the least. Maybe you have a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, or a relative who, late in life, repented and turned to Jesus for a new life. They, too, are precious in God's sight. Come early or come late, there is enough for everyone in the Kingdom of God. Guess what? HE is hiring.

Sharon Wood and her husband, Tommy, live in Buckhead. They have grown boys, both married, and three grandchildren.

My Response and Prayer:

Friday, March 18

Return to Jerusalem to Raise Lazarus

Scripture Reading:

John 11:1-54

Devotion Focus: John 11:1-4, 38-44

Back from the Dead

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead as a physical manifestation of God's presence in our lives, His promises of eternal life, the forgiveness of sin, and perfect grace. Jesus knew that Mary and Martha did not have faith in His ability to bring Lazarus back from what was indisputable and sure death. It was Jesus's hope and prayer that through the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection, the hearts of the faithless and skeptical would be moved and softened toward the promises of a loving God.

We tell ourselves things like: "I am no good." "I am not worth saving." "I am nothing more than the sum of my sin." "There is no hope for me." Without Jesus, we are all as dead as Lazarus and every one of us is as faithless and skeptical as Martha and Mary.

The good news is that, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are redeemed and resurrected into eternal life and the overflowing and abundant grace, goodness, and mercy of our Heavenly Father God.

Jesus invites us to lay down the burdens of self-doubt and self-loathing as they beckon dangerously to us with the language of sin and death. He promises to banish darkness and deliver us into the warm light and comfort of His perfect love. In a sense, we are all "Lazarus"—and Jesus can bring every one of us "back from the dead," and cover us with the eternal glory of His promises.

Courtney Thomas is New Member Connection Leader and serves on the Intersessory Prayer Team. She, her husband, Travis, and three daughters, Caroline, Emily, and Mary Georgia live in Madison where they stay busy with church, school, community, and athletic activities.

My Response and Prayer:

Saturday, March 19

Final Journey to Jerusalem

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 19:3-30, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 18:15-30

Devotion Focus: Mark 10:13-16

Childlike Faith

Jesus says, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (v. 14, ESV). Why a child? The short answer—a child believes, doesn't debate, and accepts without questions. Can we sophisticated adults say the same?

In Luke 9:48, Jesus says, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives Him who sent me" (ESV). A sure link between a child, Jesus, and God. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, Jesus said that Nicodemus had to be born again—he had to become a spiritual child.

The apostle Paul confirms this link when he says we are children of God—and if children, then heirs—heirs of God. In First Corinthians 13:12, Paul reaffirms the child to God link saying, "We see in a mirror dimly . . . Now I know in part (childlike); then I shall know fully (in God's presence)" (ESV, notes added). Jesus again makes it clear in Mark 10:15 saying, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (ESV).

Jesus went to the cross to save us from our sinful selves. If we do not come to God as a newborn spiritual child, asking forgiveness, and thanking Jesus for His sacrifice, we have broken the link, we have steadfastly remained an adult, we have not changed course—we have not repented. Let us, during this Lenten season, begin our spiritual growth journey. Let us hear the biblical words. Let us become children of God. Let us grow more like Jesus every day. Let us repent.

Jack and Nancy are members of the Intercessory Prayer Ministry. Nancy provides a devotion at UMW meetings. Jack is a substitute leader in the 10-Alive Sunday school class and the Men's Bible study. They have 3 children and 11 grandchildren.

My Response and Prayer:

Sunday, March 20

Final Journey to Jerusalem

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 20:17-34, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:28, John 11:55-12:11

Devotion Focus: Matthew 20:17-19, John 12:1-8

True Worship

Jesus had been telling the disciples He would die and be resurrected on the third day. They did not appear to understand or accept what He told them. But Mary, who had just seen her brother Lazarus raised to life, seemed to get it.

By pouring the extravagant perfume onto Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair, Mary showed an understanding of the sacrifice that Jesus would make. Not only was it a beautiful act of worship, but she was, in a sense, anointing Him in preparation for His burial. Mary showed us that we can't rush to the joy of Easter morning without confronting the enormity of the sacrifice that Jesus made for us and sitting with the harsh reality of a suffering and dying Lord. A death in which He took our place and wiped away our sin. That, too, is part of worship.

Why did Mary seemingly know things the disciples and the others in the room did not? Perhaps because she spent her time at the feet of Jesus, connected to Him in a way that comes only from true worship. True worship isn't about how we do it, or even how it makes us feel. It is about expressing the genuine love in our hearts for God—a love so true and deep that it spills out into the room around us, leaving a fragrance that no one else can miss. Today, before we do anything else, let's just sit at the feet of Jesus in true and tender worship. Nothing is more important.

Ruth Bearden is married to Rob, and they have lived in Madison since 2001 and raised their four children here. Rob works in the software industry and Ruth is a would-be writer who co-leads a weekly women's Bible Study and volunteers where she can.

My Response and Prayer:

Holy Week

We need to immerse ourselves in the events of the last week of Jesus' life on earth to more fully understand the things Jesus experienced that week—and to examine how those things impact our lives today. For the rest of this season of Lent, we will focus on the Gospel accounts of the events that happened each day of this week.

On **Palm Sunday**, Jesus' **Triumphal Entry** into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey as the people worshipped Him and spread palm branches on the road He travelled, showed their eagerness to follow Him. It's hard to believe just a few days later these same people would be shouting for His death.

On **Monday**, Jesus made His way to the temple. We see His sorrow over Jerusalem and His anger with the moneychangers in the temple courts, before He continues to teach the people and heal the blind and lame.

On **Tuesday**, Jesus faced escalating conflict with the religious leaders, who were now determined to arrest and kill Him. Jesus knew their intentions, and confronted their unwillingness to recognize Him as Messiah. After telling His disciples about the coming destruction of the temple and signs of the end times, Jesus was anointed in Bethany while Judas agreed to betray Him.

On **Wednesday**, the disciples made preparations for the Passover, which Jesus shared with them on **Maundy Thursday**. Jesus washed His disciples' feet and issued a new commandment—or mandate—that they remember His sacrifice whenever they take the elements—the wine and the bread—of the New Covenant. After Judas left to betray Him, Jesus spent time preparing His disciples for what was coming and prayed for their protection. The evening ended with Jesus praying in Gethsemane, where He was arrested, taken to the high priest, and tried before the Sanhedrin.

On **Good Friday**, Jesus stood trial before Pilate and Herod. Though Pilate found no reason to kill Jesus, he washed his hands of the matter and gave into the Jews' demand to crucify Him. After He was mocked, beaten, and hung on the cross, Jesus gave up His spirit and died a horrific death. His body was buried in a borrowed tomb.

On **Sunday** morning, the women arrived to see the stone rolled away from the tomb and heard the angel's message that Jesus had risen. Mary became the first to see and speak with the resurrected Jesus.

The Gospels conclude with accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and His ascension into heaven. Like the disciples, we'll experience the wonder of the Risen Savior and hear His command to continue His earthly ministry as we wait for Him to bring us home. May we dedicate our lives to fulfilling this mission so that one day we might hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Monday, March 21

Triumphal Entry—Sunday

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11

Devotion Focus: Mark 11:1-11

Hosanna — Please Save

Our many first responders, firefighters, law enforcement, military, and frontline workers face the unknown each day in careers requiring them and their families to make sacrifices, often in dangerous circumstances, in order to save us from disasters, accidents, harm, illnesses, etc.

Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing everything that would occur during the last week of His human life. He knew everything that had ever happened and ever would happen to make His willing sacrifice of His own life necessary to save us. During His journey for us, He had experienced hunger, thirst, temptation, fatigue, joy, love, sorrow, compassion, with anger, disappointment, and untold agony to come. Can you imagine the mental, physical, and emotional pain and stress? Yet in obedience to His Father, and because of His unconditional love, grace, and mercy, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies concerning the Messiah and provided us the gift of eternal life. Our reconciliation to and relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is ours just for the acceptance and asking.

As if this wasn't enough, free will allows those accepting this gift to decide daily whether to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit (do NOT discount that little nudge in your mind) and the Bible or take a walk through the wide gate of the world.

In light of Jesus' sacrifice and gift, what will you choose? In the uncertainty of this world, for me, this is truly the only sure thing!

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

My Response and Prayer:

Tuesday, March 22

Triumphal Entry—Sunday

Scripture Reading:

Luke 19:29-44, John 12:12-19

Devotion Focus: Luke 19:41-44

Jesus Wept

Jesus turned toward Jerusalem and the end of His time as the Human One. He knew the atrocities which awaited Him. He did not weep for Himself, but for the destruction of Jerusalem and those who had not believed in His holy identity nor chosen the salvation He offered, which led to eternal life. He had always known what would befall Him, even as He began. He knew those who had not listened to His teachings would be assailed on every side by the Evil One, without strength to resist. He knew Jerusalem would be destroyed by enemies.

I believe that Jesus even wept for Judas and His imminent betrayal by a disciple, and everything that would happen in the coming days. This was, to me, the beginning of the end of His human ministry. Jesus wept for that as well, but He faced it with the sure and certain knowledge of His resurrection and return to the Father, leaving all who believed a path to follow Him.

Jesus taught belief, repentance, peace, and love to all who would listen. He knew that His crucifixion and resurrection would provide that path for all of us. He left us the responsibility to share the Good News with everyone, as well as the direction to “feed His sheep” and “tend His flock.” Jesus faced His tormentors with love and peace. Can we learn from His example and live our lives with peace and love? Can we carry His word to all we meet? Can our actions display our Christian belief daily? Let us live to honor Him and love everyone.

Linda and her husband, Jim, have lived at Lake Oconee since 1998. Their blended family includes 4 children, 13 grandchildren, and 7 great-grandchildren. As new members of Madison First UMC, they are enjoying all the ministries of the church.

My Response and Prayer:

Wednesday, March 23

Jesus' Final Week—Monday

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:12-19, Luke 19:45-48, John 12:20-36

Devotion Focus: Matthew 21:12-17

Jesus Clears the Temple

Jesus is clearly angry when He enters the temple area on this day. Once again (it happened in the beginning of His ministry as well) the money changers and merchants have set up shop. The profiteering activity of the religious people was keeping vulnerable, marginalized people away from God. Jesus took intentional action to deal with the sin. Though angry, Jesus did not sin (Ephesians 4:26). I reflect on times in life when my anger in the moment resulted in a unkind, hurtful word or deed to someone, usually unintentionally.

Jesus next shows the gentleness and compassion we prefer to associate with Him. He heals the blind and lame. The children praise Jesus. Jesus demonstrates His deep love and care for people.

The incidents greatly angered the religious establishment and many of the teachers of the Law. Later in the week, the evidence of Jesus actions were used against Him. And, we know the rest of the story. He sacrificed His life for us on the Cross.

These passages demonstrate the true authority of Jesus and provide a leadership lesson for us in our journey. While we should strive to be humble and practice servant leadership, we should not be timid and passive. There are times when we should be a “disrupter” like Jesus, calling out injustice and exploitation. Rather than ask, “What Would Jesus Do?” it might be better to ask, “What Would Jesus Have Me to Do?”

Steve Briley is married to Betsy. Since joining Madison First UMC in 2009, they have been engaged in various ministries. They are the proud parents of two married sons and two wonderful grandchildren.

My Response and Prayer:

Thursday, March 24

Jesus' Final Week—Tuesday Morning

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 21:18-27, Mark 11:20-33, Luke 20:1-8

Devotion Focus: Mark 11:27-33

The Authority of Jesus

As a parent of a teen and pre-teen, and an educator of middle schoolers, this passage hit home on many levels. Middle schoolers constantly want to ask why or how, oftentimes to gain clarity, and believe it or not, to push the envelope and test boundaries. Examples may include: “Why are YOU telling me this?” or “Why do I have to do it that way?”

The chief priests, law makers, and teachers of Jerusalem were trying their best to do the same to Jesus. “Who gave YOU this right?” or “Why are we supposed to follow YOU?” John the Baptist was held in such high regard, but now they were supposed to listen to Jesus—and they were quite hesitant. Jesus simply put the application and clarity back on the shoulders of the people of Jerusalem.

Jesus asked the people to make THEM think. He lived by example, He had proven himself time and time again, yet they still had doubts.

In a world as noisy as this, confusion and doubt are quite common. So many things are fighting for our attention that the soft voice of Jesus can get overlooked. And even today, like the Jewish leaders, we question THE authority or try to rationalize things on our own with our earthly understanding. We are not equipped to manage without Jesus. This passage was one of His attempts to help make that clear.

Ginger O’Neal is happily married to Ryan, and they have two children Brody (13) and Emily (12). She is the media specialist at Morgan County Middle School.

My Response and Prayer:

Friday, March 25

Jesus' Final Week—Tuesday Morning

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 21:28-22:14, Mark 12:1-12, Luke 20:9-19

Devotion Focus: *Luke 20:9-19*

The Parable of the Tenants

These verses speak of both Jesus' sacrifice for us and how we are called to repentance. Throughout the New Testament, many of Jesus' teachings are done in parables. At first reading, it may be difficult to interpret what Jesus was teaching the people.

The landowner is God, the vineyard represents Israel, and the tenants (those corrupt individuals renting the land) are the religious Jewish leadership. The servants sent to gather the fruit from the tenants symbolize the prophets God sent to Jerusalem. Like the servants in the parable, the prophets were mistreated and even killed. The parable ends with the landowner deciding to send his own son to collect the fruit, thinking that surely these men will treat him with more respect than they did the servants. The son in the parable represents God's own son, Jesus. God sent Jesus hoping that He'd command the respect that was not given to the prophets.

During the first century, when a landowner died without an heir, the land became the property of the tenants. Instead of showing the landowner's son (Jesus) his due respect, these greedy tenants (religious leaders), decided to kill him so the land will become theirs.

Jesus is prophesying His own death at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus' death provides the forgiveness we all so desperately need and do not deserve. We are called to believe in Him and repent of our many sins. Thankfully, we have a Savior who loves us unconditionally. All we have to do is ask for forgiveness!

Jennifer Braswell and Ryan have attended Madison First UMC for almost 6 years. Their son, Gunner (12) and daughter, Brennan (11) are involved in our youth and KICK programs. Jennifer is a Social Science teacher at Morgan County High School.

My Response and Prayer:

Saturday, March 26

Jesus' Final Week—Tuesday Morning

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 22:15-46, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:20-21:4

Devotion Focus: Mark 12:28-34

The Greatest Commandment

In these passages, Jesus didn't just answer a question; He explained the complete love of God and how His people should respond to that love. God the Father is the source of all love. Jesus sacrificed Himself because of that love.

God first loved us, and in loving Him, we are also commanded to show His love to neighbors (any other person around you). Loving others is not an emotional response, like loving a spouse or a child or a friend. That kind of love comes naturally. Loving your neighbor as yourself is an active response of a faithful person to God's love—a choice that we make; maybe even a sacrifice.

Hopefully it is easy for you to show your love for God. We are fortunate to live in a part of the world (and part of the country), which allows open expressions of our love for God: attending worship services, praying in public, singing songs of praise, etc. What is difficult, no matter where you live, is to love your neighbor as yourself. That love often requires sacrifice. You may have to sacrifice your time to do a favor for someone else. You may be asked to sacrifice your place in leadership to allow someone else to participate. You may need to show kindness and mercy to someone with whom you strongly disagree. And you may need to pray about it—a lot!

Loving those neighbors and others shows our love of God. If it helps, remember that God loves ALL those others, too!

Kathryn Cardwell is married to Joe, and they have lived in Madison for almost 19 years. They have two children, Mary Claire and John, and a cat named Jill, who was lovingly gifted to them by a neighbor.

My Response and Prayer:

Sunday, March 27

Jesus' Final Week—Tuesday Morning

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 23:1-39

Devotion Focus: Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus Warns Against Hypocrisy

In these verses Jesus instructed the believers to obey God's Word as written in the Bible and to obey our church leaders provided their teachings do not contradict God's Word. We should be cautious of church leaders who do not live by the standards of love and whose actions do not match Christian beliefs. We should follow the example set by Jesus and condemn leaders who serve themselves rather than others.

Nevertheless, we should also be careful to apply the same rules and expectations that we place on our leaders to ourselves and our fellow Christian brothers and sisters. That is, if we say that we are followers of Christ but our lives have not changed, we are no better than the false prophets and misguided religious leaders. As Christians, we must live by Jesus' standards of love and make sure that our actions match our beliefs. Jesus showed His love by serving others. Therefore, a servanthood approach to life keeps us aware of others' needs and prevents us from focusing on ourselves.

Don Krup and his wife, Patty, have lived in Rutledge for three years. Patty is a retired middle school teacher and Don retired from the sales department of Federal Express. They both enjoy raising and training their dogs.

My Response and Prayer:

Monday, March 28

Jesus' Discourse of Future Events

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 24:1-51

Devotion Focus: Matthew 24:36-44

Keep Watch

My husband, Jeff, and I recently watched *The Tomorrow War* on Amazon Prime Video. In the movie, young soldiers appeared from thirty years in the future to ask their parents to help them fight a war against alien creatures. People who were destined to die before the war even started were drafted and sent into the future with weapons and no training. It was a doomed endeavor.

As I watched the movie I thought about Jesus. He came when the people of earth did not expect Him. He came from the future, the past, all time, to warn us of God's coming wrath and provided hope in the middle of despair. He taught them to expect His return.

What would you do if a young child you are close to appeared today at your door from the future and pleaded, "Will you come with me?" Would you be willing to drop everything and go fight a war, or help them in another way?

What would you do if Jesus appeared today at your door and asked, "Are you ready?" Oswald Chambers wrote, "Expect God to come, but do not expect Him only in a certain way." Isn't that exactly what Jesus taught? Just like the flood came and washed away parties, graduations, weddings, and TV-watching (well, maybe not) in Noah's time, Jesus' return will come when you least expect it. Smile, you're on God's camera! What do you need to do in order to be ready to meet Jesus? Live each day in humble repentance.

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.

My Response and Prayer:

Tuesday, March 29

Jesus' Discourse of Future Events

Scripture Reading:

Mark 13:1-37, Luke 21:5-38

Devotion Focus: Luke 21:5-19

Tormented to Hope

The past two years have been filled with agony, death, fear, and despair. Collectively, our world has faced unparalleled times where most people have felt tremendous amounts of worry and stress. There have been times I have questioned God and wrestled with indescribable anxiety. But the Apostle Paul wrote, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10, ESV).

God doesn't promise us that we will not face hardships. Jesus even taught that we, as Christians, will be betrayed, persecuted, even tormented. If I am honest, my human nature immediately reacts with fear, sadness, and unease. I can only imagine how Jesus must have felt knowing He would experience all these things at the hands of the very people He was sent to save. Yet if we read these verses filled with the childlike faith Christ asks of us, we also read a message of hope.

As Christians, we are grounded in a hope that God remains present in the world and in our lives even when bad things happen. Christ's gift of eternal life allows us to be sure and confident God will meet all our needs in the present and eternity. May we feel this eternal hope in our lives, always remembering to trust in, wait for, and seek God.

Talarie Hayes works as a Kindergarten teacher for Morgan County Primary School. Her husband, John, works for Longview Wealth Management as Chief Compliance Officer. They have two children, Natalie (11) and Coalson (7).

My Response and Prayer:

Wednesday, March 30

Jesus' Discourse of Future Events

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 25:1-46

Devotion Focus: Matthew 25:31-46

Caring for the Least of These

Even a fleeting look at our world today reveals that we are surrounded by people with a very self-centered view of life. The messages we receive from media, and even from other individuals, tell us we should look out for ourselves. We should only help those who help themselves. Think about how many times an opportunity arises to feed, clothe, or just lend a helping hand to a stranger—and we pass it by. Sometimes we fail to help because it is inconvenient or even because we pass judgment on them. But Jesus expects us to follow His example—to help strangers, feed the needy, clothe the poor, treat the sick, and yes, even visit those in prison.

Jesus sacrificed His life so that we may live. Providing this small sacrifice of ourselves to others without even thinking twice about it is what we are called to do. “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (v. 40). We may see them as strangers down on their luck, but they are children of God just like we are. They are our brothers and sisters and when we start to help each other, we receive blessings from our Father.

Anna Ross helps with the Children's Ministry at Madison First UMC and teaches in Morgan County. She lives in Buckhead with her husband, Randy, and their sixteen-year-old daughter Natalie.

My Response and Prayer:

Thursday, March 31

Jesus' Final Week—Tuesday Evening

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:1-16, Mark 14:1-11, Luke 22:1-6

Devotion Focus: Luke 22:1-6

Turning Around

It is easy to dislike Judas; he betrayed Jesus, sold Him out for thirty pieces of silver, and made a deal with the authorities who were seeking to kill Jesus. What a scoundrel. And he did it when Satan entered him!

Satan, the tempter, the adversary, the father of all lies, enters Judas, and Judas arranges to put the finger on Jesus . . . in the night, so He can be arrested away from the people . . . right after sharing a Passover meal with the disciples. Thank God that I am not like that man: a sinner, a traitor, a deceiver who betrays with a kiss.

Or am I? Really? During Lent, we examine ourselves, our lives, our actions, our motivations, and, if we are honest, we find that we ourselves have betrayed our Lord in many little ways. Later, as Jesus makes the ultimate sacrifice for sin at Golgotha, we see that Judas hangs himself. Peter denies that he even knows that Nazarene. Thomas doubts, and all but John apparently are in hiding. No small betrayal from the inner circle.

But Judas did not repent; he killed himself. (That speaks volumes.) *Repentance* in Greek means—literally—*turning around*. Judas was sorry he did it, but he didn't repent, didn't turn back to God. Peter did. Thomas did. The rest did. And we learn that in Jesus and His sacrifice, we, too, can turn back to God in Christ. Turn away from any bad roads, turn to God to find, not just forgiveness, but pardon and healing. Lent is all about that—turning back to God.

Jim Killman is retired and lives on Lake Oconee. He and his wife, Lynn, have eight grandchildren and Waylon, the French bulldog.

My Response and Prayer:

Friday, April 1

Jesus' Final Week—Wednesday Evening

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:17-19, Mark 14:12-16, Luke 22:7-13, John 12:37-50

Devotion Focus: Mark 14:12-16

Making Preparations

Preparation. Does that mean hurrying about, checking off to-do lists, fretting when you're tired and ready for bed, but it's not all done so “sleep will have to wait” for you like it does for me? (Or maybe you've got it a little more figured out than I do.) The disciples were to make preparations for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was the first day and therefore, preparations would have included gathering food for the meal—unleavened bread, wine, herbs, and the lamb.

Peter and John were sent into the city, and I imagine that the magnitude of what was to come surely left these disciples feeling anxious as they found and prepared the Upper Room. Are you already beginning to feel all the feelings as you meal plan, stuff plastic eggs, grocery shop, and set the table for your Easter celebration?

As Holy Week and Easter Sunday draw near, I encourage you to first and foremost *prepare* your hearts. Spend time in the Word, in prayer, in repentance, and thanksgiving. This type of preparation is soul-stirring, meaningful, and life-giving. I know we will be glad we did—for it is the most important preparation of them all!

Sarah Ball is wife to Sam and mother to two little ones, Evie and James. She leads a young adults Sunday School class each week, Salt and Light. Sarah enjoyed serving on the Staff-Parish Relations Committee for a fourth term and co-coordinating the church's Fall Festival this past year.

My Response and Prayer:

Saturday, April 2

In the Upper Room—Thursday Evening

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:20-35, Mark 14:17-31

Devotion Focus: Matthew 26:20-30

The New Covenant

Our passage reveals the true heart of Jesus. Amid an obvious unfolding of Judas' betrayal, Jesus begins a new relationship with us. In true Christ-like manner, Jesus rises above the distraction of Judas and instead reclines at the table and vows to give His life on the cross—in turn, covering our sins and offering us grace. He asks us to accept His sacrifice and trust that it pays our spiritual debts. All we have to do is receive this grace and walk in it with thanksgiving—in turn, taking His Supper and sharing the Good News until He returns again.

Ours is a blood contract of abundant grace. Jesus has given us so much. He has paid such a high price. What is our response? Are we upholding our end of the deal? He has given us everything; how can we offer Him so little? He has sacrificed His life; how can we rebel against His direction for us? He has been so gracious; how can we not be thankful?

Lord, help me to recognize the amazing gift of your grace, to carefully follow the guidance in your Word and to live my life as an ambassador of it. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10, ESV).

Mary Balicki is a wife, mother, and realtor at Reynolds. Mary, her husband, Chad, and their three daughters have lived in Madison for seven years. Chad is a local realtor and drummer in our church worship band.

My Response and Prayer:

Sunday, April 3

In the Upper Room—Thursday Evening

Scripture Reading:

Luke 22:14-38, John 13:1-38

Devotion Focus: John 13:1-17

Jesus Washes Their Feet

Odessa Davis helped me raise my children from the time they were born until they went to kindergarten. She was wonderful! Every time I think of her now, I hear her softly singing the hymn, *Are You Washed in the Blood?* as she went about her day at our house. I had never heard that song before, but now it's part of my family's lore whenever any of us look back on those early days.

This Scripture tells the story of Jesus washing His disciples' feet. It happened during the Feast of the Passover. Jesus knew that His hour had come. The next day He would be crucified. He still had more to teach. Like a servant, He began washing the feet of His disciples. This act had spiritual meaning for the Jews. Cleansing the feet represented cleansing the body from walking in sin. What a gift Jesus gave those twelve men that night! Washing their feet with water symbolized being washed in the blood of Jesus. I wonder if those men made the association the next day when they saw the blood of the crucified Christ on the cross. They, like us, had been washed in the blood of Christ. Their sins, like ours, were forgiven. They, like us, had another chance to do better. They went on to pray, preach, and grow new disciples to spread the gospel throughout the world. Like us?

Sarah Burbach is the Executive Director for the Georgia Council of Administrators of Special Education. She is the President of the United Methodist Women's group and a Sunday School teacher.

My Response and Prayer:

Monday, April 4

In the Upper Room—Thursday Evening

Scripture Reading:

John 14 & 15

Devotion Focus: John 15:1-17

Tipping is a Good Practice

I am blessed to be a blackberry farmer. Each Spring we have to go to every vine and prune the growth. Each branch has a beautiful grouping of leaves at the end of the branch that looks so healthy and prolific that you would think this is the best part of the plant. When I tell my workers that we have to tip each of those little bouquets off, they look at me in disbelief. Why would you cut off the most beautiful part of the branch? That little cluster of leaves will take up all of the energy the plant produces, and there will be very few berries on the plant. So, we tip off some good to make what remains better.

In life, this is what Jesus is telling us to do. Allow Jesus to prune us to make us better. We are to remain in Him, and He promises to remain with us. Trim the distractions and materialistic thinking, and focus on what Jesus would have us do. This is a call to repentance from gossip, greed, and worldly desires. Earthly true happiness is a moving target that can never be attained. The desire for more is never satisfied.

Jesus tells us that His joy will be in us and our joy will be made complete. This happiness and joy come from allowing God to prune us, trim us, and shape us in His image. That kind of happiness cannot be found anywhere else.

Ray Spence is married to Cindy. His family includes Steve and Shannon Collier, Karen Spence, four grandkids and two great-grandkids. He raises blackberries and blueberries and is truly blessed.

My Response and Prayer:

Tuesday, April 5
In the Upper Room—Thursday Evening

Scripture Reading:

John 16 & 17

Devotion Focus: John 17:1-12

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

In this passage Jesus is praying to His father for Himself and His disciples. Jesus is praying to His Holy Father to protect the disciples by the power of His name.

The Lord is always by our side. He is there when we fail; He is there to share in the good times. It is in the troubled times that we sometimes forget to ask the Lord to help us through. He is always there beside us protecting us. We need to remember to talk to the Lord every day, for all the little things we mess up and for all the accomplishments we make each day. The Lord is there to protect us and forgive us no matter if we fall short.

We can pray to God all day long, even for just a minute, to ask forgiveness or thank Him for a positive event that has happened. Nothing is too small or big to take to God. Sometimes we think our problems or discretions are too small to give to God, so we do not want to bother Him. But God wants to hear about the smallest and the biggest things in our lives. Jesus is not in this world any longer, but He is always there protecting us and forgiving us every minute of every day. When we have problems, fall short, or jump for joy, He is with us protecting us, listening to us and keeping us safe.

Kathy and her husband, Tommy, have lived in Madison for two years. Kathy is team leader for the worship team and sings in the choir.

My Response and Prayer:

Wednesday, April 6

Betrayal and Arrest

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:36-56, Mark 14:32-52

Devotion Focus: Mark 14:32-42

Watch and Pray

As I read this passage, two things always strike me. First, Jesus' emotions when He said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (v. 34), always grabs my heart, and I feel sorrow that He experienced this because of me . . . because of us . . . so that we can be forgiven and spend eternity with Him. Most of the time, I think of Jesus in terms of other titles given to Him—The Almighty, Alpha & Omega, Son of the Living God, Prince of Peace, Lord of lords and King of kings, Savior, and many more majestic, exalted names. However, His words in this scripture show His human side while He was on Earth and bring to life His feelings, the same ones we experience. He knew everything that was about to happen to Him. Yet, He relied on His spirit, went forward with His father's plans for Him, and endured it all for us.

Second, He told Peter, James, and John, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (v. 38). Our busy schedules, daily distractions, and life's difficulties can be exhausting, but when we let these types of things take control and precedence, it is easy to drift "asleep" spiritually and fall into temptation. May we pray as deliberately and diligently as Jesus did that night in the Garden of Gethsemane to keep our spirit strong, our relationship with Him active, and endure when life's challenges catch us off guard and seem overwhelming.

Alicia Braswell and her husband, Kim, have a son, Cad (14), and daughter, Cate (12). They have been at Madison First UMC for six years.

My Response and Prayer:

Thursday, April 7

Betrayal and Arrest

Scripture Reading:

Luke 22:39-53, John 18:1-12a

Devotion Focus: John 18:1-12a

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

Death has been on my mind so often in the last two years. I am sure that is true for many of us! Never in my forty-one years has it touched so many lives I know and love. Some of those deaths have been such a surprise, and yet we know that nothing surprises Jesus. He knew and accepted even His own death saying, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (v. 11).

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us should be a constant reminder of what a life laid down looks like. Although I have not faced death, as a believer I am still called to daily, even hourly, sacrifice my own interests for others. My spirit is willing, but my flesh is weak! How often do I follow Jesus' lead and graciously accept the cup the Father has given me when I don't like it? Not often enough.

In this passage from John, we see Jesus praying for the strength to follow through with what He knew was God's plan for His life, even as it brought Him a painful and public death. I am praying for two things during this season of Lent. First, I will be more deeply in awe of Jesus' mighty work on the cross, and second, that I will position my heart better to follow His lead with grace and humility each day.

Emma Boulware is a wife and mother and the office manager for her husband's medical practice here in town. They moved to Madison not too long ago and have received such a warm welcome from Madison First UMC and the community.

My Response and Prayer:

Friday, April 8

Jesus' Trial Before the Sanhedrin

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:57-75, Mark 14:53-72

Devotion Focus: Matthew 26:57-68

He is Worthy

“He is worthy of death!” This is perhaps the most ironic statement ever uttered. Jesus is the only person in history who lived a life free from sin. He didn’t deserve death—much less crucifixion. So why did He allow Himself to be executed? The theologically correct answer is that He died to pay our sin debt. For most of my life I’ve believed this to be true. However, I didn’t truly begin to grow spiritually until I began to appreciate the depth of the sacrifice.

“Babette’s Feast” tells the story of Babette. Revolution forces her to flee to Denmark and seek refuge in the home of a devout Lutheran minister and his two daughters. They are members of a small austere congregation that rejects what they see as the excesses and extravagances of modern life. To pay room and board Babette works for the family as cook and housekeeper.

One day Babette receives news from France that she has won the lottery. The sisters believe that this will be the end of Babette’s stay with them. Before she leaves, Babette asks to cook a French meal for them. At the end of the meal Babette tells the sisters that she will not be returning to Paris. All her money is gone. She reveals that she was formerly the head chef at the Cafe Anglais, the most prestigious restaurant in Paris, and tells the sisters that the dinner cost 10,000 francs. The sisters were astonished. They had enjoyed the meal but did not truly appreciate it until they learned the cost.

This season let us mediate on what it cost Father and Son to give us eternal life.

John K. Miles, Jr. is a husband, father, Bible study teacher and businessman.

My Response and Prayer:

Saturday, April 9

Jesus' Trial Before the Sanhedrin

Scripture Reading:

Luke 22:54-71, John 18:12b-27

Devotion Focus: Luke 22:54-62

Your Worst Moment

In this passage, we learn of Peter's worst moment in life when he lets fear get in the way of his relationship and commitment to Jesus. Not one, not twice, but three times, Peter denied knowing Jesus. Just as Jesus had told him he would do.

We have all had these moments in life, but I have found that sometimes it is better to make light of them than to let them get in the way of the day to day. This is sometimes easier said than done. As a mom, I often refer to these moments as "mom brain" or a "mom fail." Silly things like forgetting to take my girls to ballet or waiting until the last minute to finish a school project. At the end of the day, it is comforting to know that we don't have to be remembered by our worst moments, or mom fails. We are forgiven and restored each day in Christ Jesus. Praise the Lord for that!

Peter is a great reminder that our failures don't determine our future with the Lord. God can take those failures and make something good of them.

Thankfully, God has great patience and love for us. He uses our failures and our past experiences to change us, and then allows us to encourage and bless others.

Christian Williams is married to AJ Williams. They have 4-year-old twin girls, Charlotte and Chandler. Christian is a long-time member of the church and serves on the Madison First UMC Preschool Board.

My Response and Prayer:

Sunday, April 10

Jesus' Trial Before Pilate

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20

Devotion Focus: Matthew 27:1-10

What is True Sorrow?

What do you think about when you hear the name Judas, or thirty pieces of silver? The ultimate betrayal, a weak man, a traitor? The word “neologism” is used to describe one word that has taken on a new meaning. In this case, the name Judas is a synonym for a traitor under the guise of friendship. Maybe you’ve heard, “He is a Judas,” used to describe a person who cheated or betrayed someone?

Judas betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver. Afterwards, did Judas go out and celebrate, buy wine and cheese, then party it up? NO. Judas was stricken by remorse; he cried and threw the money back at the religious leaders. However, he did not repent; instead he chose to hang himself. It is a sad, prophesied story. Judas’ actions fulfilled the prophecy that Jesus would be betrayed by a friend.

I believe we are all sorry for something we may have done in the past, be it as simple as not putting the carts back after grocery shopping (one Grady taught us when he first came to Madison) to envy, gossiping, little white lies, or taking the Lord’s name in vain—all the way up to prosecutorial sin. We are so blessed because Jesus teaches us that regardless of our sins, we can be forgiven. He took our sins as His own. He is our love, our all, and unlike Judas we can be forgiven all our sins. We need only repent and ask for forgiveness. I pray we can learn this lesson well: He died for us so we can be forgiven. What an Easter blessing to each of us to KNOW that He is right beside us, throughout all our lives, forgiving and loving us.

Judy Gilbert is a long time member of Madison First UMC. She is a member of the prayer ministry and the Easter Sunday School Class. She is married to Bruce and they have three grown children.

My Response and Prayer:

Monday, April 11

Jesus' Trial Before Pilate

Scripture Reading:

Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-19:16a

Devotion Focus: Luke 23:1-25

Stay Close and Stand Up

So many times in life we get caught up with groups, news, and public opinions. We allow others to influence our actions, requests, and demands. Many of us jump to conclusions without all the facts or listen to biased news or others who are pushing their agenda. We do not stop and ask what is right, fair, and just, or wonder how we would feel if we were on the other side. We need to slow down, pray and ask, "What Would Jesus Do." I remember years back there was a movement of WWJD, including armbands to wear as reminders. How soon we forget or stop good habits. Had the people in the crowd stopped, prayed to God, and listened with their hearts, would things have changed with how Pilate and Herod dealt with Jesus?

In these verses, we see how mob rule works. A group can be manipulated by a few to accuse and abuse an individual or group of people. We see how public opinion convicted Christ while a murderer was let loose by those in charge. We know there were some in the audience who had listened to the teaching of Jesus and had seen some of His miracles. Were they afraid to speak up or did they fear how others would talk about them? So many times we sit back and will not stand up for righteousness and justice.

During this Holy Week I encourage each and every one of us to form a closer relationship with God, not let others lead us astray, and ask for the strength to stand up for righteousness.

Sam Ring is a self-professed old man starting his second childhood. He likes motorcycles, leads yoga classes, helps with Neighborhood Missions and enjoys the Emmaus Community, Madison First UMC, the Methodist Men's Group. Sam loves his wife of 47 years, Joanne, and their children, their spouses, and grandkids.

My Response and Prayer:

Tuesday, April 12

Crucifixion of Jesus

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 27:32-56, Mark 15:21-41

Devotion Focus: Mark 15:21-32

Ridiculed, Mocked, and Crucified

I think at some point in our lives we have all been the recipient of bullying or mockery. As hard as it is to admit, we may have even been the culprit in such confrontations.

It is difficult to imagine our Savior being mocked and ridiculed. Jesus was not only verbally ridiculed, but He was forced to endure more shame and torture by bearing His own cross, on which He would later die. In Jesus' era, death by crucifixion was fairly common and was considered a horrible spectacle. It was yet another way to mock and torment the accused.

Jesus, the Son of God, incapable of sins, was ridiculed, mocked, tortured, and hung on a cross to His death for all to observe. You see, Jesus knew this would be His fate, and still He endured the pain. He lived His life for others, and He died for us. He did this for you, and He did this for me. He withstood such heartache so our sins could be forgiven.

As we reflect on this passage, let us remember the true sacrifice God made for us by sending His only Son to die on the cross for our sins. Let us reflect and consider how we can be a light to others and tell the story of Jesus Christ.

Brighton and Jesse Patrick have lived in Madison for nearly ten years. They have two daughters, Ava and Claire, who keep life fun and busy.

My Response and Prayer:

Wednesday, April 13

Crucifixion of Jesus

Scripture Reading:

Luke 23:26-49, John 19:16b-37

Devotion Focus: Luke 23:44-49

When Jesus Died

These verses describe the last three hours of Jesus' life and the minutes immediately following His death. Jesus had been on the cross for several hours when darkness occurred from noon until about three in the afternoon. During this darkness, the sins of mankind were transferred to Jesus. Luke also recorded the tearing of the Temple curtain. Jesus assumed our sins and through Him we were given the path for salvation and direct access to God. God was no longer thought to reside in a section of the Temple, with access only given once a year to the high priest. The barrier was removed and access granted for all who seek forgiveness through Jesus.

Hebrew children are taught to pray, "Into your hands I commit my spirit," as they go to bed at night. Jesus preceded His prayer with the word "Father," and cried out these words in a loud voice. Having been on the cross for several hours, He would have been struggling for breath. Jesus inhaled and gave this prayer with the loud cry of a winner. He remained in control of his destiny. His work was finished.

The centurion, a Roman officer and a Gentile, recognized Jesus' innocence and praised God, showing Jesus came for everyone, not just the Jewish nation. The crowd, who had been incited by the Jewish leaders to cry for the death of Jesus, went away beating their breasts. Was this a sign of joy and victory or fear, alarm and regret? His followers stood at a distance and watched. I imagine most were expecting a miracle to save Him from death and were looking on in shock. Thankfully this wasn't the end of the story.

Tommy Wood is married to Sharon. They have two sons, two daughters-in-law, and three grandchildren.

My Response and Prayer:

Thursday, April 14

Burial of Jesus

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 27:57-66, Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:38-42

Devotion Focus: Matthew 27:57-66

Attempting to Secure the Tomb

Verse 55 states that the ladies were “watching from a distance.” Can you imagine what they were thinking? Presently, I believe there are a lot of people that handle their relationship with Jesus that way . . . from a distance. When He knows us intimately, every hair on our head, why do we not TRUST our Savior?

Just as our Lord does everything . . . His timing is perfect and Joseph arrives to provide a tomb for Jesus’ body. I do think it odd that they had to describe him as “rich,” yet he did the right thing by taking Jesus’ body and preparing it when His disciples fled. At the end of the day, we have to remember that what matters most is what is right in the eyes of our Lord and not what is popular.

True to their previous conduct, the chief priests and the Pharisees didn’t want Jesus’ disciples to be able to deceive anyone by taking the body, so they had Pilate order the tombstone sealed and guards placed to secure it. That is almost laughable but at the same time very sad. Fear will make humans do some crazy things.

We all know the end of the story, but my biggest take away is something that I say often, “Jesus is the only man that has never let me down.” He is the way, the truth, and the light. I woke up this morning, so I know He has something for me to do! Amen and AMEN.

Heather Cadle has attended Madison First UMC since 2002. She’s had many opportunities to serve God and His people, from the Intercessory Prayer team to the Honduras Mission team, from the Preschool Board to Lay Leadership. She is a Career Licensed Agent with US Health and recently became engaged to her college sweetheart, Larry Brown.

My Response and Prayer:

Friday, April 15

Jesus' Resurrection & Final Appearances

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 28:1-15, Mark 16:1-13, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-23

Devotion Focus: Matthew 28:1-15

He Has Risen, Indeed!

Mary Magdalene and another Mary went to Jesus' tomb the day after His crucifixion. These verses say a great earthquake occurred and the women saw a magnificent angel descend from Heaven, roll away the stone in front of the tomb, sit on top of it, and then tell them not to be afraid. The angel told them Jesus had risen and He would meet His disciples in Galilee.

These women were blessed to be the first to see the risen Lord Jesus. They became the apostles to the apostles as they ran to tell them what had happened. They were blessed to realize that the resurrection had happened! This is what Christianity is all about . . . Jesus' resurrection from the dead! This is the fulfillment of prior Scripture and the basis for our belief in the risen Christ. The angel was the first to preach the Gospel when he said, "Do not be afraid . . . He has risen, just as He said" (vv. 5-6).

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for every one of us leads to this amazing resurrection that brings hope and joy to the lost and sorrowful. It reminds us that true Christians have no cause for alarm no matter what happens in this world. Thus, we, as Christians, are the most blessed people of all.

Cindy Spence is married to Ray. She is a Mom and a Mamaw. Her family makes her a blessed woman! She is Co-chair of the Intercessory Prayer Ministry, and absolutely loves it.

My Response and Prayer:

Saturday, April 16

Jesus' Resurrection & Final Appearances

Scripture Reading:

Luke 24:13-35, John 20:24-21:25

Devotion Focus: John 21:1-14

Lessons from a Fisherman

Fishing is a favorite pastime of many of those that I love most. My dad, my father in-law, my husband and his brother, my own brother, and many uncles all love to spend their time on the water “wetting a line.” Occasionally I join them, and while I love the thrill of the catch, I know a slow day can leave you with a totally different feeling. Peter and his fellow fishermen must have felt that way. They had felt the excitement of Easter, but as they attempted to return to “real life” and hit the water, they were left feeling tired, frustrated, and hungry with empty nets. The passage says “they caught nothing.” Have you ever worked so hard and caught nothing? Cleaned all day, then kids come home and sudden disaster? Worked hard for a deal at work to lose at the last minute? They must have felt totally defeated.

There is much going on in our world that can leave our nets feeling empty. Sick loved ones, tragic losses, political unrest. Where do we turn? Peter and his fellow fishermen were masters of their trade when a stranger spoke to them and shared advice. They were exhausted, and maybe even desperate—but they listened and won! Jesus filled their nets.

When my net feels empty I cling to the things I can control. The fishermen taught us that if we can surrender the control and listen we may just win! In this Lenten season, let's all turn to the right and lean into God! We're sure to come out with a fuller net.

Ashley and Clint Johns have two young children, Charlie (7) and Harris (5). Ashley enjoys tennis and volunteering in the community. She spends most of her time at the primary school, Madison First UMC Preschool, and our children's ministry.

My Response and Prayer:

Sunday, April 17

Jesus' Final Instructions

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 28:16-20, Mark 16:14-20, Luke 24:36-53, Acts 1:1-11

Devotion Focus: Acts 1:6-11

An Unstoppable Spirit

What enables a figure skater to become an Olympian? Or a scientist to develop a medical breakthrough that improves the condition of those suffering? Regardless of a person's path in life, the qualities shared by most successful people are discipline, drive, determination, and perseverance. The combination of these characteristics in the right proportion enables an ordinary person to do extraordinary things.

In Scripture, Jesus is referred to variously as the Great I Am, Physician, Healer, and Shepherd. However, perhaps the most relevant description of Jesus is the Great Catalyst. As Acts begins, Luke recaps Jesus' earthly ministry, condemnation, and resurrection, then tells of a fledgling movement taking root that would change everything.

Jesus didn't quit when He ascended and took His place at the right hand of the Father. He promised to empower His disciples through the Holy Spirit, and He did. He told them they would do great things all across the world. The Lord's presence made His disciples unstoppable. And Jesus longs to continue His work through us today.

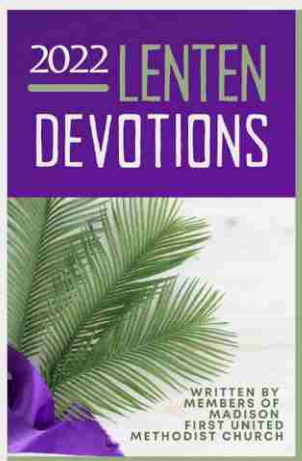
As we reflect upon the sacrificial love of God exemplified through Christ's suffering and death on the cross, we are advised to not stand around looking up at the sky. As believers, we inherit the legacy of an unstoppable spirit that can enable us to do extraordinary things if we submit to God's will for our lives.

Todd Watson is an executive with the University System of Georgia and an adjunct professor. Roberta, his bride of more than 35 years, is the Director of Education at Madison First UMC. They have two grown children, Katie and Will.

My Response and Prayer:

This Lenten season, come along on a journey through the Gospel accounts of the final months of Jesus' life. Witness His heartbreak when He is rejected by the very people He came to save, and betrayed by one of His chosen disciples. Celebrate the Last Supper in the Upper Room and listen as Jesus prepares the disciples for His death, reassures them He will see them again, prays for their protection, and equips them to continue His ministry. Witness His suffering at the hands of those who mock Him, flog Him, and crucify Him—all of which He endured with the silence of a lamb led to the slaughter. Watch in stunned silence as He hangs from a cross praying for those who crucified Him. Mourn as His body is laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. Rejoice with those who were first to see Him resurrected from the dead. May all that we experience this Lenten season inspire us to confess our sins, trust Him with our whole hearts, and follow Him all the days of our lives.

Roberta Watson, Director of Education



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