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FROM ASHES TO EASTER



A Lenten Devotional
Based on Year I
of the
Lutheran Book of Worship
Daily Lectionary

by The Rev. Dr. David M. Wendel

The Resurrection of the Lord—Easter Sunday

Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find His body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that He was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see. And He said to them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself. —Luke 24:13-35

Hoping that you have been able to join the community for Easter worship this morning, hearing the Gospel of the Resurrection of our Lord, it is a fitting conclusion to our Lenten devotions to hear the account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

We discussed this experience earlier in Lent, but the words of Jesus remind us how foolish we are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. In spite of our foolishness and slowness, the Lord Himself opens the Scriptures to us. We see Christ and His incarnation, death and resurrection on every page!

It has been my pleasure to again share this journey with you from Ash Wednesday to Easter. It is my prayer that your Lenten season has been enriched and deepened by our reflections together. And now...

*May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace.
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

(Easter Response: If you wish, take a moment to send me an email sharing how you have made use of this Lenten Devotional Booklet, how it helped your Lenten journey—anything you might like to share with me regarding our Lent and Holy Week devotional time together. Email me at dwendel@thenalc.org.)

Holy Saturday of Holy Week

*But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin,
your spirits are alive because of righteousness.*

*If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,
He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies
also through His Spirit which dwells in you.*

—Romans 8:1-11

Now that we have arrived at Holy Saturday, having concluded our Lenten observance for another year, I am aware of all the things we might've said, should've said, could've said about Lent, repentance, forgiveness and preparation for Holy Week and Easter. There is so much to “unpack,” we have to pick and choose. This is why it's a blessing to have an annual “Lent,” to have many years in which to explore and dig into the many aspects of a Lenten observance.

Yet here we are. It is Holy Saturday. We've had 40 days, excluding Sundays, of Lenten prayer, fasting and discipline. We've marked each day of Holy Week and last evening, liturgically, we saw Jesus breathe His last, saw Him laid in the tomb, saw the stone rolled into place.

Holy Saturday has always seemed, to me, a “time between times.” Not really Holy Week, in a sense, but not yet Easter Sunday. Still wiping tears after Good Friday reading of the Passion of our Lord, yet able to pick up the scent of Easter lilies in the air. This is the very embodiment of “already, but not yet.”

Surely the disciples were also unsettled on Holy Saturday, knowing Jesus was dead and buried, hiding behind locked doors—not having grasped what Jesus had said about being crucified and raised on the third day. There was no hope, no sense of expectation. Why would there be?

Our Holy Saturday is blessed and a blessing—because we know that Jesus' death leads to His resurrection. While we are not singing “alleluias” today, we may well be tapping our toes, anticipating, hearing the choir rehearsing “Jesus Christ is risen, today!” in the fellowship hall.

Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, dwell in me, give life to my mortal body—today! Amen.

Introduction



The Rev. Dr. David M. Wendel

As we approach Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the Season of Lent, it seems worthwhile to say a few words of introduction regarding this historic, often misunderstood and misdirected, observance.

Without the time or space to present a detailed explanation of the development of Lent, it is enough to say that a time of repentance, reflection and renewal has been practiced by Christians as a 40-day season (excluding Sundays) from the fourth century to the present day. Lent had its roots in baptismal preparation, fasting before celebration of Easter, and renewed baptismal commitment for those who had fallen away from the faith.

Historically, Lent has been associated with the three spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving (see Matthew 6). Lutherans have often focused their observance on growing deeper in the Word of God, study of Luther's Small Catechism, and reflection on one's sinfulness, repentance and renewal through God's grace and forgiveness. What is important, for Lutherans, is that Lenten observance be seen as a gracious gift for renewal and spiritual refreshment, not a good work to please God or earn His favor.

Martin Luther, preaching on Matthew 4:1-11, wrote about the spiritual discipline of fasting, “But the worst of all is that we have adopted and practiced fasting as a good work: not to bring our flesh into subjection; but, as a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace.” (Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Luther's Church Postil). Whether we share Lenten devotions, worship more frequently, give up things for Lent or engage in the biblical practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, it may never be understood as “a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace.” Lent itself is a gift of God! Let us observe it as such.

This Lenten Daily Devotional is based upon the daily lectionary provided in the Lutheran Book of Worship, Year I. The daily lectionary appoints three lessons for each day, although for the purposes of this booklet, one or more verses from one lesson have been chosen as the basis for each day's reflection.

The entire lesson appointed for the day is listed after the verses cited, if you have time and wish to read the text in its entirety. Otherwise, read just the brief lesson printed at the top of each page.

The prayer following each devotion may be seen as a "prayer starter," encouraging your thoughts to go deeper into prayer, or you may find them sufficient as printed.

This year, I have added a Lenten Response for each day, providing a helpful suggestion for putting the devotion into simple action. You will note that there are no responses suggested once we move into Holy Week. My hope is that your response, then, will be observing the days of our Lord's passion, death and resurrection.

Here's something to keep in mind about Lenten devotions and all Lenten disciplines: use them in grace! People often become demoralized and disheartened when, by the end of the first week, they have stumbled in their Lenten discipline. If you miss a day's devotion, or several days, catch up when you have time. There's no eternal harm in reading two day's devotions at once, or reading one week's devotions all together, if necessary. This booklet offers short, to-the-point devotions that do not take much time, so that you may find joy in the simple Lenten discipline of daily devotions.

Good Friday of Holy Week

*Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are you going?"
Jesus answered, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow afterward." Peter said to Him, "Lord, why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly I say to you, the cock will not crow, till you have denied me three times."*

—John 13:36-38

It sometimes seems that the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are etched into our collective memory. Christians may not remember much of Holy Scripture, but the details of our Lord's passion and death stay with us. Nothing more so than Peter's heart-breaking denial—not once, not twice, but three times!

Peter was one of Jesus' inner circle of disciples. When big things are happening, you can always count on Peter, James and John being there. Peter is arguably first among the disciples. It is Peter who confesses, "You are the Christ," and upon this confession, Jesus says He will build His Church. How deeply troubling it must have been, then, that Peter will deny Jesus three times.

We look at Peter and ask, "How could you do it?" Couldn't you have been stronger than that? Why would you betray your Lord and Master? We like to beat up on Peter for his denials. We're not very forgiving of the sins of Peter, thinking he should have been better, stronger, more faithful. A more useful approach to Peter might be to see ourselves in him!

Oh, we would never deny Jesus, would we? We ARE better, stronger, more faithful—or so we think. The example of Peter in the Bible, however, assures us not that God chooses and uses perfect and perfectly faithful persons to be disciples, but as God used imperfect Peter, maybe God can use you and me!

Lord Jesus, you were crucified with Peter's bitter betrayal ringing in your ears, yet he became a powerful preacher, empowered by your resurrection. Empower us, as well—to share the good news. Amen.

Maundy Thursday in Holy Week

*The cup of blessing which we bless,
is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread...
—I Corinthians 10:14-17, 11:27-32*

I am forever thankful that Martin Luther had it right, especially with regard to the Lord's Supper! Blessed Martin might not have had *everything* right, but in the most important things—he was right on.

Our Lord, Himself, instituted His Holy Supper. He says, "This is my body; this is my blood of the new covenant—do this for the remembrance of me." Luther had no hesitation—when our Lord said "This IS my body and blood," He meant what He said. Some in our world may debate what the meaning of "is" is. Luther had it right. We trust our Lord at His word. When we share the Lord's Supper, it is His body and blood that we are eating and drinking.

Maundy (as in Thursday) comes from the Latin word, "command." Jesus commands us to "do this." He also commands us to "love one another as I have loved you." Interestingly, He commands us to wash one another's feet!

We continue to obey all of Jesus commands, but we do cherish and esteem highly the Lord's Supper, the Sacrament of Christ's presence among us. I believe this is one time when we can trust that most every congregation will be sharing our Lord's body and blood today.

We are united at the table of the Lord, though we are gathering in many places—in beautiful churches, in storefront worship spaces, in house churches where we gather as the first Christians often did! We are not united because we are Lutherans, or members of the NALC—we are one because we all partake of the one cup and the one bread, so that we who are many are one body!

Lord Jesus Christ, we are one through your body and blood. Make our unity a powerful witness to our broken and hurting world. Amen.

Ash Wednesday

*Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves
that they were righteous and despised others... —Luke 18:9-14*

As we step into the season of Lent, we're not always ready or in the proper mindset. We've been in the Season of Epiphany, still basking in the glory of Jesus, born at Bethlehem, baptized in the Jordan, revealed as Son of God and Messiah. Last Sunday was our celebration of the Transfiguration: Jesus, shining on the mountaintop with Peter, James and John, declared by the Father to be His Son. The disciples would like to stay but by this time, the Lord had "set his face toward Jerusalem." Already, Jesus was looking toward his passion, death and resurrection—for us and for our salvation.

And we're on our way to Holy Week and Easter, ready or not. Lent is a blessing to us because it's time for an "attitude adjustment." Not ready for Holy Week and Easter? Good! Lent gives us time to focus and prepare; time to be in God's Word, calling us to repent and believe; time to respond to Emmanuel, God-with-us, by reorienting our lives. Lent gives us time to confess once again that we dare not trust in ourselves, thinking ourselves righteous!

The parable Jesus tells is about the Pharisee and the tax collector who go up to pray in the Temple. The Pharisee is arrogant and trusts in himself and his own actions. The tax collector is humble, acknowledging his sinfulness, praying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus tells us this man went home justified, not because he was humble or repentant, but because he realized his need for God and God's forgiveness!

Lent is not about proving ourselves righteous, or spiritual, or obedient. Lent is about confessing that it is by God's grace that we are forgiven, saved and renewed.

Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner! Amen.

Lenten Response: Throughout Lent, as you arise in the morning and lie down at night, pray, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession... it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of bondage... —Deuteronomy 7:6-11

I first heard the adage, “How odd of God to choose the Jews,” from my Jewish philosophy professor (a rabbi) at Indiana University. As a Jewish teacher and theologian, he was acknowledging, himself, that Israel didn’t deserve God’s favor, whether in numbers, faithfulness or character. Our reading proclaims that God chose the Jews, perhaps in spite of themselves, to manifest his great love and desire to free them from slavery in Egypt.

We might say, “how odd of God to choose Peter,” who three times denied the Lord and continually showed himself to be impertinent, difficult and disobedient. And yet, by choosing Peter, the Lord illustrates that God chooses and uses plain, ordinary, sinful persons like Peter—and us!

Every one of us can say, “how odd of God to choose ME!” I am disobedient, I am unloving, I sin against God and neighbor. Still, God chooses you and me! Indeed, God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). St. Paul states that, considering his own weakness as an apostle, yet God manifested his power through him. Choosing imperfect, unrighteous, undeserving people like us ensures that the focus will be on God and his love, mercy and grace—truly his power at work through us! And we can only say, thanks be to God!

Lord God, thank you that before I was born, you chose me and appointed me to be your child, reborn now through the death and resurrection of Jesus, my Savior. Amen.

Lenten Response: Have you decided on a Lenten discipline? How about “thankfulness”? Make a list for Lent, adding one thing each day for which you’re thankful!

Wednesday of Holy Week

Therefore, my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved...rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let all know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 4:1-13

This may seem an unusual reading for Wednesday of Holy Week. Consider it something of an interlude. In the book of Revelation, interludes often appear in-between major visions given to John. The interludes are a pause, a time to catch one’s breath before the troubling, powerful, or moving next part.

Tomorrow, we will observe Maundy, or Command Thursday, as Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper, commanding, “do this.” We then follow to the Garden, where he will pray, be arrested and begin the events of His final day. It will be moving, troubling, powerful. Today, we have an interlude that reminds us, in the midst of the emotions of the passion, to stand firm, to rejoice in the Lord, to have no anxiety about anything, offering prayers and supplications, with thanksgiving, to God.

And don’t forget the last sentence above: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Although we may shed some tears as we sing “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” and “Were You There,” we do so knowing, knowing that Jesus has won the victory!

We observe the Three Days assured that Jesus, who was crucified, is risen! We don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, but neither do we want to grieve as those who have no hope. The peace of God will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Lord God, in spite of our observance, in spite of struggles and challenges in life, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, that we may have your peace. Amen.

Tuesday of Holy Week

For many...live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power which enables Him even to subject all thing to Himself.
—Philippians 3:15-21

We grieve for those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ—focused completely on this world and the things of this world. What an empty existence that must be—full of earthly pursuits, possessions and preoccupations, yet always aware of the gnawing emptiness that is life without Jesus Christ.

I read recently of an 88-year-old woman who had no faith, waking every morning, saying, “Shoot! I didn’t die during the night.” We are waiting joyfully, knowing our commonwealth—our shared treasure and riches are in heaven, thanks to Jesus Christ, our Savior. We have no desire to rush life along or to hurry on to death. We wake every morning with “Thanks be to God!”

And yet, we have no fear of death, either. When that time comes, the Lord Jesus will change our lowly, mortal bodies to be like His glorious body, by the power by which He is able to subject all things to Himself. While we can hardly imagine what that might be like, we trust God and His Word and as we are in the midst of Holy Week, our minds reach to eternal things.

As we ponder our Lord’s death and resurrection, let us remember and pray for those who may be “enemies of the cross of Christ, with minds set on earthly things.” Let us not rest till we have done all we can to invite all of those into a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ!

Almighty God, we pray for those who are even now, enemies of the cross of Christ. Bring them to the sure and certain knowledge that their commonwealth is in heaven, not on earth. Amen.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.
—John 1:35-42

The more we know about the biblical basis for the “Sunday liturgy” the more we will appreciate that this traditional, historical, ancient form of worship is nothing other than the words of Holy Scripture. I cringe a little when I am in a worship service containing bits and pieces written by a biblically liberal pastor working for a biblically liberal church publishing house! They are often empty, misdirected and unable to speak for our deepest human needs and yearning for repentance, confession, forgiveness, mercy and the one true God. Give me Scripture, and only Scripture, in our worship! Give me the words Jews and Christians have spoken and prayed for thousands of years—and these will resonate deep in our souls.

At the moment in our Sunday worship when the Words of Institution have been spoken and Christ is truly present in, with and under the forms of bread and wine in Holy Communion, we then sing the Agnus Dei (Latin for “Lamb of God”). We are acknowledging that the Lamb of God is with us, even as John the Baptizer pointed to Jesus and immediately, the two disciples turned from being John’s disciples and now followed Jesus!

The reality of Jesus’ presence with us in Word and Sacrament means that we take the place of John in our worship, pointing to Jesus, declaring “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Jesus is present, and our proclamation is intended to point him out, hoping that all will see him in the Lord’s Supper and then come, follow Jesus!

Jesus, Lamb of God, come to us, forgive us our sins and grant us peace. Amen.

Lenten Response: If you have the courage, point to the Body and Blood of Jesus on Sunday as we sing, “Lamb of God.”

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

...but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing and regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ... —Titus 3:1-15

It should be clearly stated here, during the first few days of Lent, that our 40 days of spiritual discipline will not save us or gain us eternal favor in God's sight. In today's reading, Paul is laying out clear expectations regarding the life of the Christian, exhorting his readers to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, ready for honest work, not speaking evil, avoiding quarreling and so on. (Read the entire passage cited above.) As followers of Jesus, there are expectations of godly behavior. Disciples are to live increasingly "disciplined" lives.

In the North American Lutheran Church, we are all about the life of discipleship and we have joyfully and hopefully engaged in the commission of our Lord to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations." We speak of the expectation that disciples will be regularly reading, hearing and living the Word of God, praying, sharing the faith, and "making disciples." Yet, some forget that this is not about "saving ourselves," making ourselves acceptable in God's sight or proving ourselves "better" Christians than others. We seek to live Christ-like lives as disciples in response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, even as we practice Lenten disciplines in response to Jesus' own 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus' own suffering, self-denial, death and resurrection.

Paul writes, "but when the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Savior appeared, HE SAVED US..."

Lord God, we thank you for your goodness and lovingkindness, that through Jesus death and resurrection, you have saved us! Amen.

Lenten Response: Read the entire appointed passage above, Titus 3:1-15, Paul's list of exhortations, and choose one action to work on today!

Monday of Holy Week

*And Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it; as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your kind is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of Him and had been done to Him.
—John 12:9-19*

If you didn't hear, or read the Palm Sunday processional gospel, it is today's reading. John, one of the disciples of Jesus, tells us they didn't understand, at first, what happened and why. It was after Jesus was risen that they remembered the prophecy—and that it was fulfilled by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a colt.

The truth is, most of the events of that first "Holy Week" were not understood by those first disciples. They were surely confused, frightened, lost, troubled by all that happened to Jesus. His Palm Sunday entry, his Last Supper, the command to "do this for the remembrance of me", His praying in the Garden, His arrest, torture, crucifixion. All of this threw the disciples into a state of shock, leaving them, finally, huddling behind closed, locked doors for fear that the same thing that happened to Jesus would happen to them!

For two of the followers of Jesus, it didn't all make sense until after His resurrection, Jesus joined them walking on the road to Emmaus. They didn't recognize their risen Lord, but He opened to them the Scriptures and they knew Him later, in the "breaking of the bread."

This is how it is for us, as well. We may not know or understand God's great plan for the salvation of the world. We may not be able to explain how and why it happened as it did. But our Lord opens our minds to understand how the Scriptures bear witness to Him, and we know Him with us in "the breaking of the bread"—in our weekly celebration of our Lord's Supper!

Lord Jesus, as we walk with you through Holy Week, open our minds to understand the Scriptures, and reveal yourself to us in the "breaking of the bread." Amen.

Sunday of Holy Week, Palm/Passion Sunday

*And the blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple and he healed them.
But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things
that He did, and the children crying out in the temple,
“Hosanna to the Son of David!”
they were indignant and they said to Him, “Do you hear what these are
saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘
Out of the mouths of babes
and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise?’”
—Matthew 21:12-17*

The daily lectionary doesn't include the appointed Holy Week texts. It is assumed you will hear the Palm Sunday gospel in worship today. If you are not able to gather with the worshiping community, read the Palm Sunday account for yourself. Our reading for today instead seeks to highlight the different reactions to Jesus. The children in the temple are crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David”—the same cry which the people of Jerusalem shouted as Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, waving palm branches to welcome Him.

Children see Jesus and know that He is Messiah and Lord—the chief priests and scribes fail to see and know. One would expect the religious leaders who know the prophecies and have been looking for the coming of the Christ would join the children shouting, “Hosanna!”, but isn't that the way it is in the world?

I appreciated those years in Colorado Springs when our congregation was able to secure a pony, have someone dress up as Jesus and have a Palm Sunday procession outdoors, around the neighborhood. It was a visible witness that often got a few looks—some knowing, some confused by the spectacle. I expected some who saw were joining us in crying, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” while others might scowl and shout, “You're tying up traffic-foolish Christians!” Some will approach Holy Week and Easter in the same way. Some will believe and some won't. Some will walk with Jesus to the Upper Room, Golgotha and the cross, some won't. Some will run to the tomb, some won't!

Hosanna, hosanna to you, Jesus, Son of David!

Sunday of the Week of Lent I

*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.
For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and
the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.” —I Corinthians 1:18-31*

For those of us who observe the season of Lent, regardless our particular Lenten discipline, the world around us sees our actions as foolishness. Spending more time at church? What a waste, they say. Fasting, to empty yourself to be filled with Christ? Makes no sense, they say. Taking time each day for Lenten devotions? Why not use that time for something more fun?!

There is very little about Lent and spiritual discipline that commends itself to the secular, godless world, just as the cross and Jesus' sacrifice for the sins of the world are seen by the so-called “wise” of the world as absurd, ridiculous. Paul goes on to say in our reading, “but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...for the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

This Lenten season, let's be as foolish as we can be, by God's standards. Let's worship, and read and study the Bible, and pray, and give to the poor, and fast, and pray some more. Let's volunteer at the homeless shelter and feed the hungry at the soup kitchen, though we get nothing tangible for our efforts. Let's give money to support our missionaries, serving in lands we will never visit, helping people we will never meet. Let's revel in godly foolishness this Lenten season!

Lord God, let us boast, not of ourselves, but of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified for us and our salvation. Amen.

Lenten Response: See above suggestions for godly foolishness.

Monday of the Week of Lent I

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." —John 2:1-12

This passage usually appears on Sunday morning during the season of Epiphany, as the signs Jesus did begin to reveal who he is. In the season of Lent, it may speak a somewhat different word.

Certainly, it is undeniable that this is one of the “signs” Jesus did to “manifest his glory, that people would believe in him.” But I’m often drawn, as well, to Mary’s instruction to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Isn’t this a valuable word to us, especially in the season of Lent? Do whatever he tells you!

Most will remember the “WWJD” campaign a few years ago, when small rubber bracelets were sold to remind people to ask themselves, “Now, what would Jesus do in this situation?” Does that mean I’m supposed to consider what I think Jesus would do, and then try to do it? Some people think Jesus would or wouldn’t do this or that. And then, can I really do what Jesus did? Jesus was the Son of God; we are sinful human beings. I would prefer to hear and heed Mary’s instruction: “Do whatever Jesus tells you.”

And what does Jesus tell you to do? Read the Scriptures. There is too much to list it all here, but there are some things easily recounted: come, follow me; love one another as I have loved you; abide in my word; receive the Holy Spirit; do this in remembrance of me; go, make disciples, baptize, teach. We could go on. The point is, as disciples and followers of Jesus, we are not free to do as we wish. We are to do whatever Jesus tells us. We are to do what he commands us—commissions us to do!

Lord Jesus, help me to do whatever you tell me to—as you speak to me through the Holy Bible! Amen.

Lenten Response: What is one thing Jesus tells us to do—that you aren’t? Make this your Lenten focus.

Saturday of the Week of Lent V

*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant... But this is the covenant I will make...
I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts;
and I will be their God and they shall be my people...
I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.
—Jeremiah 31:27-34*

Honestly, I never liked disciplining our kids. I dislike disciplining our grandkids even more! I did it because we wanted our children to learn right from wrong, to understand that there are boundaries and limits to behavior, helping them to grow and mature into productive, loving, responsible adults.

I enjoyed, much more, the restoration after the discipline! I looked forward to the time after the grounding, the moment when I could “free” the kids from their “time-out.” The experience after the punishment when we realized the lesson was learned and we could move forward, together, into a new aspect of the parent/child relationship.

Now, the Lord God, through Jeremiah, the prophet, is speaking of that time of restoration after the discipline. The time of judgment and wrath would come and it wouldn’t be pleasant for the children of God. But the Lord now speaks of what the time after would be like—a time of renewed relationship, of heartfelt obedience. The promise of “what comes after” was intended to keep God’s people going, even during the chastisement of exile in a foreign land.

Holy Week moves from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the reading, in most congregations, of the Passion of our Lord. There will be emotional highs and lows during Holy Week. Remember, Easter is coming! We are not singing “alleluias” in the Upper Room or at the foot of the cross, but there will be restoration and resurrection!

Lord God, forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more. We are yearning for restoration and resurrection! Amen.

Lenten Response: Can you clear your calendar for next week to make space and time for prayer, worship and quiet time? Give yourself the gift of a meaningful Holy Week.

Friday of the Week of Lent V

*Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life;
he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,
and whoever lives and believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,
and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*
—John 11:1-27

As I prepare these devotions without the benefit of seeing you and knowing how you are responding, I am always concerned that you hear in them, the great hopefulness we have because Jesus died and was raised for us! Although it is right for us to talk honestly about sin, disobedience, guilt, judgment and wrath—calling all to repentance and amendment of life—this is possible only because of God's grace and mercy!

Lent is not intended to make us grovel and bow under the great weight of our sinfulness. Lent is to provide opportunity for heartfelt reflection and self-examination, true repentance for the sake of forgiveness—so that we arrive at Holy Week and Easter ready! Ready to walk again with our Lord, ready to hear again of His passion, death and resurrection, ready to receive the good news that Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

It's helpful for us to have the account of the raising of Lazarus as we are about to enter into Holy Week. The chance to see Jesus restoring life to Lazarus and to overhear His interaction with Martha proclaims to us, again, the good news that Jesus is the resurrection and the life—that all who believe in Him—though we die, yet shall we live! This is the Gospel which I hope and pray you have been hearing throughout these Lenten devotions. We don't preach law, sin and judgment in Lent and save the good news for Easter. Jesus, the resurrection and life is to be proclaimed always—as it is His risen presence which is the power of God unto salvation. We confess, repent, and amend our lives, because of the promise of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ!

Lord Jesus, as we draw near to Holy Week, keep us focused, keep us mindful of you, the resurrection and the life. Amen.

Lenten Response: Today, put your congregation's Holy Week services on your calendar. Make them your priority next week.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent I

*But Jesus spoke of the temple of his body.
When therefore he was raised from the dead,
his disciples remembered that he had said this;
and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.*
—John 2:13-22

The larger appointed passage for today is Jesus cleansing the Jerusalem temple of those selling oxen, sheep and pigeons for sacrifice, and the moneychangers at their businesses. He was consumed with zeal for the house of his Father—that it had become a place of trade—especially with regard to the sacrifices required. Remember, it was not the sacrifices which Jesus abhorred, but the way that sacrifice to the Lord God, atonement and forgiveness had become a money-making scheme, institutionalized in the temple precincts which were supposed to be for prayer!

As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this year, we are reminded of Luther's protests in the 1500s. Rather than encouraging the faithful to engage in heartfelt, true repentance that involved the whole of one's life and being, "penance" was reduced to a money-making scheme for the Church, with forgiveness, grace and mercy being bought and sold. Rather than repentance and change of life, we are always seeking to institutionalize salvation so we can know that, when we do the right things, pay the right amount, behave the right way, the salvation machine will guarantee us eternal life.

Jesus speaks to us, however, as he did to those in the temple, reminding us that, finally, it is all about the temple of his body, destroyed on Good Friday, raised up on the third day—the day on which Jesus conquered sin, death and the devil, assuring us salvation is from Christ the Lord! Believe the Scripture and the Word which Jesus has spoken!

Lord God, help us to believe the Scripture and the word which Jesus has spoken—trusting in him alone. Amen.

Lenten Response: Find a way to mention to someone that this year is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and see if that opens the door to a conversation about the Gospel.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent I

*Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart,
leading you to fall away from the living God.
But exhort one another every day...
—Hebrews 3:12-19*

Today, I am exhorting you! Many are driven away from the church, or never come in the first place, because they are shocked and disheartened to find that there are those in the church who have evil, unbelieving hearts. If each of us in the Body of Christ would guard against ever having an evil, unbelieving heart, life, communication and ministry in the church would be more effective and faithful. How is it that evil and unbelief find their way into our hearts and into our congregations? The author of Hebrews says that we are sometimes “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

It is not difficult, at times, to see evil at work in congregations, as there are those whose hearts are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. People sometimes tear down the Body of Christ, rather than build it up. Members of the Body, pastors included, sometimes think they, alone, are right. They won't listen to others; they are not willing to communicate, to be chastened, to be reproved. This often indicates one's heart is hardened.

How do we guard against this? How can I guard against MY heart being hardened by sin? By being grounded in the reality of the living God. Hebrews says, “For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end...” Our “first confidence” is stated in 3:1. As we are holy brethren, sharing in a heavenly call and considering Jesus the apostle and high priest of our confession, let us always strive to be holy brethren—a holy family, sharing in that heavenly call.

Lord God, do not let our hearts be hardened—and make of us a holy family in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Lenten Response: Is your heart hardened toward someone in your congregation? Go to that person and extend the hand of reconciliation.

Thursday of the Week of Lent V

*Then Jeremiah spoke to all the princes and all the people, saying,
“The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city
all the words you have heard. Now therefore amend your ways
and your doings, and obey the voice of the LORD your God,
and the LORD will repent
of the evil which He has pronounced against you.”
—Jeremiah 26:1-24*

As we've been reading, periodically, through Jeremiah in these devotions taken from the LBW daily lectionary, we heard the prophet foretelling judgment and exile, as well as promise for restoration. Now, push comes to shove for Jeremiah. The people have tired of hearing his message and they have “laid hold” of him, saying, “You shall die!”

Prophets and preachers calling people to repent and amend their ways and their doings have often faced opposition. An important part of confession and repentance is amendment of life! Now that you have acknowledged your sin, how will you change your behavior so that you don't go and sin again? Most folks will confess their sins, want forgiveness freely given, and then go out to do the same thing they did before!

Have you been particularly mindful of your sin and disobedience during this Lenten season? Has your participation during the rite of Confession and Forgiveness on Sunday morning been heartfelt, especially during the Sundays of Lent? Do you, then, leave with an intention and a plan for how NOT to do the same disobedient things over again? The words of Jeremiah come to us across the ages: Now therefore amend your ways and your doings and obey the voice of the Lord!

Lord God, I confess that I have sinned against you this day. In the name of Jesus, I ask forgiveness. Deliver and restore me, that I may amend my life and obey your voice. Amen.

Lenten Response: What is the sin you struggle with most? What might you change or do differently to avoid repeating this sin in the future?

Wednesday of the Week of Lent V

*But how are people to call upon Him in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without a preacher?
And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written,
“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!”
—Romans 10:4-21*

When I was a child, it was the cherished role of the pastor and congregation to encourage young people to consider whether God might be calling them into ordained ministry. There is now a shortage of clergy in most every denomination. And why is that? Our increasingly secular culture. Fewer children and youth being raised in the Church. Rampant attitudes that believe everyone will go to heaven, regardless, so why be a preacher?

It is now time for pastors and congregations to once again become encouragers—finding those youths who seem to have the faith, the grounding, the passion for Jesus and the Word of God, such that they just might experience the call to ministry!

Besides my family and pastors, Clayton Huntington (of blessed memory) in my home congregation in Columbus, IN was always an “encourager.” He gave me a job every summer and holiday vacation in his hardware store so that I could put myself through eight years of college and seminary. Can you be a “Clayton Huntington” for some young person?

And why is this meditation part of our Lenten devotions? Even now, your pastor is hard at work preparing services and sermons for the Great and Holy Week, fast approaching. We need to be raising up pastors now, to serve the Church in the years to come. Who will preach the Word of God during Holy Week and Easter, if there are no preachers?

***Almighty God, call young people into ministry, that there will be pastors to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments in years to come!
Amen.***

Lenten Response: Encourage one young person in your congregation to consider ordained ministry—and thank your pastor for preaching the Good News!

Thursday of the Week of Lent I

*At that time, the LORD said to me, “Hew two tables of stone...
and come up to me on the mountain...
And I will write on the tables the words...
and you shall put them in the ark.”
—Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5*

These are the words of the Lord God to Moses, after he has broken the first set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments. So, the Lord God created a second set of commandments.

If you’ve worshiped in many early American churches you will usually find around the altar, the Ten Commandments on one side and the Apostle’s Creed on the other. There was a time when the Ten Commandments were visible most everywhere: in school classrooms, in homes, in Sunday School rooms and yes, visible somewhere in the sanctuary, narthex or fellowship hall. Now, it can be hard to find a copy of the Ten Commandments posted in churches!

It seems the removal of the Ten Commandments, visibly, from churches has gone hand in hand with a diminishment of respect and regard for God’s Law. It is called, “antinomianism”—anti-law; being opposed to God’s laws and commandments. The reasoning goes, “if we’re saved by God’s grace, it doesn’t matter what you do—the laws of God are no longer binding.” Nothing could be further from the truth. It is because we are saved by grace through faith, that now we want to live the laws and commandments of God!

Consider the biblical witness that God himself wrote the commandments on the tablets! There was no intermediary—no scribe—no interpreter, paraphrasing or re-imagining what God wanted to say. The commandments were hand-chiseled by the Lord God!

Lord God almighty, help me to cherish your commandments, but even more, enable me to obey them, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lenten Response: Memorize the Ten Commandments—again, or for the first time.

Friday of the Week of Lent I

*And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you,
but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways,
to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart
and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the
LORD, which I command you this day for your good?
—Deuteronomy 10:12-22*

Now that the Lord God has given us his commandments, what are we to do? How are we to live? What is our response to God's graceful giving of the Law?

Fear the Lord our God; walk in all his ways; love him, serve him with all our heart and soul—keeping his commandments and statutes. And why? For our own good!

It is tragic that “law,” “commandments” and “obedience” have become negatives in our culture and society. Laws and commandments provide boundaries and limits to human behavior, not just to please God or to establish a safe, peaceful, ordered environment, but for our good! It is so that we can live life as God has created it, with love for Him and for our neighbor as our guide, respecting and valuing life, always caring for the littlest and the least in our midst.

The book, *The Object of My Affection is in My Reflection*, by Rokelle Learner is about dealing with narcissists. The goal of living the Christ-like life is the opposite of narcissism. Christ lived for God, the Father, and for others. The Ten Commandments direct us to love God and love and respect others. They are not intended to keep us from joy, laughter, pleasure and happiness in life. Rather, they are to create lives in which such things are possible.

Lord God, I want to delight in your commands and keep them. Help me to love you with all my heart and soul. In Jesus name, Amen.

Lenten Response: Now that we have memorized the Ten Commandments, read Luther's explanations in the Small Catechism. If you don't have a copy, ask your pastor for one or find it online at <http://bookofconcord.org/smallcatechism.php>.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent V

*So for the second time they called the man who had been blind,
and said to him, “Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner.”
He answered, “Whether he is a sinner, I do not know;
one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.”
—John 9:18-41*

The account of Jesus healing a man born blind is tragic. Not because Jesus healed the man, but because the Pharisees were determined to prove Jesus was a sinner and blasphemer. The religious leaders go to great lengths interrogating the man and his parents, aiming to discover some detail to incriminate Jesus.

Finally, the man can only repeat the details and leave the Pharisees to decide for themselves. The man says, “One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” And did the religious leaders come to “see” Jesus as Messiah and Lord? Or did they remain blind to the truth of who Jesus is and why He came? Jesus turned the table on the Pharisees, proving that the blind man does indeed now see, while they remain “blind.” It is a powerful account contrasting seeing and not seeing, believing and not believing, sin and righteousness.

Many of us have been in situations where we have shared the truth about Jesus with someone, only to have them argue, wanting to prove the Christian message false. People who hear the truth but refuse to believe in Jesus. People who have the chance to see Jesus for who He truly is, but choose to remain “blind.” And what do we do in such situations? Don't argue. Tell them, “One thing I know: I was blind, now I see!”

Lord Jesus, thank you that through the ministry of family, friends, pastors and fellow Christians, I have come to see and believe that you are Son of God and Savior! Amen.

Lenten Response: What new insight or learning has been revealed to you through your Lenten devotion? Share this with someone else.

Monday of the Week of Lent V

Then the word of the LORD came to me: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah...I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land.

I will build them up, and not tear them down;

I will plant them and not uproot them.

I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

—Jeremiah 24:1-10

The book of the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that though the Lord God chastens and reproves, He also plants and builds up. Though God judges sin and disobedience, He also forgives and renews. Though we die, yet shall we live!

We have heard much from the Lord, through Jeremiah, about the judgment which would come upon Judah in the form of exile. But after exile would come a time of blessing and restoration. The Lord God promises that He will set His eyes upon the returning exiles for good. But even more, He will give them a heart to know that He is the Lord—so that they will return to Him with their whole heart.

If you haven't heard this so far in Lent, then hear it now: Lent is not just about sin, judgment and wrath; it's about planting, building up and restoring. Lent is about returning to the Lord God with our whole heart, knowing that He is our God and we are His people. Lent is all about dying to self and living anew for Christ Jesus.

Do you get stuck in Lent, focusing on sin and guilt, never moving to forgiveness and renewed life in Christ? Is your Lenten observance balanced? As God promised a new start for Jerusalem and Judah, God wants you to return to Him with your whole heart—and live!

Turn my heart to you, Lord, and make me your own! Amen.

Lenten Response: Wake up every morning and say, “Thank you, Lord, for another new beginning!”

Saturday of the Week of Lent I

Although He was a Son, he learned obedience through what He suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

—Hebrews 5:1-10

Two things are clear from this passage. We can learn obedience. Jesus alone was perfectly obedient.

I will admit, in all my years, I rarely hear sermons on “obedience.” I've heard lots of sermons on grace, forgiveness and mercy. Does preaching “obedience” negate preaching “grace Surely not.

Lutherans, of all people, ought to be familiar with what is referred to as the “three uses of the Law.” These have been debated, at times in Lutheranism, but as Dr. Jim Nestingen stated, “We all agree there is to be a new life in Christ!” He's referring to the third use of the Law, sometimes defined as “call to obedience.” The first or civil use of the Law orders all human society—commanding us not to kill, steal, lie or commit adultery. The second use shows us our sin, that we cannot save ourselves by our own obedience, driving us to our need for the Savior. Now that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, we are called to obey. Obedience is not always easy. Learning obedience can involve suffering and pain—certainly self-denial. But we can learn obedience. It should happen in the home and in the family, but the entire life of the believer is one of learning obedience.

That being said, only Jesus was perfectly obedient. He became obedient unto death—even death on a cross—for us and for our salvation.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your perfect obedience, for being the spotless Lamb of God. Amen.

Lenten Response: Take a cross from the wall—or a piece of jewelry—and hold it for five minutes, pondering Jesus' death as an act of perfect obedience.

Sunday of the Week of Lent II

*Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you...”*

Then Jeremiah said, “Ah, Lord God!

Behold I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.”

*But the Lord said to me, “...to all whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak...”*

be not afraid of them, for I am with you...says the LORD.”

—Jeremiah 1:1-10

Although this is the account of the call of the prophet Jeremiah, these words of the Lord speak to each of us. God calls each of us to speak, to serve—and we have lots of reasons or excuses why we can't or won't.

It is useful to remember, “God doesn't call those who are gifted—God gives gifts to those He calls!” As God calls Jeremiah, He promises the new prophet that he need not be afraid of those to whom he will be sent or hesitant to speak to those to whom he is to speak, for the Lord God will be with him. Oh, if only God would be with us in the same way!

Yet, is He not? Jesus promises that He will be with us wherever two or three are gathered in His name. He assures us, “Lo, I am with you always...” His words to Jeremiah are spoken to you and me as well: “be not afraid...for I am with you!”

When called to serve in some new way; when given an opportunity to share the Gospel; when we have the chance to walk alongside a new believer, we need not hesitate or allow ourselves to be fearful, for the Lord God who calls us is with us!

Lord God, I don't know how to speak, what to share, how to proclaim the Good News, but I know you are with me. Amen.

Lenten Response: Write in large letters on a sheet of paper: “Be not afraid, for I am with you!” and tape it to your bedroom/bathroom mirror so you may see it as you begin your day.

Sunday of the Week of Lent V

*And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things,
and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes,
and be killed, and after three days rise again...
and Peter took Him and began to rebuke Him.*

—Mark 8:31-9:1

We can't imagine a follower of Jesus “rebuking” Him, but there it is. Webster's dictionary defines rebuke as “sharp disapproval or criticism.” Really? Peter sharply disapproves of and criticizes the fact that Jesus will suffer, be rejected, killed and rise after three days? This is proof that, still, the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was telling them. Still, the notion of the Son of God suffering for the sins of the world didn't make sense. And does it today?

If we try to grasp the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection by human reason or rationalizing, we will always end up confused and frustrated. We may also want to rebuke Jesus, questioning why should it be this way? What God—or Son of God, would give His life for sinful humanity? What self-respecting divine being would suffer, be rejected, die—for the sake of His creation? One who would then rise to new life?

That's the point, isn't it? Not only that Jesus gave His life, but that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures! He bore our sins on the cross, so that we might be raised, with Him, to newness of life.

Because of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection—death is not the end for us! We have hope and a future, through Him. Life is transformed! Life has meaning, because Jesus died and was raised! Life is full and free, because Jesus lives! We dare not rebuke our Lord, but thank and praise Him!

***Lord Jesus, thank you for your suffering, death and resurrection.
Because of you, I have life and have it abundantly. Amen.***

Lenten Response: It's Sunday! Go to church, receive the means of grace, give thanks and praise!

Saturday of the Week of Lent IV

After this many of His disciples drew back and no longer went about with Him. Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.”
—John 6:60-71

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!” Besides the Bible, when have you heard these words recited?

Once again, we have in our passage words that are part of our Sunday worship service. We sing the “Alleluia Verse” prior to the reading of the Holy Gospel, singing precisely these words of Peter. We acknowledge that the reading of the Gospel lesson presents the very words of the Lord—words which give life and eternal life! To whom else shall we go? We stand in respect to greet the Lord present in His Word, as the Gospel is read in the midst of the congregation.

Of course, not all will receive Jesus and His Word. John tells us that many of His disciples drew back and no longer went about with Him. Many today reject Jesus and His Word, acknowledging Him as *a* son of God like Mohammed or Buddha or Joseph Smith, but not the Holy One of God, the way, the truth and the life.

This is the dividing line between biblical, confessional Christians and those who see Jesus only as a wise sage, a helpful teacher, an engaging life-coach. The Scriptures proclaim Jesus as only begotten Son of God, born of the virgin, Mary, crucified and risen for our salvation. He, alone, has words of eternal life!

Lord Jesus, you have the words of eternal life! And I believe and have come to know that you are the holy one of God. Amen.

Lenten Response: Tomorrow in Sunday worship, take note how Lutheran worship is full of Scripture—from beginning to end!

Monday of the Week of Lent II

Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony... 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 your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.”
—John 4:27-42

Our passage today is the conclusion of the account of Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus offered the Living Water. The woman was so moved by her experience that she testified to others about Jesus. First, they believed because of her testimony—but then, after being with Jesus, they heard and believed for themselves.

After Jesus’ resurrection, before His ascension, He commissions us to “go therefore and make disciples,” (Matthew 28:19) and he also sends us saying, “You will be my witnesses...” (Acts 1:8) We may not understand ourselves as “worthy” to go and make disciples, let alone to be His witnesses. And yet, do you know the Samaritan woman? Married five times, now living with a man outside of wedlock. Still, many come to believe because of her testimony.

Witnessing to Jesus is not arguing theology or quoting Scripture. It’s also not telling people “about” Jesus. Witnessing is sharing our own experience of the Lord. How has God been active in your life? How does God speak to you through His Word? What does Jesus’ presence in the Lord’s Supper mean to you in your day to day life? This is what we are called to share, so that others come to know and believe Jesus!

Jesus, I will be your witness. Send your Spirit to me, that I may have the words you want me to speak when given the opportunity. Amen.

Lenten Response: How would you share your experience of God’s activity in your life? Jot down three sentences on a 3 x 5 card so that you are ready to share.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent II

This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. —John 4:43-54

In the Gospel of John, we hear about people wanting signs in order to believe. The first sign is Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. This passage includes the second: the healing of the official's son who was ill. Jesus said, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

We're not all from Missouri, the "show-me" state, but most today hold that "seeing is believing." People want proof, evidence—something they can see and touch to know and believe.

Where are the signs of God's presence among us today? One might point to a number of signs of God's presence in one's life. But we have been given certain signs as we live on this side of Jesus' resurrection and ascension; signs that are clear, visible and real. The miracle of Christ's presence among us today are Word and Sacrament—the means of grace!

Christ is the Word made flesh to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. Jesus sends His Holy Spirit to descend upon the newly baptized that they may be born anew by water and the Spirit. Jesus promises, "This is my Body, this is my Blood," when we "do this in remembrance of Him." When someone asks us where we see Christ present in the world today, we can open God's Word. We can bring them to the baptismal font. We can invite them to be present at the Lord's Supper, where the faithful receive Jesus, truly present to offer forgiveness, life and salvation!

Lord Jesus, thank you for the signs of your risen presence among us—as you come to us in Word and Sacrament! Amen.

Lenten Response: Write "The Word made flesh, living with me" on a sticky note. Put it on your Bible, to remain there throughout Lent.

Friday of the Week of Lent IV

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people... behold, I will attend to you for your evil doings. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock... and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing... —Jeremiah 23:1-8

It is something of a blessing and a curse that God sets shepherd/pastors over His flock to care for them. It is a blessing, because God wants under-shepherds to be there in the community, feeding and watching over the sheep. It is a curse because pastors are all-too-human and, sometimes, do not live up to their responsibilities.

It is a sad reality that pastors are not always faithful shepherds, sometimes destroying and scattering the sheep of the Lord's pasture. Thankfully, it is not often. I will say, however, that when installing a new pastor, I remind the congregation that their new pastor is just that: a pastor. Your pastor is not your Savior. Your pastor will not make all things new—and better. The pastor and the congregation must work together, as a team, to strengthen and grow ministry, to reach others with the presence of Jesus Christ, to develop and maintain an active, viable mission in the local community.

The good news in our reading is that even when the shepherds/pastors destroy and scatter the flock, the Lord God will Himself gather the remnant, bring them back to the fold to be fruitful and multiply and, yes, set over them new shepherds so that they will no longer fear or be dismayed! The Lord will not forsake His flock or His sheep!

O Lord, you are my shepherd. You lead me beside still waters. Restore my soul! Amen.

Lenten Response: Send an encouraging email or make a phone call expressing thanks to your pastor for the love and care.

Thursday of the Week of Lent IV

*Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.
And He who searches the hearts of men
knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*
—Romans 8:12-27

This is truly one of the most comforting passages in all of Holy Scripture! It has to be right up there with the 23rd Psalm. Some people speak and act and pray as if they always know exactly what God is up to, are totally in sync with His will and are confident of the outcome! Me—not so much. How about you?

It's at times when we are troubled in life, confused, lost, lonely, grieving that these words of Paul hit home. There have been many times in my ministry when we were at a total loss for words—and prayer.

An arrogant, know-it-all prayer by the pastor in a time of great sorrow or tragedy is worse than just keeping your mouth shut, allowing the Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness, interceding with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit, in those moments, searches our hearts and prays, not according to our will, but God's.

What a blessing are these words of St. Paul! Anyone who has ever been hurting in life, anyone who has lost a baby, lost a son or daughter in combat, truly wrestled with the slow, agonizing death of a loved one knows what Paul is talking about. Let's not pretend we always know what to pray or how to pray. Let's rely on God and His Holy Spirit, at times, to help us in our weakness!

***O Holy Spirit, comforter, advocate and guide—pray in me and with me!
Amen.***

Lenten Response: List the several people you know who are truly struggling in life at the moment. Take five minutes of silence and ask the Holy Spirit to pray for you, for them!

Wednesday of the Week of Lent II

Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?
—Romans 1:26-2:11

Our reading today is much debated, as St. Paul talks about people giving themselves up to “dishonorable passions” and women and men exchanging unnatural relations for natural. Paul goes on, however, to indict all of us sinners, leaving no one free to be judge over another. Paul asserts there will be judgment for every human being who does evil, for God shows no partiality. Paul asks, “Do you suppose that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?” He lists such things as wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Each of us can find ourselves convicted in his listing of sinful behavior. Paul tells us God is judge—not us.

Without a doubt, we are called to recognize and strive for godly behavior and obedience. We must call sin exactly what it is: sin. But we are warned not to consider ourselves as judge over others. And while Paul is writing about sin, judgment and wrath in this passage, even more he is writing about grace!

Paul asks, “Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” This is the crux of Paul's discussion. This is the turning point, always, for Paul's argument. God's grace, mercy and kindness are meant to lead us to repentance! We do turn away from God. We are all sinners and none of us is righteous in and of ourselves. But God offers us forgiveness, that we will repent and receive His grace—to begin again and anew, through new life in Christ!

***Lord God, because you are kind, gracious and forgiving, lead me to
repentance and renewal this season of Lent! Amen.***

Lenten Response: Pray the “Jesus Prayer” continually throughout the day: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Thursday of the Week of Lent II

While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?

You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

—Romans 2:12-24

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is contrasting the faith and actions of the Jews with that of Gentiles. Are Jewish Christians in a better place in God's sight than the Gentile Christians, because they were "first in"? Are Jewish Christians better off because they were the recipients of God's Law under the old covenant? The point in this passage is that receiving God's law is not the same as obeying God's law.

All of this in Romans, however, is aimed at helping all—Jewish and Gentile Christians alike—to understand that "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God (and with each other) through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

The reality of our lives is that we do preach and teach God's commandments and ordinances, while sinning regularly. Lifelong Christians are no less sinners than those new to the faith. We are all called to be humble before God, acknowledging our sin and disobedience and placing our complete faith and trust, not in ourselves, but in Christ. "Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God." (Romans 5:9)

Lent is about being reconciled with God through the blood of Christ Jesus, just as it's about being at peace with our neighbor through Him—whether "new" Christian or "old," whether Jew or Gentile, whether lifelong Lutheran or recent convert!

Humble me, O, God, that I may be at peace with you and with my brothers and sisters in the faith, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lenten Response: At worship each week, make it your goal to greet and share the peace of the Lord with someone who is not a friend, family member or well known to you.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent IV

Then they said to Him, "What must we do to be doing the works of God?"

Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him

whom He has sent...for this is the will of my Father,

that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him

should have eternal life; and I will raise Him up on the last day."

—John 6:27-40

The problem with humanity, from the very beginning, is our desire to save ourselves! Adam and Eve in the Garden ate of the tree, thinking they would be like God, in control, gods themselves. The Church in Martin Luther's time gave people the chance to save themselves by making a contribution, doing good deeds, praying to religious artifacts, no repentance and change of life necessary. We continue to see Christianity corrupted today by preachers who proclaim, "You are saved by grace through faith in Jesus—if only you will do thus and so!" You have to really listen to hear the "catch"—but there is often a catch that makes salvation, God's grace in Jesus, dependent upon you and your actions. It's so tempting—thinking we have guaranteed our salvation because we've fulfilled the requirements!

The disciples, always well-intentioned, also wanted to know, "What must we do to please God?" The rabbis taught 613 rules one may fulfill to know one is righteous before God. Surely Jesus had a "take" on this as well!

Maybe they were disappointed when Jesus said simply, "This is the required work of God—that you believe in Him whom He has sent—that you believe in Jesus, and so will be raised on the last day! Although God has expectations for His children that help life to go well for us, as we discussed earlier, salvation, eternal life is through belief, faith in Christ alone!

Lord Jesus, I believe in you—and trust that you will raise me on the last day! Amen.

Lenten Response: Read Genesis 3, the account of Adam and Eve.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent IV

Thus said the Lord to me, “Go and stand in the Benjamin Gate...and say, ‘Hear the Word of the Lord... Take heed for the sake of your lives and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers.’”
—Jeremiah 17:19-27

We have heard from the Lord, through Jeremiah, warnings and exhortations regarding judgment and wrath that would come upon their sinfulness. Now we begin to hear promises of renewal and restoration as well. Jerusalem and Judah can be renewed by observance of the Sabbath! Blessings will come upon them if the people will again “keep the Sabbath day holy.”

Certainly we live in a different world and a different religious community today. We are not Jews nor do we keep the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). Our Sabbath is the Lord’s Day, the day of Jesus’ resurrection: not the seventh day, but the so-called “Eighth Day”—the day of recreation and renewal!

That has never meant, however, that the commandment is null and void. The Lord God still is commanding us to “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” While not wanting to make Sabbath-keeping a burden for you, what might it mean for us to do something—anything—to make the Sabbath a holy day, or a more holy day? Worship is our central “holy” activity on Sunday. Might we add a brief time of Bible reading or prayer? What if we choose not to play golf, go to the mall or catch up on office work on one Sunday during Lent? Would the world as we know it come to an end? Probably not. We might find, however, that we are refreshed and renewed in some small way. Let this be a gracious gift, not a burden!

Lord God, in some small way, help me to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy as you command. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Lenten Response: See above--find some new way one Sunday in Lent, to keep the Sabbath holy.

Friday of the Week of Lent II

“You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”
—John 5:30-47

Our Lord is making a fine distinction here. Of course, He is speaking of the Jewish Scriptures because, at this time, there were no New Testament writings. His message remains, however: eternal life and salvation are not to be found in the Scriptures apart from Christ!

Now, the fine point is that the whole of the Old and New Testaments contain Jesus Christ and point to Jesus Christ. The Bible proclaims the whole story of God at work for the salvation of the sinful world, through the life, death, resurrection, ascension and second coming of the Son of God, our Savior and Lord. For us, the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and we don’t separate the Scriptures from Christ.

In Jesus’ time, however, there were those who were searching the Jewish Scriptures for eternal life but were not receiving and believing in Jesus, to whom those Scriptures bore witness! In this passage, Jesus is affirming that, as John the Baptizer bore witness to Him, the Jewish Scriptures bore witness to Him, even as Jesus bore witness to the Father who sent Him. Even Moses, Jesus says, was bearing witness to Him, pointing to the coming of the Savior!

And what does this say to us, we who have the Old and New Testaments? What does this say to we who have the whole Bible? It reminds us that Christ is on every page of the Bible, from the first to the last! It reminds us that even the Old Testament points to Christ and prepares for Christ. It reminds us that we cannot, as Christians, understand the Old Testament apart from Jesus and the New Testament. And this reminds us that the Bible is trustworthy and true, because it bears witness to Jesus Christ, God’s own Son!

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to see you and to believe in you as Scripture bears witness to you. Amen.

Lenten Response: Read the first and last chapters of the Bible.

Saturday of the Week of Lent II

*Declare this in the house of Jacob, proclaim it in Judah:
“Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not,
who have ears but hear not. Do you not fear me? says the Lord.
Do you not tremble before me?
...But this people have a stubborn and rebellious heart;
they have turned aside and gone away.” —Jeremiah 5:20-31*

The prophet Jeremiah proclaims judgment on God’s people. There is chapter after chapter in the book of Jeremiah declaring God’s wrath upon their faithlessness and unwillingness to fear God and His judgment. God will visit it upon them in the form of exile. These chapters of Jeremiah are hard to hear—especially if you were of the house of Jacob! But many would prefer not to hear about God’s judgment and wrath, thank you very much! Most would prefer to hear about God’s love, grace and mercy!

The promise of God’s love, forgiveness and restoration will come, but not until later. For the moment, God wants Jeremiah to make sure His people hear and heed his words—convicting them for failing to regard their God, failing to fear and tremble before Him, having turned aside and gone away.

Some people today don’t care for Lent very much, especially when there is a focus on sin, a call to repentance and, yes, maybe discussion of God’s judgment. Many prefer a more “upbeat” and “uplifting” message. In the same way, some don’t like Martin Luther’s words in the Small Catechism that we are to “fear and love God.” “Fear God?” some say. I want to love God and know that He loves me, in spite of myself. I want a God who only wants love, not fear and trembling,” say the foolish and senseless people.

Lent provides us with a Biblically balanced season in which we hear about sin and judgment, but also about grace and restoration. We are called to fear God, but also to love Him, as He loves us. Truly, God’s judgment is an act of love as He calls us to repent and turn back to Him!

Lord God, turn us back to you—as we fear and love you, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lenten Response: Talk with a friend or family member about what it means to “fear and love God.”

Monday of the Week of Lent IV

*And when they had eaten their fill, Jesus told His disciples,
“Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost.”
So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets...”
—John 6:1-15*

One of the first things I learned in seminary study of the Bible is that numbers have meaning. Yes, in the Scriptures, sometimes a number is just a number, but usually, these numbers have some special meaning. Just as the number “seven” is the number of divine completeness, the number twelve is always saying something more than just “12.”

What do you think is the significance of the number twelve?

Twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve apostles. Old Covenant, New Covenant. Old Israel, New Israel. The Church of Jesus Christ, as the Lord called twelve men to be His disciples. John tells us that having twelve baskets full left over from the bread and fish is a sign. And what does this sign mean?

Having fed thousands of followers—there’s still more! There is no end to Jesus’ ability to feed His flock! Perhaps the twelve baskets full mean there will be plenty to feed the Church to come, as the twelve disciples make more and more and more disciples in the years to come. Maybe Jesus was thinking about you and me as the leftovers were collected, hoping that we would see the sign and know that He wasn’t just feeding His flock then, but that He provides for us now! We, too, receive Living Bread from heaven—Jesus Christ! We, too, feast on His presence in Word and Sacrament!

Lord Jesus, thank you for feeding us with your very presence! Amen.

Lenten Response: Take a few non-perishable food items to your local food bank or church collection box. Or make a financial contribution to Salvation Army or some other ministry that feeds the hungry and homeless.

Sunday of the Week of Lent IV

The Pharisees came and began to argue with Jesus, seeking from Him a sign from heaven to test him.

And He sighed deeply in His spirit and said,

“Why does this generation seek a sign?

Truly I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.”

—Mark 8:11-21

Throughout the season of Lent, our Gospel readings highlight the struggle between proof and lack of proof, signs and lack of signs, belief and unbelief. Some people who saw Jesus and listened to His teaching and witnessed miracles and wonders came to believe. Others couldn't and wanted more. Others still had no interest in believing, wanting only to test Jesus.

In our day, people continue to struggle. Some want to prove Jesus is Son of God and Savior, while others want to prove He isn't. Some just want to poke fun at Jesus and His followers! Some mock the time and energy Christians invest in faith, discipleship, church, serving God and neighbor.

It has always seemed to me the most radical sign we can give to the unbelieving world—is to show up regularly for Sunday worship! I imagine neighbors watching Christians load up into the car on Sunday morning to head to church, thinking, “Have they nothing better to do? Wouldn't their week go better if they'd just sleep in, read the paper and have time to themselves?” I pray that when you leave home for worship on Sunday morning that someone sees you and is troubled that you are a “practicing” Christian—actually going to church in the midst of an unbelieving world! Maybe you will be the sign they need, challenging their lack of faith.

Lord, let me be a sign and a witness as I seek to live my faith, through Christ the Lord. Amen.

Lenten Response: Put a small cross on the outside of the door of your home, as a humble, simple witness.

Sunday of the Week of Lent III

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own;

you were bought with a price.

So glorify God in your body. —I Corinthians 6:12-20

Paul begins this passage saying, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.”

We would be mistaken to think that Lent is only about mentally and spiritually pondering sin, grace and justification. Lenten discipline has traditionally been an “embodied” experience: involving mind and body. This is why Christians have also adopted Lenten fasting, kneeling, denying and, yes, sometimes adding exercise to our Lenten routine!

If we are honest with ourselves, it is often the case that we are “enslaved” by our desire for food, alcohol, drugs, sex. Our freedom in Christ is to set us free from these entanglements and obsessions. We were indeed bought with a price! Jesus Christ died and was raised to give us new life, that we might be renewed in body, mind and spirit.

The season of Lent can be a powerful time to not only reorient our thinking but also our actions. Adopting a new exercise regimen with a spiritual focus; fasting in a healthy way, to empty ourselves to be filled with Christ. Honoring our bodies in any way for the season of Lent can have greater meaning for us than just wanting to lose weight to get into that Speedo or bikini! Do it for the season of Lent, and maybe you will develop a holy habit that will continue through the season of Easter and beyond. Do it to glorify God!

Lord Jesus, set me free from enslavements and obsessions. I offer my body and mind to you, as you have made me your own. Amen.

Lenten Response: Look in a mirror today and say, “You belong to God. You were bought with a price—the price of Jesus' own life.”

Monday of the Week of Lent III

*So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man
to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:*

*“Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered...”*

—Romans 4:1-12

When leading Bible studies in the parish, folks were surprised to see how much there is in the Bible about circumcision. It was the sign of the covenant for Jewish males. It was a big deal in the early Church because some believed that men must be circumcised to become part of the Jewish community BEFORE becoming part of the Body of Christ. Paul engages in a detailed discussion of faith and works, circumcision and uncircumcision to deal with this issue. Finally, Paul affirms that what matters in all instances is faith—faith for Abraham, faith for David, faith for you and for me.

We hold that a person is justified—saved—not by “works,” not by fulfilling commandments, but by faith in Jesus Christ who died and was raised for us and our salvation. As David said, it is a blessing that our iniquities—our sins—are forgiven, covered by the blood of Jesus.

If we approach Lent from a legalistic perspective, as if what we do or fail to do—as if our ability to keep our Lenten discipline will gain us favor in God’s sight—we are sadly mistaken. The season of Lent and whatever discipline, activities, devotions we attempt will not save us. Lent and the disciplines thereof are to be in response to the good news that, through Christ, our sins are forgiven and covered. Because we are saved by the blood of Jesus, we are free to joyfully engage in spiritual discipline and devotion for our own growth and the glory of God!

Lord God, thank you for Jesus, who covers our sins, that we will be forgiven and saved—by grace through faith! Amen.

Lenten Response: Offer a prayer of thanks to Jesus, who died on the cross and shed His blood to cover our sins!

Saturday of the Week of Lent III

*For the wages of sin is death,
but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

—Romans 6:12-23

I’ve heard complaints that folks don’t like Lent because there’s too much focus on sin! Sin is not a popular topic in our world today. Sin as disobedience of God isn’t relevant anymore. If Christians talk about sin, many would prefer to discuss it as “just the brokenness of the world,” so that sin is our unfortunate corporate condition and not individual transgression against God.

Why focus at all on sin today? Because the Scriptures tell us that sin is harmful. Sin does have consequences—for us personally, for our families and neighbors, for the Church and, yes, for the world. Hatred, greed, lust, self-centeredness, idolatry—sin negatively impacts our world and our own little corner of it. And God will hold us accountable for our sin. We die because “the wages of sin is death.” To ignore or avoid acknowledging sin is to kid ourselves, just as thinking we can ignore or avoid death means we will never die. Sin and death are our reality.

And yet, is Lent a time for dragging around a burden of guilt, sour-faced, making sure all see how troubled we are by our sinfulness?

In Lent, we confess our sins and acknowledge our inability to live a righteous, godly life—to hear again and anew the good news that we have a Savior, who is Christ the Lord! We do need to be honest about the fact that the wages of sin is death, so that we receive the free gift of God that is eternal life in Jesus Christ! There is to be a balance in Lent: sin and grace, Law and Gospel, death and new life in Christ!

Lord God, I know I sin every day, but I thank you for the free gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ! Amen.

Lenten Response: As you have received the free gift of God’s love in Jesus Christ, share that love with another through a simple smile, loving gesture, or act of kindness.

Friday of the Week of Lent III

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

—Romans 6:1-11

There has certainly been enough disagreement within Christianity about Holy Baptism to cause confusion and consternation! Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Anglicans and some others baptize infants and young children, while Baptists and some others baptize only “believers”—those who can “make a decision for Jesus” prior to being baptized.

I’ve been fortunate to have close relationships with a number of Baptist preachers, the first having been Brother Frank Wells in Hobbs, NM. Rev. Wells started preaching when he was 12, was ordained at 14 and I knew him when he had been pastoring for 60 years or so. He preached in our congregation and I was blessed to preach in his. He was the oldest pastor in Hobbs; I was the youngest! We never argued about baptism, although we discussed it quite often. We agreed that the disagreement often came about because of emphasis. Lutherans affirm that baptism is God’s work, while Baptists have seen baptism as the result of human action.

The more Lutherans and Baptists have talked with one another, the more many have come to realize that, while the emphasis may be different, baptism is something God does. Even though a young person or adult may “decide” to be baptized, the decision is the work of the Word and Holy Spirit, working in the new believer. When a baby is baptized, the parents decide to bring the baby to church, promise to raise the child in a godly household, make a commitment. Either way, the death and resurrection that happens in baptism is God’s work, not ours! God alone gives newness of life!

Lord God, help us keep the focus always on you—your love, your grace, your Word, your Son, your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lenten Response: Dip your finger in water and trace a small cross on your forehead, in remembrance of your baptism!

Tuesday of the Week of Lent III

But this command I gave them, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.” —Jeremiah 7:21-34

The Lord God of Israel continues to speak to His people through the prophet Jeremiah. He makes clear what He wants and expects of His people: that they obey His voice, walking in the way that he commands, that it might be well with them. Simple, straightforward, easily understood. But the Lord goes on, “But they did not obey or incline their ear, walked in their own counsel and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward.”

Christians sometimes cringe when we speak of “expectations.” Some have come to believe that being saved by grace through faith apart from works of the Law means God expects nothing of us! Jesus Himself says, “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom, but the one who does the will of my Father...” (Matthew 7:21)

God wants us to obey His voice, to walk in His way. This is how life may go well with us. It is for our benefit that we are to keep God’s commands. But sometimes we do not obey or incline our ear. Sometimes we walk in our own counsel and the stubbornness of our evil hearts. Being clear about what God expects of His children helps us to obey and move forward in life and not back. And what does that look like in daily life?

Shall we say it again? Abiding in God’s Word, loving God and neighbor, being His witnesses, being disciples and making disciples. Simple. Straightforward. Easily understood!

Lord God, open my ears that I may obey your voice and walk in the way that you command, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lenten Response: Write the verse above on a sticky note and place it where you will see it and read it throughout the day.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent III

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

—John 8:12-20

In our reading today, the Pharisees are challenging Jesus. They charge that since He has borne witness to Himself, His testimony is not true. The Jewish law states that proof requires two witnesses. Jesus goes on to assert that He and His Father bear witness to Him!

We bear witness as well—that Jesus is truly the light of the world! We have experienced times of darkness in life and know what it is to have the light of life shining in the darkness, lighting our way, leading us on. It is this Light to which we bear witness, testifying that Jesus brings to every dark corner His love and life.

When were times of darkness in your life, when Jesus, the Light of the world brought you hope and peace? Most of us have had such times, if we stop and consider. How difficult would it be to share one or two of those experiences with someone who does not know Jesus? Would your "testimony" make a difference in the life of someone walking now through the valley and shadow of death, loss, grief, struggle? Who might need to hear your testimony right now? Who do you know who may be walking in darkness and unbelief?

Lord God, help me to bring the Light of the world to someone living in darkness. Amen.

Lenten Response: Share your experience of Jesus, the Light of the world with a family member or friend. Ask them to share their experience with you.

Thursday of the Week of Lent III

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in Him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."

—John 8:21-32

Why is it that some pastors, preachers and teachers want to make it all so complex and difficult?! I wish I knew. Yes, some passages in the Bible are harder to digest than others. Some texts take work. But the basic message is simple and clear. Sermons and teaching should be simple and clear as well so that people can hear and understand.

In our reading for today, you might find Jesus' "sparring" with the Jews a bit convoluted. Jesus is speaking about His coming death, about "going where you cannot come." He also speaks of their death because of sin, unless they believe in Him. He tells them He is not of this world, while standing right in front of them. And then, He talks of His relationship with the Father, by whose authority Jesus speaks. Many believed in Him. Some didn't. But to those who did believe, Jesus states clearly: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."

If you were standing in an elevator for a couple of minutes and someone asks, "What is this Christianity all about?"—it shouldn't be that hard to answer. You could say many things, but this is as good a summary as any—continue in Jesus' word and teaching, be His disciple, know the truth—be free in Him! That ought to generate such interest that out of the elevator, the inquirer might just want to know more!

If the Gospel is like a bottle of sweet-smelling perfume, when an inquirer shows interest—better not to dump the whole bottle out on them at once—but give them just a whiff—so that picking up the pleasant scent, they immediately want more!

Lord God, help me to abide in Jesus' word, to be His disciple, to cling to the truth—so that I will be free—from sin, guilt, death and the devil. Amen.

Lenten Response: See how many times you can speak Jesus' words above—out loud—to someone else today!