

# HILLTOPPER

United Methodist Church of Parsippany

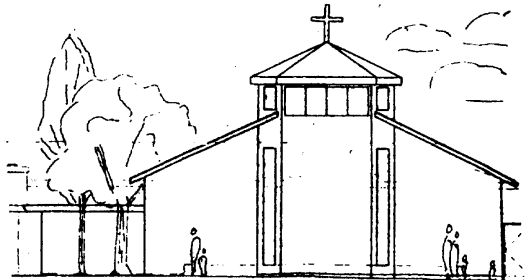
903 So. Beverwyck Road, Parsippany, NJ 07054 (973) 887-4657

<http://www.parsippanyumc.com> E-Mail: [jedwards14@juno.com](mailto:jedwards14@juno.com)

*Sunday Worship Celebration: 10:30 a.m.*

*In a hostile, hurting world we reach out to share kindness and laughter. Our spirituality is based on Jesus and his love and compassion. We provide a community of support and healing where all are welcomed and valued regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, disability, gender, or economic status. In a world where people feel they can love only those who are like themselves, we seek to celebrate the uniqueness of every human being.*

*"Making Room in the Circle"*



## MARCH 2012



A sermon preached by Pastor Jeff on February 12, 2012 based upon Mark 1:40 – 45, entitled "Kissing the Leper, or, Lepers R Us"

*A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.'*  
<sup>41</sup>*Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'* <sup>42</sup>*Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.* <sup>43</sup>*After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,* <sup>44</sup>*saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer*

*for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'*

<sup>45</sup>*But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.*

The man referred to in our Gospel story as being a "leper" probably didn't suffer from what we know today as the disease of leprosy – Hanson's Disease — which involves severe disfigurement of limbs and the loss of sensation. Rather, the man most likely suffered from some kind of clearly visible skin disease that was less intense in its physical affliction, but which nonetheless was assumed to be contagious, rendering the sufferer in the eyes of his contemporaries as "unclean." When he first came down with the disease, he'd been required to leave his family and community so as not to contaminate them, for physical contact with the leper would by itself render a person unclean.

There was further the assumption that the disease was a curse – some sort of punishment given by God – that the sufferer had somehow brought the suffering upon himself by sinning – by some sort of moral lapse. He was getting what he deserved. And so the sufferer endured shame and scorn in the eyes of those who were not afflicted.

So you can see that were multiple dimensions to the condition that afflicted this man, and that the psychological and spiritual dimensions – the extreme isolation and shame — were in certain ways far more painful than the physical pain or discomfort.

The dominant religious identity in those days was the one embraced by the Pharisees. In those days, a hard core, fundamentalist Pharisee would start his day by thanking God that he



wasn't born a Gentile, a slave, a leper, or a woman. God, it was believed, had placed a curse on these four categories of people.

In the Gospels we see Jesus reaching out to all four of these categories of people out-caste from the in-crowd of society.

And Jesus wasn't a guy with a casual Midas touch. He personally engaged each suffering person who came to him seeking healing. And there was a cost for Jesus personally.

In case of this leper, the Gospel writer Mark expresses this cost directly. The words translated "moved with pity" literally refer to Jesus feeling the man's suffering in his bowels – in his gut. Jesus feels the man's pain is his body.

You may remember the story we heard last week that comes right before this one, in which Jesus got up early to go out to pray by himself, and the disciples go searching for him, when they find him he tells them of his intention to go to the villages throughout all of Galilee that he might preach there as well.

But at the end of this story, Mark tells us, because of the sensation made by his healing of the leper, Jesus was no longer able to go into the villages. In a sense, Jesus exchanges places with the man. The man is cleansed and restored to the community of the village, while Jesus is forced to stay out of the villages and the countryside where previously the new cleansed man had inhabited.

Jesus has offended the sensibilities of the Pharisees, and rendered himself unclean. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus ministry steadily leads to his deepening sense of rejection, which culminates in his death on the cross, where he takes on what for his contemporaries was the ultimate sign of God's curse.

Jesus intentionally identified with the suffering servant prophesized in the Old Testament book by the prophet Isaiah. He takes on our suffering, our affliction, and in doing so, we are healed.

There's a cost Jesus pays to redeem us, but Jesus would have it no other way. As he expressed in his parables, there was great joy in heaven – the angels party like crazy — every time one of the lost was found; one of those left out of the circle is brought into the circle of God's eternal love.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Francis of Assisi got this. As his heart was softened by the love of Jesus, he began to leave behind the privileged life of a rich young man in the "in crowd," to go and live among the poor and destitute of society. One of my favorite stories from Francis' passionate life comes from when he was first began to hear, and respond to, the call of Jesus. Throughout Francis' life, he had felt a terrible revulsion in the presence of lepers – which in his day were persons afflicted with the grotesque disfigurement of Hanson's disease. He would go out of his way to avoid having any contact with lepers.

One day he was coming down a road when he heard up ahead of him the sound of the bell a leper was required to ring to warn those not afflicted with the disease of their approach. With the sound of the bell, and then the sight of the man's disfigured body, Francis felt his usual sense of revulsion, and began to turn away. But something inside him nudged him onward to approach the leper. Francis knelt down before the destitute man, gave him all the money he had. And then he kissed the leper on the lips. And as he did so, Francis felt a great joy open up inside of him.

After bidding the leper farewell, but before continuing very far down the road, Francis turned to look back, and was astonished that the leper was no longer visible. He concluded that the leper had been none other than Jesus come in disguise to bless him.

If we were to ask who are the modern day lepers, it wouldn't be signs of skin disease that we would necessarily be looking for, but rather for persons who experience life as out castes. The candidates are numerous.

People suffering from mental illness come to mind, misunderstood by persons fortunate enough to be born with brains whose chemistry doesn't routinely cast them down into the deep darkness, who assume that somehow the depressed person should just snap out of it. Schizophrenic people and their suffering parents come to mind, who ignorant people often assume are suffering because of the failure of their home life.

You hear stories of autistic children rejected and tormented by their fellow school children because they act differently; and of parents of autistic children receiving condemnation when their

children don't conform to the norms of behavior and assume that the reason is to be found simply in the parents' failure to properly discipline.

People suffering from addiction are lepers when their affliction when the disease aspect of their suffering isn't appreciated, and their helplessness on their own to overcome their addiction. People trapped in an enduring grief and heart-brokenness are lepers, having lost their sense of belonging in the old world they once knew.

The modern day leper might be the newly immigrated person, living as out castes from the dominant culture. Or maybe a person going through the break-up of a marriage or other love relationship, with their pain viewed as a threat to the love bonds of others. Lepers can be parents of a child with a problem of such gravity that their very life is at stake, when everybody else's children seem to be doing just fine. Or persons whose mortgages are being foreclosed, and their homes lost, or those who can't find a job in an economy that has passed them by.

Indeed, leprosy is experienced to a degree by anyone who walks to the beat of a different drummer, and as a result, experiences rejection. Or perhaps the leprosy is experienced in the isolation a person experiences who wishes he or she could march to that different drum beat, because the drum rings true to their ears, but they are afraid to do so because of the very real fear that they will be rejected – cast out by those with whom they rely.

Here is one of the assumptions I live with: I assume that a leper lives inside of every one of us. That there is a space that each of us inhabits at times in which we feel at the core unlovable, unacceptable, unworthy. That feeling of, *"if people really knew what went on inside of me – the thoughts I have, the feelings that roll over me - they would flee from my company."*

It is to something like that place that I invite you all to go with me every Sunday during the pastoral prayer when I ask God to touch us in that place of our deepest need, the place where we feel unworthy of being touched, embraced, loved, and then pause for a few moments.

Perhaps I don't know what I'm talking about, and there are people who never feel like a leper. Or maybe such people have just managed to avoid all the terrain in life where such feelings could arise within them, and it's only a matter of time before life leads them to such dark places, because that's part of what it means to share in the human condition. The old, old story of Adam and Eve expresses this condition, describing how after the fall they recognize for the first time their nakedness and vulnerability, and in shame they cover themselves with fig leaves and hide from the God they expect will condemn them. So in a sense, to be human is to feel like a leper. We're all lepers.

There was a pop psychology slogan back in the 70s that declared, *"I'm okay, you're okay."* But maybe there are times when this is precisely the truth that we **aren't** feeling – that what we feel, instead, is *"I'm **not** okay."*

It's striking what the leper says to Jesus: *"If you want to, you can make me clean."* He doesn't doubt that this man in whom God is so obviously present has the power to relieve him from his suffering. What he doubts is whether this God will **want** to do so. He feels that unlovable.

And so there is such good news in this story. God does not reject the leper. God loves the leper, and invites him into the great circle of God's love.

And he does the same for us as well.

Maybe the truth isn't *"I'm okay and you're okay,"* but rather, *"I'm not okay, and you're not okay; but that's okay,"* because Jesus Christ has come to love us with a love we never knew existed.

It occurred to me as I read the story of Jesus with the leper that a good name for what we are about here in the church would be: *Lepers R Us.*

The central image put forth for the Church in the New Testament is that we are *"the body of Christ."* It's a striking image in part because it's just so physical. I mean the Apostle Paul could have said that the Church is "the Spirit of Christ," but instead he referred specifically to the actual, physical body. We are to get down and dirty, like Jesus, like Francis, in embracing the lepers.

This I believe is what makes this particular church so special. People experience a permission here to be human, which is to say, to embrace their own personal leper, and the lepers of others, more so than you find in a lot of churches.

How did we get this way?

I'm not sure. It was a pretty loving place when I arrived here almost 23 years ago as a recently divorced pastor parenting a three-year-old son. There were churches that might not have wanted to be assigned a pastor in a situation like mine, and I was told that the question was raised at the PPR meeting when I was introduced: *"Would folks accept a divorced pastor?"* But they worked that through, and embraced me. As there is now, there were some really loving folks here in those days – some are still here with us – who had grappled with their own personal lepers. And in my time here I have experienced healing in my life.

Twenty years ago the most recognizable "lepers" in our society were probably AIDS patients, followed by Gay and Lesbian persons, often forced to hide their true natures in the closet.

There were two musical guys who had been members of this church for a couple of years before I got here named Jim and Dwayne. They lived together and sang in the choir and were active in a lot of other ways in the life of the church as well.

And then one day Dwayne got very sick, ending up in the hospital. After just a few days he died. People were stunned, grief-stricken. Jim was absolutely shattered. We held a beautiful funeral in the old sanctuary; the place was packed with folks from the church as well as folks from Jim and Dwayne's life in the world. The UMW put on their usual wonderful reception afterwards. In the course of the funeral, certain things became clear that hadn't been clear to a lot of people in the church. That Dwayne had died of AIDS. That Jim and Dwayne were gay, that they were lovers, and that Jim himself was also HIV positive.

Now Jim hadn't really been "in the closet" previously, but he grew up in South Dakota where people weren't inclined to call attention to themselves, and so he wasn't ostentatious about being gay or about anything else for that matter, which explains in part why it wasn't until the funeral that a lot of people realized his sexual orientation. Twenty years ago people didn't tend to pick up on such things as readily as they do today.

For a lot of people in this congregation Jim was both the first out-of-the-closet gay person and the first HIV+ person they had known. And for a lot of people, as was the way with the prevailing culture – especially the prevailing Church culture, particularly twenty years ago – gay people and people with AIDS were viewed as unclean lepers – some sort of dangerous moral degenerates to be avoided at all costs.

But there was a problem. People knew Jim. They loved Jim. **Everybody** loved Jim. He was the salt of the earth. He was gentle and giving and reliable and humble. Even though he was an extremely gifted person, he never tooted his own horn.

And he was also unmistakably broken-hearted, in need of his church family's loving embrace. And the church came through. Like St. Francis, we kissed the leper, and found he was Jesus in disguise, and were blessed by a great joy as well.

For the next fifteen years – before Jim and his elderly mother who had come to live with him moved away from Parsippany – Jim continued to be a very active and important part of our church family. In the first year after Dwayne's death, in memory of Dwayne, Jim purchased the beautiful hand bells we still so enjoy that are played in our worship. He served as the new bell choir's director. He started a little orchestra made of adults and children that would play once a month.

Somewhere along the way Jim developed the symptoms of full-blown AIDS and had to take early retirement from his secular job. For a couple of months Jim was confined to his bed, and the church came through for him, bringing him food, loving and touching him in a range of ways.

The church was sensitized to the suffering of people with HIV and with money from the conference, we starting running retreats for People living with HIV – times of rest, play and worship where hurting folks could get away for a weekend from the pressures of their lives.

It wasn't long in the life of our church before the issue of a person's sexuality or even their HIV status became something of a non-issue. We saw people simply as people, not sexual orientations or diagnoses.

It didn't seem unusual to us. But some times I'd be reminded of the fact that it was. One time this woman in her sixties started coming to our church. She clearly liked it here, especially the warm sense of family-like welcome she experienced here. She loved the sound of the bells she would hear in worship, and thought she would join the bell choir where beginners were

welcome. She mentioned this to somebody, and they got to talking, and the person matter-of-factly told her something of the background of the bells – how Jim’s lover had died of AIDS, and then and there, she stopped coming to our church. I wanted to tell her, “*Lady, this is why you found such love and welcome here at this church! You need to kiss the leper if you want to know real joy!*” But she fled instead.

It’s funny: our church has developed something of a reputation in our conference for being a “gay friendly” church, but that’s not really how we view ourselves. We see ourselves simply as a “human being friendly” church, because we know we’re all lepers loved by Jesus. It says more about the state of churches in general – how unwelcoming they tend to be towards Gay people – that our church is thought of that way.

It’s safe here to be a human being. It’s safe to love here. Jesus still reaches out to lepers here.

In the kindness of Jesus,  
Pastor Jeff

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Pastor Jeff leads worship at **Troy Hills Nursing Center** on Reynolds Road on the third Thursday of every month at 10:30 a.m. Anyone who would like to share in this ministry on is invited to join him.

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United Methodist  
Women

Looking back...no snow on the 1<sup>st</sup> and no meeting. Winter with snow just hasn’t arrived yet!

We hope for good weather on....

**Wed, March 7<sup>th</sup> – 7:00 p.m.**  
**PROGRAM: Speaker from United Methodist Homes**  
Refreshments  
Come – and bring a friend...

March 2 – World Day of Prayer  
March 11 – Daylight Savings Begins

March 17 – St. Patrick’s Day  
March 20 – Spring Begins

Get well wishes to those of you who are ill, and  
HAPPY BIRTHDAY to those of you celebrating this month with Angela Nolan and Karen Wilk.

God Bless,  
Doris Bradley

**Prov. 17:17 “A friend loves at all times.”**

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**Something New: Our church calendar is now available on the church’s website.**  
If you are planning an event and need to book the church or a particular room, please check the calendar on the website, then call Gail Booth or Wes Sitgreaves to confirm availability and reserve your time. (Fred Coleman will also have a hard copy of the calendar here at the church that you can also check for date availability.)



It's amazing how many little things we do or experience every day that contribute to our overall happiness and amusement. It's the little simple things that make us smile, feel warm inside, or sometimes laugh out loud. When was the last time you felt happy because you were the last one in the checkout line before the "closed" sign went up? Or making a snow angel? We are going to draw attention to these AWESOME moments by converting the bulletin board in the narthex into the **BOARD**

**OF AWESOME.**

We want everyone to post their awesome moments on the board. You will find everything you need on the bulletin board: marker, awesome moment scrolls, and stick pins.

Add one, two, or as many as you want. Fill the board! Let's make this a real corner of joy in our church. If you have any questions, please speak to Darryl, Connie, or Barb.

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**Healing Prayer sessions** are held every Wednesday morning from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. in the prayer chapel. All are invited to come and be a part of this time of prayer -- for yourself or for others.

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**A day time men's discussion group** with Pastor Jeff is meeting on **Fridays at 1 p.m.** at the church. We listen to short audio tapes and discuss what we hear during the 90 minute sessions. Any men available in the day time are invited to join us.

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Laurie Wilken or Connie Wallace.

On the second Thursday of every other month our congregation provides dinner for the families at **Homeless Solutions**. Our next scheduled dinner is **Thursday, February 9th**. If you would like to take a turn in helping with this outreach, or if you would like to donate money towards the expenses, please speak to

Anyone who is interested in serving from time to time as a **liturgist** in the Sunday worship service is invited to speak to Pastor Jeff.



**FLOWERS FOR THE ALTAR ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS** – If you want to remember or honor a special occasion in your life by putting flowers on the altar, please get in touch with Connie Keller. Flower arrangements are currently being purchased at Shop Rite for varying costs depending on what you want. You are certainly welcome at any time to place flowers on the altar. If you want an announcement in the bulletin, please call Connie

Keller or send her an email with the dedication. Contact information: Connie's cell: 973-568-5404; home: 973-887-4384; email: [connie@mhmlender.com](mailto:connie@mhmlender.com)

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Our church website has been revised and updated. If you haven't seen it lately, check it out at [Parsippanyumc.com](http://Parsippanyumc.com). At the website you will find a link to all of Pastor Jeff's sermons, as well as his occasionally bloggings.

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The **UMW** is selling **Food Gift Cards to benefit the General Budget** for ShopRite as an *ongoing Fund Raiser*. The church will receive 5% of all purchases (you buy \$100 of gift cards, the church gets \$5). Gift Cards are available in \$5, \$10, \$20, \$25, \$50 and \$100 denominations. Please see Betty Polen at the beginning of Coffee Hour if you would like to purchase ShopRite Gift Cards. Checks should be made payable to The United Methodist Women.

Thank you, The UMW

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**Parsippany Food Pantry** - **Wes Sitgreaves** has called to our attention the ongoing need of the Emergency Food Pantry in Parsippany in these difficult economic times. There are more and more families turning to the food pantry for help. You can bring your donations of non-perishable food items to the church any **Sunday**. Wes Stigreaves takes the food over as the bin gets filled up. Supermarket gift cards are also welcome - buy them from Betty Polen and raise money for the church at the same time!!! This is a very easy

way to give back to the less-fortunate in our own township.





**Consider becoming a part of one or more of our Musical Groups here at church:**

**Bell Choir** – rehearses Thursdays at 7:00 p.m. If you are interested in joining us, please speak to Barb Bradley or Aimee Letsch - or just show up on Thursday and see what happens!

**Choir** – rehearses Thursdays at 7:45 p.m. We always have an "open robe" for anyone who loves to sing. We sing in 4-part harmony, so if you've sung in your high school chorus or any other equivalent, you have a great start! Speak to any choir member or Barb Bradley if you're interested.



**Kids Bell Choir** – rehearses every Sunday after worship. All children and youth in 3rd grade and up (including junior and senior high school) are welcome. Directed by Aimee Letsch (973-585-7634).

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A **small gathering of men** from our church meet together every Tuesday at 7:15 a.m. at the Empire Diner with Pastor Jeff for breakfast, conversation, and a concluding prayer. All men are welcome.

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Anyone aware of a **Prayer Concern** is invited to contact Grace Agre at 539-3855 who will put the **Prayer Chain** into action. If Grace cannot be reached, please contact Pastor Jeff. If you would like to add your name to the people who receive the prayer chain, please speak to Betty Polen

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**SCRIPTURE READINGS FOR FEBRUARY**

March 4  
 Genesis 17:1-7,15-16  
 Romans 4:13-25  
 Mark 8:31-38

March 11  
 Exodus 20:1-17  
 1 Corinth. 1:18-25  
 John 2:13-22

March 18  
 Numbers 21:4-9  
 Ephesians 2:1-10  
 John 3:14-21

March 25  
 Jeremiah 31:31-34  
 Hebrews 5:5-10  
 John 12:20-33





**BIRTHDAYS  
&  
ANNIVERSARIES**  
**MARCH BIRTHDAYS**

2 <sup>nd</sup>	Evan Nichols	20 <sup>th</sup>	Len Bostwick
5 <sup>th</sup>	Michael Weiss	20 <sup>th</sup>	Alexa Taylor
7 <sup>th</sup>	Ian Crawford	20 <sup>th</sup>	Rachel Weiss
7 <sup>th</sup>	Christina Sakelakos	21 <sup>st</sup>	Myrna Labis
7 <sup>th</sup>	Kristopher Hawkins	22 <sup>nd</sup>	Jared Gropper
9 <sup>th</sup>	Ryan Laux	22 <sup>nd</sup>	Briana Laux
10 <sup>th</sup>	Anna Gripp	23 <sup>rd</sup>	Jim Simmons
10 <sup>th</sup>	Maya Roelofs	24 <sup>th</sup>	Karen Wilk
12 <sup>th</sup>	Alex Hawkins	24 <sup>th</sup>	Angela Nolan
12 <sup>th</sup>	Sue DeJessa	24 <sup>th</sup>	Glenn Owens
14 <sup>th</sup>	Debra Mortensen	25 <sup>th</sup>	Nancy McAllister
16 <sup>th</sup>	Paul Larsen Sr.	26 <sup>th</sup>	Kate Eiring
17 <sup>th</sup>	Julia Sklow	28 <sup>th</sup>	Arlene Sklow
17 <sup>th</sup>	Daniel Wallace	29 <sup>th</sup>	Sarah Roberts
20 <sup>th</sup>	Andy Klekanos	29 <sup>th</sup>	Monica Hawkins
		31 <sup>st</sup>	Ron Gounaud



# The Passion Story of *Jesus*

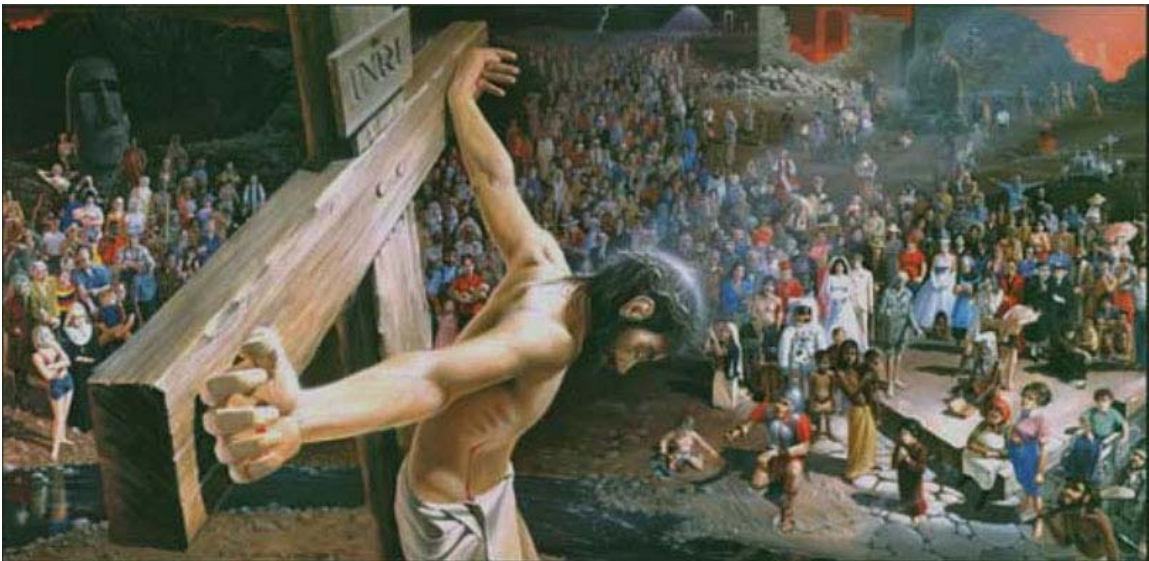
as recorded in chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew's Gospel  
acted out by a cast of twenty-one, with music, lighting and screen  
projections, providing an unusual opportunity to experience anew the  
astonishing power of Jesus' death and his divine, suffering love.

**Maundy Thursday, April 5<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 p.m.**

This performance will include Holy Communion,  
and anthems by the adult choir and the children's bell choir.

**Good Friday, April 5<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 p.m.**

*Directed by Jeff Edwards*



The cast includes Betsy Adams, Garrett Belanus, Gail Booth, Mark Chauhan, Earl Christopherson, Kayla Christopherson, Bobby Edwards, Jeff Edwards, Sarah Edwards, Kate Eiring, Jennifer Eng, Terry Germann, Norma Owens, Jolie Rajasekaran, Eric Roelofs, Garin Roelofs, Jean Sakelakos, Kaitlyn Sklow, Julia Sklow, Mariahna Suzan and Richard Witter, Jr.

# March 2012

## United Methodist Church of Parsippany

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday																																																																																											
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<b>4</b> Worship 10:30AM	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b> 7:15 AM Men's Breakfast	<b>7</b> 10:30 AM Healing Prayer  7:00 PM UMW	<b>8</b> 7:00 PM Bell Choir  7:45 PM Adult Choir	<b>9</b> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group	<b>10</b>																																																																																											
<b>11</b> Ad Council - after worship  Worship 10:30AM	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b> 7:15 AM Men's Breakfast	<b>14</b> 10:30 AM Healing Prayer	<b>15</b> 7:00 PM Bell Choir  7:45 PM Adult Choir	<b>16</b> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group	<b>17</b>   <u>St. Patrick's Day</u>																																																																																											
<b>18</b> Worship 10:30AM	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b> 7:15 AM Men's Breakfast	<b>21</b> 10:30 AM Healing Prayer	<b>22</b> 7:00 PM Bell Choir  7:45 PM Adult Choir	<b>23</b> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group	<b>24</b>																																																																																											
<b>25</b> Worship 10:30AM	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b> 7:15 AM Men's Breakfast	<b>28</b> 10:30 AM Healing Prayer	<b>29</b> 7:00 PM Bell Choir  7:45 PM Adult Choir	<b>30</b> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group	<b>31</b>																																																																																											