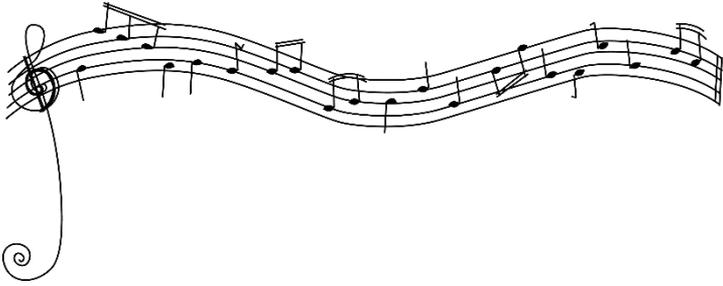
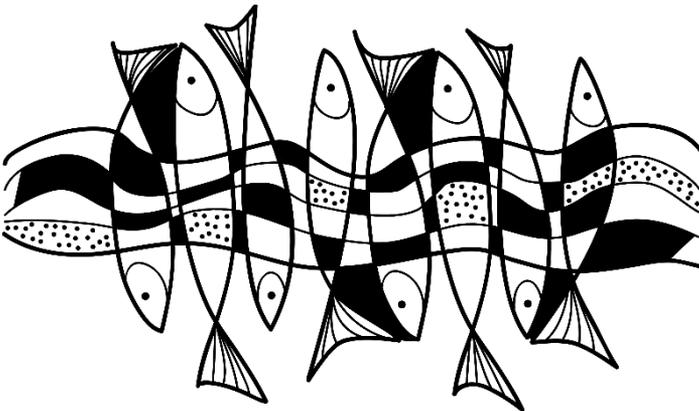


*There is a balm in
Gilead*



**Lenten reflections
for our journey through Lent**



An intro into our Lenten journey:

The word Lent comes from the Old English “lencten” or lengthen for the lengthening of the days, or spring. So as we come into our liturgical season of Lent we watch the days lengthen, the promise of new life prepare to emerge from the earth, and turn our hearts to the promise of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Our rich Christian heritage gives us much to ponder when we consider the rituals and practices of our liturgical year. When the Protestants (“the protestors” –originally a derogatory name) following Martin Luther, split from the Roman Catholic Church in 1521 they were seeking to reform the Christian faith. As time progressed all things “catholic” became suspect, and a great deal of rich liturgical practices were thrown out. Current Ecumenical thinking suggests that perhaps the baby was thrown out with the bath water. There is a new desire to reach back to the early church and reclaim liturgical practices that inform our Christian faith.

In the early church there was a long period of study prior to baptism, which often included a year of preparation culminating in baptism at Easter. As early as 180 CE Tertullian noted that catechumens (those preparing for baptism) fasted prior to Easter. The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD is the first record we have of a forty day period of fasting.

The number forty is significant in the Bible and it signifies a sufficient period of time. When Noah built the ark it rained for forty days and forty nights (Genesis 8:6). Moses went up Mt Sinai for forty days and forty nights (Exodus 24:18). The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years (Numbers 32:13). Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days (Mark 1:13), and was present with the

disciples for forty days after his resurrection (Acts 1:3). These were periods of testing and trial that ended with restoration and renewal.

From early times, Lent has been a time of spiritual preparation for the celebration of Easter. During the forty days of Lent we are invited to examine ourselves, repent of our sins, and turn to God. Through practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, self-examination, and performing acts of charity we seek a deeper relationship with God.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday which falls on Valentine's Day, February 14th this year. From the earliest Scriptures we are told that people wore sackcloth and covered themselves with ashes as a sign of their repentance. When our hands or foreheads are marked with a cross in ashes (or a heart?) it is a sign of our mortality, repentance, and faith in Christ Jesus. You are invited to join in this rite of faith. **Ashes to Go will be available at the North Billerica Train Station from 6-8 am; at our Lenten Luncheon Service at 12:30 pm; and at our 7 pm service in the Chapel.**

This devotional is designed to take a deeper look into Lent and Holy Week. You are invited into a time of reflection as you walk with Jesus into Jerusalem, instead of how we so often take a deep breath on Palm Sunday and hurry through to Easter. I pray that this time of reflection will strengthen you as a disciple of Jesus. May God's blessings be abundant on your journey. "Rise, let us be on our way." –John 14:31

—Katherine

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? —Jeremiah 8:22

Ash Wednesday

The tradition of Ash Wednesday is to burn the palms from the previous Palm Sunday, and mark our hands or heads with a sign of the cross. The traditional words said are “Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.” It is a time of mourning, the putting on of sackcloth and ashes, as we repent of our sins and seek God once again.

The prophet Jeremiah expresses God’s lament that the people have turned away. *“For the hurt of my people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead?”* To which we are able to respond, *“There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul”* (African American spiritual.) Our balm is not the resin of the storax tree, it’s the love and grace made known to us through Jesus Christ.

Knowing that the invitation always stands to seek Jesus, receive forgiveness, and be restored to right relationship with God, I rejoice in our turning to focus on the source of all life. The words I use as I impose the ashes are “Turn to God, and hear the good news of Jesus Christ.” This year I will offer ashes in the shape of a heart, because love is the essence of God and the overarching message of the New Testament.

Prayer: God, in your mercy mark not only our hands or our heads, mark our hearts so that we always turn towards you, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” —Matthew 21:9

Palm Sunday

With triumphant shouts Jesus enters into Jerusalem riding a colt. Not a triumphant noble steed, but a simple colt borrowed from a villager. Jesus’ followers lined the street; people who heard there was a new leader who cared about average people lined the street; and curious people who wondered if there could be another way lined the street.

In the days to come the people around Jerusalem were confused and disappointed that Jesus did not rise above the powers to be and set civil society right. The dawn of equity and fairness did not break and shed light on a new day.

What about us? Are we still willing to line the street? Are we waiting for what may be? Are we wondering if Jesus’ triumphant entry might change our lives?

Our excitement so easily turns to confusion and disappointment when our prayers are not answered in the ways we dictate. Perhaps if we call out Hosanna (save us or the one who saves) and trust that Jesus hears and will work all things for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28) our prayers will be answered in a new way. It takes faith.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, make a triumphant entry into our hearts and answer our prayers according to your will. Amen.

“In real life we deal, not with gods, but with ordinary humans like ourselves: men and women who are full of contradictions, who are stable and fickle, strong and weak, famous and infamous.”

~Nelson Mandela

Holy Monday

After the triumphant journey into Jerusalem, Jesus cleared the tables of the money lenders in the temple, and taught in the synagogue. Jesus called people to look at their own behavior, not just the practices of their culture.

Our Lenten journey calls us to a time of introspection. A time to look at ourselves. A time to look at the ordinary and peculiar ways of life. It is a time to see the juxtaposition of who we are, mirrored against who God might want us to be. A time to reflect on our sins, the falling short of the glory of God, the selfish focus on our own desires, the justification for seeing our way as the only way. Yet not a time to reflect in self-pity, instead, a call to awareness of how we are, and what needs call out from our behavior. God loves us just as we are. God loves us too much to leave us where we are now. God calls us to more. God calls us to take stock, to admit that we need more than we can provide ourselves, and then there is room for God to fill the void.

The work of Lent is to let God into the earthy, gritty, everyday things of life. The here and now. The mundane and boring. The waking and sleeping. The coming in and the going out.

The Lord who will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.
—Psalm 121 :7-8

Prayer: Today and every day, journey with me, Lord. Guide and guard me as I journey closer to you. Amen.

“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”
—Mark 11:25

Holy Tuesday

In one of Jesus’ final walks with his disciples he made clear that they are required to forgive. In Mark’s gospel there is usually debate of every point that Jesus makes. Not this one. It’s a straightforward declarative statement without added commentary. Just forgive, that’s it.

Perhaps of all of Jesus’ teachings this is one of the hardest. We hold onto our hurts and injuries as badges of pride. We hold onto the false notion that someone needs to be sorry for us to forgive them. Yet our anger and hurt bind our spirits and do damage to ourselves. How much better would it be if we could just let it go?

If we make forgiveness a part of our spiritual practice it becomes easier. When we remember a hurt, anger, or resentment we can bring it into our prayer. I often visualize laying it down at the foot of the cross, knowing that Jesus can bear my pain. I pray a prayer of thanksgiving that I am free of that heavy burden.

If the resentment reenters my head and heart, and sometimes a memory years later may cause a recurrence, I release it to the cross again. Wash, rinse, repeat, until we are cleansed in Jesus’ love.

Prayer: Lord, take from me my anger and resentment. Help me to forgive. And thank you for forgiving me. Amen.

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the
rivers
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not how shall
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body
and went out into the morning,
and sang.

~I Worried by Mary Oliver

Holy Wednesday

It's almost a badge of honor to worry. It gives a sense of control over what might be. How silly, and yet it's how we hold onto hope in the most feeble way. I worry that..... I have hope that..... What would happen if we began with hope? What if we rose each morning with a song of hope? The praise that rang from our lips might change things. God might hear. The angels might join in on the chorus. Our hearts might be directed to expect the best, and good things might find us.

Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

~Matthew 6:27

Prayer: When I am worried help me to lay my burdens at the foot of your cross, so that I might live in your hope. Amen.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

—John 13:12-15, 34

Maundy Thursday

Maundy from the Latin *mandatum* meaning command, refers to Jesus’ command to love one another after he serves the disciples by washing their feet. The tradition often practiced in Christian churches is to have a ritual of foot washing and the Lord’s Supper on Maundy Thursday.

We combine the Tenebrae service (which means shadows) as we read the scriptures of Jesus’ passion and extinguish the lights, with our Maundy Thursday service. The Tenebrae readings are traditionally the Good Friday readings.

The message Jesus seeks to impart on Maundy Thursday is that we are to serve each other and we are to love each other. It’s that simple, yet challenges us every day. Serve others. Love one another. This message is brought fully into the light as Jesus serves the disciples during the Lord’s Supper. Jesus offers himself to them, and to us, as we remember Jesus and are fully known by the risen Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, we remember you, how you served and how you loved. Guide us to serve and love like you. Amen.

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.

—Luke 23:46

Good Friday

When I was in first grade we were instructed to draw an Easter picture. I began by drawing an Easter egg, then crossed it out and turned the page over, and drew Jesus on the cross. He was wearing blue jeans and a sweatshirt. It was my mother’s favorite picture.

The image of Jesus on the cross both disturbs me and inspires me. I wonder sometimes at the Protestant disdain for the crucifix. I’m told that we display the empty cross because we celebrate the risen Christ. That’s well and good, but I think we also struggle with our discomfort.

Christians have struggled with the theology of the cross. I struggle with many atonement theories- and reject many. I do not believe in Divine child abuse; that God needed Jesus to die for our sins. Nor do I believe in the related substitutionary atonement where we had nothing pure enough to offer to pay for our sins, so Jesus took our place on the cross. My atonement theory requires discomfort on our part.

I believe that humanity could not handle perfect love in our midst because it would overturn the economic and social structures. Rather than change, humanity chose to put an end to the threat by hanging Jesus on the cross. I think it’s an ongoing struggle. The good news is this, God so loves the world that Jesus came to teach us how to live, and through infinite love broke the bonds of death so Jesus could draw the world to himself. (read John 12:27-36)

Prayer: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.
Amen.

And when all the crowds who gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. —Luke 23:48

Holy Saturday

Holy Saturday is the loneliest day for me. I feel empty as I ponder a world without Jesus. Even though I know the rest of the story, I sit in the emptiness and feel the barrenness of the world. I feel God's sadness and mourning. What have we done?

I try to sit in the emptiness. Knowing that I am as culpable for turning from perfect love as the rest of humanity. And when I sit in that space long enough I am always amazed that a feeling of God's love comes over me—even in the brokenness of my humanity I am loved. That's enough for today.

Prayer: I love you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

“Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

—Luke 24:6

Easter

On Friday morning the world was shaken and fell into darkness, on Saturday there was fear and mourning and all hope was gone, but then Sunday morning came! Sunday morning the bonds of death were broken. Perfect love was revealed. Jesus Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

From glory to glory God’s love is revealed to us. We are called to live resurrected lives. As disciples of Jesus we learn that even in moments of heartache and despair resurrection moments will come. We are beloved and joy will come again in the morning.

We no longer live as people without hope. We trust that God’s perfect love will make all things right, and we trust that even our imperfect love will be used for the building of God’s kingdom.

With grace upon grace we proclaim the good news of our Savior. We are redeemed in God’s love and are called to be a blessing for the world. This is good news.

Prayer: Hallelujah, Christ is risen. Hallelujah, we are redeemed. Hallelujah, we are blessed, and we give thanks and praise in Jesus’ name. Amen.

One of our great resurrection moments in our congregation was the decision to become an Open and Affirming congregation. Let us review our covenant as we mark our 5th anniversary as Open and Affirming.

Open and Affirming Statement

*You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your strength, and with all your mind;
and your neighbor as yourself.*

~Luke 10:27

We, the congregation of the First Congregational Church of Billerica, are committed to loving each other as God loves us: freely and unconditionally.

We believe that all people are created in God's image and thus are loved and blessed equally by God.

We invite and welcome into our community persons of every gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, age, race, nationality, economic and social status, mental and physical health and ability, faith background, marital standing, and family structure.

In our community of faith, all people are encouraged to participate and share their talent and gifts in worship and sacraments, leadership positions, ordained ministry, lay ministry, learning, service, mission and fellowship.

Therefore, no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome in this United Church of Christ.

Following the example of Jesus Christ, we hereby declare ourselves to be an Open and Affirming Church.

Our purpose is to seek God's grace for ourselves and the world. As followers of Jesus:

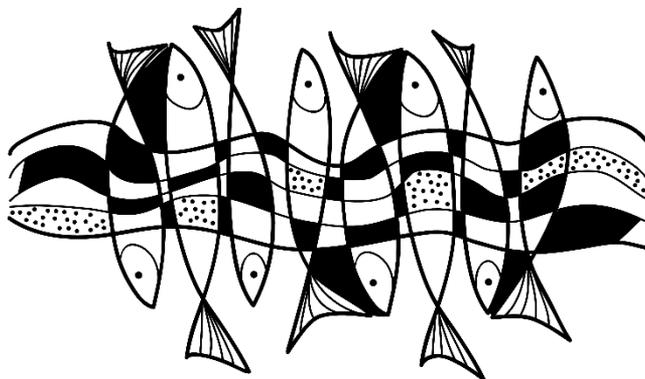
we perpetuate the Word of God by worshipping, teaching, and ministering in a loving and caring way;

we are an open and affirming congregation that welcomes the diversity of individuals and their gifts;

we provide a place of Christian learning for ourselves and our children;

we seek the betterment of the church, the community and the world,

.....so that God's love and justice are made real.



First Congregational Church
Rev Dr Katherine Adams, pastor
An Open and Affirming Congregation of the
United Church of Christ
18 Andover Road, Billerica, Massachusetts 01821