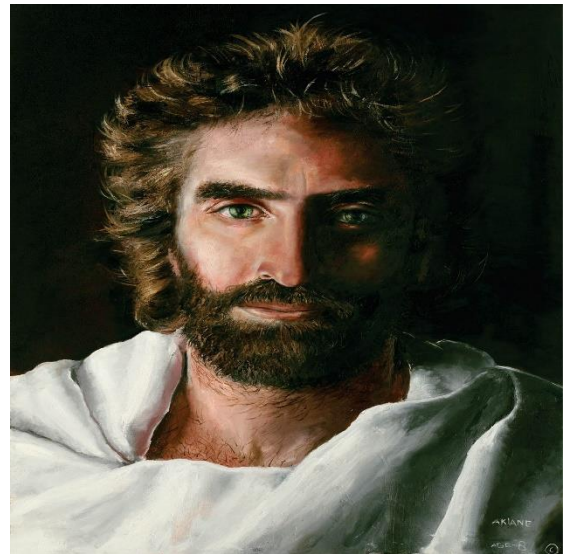


Joint Conference Vision & Development Team 2018 Lenten Devotions

What is Covenant?



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Scriptures and Reflections with discussion questions

Ash Wednesday –

Isaiah 58:1-12

58:1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

58:2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

58:3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

58:4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

58:5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

58:6 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?

58:7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

58:8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

58:9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

58:10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

58:11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

58:12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Ash Wednesday is often a day of fasting and prayer, or at least it traditionally is such. When I was a girl we began Lent with determining what we would be giving up for Lent, what we would do without. It was challenging as a child. I wanted to give something up, but not to anything I was too very attached to or would miss too much. After all, 40 days is a long time.

As I read this passage from Isaiah, fasting takes on a whole new meaning. Fasting in the eyes of God is not about doing without. Rather fasting is to reach out to those who are bound, oppressed, faced with injustice or with deep need. Fasting is about feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, being light in the dark places. Maybe we could reflect this Lenten season on what we can do for others, rather than what we can do without.

1. What does it mean to you to loose the bonds of injustice?
2. How can the church covenant together to shared resources, speak out for justice, care for those among us in the most need?
3. What yokes, traditions, stuck places prevent you as an individual or a church from moving forward into Isaiah's descriptions of what the Lord seeks as a Fast?
4. What might we need to change to birth a new conference? How might a new conference help us to serve God's justice and reflect God's mercy and love in the world?

First Sunday in Lent –

Genesis 9:8-17

9:8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

9:9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,

9:10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

9:11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

9:12 God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:

9:13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

9:14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,

9:15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

9:16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

9:17 God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Rainbows are a wonder of nature. I love the rain and the sun mixing together to allow the prisms of light to shine forth in the sky. In Genesis, a rainbow is a sign of God's covenant with all creation, with every living creature on the earth. Often, we think of covenant as between human beings and God, but clearly in this passage we are reminded that all of creation is loved by God. God's promise is with all creation.

When we misuse the environment, destroy our ecosystems, annihilate species God has created, we break covenant with God. When we treat each other with disdain, prejudice, racism, sexism, or hate, we break covenant with God. God's covenant is with us, but our covenant is also with God. In these days of Lent as we reflect on caring for our neighbors let us also remember to care for all of creation, all that is blessed and created by God.

1. What does your congregation do to preserve the environment and sustain God's covenant with the earth?
2. How do you view your covenant with God and all creation? What changes for you in his bible story when you think about all creation as loved by God?
3. What changes for you and your church as you reflect on God's covenant being with all creation?
4. How might sharing God's covenant be different if the whole conference or maybe even the whole of Eastern Pennsylvania as a new conference, set about preserving and blessing all that God has created?

Second Sunday in Lent –

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.

17:2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

17:3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,

17:4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

17:5 No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

17:6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

17:7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

17:15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

17:16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Imagine having a child in your old age and not just any child, but your first child. What would that feel like? That is the promise God is making to Abram. Abram's side of the covenant is to walk before God blameless and in return God covenants to make Abram the ancestor of a multitude of nations. An awesome promise is made by God. Can Abram hold up his part of the covenant?

Abram falls on his face before God. In response God accepts Abram's promise and renames him Abraham and restates the promise that nations will be descendants of Abraham's child. God makes an everlasting covenant. There must be joy and fear and anxiety and hope in Abraham's heart? How can this be? How can God do this thing, keep God's promise?

1. What promises do you make as a follower of Jesus, as a member of a Christian church?
2. How do you feel the promises of God being fulfilled in your individual life and in the life of the faith community, the church, to which you belong?
3. How does this covenant, this mutual covenant with God and Abraham, inform you about the covenant promises we make together between the settings of the United Church of Christ – the individual church member, the congregation, the association or conference, and the national setting?
4. As we continue to talk about and determine whether a new conference will be birthed in Eastern Pennsylvania, what covenants do we need to make with each other? What needs to be retained and what do we need to release or reform?

Third Sunday of Lent –

Exodus 20:1-17

20:1 Then God spoke all these words:

20:2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

20:3 you shall have no other gods before me.

20:4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

20:5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,

20:6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

20:7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

20:8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

20:9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

20:10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

20:11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

20:12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

20:13 You shall not murder.

20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

20:15 You shall not steal.

20:16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

20:17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The commandments are full of covenantal relationships: God with us, us with God, and us with our neighbor. In this passage, the first eleven verses are all about our covenant with God – our relationship with God. We are called into relationship with God in particular ways: to know God as the only object of our worship and adoration, to use God's name for praise but not for curse, and to keep holy a Sabbath day to honor God. The next six verses are about our relationship with our family and our neighbors. No less important than the first eleven verses, the last six are specific about our treatment of one another and how our actions toward each other reflect our love of and relationship with God.

1. What challenges do you face in living into the spirit as well as the letter of the commandments?
2. How do you fulfill your promises to God through treatment of neighbors, pew mates, church members, friends and family?
3. What giftedness and inspiration does your church provide to help you maintain or expand your covenant promises with God and your neighbors, both inside and outside the church?
4. As a conference, a newly formed conference, we will need to work on developing and strengthening relationships with one another. What are some ways we can begin to develop and deepen relationships across our two current conferences?

Fourth Sunday of Lent –

Numbers 21:4-9

21:4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.

21:5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

21:6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

21:7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

21:8 And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

21:9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

I've never really liked this passage. The people complain. God punishes them with poisonous serpents. This has always seemed a little extreme to me. It isn't until the people repent that God provides an antidote – a model of a poisonous serpent on a pole for people to look at. This is a vengeful God I don't quite get. On the other hand, I am not very patient with grippers and complainers. I am more inclined to be patient with those who have solutions rather than simply complaints.

Maybe God gets tired of our incessant complaining as well, our dissatisfaction with how things are, with what we have and what we don't have. I wonder if there is a remedy for our all-to-human complaining natures. I wonder if a bronze serpent would work these days? In any case this passage is more about relationships and repentance than it is about complaining. Coming into the presence of God seeking renewed relationship results in wholeness, health and relief, Maybe that's the whole point.

1. What are the complaints that you carry with you, complaints about your life, your work, your church?
2. How might you participate in an antidote for poisonous complaining?
3. Are there broken relationships in your family, your circle of friends, your church, your association, your conference, or the whole of the United Church of Christ that need a curing healing touch to be brought into wholeness?
4. As we design our new conference, how do we need to prepare for problem-solving and healing within and between each setting of the church?

Fifth Sunday of Lent –

Jeremiah 31:31-34

31:31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

31:32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

31:33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

31:34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Throughout scripture, the human relationship with God has been about covenant, about promises made and sustained to uphold relationship. Covenants are exemplified by rainbows in the sky, by children birthed, by stone tablets of rules and expectations, by staffs of healing and wholeness and now, by a law written on the hearts of the faithful and faith-filled. God wants to be imbedded within us, to be completely known by us. What a gift! We are called not just into relationship with God, but to house the law, the word, the covenants of God within us! We shall each and all have the opportunity to love and know God completely. What blessing!

We are the gift that God has prepared for the world. We are given the knowledge of God so that God's love and grace, God's relationship and covenants can be known to everyone. God will be ours and we will be God's. Imagine the grace that might give the isolated and the broken, the desolate and the lonely.

1. What changes has God made in your life, in your heart, and in your spirit?
2. How does your church exemplify the presence of God to the wider community?
3. What giftedness do you bring into relationship with God, with one another, with those in need, and with those who are also gifted?
4. What can the wider church: the association, the conference or the new conference, do to help spread the light and love of God to the world? How can you help the wider church accomplish that mission?

Palm Sunday –

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

118:1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

118:2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

118:20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

118:21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

118:22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

118:23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

118:25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

118:26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

118:27 The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

118:28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

118:29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

The covenant of God's love is expressed so beautifully in this reading from the Psalms. God's love lasts forever! God's love is steadfast! We are invited to be the righteous and to enter the gate of the Lord. As we have explored these Hebrew Testament (Old Testament) readings throughout Lent, we have been reminded about the promises God makes to us and to all of God's creation. The least and the lost, the found and the blessed, the broken and the whole, all of us, each of us are invited into relationships with God. We are blessed, and we are blessing.

When we are working on our relationships with God and with each other, when we offer grace and hope, when we love one another, the light that is our faith in God shines forth. We are the hands of God in the world. We are the heart of God in the world. We are the voice of God in the world. We are the only outpouring from God some people will ever know.

1. What do we need to celebrate about our faith and God's love for us?
2. How can we be more a reflection of God's love in the world?
3. What are the gates of the Lord we are called, individually, or corporately as congregations, associations, conference, or denominations, to walk through?
4. As we design our new conference, how do we need to view our relationships with God and one another to assure we feel and share the steadfast love of God?

Maundy Thursday –

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

12:1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt:

12:2 This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.

12:3 Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.

12:4 If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.

12:5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.

12:6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.

12:7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.

12:8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

12:9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs.

12:10 You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

12:11 This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.

12:12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.

12:13 The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

12:14 This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

The Passover is an important celebration of the Jewish faith. "The eight-day festival of Passover is celebrated in the early spring, from the 15th through the 22nd of the Hebrew month of Nissan, March 30-April 7, 2018. It commemorates the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt. It is observed by avoiding leaven, and highlighted by the Seder meals that include four cups of wine, eating matzah and bitter herbs, and retelling the story of the Exodus. In Hebrew it is known as Pesach (which means "to pass over"), because G-d passed over the Jewish homes when killing the Egyptian firstborn on the very first Passover eve."¹

Christian churches and faith communities may celebrate Passover, but remember that what we add makes the celebration a Christian one. It is important to celebrate the essence of the Jewish tradition with respect and adherence to tradition. Perhaps it is better yet to reflect on the fact that Jesus was celebrating Passover with his friends, all his friends including men, women and children (since Passover is a family celebration), when he offered to those gathered bread and cup, as symbols of his life – his body and blood. Perhaps remembering that Jesus was a man of Jewish faith who formed a new way of worshipping God and living in covenant is more than enough.

1. What traditions in your church really exemplify God's love and what are simply rituals to which we have become comfortable?
2. How can we assure that, as we worship, that we are truly worshipping God and not just our history?
3. In what ways can we help others understand the "why" behind the "what" we do?
4. How will we form new traditions and celebrations as we become a new conference? What must be retained and what can be released?

¹ http://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/871715/jewish/Passover-Pesach-2018.htm

Good Friday -

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

52:13 See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

52:14 Just as there were many who were astonished at him--so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals--

52:15 so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

53:1 Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

53:2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

53:3 He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

53:4 Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

53:7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

53:8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

53:9 They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

53:10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

53:11 Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

53:12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah shares with us the image of a suffering servant, one who is despised and rejected by others. It may be that the servant does not deserve what is befalling him. Even more important is the fact that the servant doesn't complain about his lot in life. Remember how much I appreciate complainers, NOT! But in this reading, the servant is oppressed, afflicted and through no fault of his own and he doesn't even complain about it. Rather the suffering servant offers no violence, no complaint, and no angry response. Rather the suffering servant is rewarded through seeing the light, having the knowledge that he has responded in faithfulness to God.

1. As you reflect on the entirety of Jesus' life among us, how does this passage speak to you?
2. In what ways do you seek the accompaniment of God through struggle, through trials and through the pain of human life?
3. For whom do we need to speak out in protest, in justice and in the proclamation of righteousness?
4. How will our new conference need to be designed in order to be responsive to those within our walls and in the world who are facing injustice, persecution, prejudice and suffering?

Resurrection of the Lord – Easter Sunday –

Isaiah 25:6-9

25:6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

25:7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

25:8 Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

25:9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

The shroud of sorrow has been destroyed! Death has been conquered! Tears are no longer needed! God's promises have been kept. In my own life, I pause on Easter Sunday morning to reflect on the promises God has made to me and their fulfillment. I also pause to reflect on the promises I have made to God and whether I have lived up to the covenant promises I have made to God.

As we began this devotional we reflected on fasting for God. Remember, fasting in the eyes of God is not about doing without. Rather fasting is to reach out to those who are bound, oppressed, faced with injustice or with deep need. Fasting is about feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, being light in the dark places. We thought we might be able to reflect on what we could do for others, rather than what we could do without.

1. As Lent concludes and the Easter season begins, what has changed in your heart, in your church and in your community?
2. How has God's conquering of death and sorrow changed your perspective on life and faith, on your relationships and covenant with God and your neighbor?
3. Where do you find joy in your faith this day?
4. How can the formation of a new conference amplify the presence and joy that comes from expressing our faith?