

Breaking Up the Unplowed Ground
Message for North East United Methodist Church
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I love Christian author C.S. Lewis and especially his series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.



In the most famous book of the series, The Lion, The Witch, & The Wardrobe, we follow four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund & Lucy, as they are shipped out of London to protect them from the bombings during the war; they find themselves staying in an old historic mansion owned by a very eccentric professor.



During a rainy day, with nothing else to do, they decide to play a game of hide-n-seek. Lucy, the youngest, finds a room that is empty except for an old wardrobe.



She decides this would be a great place to hide and opens the door and walks inside, through the fur coats, toward what she believes to be the back of the wardrobe.

Suddenly, instead of fur coats, she is feeling branches brush against her and snow beneath her feet and she finds herself in a magical land called Narnia.



It is through this door that she and later, her siblings, discover that this world is not all there is...that they are royalty...that there is a battle going on between good and evil all around us...and that there is a Savior...the Lion of Judah...

Literary critic, Francis Spufford, in writing about Lewis' book, says, *"I love the way there were hidden doors that you could find in unlikely places, like the back of a wardrobe, which would show you that this world wasn't all there was..."*

Kurt Bruner & Jim Ware, in Finding God in the Land of Narnia, write, *"At any moment we, too, may slip through an undetected crack and find ourselves standing in the middle of a strange and marvelous land, a place beyond the walls of the known universe. For there is such a place. Happily, this workday isn't all there is. Nearby, just at our elbow, hovering over our heads, and brushing past our shoulders, is the "other dimension," where God and the host of heaven dwell in power and bliss and unapproachable light."*

Revelation 3:8 (The Message), ***"I see what you've done. Now see what I've done. I've opened a door before you that no one can slam shut."***

God is about opening doors before us...doors for us to walk through...doors that lead to a deeper relationship with the Creator...opportunities to get to know Him, to work alongside Him. Just this past fall, look at the many doors God has opened and invited you to walk through...

- Opportunities to reach out beyond our church through Jill's House, the Crop Walk, and Operation Christmas Child.
- Opportunities to learn more about His love for you through message series like *"Lessons from Shenandoah"* and *"The Ghosts of Christmas,"* as well as through the Weekly Devotions in the Bulletin
- Opportunities like the ACT UP Small Groups, the United Methodist Men's Advent study on Joseph, Camps Farthest Out, and the Youth Rally...opportunities where together we grow closer to Christ and one

another as we study His Word.

- Opportunities to serve others by volunteering in the Nursery, with Children's Church, Sunday school, Youth Group, and on other ministry teams like Missions and Hospitality.

These are doors to a deeper relationship with Him...and those who walked through these doors have been blessed...have experienced a greater truth...a greater reality...They have experienced Christ. Jesus said, "...*knock and the door will be opened to you.*"

We are getting ready to begin the season of Lent, journeying together toward Easter and the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. It is a very special time of year, when we remember that "*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...*"

Lent is a time of self-examination...a time of soul-searching and repentance. Lent is a time to explore very deeply who we are and how we are living out our faith.

The season of Lent is a door...a door to knowing God more deeply...a door that each of you have the opportunity, the choice, to walk through and, in turn, enter a new room in your relationship with Him...a more intimate room...You have the opportunity to experience the resurrection of Christ anew this Easter morning, and to allow the empty tomb to change your life.

You also have the choice to stay where you are...simply observing others as they walk through the doors placed in front of them, go deeper with God and His Word, and are transformed...hearing their Jesus stories.

But to walk through this door this Lent, and to receive all God has for us, we must prepare our hearts.

John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness, Matthew 3:3 (NKJV), "***Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.***"

How do we prepare to open our eyes and walk through the doors, grab hold of the opportunities, God places before us, going deeper with Him, deeper in our walk of faith, during this season of Lent and Easter?

First, we have to **Break Up the Unplowed Ground.**

Hosea 10:12 (NKJV) – ***“Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you.”***

“Break up your fallow ground...”



God reiterates His message through the prophet Jeremiah...Jeremiah 4:3 (NKJV) – *“Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns.”*

The "*unplowed ground*" (NIV) or "*fallow ground*" (KJV, NRSV) is the land that could be productive, but for whatever reason has not been broken up, tilled, plowed, and prepared for planting. The prophets speaking the Word of the Lord are commanding the people to break up that land -- spiritually!

Unplowed ground won't let a crop grow. It's hard, preventing seeds from penetrating, germinating, and growing to maturity. When it's time to put in the garden we get out the rotor tiller and turn the soil so that seeds are able to get into it and let their roots go down deep where moisture can be found.

Isn't this what Jesus told us in the Parable of the Sower? Matthew 13:3-6 (NIV) - ***“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.”***

Secondly, **Stumps & Rocks must be removed.**

As our forefathers moved West, they began by logging the trees on their land and rooting out the stumps. Removing stumps was hard work. They had to dig down and cut each of the main roots with an axe and then attach a rope or chain to the

stump and pull it out with a team of horses or oxen. Finally, they had to pile all the stumps together and burn them as they continued to clear the land, collecting all the rocks they found, both large and small, getting rid of them so they could plow the soil.



What stumps continue to take root in your heart? What rocks are in the way of God's planting?



We must remove the stumps and rocks that continue to get in the way of God enriching the soil of our hearts.

Often during the season of Lent, Christians vow to give up something for a time. Often people vow to give up chocolate or soda or ice cream, but Lent is a time to give up things like hatred, bitterness, lust, greed, pride, worry... These are the stumps that must be rooted out and the rocks that must be gathered and transported away so a new crop can be planted. These must be removed so the new crop can grow...so we can receive all God has in store for us.

“Break up your fallow ground...” “Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”

Thirdly, **Hardness must be broken up.**

A plow or rotor tiller does the hard work of opening up the ground. It takes energy to pull the plow, to guide the plow, to keep the furrows straight so the field can be plowed efficiently.



Where is the hardness in your heart? Where is the unbelief that is lurking in your soul? What guilt are you carrying? Unforgiveness? Selfishness? If you've been hurt in a relationship, you may have sealed off an area of your life because it's just too painful. But you need to let God break up those old resentments and heal those old hurts. He'll pull the plow, but you must direct it toward those hard places in you that you know must be dealt with.

The hardness in your heart must be faced squarely and broken up if God is to plant something new and fruitful in your heart this Lent, this Easter, and in the coming year.

“Break up your fallow ground...” “Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”

Lastly, **Thorns must be gathered and burned.** *“And do not sow among thorns.”*



Jesus said, in the Parable of the Sower, Matthew 13: 7 (NIV) - ***“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”***

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson writes, *“When a field goes unplanted for several years it often becomes covered with thorns or other weeds. Depending on your particular plot of land, those thorns may represent sexual temptations and lust, self-indulgence, pride, anger, selfishness, a love of entertainment and recreation, addictions, greed, and other thorns. Each of these chokes the Word. Each has a devastating effect on the crop that God wants to grow in you and me. We must root them out.”*

If we are to walk through the doors that God will open this Lenten season in our church, in our lives... we must prepare the ground.

There is a great scene in the film, *Facing the Giants*, in which Coach Taylor is approached by Mr. Bridges, a devout Christian who walks the halls of the school everyday praying over each locker, praying for each student. He tells Coach Taylor that God has opened a door for him to walk through...and tells him a story about two farmers. Each farmer prays for rain...but only one went out and prepared his field to receive the rain.

We must not only pray that God rains blessings down upon us, that we experience Christ's resurrection in such a way that it transforms our lives, but we must prepare so we might receive the blessings God has for us...

We must **Immerse Ourselves in God's Word**.

In Ezra 7:10 (NLT) – we read that “*Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD...*” And because Ezra was willing to study, to learn, to listen...to “*plow*” his heart that God might plant His Word, His instruction, His love...”*the gracious hand of his God was on him.*”

Isn't that what each of us wants...what each of us wants throughout the year...”*the gracious hand of [our] God [upon us]?*”

As Charles Spurgeon wrote, “*If God has spoken, listen! If God has recorded his words in a Book, search its pages with a believing heart. If you do not accept it as God's inspired word, I cannot invite you to pay any particular attention to it; but if you regard it as the Book of God, I charge you, as I shall meet you at the judgment seat of Christ, study the Bible daily. Treat not the Eternal God with disrespect, but delight in His Word.*”

We must listen...force ourselves to **Be Open-Minded**...hearing what God has to say to us...expecting Him to teach us and challenge us.

In Acts, Paul and Silas travel to Thessalonica to preach the “*Good News*” about Jesus Christ...but the Thessalonians are unwilling to listen...unwilling to hear...there was jealousy...a blind adherence to tradition...but in Berea, the people were, “*more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men*” (Acts 17: 11-12, NLT).

James tells us to be “*swift to hear.*” We have to want to hear what God has got to say to us...we have to “*listen.*” We have to be slow to respond with our opinions and slow to get angry when God’s Word challenges us and causes us to rethink how we have lived our lives.

Lastly, we must **Obey**. We must put what we learn, what God teaches us, into action. James writes, “*If you don’t obey, you are only fooling yourself.*”

If we are living in sin...if we are not obeying God’s Word...God’s instruction...if we are carrying unforgiveness in our hearts...if we are looking at things we should not...if we are gossiping about our neighbor...if we are hoarding our money...if we are failing to trust God and failing to love our neighbor...how will we ever be able to hear and receive what God has for us? James says that we must allow the message to be planted...“*looking steadily into God’s perfect law—the law that sets you free—and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.*”

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent and prepare for the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Personally, in order to “*prepare the way of the Lord*”...in order to give this season the time and thought God deserves...in order to receive God’s blessings and live into the life God has for me...I’m giving up television for the six weeks of Lent...that I might not continue to find myself distracted from more important things...

God opens a door for each of us this season to walk through...to walk through to a land more magical than Narnia...more beautiful...more holy...to become Christ-like in our thoughts and actions...to be immersed in the love of God...

We have the choice whether or not we walk through...it will take work...it certainly isn’t a walk in the park...but hard work, plowing up the hardened ground in our hearts...self-examination...softening the dirt so God may plant His blessings...

It is hard work, diving into His Word...making time to listen to what He has to say to us through the Bible, through worship...It is hard work, being open-minded to His Word even when it challenges us, challenges the way we are

living, what we have been doing. It is hard work to obey...to love our neighbor...to change our lifestyles to be more in line with Him...

It is hard work...to prepare “*good soil*”...to “*prepare the way of the Lord*”...but Jesus tells us it’s worth it...



Matthew 13: 8-9 (NIV) – ***“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”***

“...for the gracious hand of his God was on him.”

God wants to bless you in the months ahead...God wants you to experience the resurrection of His Son on Easter morning like never before...the moment transforming your lives...

But you must prepare the ground to receive such blessing...

Prepare your hearts...begin today...“*Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.*”