

Eyeing Easter, Walking through Lent:

A Bible Study with Global Baptists

Students Guide

Eight online adult Sunday school
lessons



Acacia Resources, a division of Baptist Center for Ethics
P.O. Box 150506
Nashville, Tennessee 37215-0506
(615) 627-7766
www.acaciaresources.com

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Foreword

Denton Lotz, general secretary, Baptist World Alliance

During the fourth century, the early Church prescribed a 40-day period of preparation prior to Easter for those who were to be baptized. The rest of the faith community was also called at this time to repentant prayer, fasting and almsgiving as preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. This season of the church year became known as Lent.

The discipline of fasting has origins in scripture. The prophet Isaiah, for example, condemned fasting that sought its own pleasure and issued in quarrels and fighting: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see them naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isa 58:6-7).

In all human endeavors we have a tendency to make rules and regulations. Sometimes, though, we lose the reasons behind them, resulting in ritualism. Often religiosity becomes a show to impress others. That became the case with fasting, and Jesus reacted against such piety.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt 6:16-18).

Like Isaiah, Jesus called for the kind of fasting that changes lives and demands justice and concern for the poor and needy.

Jesus was opposed to ritualism without service, worship without action and prayers without work for the kingdom. Jesus commanded fasting from the heart that results in service, action and mission.

The *Didache (The Teachings)*, one of the instruction books of the early church, instructed Christians to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, not like the hypocrites who fasted on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

In our reaction to the evils of the medieval church, we Baptists threw out some customs and traditions that for centuries were an encouragement to the church to practice holy living, including fasting and the observance of Lent. In rejecting such practices, we have sometimes failed to hear their original call for repentance and change of heart.

The purpose of these Lenten lessons is to cause us to reflect and act upon the call of Christ to serve the world in which we live. The 40 days of Lent should lead us to repent where we have failed God and our neighbors and challenge us to unite as a community of believers to be witnesses of God's kingdom.

What might this mean for Baptists of the world today?

Among other things, it should mean a prophetic protest against the consumerism of our materialistic society. While the rest of the world goes hungry, we are stuffing ourselves with things and more things. Lent can give us a new understanding of listening to the call of Christ beyond the materi-

alism that seduces our body and soul from true Christian discipleship.

Perhaps it will help us begin projects to help the 6 million children in Africa who are orphaned by the tragedy of AIDS.

Perhaps it will open us to hear the voice of Christ calling us to be peacemakers.

Or, maybe it will give us boldness in declaring the joy of salvation in Christ.

Saint Augustine used two Latin words to describe the human dilemma of man over against God. The Latin word "uti" means "to use," and the word "frui" means "to enjoy." Augustine reminds us that we are to enjoy God and use things. The tragedy is that humanity too often uses God and enjoys things! Observing Lent and some of the spiritual disciplines it encourages will keep our eyes off of things and centered on Christ.

A long time ago, a German friend invited me to the symphony. He told me not to eat all day, but to fast. The reason, he said, was that when we fast our ears are more open to hear the beauty of the music.

In a similar vein, observing the Lenten season prior to Easter enables us to open our ears, bodies and souls to hear more clearly the voice of Christ.

May God grant us the courage to be open to a new spiritual springtime in our lives, to follow Christ more clearly and love Him more dearly. May that be our prayer during this time of Lent... for Christ and His kingdom!

Introduction

“Remember, you are dust,” the minister says as he or she makes the mark of the cross on parishioners’ foreheads on Ash Wednesday.

Generations of Christians have participated in this solemn and deeply meaningful ritual that marks the beginning of the season of Lent. Very few among them, however, have traditionally been Baptists.

Tracing their origins to protest movements that withdrew from established Christian traditions, most Baptist churches have historically viewed Lent with suspicion and their neighbors who bore the sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads with curiosity. Discussion about Lent was likely limited to what bad habit or pleasurable pursuit they would avoid.

Because their churches have generally rejected the liturgical calendar and the more formal worship style it encourages, most Baptists have little understanding of the rhythmic seasons of the church year and their meanings. In forsaking the formal, Baptists have also deprived themselves of some important tools in the Christian journey.

Things began to change noticeably in the Baptist world when more Baptist churches began observing Advent. While Lent has taken root less quickly in Baptist soil, it too has captured the imagination of many Baptists, introducing them to a spiritual discipline they now recognize that they need.

Especially for those Baptist churches that use the liturgical calendar for worship planning and education, Lent, like

Advent, has become a much anticipated and carefully planned season.

Beginning with Ash Wednesday, a day Auburn, Alabama First Baptist Church pastor Jim Evans says is “devoted to recalling God’s embrace of our humanity,” Christians around the world commence “a 40-day vigil devoted to reflection and repentance.” More than giving up something, Lent for Christians is a challenge to reclaim, restore and renew their faith.

“During Lent,” says Heather Entrekin, senior pastor of Prairie Baptist Church, Prairie Village, Kansas, “we have an opportunity to do things, or to stop doing things, that can help us pay attention to God and become more open and available to God.”

While Lent encourages some elements of personal introspection, it must not stop there. Observing Lent challenges us to reorder our priorities and change our values. It causes us to recognize and confess the sin in our lives not only as individuals, but as communities, cultures and societies. Personal sins have far-reaching effects, resulting in false ideologies, harmful structures and destructive patterns that cause suffering for others and block the spread of justice. Lent demands an inside-out change.

It calls us from purely private faith to a faith that shows itself in actions that work for the good of the community and the world. It challenges those of us in positions of power and wealth to remember and act on behalf of those who suffer from poverty, injustice and violence.

We need look no farther than the early experiences of the Hebrew people and the teachings of Jesus for examples of this kind of living faith.

As the children of Israel made pilgrimages to Jerusalem for religious observances and celebrations, songs helped them not only pass the time but also reinforce their faith and teach their children. Many scholars believe that the Psalms of Ascent (120-134) were used during these journeys.

These psalms deal with concerns every serious traveler faces, including new direction, guidance, anticipation, fear, doubt, joy, security, perseverance, hope and deliverance. The physical journey these pilgrims made up to Jerusalem, the imagery in the Psalms and the spiritual concepts they convey offer parallels to Christian discipleship.

From the moment of his birth, Jesus too was on a journey, one that would lead him not only to the cross but also to resurrection. As a Jew, he would have known and sung the ancient pilgrims' songs.

Jesus modeled the journey of faith and invites us to follow. His teachings, coupled with those significant Hebrew songs, provide us a map through Lent that leads to intentional spiritual inventory and necessary course correction.

In 2005, Ed Hogan, pastor of Jersey Village Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, undertook such a Lenten journey that resulted in significant spiritual, emotional and relational growth not only for him but also for his congregation.

Inspired by Eugene Peterson's book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which examines the Psalms of Ascent, Hogan determined to walk 1,000 miles in the 100 days preceding Easter and use the time he walked each day to draw closer to God.

Sometimes he walked alone; at other times he was joined by members of his congregation. As he walked, his health

improved, he lost weight and he developed deeper bonds with his parishioners. He chronicled his experiences in a personal blog (<http://thelentenwalk.blogspot.com/>).

Recalling Peterson's words, Matthew 20:17-19 and its reference to Jesus and his disciples going "up" toward Jerusalem, Hogan wrote: "That one small word... up... is so important. This was more than a trip, and these disciples were more than tourists. They were pilgrims, and they were heading toward an encounter with God. Anywhere you walked in Israel it was always 'up' to the temple. In making this journey, the disciples were heading up toward God, and God was making the journey with them. Long before it dawned on them that they were heading toward God, God had found them and was nudging them up the hill."

As we move toward Easter's celebratory encounter with God, rather than taking a thoughtless leap, Lent compels us first to evaluate, repent, reflect and recommit to the life of faith we claim. These Bible study lessons are designed to guide that process and challenge Baptists to:

- reflect on God's history of deliverance;
- repent from self-centered and self-sufficient living;
- reaffirm their dependence upon God;
- recommit to walking the life of faith.

Inspired by examples from the lives of people touched through the Baptist World Alliance, goodwill Baptists from around the world can join in prayer and action to further God's redemptive work in the world. As people changed by God's love and forgiveness, we can embrace our responsibility to help others and create positive changes in their lives.

As we move from Lent to Easter and beyond, we see past the empty tomb to discover Jesus among those he came to seek and serve—the poor, the captives, the sick, the oppressed, the marginalized. As global Baptists work together to serve them, we will truly “bless the Lord.”

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, TN

What is the BWA?

The Baptist World Alliance is a fellowship of 214 Baptist unions and conventions comprising a membership of more than 34 million baptized believers. This represents a community of approximately 80 million Baptists ministering around the world. The BWA unites Baptists worldwide, leads in evangelism, responds to people in need and defends human rights.

Create In Me a Clean Heart

Text: Psalm 51

Theme: Confession opens the door to renewal.

Introduction

The ritual is assumed. It is a habit really, one that those who do it regularly do not likely notice. In many places of the world where hot running water is a luxury, people, before a meal, line up at or are served by one who holds a basin in one hand with a towel draped over the forearm and, with the other hand, pours lovingly warmed water from a pitcher. Hygiene is very important and this ritual is mostly about hygiene.

However, for someone from the western world of modern conveniences where hygiene is a private matter, there is something about the stance, something about the posture and something about the engagement of this “third-world” cleansing ritual that strikes deep.

The stance is vulnerable. Hands are out-stretched, palms upward, awaiting the water’s flow. No fist. No power. No dexterity. Just wait.

The posture is humble. One’s body tilts forward, to watch, to witness the flow of cleansing liquid poured out hopefully without hesitation.

The engagement is confessional. Eyes are diverted for the focus is on the dirt that must be seen in order to be washed away.

What strikes deep is the realization that unless I bow down, I cannot enter in. It is the realization that I need another to make me clean and that being welcomed to the table hinges on the acknowledgment of my sinfulness. From another's mercy comes the possibility of communion.

Those who regularly assume this position for physical cleansing, those whose lives are filled with poverty, injustice, violence, persecution, suffering, disease and material deprivation, become for Christians in wealthy and powerful communities teachers of spiritual truths. Their lessons are both simple and profound: cleansing is an essential first step on the path to wholeness. And apart from mercy, we can't begin the journey.

Clean water, life-giving and life-sustaining, is a rare and precious commodity in many parts of the world. In the African nation of Benin, for example, only 50% of the population has access to it. Many of the diseases to which Benin's people fall victim are related to the lack of clean water and basic hygiene.

Person by person, village by village, Baptist World Aid, the compassionate arm of the Baptist World Alliance, provides wells, water purification systems and education on water usage, cleaning and sanitation to those most vulnerable to disease. The changes that come to individuals, families and communities once they have regular access to pure water point to the possibilities of inner change from the living water, Jesus Christ.

Our path to Easter begins with a similar cleansing during Lent. It begins when we realize that our first stance, our first posture and our first engagement on the path toward full forgiveness at the resurrection of Christ, is vulnerable, humble and confessional. It begins when, from this position, we appeal as David did, "Have mercy on me, O God."

The Biblical Witness

The situation is clear for the inscription tells us that David's lies have caught up to him in the person of Nathan. Nathan's own servant-like and wise nature led him to invent a story about an only lamb. After all, David was the king, and you have to be smart when confronting a king. But Nathan played it right. He did not accuse. It was David's own indignant declaration that was the sentence: The rich man who had taken the poor man's lamb deserved to die (2 Sam 12:5). David, in his kingly decisiveness, knew what it would take to make this situation right, to restore justice. A death is called for, he declared. It did not take much for Nathan to help David see that the death he called for was his own.

All David could do then, as he awaited the day of his death, was plead. And David did just this.

Psalm 51:1-9 Coming Clean

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless

when you pass judgment. ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

The time for an attempted cover-up is gone. No more can David attempt to hide deceit with deceit. There is no room left for any rationalization of his behavior: I am king so I can have any woman I want. There is no space for blame: She should not have been bathing when I looked her way. Nor is there any place for comparison: Others have done much worse things than this.

David is completely vulnerable and totally humiliated. He has been exposed. The verdict is in and David, he alone, is at fault.

The pleas start pouring out. They seem to come slowly at first. A trickle is not going to do it this time. Then, as he puts words to his heart's cry, his self-loathing increases and he awakens to the fact that he finds himself disgusting. The pleas come more quickly, more intense, more emphatic as if the water itself is not that which cleans. The spring rain becomes a deluge. A light rinse will not get out this stain. Detonating the grime from these tight crevices will require the full force of the water's power. Cleaning this mess requires the hose on full blast.

Blot out (vv 1, 9), wash (vv 2, 7), cleanse (v 2), purge (v 7) ... have mercy. The images are of power, force and desperation. The talk is of full elimination—the ink must be dissolved in order to erase David's name from the signed

sentence of death, and the filth of his actions requires bleach. Only mercy, only true benevolence can fulfill justice's mandate while, at the same time, forgive the criminal. Mercy, only mercy, can do both.

Psalm 51:10-16 Mercy's Gifts

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. ¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. ¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

Mercy. David seems to know of that which he desires. His pleas are mixed with longings. There is a reminiscent quality to his words. It is as though he remembers times of mercy demonstrated, moments when he heard joy and gladness, glimpses of God's face, and periods of companionship. Joy restored comes only after joy once experienced.

As much as David's desires are for his own release, they are also for God to be God. Be the God that you are, yes, for my sake, but not just for my sake. Act according to your steadfast love. Move according to your abundant mercy. Create as you have created in the past. Focus on that which is good in this, your world, and in me, your servant. Stay close. Be present. Speak it and it will be so.

If God will be God again, then David will teach transgressors God's ways, sing aloud of God's deliverance and declare God's praise (v 13).

These descriptions of David's ensuing activity after God acts like God again are not presented as matters in the negotiation of forgiveness. He is not saying to God, if you do that for me, I will do this for you. David is not even remotely in a position to bargain. Not at all. That time has passed, even though it actually existed only in his mind, not God's.

Rather, these descriptions are also part of David's same reminiscence. Unless God is God again, David will never again experience the delight that comes with teaching, the joy that comes with song and the energy that comes with declaration. He remembers what it was like to be right with God, to be in communion with God, and because of this, to be in right communion with others. These activities are the natural responses of a loved one to the beloved.

Psalm 51:17-19 **Restored for Service**

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, ¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

In response to the declaration that, because of his sin, he must die, all that David can offer as he pleads for forgiveness is a broken and contrite heart. And that is all that God may consider worthy of acceptance.

A broken and contrite heart is one that is ready to be taught the truth about the human heart. It is one that is ready to be purged with strongest substance, the only substance that can cleanse death. It is one that desires to hear directly from God. It is one that acknowledges that God's help is required to live with the ever-present memory of past sins. It is one that needs to be changed, re-created. It is one that needs that assurance of God's presence. It is one that is ready to rejoice again. And, it is one that desires to will that which God wills for God's people and God's world.

A broken and contrite heart, restored and renewed, becomes a pure vessel through which God can work to relieve poverty and violence and establish justice.

We receive mercy and are restored for a purpose: to extend mercy to others.

Daring to Hope

Lent is an in-between time. It is the time between the declaration of guilt and the actualization of the sentence our guilt deserves so that justice is reestablished. It begins with Ash Wednesday, the day that declares death is certain. And, it ends with Easter, the day that begs to differ.

But what of the in-between days? In between are the days that we have to live with the sentence. In between are the days that we bring the only sacrifice we have, a broken and a contrite heart, to God. We have to face the likelihood that there is no way out. We have to acknowledge that what we have done or not done deserves this retribution. We have to wait until the day when the executioner calls our name. In between are the days that we wait in the agony of reality and in the improbability of hope.

A man joined the line outside of the barren, concrete-blocked four walls and tin roof. It was early on Sunday morning and some of the women, like every Sunday at this Rwandan Baptist church, served tea to those who did not have food for breakfast.

This man knew the protocol. The line is for cleansing so that entrance to the table may be granted. He had grown up at this church and his family is still part of the community. However, since the events of the 1994 genocide, he had been in prison, accused of and guilty of butchering members of this same community with a machete.

His time in the prison is finished, but what of the sentence of this community? The families of his victims are here but this is the only community he knows. Where else would he go? He remembers the times of gladness, the moments of rejoicing, even the games he had played with his friends, the very men he had attacked.

Might he dare hope for the possibility of yet another of those moments in this place and with these people? Might these people understand that his presence here is an act of vulnerability, that he comes in utter humility ready to confess? Might he allow himself to imagine that he, after all he has done, will be welcomed?

He is not sure that anyone has recognized him yet. No one knew he was coming today. He waits in the line daring to hope. It feels like forever. It feels like he has been waiting for days.

What of your in-between days this Lenten season? As you face your sinfulness, as you plead for God's mercy, and as you remember the joy of God's companionship, pray that God will be God again.

Acknowledge that you need God's help to make you clean, and that being welcomed to the table hinges on the acknowledgment of your sinfulness. Thank God for mercy that restores the possibility of communion.

As you explore and contemplate the amazing work of God in people's lives around the world during this Lenten season, resist the comfort of privatized faith. Recognize and confess the pervasive nature of corporate sins that create problems and suffering for others.

Determine to look beyond yourself to a world that needs the mercy, justice and restoration a pure heart can help it find.

Written by Carla Nelson, education consultant, Canadian Baptist Ministries, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Life-Giving Water

One of the current projects for Baptist World Aid is to provide new wells for three villages in Benin, each with a population of about 900. Residents of the villages will participate in this work, collecting gravel and assisting the bore-hole technicians. Once the wells are completed, residents will participate in training seminars on use, care and maintenance of the wells and equipment. Each village will have a management committee in charge of maintaining the wells.

Prepare the Way

**Texts: Psalm 120
Luke 3:1-18**

Theme: Our walk with God begins when we admit our need for God.

Introduction

We live in a world of kingdom-building, and it is not the kingdom of heaven of which we speak. Far from it.

Government officials are indicted for using their positions wrongfully, and polls show favor toward our international leaders to be at an all-time low. Church leaders admit to scandalous affairs, both of a sexual and financial nature. Our world, it seems, has come to the point that no one can be trusted.

The name “Baptist” does not fare much better, and, because of our penchant for in-fighting and control-seeking, is confronted with a growing skepticism as to what kind of people we are. We find ourselves faced with the need to re-define our identity in ways that show a greater loving care for the world in which we live. We are guilty of trying to convert the world to our way of thinking and doing, and have somehow lost what it means simply to love others for who they are as creations of God, as Jesus did.

Dr. Amparo de Medina, a clinical psychologist and family counselor in Cali, Colombia, is one Baptist leader focused

on building God’s kingdom through loving and helpful actions in some of life’s most difficult circumstances.

Domestic violence is a plague to women throughout the world, one that Amparo wants desperately to eradicate. Her passion is to edify families, specifically by educating them and campaigning against domestic violence.

She ministers to families in great crisis and with many needs, helping them not only on a practical level with the issues surrounding domestic violence but also by sharing her own faith in Christ, pointing them to the one who provides lasting hope and peace.

With her degree in psychology and her writing the book entitled *Libres de la violencia familiar*, (Free from Violence in the Family), Amparo has earned a hearing and great support in the general public as well as within Christian circles. The lives of many families have been changed because of Amparo’s faithfulness to God’s call.

The Biblical Witness

Barbara Brown Taylor has recently published a book entitled *Leaving Church*. In it she tells of how and why she resigned as pastor of a small Episcopalian congregation in north Georgia. Judging from what she says, my guess is that because of her pastoral inexperience she tried to be all things to all the people all the time, and it burned her out. She seems to have a different take on it, however, and in her book she puts it this way:

“I realized,” she says, “just how little interest I had in defending Christian beliefs. The parts of the Christian story that had drawn me into the Church were not the believing parts but the beholding parts.

‘Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...’
‘Behold the Lamb of God...’
‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock...’”

Is it worthy for us Baptists to think more in terms of what we behold—what we see and then tell—than in what we believe? Perhaps so, and maybe this Lenten season is the time to do just that. In the process, we can, both individually and collectively, begin to right that which is wrong and recover that which is lost. We can prepare the way for the One who has come to show us the way.

Let us look to the psalmist and to John the Baptist for the answers we need.

Psalm 120:1-2 From Sin to Distress

*¹In my distress I cry to the Lord, that he may answer me:
²“Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.”*

Psalm 120 is the first in a collection of fifteen poems known as “Psalms of Ascent.” They are associated with pilgrimages to holy festivals, an appropriate choice for our Lenten journey. Sometimes, we journey not where we necessarily want to go, but where, for the sake of sheer survival, we must go. Because of our spiritual need, we find ourselves moving toward the inevitable presence of God. And, wherever we find God’s presence we find redemption.

Redemption must necessarily be preceded by recognition of our sinful nature, a recognition that comes from our distress. Interestingly, the New Revised Standard Version above presents the psalmist’s use of verbs in the present tense. James Luther Mays, in *Interpretation: Psalms*

suggests that it may be more accurate to translate in the past tense, which would imply that the psalmist’s distress is a thing of the past and that, per his request, the Lord has already delivered him “from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue” (v 2).

That may not be true in our case, however. Our individual and collective deceit creates problems for us and for those over whom we have influence (v 2). We can find evidence of that all around us, from the war in Iraq to the misuse of power in congregational leadership.

Psalm 120 has an eschatological aspect to it; in other words, it is future-oriented. It is thought that the psalm was especially meaningful to the Jews in dispersion or exile. In that regard, it is reflective of much of scripture, especially in the seasons of Lent and Advent, when promises and the fulfillment of such promises are yet to be met.

In other words, this psalm generally reflects life for most of us most of the time. The present moment often brings distress. The conditions may vary, but the reality does not. For the psalmist, his distress comes from his enemies. The source of our distress may be something altogether different. But sift it down to its lowest common denominator, and whether it is another person or the difficulties that life can bring, the word that defines it best is *enemy*.

To whom can we go in such a time? The only one who can be counted on is the Lord.

Psalm 120:3-4 Prevailing Justice

³What shall be given to you? And what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? ⁴A warrior’s sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!

Is there justice for those who are victimized by deceit? The psalmist asked the question in verse 3 and answered it in verse 4. The enemy is a proponent of war, and justice, interestingly described by means of a warring metaphor, will prevail against those who do not seek peace. The distress the psalmist felt did not rid him of his faith in an ultimate God who would bring justice against his enemies.

Psalm 120:5-7 **“I am for peace”**

⁵Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meschech, that I must live among the tents of Kedar. ⁶Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. ⁷I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.

The perfect number in scripture is seven, so it is appropriate that verse seven provides us with the central theme of this psalm. “I am for peace,” says the psalmist, but he dwelt among those who were not.

We have returned to the psalmist’s source of distress. This provides us with the hint that, though the Hebrew verbs are past tense, the psalmist’s difficulties still exist. The psalmist tried to live in a conciliatory fashion, but his enemies responded with hostility, and the ending of the psalm reflects his despair.

However, there is good news . . .

Luke 3:1-6 **The Heart of the Message**

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the

region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas... Luke, the Gospel writer, was more than just a name-dropper. He was a historian, a careful one at that. Specific dates, of course, such as we use today, were not available in those times. So, Luke used the evidence at hand, the periods of time when known rulers were in power. And, he used all the powerful personages he could to prove his point. There was a specific time in history when God chose to begin his ultimate act of redemption.

It all began with John the Baptist, whose primary message was one of redemption based on repentance. There should be no question as to why this story is central to the Lenten season.

Luke 3:7-18 **Repentance and Reforms**

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to

raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” ¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” ¹⁵And the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.

We have moved from past tense to future, and in the future there is redemption. How is this redemption revealed? Luke mentions three groups that responded favorably to John’s preaching: the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers. Each represents a portion of society that embodied sinful behavior (what, no religious leaders?!) and asks the same question: “What then should we do?”

It is quite interesting that they responded in such a way, considering what John called them. I assume that you are reading this because you are committed to the Christ way. It would further follow that this commitment is revealed in regular church attendance. When was the last time you heard a minister refer to his or her congregation as a “brood of vipers”? If it did happen, did the preacher get away with it? John did! In fact, the crowds called for more. “What then should we do?”

John gave specific responses, based on their particular responsibility to the world in which they lived. Redemption,

based on God’s grace in response to repentance, results in ethical reforms and lifestyle changes: how we respond to the poor and hungry, how we conduct business and use our power and position.

It was a favorite practice in John’s day to claim religious conviction based on one’s ancestry to Abraham. The Baptist put Abraham in perspective. Abraham was the instrument of God’s purpose. If Abraham had not been available, God could have used stones to raise up children. The covenant between God and God’s people is not based on blood kin but on the deliverance of God’s will. “Good fruit” is what John called it, and the tree that does not bear the purposes of God will be cut down and destroyed.

“What shall we do?” is the collective response of those who heard these stark and disturbing words. To the “crowds,” the general populace, John gave examples much like Jesus would later provide in the Sermon on the Mount. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

To the tax collectors, when they ask what they must do, the prophet told them to be honest in their dealings with the populace. Now, that’s a novel idea, since the publicans were notorious for taking far more than was required in order to line their own pockets.

Soldiers put the question to John, and his response was basically the same as to the tax collectors. To those who use their authority to extort money from their Jewish captives, John said, “Stop it! Oh, and by the way, be happy with your wages.” Of course, the reason the soldiers were in the extortion business in the first place was that they were paid on a meager basis. Greed is not the sole possession of the wealthy.

The way of God is an ethical way. Fairness and generosity are marks of the kingdom of heaven and enable the true believer to help prepare the way of a coming God whose ultimate purpose is the redemption of the world.

Luke 3:16-18 **Pervasive Change**

¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

When questioned as to whether he was the Messiah, in humility John deferred to *another*. "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming..." Then he said this great separation will take place when those who admit to and live out their need for God will be given their reward.

What John described sounds like a painful process... Holy Spirit and fire, winnowing fork in hand, clearing the threshing floor and gathering wheat, the chaff burned with unquenchable fire. Yet, Luke refers to it as *good news*. Indeed, it will be good news for those who are found living a repentant lifestyle, who treat others ethically and share with others generously.

Baptists, historically, have focused on individual repentance, but Lent offers a wider perspective. John baptized the people individually, to be sure, but he spoke of a collective ethic that begins with just one changed heart. It is

impossible for one person to be changed without the resulting desire to share that good news with others. When that happens, society changes, culture shifts, worlds are turned upside down.

Building the Kingdom

Premila Priyangani of Gonawala, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka works as a field officer assisting the Sri Lanka Baptist Women's League with their tsunami relief efforts. It's been a long but rewarding journey for the young woman whose life began in a very poor family and whose conversion to Christianity initially resulted in a lot of misunderstanding and even hatred from those around her.

On her first visit to the area where she now works, she witnessed people along the beach lighting oil lamps in remembrance of those who lost their lives during the disaster a year earlier.

"I was moved," she recalls. "I decided that though there are ugly people around us and ugly things happening in the society, I will serve the Lord in the best possible way I can."

Her challenging job involves collecting data and statistics from those in the area and coordinating programs to help the 180-200 families there.

"I work with people of different caste, creed, rich and poor all alike who were affected," she says. "At first the people thought that I was just another person come to take photos and send abroad and collect money. But, as our programs were conducted on a regular basis, the people built up confidence in our work."

Educational programs for children, English classes for adults, patchwork and sewing classes, medical clinics, art competitions, awareness programs—all have endeared her to those she serves. “The people trust us and our work,” she says.

“I try my best to serve the community in the best possible way with the talents God has provided me, I have been able to be a close friend to many; I have been a mother to those children who have no love from their parents, a sister to the young women whose husbands have been unfaithful. With all this around me I have been made new. I am someone. Now I appreciate how much God has blessed me. This appointment was a blessing to me in disguise.”

Premila Priyangani reminds us that repentance begins with the heart, but it doesn't end there. The Lenten journey, courtesy of John, provides us with specific things we can do to show our desire to participate in an unseen kingdom.

We cannot depend solely on our Baptist heritage, as the “crowds” did with their ancestry. We must forge new ways of being Baptist and showing our love to the world in a more caring and creative fashion. We must most not only share what we have with “the least of these,” we must make it clear why we are doing so. To live as stewards and not consumers is a vital role of a repentant person, as is making sure that how we treat others is beyond reproach.

Preparing the way of the kingdom is not just the role of the psalmist or John the Baptist. It is ours as well. During this Lenten season, in a spirit of repentance, may we begin such a journey.

Written by Randy L. Hyde, senior pastor, Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, Little Rock, AR

Look Beyond the Here and Now

**Texts: Psalm 121
Luke 12:22-34**

Theme: God's provision changes our priorities.

Introduction

“A lonely, forlorn beggar sank to the gutter in the main street of Narasaraopet, in South India, sick, hungry, exhausted. Leena Lavanya was not the first person to observe the woman's pain and distress, but she was the first one to stop and help.”

With these words Tony Cupit, former director of evangelism and education at the Baptist World Alliance, begins to tell the story of this bright young woman from Andhra Pradesh, India, who he names “a Baptist Mother Teresa, a servant to the poorest of the poor,” in his book *Stars Lighting Up the Sky*.

“Doing what she could to ease the woman's embarrassment,” continues Cupit, “for she was clothed in rags and indescribably dirty, Leena helped her to her feet, comforted her and gave her food and water. Sensing the extremity of the woman's sickness, she took her to the only hospital in the region, at Guntur, 40 kilometers distant. The woman, Sultana, was diagnosed with AIDS. Leena reached out to Sultana because she has a great love for those in need.

“Leena discovered 40 HIV/AIDS patients in the hospital. Over the ensuing weeks, she extended her interest to all of

them, bringing them food, multi-vitamins and clothes, and most especially listening and being available for them. Thus began Leena's ministry to AIDS patients, a ministry that was added to a range of ministries of compassion in which she was already heavily engaged: a school for children in a rural, slum area; a sewing school for destitute women; a ministry to lepers; a computer school for unemployed youth; a hospice for HIV/AIDS sufferers; a ministry to Hindu devotees at an annual festival; an extensive ministry of outreach to villages surrounding Narasaraopet, and an array of human rights causes."

All of this began at a Baptist World Youth Conference in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1993. Leena had gone to the conference on a scholarship and heard North American Baptist leader Tony Campolo say, "Many Baptist young people sing 'All to Jesus I surrender,' but in reality they surrender very little." Leena determined that from then on she would surrender her all to Christ serving his neediest children in India.

"Leena has utmost faith that God will provide all her needs," writes Cupit. "She lives very modestly. Up until recently she took no salary, and only now allocates a small amount per week for her personal needs. Her lack of desire for personal gain, her trust in God, and her personal generosity inspire people to give sacrificially to her ministries."

Leena's life is an example of how God is personally concerned for us and protects us through all of life's experiences. She also models how we should not be anxious for our personal lives, but live in generosity as God's own way of being and Jesus Christ's supreme example.

The Biblical Witness

Psalm 121:1-2 God Alone

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? ²My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

The beginning of the Christian experience makes us realize that God, the creator of heaven and earth, is personally concerned for us. The fact that such a "huge" God would care for such "little" creatures is indeed cause for wonder. In another Psalm, King David wrote: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps 8:3-4).

This is one of the most basic and, at the same time, powerful of Christian realizations: God cares for us. This experience of total dependence also demands the most complete allegiance to this all-caring God. When we realize that our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth, then our worship and our first allegiance cannot stay with anything or anyone other than God. Country cannot claim it, nor family, race, religion, social status, riches or any other of the human-made gods. "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3) is more than a command; it is the willful yielding of a heart that knows his or her help comes from the Lord, and from the Lord alone.

Psalm 121:3-6 Care in the Smallest Things

³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at

your right hand. ⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.”

The psalmist goes on to declare that God protects us and guides us as we move throughout life’s experiences.

The psalmist’s experience was that God not only cares for us in a general way but God also takes delight in caring for us through the small stuff of our lives. Many people would agree that God cares for us, but for small stuff they still trust more in money than in God. A good name, a wealthy family, a powerful country, a well-provided bank account seem to be the assurances that most people—even Christians—look for when they try to secure for themselves a good life. The psalmist trusted fully in God. If God has the power to control all aspects of the order of the universe, it does not seem very intelligent not to trust God for each and every detail in our lives.

Jesus also recognized this mutually-exclusive dilemma in which we humans find ourselves in his Sermon on the Mount: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt 6:24).

The word Jesus used for “wealth” is *Mammon*. Many times Jesus referred to riches, but on two occasions, perhaps to make his teaching most strong and powerful, he used the name *Mammon*, a name ascribed to the god—or demon—of wealth. *Mammon* is more than the personal riches that a person could have. *Mammon* represents a system in which riches dominate the human person and the human *milieu*, determining who and what we are socially and personally. Systemic riches oppress humanity and misplace our values. *Mammon* makes the person live depending more on money than on God, making riches the ultimate value and

ultimate allegiance. The psalmist, and Jesus, said otherwise: our ultimate allegiance relies on God, who takes care down to the most menial details of our daily lives.

Psalm 121:7-8 Life’s Keeper

⁷The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

⁸The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

The psalmist concludes in total wonderment: No circumstance places us outside of God’s care.

The experience of the psalmist was that God is the only one who keeps our lives. God keeps our “going out” and our “coming in.” There is nothing that escapes God’s control. People need money in life, but there are things that money cannot buy: health, love and satisfaction. Over all other things, money cannot buy God. This is why, in the words of Jesus, we need to make God our special treasure (Matt 6:21).

The true problem is not riches. The true problem is where our heart is. When our heart is in riches, when we treasure riches believing they are our hope and our salvation, our heart is away from the true provider and lover of our souls.

Worshiping God is more than just singing some hymns on Sunday morning, listening to a good sermon or even “paying” our tithes—as some say. Worshiping God means trusting fully in God for our daily provision, having God as our only hope and making God our true capital and our special treasure.

When sending his disciples on mission (Lk 10:4), Jesus ordered them to go without a purse, a bag, even an extra

pair of sandals. Later he asked them, “When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?” And they answered: “No, not a thing” (Lk 22:35).

The Israelites had this same experience. They never lacked manna in the desert (Ex 16:14-35), nor water (Ex 17:1-7, Num 20:1-13, 1 Cor 10:4). Elisha the prophet was fed by ravens (1Kings 17:4) and by a widow in Zarephath of Sidon (1Kings 17:8-24). Even our Lord lived not having a place to lay his head (Matt 8:20). Even in the worst-case scenarios, none of these lacked for their personal need or for the friendship and company of God.

Luke 12:22-26 **Why Worry?**

²²He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?”

Jesus recognized the human tendency toward anxiety and offered a better way to live.

His argument was quite simple. Every person depends on someone or something to live. Every person who depends on someone or something lesser than God will live in continuous anxiety. Every person who depends on God will find complete peace in God (Isa 26:3).

Italians say, “I soldi non fanno la felicità ma calmano molto i nervi” (Money does not make for happiness, but it calms a lot your nerves). What the saying does not reveal is that this money, which supposedly “calms your nerves,” is the same that generates anxiety over anxiety for those who speculate on it in the stock exchanges and other markets of the world.

Again, the problem is not money. Money is an essential tool for life today. The problem is depending on money—*Mammon*—as if it was our ultimate and most essential good. The psalmist and Jesus teach us that our ultimate and most essential good is God, nothing else, nothing less.

Life is more than food, said Jesus; the body is more than clothing. Christians today need to learn from Paul, the apostle, who taught, “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these” (1Tim 6:8). And “being content” in Paul’s language is *autarky*, self-sufficiency and contentment. We find contentment not in things, but in God.

The person who is anxious, preoccupied, worried, desperately searches after many things. But if we learn to sit at the feet of the Teacher and learn from the Teacher’s experience, we will discover the ultimate truth of life: we depend on God. Everything we are, everything we have, everything we know, all of our successes and our ventures, everything and all things, it all depends on God.

Luke 12:27-31 **God Is Faithful**

²⁷Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of

*little faith!*²⁹ *And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying.*³⁰ *For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.*³¹ *Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*

As birds depend on God for their birdseed, and lilies of the field for their garments, so each of us, either consciously or not, depends on our great good God. To live in anxiety and worry is useless, Jesus said, because if God has given us life, God will also give us with it the necessities for a worthy life. To worry about the body is useless because God, who gave us the body, will also provide the necessary things for sustaining a healthy body.

The origin of anxiety is not in the lack of things. Even in abundance, people are anxious. The origin of anxiety is the lack of faith that God will give us the things that we could need in the moment that we might need them.

Anxiety and worry begin when we want to become rich, when we want to have more than what we need to feed or clothe ourselves. Only one stomach we have, only one body. If we keep more food than we can eat, how are we going to prevent some of that from becoming spoiled and rotten? If we keep more clothing than we can reasonably wear, how are we going to keep those clothes from becoming old? The same thing happened with those who gathered more manna than they needed: they found “it bred worms and became foul” (Ex 16:20).

We will not live longer because we eat more. We will not be better people because we dress in silk. The human problem is not the length of the life span or the beauty we might reach. The human problem is lacking faith in God. The

faithless life is not worthy of being lived 5, 50 or 150 years. People like Leena have discovered this.

In the mind of the world, the more you keep, the more you have. As in the story of the monkey that could not take his hand out of the jar because his fist held the coin, we think we have more because we keep more. The teaching of Jesus is quite the opposite: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Lk 6:38).

The logic of the kingdom runs contrary to the logic of our world: The more you give, the more you have. As in the dialogue of Solomon with God (1Kings 3:5-14), if we ask from God the kingdom, God will give us with it all things. If like the monkey in the story we release the coin, we may have back our hand, and also the coin! Jim Elliot, the missionary to Ecuador who was killed in 1956, used to say, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Luke 12:32-34 **The Way of Generosity**

³²Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus taught that trusting God’s provision for us enables us to loosen our grasp on what we have and help others who have less.

The ultimate question is: Whose kingdom are we pursuing? According to Jesus, there are only two kingdoms to seek. We can either seek the kingdom of *Mammon* or the kingdom of God (Matt 6:33). When we strive for the kingdom of God, the problems of humanity find solution. Poverty would be history (www.makepovertyhistory.org), hunger would be no more (www.micahchallenge.org), crime and greed would disappear (www.purposedriven.com/en-US/PEACE/PEACE_Plan.htm), aid and help would suffice for all (visit www.bwanet.org/BWAid). All problems may not disappear immediately but, as in the case of Leena, we can make a difference.

God is not selfish. God is not insensitive. God not only “gives to all mortals life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25) but “gives to all generously and ungrudgingly” (Jas 1:5). God is generous and wants us to learn how to live with generosity. Jesus is the ultimate example of divine generosity, Paul said to the Corinthians: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Generosity, acceptance, hospitality, community; these—among others—are the values of God’s kingdom. Living by them is what people like Leena teach us by their example. Living by them is not optional for us if we want to reflect in our daily lives the character and the mighty acts of the One who called us “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pet 2:9).

This is the “logic” of Lent. Lent challenges us to change our values and realign our priorities according to the purposes of the kingdom of God. When we realign our priorities, change occurs—change that affects our families, our citizenship, our human relationships, our jobs, our preju-

ices, our finances, our possessions—every area of our lives.

It Starts with the Heart

According to Leena Lavanya, in order to begin helping someone in need, we do not need to be rich or devoid of all life’s anxieties but open to the lead of the Spirit when we see an opportunity.

“I was traveling on a bus in my home city, seated next to a woman I had not previously met,” she says. “I began witnessing to the woman about my faith in Jesus Christ and discovered she was a prostitute. In my eagerness I began to encourage the woman to leave her profession of prostitution and become a follower of Jesus, only to be confronted with her challenge to me to explain how she would support her son and family members if she did as I was suggesting. I had no ready answer. So my family members and I decided to give up our breakfast for three months and with the money we saved we purchased a sewing machine for the woman. We taught her to sew and gave her a way to earn a living.”

Later in Leena’s life came the Youth World Conference, later the calling to a life of ministry, much later any sort of worldly recognition. The beginning of Leena’s journey of faith and service was that moment when she yielded her tender heart to the voice of God telling her to do something for that poor South Indian woman. The beginning of generosity is a tender heart, full of sensitivity toward the needs of others, and ready to fill that need in the name of the Most High.

What can we do? Perhaps we could encourage a young person in our congregation or circle of friends to attend the

next Youth World Conference sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance, to be held in Leipzig, Germany in July 2008 (www.bwanet.org/Events/youthconference2008newpostcard.htm).

Perhaps we could also gather some funds to provide scholarships for a US and/or Third-World-country young person to be able to attend the conference. Perhaps even God will touch the life of this young person, and perhaps, just perhaps, we will see a new Leena among us, a new “Star Lighting Up the Sky,” a new demonstration of God’s eternal purpose of alleviating the suffering of “one of the least of these” (Matt 25:45).

Written by Dina Carro, member, Baptist World Alliance study and research executive committee; and Daniel Carro, professor of Divinity, John Leland Center, Arlington, VA

A BWAid Priority

The AIDS pandemic sweeping across the world affects individuals, their families, communities and countries. No part of the world is immune from this disaster, though rates of HIV prevalence are higher in many countries of the Third World, and Africa in particular.

Baptist World Aid has made the fight against HIV/AIDS a priority and has undertaken a new mapping initiative to compile a comprehensive database with information on what Baptists are doing in relation to HIV/AIDS around the world. This list is still in the initial stages but if you would like to see the information gathered thus far, or would like to submit a project for inclusion, please email BWAid (bwaid@bwanet.org).

Ask, Seek, Knock

**Texts: Psalm 125
Luke 11:5-13**

Theme: God surrounds us and gives us what we need.

Introduction

The 34-day war that began on July 12, 2006 in my country of Lebanon resulted in a disastrous humanitarian crisis. Over a quarter of the population was displaced, particularly—though not exclusively—Shiite Muslims from the south. Tens of thousands of vulnerable families took refuge in schools and churches in and around Beirut.

In times of crisis, religious identities fade away and Middle East principles of honor and hospitality take over. You do not turn away a person in need; not only is that a question of protecting your own honor, but you feel responsible for the honor of the needy person and cannot allow that they should live in a situation that places their human dignity at risk.

The Baptist community played a leading role in safeguarding Lebanese human dignity during that critical time. The Beirut Baptist School (BBS) opened its doors to about 760 refugees, and the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) hosted close to 100 others. Young and old from our churches volunteered to organize food and clothing, as well as children’s entertainment, and a large group gathered morning and evening each day for prayer and intercession at the seminary.

The wider Baptist family also stepped in with assistance. Several groups from Baptist churches in the US, on mission trips in Lebanon when the war broke out, spent long hours filling food packs, caring for the needy and praying with the community. A group of Hungarian Baptist doctors entered the country at great risk and brought much-needed medical care.

The level of solidarity that the Lebanese Baptists experienced from the worldwide Baptist family in reaching out to the victims of the summer war was quite incredible. What principles do we learn from the Bible about such hospitality, the safeguard of human dignity and trust?

As we move through this Lenten season, we hear both the voice of the world and that of the Word. The voice of the world calls us to fear and hatred and rejection, whereas the voice of the Word calls us to hospitality and trust in God. The world would convince us that we should seek to possess as much as we can to secure our own comfort, whereas the Word challenges us to ask, seek and knock in dignity and as honorable children of our faithful heavenly Father.

The Biblical Witness

Luke 11:5-7 Neighbors and Hospitality

⁵And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'."

One immediate picture that may come to mind for the modern reader of this parable is the scene of a TV sitcom. Which one of us has never had that neighbor who always comes to the door at the wrong hour, when the family is just about to gather around the dinner table, or when we are about to go to bed or step outside the door for an important appointment?

The characters of this parable that Jesus is narrating, however, should not be confused with that sort of comic setting. Not only were these two characters friends, but they were also Middle Eastern neighbors. There was already, as we say in my part of the world, "bread and salt" between them. They were bound by an unspoken code of honor and hospitality that is very powerful and important in the Middle East.

The setting of the parable is entirely hypothetical, as indicated by "suppose that" (v 5). Jesus' audience would have been able to identify with either character; they could be the needy character just as they could be the neighbor already in bed with his family. The sentence structure would have triggered two possible answers from the audience, both of them negative:

1. None of us would go to our neighbor at midnight, because it is unseemly to do so at such an hour; and
2. If our neighbor did knock on our door at the unseemly hour of midnight, none of us would turn them away because they would have to be quite desperate to come at such an hour!

The unspoken reality of this situation is that it was already hard enough for the needy neighbor to swallow his pride and come to his neighbor's door at such an hour. The second neighbor would have quickly understood that this is

about honor and hospitality, not about his friend being a leech of a neighbor!

Luke 11:8 **An All-Honorable Resolution**

8“I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.”

The power of the parable’s resolution in verse 8 belongs precisely in that very critical setting. The positive response of the neighbor is exactly what anyone in Jesus’ audience would have done in the same situation. Whether wholeheartedly or not, the Middle-Eastern hearers knew that there was no alternative solution to that crisis. The potential answer hypothetically laid out in verse 7, however, could well have been what the neighbor initially thought within himself as he heard the neighbor’s knock. But he could only have answered him rejecting his request *inwardly*, from within his mind, and never *loudly*, from within his house.

The Greek verb translated as “persistence” (v 8) can also mean “shameless” or “insolence.” This is the only occurrence of the verb in the New Testament, and I want to retain the sense of “shameless.” But in this case I believe it is more a loss of shame out of despair than out of insolence.

Remember that the needy neighbor opted for his friend’s door not for his own benefit and for the purpose of self-gratification, but because another friend (v 6) had taken him by surprise at that same unseemly hour. The poor man would have quickly evaluated the less shameful solution: feeling dishonored by failing in his hospitality toward an unexpected traveler, or taxing on the emotional bank ac-

count he had with his neighbor by saving face before the traveler. Many a Middle-Eastern host would have opted for that option as well, no doubt.

Notice also that the needy neighbor is not a beggar. He wishes to emphasize this explicitly by asking his friend and neighbor to “lend me three loaves of bread” (v 5), not “give me.” Of course none of the two neighbors would have expected that the three loaves would later be replaced. This is just a “saving face” expression as well.

Persistence or shamelessness, therefore, indicates that the situation’s challenge to the man’s dignity was such that he found it less shameful to go to his neighbor and friend—for whom he would no doubt have occasion to make it up in the future—than to fail in being hospitable toward his traveling friend. Persistence here may not even necessarily mean—indeed is unlikely to mean—that he knocked and asked many times. Rather, the mere fact that he actually dared to expose his own pride and come and knock at that hour would have communicated to his neighbor-friend that he was in desperate need and had no other choice if he was to fulfill his duties of hospitality.

Luke 11:9-13 **God the Faithful Parent to Honorable Children**

9“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

*10*For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. *11*Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? *12*Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? *13*If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your

children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

The previous background analysis is very important to understand the full implication of Jesus’ transposition of this story to his first-century audience—and to all of his followers in every age—in their relationship with God as parent. Note that in Luke’s account, the audience of Jesus is his disciples. The preceding context describes the disciples as coming to Jesus in his prayers and asking him to teach them how to pray, “as John taught his disciples” (v 1). After teaching them what has become known as The Lord’s Prayer (vv 2-4), Jesus goes on to tell them the present story. The immediate question that comes to mind when Jesus’ disciples in every age hear the words of verses 9-13 is: Is Jesus saying that God will respond to *all and any* of our requests, whatever they are?

If the needy neighbor is like the intrusive neighbor of a sitcom, then we may understand this to be the implication. But how disappointed we will be when God does not respond to our request for a brand new red Ferrari! It is clear, however, that the needy neighbor’s request was culturally appropriate. If he were coming with a request to fulfill some personal whim, or simply because he suddenly felt a little hungry in the middle of the night, then probably his friend would have feigned not to have heard the door knock, or if he had responded positively, he would have done so grudgingly and just to avoid appearing stingy.

But it is clear that his neighbor was not being whimsical. His request did not come from a self-centered need but from a sudden need arising from the arrival of an unexpected traveler toward whom hospitality and care was a duty.

I believe that this is what Jesus is teaching in this story: God is a faithful parent who will not fail in caring for God’s children, but God also expects us to be honorable children whose requests are not whimsical. In addition, just as God expects us to offer hospitality and care to the stranger and needy, God will not fail us when we request help in doing so. Note, too, that what is being asked for here specifically is the Holy Spirit (v 13): the symbol of a most-honorable request.

Matthew 7:7-11 Entrusting Pearls and Holy Things

Consider a few comments on the parallel account found Matthew 7:7-11. The wording of “ask, search and knock” is almost the same in both Luke and Matthew. But there has historically been a lot of mystery attached to the immediately preceding verse 6: “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”

Most commentators, in puzzlement, have attached that verse to the preceding context, or simply viewed it as a self-standing statement. I believe that it belongs to the ensuing context, the teaching of Jesus about prayer with which we are presently dealing.

In Matthew’s narrative, the audience of Jesus was general, not just his disciples. Many in the Jewish population had put their trust in their religious leaders and were often disappointed. Jesus was telling them that, to God, his people’s needs and doubts were like pearls and holy things. If they entrusted them to “dogs” and “swine”—people unworthy of their trust—they would only be harmed and trampled upon as a result.

This too belongs to Jesus' teaching about prayer and need. Some "asking" can turn out to be dangerous if we ask the wrong person or unworthy authority. This leads us to the passage from the Psalms, which is precisely about trust.

Psalm 125:1-2 Whom Do You Trust?

¹Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. ²As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on and forevermore.

This Psalm is addressed to the faithful, the "righteous." Many people put their trust in the wrong place. But only those who trust in the Lord will remain unshaken (v 1). God surrounds the righteous with God's protection as firmly and unshakably as the mountains that surround Jerusalem (v 2). The God described in such terms here is without any doubt the same parent described in the teaching of Jesus in Luke 11 and its parallel in Matthew. The Bible over and over calls us to beware and learn where and with whom to put our trust so that we will not be disappointed.

Psalm 125:3 Even the Righteous Can Fall

³For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong.

Verse 3 has a construct that is quite unique in the Old Testament. A "scepter" is usually a symbol of rule and most occurrences of the word in the Old Testament are quite straightforward in meaning, namely referring to the rule of a political power. The present occurrence seems to allow for

two possible meanings. The first is that God, as subject of the verb, is the protector of the righteous, who will not allow them to fall under the (political) rule of an evil power.

The second possible meaning has the addressees as subject of the verb and is a warning command about allowing the "scepter of wickedness" to rule over one's self. The Hebrew language only has two verb tenses: the perfect tense for completed past actions or the imperfect tense for actions not yet completed. The imperfect tense, which is used here, can be translated either as a future indicative, implying that God will not allow for the "scepter of wickedness" to rule over his people; or as an imperative command, in the sense that "you shall not allow for the scepter of wickedness to rule over you."

The latter part of verse 3 seems to indicate that this second meaning is closer to the intended one. What seems to be intended by the words "so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong," is moral rule rather than political rule. Of course in the original setting of the Psalm, a wicked political rule could have led to the incursion of moral wickedness among God's people, such as idol worship and other abhorred practices. But the command to the righteous not to allow for the "scepter of wickedness" to rule over them seems to carry strong symbolic implications that are also very meaningful for us in every age.

We learn from this third verse that, even though God is the protector of the righteous, the righteous are nevertheless not sheltered from fault if they allow for "scepters of wickedness" to rule over them. I am inviting you to understand "scepters of wickedness" here as symbols of power and authority, which we often allow to take control of our lives.

These symbols of power may be inherently good or bad. They may be as harmless as a job, family relationships, friendships, or even marriage. Or they may be as harmful as addictions, pornography, immorality or lie. The inherent moral value of a *scepter* is not actually relevant. A *scepter*, as a symbol of power, remains in a position of authority, whether inherently good or bad. The point is: what are the symbols of power that we have allowed and continuously allow to take control and replace God's authority in our lives?

Psalm 125:4-5 **We Reap What We Sow**

⁴Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts. ⁵But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways the LORD will lead away with evildoers. Peace be upon Israel!

Remember that the main characters addressed in this Psalm are “the righteous.” This is important, for those who consider themselves to be righteous often reach a level of arrogance to where they feel that they are untouchable. As Baptists, we consider ourselves to be made righteous before God through Jesus. And we rightly believe so, for this is what the New Testament teaches. However, we also do well to take a time-out in our lives every now and again and examine where we have taken God's grace for granted and where we have allowed for “scepters of wickedness” to take control of our lives.

This is what Lent is all about. I hope that as “Reformed Christians” we will never revert to a point where we practice the Lent season as a duty and meaninglessly give up this or that habit in the hope to please God and acquire a greater

degree of self-righteousness. What we are called to do is to reexamine the lines of authority in our lives.

Verses 4-5 stand as a warning for us. As we can see in the religious rulers of Jesus' day, many who saw themselves as children of Abraham thought that their righteousness was immovable, an unshakable guarantee that they were safe. Yet Psalm 125 reminds us that “those who turn aside to their own crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers” (v 5). And those people are the same righteous people from verse 3, the same who had put their trust in the Lord in verse 1, the same “his people,” whom God protected as their fortress in verse 2.

Worthy of Trust

God has presently entrusted me with heavy responsibility as academic dean at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon. The burden of responsibility is real, because the spiritual, character, practical and intellectual formation of dozens of future leaders in God's kingdom in the Middle East and North Africa has been entrusted to the team I work with.

Are we worthy of the trust that these young men and women, as well as God, have put in us? Where do these students go with their needs, spiritual and intellectual? How often are we like pigs and dogs that turn around and trample what is most precious to them, their questions and doubts and needs?

What about those who are church ministers and leaders among us? Are we constantly aware of the implications of these responsibilities God has entrusted to us? Or do we faithfully teach our people that neither do we have the right to be scepters of authority and rule in their lives? Do we

continuously point them to the Father, the faithful, honorable and hospitable neighbor and friend who will neither turn them away nor ever possibly squander their pearls and what they consider most holy?

And to all of us during this Lenten season: How serious are we about dislodging the “scepters of wickedness,” or simply the scepters of authority apart from God, from our lives? Or do we feel safe in our self-righteous status as children of God? And when we finally repent and become convinced that all scepters but God’s have no place in our lives, where and to whom will we go with these most holy things, with these “pearls of ours”?

Psalm 125 and Luke 11 both invite us to come to the Only One who is worthy of our trust, the One who understands what it means to be honorable and hospitable better than anyone else, the One who will safeguard our dignity if we know how to be self-respecting and trustworthy children as well.

Written by Martin Accad, academic dean, Arab Baptist Theological Seminary and director, Institute of Middle East Studies, Mansourieh, Maten, Lebanon

“Christian concern for justice is not from a political motivation or a desire for one political party to dominate another. It is the prophetic prayer and demand of the Bible: ‘What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’ (Micah 6:8) As Baptists we must never forget this prophetic aspect of the Christian life. If in preaching the Gospel we neglect God’s concern for the poor and for justice, then we are not preaching the whole Gospel, but rather a heretical gospel. Jesus calls us to be peace-makers and to work for justice.”

—Denton Lotz, General Secretary, Baptist World Alliance

Shout for Joy!

**Texts: Psalm 126
Luke 12:13-21**

Theme: God is the source of our hope.

Introduction

In 1999 I took something of a summer “Lenten journey.” I traveled to Dresden, Germany to participate in the annual meetings of the Baptist World Alliance. Between meetings I walked for miles around that rebuilding Baroque city. In February, 1945, Dresden was firebombed, killing between 35,000 and 135,000 people, most of them women, children and elderly refugees in this non-military center.

The more I walked and thought of our corporate and personal sin, the weaker I felt. Yet, the weaker I felt, the closer to Christ I felt. When I was weak, he was an even stronger presence. And, much to my surprise, joy—worship joy—appeared.

The BWA meeting climaxed when several hundred of us shared an incredibly joyful worship service one night in the basement of the rebuilding Lutheran Frauenkirche. Its chancel would not be ready for worship for a few more years, so we walked through the smoke-stained rubble into the basement.

We met directly beneath where the great dome had collapsed during the firestorm. We met there, German and

British and American, Russian and Czech and Romanian, Albanian and Serbian, Hutu and Tutsi, Palestinian and Jew, Chinese and Australian. And in the underbelly of a bombed out cathedral, we had communion. We came to the cross. For where else could we come? And there, at the cross, we found joy, worship, community, generosity and peace. It was a Lenten journey.

Some of the Psalms of Ascent (120-134), used by Jewish pilgrims on their journeys to the Temple, have been biblical mile markers on our Lenten Bible study journey this season. Today our theme is Joy, for there is indeed joy in the journey, even the journey to the cross. Our Suffering Servant was empowered in his journey to the cross by “the joy that was set before” (Heb 12:2). And we, too, can be!

The Biblical Witness

Today two texts teach us that joy is far different than merriment. Joy is like a Temple worshiper whose long ascent is celebrated with a song that remembers when the holy place was rubble (like Dresden’s Frauenkirche). Merriment is like a rich, selfish farmer who “makes merry” with his own soul (while the poor go hungry), and then quickly loses even his soul. Joy endures suffering and shares resources. Merriment is fleeting, delusional and self-serving.

Joy comes through a Lenten journey. Perhaps we may find it today as we study these two passages. They share common themes: agriculture; reversals; the vulnerability of life and possessions; and contexts of Lenten-like journeying. But most importantly, these passages contrast for us joy and merriment, gratitude and greed, bringing the sheaves and hording the sheaves, authentic life as worship and inauthentic life as practical atheism.

Psalm 126:1-3

Divine Restoration Results in Joyful Worship

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. ²Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” ³The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

This Psalm of Ascent begins by calling up sacred memories of the restoring work of the Lord. Most interpreters assume this refers back to the return of the exiles from Babylon and perhaps particularly the rebuilding of the Temple and the resumption of worship. We cannot be certain from the text that this is the sacred memory, but it certainly seems to fit.

In exile the musicians had hung their harps in the willows by the waters of Babylon and stopped singing the Lord’s song (Ps 137). But now, following God’s deliverance and restoration, laughter and joy fill tongue and mouth. (It must have felt like worshiping in the basement of the Dresden Frauenkirche felt to me, or, better yet, like it did to the worshippers when that rebuilt church was reconsecrated in October 2005.)

Psalm 126 is sung as worshippers flood into the Temple. It is dream-like. Even the other nations can see what the Lord has done. In ancient days, captive nations were virtually never returned to their lands. Temples stayed rubble, harps rotted in willow trees and songs were lost. But joy has won out! “The Lord has done great things” (v 2) and “restored the fortunes of Zion!” (v 1).

Psalm 126:4-6 **God's Past Restoration Enables Us to Live in Hope**

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. ⁵May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. ⁶Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

The language and theme of restoration continue in verses 4-6, and an agricultural proverb is introduced to illustrate the power of joy to emerge from sorrow. Things have regressed from the earlier fortunes of a post-exilic type restoration. But sacred memory enables the journeyer to live in hope that the Lord will restore once again the fortunes of Zion.

Verse 4 is a prayer that restoration will come to the parched lives of the journeyers like rushing streams come after rains to the dry wadis of the Negeb region of Israel. How quickly and powerfully God can restore our fortunes! Journeyers are sustained with the resources of prayer, memory and hope. The mighty acts of God never end. Streams come to the desert, joy returns to the Temple, resurrection follows crucifixion and renewal follows dryness.

To illustrate, the psalmist quoted a popular ancient proverb about sowing and reaping. This is a favorite sermon text at evangelism conferences, for it guarantees a harvest when our hearts are broken over others. All Lenten journeyers should learn that the more we move out of ourselves, the further down the road to the cross we are. The more we weep over the souls of others, the more authentic our lives will be. The more we weep over the rubble of poverty and injustice, the closer we are to worshipful, biblical joy.

Ancient biology believed that the seed actually died, giving up its life to the new sprout (Jn 12:24; 1 Cor 15:36). So sowing was a kind of burial that was accompanied in some ancient cultures by grief rituals. But even such “sowing in tears” anticipated the resurrection-like harvest of bounty and joy. As the nineteenth century hymnist/psalmist paraphrased it: “We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.” But such rejoicing and harvest come only after self-surrender, crucifixion, death and burial.

Luke 12:13-15 **Jesus Does Not Value Life Based on Wealth**

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Luke used Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem (9:51—19:41) as a major literary device: discipleship is a journey to the cross that totally reorients our lives. Lent is central to discipleship. Our Lenten journey now takes us to one of Luke’s “road to Jerusalem” parables—a parable that exposes inauthentic life.

This is not a typical “parable of the kingdom of God.” It is more about the “kingdom of thingdom.” It is not addressed to the disciples but to the “crowd”: a word for all (non-believers, businesses, nations, etc.), not just “church people.” The parable was triggered by a man’s misguided effort to have Jesus prod his brother to divide their inheritance. Apparently there had been a death and burial, but

unlike in Psalm 126, this man had no sacred memories, no self-sacrifice, no hope. All he had was greed, the “sin of the clutching hand” (as greed is often painted). He was not seeking justice, he was furthering greed, and Jesus would be no party to it.

Greed often tries to speak the language of justice. But the word of Jesus, like a sharp two-edged sword, cuts through the joint and separates the sin of the clutching hand from the truth. And the truth is that earthly life is not to be valued by what is held in the hand, the bank or the brokerage firm. It is to be valued by what is given away.

Luke 12:16-21

Life: Valued by What You Give Away

¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

The rich man of this parable obviously had not spent much time with Psalm 126. Oh, he knew something about sowing and reaping, but not about weeping and rejoicing. He was already wealthy, but barns are never big enough for farmers who do not know Psalm 126. This rich fool had no sacred memories: he only thought ahead about the many years of merriment he would enjoy. He had no joyful worship: Why

didn't he “come rejoicing, bringing in his sheaves” to the Temple?

This foolish man had no sense of community. His life was like his speech, a soliloquy. Psalm 126 speaks of “our” and “we;” this fool spoke of “I” and “my.” How he needed Psalm 126! He had already arrived, so he thought, and had no need of “Psalms of Ascent” or Lenten journeys. How he needed the joy of the journey and the joy of worship, instead of his cheap, secular imitations—gluttony, drunkenness and merriment. He, like the man who asked Jesus to divide his inheritance, needed to have his greedy, clutching hands pried loose from his barns, crops and land.

The rich fool's soliloquy was interrupted by God—the only time in any parable God actually speaks, so pay close attention! God called him a “fool,” because he had lived the life of a practical atheist (Ps 14:1). Then God said, “This very night *they* demand your soul!” (v 21, Amplified Bible).

“They” could be a rabbinic euphemism for the holy name of God, but there is no indication that God was “killing” this man for his foolishness. Or, “they” could be speaking of the death angels. But “they” could also mean the possessions themselves: These possessions have so possessed the fool that they will kill him. Greed, the sin of the clutching hand, has a death grip!

This is a parable about sharing the bounty that God gives us. It is about “bringing in the sheaves” to the poor as an act of joyful worship of God. Bountiful harvests were considered in Judaism to be special blessings from God to be shared with the poor. “Treasure in heaven” (the opposite of “treasures for themselves,” v 21) and being “rich toward God” (v 21) are Jewish euphemisms for charitable

almsgiving. This man's foolishness was not just his greedy clutching of his goods; it was also his failure to bring his sheaves to the poor of the land.

Justice-Making Joy

I was overjoyed to be present at the 2004 BWA meeting in Seoul, South Korea when the General Council adopted a resolution supporting the Micah Challenge (named after the Old Testament prophet). It was a Psalm 126 worship experience to me, a movement toward the kind of "being rich toward God" that Jesus was talking about in Luke 12.

The Micah Challenge, an effort to cut global poverty in half by 2015, is receiving major emphasis by the BWA and many of its constituents. "Christians everywhere must be agents of hope for and with the poor, and to work with others to hold our national and global leaders accountable in securing a more just and merciful world," said the 2004 resolution.

The statement called on nations "to take seriously the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations in the desire to halve current levels of world poverty by 2015 and upon the richest nations to take urgent action to ensure that at least 0.7 percent of the national GNP is used to this end."

These are the goals:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, by cutting in half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and live on less than one dollar a day.
- Achieve universal primary education, ensuring that boys and girls alike have access to school.

- Promote gender equality and empower women, by improving female education, employment and leadership opportunities.
- Reduce child mortality, including immunization against measles.
- Improve maternal health, by increasing the numbers of births attended by skilled health personnel.
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, halting and beginning to reverse their spread by 2015.
- Ensure environmental sustainability, by building principles of sustainable development into government policies and programs, increasing access to safe drinking water and improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.
- Develop a global partnership for development, including reduction of national debt.

The Micah Project provides a wonderful application of the Lenten journey themes of these two passages. It calls us away from greed and toward the generous sharing of our bountiful harvests. It calls us away from isolationism and toward global community. It calls us away from a rich, foolish, frivolous merriment that squanders resources and toward a sacrificial, memory-filled, justice-making joy that brings the sheaves from full barns to empty stomachs. It calls us from death to hope.

May our Lenten journey bring us to the cross. And may we be so empowered by the joyful Christ who is set before us that we, too, will pause on the Lenten journey just to shout for joy!

Written by Craig A. Sherouse, senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Griffin, GA

Invite the Poor

**Texts: Psalm 127
Luke 14:7-14**

**Theme: Discipleship fosters humility,
practices generosity and welcomes the
poor.**

Introduction

My grandparents' farm in Somerset, England, was a great gathering place in the 1950s as family members and friends returned each summer for the harvest. From an early age, the children of the family were on top of the wagons stacking bales of hay, and we were not very old when we took our turn driving the tractor.

While my uncles did the heavy work, we cousins did what we could to help with this annual ritual. The highlight of the day was the arrival of my grandmother, mother and other women who brought lunch in large wicker baskets. The feast was spread before us and everyone gathered at the table to eat.

Even in the austere postwar days of the 1950s, food always seemed to magically appear, especially for those in the country! Grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins, farm workers and day laborers; all sat at the same table and ate the same food. No one had a special place, and all were fed.

Years later I made my first visit to North Korea for Baptist World Aid, the relief and development arm of the Baptist World Alliance. Here things were very different. After the drought, and then the flood, compounded by poor government, we sat at tables of food in the hotel for westerners, while outside, mothers groveled in the dirt to scratch up any weed or root to feed their children.

Then there were the mothers in Rwanda, desperately trying to feed their babies from empty breasts; or taking the remaining fruit from a tree, squeezing out what little juice there was and carefully dripping it into their children's mouths. Looking into the eyes of those children, I knew that they would be dead within hours.

As Christian disciples we are called to care for and be concerned about the poor. Jesus had a special sense of mission to the poor and oppressed. The Gospels show that Jesus repeatedly reached out to the poor, women, Samaritans, lepers, children, prostitutes and tax collectors.

We are called as disciples to follow his example by being humble, generous and welcoming to the poor. Poverty is massive and seems overwhelming, but we can do something about it. During this Lenten season, allow the wisdom of the psalmist and the teachings of Jesus to challenge you not only to help and care for the sick and the poor but also seek them out and invite them to join you at God's table.

The Biblical Witness

**Psalm 127:1-2
Help with the House**

¹Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps

watch in vain. ²It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Shelter is one of life's basic needs, and God has always been concerned about it and every other aspect of our lives. The psalmist reminds us that we are totally dependent upon God for everything, and God cares about even the most routine matters of life.

His reference to the necessity of God's involvement in building a house holds true on every level of "house-building," from the physical construction of a shelter to the establishment of a family and even to the building of a community, dynasty or a nation. All activities associated with these are "vain" (v 1) unless God is involved.

The psalmist recognized that building a physical structure, establishing a family and creating a community or a nation all involve a lot of work, which is often accompanied by worry and anxiety. That is needless, the psalmist said, for the Lord "gives sleep to his beloved" (v 2).

Life is so hectic today and lived at such a frantic pace. Perhaps this has always been the case. Certainly there was not the concern in Solomon's day about spam in our emails, the 45-minute commute or long and tedious meetings at church!

Many people work all the hours God gives and would do more if they could, all to provide food and shelter for their families. Anxiety, depression and other stress-related issues can easily overwhelm both "the haves" and "the have nots."

How good to realize that we can look to the Lord to guard and protect us. Yet many in our world today know nothing of God's love and care and have nowhere to turn for help in

meeting needs created by poverty, natural disaster, injustice and other situations beyond their control. God expects those of us with more than we need to practice generosity toward those who have less than they need.

Baptist World Aid (BWAid) has helped to build and rebuild a number of houses following the Asian tsunami, Pakistan and Indonesian earthquakes and Hurricane Katrina. Many of these people rightly see their new homes as a gift from God.

BWAid and other Baptist groups have accepted the challenge to Blitz Build 12 houses in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in April and May 2007. Working with Habitat for Humanity, over 300 Baptist volunteers will be the arms, legs and hands of Jesus in ensuring that these homes are not built in vain. For God cares for the routine and mundane, and turns it to a spiritual experience.

Psalm 127:3-5 Divine Economics

³Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. ⁴Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. ⁵Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Understanding the psalmist's reference to building a "house" in verses 1-2 to mean establishing a family or a community of some kind, we can move easily to his next thoughts in verses 3-5. All of the activities he mentions are necessary and ordinary life occurrences, and God wants to be a part of them. We should, in fact, view all of these things in relation to God. Anything we try to do apart from God's involvement is, in the end, void of meaning.

While Hebrew scripture rightfully declares that children are “a heritage from the Lord,” (v 3), some Christians today wrongly interpret this passage and insist that truly “biblical” families will have as many children as possible. Children and wives in Hebrew culture were a man’s property and were considered primarily an economic blessing. In an agricultural society, many children meant extra hands to work the fields and assured the parent he would be cared for in his old age.

The birth of a son, specifically, is still a cause of great rejoicing by both the mother and the father in many parts of the world today. I remember an Indian pastor asking me about my children. “I have two sons,” I replied.

“Oh, you are very lucky,” he said. No dowries to be paid, the family line would be continued, and the sons and their families would take on more and more work and serve as an insurance policy for the future.

However, not every man has “his quiver full of them.” Not everyone is able to have children, and many childless couples have been hurt by the emphasis put by some on the need for evangelical Christians to multiply. My quiver has not been full, but we give thanks to God that we were able to adopt two sons.

What a dilemma for many in our world today! Should they have more children than they can feed and support? With HIV/Aids at pandemic level, many families take in the children of infected and affected family and friends. How can they afford the cost of food, clothing, shelter and education?

Children truly are a heritage and a reward, yet they are also a responsibility, one we must all assume. Each is a child of God, and therefore a brother or sister to each of us. Many have parents who want for them everything we want for our

own children but who are unable to provide adequately for them. Genuine discipleship demands that we seek out and help care for these children and their parents.

In God’s economy, each person has inestimable value determined not from the esteem or recognition others give but from God’s acceptance of each of us.

Luke 14:7-11 **Preferred Seating**

7When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place,” and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Have you ever felt embarrassed about being in the wrong seat? As a child I was taken to the Parliament in London and was shown the seat where Winston Churchill sat when attending. I couldn’t resist it and had to sit in the great man’s place. “Stand up,” shouted the guide. I sprang to my feet. I was in the wrong place!

Just as we often do today, people in Jesus’ day noticed things in social settings that led them to conclusions about other people—where people sat, whom they ate with, whether they performed certain hygienic practices before

eating. Then as now, these things helped determine a person's social standing. And then as now, Jesus called for an opposite—and a better—way.

Jesus was so good at observing a situation and commenting on it in parable form. It would have been so easy for him to reprimand the situation he had just witnessed, but no, he knew that people learn in different ways.

Help us to remember that simple lesson!

This parable tells us not to take the place of honor, as someone more important than we may come along. If we are in the place of honor, there is only one way—down. If we are sitting at the end of the table, there is only one way to go—up! By being humble, we could end up in a more privileged place!

Then Jesus spelled things out. Our Christian community turns customs and expectations upside down. This is why many Baptists around the world are putting others first, and so caring for the hungry and the poor before looking after themselves. Or are they?

Do we see hunger as something that happens in our world only at our Harvest and Thanksgiving times, when we tend to take up special offerings to help the hungry? People are hungry 365/7/24: 365 days of the year, 7 days a week and 24 hours a day. BWAid needs to be able to respond 365 days a year, and this is why we want you to help us on a regular basis.

Take time to look at the causes of hunger in our world and what you can do to help by visiting www.micahchallenge.org or www.bread.org.

Luke 14:12-14 **Check Your Guest List**

¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.

¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Whereas Jesus' earlier comments were directed to guests, these are directed to the host. Again, he turns social customs and expectations upside down by telling the host not to invite precisely the kinds of people one would expect him to invite—those whose presence could serve him well—friends, relatives and rich neighbors (v 12).

But Jesus didn't stop there. He also specified those the host should invite: "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" (v 13), those who clearly had nothing to offer the host in return.

What a contrast! Yet the life of discipleship is often marked by just such contrasts, and that, Jesus said, results in God's blessings.

Jesus called his followers then and now to create an inclusive human community, to assist the poorest of the poor by inviting them to be fed from the physical and spiritual banquet on offer.

We are called as Christian disciples to show and foster humility, practice generosity and welcome the poor.

A Banquet for All

Following the Rwandan genocide in 1994, many men were slaughtered in the ethnic cleansing that took place. When the women and children were able to return to their communities, they needed help in repairing their homes. BWAid, working through the Baptist Union, distributed tools so that the land could be cultivated and seeds so that the people would eventually be able to feed themselves and their families.

After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, much of the food distribution infrastructure broke down and many were hungry. Baptist leaders there had never been confronted with anything like this. The State had always taken care of the physical needs, while church leaders tried to meet spiritual needs. Now, many leaders had become recipients of food from the West and worked to distribute it to those most in need in their communities.

Our European Baptist colleagues packed family food parcels, full of essential supplies. A small label gave the address of the European Baptist Federation. It wasn't long before a radio station in Bulgaria called the EBF in Germany and asked, "Why are you sending us food? Why are you helping us? What have we done to deserve this?"

What a joy it was for our aid workers to be able to explain that they were simply sharing God's love, as all are invited to the banquet!

In recent months in Eastern Africa, floods have followed drought, and people have moved from hunger to starvation. Baptist leaders are asking BWAid for help as they seek to serve "the least of these."

As it has done for nearly 90 years, BWAid continues today to care for those in need, working through the indigenous Baptist leadership and irrespective of color creed, race or religion.

BWA's commitment reflects Jesus' response to the poor of his day. Jesus reached out and touched those who had leprosy. He affirmed women, even those who were "immoral" or ostracized, like the woman at the well and the woman who suffered from hemorrhaging.

Just as it did for Jesus, caring for those on the margins will create controversy for us and will draw criticism. Is the church today more committed to remaining "respectable" rather than faithful to the gospel?

With your Christian discipleship, humility and generosity, you can make a difference. You can invite the poor to the banquet!

Written by Paul Montacute, director, Baptist World Aid, Baptist World Alliance, Falls Church, VA

Hunger Relief

Hunger continues to be one of the greatest problems facing our world today. Natural disasters and man-made catastrophes have a devastating effect on food production. BWAid not only feeds the hungry but also looks at some of the causes of hunger and seeks to alleviate them.

Depend on God

**Texts: Psalm 130
Luke 23:44-49**

Theme: God saves and redeems us.

Introduction

My pastor and I, along with our wives, were blessed to attend the 1980 Baptist World Alliance Congress in Los Angeles, California. I especially wanted this to be a meaningful experience for my pastor. He was not denominationally inclined, and I wanted him to know more about what Baptists were doing.

Things went well during the first two days. The morning speaker on the third day was someone sure to inspire. Just as he began his message, I heard talking behind us. Hoping it would go away, I tried to focus on the service. The talking continued. We were all annoyed by it.

Finally, I could take no more and turned around to eye the “offender.” Then I recognized a BWA friend, George Boltnew. George was seated with four Russian pastors who were given special permission to leave Russia to attend the BWA. These men could not speak English and did not know what was going on, so George was translating for them. This translation ministry allowed them to be participants rather than confused observers.

My anger and annoyance ceased. I explained the situation to my guests. I began privately to thank God that our

brothers from Russia were allowed to leave the Iron Curtain and come to an international meeting, even though they were being observed by secret police.

I remembered an earlier General Council meeting in Berlin, Germany. Communist Rule would not allow the Christians in East Berlin to come to the meeting in West Berlin. A bus load of us were given special permission to worship and meet them for a couple of hours.

God has saved and redeemed God’s people. Now the wall is down. Believers from countries once dominated by the Soviet Union are now free to come and go as they please. We from the West are free to visit their countries and churches.

In Christ, we have discovered and do proclaim our oneness in him. Thanks be to God for redemptive grace!

The Biblical Witness

As one of the church’s seven penitential psalms, Psalm 130 is especially appropriate for Holy Week with its references to the depths to which our sins take us and the forgiveness God provides. Its references to waiting for the Lord remind us of the time between Good Friday and Easter morning, when we wait to celebrate God’s victory. Its strong themes of hope and redemption point to Jesus’ ultimate work of salvation, carefully preserved for us by Luke and the other gospel writers.

Baptists have traditionally placed great emphasis on the experience of personal salvation. Lent and Holy Week call us to revisit the cross in order to remember the depths of God’s love and the way we should live, following Jesus not only by verbally confessing our faith but also by devoting ourselves daily to obedient discipleship.

Psalm 130:1-4 **Out of the Depths**

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. ²Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! ³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? ⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

The psalmist does not tell us the life situation that placed him in the “depths.” Our imaginations run the gamut of severe personal sickness, family crises, natural catastrophes, assaults from enemies and other kinds of depressions.

When one is in the “depths,” life seems at its worst. Blue skies seem black. Things that often gave comfort fail. Food seems tasteless. Music becomes noise. The words of friends or loved ones are of no solace. Sometimes people want to drop out of life because of the “depths.” The famed blues singer B.B. King has a line about “being so far down you have to look up to see the bottom.”

The psalmist knew what to do when he was in the depths. He prayed. “Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” (v 2).

Often it is our deliberate turning away from God that leads us to “the depths” of despair, yet the psalmist reminds us that nothing we do can place us beyond the reach of God’s mercy, forgiveness and redemption.

In trouble, even the worst of us have a sense of God. Even those who have disrespected God cry out, “Lord, have mercy!” It is good to know that we can call upon God when we are in the depths. God even hears those who have lived

shamefully. God is a forgiving God. Knowing the frailty of the human heart, God forgives and offers us another chance.

Psalm 130:5-8 **Live in Expectation**

⁵I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ⁶my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. ⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. ⁸It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

In Hebrew thought, “wait” did not always mean idleness. It also meant serving. Both the idea of patience and service are in these verses. Patiently, the psalmist waited to see what God would do next in response to his plea.

There are times when we must slow our anxiety level and wait. Our waiting is with expectancy. We feel assured that God will do something, so we wait for God to act. But like the watchman who was the sentinel for the sleeping city, while we wait for the morning light so that we can see clearly, we are still serving. No watchman on the ancient city walls would abandon his post. The darkness of the night, the fierceness of the cold, the fear of the enemy did not matter. Daylight would relieve some of his fears, but he kept watch until daylight came. Our human anxieties may be relieved if we keep active in serving God while we wait for deliverance.

The life of faith involves waiting on God and trusting in God’s Word. When we wait for God and are delivered, we have a testimony.

Luke 23:44-49 When Jesus Faced the Depths

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." ⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

We might be tempted to think that because Jesus was the Son of God, he had no down times, no depression, no frustrations, no "depths" of despair. The fact that he did is evidenced by the amount of time he spent in prayer.

Prayer was not a "crutch" for Jesus. He prayed often because it was fellowship time with God. He needed God's affirmation that what he was doing was in God's will. Sometimes he needed just to vent his frustrations with humanity to one he could trust. Jesus depended on God to renew his courage, bolster his strength and affirm his mission, even and especially in the last moments of his life on earth.

Especially as he was going through the final phase of his sacrifice, Jesus depended on God. Who else could he turn to? The disciples had abandoned him in fear for their lives. Only a few believers, including some of the women, stood in viewing distance. But they could not help. Jesus had to depend on God.

Luke describes a terrible scene at the cross. At 12 noon, darkness covered the land for the next three hours. The sun stopped shining. What an eerie setting!

Three men tortured on crosses. The agony of their screams of pain pierced the darkness. The Gospel of Matthew 27:45-53 describes an earthquake. It shook the earth, split rocks, busted open tombs. The dead got up and walked around the city of Jerusalem. That almost sounds like a science fiction movie, but it was a manifestation of God's judgment on sin, and actions for our redemption.

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," Jesus said (v 46), expressing his total dependence on God. His humanity was seen in both his death and his "last testament." He entrusted all that he had to God.

While Jesus was confident in God's plan and his role in it, he expressed feelings of abandonment and aloneness (see Matt 27:46; Mk 15:34). We, too, at times feel abandoned and alone in the walk of faith. Discipleship often calls us to make choices that may remove us from the familiar and comfortable.

Jesus' crucifixion represented for many people the death of hope and the birth of despair. But as surely as Jesus trusted God in life and death, so may we confidently trust God, even in the "depths," in life and in death.

According to Matthew's account, the centurion in charge of the crucifixion had a conversion experience at the cross. "Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" (Matt 27:54). The afternoon's drama convinced him that Jesus was who he claimed to be. He be-

came a believer. Believers ought to have changed lives. One wonders what his life was like after the Calvary experience.

God Is Faithful, All the Time

When one of the major contributors to the BWA withdrew its support in 2003, some wondered how we would survive. Voices from within the organization reminded us that when we stand for right, God will not abandon God's people. Some voices came from places of extreme poverty and political difficulty.

Time has proven them to be right. God did not abandon the BWA, but instead showed favor. God moved on the hearts of individuals and churches to give more than they did before. New supporters stepped up to our aid. We more than covered our loss.

You can depend on God!

Written by Emmanuel McCall, vice president, Baptist World Alliance, Atlanta, GA

“Precisely because we have a vision of ‘A new heaven and new earth’ (Rev 21:1), Christians can and should be involved in the tragedies and conflicts that confront the people of the world. Because of our vision and the Kingdom of God, we can be involved in society. We realize that we cannot bring in the kingdom, but as followers of the King of kings we ought to be involved in this world and work for solutions of justice for humanity.”
—Denton Lotz, General Secretary, Baptist World Alliance

Come, Bless the Lord

**Texts: Psalm 134
Luke 24:1-12**

Theme: Easter invites us to see God's love in action and follow it.

Introduction

How does it feel to live in the murky world of cold streets and back-door rooms of bars and motels, hidden in brothels or imprisoned in closets of unknown places, let out only “to serve” another client?

This is the world of a multitude of women around the globe who are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, abuse, fear and hopelessness. Either by desperate choice or trafficked by others for personal gain, these women are victims of modern-day slavery. They are prostitutes, treated as mere flesh and with disgust almost everywhere.

How does it feel to find that your only worth is as a personless object of degrading lust; a means to someone's uncontrollable, and most of the time violent, sexual desires?

In a recently published collection of personal testimonies, *We Testify*, Shanah Neshama reports stories of contemporary believers who have experienced God's living presence in the midst of life's most dreary and difficult circumstances. One of the most moving accounts is the story of a young prostitute who testifies to the abyss of darkness in this

underground world and also to her dramatic deliverance by those who walk Christ's walk of love and care.

As in the time of Jesus, very few people are ready to recognize and celebrate the humanity buried in the desperate way of life imposed on these women. Yet with a cup of warm beverage, with a flower, with a prayer, with a word of compassion and care, one team of Baptists does exactly that.

Project Hope, as they named their initiative, returns what has been taken away forcefully from the women trafficked for prostitution on the streets of Prague in Czech Republic. It restores their human dignity and worth in the eyes of God. Sharing Christ's love in action points these women out of darkness and toward hope.

Have you ever experienced the debilitating effect of helplessness, powerlessness and fear? If you have, you can sympathize with people from all walks of life mesmerized and abused by countless tyrants and autocratic powers, both big and small. You would understand their cry: Is there any hope?

Knowing where help can come from and having "tasted that the Lord is good" indeed (1 Pet 2:3), the people of God of all times have anchored their hopes in God, finding meaning through difficulties and suffering by strengthening their trust in God's steadfast love and redeeming actions.

The Biblical Witness

Come, Bless the Lord

¹Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord! ²Lift up your hands

to the holy place, and bless the Lord. ³May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.

The words of the psalmist in the final Song of Ascent (Ps 134) are a reminder for us at Easter to do what the Hebrew pilgrims did when they were about to leave Jerusalem for a long and hazardous journey back home: praise the Lord (vv 1-2).

References to the community of faithful blessing God (vv 1-2) and God blessing the people (v 3) summarize a common theme from the series of psalms known as the Songs of Ascent (Pss 120-134). They were sung in thanksgiving and in anticipation of being in God's presence. The mutuality of blessing reflects the people's admiration for God's forgiving, protective and redeeming love and God's approval of their faithfulness in spite of the misery of life.

One salient feature of the Songs of Ascent is their focus on God's presence (on Zion). Memories and traditions of God's dwelling in the midst of God's faithful people nurtured their faith. Seeking God's presence was the aspiration for their yearning, hopes and prayers. And this is true for us today.

Luke 24:1-5 He Is Not Here!

¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

As with the Songs of Ascent, Luke's account of the story of Jesus is concentrated on Jerusalem. It opens and closes with memories of people praising God (1:39-56) and of God blessing them (24:50-53); with Zechariah serving in the Temple (1:5-25) and disciples praising God in the Temple (24:50-53). Luke's retelling of the passion and resurrection stories offers a unique blending of the traditions of the gospels of Mark and John.

His resurrection account consists of four parts. Affirming that Jesus is alive, and interpreting the scriptures in light of his passion and resurrection is essential to the structure of Luke's narration (24:6-8; 25-27; 44-47). Notice especially:

- the story of the women (and Peter) discovering the empty tomb, and the angels interpreting the event for them (foretold by Jesus);
- the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, having a stranger interpret the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus (foretold by scripture; cf. 32), and recognizing Christ as the stranger in breaking of the bread;
- the meeting of the whole group of disciples with Jesus, convincing them that it is he, opening their mind to the proper perspective of interpreting scriptures, and directing them regarding their future role as a community witnessing the resurrected Lord (foretold by Jesus and the scriptures); and
- the closely-linked blessing and ascension scene in Bethany bursting with great joy and praising God.

The necklace of Luke's resurrection stories skillfully points back to the beginning of the Gospel and ties together incarnation and resurrection: Christmas and Easter.

The narration of the first episode turns around an inaptness that serves as a bridge from the scenes of Jesus' death and burial to the appearance stories to follow. Faithfully portraying natural human reactions, Luke carefully recorded in this episode a series of cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to what happened at the tomb. Women went on searching for the body of their Lord in a predictable place of where it was laid (23:55). Like the women, we often search for Jesus where we expect to find him, in "predictable" people and places, instead of where he actually is (24:1-5).

Luke emphasized the significance of Jesus' earlier teaching regarding how he would fulfill his divinely appointed role in his passion, how his suffering was neither a contradiction of his status before God nor the last word in God's plan for him. While the world passed its judgment—death to this one—God's ultimate verdict was life and life eternal to him. As Baptist theologian James McClendon insists, the resurrection of Jesus is the starting point of Christian faith.

Catholic liberation theologian Johannes Metz suggests that the most demanding kind of memory for the Christian is the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The story of the empty tomb has a particular significance in the chain of Easter events.

In celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth, the Easter event invites us to see God's ultimate love in action and follow it.

Luke 24:6-10 **The Power of Memory**

⁶*Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,*
⁷*that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and*

be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”⁸ Then they remembered his words,⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

Experiencing Easter requires that we remember (6-9) and tell (10) that God is not God of the dead but of the living (as Jesus himself argued; see 20:38). Throughout the gospel story, the Evangelist has repeatedly noted the incapacity of the disciples to grasp the legitimacy of Jesus’ path to glory, but now he signals a step forward at least on the part of the women. While giving them credit for being the first witnesses, we must overlook the fact that the move from perplexity to clarity on women’s part is enabled by the angelic call to remember Jesus’ words.

Luke 24:11-12 **Amazement**

¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Left without supernatural guidance and misled by their male biases, the men continued being imperceptive and dismissive (24:11). The male disciples’ disbelief was not rejection of the message of the resurrection (contra Acts 17:18, 32) but rather a lack of comprehension.

This brings forth the major point of the episode: the empty tomb is little more than an unresolved mystery apart from its place in the entirety of Jesus’ ministry. For the Evangelist it

is clear that the sequence of events requires interpretation (cf. Acts 8:31-35), and the key to understanding is Jesus’ own prophetic delineation of the purpose of God.

As anticipated in Peter’s attentive and somewhat expected reaction (Matt 14:28-29, Lk 9:20, Jn 18:10; 21:7), as well as in that of some other male disciples (Lk 24:24, Jn 20:3-8) and in the stories to follow, the empty tomb drives Jesus’ followers to look for him beyond that moment and place in time. Jesus’ vision, words and deeds form the content of the disciples’ memory. To remember is not merely a cognitive evocation. It is also, and importantly, bringing to mind the insights that guide responses to what is recalled.

Memory and Blessing

Memory is invaluable. Paul’s writings on the memory of Easter were handed down as historic validation for a person’s transformation (1 Thess 1:9-10, 1 Cor 15, Gal 1:15-17). But the story of Easter is also an account of a community in the process of formation from eyewitnesses to ministers of Jesus’ words and deeds (Lk 1:2). Our memory of Easter serves to propel us, as it did Jesus’ first followers, to actions that bless the lives of others.

Even painful memories can teach us. Terrifying stories of Nazis targeting Jews for annihilation in Europe during World War II are well known. Ambivalent silence, indifference or even cooperation of organized Christian bodies enabled Nazis to carry on their devilish plan. Very few stood up to rescue their Jewish neighbors guided by Christ-centered vision for justice, love and compassion, as Baptist theologian David Gushee has argued in *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*. Believers committed to the way of Christ were first among them.

Much less recognized is the fact that the Shoah or Holocaust was intended for at least two racial minorities in Europe: the Jews and the Romas (or Gypsies). According to some estimates, more than 1 million Romas perished in the gas chambers of concentration camps. Those who survived are still among the pariah of modern Europe. In many places, particularly in Eastern Europe, they are ostracized, marginalized and deprived of elemental social care, including quality education.

With the support of the wider Baptist community, Baptists in Bulgaria and Romania are stepping in with initiatives to undo social injustice and human degradation against the grain of social disdain for the Romas. This is the far-reaching aim of Project Ruth, carried on by Grace Church and Pastor Otniel Bunaciu in Bucharest, Romania.

Apart from providing for quality education and a fair start in life for Roma children, this Baptist community extends God's compassionate care by embracing Roma youth from rough neighborhoods and enhancing their sense of worth and dignity through holistic care for their nutritional, medical, educational and social needs.

Remembering Easter requires that we look beyond the empty tomb to discover Jesus among those he came to seek and save—the poor, the captives, the sick, the oppressed, the marginalized (4:18)—those in need of redemption and love delivered by a community of care and compassion. We “bless the Lord” when we serve them.

Baptists have a rich heritage of faithful witness to the Easter memory of God's love in action. We have played a key role in advancing the gospel message globally by words and actions in defense of justice and human rights.

Lent and Easter call us to reassess our mission strategies and priorities in light of biblical principles and determine how to apply them to 21st century mission efforts with integrity and compassion.

Written by Parush Parushev, academic dean and lecturer in applied theology, International Baptist Theological Seminary, Czech Republic

“I believe that Scripture commands us to work with all people and to be a witness to the Kingdom of Christ even in difficult places. Where there is corruption, we must fight for honesty. Where there is war, we must work for reconciliation. Where there is suffering from persecution and genocide, we must become the voice for the voiceless and cry out, ‘In the name of God, stop!’”
—Denton Lotz, General Secretary, Baptist World Alliance

Appendix A

More About Lent

- Lent is the 40-day period before Easter, excluding Sundays.
- Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the Saturday before Easter.
- Because Sunday is the day on which Christ arose, Sundays are not included in counting the days of Lent and are not considered suitable days for fasting and mourning our sins.
- “Lent” is the Old English word for “spring,” the season during which the days of Lent fall.
- Tracing its beginnings to the 4th century of the church, Lent was originally a time of prayer, study and preparation for those who were to be baptized on Easter Sunday. Because these new believers would become part of a faith community, that entire community was also called to engage in a time of preparation.
- The 40 days during Lent reflect other important times of discipline, devotion and preparation recorded in scripture, most significantly, the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness praying and fasting immediately prior to launching his ministry (Matt 4:2). In other significant events, Moses stayed on the mountain 40 days (Ex 24:18, 34:28). God made it rain for 40 days and 40 nights during the time of

Noah (Gen 7:12). The Jews wandered 40 years traveling to the Promised Land. The spies were in the land 40 days (Num 13:25); Elijah traveled 40 days before reaching the cave where he had his vision (1 Kings 19:8); Ninevah was given 40 days to repent (Jonah 3:4).

- Many Christian traditions today encourage prayer and fasting during Lent as a reminder of Jesus’ 40-day period of prayer and fasting. Christians who observe Lent also engage in introspection, self-examination and repentance.
- Some Christian observances of Lent today include a strict schedule of fasting on certain days. Others place less emphasis on fasting but focus instead on charitable efforts. Still others give up something they enjoy, such as a favorite food or activity as part of spiritual discipline, to encourage humility and to remind them of the importance of the spiritual over the earthly.
- Worship paraments (altar, pulpit and lectern cloths) and clergy vestments during Lent are usually purple, red violet or dark violet, symbolizing Jesus’ pain and suffering and the suffering of humanity under sin. Purple is also the color of royalty, so it also points toward the coming resurrection and hope of new life we celebrate on Easter. Because gray is the color of ashes, some churches use gray paraments on Ash Wednesday. The sanctuary colors on Good Friday and Holy Saturday traditionally are black, symbolizing the darkness and death resulting from sin. Black paraments are always replaced by white ones before sunrise on Easter Sunday.

- Because the focus of Lent is on reflection and repentance, some churches avoid using flowers in the sanctuary during this time. This can be especially meaningful when those congregations use a “flowering cross” on Easter, a cross-shaped structure to which congregants attach fresh flowers in celebration of the resurrection.

“Lent is an in-between time. It is the time between the declaration of guilt and the actualization of the sentence our guilt deserves so that justice is reestablished. It begins with Ash Wednesday, the day that declares death is certain. And, it ends with Easter, the day that begs to differ.” —Carla Nelson, education consultant, Canadian Baptist Ministries, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Appendix B

Lenten Glossary

Ash Wednesday is the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday and marks the first day of Lent. The name comes from the ancient tradition of placing ashes on the heads or foreheads of worshippers as a symbol of humility before God and of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. The day encourages Christians to realize the consequences of sin and reflect on the changes necessary in their lives to follow Christ more completely. The ashes used traditionally came from burning the palm fronds from the previous year’s Palm Sunday celebration. Today most churches purchase ashes specifically for this purpose. They are usually mixed with olive oil for application.

Easter marks the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is always on a Sunday, falling between March 22 and April 25.

Good Friday commemorates Christ’s crucifixion and burial. People have different theories on exactly why it came to be called “good”; after all, it was the worst day in history. In retrospect, however, we can see how the worst possible event brought about the greatest possible good. Christians affirm on Good Friday that not even death can separate us from God’s love.

Holy Week recalls events in Jesus’ life beginning with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Sunday (Palm Sunday) and through his trial, crucifixion and burial. It ends on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday.

Lent is the 40-day period (excluding Sundays) between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday.

Mardi Gras or Carnival falls on the Sunday, Monday and Tuesday immediately preceding Ash Wednesday and was originally begun as a festival before the fasting during Lent. Today it is marked in many places by parades, costumes, dancing and music, and taken to extremes, by drunken revelry and wild antics. *Mardi Gras* is the French term meaning “Fat Tuesday”; the day is also known as Shrove Tuesday (in Old English “shrove” means “to repent”).

Maundy Thursday (Holy Thursday) recalls the “Last Supper” Jesus shared with his disciples.

Palm Sunday falls on the Sunday before Easter and marks the beginning of Holy Week. It recalls the scene of the crowd greeting Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem by waving palm branches and lining his path with them. A common custom in ancient Near East lands was to cover the path of someone thought worthy of this high honor. In Jewish tradition, the palm branch was a symbol of triumph and victory. The synoptic gospels record that people placed their garments or cut rushes on the street on which Jesus entered, while John’s gospel specifically mentions the crowd laid palm fronds.

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