

## Newsletter Reflections for March

This year the month of March finds us started on the second week of Lent. When we reach the final week of this month we will be entering what is known as Holy Week. The last Sunday of March has the schizophrenic title of Palm/Passion Sunday on the church calendar. When I was growing up in the Southern Presbyterian Church we did not talk about the journey of Lent very much, if it was mentioned at all. We celebrated Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Then we went joyfully to the Easter morning celebration of the resurrection with a sanctuary filled with beautiful lilies. We ignored both Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But after the re-unification of the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Church, Palm Sunday became Palm/Passion Sunday. By this time I was no longer attending church with the same congregation so I am not sure if that change was immediately reflected in the liturgy during Holy Week. However, by the time I returned to North Carolina, I was glad to notice the congregation acknowledged that something important happened during that week named Holy. As a pastor, I do not think that it is possible to adequately address the journey to the cross and all that happens within that week in one Sunday's worship service...not really in the whole week. In fact, I think we need to spend a great deal of time with the opportunities that the journey of Lent and those Lenten reflections give us to grow in our spiritual lives; to recognize that journey that Jesus made to the cross was made as a man. Yes, Jesus was God incarnate; God with us, but he was fully human as he walked among us on that journey or it would not have been the redemptive act for us that it was. The Apostle Paul's letters continually remind us of this important aspect of both Jesus' life and his death on the cross. The work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer also reminds us that we tend to want what he termed "cheap grace". We want to accept the gift of mercy and forgiveness that God has made available to us; knowing that we do not earn it, knowing also that we do not and cannot merit it, but then forgetting to give anything back when we receive and accept the gift. We forget that when we accept the gift of grace we become part of the covenant that God has initiated. We gladly accept the claim of being God's beloved children, heirs to the rights and privileges granted through that covenant, but inclined to forget the teachings of Jesus asking us to love, to show compassion, to "tend his sheep" and follow his example of crossing boundaries and ignoring divisions separating people. Most often we forget that Jesus asks us to deny that fundamental aspect of our nature which is often dominant: that of self-interest. When we accept God's grace we can respond by allowing God to enter and transform our lives. This transformation is more than just a superficial change. Instead, it is a total and radical re-orientation of how we view all others, how we view our place in this world. This transformation is reflected by changes in our orientation toward others because of their value in God's kingdom; in how we interact with others because we become aware of how God's desire for us to be in community with one another calls us to care for each other and to see all others as ones bearing God's image within. Jesus spent the majority of his earthly ministry speaking of the reign of God

being near; teaching and demonstrating how to bring it close because he did not recognize the boundaries of his day, the divisions of the culture around him, those things that others saw as separating factors. Instead, wherever he saw need, he answered the need with compassion. That was what brought the kingdom of God near. As we journey through Lent this year, perhaps that should be our focus. In this time in our broken world there is a great need for a healing of divisions, of a building of bridges and a dismantling of barriers, of ways of once again looking at each other and seeing beyond disagreements to basic values of caring that all people should be able to live healthy lives with homes that are in safe neighborhoods, all should be able to eat well and be clothed adequately, all should be able to find gainful employment that will supply their families' needs. At some point we need to rediscover that even if we disagree on how to get to these ends, we should have these as our goals and should re-discover how to work toward them together and not perceive a disagreement as making us enemies. We should work to see that hate and hate speech have no place in a world that is trying to bring God's kingdom near, especially when our Lord calls us to love even our enemies.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby