

Your Very Best Life: First Sunday in Lent **"Promise of New Creation"**

February 29/March 1, 2020

Digging Deeper

Your Very Best Life: "Promise of New Creation"

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Background Notes

First Sunday in Lent (February 29/March 1, 2020)

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction

Lent begins. The days lengthen because the light of Jesus begins to shine in the darkness. As we observed in last week's study, "Lent memorializes that event as the central theme of salvation made possible by Jesus' finished work on the cross. The *growing intensity of light* gradually illuminates the cross during the several weeks leading up to holy week with the goal of Good Friday. The word "Lent" comes from the old German *langitinaz* meaning "lengthening of days." The English language develops from this the word *lencten*, the synonym for "spring season." During spring the days "lengthen" and sunlight grows in intensity for longer periods of time. The church saw in this natural occurrence the spiritual meaning of the days leading to the cross, days marked by increasing light on the purpose and meaning of Jesus' crucifixion when he was "lifted up from the earth" when his saving work became more clearly understood."

Lent leads us to the momentous event of the cross, and in keeping with our theme of *elevation*, we reiterate our theme text:

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32).

The promise of Lent is that what happened with Jesus can also happen in us. He lifts us up so that we might have "The Very Best Life" as he draws us deeper into relationship with himself.

The readings this week begin *in the beginning*: first, when human life appears in God's original creation and then afterward faces the great temptation with its test of God's gift: human freedom. What will humankind do with this enormous capacity formed in the image of God the Creator? Freedom for good, in agreement with the way God made the world, or freedom for bad, in rebellion against the law of God? What will God do if freedom turns downward away from God-likeness and prefers the life of the creature more than the Creator? These are the large questions of the first three readings, and they await the word of Good News in the testing of Jesus. The first humans make their choice in the garden where freedom ought to flourish, nourished by the gracious gifts of God. The new human will make his choice in the wilderness, deprived of food and water, and confronted by the hideous strength of an alien power that refuses to allow God to begin anew. Lent begins in the Tale of Two Humans and in the drama that threatens to deprive humanity of *Its Very Best Life*.

"You Are Free if You Choose Well" — Reading 1

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:15-17).

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" ⁴ "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Genesis 3:1-7).

God has work, meaningful work, for the first humans to perform, the work of the garden where soil is tilled and plants grow, where animals live and must survive. In caring for the earth and its creatures, plant and animal, the human mirrors the good creation of the God who made all things. With such a monumental task, the human requires guidance and the capacity for making good choices. The garden supplies the necessary resources, including food for life.

And so, “God commanded the human...” which is to say He instructs and guides the work of the human. God begins with commands about how the human should use the resources of the garden. His commands awaken the moral capacity of the human for choosing good and bad, choices which breathe the air of freedom. “You are free ...” God says. But freedom for humanity is yet untried, unproven, without due practice. The commands of the Creator are intended to exercise the human in the direction of the Good. That exercise is lavishly broad, open, and generous. “Any tree...” is the leading opportunity for humans to thrive in a wide range of experience with basic necessity for life — *The Very Best Life*. However, freedom works within *boundaries* intended by God to keep human beings safe while learning the disciplines of freedom. “But...” marks the boundary: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, else you will surely die.” To cross the boundaries is to transgress, and transgression has dire consequences.

Why this single prohibition? Why this boundary and not some other? “Knowledge of good and evil” implies an external standard for judging *what is good* and *what is bad*. The word knowledge doesn’t refer to information but to moral judgment. The *tree* so described is different from all the other trees, “*any other tree*,” for its fruit is not for *digestion* but for *decision*. This fruit is consumed by the heart where judgments about good and bad are decided. That choice comes not from the eating of the fruit, but from not eating from it, and for that decision, the humans need the command of the Creator. This tree is the *place where the human makes judgments guided by the word of the Lord*. It is the judgment tree of moral choice, the place where humans either obey the word of the Lord, or where they doubt and refuse it.

The garden is the habitat for all manner of creatures which “the Lord God had made...” They are *good* for the humans if humans treat them according to the order of nature as their attentive masters. In the case of this story, that judgment is laid aside, and the man and the woman regard the serpent as a peer with whom they engage in reasoned conversation; as a creature that dares to challenge the Creator’s good intentions toward them. The serpent creature usurps a role that contradicts the order of creation and tempts the human pair to do likewise. The God’s tree for judging good and bad is offered by the serpent to be the tree for food. The good uses of God are set aside, replaced by the bad uses of the creature. As a result, the creature replaces the Creator as the ultimate judge of moral values. St. Paul once wrote:

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-- who is forever praised. Amen. (Romans 1:21-25).

Human nature became corrupted through this distorted choice, and sin entered the world bringing shame and not honor; death and not life to the human race.

This is a story that didn’t just *happen*, but became the story that *happens* repeatedly in the course of history. It is our story, and will keep us from *Our Very Best Life*.

“You are Forgiven if You Confess and then Sing” — Reading 2

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| 1 Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered. | my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long. |
| 2 Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit. | 4 For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer. |
| 3 When I kept silent, | 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you |

and did not cover up my iniquity.
 I said, "I will confess
 my transgressions to the Lord."
 And you forgave
 the guilt of my sin.
 6 Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
 while you may be found;
 surely the rising of the mighty waters
 will not reach them.
 7 You are my hiding place;
 you will protect me from trouble
 and surround me with songs of deliverance.

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should
 go;
 I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
 9 Do not be like the horse or the mule,
 which have no understanding
 but must be controlled by bit and bridle
 or they will not come to you.
 10 Many are the woes of the wicked,
 but the Lord's unfailing love
 surrounds the one who trusts in him.
 11 Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
 sing, all you who are upright in heart! (Psalm 32)

Through the poetry of the psalm, the question raised by *Genesis* — the question of sin — is examined with all of the anguish of a tormented soul. The question cannot be “kept silent” (v. 3) for the poet is “groaning all day long...for day and night ... sapping strength ... wasting away.” Beyond the suffering inflicted by sin is the deep longing for a return to “blessedness,” to *the very best life*. Only forgiveness by the Creator-Redeemer Lord can answer the question. Only removal of *guilt*, confession of *transgression*, disclosure of *iniquity*, renouncing of *deceit*, and release from *sin* will reboot humanity’s return to the state of blessedness and *the very best life*.

Prayer, the desire to “find” God beyond the fatal fall, is the “hiding place” for the sinner harassed by the “trouble” of sin. Prayer promises “deliverance” when the sinner faces “the rising of the mighty waters.” It is the “faithful” who pray to the God who forgives and delivers. After prayer — *our words to God* — there comes the *word of God*, His voice from out and beyond the tragedy of human moral failure.

The word of the Lord says “I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.” Like the father to his wayward child, God cannot leave his sinful fallen children alone to fix the problem of sin and its consequences. Human guilt and shame are too great for self-help remedies. Under the “loving eye” of the Creator-Redeemer, humans hear the words of instruction and counsel, of redirection and remediation. Attitude matters here for humans are not horses or mules in the eyes of the father who instructs and counsels, mere animals to be constrained by “bit and bridle.” Coercion alone is insufficient; God’s “unfailing love” must “surround; and His children need to respond by “trusting in him.” *Recovery* after the great fall is about gracious love given and received in a relationship which makes possible again *the very best life*.

None of this is mere transaction which takes place only in the cool recesses of the mind, whether of God or of His human partners. The last words of the psalm burst into song: “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad ... sing!” God has pronounced a new day of beginning again, released from sin and instructed in righteousness. He pronounces His children whole and well, blessed and flourishing: “You righteous, you upright in heart!” are new names of humanity’s restored identity. Only the heart-filled, mouth-filled words of a jubilant song can give expression to the blessing of the forgiven and liberated child of God. *The very best life must sing, praise, give thanks, and rejoice*. The very best life flourishes with gratitude to God.

“You Can Live Through God’s Grace” — Reading 3

¹² Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned-- ¹³ for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

¹⁵ But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! ¹⁶ Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.

¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the

many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:12-19).

“Therefore” introduces a *conclusion*. When we see “therefore” in Paul’s writings, something bold and powerful is about to follow. Technically, a conjunctive adverb, the word “therefore” *joins* the preceding statements with their outcomes, implications, and conclusions. It’s a big word for Paul, having all the force of an exclamation, such as, “Take a look at this!” In this text from the epistle reading, he reminds his readers that “sin entered the world” bringing with it death for the whole human race. The story from *Genesis* and the poem from *Psalms* are the backgrounds to this show-stopping “therefore!” “Just as...” reminds the reader about sin and the damage it has wreaked in human life within the world.

“Adam” is another term for “the human” and refers to both the character in Genesis 1-3 and to the whole human race afterwards. He is the “commandment breaker” and so he is the sinner in need of salvation. His race required “law” to keep its humanity within the bounds of God’s will. Paul says this “Adam” — these humans — are a pattern or “type” of “the one to come.” Paul sets up in his instruction an analogy in the form of *type and anti-type*, point and counter-point. Large contrasts comprise the body of his conclusions about the human situation under sin and the new human situation under salvation. “The one to come” turns out to be Jesus Christ who is the New Adam, the new human, who becomes the answer to the question of sin and the giver of *the very best life* for human beings.

“But” orients the reader to the contrasts Paul lays out (v. 15). The new orientation is “the gift” set in contrast to “the trespass.” The gift is “the one man, Jesus Christ” who reverses the disobedience of the first Adam and of his descendants who are the consequence. Jesus brings “grace” that is more abundant than the sin which infected the human race, for grace “overflows to the many.” *Sin* certainly has “flowed” like an undisrupted river with tributaries from every corner of the human landscape, filled with moral contaminants, poisonous desires, and deadly actions. *But* (!) *grace* flooded the world with its “overflow” – its cleansing flow, decontaminating human hearts, desires, intentions, purposes, and affections. *Sin* brings “judgment and condemnation.” *Grace* brings “justification” to *make things right*. *Sin* brings death the Tyrant; *grace* brings Life, the risen King Jesus.

One final move in Paul’s carefully constructed argument (“consequently, v. 18) emphasizes the grand theme of “righteousness,” the supreme good from God to overcome the extreme bad from sin. This term, “righteousness” refers to a *state of being* as indicated by the suffix, “-ness.” *Sin* invaded God’s good creation and put it “out of joint,” so that human beings went “side-ways” and “downward,” losing the goodness of humanity made in the image of God. Humans shrank in honor and became mere creatures: they “trespassed,” crossing the boundary from *God’s* image to *creature* image. In so doing they “condemned” their own nature as humans. Recall the conversation between the humans and the serpent in Genesis 3! Snakes aren’t supposed to talk, and humans aren’t supposed to talk with snakes! Paul knows all of this when he uses the word “trespass,” a word meaning “to illegally cross the boundary line” set by the Creator. “No trespassing” signs put boundaries between humans and lower forms of created life, between humans and the tree for judging good and bad. Having crossed the boundary, humans condemned their own humanity and thereby fell under the condemnation of God. The trespass was “disobedience” for it set aside the instructions of God and adopted the guidance of the tempter. As a result of the great trespass, human beings “were made sinners,” that is, their *essential nature* changed when they chose to disobey God.

However, God through Jesus Christ launched a fresh initiative, a new contrast, and offered righteousness. He offered righteousness, a new nature renewed in the image of God through the righteous obedience of the New Adam named Jesus, His Son. Jesus defines this new nature, this righteousness: by who he was, what he said, how he lived, and where he died. Jesus dealt with the problem of sin by meeting its full force on the cross, bearing human sin in his own body, suffering sin’s penalty, dying in place of human beings, and then rising in a transformed human body. *Jesus embodied righteousness*, and so he made possible righteousness for us. The

truly Human One gives righteousness to human ones when they receive him through saving faith. In Paul's words, "the many will be *made righteous*." Righteousness enacted by Jesus is "Your Very Best Life."

"You Can Avoid Sin if You Trust the Word" — Reading 4

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" ⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matthew 4:1-11).

The Gospel reading picks up themes from *Genesis* and the Old Testament writings, applying them to the first days of Jesus' ministry. If Jesus is the author of "Your Very Best Life" — and he is, then the account of his temptation in the wilderness serves to authenticate the moral foundation for that life. Through his temptation, Jesus proves his identity as God's Son: the giver of resources for real life, the obedient Son of the Father, and the supreme embodiment of true worship.

The background for the temptation narrative in Matthew 4 is Genesis 3, studied above, and the first temptation of humanity. The original story is set in a *garden*, surrounded by the resources of God for *the very best life*. The Gospel story of Jesus is set in *the wilderness*, bereft of necessary resources for creaturely life, without food and water. Consider this difference of environments when comparing Adam with Jesus.

Prior to this account, Matthew 3:13-17 describes the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptizer. At the climactic moment of his baptism, we hear the following:

¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Matthew 3:17).."

Here is the *fulcrum* for Jesus the *lever*. God the Father goes on record that Jesus is His Son, blessed by His love, and authorized by His own good pleasure. In other words, God tells the witnesses to Jesus' baptism, "I set my approval on Jesus, for He is my Son who represents all that I desire for a *true human being*. This is what I intended when I made human beings in the Garden of Eden. Jesus, my Son, embodies "the very best life." What follows, in Matthew 4:1-11, is the test and proof of God's claim, worked out in three temptations which have as their own purpose to prove just the opposite. They are both tests and temptations: tests authorized by God the Father because it is "the Spirit" who leads Jesus "into the desert"; temptations crafted by "the devil."

"The devil" is a phrase conjuring up images that have a long and deep history in the biblical story, reaching back to the garden, through the story of Job (in the book bearing his name), and in the later writings of Jewish writers including the prophet Zechariah (see Zechariah 3:1-2). The word "devil" is the Greek *diabolos* meaning "adversary." It has roots in the Aramaic/Hebrew languages found in the word *Satan* with the same general idea. In the *Genesis* story the words "devil" or "Satan" are not used, but instead the ordinary term for the reptile serpent or snake. What the later biblical writers do is identify the serpent in its role as the adversary who tests and tempts the integrity of the first humans. In the case of Jesus, the role or function of this creature is more carefully refined.

Furthermore, the story of Job, who suffers for reasons unknown to him, the Satan character performs the role of an investigative prosecutor permitted to "test" Job through misfortunes in order to prove that his righteousness is conditioned only on his good fortunes. Job's inexplicable sufferings create the environment for his temptation "to curse God and die" (see Job 1). Zechariah 3 portrays the Satan character as challenging the credentials the priest Joshua to be a high priest. In each case the integrity of human beings as faithful to God falls under scrutiny. It is the adversary-lawyer Satan who leads the prosecution. Eventually, Judaism and Christianity bring together these features (serpent, adversary, prosecutor) into a single being, identifying him as

an angel within the judicial council of God who finally “goes rogue” by challenging and usurping the sovereignty of God Himself.

Given these literary developments, the account in Matthew 4 begins to make sense in terms understood by contemporary readers. Jesus, under this perspective, is led by the Spirit to the courtroom of the Diabolic Prosecutor in order to subject Jesus to an inquisition. Weakened by hunger and thirst in the wilderness, Jesus is deprived (like Job) of basic resource for life. Having “softened up” his defendant, the devil-prosecutor proceeds to investigate God’s claim about him: “If you are the Son of God.” The devil doubts the claim, thinks that he can disprove it, and then proceeds to produce evidence that it is not true. This is like the serpent in the garden questioning the truth of God when he said to the woman, “Did God really say?” and “God knows that you will not really die if you eat from the tree.” Or, in the case of Jesus, “Did God really speak the truth at your baptism, that you are His Son?”

The three tests each have three temptations in mind when the devil speaks to Jesus.

1. If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.
2. If you are the Son of God throw yourself down (from the pinnacle of the Temple).
3. See these kingdoms of the world. If you worship me, you can have all of them.

How does Jesus respond to each? Does he make bread from stones, performing a miracle for his own survival in the wilderness? Does he throw himself down in a public way, forcing God’s hand to save him and prematurely become a royal hero? Does he bow down to the Devil to receive the kingship of the world from him and not God? Each question is a test that is a temptation to disobey God. Jesus does not do what the inquisitor asks, but instead in each case quotes from the book of *Deuteronomy*, the authorized written witness to the Word of God. In one case the Devil tries to quote Scripture, attempting to play the game of using sacred texts for his own purposes. Each test fails in delivering the intended temptation to which Jesus yields. The devil-prosecutor is a legal trickster, trying to outsmart his defendant, getting him to misstep, and entrap him in his own words. The devil fails. He fails to make his case of proving God is wrong about Jesus, that he is not the Son of God. He fails *to lead Jesus into temptation*.

Committed to his calling as *the new human being* who embodies the Son of God, Jesus shows the way for having *the Very Best Life*. Ordinary bread is not enough; public recognition is not enough; proud power is not enough. Faced with the lust of the flesh (bread), lust of the eyes (all the nations of the world); pride of life (recognition as king) (compare 1 John 2:15-17), Jesus turns away from the temptation occasioned by each test and turns to the Word of His Father. Jesus proves himself to be the faithful, obedient, and authenticated Son of God, *the new human within a new creation*. Since the Son of God lives obediently the human life of Jesus, he is acquitted in the court of heaven. *The Very Best Life* defeats the very worst life proposed by the devil-prosecutor who tries to prove otherwise. Jesus knew based on the second temptation that the devil was testing him because the devil was testing God. Jesus would not allow the honor and glory of His Father to be compromised by yielding to the devil’s temptations.

As a Lenten text, the Gospel text foreshadows the temptations which lay ahead of Jesus. In Luke’s account of this same incident, the writer adds to the phrase “then the devil left him” the words “for an opportune time” (see Luke 4:13). Luke suggests that Jesus would face his adversary again and again: when Peter tried to persuade Jesus not to accept crucifixion as part of his mission (Matthew 16:23); when Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane; when Jesus hung of the cross, among others.

Sin flows like a river, but grace overflows like a flood. This is the great theme of this Lenten week, and grace through Jesus makes possible “Your Very Best Life.”

Conclusion

Our readings this week began in the garden with the first humans, made by God in His image, destined by God for greatness, and tested by God through the serpent. Choose well and you will live. Choose poorly and you will die. *The stark contrasts* found in the readings catch our attention: good and evil, life and death, sin and forgiveness, first humans and the new human, Jesus. Creation didn't end with the garden: please be patient, God is not finished with you yet! "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, we have already come. Grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home," penned the poet of *Amazing Grace*. Birth pangs accompany the arrival of humanity on the landscape of history. Jesus dies on the cross. Lent takes seriously the suffering on the road to new creation. Lent also rejoices in the grace of God which is greater than the sin of humanity's failed test.

Jesus in his wilderness trial reminds us that Lent also follows the footsteps of God's Son during his sojourn alongside His human creation, suffering as we suffer, overcoming temptation so that we can also. As Paul reminds us:

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:12-19).

Here is the story of two humanities: the first one falling into disobedience; the second one passing the test with righteousness. In the form of real flesh and blood, a true human among flawed humans, Jesus shows us the way and let's us see that obedience to God — *faithful* obedience — is truly possible for the human race. Jesus is God's sign that *beyond the very worst life* there is provision for "Your Very Best Life." He is the embodiment of *grace*: the gift of *new beginnings* when humanity deserved no second chances; the offer of *forgiveness* when sin threatened only death; the example of a life lived by *the word of God* when all other human wisdom proved untrue.

This week, Christians everywhere who hear these four important texts during Lent have the opportunity to renew their baptismal promises and *elevate their commitments to the next level of obedience* to God and His Word. Will you? Those who seek *a better way of being human* in a world that constantly assaults them with demeaning messages about their humanity are invited to: love a better vision, resist the lure of temptation, receive the gift of forgiveness, and look at Jesus as the new creation for a better life into a hopeful future. Lent creates fresh spaces through environments which promote life and not death, good and not evil, righteousness and not sin. The graces of Lent are summed up in the person of Jesus whose journey to the cross begins this week, the first Sunday in Lent. Will you commit to using the opportunities of this series to cultivate practices for a new humanity in you? Will you join with brothers and sisters in our congregation in this hopeful project of personal and corporate change? If you do, the river of grace will flow richly through you, and "Your Very Best Life" will be your new beginning and your *New Creation*. Remember the theme verse for our series:

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32).

To God Be the Glory! Amen!