

## 2017 Lenten Devotionals Introduction — Redstone Presbytery

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

**"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."** (Isa. 58:1)

Our communities have discovered themselves in the grips of a serious alcohol and other drug problem. Heroin, alcohol, cocaine, and a host of other drugs are destroying families, homes, children, parents, grandparents, neighborhoods, communities and individuals. Communities are faced daily with death, destruction, hopelessness, disability, criminal behavior and prison. The people impacted are individuals both far and near to us, our sons and daughters, our neighbors and friends. As the church and followers of Jesus Christ we are called to have a prophetic voice in our communities and speak out with authority and boldness to the tragedies around us, like the prophet *"Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!"*

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we can't allow our neighborhoods to decline around us and watch passively as our sons and daughters perish. During this time of Lent, we take time to understand our own limitations, mortality, and our tendency to act in ways not in line with God's way, but we also reveal our hope in repentance, forgiveness, and resurrection. We invite you to explore the meaning of Lent and how it speaks to the epidemic of AOD abuse and dependency that surrounds our churches and communities. As the people of God, we are called to share the good news of God's amazing grace and love.

Alcohol and other drugs are creating a serious health and mental illness crisis, emotional pain, despair and unspeakable sinful behavior. God does not wish us to be silent. Our call is not to speak harshly, but lovingly of the hope and grace that comes by facing our sin. The prophet Isaiah is telling God's people that redemption and restoration is possible.

God is telling us just as God once told the Israelites what was needed: help the poor, free those in bondage, give food to the hungry and clothes to the naked. These are acts of true repentance. These are acts of faith that arise only from a heart that has turned around to face God. As Christ's church if we engage ourselves in the work God is calling us out to do, we will experience the wonderful things of God in our midst as the prophet tells us, *"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."* (v.8)

Lent provides us the opportunity to discover new avenues of faith and discipleship. Lent provides a time to explore a deeper understanding of discipleship and how God is calling us to serve and where God is sending us. This Lenten journey should never be easy, but challenging and joyful. These Lenten journeys can help us gain a better appreciation of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the power of the resurrection, which gives us life, not just after death, but life in the here and now. Eternity starts today. We hope you will find these devotions helpful in strengthening your faith and discipleship.

Don't keep what you read, pray, think and experience a secret (at least not all of it). Please leave your comments on this blog and share your journey through Lent. Share your thoughts and ideas about the daily selections with others and pray for the future ministry and mission of your church and your life together as the Body of Christ. Use this time of Lent to give God the opportunity to speak to your heart and life in some unique and surprising ways.

## **Suggestions for Using the Devotions**

1. Set aside time each day to read the selection for the day, time to think about it and time to pray.
2. Give yourself time to sit quietly and simply rest in the presence of God. Give God the opportunity to speak to your heart. Listen for God's still small voice speaking within your prayers. *"I keep the LORD always before me;"* (Psalm 16:8)
3. We most likely know at least five individuals and/or families who have been impacted by alcohol and other drug abuse and dependency. Write those names on a note card and make a point to pray for these individuals and families daily. Consider sharing with them a link to this blog in an e-mail message and invite them to attend worship with you. Pray that God might use you as a witness in their lives.
4. Pray for all those you know who are sick, ill, injured, lost or having any problems in their lives.
5. Keep a prayer journal and record all the people and areas of your prayers. Make a point to record God's response to your prayers.
6. Pray for the all ruling elders on the Session who have been called to lead your congregation. Pray that God will empower them as spiritual leaders for your congregation. Pray that God will give them vision, knowledge and purpose as they do their work for the mission and ministry of the church in the twenty-first century.
7. And pray for your pastor. Pray that God will make them better preachers, better teachers, and better pastors to all they meet, giving Glory to God in all that they do.

Daily Lectionary Readings listed for each devotion are modified selections from the Two-Year Daily Lectionary (Book of Common Worship, Year 1). The daily lectionary readings are not intended to directly relate to the subject of the devotion for the day.

All scripture quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. "New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved."

## Bios of Lenten Devotional Contributors

**Lynn Mance** is a Ruling Elder at Delmont Presbyterian Church and a Redstone Presbytery Authorized Preacher. Her family history includes alcoholism. She has a heart for those who struggle with addiction and wants to help in this drug epidemic.

**Lee McDermott** is pastor of the McClellandtown and Grace Chapel Presbyterian Churches in Fayette County. He has 30+ years of experience in addictions counseling, treatment and prevention.

**Sue Washburn** is the pastor of Reunion Presbyterian Church in Mount Pleasant, PA and the current moderator of Redstone Presbytery.

**Cathy Ritter** is a member and Ruling Elder in First Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, PA. She has a heart for the city and is in the trenches, easing the pain of the most vulnerable in our society.

**Elizabeth Comer** is Director of Clinical and Case Management Services for the Westmoreland Drug and Alcohol Commission. Elizabeth has worked in the drug and alcohol field since 2006 with prior experience working in mental health, medical social work, and the IDD field.

**Susan Perry** is a wife, mother, grandmother, a retired attorney, and currently the Moderator of the Presbytery of West Virginia.

**Walter Maynard** is a Ruling Elder from the Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greensburg, PA

**Rev. Richard "Skip" Noftzger** is Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk of Redstone Presbytery. Visit Skip's blog [Flowing "Grace and Truth"...in Him....](#)

**Donna Havrisko** is the pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greensburg, PA.

**Alice Tondora** is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Johnstown.

**Andrea Andi Falcone** is a Yoga Teacher, Reiki Master and Thai yoga Bodywork Practitioner, but most importantly, a spiritual warrior saint in recovery. She resides in rural Appalachia, Lost River WV. Her Recovery began with the 12 step programs (AA/NA) then exacerbated with Yoga, to release the "issues from the tissues".

Each Daily Devotion will be posted on the blog "**Redstone Together**" beginning Tuesday, February 28, 2017 with the introduction and bios.

Visit the link: [redstonetogether.blogspot.com](http://redstonetogether.blogspot.com)

Scripture: **Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

"Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." (Joel 2:12-13)

Sometimes it seems like there is no hope. When we read of the events of the Bible, we are told of the impact of plagues within the lives of the people. In the prophet Joel, this time it is a plague of locusts. Connected with their failures as a people of God, it signified what was to come in that "day of the Lord." It can all seem so distant, so foreign to our own world, but "locusts" come in many forms. We live with our own "plagues" that have resulted from our individual and collective failures. Then, and now, it may seem like there is no hope.

Yet, in the midst of even the most dire circumstances, they (and we) are challenged to do what they (we) should have already been doing long before. Sometimes, it takes a season (like Lent) to be reminded to enter "into the light." During this Lenten journey, we also are challenged to step back and do what we probably should do day in and day out all year long.... pray, fast, weep, mourn, return. With that expectation of returning, there is the promise of a God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Too often, caught up in everyday life, the promise may not always seem relevant.

But, when we are struggling, the promise seems too good to be true. Surely, in my own inadequacies, in my own failures, God would not be gracious to me. Yet, the promise remains. God has not changed. God still says, "*return to me with all your heart.*" That God is *still* gracious, *still* merciful, *still* slow to anger and *still* abounding in love.

The very act of returning is not a solitary act. We are to join in conversation with each other before and with the one who longs for us to come back. God calls us to return as a people, as the Lord's community. In fact, the prophet challenged them to gather the people, old and young, in order to call a "solemn assembly." It is in coming together with others that we pray, we fast, we mourn and we return.

During this Lenten journey "into the light," may we come together with others who also know the pain and the problems of our experiences and our world. In this time of plague of our own "locusts," may we return to find hope in the only place where it is certain, in the presence and power of our God. As we reflect and as we pray, we will be welcomed in our return by the Lord who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Skip Noftzger, Contributor

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 5

Hebrews 12:1-14

Luke 18:9-14

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture Reading: **Luke 15:1-7**

"there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:7)

"It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song." - Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Within every community surrounding every church, there are individuals and families separated from God, lost and wandering in the wilderness. The lost are not just some unknown, faceless person, often they are our own sons and daughters, nieces and nephews and grandchildren. A church needs the surrounding community as much as we believe the community needs the church. We will never experience wholeness until we rejoice together in each one being found, our song will never sound as good until we are all singing together.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 7:6-11

Psalm 27

Titus 1:1-16

John 1:29-34

The parable of the lost sheep often draws our attention to the rejoicing in heaven over the one lost sheep returned to the fold. The story also tells us about the rejoicing that comes when the whole flock of sheep is once again whole, now back to 100.

The church is never in the fullness of its life together or singing at its best while it remains less than whole. We should rejoice over each new person who has been found, but there is always one more. Whatever problems which exist in our communities, like, alcohol and other drugs (AOD), God is always calling upon the church to discern where the Holy Spirit is sending us. What is the one thing our church could do to enhance the lives of those living in our community? The path before us may never seem clear or straight, we may need to become trailblazers in the darkness, clearing the way for others, but God's Spirit is always lighting the way.

AOD abuse and dependency will confuse and frustrate us, but God does know the way and is calling us to discover it. The way forward is not just to save the lost, but to save the church and its members who also lose their way when it comes to answering our call as disciples. We need to go out and not simply wait for the sheep to come into the fold. We need our community and its people to be whole.

We need you to join us in a conversation about where God is sending us to reach out to those whose lives are being destroyed by AOD, individuals, families and children. We need your voice to join our song as we partner with those who are working to solve this serious social problem and to learn our own unique way forward. The path forward calls us to learn new skills and methods, to partner with those playing many different roles within our community, sharing our gifts, and discerning God's Spirit. If we commit ourselves to this conversation, we will discover we can transform the lives around us and transform the life of the church. Then, the church's voice can rejoice and will be whole as we are heard singing together.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Pray: Those found and the community where they rejoice.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Psalm 22:6-11**

"But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; 'Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'" (Ps. 22:6-8)

I remember the beginning of basketball season one year when I was in junior high. I'd been out of shape and the constant running meant that my feet were blistered and raw after the first practice. I knew the next day was going to be torture. I needed to get back in shape. That's what sports practices are for, right? A time to get stronger and practice skills so that when the big game comes, we are ready.

Lent is a practice time, too. We take up differing spiritual disciplines knowing that Jesus is heading for the cross. It's a dark, foreboding time in the church year with Good Friday and Holy Saturday being the darkest of all. Today, we practice trusting that God is at work in the difficult times.

In Lent, we are reminded that there are seasons in the church year and seasons in our lives. Some of those seasons are joyous and exciting—we get married, we have children or grandchildren, or we retire. Jesus had good seasons early in his ministry. He was successful and was making a difference in the world.

But seasons change, even for Jesus. Some of our seasons are dark. We suffer as we watch loved ones make bad decisions or we succumb to the addictions we are trying to overcome. Jesus knows our suffering. Even the perfect Son of God undergoes suffering on the cross. Jesus has been to the dark places. He's been scorned, despised and mocked.

All of us feel like that worm the Psalmist writes about at one time or another, wiggling blindly through life. Therefore, we need the practice of Lent and Holy Week. We need the Lenten practices so that when our season comes, we are prepared for the difficult times.

Lent is our annual practice of seeing God at work in the dark and in the suffering because it doesn't come naturally to most of us. We need to practice having faith in darkness so that when our season of struggle comes we can trust that God is there—even if the proof of God's presence is not.

For the great promise of the Christian gospel is not one of one glittery success after another, but a life of purpose and meaning. The reward of a faithfully lived life in Christ is not ease but God walking with us in the valley of the shadow of death. It's the promise that no matter how dark the night. Jesus is there with us. Jesus knows our suffering. Jesus loves us where we are and how we are. It's the promise that it's not the darkness that is eternal, but the light that is just below the horizon.

Sue Washburn, Contributor

### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 7:12-16

Psalm 22

Titus 2:1-15

John 1:35-42



### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Matthew 11:25-30**

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* (Matt. 11:28)

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 7:17-26

Psalms 43

Titus 3:1-15

John 1:43-51

My name is Lisa and I'm an alcoholic. This is what it was like for me to go from active addiction to recovery. I went from weary and burdened to living a life of peace. Is life easy? Not at all. But because of the 12 steps of AA and a God of my understanding, I can get through life, clean and sober.

My bottom came on April 28, 2014. Six weeks after my boyfriend died of a heroin overdose. You think that would be my bottom, but it wasn't. Actually, I continued to use heroin, and my drinking got much worse. I lied about everything. Finally, those lies caught up with me. On that day in April I was arrested and charged with my boyfriend's death. That is when I hit my knees and said "God I can't do this anymore. Please help me." That is where my journey into recovery began.

I knew nothing about AA or the 12 steps but was directed to the rooms through outpatient rehab. I had the gift of desperation and the willingness to go to any length. What I learned very quickly was that addiction is a disease. I wasn't a bad person trying to become good, I was a sick person who needed to get well. I was spiritually bankrupt and needed a Higher Power in order to do that. What many people don't know is that AA and the 12 steps are a spiritual way of living. As alcoholics/addicts we cannot and will not recover unless we find that Higher Power.

For me that was easy. I grew up in the church with a loving God. I turned my back and walked away from him. He waited for me to turn back around and I did. We say in the rooms that God led me to AA and AA led me back to God. My boyfriend dying and me getting arrested has been the biggest heartbreak and tragedy in my life, but if it didn't happen the way it did... I can't imagine where I'd be.

In recovery, I have lost custody of my child, my house, my job, have gone to trial for murder, gone through breast cancer including two surgeries and 16 rounds of chemo. I am learning to love myself, am a daughter, mother, sister and friend like I have never been. I am trying to be the best person I can every day. I humbly ask God to help me get through my day and do my best to do His will and not mine. I lay my troubles at his feet and let my faith carry me through. Am I perfect? Of course, not, I'm human. But when I fail or slip, I know what to do. And through it all, good and bad, I've stayed clean and sober.

The 11<sup>th</sup> step is probably my favorite: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand him. Praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out. I pray...a lot. And when someone asks how I know if I'm spiritually fit, I say when I find calm in the middle of the storm, I know I am close with God and exactly where I need to be.

Lisa, Contributor Remember in Prayer: Those seeking rest from their drug burden.

Scripture: **Psalm 32:1-7**

"Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." (Ps. 32:1)

Psalm 32 teaches a simple lesson: Trying to conceal one's sins from God is useless and brings needless (often physical) suffering. Confession of one's sin brings God's help and guidance toward the goal of a more righteous life.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Psalm 32

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Mark 2:18-22

Twelve step groups speak in their fifth and eighth steps about the importance of seeking forgiveness by first identifying the wrongs, to make a list of the nature of their wrongs, admit to these wrongs to God, to themselves and to another human being. They also make a list of those people they have harmed and prepare themselves to make amends. The importance of this step is to not simply acknowledge the obvious wrongs, but the secret wrongs often buried deep within one's soul which need uncovered.

The writer of Psalm 32 knows the terror of secret sin, and the joy of being forgiven. *"Happy are those..."* he begins his psalm. Or, in an older translation, *"Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."*

Unrepentant, secret, hidden sin causes grief, shame, and guilt. The sinner's body "wastes away," and his strength is "dried up," like a potted plant left too long in the scorching summer sun. There is no life or vigor left in him, and his secret sin eats away at him, mind, body, and spirit. God's hand is "heavy" upon him (vv. 3-4).

We do not often talk about guilt or shame. Some churches tend to shy away from speaking too often about sin, shame or guilt, trying to distance themselves from the damaging effects of misplaced usage in past generations. I am not advocating a return to fire and brimstone preaching. While still the Psalmist makes it clear that sometimes guilt and shame can and does impact the lives of those around us, even if, not inflicted upon them by others. For the person to move forward in recovery they must acknowledge their sin and be willing to seek forgiveness. Forgiveness is what leads to true joy. In confession, God forgives, and the individual can start life anew. Such new life is what the psalmist calls "happy" or "blessed."

*"I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go."* (v. 8) This psalm, then, is a composition designed to teach one how to live well, how to live a happy and blessed life. *"While I kept silence, my body wasted away...Then I acknowledged my sin to you...I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin"* (vv. 3, 5). A vital role of the church is to assist those in recovery to achieve this blessed life, which comes through confession and forgiveness.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Men and Women who find it difficult to reveal their secret sins and find forgiveness in God's presence.



## Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Psalm 32:5-11**

"I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you." (Psalm 32:8-9)

What makes someone teachable? Nothing more than the desire to learn. It takes a spirit of humility to acknowledge we don't have it all figured out and never will. Our whole life long we need the steadying and guiding hand of the Lord. And the Lord often chooses to teach us the way we should go through others, through men and women who are just as imperfect as we are.

### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 8:1-20

Psalm 6

Hebrews 2:11-18

John 2:1-12

Some of us can allow ourselves to be taught that addiction is a disease. Recreational drug use can and will, without warning, alter the chemical makeup of the brain. The addict no longer thinks as we do; in fact, in many ways he or she cannot. This does not absolve them of their destructive habits and the pain they cause to self and others. Acknowledging that addiction is a disease does not mean we give in to enabling behaviors. Instead, it makes it possible for us to feel compassion rather than judgment.

Some of us can allow ourselves to hear and acknowledge we have a problem, that we are seeking freedom in substances that put us in chains. We can be taught that there is a better way, and that there is ONE who is stronger than the all-encompassing desire for the next drink or the next fix. This ONE is God, and the God who created you has the power to redeem you from all ills, to instruct you and lead you out of darkness and into life like you have never known.

Let us pray for the humility to acknowledge that we have much to learn, whether we are an addict or clean. Let us pray for God to send each of us wise men and women to teach us in the way we should go, the way of love and life.

Alice Tondora, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Ask that God might open the heart and mind of those seeking treatment for their addiction and allow them to accept God's instruction.

### Informational Resources

For information about prescription opioid misuse and heroin use, go to: [www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/relationship-between-prescription-drug-abuse-heroin-use/introduction](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/relationship-between-prescription-drug-abuse-heroin-use/introduction)

For information about cocaine, go to: [www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/cocaine/what-cocaine](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/cocaine/what-cocaine)

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Today's Scripture: **Psalm 51:1-17**

*"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions... For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." (Ps. 51:1, 3)*

Many suffering from alcohol and other drug (AOD) dependency clearly understand the depth of their destructive behavior *"for I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."* They would like to declare with the psalmist *"have mercy on me, O God"* but they have come to believe that the *"steadfast love"* of God is unavailable. They have come to believe that God's *"mercy"* will not *"blot out my transgressions."* Having given up on hope and they need to rely upon others.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 9:1-12

Psalm 25

Hebrews 3:1-11

John 2:13-22

For individuals dealing with addiction, just as the Psalmist experienced, there is only one way to salvage his life: He needs to call on God (vv. 1-2). The Psalmist gets to the point immediately, pronouncing himself a sinner. He throws himself on the mercy of God, knowing that he deserves no mercy. His prayer is an admission of guilt (v. 3), one in which he does not try to maintain his innocence, defend or explain his action or try to put the responsibility on another party. The psalmist stands as his own accuser and he acknowledges that to God. The first step to true penitence is a clear recognition of one's own sin and a willingness to accept responsibility for their behavior.

For the person struggling with addiction, recovery will not begin if they are dealt with harshly. Any accusation of their sin only deepens what they already know about themselves and only increases the guilt they are currently carrying upon their hearts. While maintaining their denial, they will seldom share these feelings. What they need to hear is that God is merciful and loves them. They need the church to share with them this hope and the knowledge that God is willing to blot out their transgressions. They need the loving care of others to find this grace of God, initially they will not believe it possible, but it is a message the church is obligated to repeat frequently and often.

*"Against 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"* (v. 4). The psalmist is not denying that he has wronged other people in directing this comment to God. However, in the presence of God, whom he has alienated, the important aspect of his sin is that which is focused toward God. When sin is seen in its relationship to God, no matter against whom the wrong has been directed, every sin is directed against God. It is always God's right to make demands and call humans to account.

Lent reminds us every year, how much of God's *"steadfast love"* and *"mercy"* has been given to us through Jesus Christ. We are the benefactors of God's mercy and we are not to keep it to ourselves, but to share it with others in need of God's mercy.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Individuals seeking God's mercy in God's steadfast love.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 3:1-7**

"He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'" (John 3:2-3)

You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

Nicodemus the Pharisee sneaks to see Jesus under the cover of night, presumably afraid that he would be criticized for doing so. Once he finds Jesus he ends up very confused by the things that Jesus is saying. In fact, Nicodemus and Jesus seem to be having two different conversations. Jesus talks about being born again at a spiritual level while Nicodemus is literally trying to figure out how to re-enter a womb. They are speaking different languages!

I suspect this is how it must feel for people who walk into a church for the first time. Like Nicodemus they are intrigued by Jesus, but they have no idea what to expect in church. They may sneak because friends or family may criticize them. But they risk it because they know there is something special about what Jesus can offer.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 9:13-21

Psalms 147:1-11

Hebrews 3:12-19

John 2:23-3:15

Then they get inside a church and it all gets confusing. People start reciting things from memory and using words they don't understand. Rather than feeling like a safe place, a refuge, it feels like yet another foreign place.

But the good news is that even in the most traditional churches, those with high liturgy and organs or old songs or "thees" and "thous" point to something that is beyond. They point to the love of Christ.

Nicodemus didn't let his confusion keep him away permanently. He watched Jesus from afar and in the end helped in his burial. I suspect that it's because even though he couldn't understand what Jesus was saying, he could still feel the love of God in Christ in a way that went beyond words.

That leads me to wonder how we can minister in a way that goes beyond our "foreign" ways. What can we do to make sure people sense the love of Christ despite the traditions of the church? How can we make our words and our actions reflect the Good News of Jesus Christ for people who don't speak our church language?

Sue Washburn, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Individuals afraid to approach others and ask the questions which need asked for their re-birth to begin.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 3:16-17**

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

My first memories of life were growing up in the church and being taught to memorize John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* Knowing these words, personally, made it an even more strange and difficult experience for me to understand that others I met later in life had no experience with the church, scriptures or Jesus. They had no basic understanding of God, which I had taken for granted for years.

**Some have never heard this** ... They did not know nor had anyone tell them that God loved them. They never had someone to tell them the stories of scripture that told of God's abundant love. They had never heard about Jesus Christ and how Jesus tells us so much about our lives and how we could better live our lives. They have never heard of grace, mercy, forgiveness and all the joy these could bring to their lives.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 9:23–10:5

Psalms 147:12–20

Hebrews 4:1–10

John 3:16–21

**Some have heard and don't believe it** ... I met others who had been told about God and did not believe it was something they could embrace. The reasons could be numerous for their disbelief. Some heard that the story was not for them and they were not included in God's story. Some were told a story with too many conditions and rules for them to follow.

**Some think they tried it and it didn't work....** Some were told God would do all the heavy lifting and when God did not, they concluded that it did not work. Some found it did not work because they were expected to give up too much or do things they found too difficult.

**Some have heard it and don't believe it applies to them because of their many sins....** Some were told their belief would not matter, because their sin was too great. They were told grace, love, forgiveness and mercy simply passed them by because they choose poorly.

Too many people have believed too many false narratives, when God through John clearly tells us, *"God did not send the Son into the world **to condemn the world**, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* (v. 17)

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Churches seeking to discern how God will help them be welcoming and hospitable to those struggling with addiction.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Hebrews 4:12-16**

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb. 4:15-16)

It takes courage to admit, even to yourself, that you need help, that life has spun out of control because of addiction. To acknowledge the ways you've harmed yourself and others is not for the faint of heart. We increase our burden when we think of God and fear a great disciplining parent in the sky, ready to dole out the punishment we deserve.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Psalms 105

Hebrews. 4:11-16

John 3:22-36

The fact is, all of us deserve punishment for our waywardness; the addict is no different from the person who *seems* to have it all together. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. That is why we need and have a Savior in the person of Jesus Christ. Not only do we have a Savior, we have someone who understands why we might have a deep-seeded desire to escape the reality of this life, even if that escape is through substances that end up making things worse. Jesus knows what it means to be human and live in this fallen world. He was betrayed by one of his closest followers. Jesus grieved at the tomb of his good friend Lazarus. Jesus was the target of others' scorn. The devil visited Jesus and tempted him to deny his status as God's beloved Son. Jesus many times could have taken the easy way out, the way that did not involve a cross, but he did not.

Jesus understands how we are tested, the trials and troubles we have seen. Not only does he understand, he shows us mercy because he knows how hard it is, and he remembers that we are human. We don't have to fear a parent's wrath. Instead, we can come confidently to Jesus, knowing he will offer pardon...and not just pardon, but mercy and grace to help us in our time of need, not just in our time of confession.

Let us pray for all who fear God, that they may know our Savior's grace and favor. Let us pray for fear to be transformed into confidence that will then guide them on a new path.

Alice Tondora, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Individuals finding it difficult to admit to their problems and need courage to move forward.

#### Informational Resources

**National Institute on Drug Abuse:** Advancing Addiction Science

Wide range of information related to research, studies, and facts on drug abuse. [www.drugabuse.gov/](http://www.drugabuse.gov/)

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 4:9-10**

"The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'" (John 4:9-10)

Samaritans and Jews were viewed differently in Bible times. Samaritans were often a hated mixed race. They had a reputation of a sinful life and kept to themselves as others typically shunned them. Samaritans were to be avoided. They just didn't mix well in the society of Jews.

In this passage, a Jew named Jesus, asks the Samaritan woman for a drink of water. This was unheard of. Thirsty or not a Jew should just move on and ignore a Samaritan. Even the Samaritan woman questioned him like he had lost his senses.

Often our society sees these differences among the addicted and non-addicted. The non-addicted keep their distances because they don't live this life of sin that is carried with addiction. Often the addicted feels different themselves. They may even feel shamed and unworthy of the life that the non-addicted lives.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 11:18-28

Psalms 31

Hebrews 5:1-10

John 4:1-26

In this scripture differences are put aside. The woman is no longer just a Samaritan and Jesus is no longer a Jew. Together they are two of God's chosen people meeting together at a well. Jesus teaches the woman about another type of water called living water. The living water is one available to everyone regardless of their afflictions. Once this spiritual water is tasted, one is no longer thirsty.

The living water of God's gospel is intended for every person. It isn't rationed by race, social position or sins. We all are called to reach out crossing all barriers to share the gospel. Although we can share this living water it does not come from us. Only Jesus can give this gift that satisfies our soul's desire to never thirst again. Our thirst is forever quenched by just knowing Jesus. Come and drink in this Lenten season of renewal. Jesus is calling you.

Lynn Mance, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: All who are thirsty for the living water.

#### Informational Resources

**NIDA TV** is a video library system on the [drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov) website: [www.drugabuse.gov/nida-tv](http://www.drugabuse.gov/nida-tv) which delivers NIDA's (National Institute on Drug Abuse) current science-based information in a consolidated location. NIDA TV allows videos to be more accessible through playlist categories including, NIDA Research, Director's Remarks and a new forum for scientists called, "I-Science."



Scripture: **Mark 9:33-37**

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37)

I watched the mother and father push their newborn baby up and down the street in front of my home with loving care several times a week. I watched this baby grow from a toddler. This year she will be 11 years old. She is a beautiful girl, blue eyes and blonde hair. I don't see her much anymore. She is living with another family member and visits her mother once or twice a week. Her father died five years ago, from liver failure caused by alcohol abuse and her mother is very poor health caused by prescription drugs, alcohol, and methadone. Other family members on her mother's side are also addicted. I wonder what, this eleven-year-old girl is feeling and thinking as she watches her family waste away. I wonder how she feels when she hears from other kids that her mother is a drunken dope addict. I wonder if she will be able to overcome her traumatic childhood. We need to realize that she is not alone. There are other children growing up in similar situations.

There are twenty million children in the U.S. that are suffering from parents that are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol ([www.alcoholicsvictorious.org](http://www.alcoholicsvictorious.org)). Approximately thirty thousand babies born in the U.S. in 2016 were addicted upon birth and had to be in recovery immediately. They are referred to as NAS babies ([www.marchofdimes.org](http://www.marchofdimes.org) )

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 1:1-10

Psalms 42

1 Corinthians 3:11-23

Mark 3:31-4:9

The burden of being yoked to addiction is that it wears out their soul. It drains their self-worth. They feel worthless and some people lead them to believe that they are worthless. Jesus wants to free them from the burdens of addictions. He wants to heal their soul, build their self-worth, and put them in peace with God. Jesus wants them to be yoked to him. *"Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Matthew 11:29).

What can we do as Christians? We must not judge. *"Do not judge others..... Do not condemn others..... Forgive others....."* (Luke 6:37). We are to love others, not judge them. But you must be careful. Remember the driving force behind addictions is Satan. We cannot allow ourselves to be blind. *"Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?"* (Luke 6:39). Look for leaders who will teach you about faith and give you good guidance. Jesus doesn't want children treated as second-class, he took a child and put him amid them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but him who sent me."* (Mark 9:37). Children from addicted families are not easy to work with. They inherit the family attitude of "don't trust, don't feel, don't talk. Christians can help these children break these rules. They should do it in a Christ like manner to gain the children's trust. The children are normal children living in an atmosphere that is not normal. They are carrying heavy burdens.

Walter Maynard, Contributor

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Psalm 121**

"I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." (Ps. 121:1-2)

My brother, Bob, is a recovering addict - he's been "clean" for more than 12 years, all because he looked to the Lord for help.

Bob started on marijuana when he was a teenager. For many years, we had no idea he was using - we had never been exposed to drugs and didn't really know the symptoms of drug usage.

As time passed, he began to use harder drugs, and started stealing to get them. When he was arrested, we realized what had been going on with Bob. We tried to help in various ways, none of which worked. His first wife left him and took his son, because she wanted nothing to do with drugs; his second wife died of a drug overdose while he was in jail the first time.

Finally, Bob stole things one time too many and he was sent to a prison in Mercer County. It was while he was there that Bob finally got the help he needed. Bob was in prison more than two years. He went to Christian counseling while he was there and began to read the Bible and devotionals. The more he read, the more he wanted a better life than the one he had with drugs.

He read the Psalms a lot, especially Psalm 23 and Psalm 121. He began to look more to the Lord for strength and help in living his life. And we did, too.

*"No, my strength comes from God, who made heaven, and earth, and mountains."* (v. 2, MSG) We knew that if our family kept looking to the Lord for help, we would all get through this together. He prayed; we prayed. He read God's Word; we read God's Word. He looked to the Lord; we looked to the Lord, not only for his drug habit to end, but for our direction each day. He spent more time asking the Lord for help; we did the same. We all found strength from God

When Bob was finally released from prison, he was a changed man. He had found the Lord; he found other friends who wouldn't lead him back to drugs.

We are so grateful that Bob chose to look to the Lord and found Him, waiting. And we did too.

Contributor, A friend of First Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, PA

Remember in Prayer: To those who ask "where will my help come" may they find this help with Christ's church.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 1:11-19

Psalm 121

Romans 1:1-15

John 4:27-42

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 4:40-42**

"So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'" (John 4:40-42)

People are seeking a place where they can belong, a place where they are accepted. The Samaritan woman was not impressed by Jesus' theology, but by his presence, how for that moment in time she was the most important person for him to spend time, even though, spending time with Samaritans was considered unacceptable.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 2:1-13, 29-32

Psalms 34

Romans 1:16-25

John 4:43-54

During the years, I worked in addictions treatment, I received hundreds of hours of training in pharmacology, counseling techniques, group therapy, treatment approaches and methods, and a host of other areas important to addictions treatment. For many of the individuals I worked with in treatment all this training I'd received meant nothing. For them, the most important thing that I did was giving them my presence. To simply be there for them when it counted. Sitting with them in a court room as they awaited sentencing. Visiting them in prison while waiting to post bail, go to trial or serve their sentence. Praying with them at their bedside while they detoxed.

During those years, I attended numerous 12 step group meetings. The meetings helped me better understand these individuals, I was working with daily. Often, during those meetings I encountered individuals that I had provided treatment services. Often the feedback, I received from clients about the effectiveness of their treatment experience was on how much they appreciated the fact that I was present during the meetings that I attended or that I was there when they shared their personal story with the group. During those meetings, I frequently said nothing and frequently did nothing, but I did shake hands, greet people, and asked them different questions that I knew were important to them. Though these were simple actions that I took part in every day of my life, I discovered that these actions were very important, because I was present with them.

Job's friends who sat with him in his time of trouble, their presence counted, their main problem came when they decided to speak. We often believe we need to say something important and useful, when all that is really needed is our presence. Others simply need to know they are not alone, someone is willing to stand with them.

Jesus made a difference in the life of a Samaritan woman and the village where she lived, not just because of the words he shared, but because he clearly showed that his presence among them was important and they came to believe.

Lee McDermott, Contributor      Remember in Prayer: Those who are finding their ministry among those who simply need the presence and compassion of others.

## Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Psalm 51:1-11**

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me." (Ps. 51:10-11)

I am including a Holy Reading Psalm 51:1, 4, 6, 10, 15-17 and then a devotional stretch so as to pray with your body.

Have mercy on me O GOD, according to your steadfast love; According to your abundant mercies blot out my transgressions. You desire truth in the inward being; therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Create in me a clean heart, O GOD, and put a new and right spirit within me.

PRAYING WITH THE BODY, HEART, AND SOUL

Hear me, O Merciful One (legs hip distance apart, slowly raise arms to the stars)

Inhale: Quietly express your prayer with your body, heart, and soul. Clear my conscience in your love (arms extended to the side slowly twist from side to side keep knees slightly bent)

Exhale: breathe out guilt, shame and blame. Your truth Permeates my whole being (grab opposite elbows behind back, press heart forward, stretch throat and let head drop towards back)

Inhale: With open heart, inhale God's truth. Your wisdom fills my heart (Raise arms to the heavens, press palms together, slide hands to the heart and bow)

Exhale: Bowing down, thank GOD for the wisdom to know love from fear. Fill me with your loving Spirit (slide hands to back of calves pull chest towards thighs, forward fold)

Inhale: Be inspired, renewed, and revitalized as you inhale. Cleanse my heart of wrath, greed and gluttony. (arm's reach out touching floor with fingertips tailbone lifted)

Exhale: feel lightened, emptied, and open for God's love. Rid my lips of lies and deceit, O God (sitting on floor, softening face, drop chin, soften jaw, hands pressed together at heart center)

Inhale: lift your chin, soften your lips, open your mouth to receive goodness, truth, and beauty. Let them instead declare your love (stretch arms out taking hold of your pant legs and lower nose towards knees)

Exhale: Bow your head to a love that never fails. Accept and heal my broken spirit (on all fours drop belly, bring eyes up towards the heavens, tailbone up, then arch body like a cat, chin to chest, tuck tailbone)

Inhale: Look up and offer you soul for comfort and healing. Teach me to be humble of heart (knees out wide, forehead to the ground, arms stretched out, child's pose)

Exhale: Be the child of God that you are: loved, loving, and loveable!

May the longtime sun shine upon you, all love surround you, and the pure light within you, guide your way on. - Irish prayer

Andrea Falcone, Contributor

### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 3:6-18

Psalm 51

Romans 1:26-28—2:11

John 5:1-18

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 9:8-12**

"The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.'" (John 9:8-9)

In my early years as an addictions counselor, I was amazed by the transformation; physically, emotionally, and spiritually that occurred with people in recovery. A few years into their recoveries many were unrecognizable compared to their former selves. One day, I was shopping with my wife when a woman ran up and gave me a great, big hug. I had no idea who this woman was and my wife also wondered why some strange woman was hugging me. The woman told me who she was and I barely believed it, I had not seen her in five years when she completed treatment. She was 33 when I first met her, but she looked more like 55, because of her addiction. Now five years later, she looked her age.

Recovery has a major impact on many, bringing back renewed health, strength, and appearance. In the reading from John, people could not believe this was the same man who was once blind and a beggar, "*Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.'"* (v. 9) His encounter with Jesus transformed his life. Often, people are unable to recognize a person in recovery. Many people nevertheless remain afraid of even interacting with recovering people, if known.

I provided pulpit supply among many congregations when I worked as an addictions counselor. I introduced myself and revealed my full-time job. After worship this led to many interesting conversations. People would seek advice about someone's addiction. Often, someone would introduce themselves as a person who had been in recovery for 5, 10, 15 or more years. I asked if others in the church knew about their recovery and usually the answer was no. They often stated they had not shared this information, because they did not want to be identified by their old, former self. They hoped to only be identified as the person they now were in Christ. They were also concerned how others in the congregation might respond, if others knew.

These individuals had a wonderful story of transformation, renewal, forgiveness, and grace to share, but they were fearful that others might not see it the same way. A chief reason for not speaking was that they did not know where the congregation and particularly, the church leadership stood on the issue of addiction. The church never let it be known where they stood on the problem of addiction in the community. They were afraid that if knowledge of their recovery became known, others would only see them through the eyes of their former selves and not the person they had become. We sometimes give silent signals that we don't believe in stories of transformation into new creations through Christ. Where does your church stand, have you ever spoken about it, what silent signals are you unknowingly communicating, and what do you want your community to know about you?

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 4:9–10, 19–28

Psalms 102

Romans 2:12–24

John 5:19–29

Lee McDermott, Contributor

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 3:5-8**

"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

Some years ago, I read a story about Dr. M. Scott Peck who became a Christian late in his life. He was often asked by others, if he was a born again Christian. He responded by saying, if he was born again, it was a prolonged and difficult delivery. I have since come to understand too clearly exactly what Dr. Peck was saying, many experiences of coming to faith are prolonged and difficult deliveries.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 5:1-9

Psalms 130

Romans 2:25-3:18

John 5:30-47

While conducting workshops among faith communities, I have had church leaders tell me that if the AOD dependent person would just give their life to Christ and be born again they would be healed and their problem gone. As important as I know spiritual formation and faith are to recovery, I found that the delivery is far more difficult. Most AOD dependent people would love to have God do all the heavy lifting, but we know life doesn't always work that way. What is worth having is worth working hard to gain and keep. Generally, what the AOD dependent person wants is that God will remove the consequences of their usage, but allow them to continue their use as before. It just doesn't work that way.

Jesus is telling us we need to experience a new birth in the Spirit, but we need to gain a reliance upon the movement of the Holy Spirit. We need to learn to listen to the changing movements of the Spirit among us. For us to be lead to a new birth in the spirit, we will discover the spirit will blow us to destinations where we might not wish to go and ask us to quietly rest in the silence, to hear the sounds of the Spirit working among us. Silence is difficult for the AOD dependent person because they have grown accustomed to the noise which surrounds them.

If we are willing to reach out God's spirit will go with us, but we might not discern how it is working to bring new life. Being born again will not solve all our problems, it will often lead to a difficult and prolonged journey to discover our role within God's world. Though with the help and reliance upon the Spirit it will be a journey worth the time taken. The recovering person needs to learn to discern the movement of the Spirit just as the church needs to continuously discern the Spirit's movement within their members lives together. It is how we are born refreshed and new each day.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Our ability to discern the Spirit's movement around us.

#### Informational Resources

[National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)



### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Matthew 6:19-21**

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt. 6:19-21)

For some people, it is difficult to admit they were wrong; others have trouble making an apology. For me, the most difficult words are these: In the depths of his addiction my son stole something from me. Both money and sentimental items were gone, but they weren't the really important issues. The loss of control over my life, the loss of trust in my child, fear for my son's wellbeing, and the speed at which this new reality hit literally stunned me.

Most remnants of my pride were gone by the time I asked for help for my son. But there was still an elephant in the room. I could not bring myself to reach out to friends – people in our neighborhood, our congregation, and others close to my heart. Pride remained, battered but intact.

It was only when a friend reached out to me in her pain that I was able to break out of my self-imposed prison of silence. My friend's child was addicted. I shared our story with her – the pain of discovery, the uncertainty of the treatment journey, and the joy of recovery – and I think we both received some measure of comfort from our conversations. We were able to put into words that our children are great gifts from God, and they are the treasures that we seek to protect – not our pride, not our community standing, not our checkbooks, and not the opinions of those around us who might not understand our journey. Acknowledging my fears and pride allowed me to then accept and examine my weakness. And I was reminded that "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5: 6) There I was, there was my son, and there are we all.

Once I gave up on the worry about how my loss of earthly treasures would be viewed, I joined my son in becoming a recovering addict – I still care too much about how others view me, my family and my child – but I walk each day with the faith that God's view is different from ours. If my son can recover from his addiction to drugs, I can learn to live without pride.

Susan Perry, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Mother, Fathers, and Grandparents who struggle to find peace as they face the addiction of one of their children.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 5:20–31

Psalms 95

Romans 3:19–31

John 7:1–13

## 2017 Lenten Devotional

Sunday, March 19, 2017

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Third Sunday in Lent

Today's Scripture: **John 4:15-17**

"The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.' Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';" (John 4:15-17)

Most AOD dependent individuals and their families find it difficult to face the truth of their current lives. Our ministry in the church is to provide a safe and secure environment where they can face the truth and find the "living water" that Jesus tells us about.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 6:9-15

Psalms 150

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Mark 5:1-20

The woman in this story is willing to be honest with Jesus about the state of her life at this moment, "I have no husband."

When the woman bares the *truth* of her life, she and Jesus can begin to talk honestly and the work of healing can begin.

**The first casualty of addiction is always the Truth.** I ache for the "little" lies addiction causes. They get bigger and more frequent and erode relationships away. They destroy trust between loved ones and friends. I think that one of the BEST things about a 12-Step Group is that there are other people there who tell you their stories. You can see yourself in their stories, and you know that you are not crazy. And you are not alone. Only another addict can voice what you are going through, and when they say it – it has the unmistakable ring of truth. Truth has a holiness and authority all of its own. Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" - and it really does.

Donna Havrisko, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Those drug dependent individuals who are facing the truth of their behavior and the pain this creates.

#### Local Resources – Westmoreland County

**Westmoreland County Drug and Alcohol Commission, Inc.** (WeDAC, Inc.)

1 Wendell Ramey Lane, Suite 120, Monessen, PA 15062

Phone: 724-684-9000, ext. 4446

Fax: 724-684-3489

Hours: Monday-Friday 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

<http://wedacinc.org/>

In Case of An Emergency Call: 1-800-220-1810, Ext. 2

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Isaiah 58:1-12**

"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 the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isa. 58:6-7)

It's hard to share. Any preschool teacher or parent will tell you that it's difficult for a child to let other people play with their things. In the preschool setting, if a child walks into a play kitchen, the one who is already in there is told to share. If a child is playing with blocks and another wants to join, what happens? Someone steps in to make sure they share and cooperate.

But if we think about it, we lose that emphasis on sharing as we age. As we move into the independence of adulthood we go the opposite direction. High school students all have their own books and materials. As adults we have houses full of things that many of us don't share. Can you imagine someone walking into your kitchen or garage uninvited and wanting to use your tools? Is there anyone there who insists that you share?

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 7:1-15

Psalms 145

Romans 4:1-12

John 7:14-36

No. Our decision to share or not is internalized from lessons learned in preschool and God's words to us about what it means to be faithful. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God wants us to share—our food, our homes, our clothes. This is the devotion that God would like to see.

There are so many ways we can share. We can invite people in our kitchens, our churches and our lives. We can offer people, especially those with addiction in their families, the nourishment and love that they need to get through each day.

Maybe there are days that we need to think of God as our teacher. The one who gently walks a new people into our lives and churches, leading them forward with a hand on their backs and saying to us, "Remember to share your things" or "Why don't you welcome her into your game?" or "This is my child."

Sue Washburn, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Churches who are honestly seeking to answer the call to lift the yoke of addiction and set free their communities.

#### Informational Resources

**NIDA for Teens**

<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/>

**Easy-to-Read Drug Facts**

<https://easyread.drugabuse.gov/>

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Psalms 51:12-17**

"Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.... The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Ps. 51:12, 17)

We don't like to admit that there may be aspects of our lives where we have little or no control. Twelve step groups frequently speak of surrender, the action of a person who acknowledges that they have lost control and are powerless over their continued use and behavior. A *"broken spirit"* is a good example of this surrender. Surrender is not easy, people want to believe, they are in control even a little bit, but without complete surrender they will always fall back to old, destructive patterns. The surrender that leads to recovery starts in the same way the psalmist states, with *"a broken and contrite heart."* (v. 17)

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 7:21-34

Psalms 91

Romans 4:13-25

John 7:37-52

Psalm 51 are the anxious words of one who feels desperately cut off from the presence of God. The psalmist here is broken by sin and guilt and is pleading with God for restoration. Many individuals, not just those suffering from addiction, share the same brokenness described by the Psalmist. Individuals in the depths of their brokenness who will hear the words that we preach and are convinced that God is justified in abandoning them. Their addictive behavior has surrounded them with their guilt and shame and they are certain that sin has rendered them utterly unworthy of any communion with God. What words do we offer to the desperate? Do we offer confirmation of their worthlessness, by driving home the destructive consequences of their sin?

Lent is a season in which all of us are called back to a right relationship with God. For some individuals, they are certain that not even repentance will lead them on the path toward restoration. Restoration will only come when they are freed from the guilt that has for too long crushed their soul and spirit. The Psalmist offers to the desperate the solution to our epic problem of restoration with God: steadfast love and abundant mercy, a God who is eternally "for us" with the endless love of a mother for her child. The God whose everlasting love will never abandon us, no matter what our guilt says. Steadfast love and abundant mercy not only heals us of the stain of sin, but also of the lie of our worthlessness. Who among us doesn't need to hear that word?

The psalmist then prays for the power not to sin again (vv. 10-13). He wants a clean heart that can stay clean. He understands that such an action is beyond his human ability, but is available from God, who has the power to cause the change of human hearts. Our calling in season and out of season is announcing that restoration between God and his people is possible, restoration to our relationships with others is possible, restoration to God's salvation is possible, restoration to church and community is possible. Lent is calling us to acknowledge our own restoration and how it is possible for our neighbor through the steadfast love and mercy of God.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Families with broken hearts because of the heroin epidemic.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

"If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable," (1 Cor. 12:19-22)

In teaching congregations about evangelism and hospitality, I have often emphasized that today's visitor may be that special person God has sent us who will be essential to the future life and ministry of the church five or ten years from now. God often takes a long view of our church's ministry, rather than just addressing or meeting our immediate, short-term ministry needs.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul invites church members to realize and act upon their essential unity in Jesus Christ, instead of focusing on our differences in status, opinion and practice. In 12:12-31a, Paul continues his line of reasoning about the proper use of the gifts of God's Spirit within the life of the church. God's Spirit has chosen and empowered individuals to work closely together for the common good (v. 7). No one person has everything the church needs, and no one gift is possessed and used by every person; thus, every person's spiritual gift is needed. Diversity and unity are held together in Paul's imagery of an individual as part of a collective, working together for the same purpose.

Paul uses the parts of the body as an illustration for what it means to be the church and looks for ways each part of the body can function at its best. We are the eyes, ears, feet and hands. We are part of the body of Christ. We are dependent upon each other. We function best when we realize that despite our differences we all work together toward the same goal.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 8:4-7, 18-19:6

Psalms 10

Romans 5:1-11

John 8:12-20

Often churches want to increase their church membership, but they want people who are just like them. Unfortunately, the supply of people just like us has been depleted. Paul is telling us, we can't all be feet, we need other body parts to be whole. The church that is faithful to their mission is the church capable of encouraging people who are much different than themselves with different stories, experiences, talents and skills. They can and will teach us many things about God we have missed and breathe new life into the church's life.

Each of us needs to accept our role and celebrate others' role which are different than ours, and work for the common good of our calling in the Holy Spirit. We each have experiences, stories, views unique to us, which has the power through the Holy Spirit to impact the world around us. As Paul reminds us, *"On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,"* (v. 22) The stories and capabilities of those in recovery can play a prominent role in the future ministry of our church. God sends us others who will join with us in a common ministry and can help us recapture what it means to go and make disciples. Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: The ability to welcome those with different gifts.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Psalm 23**

"he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." (Ps. 23:3)

In Lent, we are reminded to meditate, repent and restore our souls. The words of Psalm 23 teach us how. Jesus is our shepherd who guides and leads us to good places. As his sheep, he wants our commitment to follow him. When we follow him, we will find contentment in the pathways of life.

When we sin, and go our own path, we cannot blame God for the environment we have created for ourselves. When one is an addict and going their own path into a sinful life of drugs or alcohol he is not following the Shepherd.

But the story doesn't need to end there.

The shepherd seeks his sheep, when they are lost he looks for them. Even in the darkness of addiction, the shepherd is within reach. Seek his help in prayer, humility and repentance.

Our souls can be depleted in normal life through work, busyness and life problems as well. Our souls are even more quickly depleted in the life of addiction. Multiple losses of job, money, family and the physical daily needs of drugs can deplete a soul to the point of survival mode.

Addiction is a wrong path because Jesus is not guiding this path. Jesus leads us to still waters and down right paths. We only reach the "green pastures" and "still waters" by following him.

So how can a soul be restored? Physical needs of sleep, food and shelter need to be met. Spiritual needs can be restored. Getting on your knees to pray to God, reflection, quiet and diversion of the lifestyle all can restore the soul.

Psalm 119:105 tell us, "*Your Word is a lamp to my feet and light for my path.*" In Jesus, he guides us down the right path. Addiction is a hard life circumstance although Jesus is shining his light the brightest in these dark times. Look for him in his word, in prayer and he will light the way to righteousness.

Lynn Mance, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Those who feel lost and pray the Lord will restore their soul.

#### **Local Resources — Somerset County**

##### **Somerset Single County Authority (SCA) for Drug and Alcohol**

300 North Center Avenue, Suite 360, Somerset, PA 15501

Phone: (814) 445-1530 Fax: (814) 445-1524 Accessline: 1-800-452-0218

A 24-hour toll free number to provide human service information and referral.

<http://www.co.somerset.pa.us/departments.asp?deptnum=11>

#### **Today's Lectionary Readings**

Jeremiah 10:11-24

Psalm 23

Romans 5:12-21

John 8:21-32



### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Psalm 130:1-8**

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;" (Ps. 130:1, 5)

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." These words of King David lamenting the death of his son echo the laments that have been expressed by my family when the scourge of addiction claimed one of our own members on November 6, 2016. Noah was 27 when he died of a heroin overdose, leaving behind a mother, father, brother, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, coworkers and many others who knew and loved him. Losing a loved one to a drug overdose is difficult to publicly acknowledge, but doing so and putting a name and face to this terrible disease of addiction may, just may, save a life.

Noah's mother reflected on what it means to be an addict in a recent newspaper article written about his struggles:

"When you know the highs of addiction, you forget the lows. You forget that you've used your last \$40 on your drug of choice and you don't have money for food, or you blew your last paycheck on drugs and can't pay your rent. You can't afford a bus ticket home, because you wanted to get high last night and now you're getting the shakes, and your stomach is sick and you need to get high..."

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 11:1-8, 14-17

Psalm 130

Romans 6:1-11

John 8:33-47

The grief felt by those of us who loved Noah often seems too difficult to bear. As his mother wrote:

"There are days when I don't want to move, to get out of bed. I wake up crying, I cry all day, I cry myself to sleep at night, I wake up in the middle of the night with tears on my cheeks, only to start the cycle all over again the next day. His name, his face, his smile race through my head all day long. I'm not handling it well, and sometimes, I don't want to handle it at all. The loss is just simply overwhelming."

Please pray for those feeling such excruciating lament, prayers to put hope in the Lord and His unfailing love.

Cathy Ritter, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Families who cry out of the depths of their soul for loved ones in the grips of addiction.

#### Informational Resources

**National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teachers**

<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/teachers>

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Romans 5:12-21**

"For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more," (Rom. 5:19-20)

There is much we can do to assist others in achieving their recovery, but we must remember, we are not alone in this pursuit. We are partners with God, we need to depend upon God who can do what we can't now see or things we can't now do.

I have over the years worked with many individuals whom I prayed for while working with them and I witnessed the grace of God at work within them. I have seen God intervene in ways I could not imagine and often, was unable to see at first, but only later recognized God's hand at work where, "*grace abounded all the more,*" (v. 20)

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 13:1-11

Psalms 149

Romans 6:12-23

John 8:47-59

Denial can be a very strong force in the lives of those with dependency problems, they harbor the common illusion that many people hold that addiction couldn't possibly happen to me. Paul in this passage speaks of disobedience, this disobedience is like the meaning of denial you often hear regarding those with AOD dependency. In both denial and disobedience, we believe our view of the world is better than the reality which we clearly face and the reality that others see quite clearly, but we question their perceptions of the same reality.

Obedience calls on us to see the world as it currently exists and it is not always a very pleasant picture of humanity. Obedience to God's will does not mean everything will go smoothly or there won't be some difficult hills to climb. Obedience does not guarantee that the wind will always be at our backs and that the journey will be calm and peaceful. Jesus told his disciples to cross to the other side of the lake, even though he knew the wind would be working against them. Jesus does tell us that he will never leave us alone and will be with us until the end of the age.

One of my favorite old hymns is "Trust and Obey". When I was, younger I was not fond of this hymn, trusting and obeying was not high on my list of things to do. As I grew older, increased in maturity, and hopefully wiser, I recognized how important trusting and obeying had become to my spiritual formation. When a person enters treatment for AOD dependency, their initial posture is not geared toward trusting and obeying, so some time is needed for them, to come to trust the treatment staff and come to comply or obey their treatment plan. Trust and obedience does not come easily, but is essential to treatment success. In early recovery, trusting someone can prove difficult and complicated and disobedience has become a way of life and not easily relinquished.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Professionals who work each day to lead others to life and recovery from their addiction.

Scripture: **John 4:36-38**

"The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." (John 4:36-38)

When we, as Christ's church, set out to address the AOD problems in our communities, we will experience the joy of seeing a harvest through our efforts. While, on other days, we will struggle when all we can hope to accomplish is to sow. In our sowing, we may never see the resulting harvest within a single, individual life where we have placed a great deal of our effort. Sadly, our sowing may not produce any harvest because addiction is deadly and the end of the story is tragic and heartbreaking.

When a person first enters treatment, their initial treatment experience may not produce a lasting journey toward recovery, but as an addictions counselor my responsibility was to sow a seed. Positive recovery outcomes may only bear fruit much later and the harvest may not be witnessed by us, but only by others weeks, months, or years later. As an addictions counselor, I know this happened frequently, I never clearly discovered what eventually happened to many of these individuals. What I did come to recognize is that God did. In turn, God allowed me the opportunity to meet some of these people months or years later.

The ability to learn what eventually happened to these individuals, who were now recovering, was truly a gift of God's grace toward me. I discovered that what I did, the actions I took and the efforts that I put forth did produce positive results at some future moment. They may not have borne fruit in the fashion that I imagined or the ways that I had hoped, but God did produce a harvest. I was privileged that God gave me the chance to truly see what my early efforts had achieved.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 14:1-22

Psalms 84

Galatians 4:21-5:1

Mark 8:11-21

As leaders within the church, we need to approach those who are lost and living in the darkness of addiction with prayer, discernment and trust in the Holy Spirit. We need to trust that God is indeed at work within the lives of these individuals. If we can trust where God is leading, and trust that God is hearing us, and trust that God stands beside us as we struggle each day to address the problems of AOD, God will bring an abundant harvest. As the church, we are called upon to sow and sometimes God will call upon us to reap. In whatever circumstances we may find ourselves surrounded by God's grace, God is calling us to be faithful and steadfast in our faith. And by doing so we will discover that we will indeed reap where we have not sowed, but our labors will never have been in vain.

As a church, we are first sent out to sow and be faithful in the sowing, then God will not forget us, God will allow us to see an abundant harvest.

Lee McDermott, Contributor      Remember in Prayer: Churches able to see the harvest which lies all around them and how God's Spirit will lead them to the right place.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Ezekiel 37:10-14**

"I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.'" (Ezek. 37:10-12)

Deep within the souls of those struggling with AOD dependency is the belief that they are beyond hope, they are lost deep within the grave of despair. Recovery offers the possibility of resurrection. They need us to help them believe that recovery is possible.

People in the midst their addictions believe the same as the people referenced by Ezekiel in today's passage, "*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.*" (v. 11) God needs Jesus' disciples to exercise their prophetic voice and proclaim what God can do, "*to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves*" (v. 12)

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 16:1-21

Psalms 6

Romans 7:1-12

John 6:1-15

We are called to proclaim a message they have never heard and to believe in someone they have never known. Prophets share the word of God with us, reminding us who we are as God's people, something which has been true from the beginning of time and has faded from our memories. We all have days and moments when we feel, "*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.*" (v. 11) These moments come at times of grief, during sudden and rapid life changes, or emotional distress.

The whole church is called by God to have a prophetic voice in our communities and proclaim that together with the Holy Spirit we have a partner in our faith. Jesus Christ leads us to the harvest which will breathe new life into our communities and help those affected by AOD problems rise to their feet to new life. We are also called to teach them how to tell their stories of restoration and redemption, how "*they lived, and stood on their feet.*" They have rich and meaningful stories about how God's love and grace transformed their lives and we as the church need to hear their stories and the hope they show us and our communities.

We all have stories of faith, heartache, hope, and grief capable of breathing new life into our communities. Communities which have arrived at a point where they have come to believe "*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;*" (v. 11) Our prophetic voice allows these stories to live and breathe new life into our communities. We are called to tell our stories and share our hope, to encourage those with recovery stories, those with stories of grief and loss, those with stories of transformation, and those with stories of resurrection which lifted them up from the darkness. We have stories to tell which can breathe new life and raise up our communities from their graves of despair. What stories is God's Spirit calling your church to tell and teach others to tell?

Lee McDermott, Contributor

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

#### Scripture: Galatians 5:1-6

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1)

Christ has set us free. We are free. Thanks be to God.

I want you to take a minute and think about a difficult time where you felt as though you were trapped in your life, or unable to make a change. How did you get through? Did you move on in your life only later to return to what was causing problems in the first place?

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 17:19-27

Psalms 91

Romans 7:13-25

John 6:16-27

We can take this lesson in scripture and apply it to so many aspects of our lives. For instance, we can start with something easy and look at dieting. How many of you have ever started a diet on New Year's Day? How many of you were still committed to your diet by March? How many by April? For those of you who no longer became committed to the diet, think about what happened. Did you decide to have a piece of cake at a party one day? Did you decide that it was okay to have an extra serving of your favorite meal that mom made (because you wouldn't want things to go to waste, now would we?) and things just started to go downhill from there?

When we break out of a cycle it is often so easy to slowly pick up and return to what we were initially doing in the first place (in a short amount of time). This can truly be said about many aspects of one's life, whether it's dieting, exercise, drinking, smoking, money, gambling, shopping, etc.

What the scripture tells us is that we are free, Christ has set us free. Thanks, be to God that we can be free! However, what the scripture also tells us is that we must stand firm and not submit again to a yoke of slavery. We know that Christ has set us free however, this does not mean that we can go back to the same demons that he has set us free from and expect that everything will be okay. We have a responsibility to stand firm and to not submit ourselves to that slavery. Slavery is a very strong word. How often do we make ourselves slaves to different vices in life? Sometimes it's easy to overlook this.

Lent is a season where we are called back to enter a right relationship with Christ. We have the blessing of knowing that we are accepted for whom we are as sinners and that God has promised that we are not alone. God has also promised us that we are free; he has set us free from whatever has enslaved us in our lives. However, God is also telling us that we have a responsibility to be accountable and to choose not to return to old behaviors that can bring us back into that cycle of slavery again. Thanks, be to God for the blessing and lessons we have in life, and for giving us the ability to move forward and to change.

Elizabeth Comer, Contributor

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 4:27-38**

"Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.'" (John 4:34-35)

The problems and challenges we face with alcohol and other drug (AOD) abuse and dependency is not something that impacts us only externally. AOD issues are not someone else's problem to solve. We can't just say that if only the government, the police, or social services would do this or that specific thing, the problem will go away in a few months. We, as a society, as a church, have a AOD problem. The AOD problem is ours by omission and when we fail to adequately live out the full expression of the gospel, we are advancing the development of AOD problems in our communities. AOD dependency, abuse and usage is as much a spiritual and relational problem than it is a physical or mental issue.

Jesus is reminding us that we only need to look around us to find opportunities for mission, "*the fields are ripe for harvesting.*" (v. 35) To hear the cries of those suffering, a field of mission lies before us and is ripe for the harvesting. What churches DO need to know is how to recognize when it's time for the harvest. The Samaritan woman recognized something special in the person of Jesus, "*Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!*" (v. 29)

The message of the harvest is always urgent, the destiny of neighborhoods, communities and families hangs in the balance. Every generation is crucial; every generation is strategic. We are not responsible for the successes or failures of a past generation and we cannot fully determine how future generations will answer the call. However, we do have our current generation! God will hold us responsible for what we do or choice not to do now. Someday, Jesus will ask us why we did not recognize Him in our neighbor.

This relationship between God's mission and the church's work in the world is the reason Jesus reminds his disciples that sometimes the fields are ripe for harvesting - not just for sowing (v. 35). When the fields have already been plowed, and planted by God's own Spirit, then Jesus' disciples simply need to decide to join with God's ongoing actions, for we are called to harvest this crop which we have not sown.

A group within Redstone Presbytery has been meeting periodically to discuss the problems and issues related to AOD facing our churches. Come and join us in the conversation. **The Addiction Ministry Network** meets again on **Monday, April 3, 2017 at Noon** at the offices of Redstone Presbytery in Greensburg, PA.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Ask God to show us the way to reveal our light to those living in the darkness and need someone to lead them out.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Psalms 27

Romans 8:1-11

John 6:27-40



### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Romans 8:24-25**

"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." (Rom. 8:24-25)

It often feels hopeless for an addict's family who is caught in the web of the addiction of a loved one. You've probably tried most everything to get it to stop. You've hid loose cash, you tried tough love, you've prayed, you sought rehabilitation information and maybe even called the police. Addiction leaves us worn out, beat up and feeling useless as an addict's family. We often fear what tomorrow may bring.

But we are reminded in the verses of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 that everything has a season and there is a time for everything. In our frightened and desperate times, God sends an advocate to stabilize us. He sends the Holy Spirit. God never makes a promise he won't keep but nevertheless his plan may take more time than we expect or sometimes doesn't go the way we had hoped. Instead of waiting impatiently for things to improve, we should place our confidence in God's goodness and wisdom. God's got it even when we don't.

By accepting the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can let go of our own resources to cope with problems. When requests are brought to God, trust that he will always do what is best.

If a loved one eventually loses his battle with addiction, so much is lost and irreplaceable. Lent offers the opportunity for reflection and change. In hope we can look ahead and trust toward what lies beyond this life when we are with Christ. God is not working to keep us happy and give us what we want in this life, he is working to fulfill his promises. Trust in God, not life's treasures, look for security in heaven that sometimes can't be found on earth.

Lynn Mance, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Families caught in addiction that they might find a way forward.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 22:13-23

Psalms 102

Romans 8:12-27

John 6:41-51

#### Local Resources — Fayette County

##### **Fayette County Drug and Alcohol Commission, Inc.**

100 New Salem Road, Suite 106, Uniontown, PA 15401

E-mail: [clientservices@fcdaa.org](mailto:clientservices@fcdaa.org)

<http://fcdaa.org/>

Phone: 724-438-3576

Fax: 724-438-3305

Toll Free: **800-856-3576** Toll free number answers 24 hours/day-7 days/week

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture Reading: **Matthew 9:9-13**

*"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him." (Matt. 9:9)*

Jesus knew that it was a religious violation to break bread with tax collectors, social outcasts and misfits, not to mention to be in close contact with a diseased woman, but he broke bread with them all. They clearly are a group gathered in fellowship. Jesus is literally a *"friend of sinners."* He did these things because he believed that showing mercy is never against the law of God.

Jesus sits down to dinner with a group of tax collectors and "sinners," people in Jesus's day, as well as ours, who were considered misfits and outcasts, earning the disdain of the purity-conscious Pharisees. But Jesus turns the tables, telling them that he has come to call not the righteous, but sinners. *"Go and learn what this means,"* he orders them, *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice"* (vv. 10-13).

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 23:1-8

Psalms 105

Romans 8:28-39

John 6:52-59

*"Go and learn what this means,"* is a phrase God has frequently shared with me. Following Jesus requires us to hit the road and experience life only in the way that Jesus can show us. Working with individuals both in the depths of their addictions, those in recovery, and their family members, helped me to understand, Jesus words about mercy, grace, forgiveness and so much more.

In calling Matthew to be one of his disciples, Jesus picked one of the most unlikely individuals. A tax collector who by profession was despised by his own people. Jesus' had the ability to see within those he called, not only what they were, but also what they could be. What did Matthew see in Jesus that made him instantly ready to leave everything, to follow Jesus? At that moment, maybe Matthew saw in Jesus the hope of true friendship and peace with God, maybe he experienced the irresistible grace of God.

Jesus shows real transformative power when he surprises the Pharisees with a call for mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus is calling us to see the possibilities which exist in the individuals around us, despite the problems and challenges they currently face. Our ministry believe that God's grace and mercy will bring amazing and unexpected change. We are expected show mercy, to educate, mentor, and help them shape their lives into the potential that God created them to fulfill.

We must note what Matthew lost and what Matthew found. He lost a comfortable job, but found a destiny. He lost a good income, but found honor. He lost a comfortable security, but found an adventure the like of which he had never imagined. We come to believe that beyond any doubt we will find a peace and joy and thrill for life that we never knew before. Do you thirst for true and lasting friendship with God? *"For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."* (Matt. 9:13)

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Ability to care for those not always invited to the table.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Ezekiel 37:7-10**

"So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'" (Ezek. 37:7-9)

One night, my husband had to take my teen-aged daughter to the emergency room because she couldn't breathe. She was afraid that she was dying, but we later learned that a severe panic attack can feel a lot like a heart attack. She had to learn how to trust in her breath. Breath is life.

When God creates Adam in Genesis 2, he is a lifeless body until God breathes into his nostrils and makes him a living being. Breath is life.

At yoga, my teacher is always reminding us to breathe. She says yoga is not about how strong we are or how flexible we are, but about how we breathe. Breath is life.

In today's Bible verse the prophet Ezekiel commanded the bones and flesh to come together as bodies, but there was no breath in them. Even though they looked human on the outside they were dead on the inside.

So often we can have everything together on the outside. Our lives look like they are supposed to. We get up. We go to work. We care for our families. We work around the house. But, sometimes we do it without any breath. Without breath, there is no life. We are dead inside.

And so, we reach out to those things that make us feel alive again on the inside—food or alcohol or drugs or shopping. We can become addicted to a lot of things that give us a false life. Things that make us feel good and alive for a short time but in the end, leave us empty again.

But the good news of the gospel is that God is not a temporary fix. God is in the business of creating new life, but it's not temporary. God is in the eternity business. When God breathes life into us, it doesn't mean everything will go our way and life will be easy. No, it is a promise that we will not have to panic or suffer alone. God is with us in the dry and dusty pits of our life. It's a promise that when we can't breathe, God will do it for us so that we may truly live.

Sue Washburn, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: New life might be breathed into our communities to find their way toward helping their neighbors.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 23:9–15

Psalms 143

Romans 9:1–18

John 6:60–71

## 2017 Lenten Devotional

Sunday, April 2, 2017

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Scripture: **1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

"To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." (1 Cor. 9:22-23)

In 1939 the story is told about the Nazis' moving into the Netherlands. Dutch theologian, Henry Kramer was asked by a group of Christian lay people, "Our Jewish neighbors are disappearing from their homes. What must we do?"

Kramer answered, "I cannot tell you what to do. I can tell you who you are. If you know who you are, you will know what to do." Later, these people became part of the Dutch Resistance Movement.

During our moment under the sun, we are called upon to remember who our God is and that we are God's people. How we respond during the defining moments of our lives will determine and define our conduct and personal relationships. Walter Brueggeman once stated, "What God does first and best and most is to trust his people with their moment in history. He trusts them to do what must be done for the sake of his whole community."

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 23:16-32

Psalms 84

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Mark 8:31-9:1

As we look around our communities, hear and read the reports of heroin overdose deaths and the social disruption due to other alcohol and other drug usage, we are being called to remember who we are. We could look around and declare, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, "*I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.*" (Eccl. 1:14) Or we could declare the same as Paul, "*I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.*" (1 Cor. 9:23)

If we had a choice to pick which social problems to solve, we might select something easier than AOD problems, but in our moment under the sun, this is the problem that God is trusting us to do what must be done. How do you feel about God entrusting you with your "moment in history?" What does this mean to you?

We are called to "*do it all for the sake of the gospel,*" and like Paul, we are to search and find whatever means works to achieve our mission, so we "*might by all means save some*". God is trusting us with our moment in history.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: To know who we are as God's people, which leads us to doing what is right.

#### Informational Resources

**National Drug and Alcohol Facts Week® - January 22-28, 2018**

<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/national-drug-alcohol-facts-week>

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **John 9:1-7**

"As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9:1-3)

I heard stories in A.A. of individuals that stated they were grateful God made them an alcoholic, because it helped them to have a life better than they could have had otherwise. Of course, these statements were made by people who were in recovery. As they reflected upon their lives they were grateful in how their addiction ultimately lead them to a life of recovery. Their recovery, in turn, lead them to a transformed life filled with the joy they were now experiencing. I don't believe God ever planned someone to intentionally become dependent upon AOD, but I have personally come to understand that God can use the place wherever it is we are now, as the starting point for a wonderful journey to discover God's love, mercy and grace.

Our life stories vary greatly from person to person and in each circumstance, God uses our stories to reveal God's presence. We all have stories of faith, we might think that others would find our stories lackluster and uninspiring, but we don't give ourselves enough credit. We might not appreciate the place where our journey begins, but we can only start at the place we currently are.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 24:1-10

Psalms 119:73-80

Romans 9:19-33

John 9:1-17

While attending seminary, I had a field education position working in evangelism in a north side Chicago church. At the time, I thought I was misplaced in this specific ministry position. My evangelism partner was a woman in the church who was about my age and was originally from western Pennsylvania, like me. We were assigned to visit individuals who had visited the church and trained how to share our faith stories and guide these individuals in making a personal decision for Christ. We both had grown up in similar churches and we both believed our faith stories were rather dull and boring, probably not capable of changing any hearts or minds. We were both wrong. Our dull and boring stories connected to the lives of many we visited. I discovered during those days the Holy Spirit was fully capable of taking whatever we had to offer and use it to give glory to God. God's spirit can take whatever the circumstance of our lives may be and provide us with a story of faith *"so that God's works might be revealed."* (v. 3)

We may believe that we have nothing to offer our communities on a variety of social problems. The blind man trusted Jesus and began at the point where he found himself and God's works were revealed in him, as they can be revealed in us. If we take the time to discern how the Holy Spirit is already at work within our communities, we will discover we can become God's partner in giving glory to God in all things.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Our ability to see God's works revealed in our midst.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Romans 5:3-11**

"and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:5, 8)

Over the years, I have extended many invitations to recovering people to join me during Sunday morning worship, frequently I am told, "I'll go back to church after I get my act together." In response, I've told them "God is ready for you now, I would hope the church could be the place where you can get your act together." Sadly, many recovering people did not see it the way I did, they had come to believe that the church was unwilling to accept them until their act was together, that the church only accepted perfect people, not flawed.

This approach to the church makes about as much sense as the person who only hires a housekeeper after they have cleaned the house. We don't need something after we have already did it. Of course, the chances I will ever get my house clean is about as possible as I will ever get my act together completely as a person. I know I need God each day, if I have any chance to keep my act together. The church should be the place where we learn how it is God will help us become a better human being. Jesus does not call us to go and find disciples who are already disciples, no he says, "Go and Make Disciples." Paul tells us that God proves he loves us first, while we still don't have our act together.

I did unfortunately learn on my own why many recovering people believed they needed to become perfect first. I had worked for many years to get churches to open their hearts and doors to accept those recovering from addiction, but repeatedly I was told by pastors and others these people were not welcome within their church. I don't get angry often, but these comments did make me angry. What I saw within these recovering people were individuals eager and hungry to learn and practice the things God had to offer, but others too often told them it was beyond their reach.

The general sense of Scripture is that we have all erred and messed up. *"All we like sheep have gone astray and turned to our own way"* (Isaiah 53:6). So, we need a pardon and we know it. This wonderful, life giving message is not just for us within the church, but for all, *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."* (v. 6) As the church, we are called together as the family and body of Christ, so we as a community can help one another, get our act together, recognizing that God first took the initiative, *"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."* (v. 8)

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Our ability to see God's grace alive and well around us.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 25:8-17

Psalms 146

Romans 10:1-13

John 9:18-41



### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Genesis 12:1-2**

"Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Gen. 12:1-2)

Beginning the journey of recovery takes faith and trust in God. When we ask someone to give up their drugs of choice and begin a journey of recovery, we are asking them take a difficult journey. We are asking them to give up what they have known for quite some time in their life, something they have grown accustomed, even if it is destroying their life. We are asking them to begin a journey to a new and different place. In their minds this new place is often viewed as a very frightening destination. Abram discovered himself called out to go in a different direction and found it within himself the capacity to trust God, eventually this experience transformed Abram into Abraham.

When God called Abram in Genesis 12, that call utterly turned Abram's world upside down and totally reshaped his life and his family members' lives. "*Go from your country*" (v. 1). Abram had just uprooted from Ur; now he's to uproot again from Haran. God has something in mind about Canaan, and he wants Abram to continue the family journey to get there.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 25:30-38

Psalms 5

Romans 10:14-21

John 10:1-18

Recovery from any illness, cancer, heart disease, diabetes or addiction creates a great deal of confusion, fear, struggle, and pain. In the early stages, we may find the road set before us seems too dangerous and difficult to travel. We find we are too frightened to begin the journey. We may feel overwhelmed by the decisions that need to be made, in order, to travel into this unknown territory. Those who have decided to begin the journey are filled with fear and need the support of others to discover the courage to open themselves to the opportunities that treatment and recovery brings.

"*Go from where you live and whom you know to a place I won't reveal yet.*" That's a crazy calling. God says that if Abram does that, he'll bless him. Barrenness will turn into family. Family will turn into nation. By taking the risk and completing the journey, not only will Abram be blessed, but he will become a blessing to others. Abram's calling in Genesis 12 can turn into a useful mission statement for us today: Trust God. Follow God. Be blessed by God. Bless others.

A difficult journey requires a lot of trust in God to take those many steps of obedience along an indeterminate journey. But the Lord said, "*Go,*" and Abraham "*went*" (vv. 1, 4a), at the age of 75 (v. 4b), leaving much of what was near and dear to him. The people starting their recoveries are called to this and the church receives the same call. When we trust the journey set before us and follow God, we will be blessed.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: To face our fears as we begin new journeys as recovering individuals, recovering families and churches called to welcome them.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Ezekiel 37:1-6**

"The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.'" (Ezek. 37:1-3)

The February 14<sup>th</sup> featured article in the Johnstown Tribune-Democrat was entitled "Cambria coroner again 'sounding the alarm' as OD deaths accelerate." The article began: "Last year was the worst year for fatal drug-related overdoses in Cambria County history – and 2017 has started out even worse. In 2016, the county saw 94 fatal drug-related overdoses with several cases still pending, County Coroner Jeffrey Lees said. So far in 2017, Lees' office has investigated 22 overdose deaths – on a pace for more than 200."

"People that are abusing or addicted to these opioids need to seek help," Lees said. "The end result could be a ride in the back of my (coroner's) vehicle."

The statistics are staggering. Then we see needles strewn on the street and deals happening in front of our eyes. A single mother dies leaving behind two beautiful daughters. Gunshots ring out in broad daylight. Hopes are dashed again as someone we thought could stay clean shows up high, thinking we won't even notice. But we do. We see all this around us and more. We dwell in the valley of the shadow of death.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 26:1-16

Psalms 126

Romans 11:1-12

John 10:19-42

God lifted Ezekiel up and set him down in the valley of the shadow of death. Ezekiel saw bones lying in a field, bones that were once part of living, breathing human beings, who, in death, had been abandoned to the elements. Now all that was left was dry bone.

God asked Ezekiel if these bones could live. The logical answer would be, "Of course not. It's utterly, physically, ridiculously impossible." But Ezekiel remembered to whom he was speaking – God, Creator of the heavens and the earth. "O, Lord GOD, you know," he replied. Not only could those bones live, they did live.

If God can bring life out of absolute death, then there is nothing outside of the Lord's control, not even addiction and its deadly toll.

Let us pray for all who see nothing but death and despair, that they may know the life-giving power of God.

Alice Tondora, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Those working to make a difference in the lives of the drug dependent individuals and feel as if they are in a valley full of bones.

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **1 Corinthians 10:13-22**

"No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor. 10:13)

We all have trials and tribulations in life. Some of them are short, some are long, and some are ongoing. In fact, many of life's challenges are created by our own doing, meaning we fall into temptation and create our own "demons" and barriers to overcome. Sometimes when we go through difficult times in life pushing through the moment can feel surmountable. It can also make us feel very alone—like we are the only one who faces this "problem."

However, we must remember even in our darkest moments that God is with us, and that we never walk alone. In fact, we often are not alone in our current circumstance. *"No temptation is overtaken you that is not common to man."* What this means is, that there are others in life that are through similar circumstance as you. You are not alone. We are not alone. God tells us that we can find great love and comfort through the support of others when we open up our hearts to God and to others.

In fact, there are many times in life where God tests us and through that test we develop a specific knowledge or skill set that can help others in the future. We must remember that it is okay to confide in our peers and speak about problems and concerns in life, because it not only helps us as individuals to process things it can also help others too.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Psalms 31:9-16

Romans 11:13-24

John 11:1-27

"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." We learn through scripture that we will have challenges throughout our lives; however, we can find comfort in the fact that God doesn't give us more than we can handle. We all have those moments where we are amid a trial and think, God I'm really getting close to that breaking point here. However, these are also the moments that test our faith and build our faith too. These are the moments where we must remember that God is with us, and so are others in Christ who can help support us too. No matter how great the circumstance, God provides a way that we can endure it.

As we continue into this Lenten Journey, let us remember that God is great, God is good, and God provides. Let us also remember to give our hearts to the Lord and to each other. To act as brothers and sisters in Christ to help others going through similar circumstance and to find peace in knowing that God makes sure that no matter what life brings us we will be able to endure.

Elizabeth Comer, Contributor

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **2 Corinthians 6:1-13**

"As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor. 6:1-2)

"See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" Paul is eager to redirect the Corinthians attention to view the gospel of God's grace witnessed around them with an urgency for fear that they will "*accept the grace of God in vain*" (v. 1). The fervent urgency of his comments begs the question: Why have the Corinthian Christians failed to see salvation and grace in their midst?

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Psalms 143

Romans 11:25-36

John 11:28-44

As an addictions counselor, I began to understand that God had given me a remarkable opportunity to witness God at work in the world in ways I never imagined. At first I believed my responsibility was simply to help these individuals recover from their addiction. What I received was unexpected and led me to a deeper understanding of my faith and practice. I had witnessed the amazing grace of God in these recovering people and I had obtained a wonderful gift.

Paul summons us and the Corinthians to see and hear the cries of our own neighbors as they struggle with a host of problems. When we fail to acknowledge these cries for grace and salvation we are missing out on receiving a wonderful gift both for the church and us. Our inattention to their suffering leads us to the possibility "*to accept the grace of God in vain.*" (v. 1) Paul is calling us to not delay, "*See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!*" (v. 2) this is the day we are called to act. Paul reminds the Corinthians that in days past he took the time to listen to them and helped them to gain salvation. Now it is our turn to do the same for our neighbor.

Paul urges the church to open their hearts. Paul reminds the church that the gospel calls them to establish new patterns of responsibility and behavior toward the community around them. These new patterns should be reflected in their actions of gratitude, in the same way that God's gracious acts had been shown within their lives. Like the Corinthians, churches today struggle to know how to live faithfully and with gratitude. Sometimes that struggle produces strain in the very relationships that are meant to help church members live authentically and graciously. For Paul, failing to love one another is a sign of accepting the grace of God "*in vain.*" Now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to exhibit faithfulness, not simply through words, but through action. Now is the time to live as witnesses of God's new creation.

As a counselor, I relied upon the movement of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit calls me to patiently wait for the "*acceptable time*" when a AOD dependent individual was ready to surrender. When I thought, all might be lost, God surprised me. At the acceptable time the Holy Spirit led me to right moment, that God was preparing.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

## 2017 Lenten Devotional

Sunday, April 9, 2017

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Passion/Palm Sunday

Scripture: **Psalm 31:11-24**

"I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many — terror all around! — as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God." (Ps. 31:11-14)

Over the years, I have spoken to many individuals both those with alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems and those with many other problems who could have easily applied these words of the Psalmist to their current situation. Amid all their problems and the consequences, they found themselves living with uncomfortably, often for years, they came to understand that they are scorned by their communities and a horror to their neighbors. They understand why people flee from them and why their acquaintances, family, and friends find them a subject of dread.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Zechariah 9:9-12  
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29  
1 Timothy 6:12-16  
Matthew 21:12-17

If they had ever read the Psalm they probably would agree with the psalmist "*I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many – terror all around!*" (Ps. 31:12-13) Many individuals in the depths of their AOD dependency do begin to understand the gravity of their situation, but many have come to believe they have simply gone too far. They are like the psalmist cannot come to that point, where they affirm "*I trust in you, O Lord; I say, "You are my God."*" (v. 12)

Addiction is deadly, the percentage of those who recover is low and many end up permanently disabled, dead, imprisoned or insane. As disheartening as the statistics are regarding addiction, this does not need to be the norm, treatment works, recovery is possible. Getting people to accept treatment and enter recovery will always be difficult, if they believe, they have gone too far for mercy or hope to apply to them. Many things prevent recovery from occurring, but scorn, dread and whispering by others takes a toll on possible treatment of many people. If, we only flee from them and treat them with scorn and dread, we are not just bringing despair to some faceless stranger, but too frequently to the chances for recover for people who are our neighbors, friends and family.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Individuals who only feel the scorn and dread of those around them who seem to only flee away.

#### Informational Resources

Large List of Web Links related to Alcohol and other Drugs provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse

[www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/other-resources](http://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/other-resources)

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Isaiah 50:1-4**

"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." (Isa. 50:4)

A couple years ago, I was sitting in my truck with a former Sunday school student. She had wanted to talk to me privately. As she began talking she rolled up her sleeve to show me a needle mark in her arm.

"How do I stop using?" she asked.

I had no idea what to say. Nothing in my seminary training had prepared me to counsel someone addicted to heroin. And so, I asked some questions and listened to the story of her life and why heroin seemed like an easy answer to some deeply rooted problems. I tried to refer her to professionals. But I knew she wouldn't go.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 12:1-16

Psalms 119:73-80

Philippians 3:1-14

John 12:9-19

She had come to me thinking that I had the tongue of a teacher. That I might have the wisdom of God with me in the Bible on the backseat. Magic words that I could pull out for such tough times.

But all I had were a bunch of jumbled words and a silent prayer that the Holy Spirit would help her to make something of them. That the Spirit would allow her to somehow feel sustained by my words.

As Presbyterians, we are all about the Word of God and the words we write and speak about God in our sermons and books. But so often it is the embodied word that offers comfort to those who are suffering. It's the hug or the eye contact or the act of listening. It's showing that we do care.

My friend ministers to homeless people every week and has had more experience with addiction and poverty issues. She says that sometimes the only thing we can do is show up and love people in the name of Jesus Christ. Rather than use our tongues and words, our ministry tools are our ears as we listen compassionately. So, that even if we don't have the tongue of a teacher, we can reflect the heart of Jesus Christ. He didn't shy away from the troubled people in his world. Instead he showed up, listened to them, touched them and healed them. He shared the love and forgiveness of God with them and encouraged his disciples to do the same.

Sue Washburn, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Help to lead us to the right people and the right place where we can assist others to begin recovery.



### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Romans 8:18-21**

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;" (Rom. 8:18-19)

Most churches during their history experience a crisis, some suffering and hardship comes with finding our way in the world, which shapes our future together. When faced with sufferings and hardship, we could just give into the crisis and determine there is no point in moving forward. Or we could decide that God is about to reveal something valuable to us. God desires our willingness to discern how this might be defining our common ministry and where it might lead. As we look around us at the crisis our communities are facing in dealing with AOD problems, we could just throw up our hands and give into the destruction of our communities or we can discern where God is calling us to serve, *"the glory about to be revealed to us."* (v. 18)

As people who are present to each other, and present to the goodness of God, we count ourselves as children of God and joint heirs of God's promises, along with Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul points out that we suffer along with Christ *"so that we may also be glorified with him"* (v. 17). Our pains are never completely pointless if they bring us closer to the one who suffered on the cross for the salvation of the world.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 15:10-21

Psalms 71:1-14

Philippians 3:15-21

John 12:20-26

This is not to say that God desires our suffering, or that God somehow enjoys watching us get beaten and crushed. Instead, Jesus invites us to join him in working to free the world from its bondage to decay, and to do whatever we can to overcome those forces that can separate, alienate, discourage or destroy us. We may suffer as we do God's work of justice and reconciliation in this world, but suffering is not going to be the final word.

In our calling, we are never forced to work alone. The Spirit of God *"helps us in our weakness,"* assists us in our praying and intercedes for us. The Holy Spirit leads us and guides us, comforts us and abides with us. In fact, it is nothing less than the Spirit of God that constantly reminds us that we are children of God, *"and if children,"* says Paul, *"then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ"* (v. 17).

Lee McDermott, Contributor

#### Local Resources — Cambria County

##### Cambria County Drug & Alcohol Program

Central Park Complex, 110 Franklin Street Suite 200, Johnstown, PA 15901

Phone: (814) 536-5388 Weekday

Hours: Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Fax: (814) 536-6867

(814) 535-8531 Weekends/Evenings

<http://www.cambriacountypa.gov/drug-and-alcohol.aspx>

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Today's Scripture: **Romans 5:1-21**

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." (Rom. 5:1-2)

Peace is an elusive concept. In cultural terms, it may be the absence of war. But humans know on a very gut, instinctual level that there is a different kind of peace. We're not sure how to find it or even what it might feel like when we get there, but we search for it in many ways. Some think they will find it if they make enough money, if they buy a bigger car, if they get a different job, a different spouse. It might be hiding in the bottom of a bottle or in the next pill. The search grows, consuming the searcher's time, money, talents, until there is nothing left. But the search cannot stop. Like an infection, the searching moves from one member of the family to the next, leaving discontent and fear in its wake. Searching wears us down, shuts us down, and takes us down. Like a shiny object, it distracts us and disrupts our plans, our hopes and our dreams.

Active addiction is a never-ending search, not only for the addict but also for those who love and care for her. While the addict is searching for his next high, his release from pain, the family is searching for the next treatment option, the way they can "cure" their loved one or, at the very least, keep him safe. Unsuspecting but caring individuals have been bilked out of millions of dollars trying to find the magic cure for what ails them, ranging from home remedies to expensive, intensive therapies at exotic locations to torture disguised as therapy.

Thank God that His grace has the power to interrupt this cycle of searching! God's grace is the antibiotic for our fear, the chain-breaker, and the peace-bringer. *"My steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you."* Isaiah 54:10. But how do we, as people of God, participate in the movement of the Holy Spirit to bring hope and peace to searchers? Pandita Ramabai, a social reformer and educator from India, said, "People must not only hear about the kingdom of God but they must see it in actual operation, on a small scale perhaps and in imperfect form, but a real demonstration nevertheless." Your steps, however small and imperfect they may be, will set you on the path to peace. Resolve today to take a step.

Susan Perry, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Our ability to see God's grace alive and well around us.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 17:5-10, 14-17

Psalms 70

Philippians 4:1-13

John 12:27-36

#### Informational Resources

##### [National Clearinghouse of Drug and Alcohol Information](#)

The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) is the world's largest resource for current information and materials about AOD.

Scripture Reading: **John 17:1-26**

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." (John 17:20)

While very ill, John Knox, the founder of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, called to his wife and said, "Read me that Scripture where I first cast my anchor." After he listened to the beautiful prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17, he seemed to forget his weakness. He began to pray, interceding earnestly for his fellowmen. He prayed for the ungodly who so far had rejected the gospel. He pleaded in behalf of people who had been recently converted. And he requested protection for the Lord's servants, many of whom were facing persecution. As Knox prayed, his spirit went Home to be with the Lord. The man of whom Queen Mary had said, "I fear his prayers more than I do the armies of my enemies," ministered through prayer until the moment of his death.

Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John reveals to us an interesting scene. Jesus is facing the cross and one might expect he would be praying for his own situation which he does for the first five verses. Jesus then changes his focus from him to his followers, then and into the future, essentially you and me. We are being prayed for by the Son of the Living God. No wonder, John Know stated this scripture was "where I first cast my anchor."

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 20:7-18

Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 10:14-17

John 17:1-11

Sidlow Baxter once said, "...Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons - but they are helpless against our prayers."

We may struggle to understand what we can do to help those affected by AOD abuse and dependency. We may now be ill equipped to counsel, share the gospel, talk, show compassion or other approaches requiring personal contact, we can always pray. As disciples of Christ throughout the centuries have learned our prayers can be powerful and can bring change by God's Spirit.

Our ministry to those struggling with AOD problems and their families should start with prayer. Prayers of intercession in worship, in our daily prayers, in our prayers in public settings and our prayers said in secret. We won't only see other lives changed, but we will be changed. When God first sends us out to explore a new ministry and a new people, we are first called to "cast our anchor" in prayer, because Jesus is praying for us.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: God might hear and answer the desperate prayers of those in the depths of their addiction.

Scripture: **Isaiah 43:15-21**

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (Isa. 43:18-19)

Methodist preacher Charles W. Allen was once asked, "What is the number one problem you have had to deal with over the years of your ministry?" Without hesitating, Allen answered, "The number one problem I have had to deal with is the mistaken notion so many people have that God is mad at them." As long, as people see themselves as being victims of an angry God, neither God nor his church will ever be a thing for them.

Isaiah reveals, however, that God's first inclination is love. God is always coming up with new ways to redeem us and to set us right, just as God is going about the work of setting his creation right. God doesn't do old things; God does new things.

In verses 16-17, God offers his people a reminder of when a similar sort of thing happened. They are reminded of the deliverance of God's people out of slavery in Egypt. God is giving them a snapshot of their ancestors. "Hey, this is what I did for my people in the past!" The Lord made "a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters" for his people to escape their Egyptian oppressors and then "extinguished" their pursuers "like a wick." The same God who did that thing will be the God who will do a new thing by leading the people again out of slavery and exile back to the land God promised them.

In each new generation, God is doing something new, because in each generation they find new ways to hold themselves in bondage. Deliverance from slavery was a thing, but so was the fact that the people had exchanged slavery in Egypt for the slavery of their own self-serving desires. In many ways, the wilderness was the hardscrabble road that represented God's judgment on his people. Today, people are held in bondage by money, possessions, alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc.

Getting God's people out of Babylon will be another wilderness experience, but it will be a very different kind of thing. *"I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert,"* says God (v. 19). To give up whatever may hold us in bondage, often involves a wilderness journey where God can *"do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it."* (v. 19)

It's good for us to look back and remember what God has done for us in the past, even when that past is marked and marred by our disobedience to God. We've all walked our version of the wilderness road, focusing on "things" that run counter to God's way for us. But, we also need to recognize that God doesn't want us to dwell on that past, but, rather, seek out the new thing God is up to in our lives. God's faithfulness remains consistent, even when our faithfulness wavers.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: Our ability to see God's grace alive and well around us.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Genesis 22:1-14

Psalms 22

1 Peter 1:10-20

John 13:36-38

### Into the Light: Join the Conversation

Scripture: **Ephesians 5:8-9**

"For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." (Eph. 5:8-9)

Theologian Robert Alden writes that "There is not enough darkness in all the world to put out the light of even one small candle."

A little boy was afraid of the dark. One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom.

The little boy turned to his mother and said, "Mama, I don't want to go out there. It's dark."

The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explained. "Jesus is out there. He'll look after you and protect you."

The little boy looked at his mother real hard and asked, "Are you sure he's out there?"

"Yes, I'm sure. He is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him," she said.

The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and cracked it a little. Peering out into the darkness, he called, "Jesus? If you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"

For those who have lived most of their lives in the darkness of addictions, the whole experience of living in the light of recovery is a strange and odd experience. A host of emotions experienced by those in recovery can be overwhelming. Managing these emotions can be challenging without help, they need to experience what is normal, to experience what is "*good and right and true*" probably for the first time. They need to experience others who are living a normal and average life. The life we live each day might be viewed by us as boring and uninteresting, but our lives can be viewed as terrifying to others who have no experience with normal, common, ordinary experiences of life. If they are ever to live in the light, they must be in a community where light is present to overcome their fear among the darkness.

Like, the little boy who asked Jesus to retrieve the broom from the back porch, we hope that Jesus will step up and do all the hard work and deal with the darkness in the outside world and within ourselves. Paul reminds the Ephesians that they once were in the darkness, but they are now light and they are called to live accordingly as children of light. The fruit of this light is our willingness to do the "*good and right and true*," by sharing the light with others. We may view our light as too dim, but if we do what is "*good and right and true*," even one small candle can defeat the darkness. Discover where your light shines the brightest and let it shine in the darkness.

Lee McDermott, Contributor

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Job 19:21-27a

Psalms 31:1-4, 15-16

Hebrews 4:1-16

Romans 8:1-11

#### Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

"For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ... But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." (1 Cor. 15:3-4, 10)

We gather today in worship to hear the familiar story of Jesus' resurrection. The story of hope which concludes our Lenten journey. A celebration of the story we hear and tell about receiving God's grace and eternal life through Jesus' defeat of death. Jesus' resurrection brings us to the same affirmation Paul states, *"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain."* (v. 10)

Paul, tells the Corinthians the good news of Jesus' resurrection, which was told to him, *"Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand,"* (v. 1) A story which is confirmed by the apostles and by over 500 brothers and sisters, some whom Paul and the Corinthians could have spoken to directly about what they had witnessed. We, as the church, give witness to the resurrection through the message shared with us throughout the ages.

Numerous individuals living in our neighborhoods have their stories of resurrection to new life happening each day. They have stories to tell, some stories of heartache and overcoming great pain, stories of roadblocks preventing surrender, stories of love recognized and amazing grace experienced, and stories of new life which captures the authentic witness of the Holy Spirit telling a story of resurrection from the dead.

Some of us in the presbytery have been joining in a conversation about how we can help our churches deal with a serious AOD problem. During Lent, we have shared our stories and witness, to paraphrase Paul, "we handed on to you which was of first importance to us and what we have in turn received." We invite you to join us "Into the Light." Our communities are in the grips of addiction and they need to hear stories that treatment works, recovery is possible and that stories of resurrection exist. As Paul confidently tells us, *"Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe."* (v. 11)

Lee McDermott, Contributor

Remember in Prayer: The presbytery's Addiction Ministry Network and the conversations they are having to restore our communities and renew our congregations and pray for the Spirit's leading others to join the conversation into the light.

#### Today's Lectionary Readings

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalms 117

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Matthew 28:1-10