****

**Wednesday of Holy Week**

**Worldwide Pandemic, April 8, 2020**

**Lexington, KY, USA**

Welcome, everyone, especially those without a digital-church home. My name is Karen Hartsfield and I am an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament who enjoys teaching.

 Today, on this Wednesday of Holy Week, I’m exploring four passages from the Bible. The first two are translations from the Hebrew language. The second two are translations from the Greek language. Please join me in studying God’s Word. (Just so you know, I didn’t select these passages myself. They are part of daily worship during Holy Week for the Presbyterian Church USA.)

**Isaiah 50:4-9**  The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

 This passage reminds me of the Hebrew people’s expected Messiah -- someone born to lead God’s people. Among those who originally wrote the Hebrew Bible, there was no consensus whether that leadership would be physical or spiritual in nature. This passage expects one with the “tongue of a teacher (v. 4).”

For me, that verse foreshadows the arrival of God as One with blood and bone. We religious types call that “incarnation.” I recognize and acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as the Incarnate One. Even Jesus’ enemies recognized him as a person of interest, a holy or spiritual presence.

Can you imagine such a gentle person, arriving as a newborn amidst God’s people under siege? The Roman military’s governor of the province, once Jesus had begun his ministry, was Pontius Pilate. Even Pilate’s wife couldn’t get the Messiah off her mind. “While [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him (Matthew 27:19).”

Jesus “knows how to sustain the weary with a word (v. 4).” That’s especially important for those of us who have been sheltering in place to avoid infection with the COVID-19 virus. Please notice that God “wakens” each morning, just like any person. And God’s purpose, once awake, is not to make puppets of humankind. Rather, “the LORD God has opened my ear (v. 5).” In other words, God shares with willing listeners what’s important to human well-being. Who would know that better than One who is both fully human and fully divine? That’s the essence of the Hebrew people’s Messiah – the Christ, in Greek. As I said, I believe Jesus is that One.

For me, the rest of the passage refers to Jesus’ suffering at the hands of his own religious leaders, and, afterward, by invaders sent by Rome’s emperor. How will we, today, prepare for an outcome that seems inevitable – except for the fact of Who it is, who’s suffering?

Jesus’ “Father” calls him “beloved.” **“**Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased (Luke 3:21-22).’”

God does not torture innocents. Rather, God came, personally, in blood and bone, to take upon God’s Self the punishment owed to humankind corporately, and individually. God did so as the Messiah I know by the name “Jesus.” What if Jesus prayed along with the psalmist, as follows?

**Psalm 70:1-5**  Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O LORD, make haste to help me! Let those be put to shame and confusion who seek my life. Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire to hurt me. Let those who say, ‘Aha, Aha!’ turn back because of their shame. Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. Let those who love your salvation say evermore, ‘God is great!’ But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay!

 There is no question that Jesus is as frail as you or me. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God’s servants, both corporately and individually, face troubles. Today, we have a natural disaster, in viral form. As a believer, I find comfort in praying the words of Psalm 70. I imagine Jesus praying them, too. Perhaps he did so silently, on the cross. His “Father,” after all, is One who loves, grants mercy, and demands justice, all at the same time, as scholar Karl Barth once explained. Jesus shares this same nature, this same Spirit Who is holy.

 And now, for the Greek writers who witnessed to God’s presence among us.

**Hebrews 12:1-3**  Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

 As we endure isolation for the sake of ourselves and others, we’re not really alone. God remains with us. We’re weary, experiencing loss of “heart” at all the deaths related to the virus. Our weariness and loss of “heart” aren’t permanent. We have the capacity to stop the death toll, if only we – collectively – will. That’s precisely what health professionals and scientists are at work doing. Thank you!

 There’s another race being run, too. It’s the one we “run with perseverance”-- the race of belief. Faith is a gift God gives us. It’s not dependent on a building or an infrastructure or committees or polities. It’s dependent on believers – like you, if you are one. And, if you’re not yet, then God is patient. I’ll help you, if you reach out electronically with faith-questions. Jesus pioneered and perfected faith. His suffering unto death wasn’t weak or shameful. Joy awaited him, awaits us, because we believe the living God.

Holy Week is about preparing to believe, for those who don’t yet. It’s about

remembering what Jesus endured for humankind’s salvation, for those who have already received God’s gift.

 Speaking of being ready, Jesus knew suffering was in his immediate future.

**John 13:21-32**  After saying this [**“**whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."] Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples-- the one whom Jesus loved-- was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.” Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival”; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.”

 As I mentioned, Holy Week is a time to prepare for an expected outcome of God’s presence among us. But, there is also what happened unexpectedly. Many in the world reject what’s contrary to humankind’s expectations. Since my baptism at age 12, I’m no longer one of them. In my experience, God is mysterious, spiritual, and awe-inspiring. As a preacher, I’ve found that words don’t describe God’s existence, God’s realm, very well. Actions do somewhat better. However, actions other than audio or video aren’t advisable right now. There’s plenty, still, to do. Such as knowing the living God. No mask required!