

AN ETERNAL KINGDOM

Prophets, Priests & the Reign of the King



NORTH AMERICAN
LUTHERAN
CHURCH

LENTEN & EASTER DEVOTIONAL 2024

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INTRODUCTION

Step into a time of sacred reflection and anticipation with this year's Lenten & Easter devotional, *An Eternal Kingdom: Prophets, Priests & the Reign of the King*. Our theme this year emerges from the collection of passages found throughout daily readings of the church seasons. This devotional provides an opportunity to reflect and meditate on the intimate connection between the Old and New Testaments by way of Jesus Christ, highlighting how our Messiah is present throughout *all* of Scripture.

How does the Messiah bridge the Testaments, fulfilling ancient prophecies in a new covenant of grace? Through the narratives of Genesis and Exodus, as well as the prophetic writings of Daniel, Zechariah, and others, we encounter humanity in stark truth—flawed yet called for a purpose. However, these sacred histories are not merely records of human failure and sin; they are the backdrop against which God's grace radiantly shines forth, foreshadowing the redemption that is to be fully revealed in Christ.

Despite these troubles, we glimpse hope into God's unraveling plan for Israel and all nations—**each prophet, priest, and king in Scripture points beyond themselves to a promised Mediator and Advocate, one who will reconcile humanity to God not just for a moment, but for eternity.**

Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

—Exodus 19:2b–6 NRSV

God declares that *His* people are a priestly kingdom and a holy nation—distinctly set apart to live in communion with Him and to embody His love and righteousness in a world yearning for redemption. This kingdom people, as we begin to see, start to resemble everyone else. God's treasured people cannot keep their covenant because "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Romans 1:25 NRSV). As Israel stands at the foot of Sinai, poised to enter a covenant with the Almighty, so we stand at the threshold of Lent, invited to renew our own vows to the Lord who liberates us from sin's bondage.

Who but Jesus Christ could fulfill the law, embody the prophecies, and inaugurate the kingdom foretold in Scripture? *He alone* is the suffering Servant of Isaiah, the eternal Ruler from Daniel, and the humble King of Zechariah's vision.¹ *He alone* is the one who has come to do what no other

¹ See Isaiah 53, Daniel 2:44, and Zechariah 9:9–12.

has been able to do. *He alone* is the one to take our place, to take our pain and suffering, the King “pierced for our transgressions...crushed for our iniquities.”

Jesus Christ alone is worthy to reign, and He will reign forever.

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

–Hebrews 4:14–16 NRSV

In this Lenten season, we are called to a holy sojourn—a path of repentance and deep reflection which culminates in the exultant celebration of Easter. Here we stand in awe of the Passion of Christ, our King, who transforms our transgressions into triumphs through His death and resurrection.

So, as we journey from Ash Wednesday to Resurrection Sunday, and into the jubilant season of Easter, let us repent, reflect deeply, and prepare to greet the risen Christ with renewed spirits. And may we stand secure in this truth: our high priest, our King, is one who is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15 NRSV). We are free to draw near to the throne of grace, to the true king, the one that has established His eternal kingdom and us as His kingdom people, forever and ever.

Our story is woven into the eternal tapestry Jesus Christ unfurls—where every thread of prophecy, priesthood, and kingship is fulfilled in *Him*. Thanks be to God!

Warmest Wishes,

Ariel Wicker

Ariel Wicker

Associate Director of Communications
North American Lutheran Church



ASH WEDNESDAY

*Beloved Lord, we give thanks that You have placed us in Christian community
and surrounded us with that great cloud of witnesses who share their faith and strengthen ours.*

*Help us to deny ourselves and follow Jesus, to turn away from sin and temptation,
and to live in righteousness and holiness all our days.*

You alone are the source of goodness and mercy.

Let us not grow weary as we journey with Jesus to the cross of Calvary this Lenten season.

We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



February 14, 2024 | Ash Wednesday

Amos 5:6–15; Hebrews 12:1–14; Luke 18:9–14; Psalms 5 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{18:9} He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

– Luke 18:9–14 ESV

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus as we enter this most holy time in the life of the Church. Today is the first day in the season of Lent—a time when we center our thoughts and our attention on the path our Lord walked on our behalf that led Him to the cross. It’s a time when we remember the reason He had to die, and the suffering He endured in order that you and I might have life.

It’s also a day known as Ash Wednesday, a day when we remember our mortality; how “from dust we came and to dust we shall return.” And yet, in spite of our sin and the many reasons why we deserve to die, the hope and the promise we have in Jesus is the security and the assurance of forgiveness and life.

Today’s passage is a study in opposites. It’s the story of two men who went up to the temple to pray—and what a contrast it was between the two. One man was a Pharisee, a leader in the religious community that was as highly respected, and as disciplined, as they come. He fasted regularly, tithed his possessions, and was often found in the temple spending time with God in prayer. In contrast, the other man was a publican, a tax collector, one who was despised by the people, whose reputation in the community may well have been that of an extortionist and a cheat.

On the surface, the contrast between these two men could not have been greater. Their lives and their actions were as differing as they could possibly be, as were the prayers they offered to God. And yet, it was the tax collector, Jesus said, who went home justified that day. It was the tax collector who was made right with God. It was the tax collector, and not the other, who went home in peace—assured and forgiven of all he had done.

So, what does that mean for us? How, on this Ash Wednesday, can we be at peace and assured and confident of our standing before God? The first verse in our story makes it clear what was happening and what was at stake. Luke says, “Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.” It all begins with the posture we take in our hearts—not so much with our goodness and righteousness in life in comparison to others but where we stand in the presence of Jesus and how we all, in comparison with Christ, come up short.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” That was the tax collector’s prayer. It needs to be our prayer as well. Human comparisons mean nothing. To see oneself as better or worse than another is missing the point. When it comes to our standing before God, it is one person at a time, one on one, alone with God.

The season of Lent is not a time to stand before God and tell Him how good we have been in this life and how much we have done. Rather, it is a time when we are before God, and He tells us what we need to hear.

Our sin causes a separation, and that separation leads to death. Our only hope is Jesus. Our greatest need is taken head-on and addressed in the person, the work, and the cross of Christ.

On this Ash Wednesday, the first day in the Lenten season, let the tax collector's prayer be ours. Let his words and confession lead us to our only hope. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we come to You today, confessing our sin and acknowledging our need. We are sinners and we have failed, and we know we deserve death. We also know, because of Jesus, that You have forgiven us and made us right with You.

On this first day in Lent, let our first actions be ones that focus on Christ. Let His work become ours. Let His promise lead us to assurance and faith. And let our faith in Christ become so certain and secure in our lives, that we live in ways that would lead others to a saving faith in Him. Amen.

February 15, 2024 | Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Habakkuk 3:1–18; Philippians 3:12–21; John 17:1–8; Psalms 27 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{3:2} O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.

– Habakkuk 3:2 ESV

^{3:12} Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

– Philippians 3:12–21 ESV



In our devotional texts for today, we hear from the prophet Habakkuk a prayer for deliverance from the exile in Babylon and a plea to the Lord to remember His promises to His people, Israel. The prophet complained earlier that God was not enacting justice, in Hebrew *mishpat*, and God's people were suffering violence and destruction.

Habakkuk asks the Lord, “Why did you make me see iniquity?” and “Why do you idly look at wrong?” In other words: *God, where are you? Don't you see what is happening here?*

We ask that at times, don't we? *Where are you, God? Are you ignoring me? Are you on vacation? Are you too busy to see what I'm dealing with here?* It's the age of question of “theodicy,” or why does God allow evil to happen in the world?

Eventually, the prophet shifts to hope as he says, “I have heard the report of you!” He knows God has done wonderful things for His people and will not let them suffer forever. He is the God of life and salvation. When we cry out to the Lord for help, He will come and rescue us from sin, death, and captivity.

When we then turn to St. Paul's words in Philippians 3, we hear exactly how God answered the prayers of Habakkuk and the other Old Testament prophets. Paul proclaimed, “Christ Jesus has made me His own,” therefore, Paul says he can forget what lies behind him and move toward the heavenly goal that is given to us by Jesus.

Friends, we have a heavenly call on our lives. In the waters of Baptism, we were claimed as God's own children, freed from the powers of sin and death, granted eternal life, and sent into the world to share this

greatest news of all time! Our citizenship is in heaven, Paul reminds us. We are in this world, but we are not of this world. We put our ultimate trust in Christ Jesus our Lord, whose life, death, and resurrection paved the way to salvation for all who believe. With this good news, we set our minds on him, who went to the cross for our sake. We concentrate on the divine call put on our lives. We don't look back at where we came from, but we push forward in the power of Christ Jesus in this earthly life, sharing His love with others, serving in His name, and awaiting His glorious return. We do not lose hope because our hope is in the Lord.

Trials will come, but we keep our minds on heavenly things, not suffering, pain, heartache, or disappointments. Jesus is with us, and we belong to Him. God answered Habakkuk with a Savior. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: We give You thanks, yes, more than thanks, O Lord our God, for all Your goodness at all times and in all places, because You have shielded, rescued, helped and led us all the days of our life, and brought us unto this hour (*The Liturgy of St. Mark*).²

² Thomas C. Oden and Cindy Crosby, eds., *Ancient Christian Devotional: A Year of Weekly Readings: Lectionary Cycle B* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 87.

February 16, 2024 | Friday after Ash Wednesday

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32; Philippians 4:1–9; John 17:9–19; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{18:30} Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise, iniquity will be your ruin.

– Ezekiel 18:30 NRSV



In the penitential shadow of Lent, we find ourselves walking through an ancient forest, where the trees are tall scriptures and their leaves are the words of prophets and apostles. The call of Ezekiel is like the deep roots of an ancient oak, urging us to *unearth our hidden iniquities* and plant instead the seeds of righteousness. As we tread this sacred grove, the rustling leaves seem to whisper of repentance, of *turning away from the blight of sin* to embrace the flourishing life of the spirit (Ezekiel 18:30). As you step into the quiet of the Lenten forest, what burdens are you carrying that need to be laid down at the foot of the ancient oak of repentance?

Here, in the quietude of this divine arboretum, we encounter a serene glade, a clearing bathed in the light of godly virtues. Feel the *peace that surpasses understanding* as it blankets the grove in a holy hush. Our sojourn bids us rest here, to meditate upon *whatever is true, noble, right, and pure*—each a flower blooming beneath the oak’s vast canopy, their fragrance *the peace of God guarding our hearts* (Philippians 4:8).

As evening descends, the forest transforms. The psalms become nocturnal creatures—their verses the hoot of the owl, the firefly’s glow, the nightingale’s song. They serenade us with *the deeds of the Lord and the depth of His forgiveness*, and we are reminded that even in the dark, the forest is alive with His presence (Psalms 105; 130).

In this Lenten wilderness, we are not merely wanderers; we are pilgrims guided by the North Star of the Gospel. Christ Himself walks with us, His words a lantern illuminating the path, *sanctifying us in the truth* as we journey toward the cross (John 17:17).

In the silent spaces of your heart, as you walk through the forest of this season, what is the nature of the ground where you plant your hope and trust? And in the quiet company of these towering trees of faith, what whispered truths do you need to hear and hold close?

Let us continue our pilgrimage through this forest of Lent, with the bark of contrition and the leaves of prayer, until we emerge into the clearing of Resurrection morning, where the forest sings with the joy of new life, and the ancient oak stands witness to the eternal truth that *death has been swallowed up in victory* (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Prayer: O Lord of the sacred forest, guide our steps through the Lenten wilderness. Like the ancient oak, may we stand firm in Your Word, drawing from the deep wells of Your righteousness. Let the seeds of repentance take root in our hearts and bloom into a garden of peace, that we may emerge from this season sanctified and renewed, ready to celebrate the victory of the Resurrection. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

February 17, 2024 | Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Ezekiel 39:21–29; Philippians 4:10–20; John 17:20–26; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{17:20}“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

– John 17:20–26 ESV



The seven verses of our Gospel lesson are part of Jesus’ “high priestly prayer.” So, we need to remember that these verses are part of the whole prayer. Just earlier, Jesus prayed that his disciples “be sanctified in the truth” of God’s Word. This is the vocation of every Christian. To strive to live in the truth of Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Now, turning to verses 20–26 of chapter 17. In these seven verses there is one word that occurs nine times! It’s called a “hina clause.” *Hina* means, “in order that” or “so that” or even as an imperative, “see that... you do thus and so!” Grammatically it is called a “purpose clause.” Jesus prays that those who come to faith in the future, people like us, would live with purpose—not meaninglessly.

There is not time to look at all nine of these purpose clauses, and there is some repetition. So, very quickly, as our Great Intercessor before the Father, what is Jesus praying—even now?

First, He prays that Christians live in a united communion. That we are one. We must strive for unity with all who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. One of the things I love about our seminary center in Ambridge is that our students rub shoulders with Christians from other traditions. Our differences do not need to be divisive. Rather, we can learn from others and hopefully bear witness in this world together to the truth revealed in Jesus.

Second, Jesus prays that his disciples would be *perfect*. We Lutherans don’t do perfection very well. We know that we are imperfect! But, the word used here conveys a sense of purpose, result, fulfillment, completion, and goal. Jesus is the North Star and our lives need to be guided toward Him. To be with Jesus is to fulfill the purpose of life.

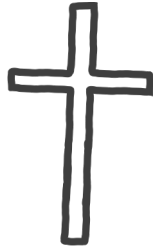
Jesus wants us to see and share in His glory! That will be perfect!

Finally, the very last verse, “that (*hina!*) the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” Here we are simply and profoundly left in awe. Certainly we want the love of God to dwell in us and move us. But, Jesus asks something truly remarkable. He prays that He personally would dwell in believers. Through the Holy Spirit, the crucified and Risen Lord Jesus; dwells in us.

This is the goal, purpose, direction, perfection, and fulfillment of human life. When the Lord Jesus is in, with, and through us. That is what Jesus is praying for you and me.

Lenten Discipline: Find some time to meditate prayerfully on the purpose of your life in light of the Gospel.

Prayer: Gracious Father, we pray for Your holy catholic Church. Fill Your Church with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify us; where it is in error, direct us; where in anything the Church is amiss, reform us; where we are right, strength us; where we are in need, provide for us; where we are divided, reunite us; all for the sake of Jesus Christ, Your Son our Savior.



The **FIRST WEEK** *of* **LENT**

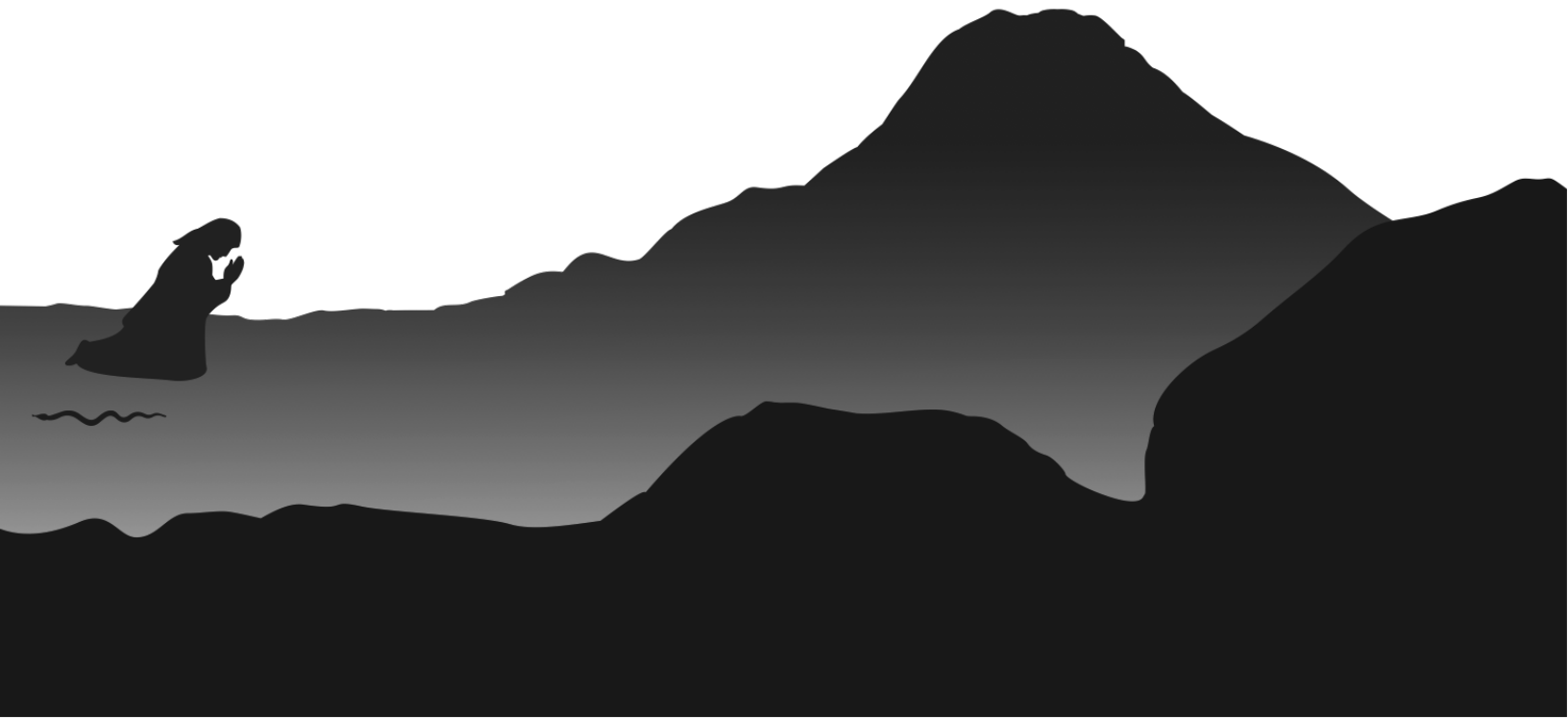
Holy Father, Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me."

Grant us faith to trust in Your Son, who leads us in all truth to see You and know You.

*May our witness to Christ's love and mercy be a beacon of hope for all to see
in this world that desperately needs a Savior.*

Send us to places known and unknown, as faithful disciples, trusting in Your guidance and care.

We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



February 18, 2024 | First Sunday in Lent

Daniel 9:3–10; Hebrews 2:10–18; John 12:44–50; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{9:3}Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. ⁴I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, “O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁵we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. ⁶We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. ⁷To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. ⁸To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. ⁹To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him ¹⁰and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

– Daniel 9:3–10 ESV



“When we stand before the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we stand exposed. There is only one name that qualifies for us and that name is sinner.” – The Rev. Dr. James Nestingen

In the Old Testament passage today, we see Daniel almost eager to confess. It’s as if he has a long list of all the sins of his people to bring before God. Daniel holds nothing back. He uses words like righteousness, mercy and forgiveness to describe the Lord in his plea. He uses terms like shame and rebellion for the actions of the people.

During this Lenten season, let us turn to the Lord in confession. No matter how we compare to our neighbors, we don’t come close to comparing with someone who walked with the Lord in total obedience. Only one person ever has, and we hung Him on a cross. We carry sins we remember, and we bring them to the Lord. But we also have those deep seated transgressions we dare not reveal—or even cannot recall.

But let’s look again at Daniel’s eagerness to confess. The passage opens with Daniel turning his face to the Lord. In Genesis 3, as the Lord comes to Adam and Eve after the fall, they turn away from God to hide themselves and their sin. Daniel, sinner that he is, shows his faith in God by turning his face to the Lord to openly confess. His faith proclaims the Lord’s faithfulness. Though we sin willfully as the first Adam did, we like Daniel can turn to face the Lord because of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. His Gospel message gives us the peace and comfort that, like Daniel, we have the Lord of all who is faithful and just, the focus of our faith.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father, I confess that I am a rebellious sinner. There are transgressions of mine only You know. I truly am sorry and repent of them. I rely only on Your mercy and grace promised through Your Son, my Savior Jesus Christ. It is in His sacrifice on the cross that I place my confidence. My hope, peace, and comfort come completely and solely in the joy of knowing You have turned Your face to me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

February 19, 2024 | Monday of the First Week in Lent

Genesis 37:1–11; 1 Corinthians 1:1–19; Mark 1:1–13; Psalms 119:73–80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{1:10} And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

– Mark 1:10–13 ESV

Have you ever talked to someone who describes their “god” as a bit too... undemanding? There seems to be a lot of that going around these days. Even some Christians would like to have us all believe in a light and fluffy Jesus. Well, there certainly are loving and kind words from the Lord, but we ought not trim away the tough and challenging words.

We see these two aspects of our faith in Jesus himself, at His Baptism. Note the pleasant, soft and downy Holy Spirit that gently descends upon Jesus quickly turns into a “driver”, sending Jesus out into the wilderness. I don’t know many who would desire the wilderness, especially if they knew the devil was out there!

Martin Luther wrote an interesting line in his book *The Bondage of the Will*. If I remember correctly, he said, “Everyone’s will is bound—either by the Holy Spirit, or something else!” That idea has stuck with me, and I think it can also be applied to being “driven”. Either we are driven by the Holy Spirit, or something else!

Doesn’t that sound like a great Lenten walk? Taking time to evaluate what we are driven by—and shedding some drivers if they aren’t from the Holy Spirit! I don’t know about you, but there are plenty of worldly drivers, and worldly voices, working on me.

Worldly voices function with different principles than the principles of disciples. Survival of the fittest. Retaliation for wrongs. Get all you can rather than giving without any strings attached, etc. I would say that, most the time, you know when you meet a person that’s driven by worldly voices. They are perpetually skeptical, cynical, and suspicious of others. You might even call them bitter from the harassment of the voices.

Indeed, we don’t escape being driven, but our driver has a totally different set of principles. You do remember the Master’s principles, right? If you want to be first, you must be last. Turn the other cheek. Don’t hate your enemies, but love them. And the list goes on.

What is it that drives us, down deep in our souls? If we are exhausted, it’s probably not God! Let us find our wilderness, even though it’s the last place our self-interested voice, or the worldly voice, would want us to go. Let us find our wilderness, so that each one of us may be driven from our Baptisms into a closer walk with God and His calling for us!

Prayer: We invite You today, precious Holy Spirit, to not only rest on us in peace, but also to drive us. For we know that You care for us, that we will use this life to mature. We also know that Your kingdom is coming, and we want to be part of the work. So, drive us wherever You need us to serve this week. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

February 20, 2024 | Tuesday of the First Week in Lent

Genesis 37:12–24; 1 Corinthians 1:20–31; Mark 1:14–28; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{1:14}Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

¹⁶Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

²¹And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²²And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

– Mark 1:14–28 ESV



Why is repentance one of the main themes of the Lenten Season? Because when Jesus appeared on the scene of human history, the need for us to repent was central to what He proclaimed: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Now, what often happens when we tell others and even warn them of the very real need to repent? Soren Kierkegaard answers this question by telling this parable: It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theater. The clown came out to inform the audience. The audience thought it was just a joke and applauded. When the clown repeated his warning, they cheered and applauded even louder. So, said Kierkegaard, “I think that’s just how the world will come to an end, to the general applause from wits who believe it’s a joke.”

I am inclined to agree with Kierkegaard. Christian preachers and teachers try to warn that a Judgment Day is coming and often the listeners treat the message as foolish, even a joke. As St. Paul notes in today’s second reading, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22–24, ESV).

Like the clown, Jesus has a message for everyone. In today’s reading it may be broken into the following four parts.

“The time is fulfilled.” The time, determined by God and according to His plan, has arrived for the Christ to come and live among us in the person of Jesus.

“The kingdom of God is at hand.” The reign of God on earth has begun with the appearing of Jesus on the scene of human history. Jesus ushers in this kingdom, revealing He is the Christ by the authority of His Word, performing miracles, and proclaiming the saving work He will accomplish at the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter.

“Repent.” Repentance is a *daily* process by which we are convicted by the Word of God. The knowledge of our sinfulness opens our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit’s power to work faith in us. This faith produces an outward change in how we live our lives. Hence, the Holy Spirit helps change our thoughts, words, and deeds. We change from being followers of the world, the flesh, and the devil to daily striving to be followers of Jesus.

“Believe in the gospel!” So today and every day, do what you are doing right now. Nurture your belief in Christ by reading God’s Word, reflect on that Word, and pray asking the Holy Spirit to work true repentance and faith in your life. Then go out and enjoy the blessing of living a faithful life of daily repentance!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to see that Your kingdom has begun and that the work of your kingdom is going on all around us. Enable us by the power of the Holy Spirit to truly repent and believe Your Gospel. And as we await Your return to judge the living and the dead and so fulfill Your kingdom, use us according to Your will for the work of Your kingdom in this world. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

February 21, 2024 | Wednesday of the First Week in Lent

Genesis 37:25–36; 1 Corinthians 2:1–13; Mark 1:29–45; Psalms 5 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{51:1} Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
⁶ Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

– Psalm 51:1–9 ESV



I don't have enough fingers to count how many times people have expressed, sometimes jokingly, a fear of coming into the church sanctuary. Usually it is accompanied by some reference to being struck by lightning. Rudolph Otto in his classic work, *The Idea of the Holy*, reflects on this experience as *mysterium tremendum*: a sense of something mysterious that evokes feelings of encountering something daunting, overwhelming, wholly 'other'—and, with it, an unnerving sense that this holy God is God, and I am me, and there is a big difference between the two.

Unfortunately, too often that seems to be the end of it. Instead of “fleeing for refuge to thine infinite mercy”, many just flee. Darkening the door of what should be sanctuary seems just too unnerving or, at the least, too uncomfortable. I have often joked that this is why we Lutherans seem to fight over the back pews. Like Isaiah, there is something unnerving about the holy, shattering our self-definitions of what is good. Yet there is another pole, another *mysterium*, which is the sense that there is something fascinating, desirable, caring, and comforting in this presence of the holy; something powerfully good.

I am reminded of the line from C.S. Lewis's, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The children are about to meet Aslan the Lion. They are quite nervous about it and ask the beavers if he, being a lion, is quite safe. The beavers' reply goes something like, “Oh, no, he is not safe—but he is good.” That line from C. S. Lewis

has stuck with me. Perhaps we do ourselves and others a disservice by trying to make God too safe, by seeking to diminish the holiness, so that God is somehow more comfortable on our own terms.

And yet, not too long ago in this Church year, we gazed with the shepherds upon the One who we profess to be God-with-us, in flesh, and in our midst as a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. Jesus bridges the gap between what we find fearsome, and what is good beyond measure—wholly and holy so. He takes us by the hand into the holy.

I suppose that if we were to convince ourselves that we are actually pretty good, we might dare to come into the presence of the Holy One on our own. But what comes of it if we are aware of not just our shortcomings but a deep sense of our sin? Can we keep up our nerve and confidence when we actually encounter the holy and pure goodness?

The psalm appointed for this evening is Psalm 51. It rings in my ear all through Lent and not just on Ash Wednesday. After all, we sing portions of it for the offertory, for morning prayer, and I still remember some of the verses from the old hymnbook liturgy. The psalm is a constant reminder to us that Lent is about confessing our sin, on the surface and in the depths of our being. But I would like to focus on just the first verse.

The cry of mercy is rooted in the confidence of God's lovingkindness. The plea to blot out offenses finds boldness in the knowledge of God's great compassion. Not only does Jesus by His compassion, mercy and grace give us the confidence to confess everything before God the Father, He is the answer to the psalmist's prayer. He is the one in whom we obtain mercy, by His death He blots out our offenses. In Him is forgiveness, so we can boldly "flee for refuge to thine infinite mercy, seeking and imploring thy grace."

Prayer: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with your free Spirit (Psalm 51:10–12).

In the name, and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

February 22, 2024 | Thursday of the First Week in Lent

Genesis 39:1–23; 1 Corinthians 2:14—3:15; Mark 2:1–12; Psalms 27 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{2:1} And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. ³ And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴ And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’ ¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—¹¹ “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” ¹² And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!”

– Mark 2:1–12 ESV

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In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus claims to forgive sins and He heals people. As you read on in the New Testament, He claims to be the Son of God. The religious leaders of the time are offended and horrified. How can someone claim to forgive sins, they ask? That is the business of God alone. This Jesus is laying a claim to that which belongs uniquely to the Almighty. The question they are asking screams out from our reading: *who is this Jesus?*

It has become fashionable in our modern day to say that Jesus was a great teacher, an insightful and important figure. Jesus has been given credit for being a moral philosopher, an innovator, and a compelling figure. But when someone claims to forgive sins and to be the Son of God, one of two things has to be true. Either that person is all that he claims to be, or he is nuts. You can’t compromise on the claim to divinity. When someone claims to be uniquely tied in to the Almighty, they are either hopelessly crazy, or they are right.

The question of today’s Gospel is, who is Jesus? Jesus says that He is God’s Son, our Savior. If He is right, if Jesus is who He says He is, then there is no one more important for us to know. There is no other one who can give life, no other one who can redeem life. There is no other one for us to follow.

Who is this Jesus? That is the question of today’s Gospel, that is the question of Lent. There is no more important question for us.

Prayer: Holy Jesus, You are Lord, You are Savior, You are the Son of God. Use this Lenten Season to direct us and Your entire Church to You. Amen.

February 23, 2024 | Friday of the First Week in Lent

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, Martyr, 156

Genesis 40:1–23; 1 Corinthians 3:16–23; Mark 2:13–22; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{2:13} He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.¹⁴ And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

¹⁵ And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.¹⁶ And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”¹⁷ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

– Mark 2:13–17 ESV



My dad was a tax collector. You see, he was the elected county treasurer of Fulton County, Ohio, and it was his responsibility to collect the property taxes twice a year. Sometimes, he was not the most beloved man in the area. When people came into the courthouse, they were upset that they had to pay these remittances to the local government. As a believer in Christ, my father did his best to calm individuals and de-escalate situations.

Being a tax collector was not always a welcome vocation. And this is what Levi experienced in his own work and associations.

In Jesus day, tax collectors were despised. They were hired by the Romans to take people’s money, and usually took extra for their own revenue enhancement. The Hebrews considered them the greatest of sinners along with prostitutes. But that did not stop Christ from showing kindness, reaching out to Levi, and compelling the publican to follow Him.

The Holy Spirit was indeed present as Levi exited the tax booth and went with the Savior. Even though Jesus was attacked by the religious leaders for consorting with unclean people at Levi’s home, the Lord declares His intentions by responding, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Obviously, the religious guys did not see themselves as those dreadful sinners.

During this Lenten journey, let us honestly confront our sinfulness, and be driven by our own desperate need for the great physician: Jesus. The only one who can heal us through His shed blood. Through God’s free gift of grace through faith, let us follow Him, as it is only through Christ alone that we have the promise of forgiveness and new life.

Prayer: Father, just as the tax collector Levi repented and followed Jesus, let us confront our own personal sinfulness, confess, and turn to Christ. Help us to realize that it’s only through the Savior alone that we have Your promise of forgiveness and eternal life. Even if we think that we are unworthy, let us remember Jesus’ shed blood, death and resurrection, His never-ending and steadfast love for us. Amen.

February 24, 2024 | Saturday of the First Week in Lent

ST. MATTHIAS, APOSTLE

Acts 1:15–26; Philippians 3:13–21; John 15:1, 6–16; Psalms 15 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{3:13} Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

¹⁷Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

– Philippians 3:13–21 ESV

Prior to becoming a pastor, I was a developmental service worker. I worked with adults with intellectual and physical disabilities. I enjoyed getting to know a diverse community, many of which were believers. One woman, we will call her Joan, was born with cerebral palsy, which is a movement disorder. Joan had poor coordination, stiff muscles, difficulty seeing and spoke with an irregular cadence and a slur. Joan did not let this stop her, as she loved life and loved Jesus. She was a true disciple, she shared Christ with everyone she met.

One afternoon I was sitting with Joan and another woman, who was physically disabled—but didn't have half of the challenges that Joan did. Joan was on a roll, enthusiastically evangelizing to this woman, but the woman stopped her to ask how she could love a God that would make her "so broken."

I recall this as if it was yesterday. Joan didn't miss a beat, and said, "God didn't make me this way. Sure my body here on earth is broken, but my heavenly body will be transformed to be perfect and glorious, just like Jesus!" Joan was straining forward, in faith, to what lies ahead!

Much of Lent is spent focusing on Christ's suffering, our suffering and our need for repentance. Today, let's break away for a short time and, using Joan as our example, celebrate and eagerly anticipate Christ's return—and the bodily resurrection promised to us as heirs to His eternal kingdom! By doing this, we are living up to what we have already attained in Christ. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we come to You today to offer our thanks and praise for the knowledge we have that one day You will raise us, and all the dead, with perfected glorious bodies—granting us everlasting life in Your eternal kingdom. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray, Amen.



The **SECOND WEEK** *of* **LENT**

God, our Creator, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Your Son Jesus, through You.

Grant that we would trust Your grace so deeply that we would submit our whole lives to Christ.

*Renew our hearts and minds for the work of Your Holy Church,
that we would share in our neighbors' joys and sorrows and serve others in humility.*

We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



February 25, 2024 | Second Sunday in Lent

Elizabeth Fedde, 1921; Emma Francis, 1945; Deaconesses

Genesis 41:14–45; Romans 6:3–14; John 5:19–24; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{6,3} Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

– Romans 6:3–14 ESV



In the Gospel of Matthew, a rich young man asks Jesus; “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

As Lutherans we know that we do not enter heaven based on our good works, but rather only through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. In our reading from the book of Romans today, the Apostle Paul addresses a different question than the one asked by the rich young man. Not *what must I do to be saved*, but rather, *what must I do now that I am saved?*

Paul explains that baptism is more than an entrance rite into God’s promise of eternal life, but it is also a call to a whole new way of living in the here and now.

He says to the church in Rome, “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, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

I love the image of walking in newness of life. When a baby is first born, its vision is not very developed since it has spent the previous nine months in darkness. A few weeks after birth its vision will go from blurry, and seeing everything in black and white, to seeing things more clearly and in vivid colors. With this new perception the world becomes a fascinating place to the newborn child, filled with new things to see and touch and taste and explore.

In much the same way, our Baptism into Christ opens our eyes to see and experience our world and the people in it in a new way. We are born again into a world filled with hope and possibility. Christ has given us a glimpse of the kingdom of God and encourages us to live each day as if we were already there. But

until we reach our heavenly home, He calls us through our Baptisms to work and pray for the day when it “will be on earth as it is in heaven.” He calls us to proclaim the kingdom, and to work to make this world a place where love prevails over hatred, where peace overcomes strife, where compassion overrules indifference and life, not death, has the final word. This is why at every Baptism we quote Jesus’ words from Matthew 5:16. We say these words over the newly baptized as both instruction and prayer: “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, help us to remember this day that in our Baptisms we were not just given the promise of eternal life in Your kingdom, but we were also called to live a new life in this world. We pray that Your light would shine upon us, dispelling our inner darkness and helping us to live lives worthy of our calling. Help us to see clearly that walking in newness of life is only possible when we are walking closely with You. We pray this in Your precious name. Amen

February 26, 2024 | Monday of the Second Week in Lent

Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, Missionary to India, 1719; Florence Li Tim-Oi, First Female Priest in the Anglican Communion, 1944

Genesis 41:46–57; 1 Corinthians 4:8–21; Mark 3:7–19a; Psalms 119:73–80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{4,8} You think you already have everything you need. You think you are already rich. You have begun to reign in God's kingdom without us! I wish you really were reigning already, for then we would be reigning with you. ⁹ Instead, I sometimes think God has put us apostles on display, like prisoners of war at the end of a victor's parade, condemned to die. We have become a spectacle to the entire world—to people and angels alike.

¹⁰ Our dedication to Christ makes us look like fools, but you claim to be so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are so powerful! You are honored, but we are ridiculed. ¹¹ Even now we go hungry and thirsty, and we don't have enough clothes to keep warm. We are often beaten and have no home. ¹² We work wearily with our own hands to earn our living. We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. ¹³ We appeal gently when evil things are said about us. Yet we are treated like the world's garbage, like everybody's trash—right up to the present moment.

– 1 Corinthians 4:8–13 NLT



When I was a kid, I loved to lay on my bed hanging upside down looking at the ceiling and imagining what it would be like to live life upside down. I imagined walking on the ceiling, stepping over doorways, sitting around ceiling light fixtures pretending it was a bonfire pit. I imagine that Jane and Michael, the children with their nanny Mary Poppins, wondered the same thing when they went to visit Uncle Albert and floated to the ceiling to take their tea. Life seemed upside down.

The apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthian church is describing what life is like for those who follow the risen Jesus Christ. Life is turned upside down. He mentions in the first chapter of his letter to this church that the cross of Christ is foolishness to those who are perishing but the power of God to those who are being saved. Life looks different from Jesus Christ's perspective. What is our weakness is Christ's power to save. When life from our perspective looks grim or hopeless, we await God's mighty work to save and reconcile and forgive our misplaced trust. We sing like children that beloved song of Anna Bartlett Warner who in 1860 wrote the poem "Jesus Loves Me"

*Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong
They are weak, but He is strong.*

Prayer: Father God, hear my prayer for Jesus' sake. I thank You for saving faith in Christ and His powerful work on the cross to forgive my sin and reconcile me to You. Use my weaknesses to bring about Your saving work in my life and the lives of others through the power of Christ at work in me. Amen.

February 27, 2024 | Tuesday of the Second Week in Lent

Genesis 42:1–17; 1 Corinthians 5:1–8; Mark 3:19b–35; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

- ^{91:1} He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.
- ² I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”
- ³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.
- ⁴ He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
- ⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.
- ⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
- ⁸ You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.
- ⁹ Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—
- ¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.
- ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
- ¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.
- ¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.
- ¹⁴ “Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;
I will protect him, because he knows my name.
- ¹⁵ When he calls to me, I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will rescue him and honor him.
- ¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”

– Psalm 91 ESV

Today’s psalm speaks to believers in a time of trouble, promising of the Most High, “*Surely He will save you from the fowler’s snare.*” Unsuspecting birds lured into a fowler’s trap by their desire for the bait are captured and await certain death. In the same way, temptations and our deceitful desires can ensnare us in patterns of thinking and behaving that lead to death instead of life.

By what are you feeling trapped today? Your calendar? Are you mastering your schedule or is it mastering you? Perhaps it's finances. Have the credit cards and loans you use to pay for things you call "necessities" worth it? Or have they become a snare? Almost anything good can become a snare in the extreme; work, wealth, food, sex, entertainment, and much more. These are the traps we set for ourselves, but there are also the traps others set for us through deceit, malice, or manipulation.

Thankfully, the psalmist points to God's promise of rescue. *"He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge"* (Psalm 91:4). As the mother bird stretches out her wings to protect her young from the fowler's snare, so God has rescued you by sending His Son to break forever the snares of sin and death. His desire to free you led Him into the trap of a cold dark tomb. But on the third day, Jesus burst the bonds of death! Joined to His dying and rising by Baptism, we are free from the traps that we set for ourselves and that others set for us. Gathered under the protective wings of the Almighty and assured of His promises, we live both free and secure.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, when tempted by the devil, You remained true to Your Father, who commanded His angels to watch over You. Guard Your Church from the plague of sin, so that we may remain faithful to You until the day when we enjoy the fullness of Your salvation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

February 28, 2024 | Wednesday of the Second Week in Lent

Genesis 42:18–28; 1 Corinthians 5:9–6:11; Mark 4:1–20; Psalms 5 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

⁴Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ²And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” ⁹And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

¹⁰And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹²so that

“they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven.”

¹³And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?

¹⁴The sower sows the word. ¹⁵And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, ¹⁹but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²⁰But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

– Mark 4:1–20 ESV



Grace and peace be to you this day.

Early in ministry, I served a three-point parish in ranch country, USA. If you know nothing else about ranchers, you should know that they are pretty self-sufficient. One day, I received a phone call from a rancher’s wife who had been working on a plan for a community-wide vacation Bible school. She had been praying for God’s direction to be revealed for months, and was now ready to share her vision. When I asked her what the theme was for this VBS, she said “It’s All About Jesus!” Well, that statement is true, isn’t it! And, with such a broad topic, we had free rein in preparing our daily lessons. It was a fantastic week of sharing Jesus stories with children who were eager to learn about Him and His great love for them.

It’s all about Jesus! From Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”; to the last verse of Scripture—Revelation 22:21, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen,” **the story is all about Jesus!** All matters in life, in death, and in eternity **point** to Jesus...His deity, His humanity, His sacrifice, and His triumph.

In our assigned readings for this day, where and how do you see Jesus?

1. How is He mightily working at reconciling Joseph and his brothers?
2. Where is Jesus in Psalm 27 when King David acknowledges that he has nothing to fear when God is on his side?
3. Then, we have this text from 1 Corinthians 6 where church members are carrying grievances and lawsuits against each other. And St. Paul reminds them that they (and we, today) were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.
4. The Gospel reading is the Parable of the Sower, and it might be a familiar story to you. So...I just have to ask the question: which soil are you anchored in?
 - a. Are your roots struggling for something solid to cling to, the answer is Jesus.
 - b. Have the 'birds' in your life taken your joy in the Lord away? Turn to Jesus.
 - c. If you are distracted by the cares of the world, run to Jesus!
 - d. Are you in a good place like that black dirt that takes your roots deep and solidly anchors your soul in Jesus? Hold on to Jesus, and tell your story.

You see? Life *is* all about Jesus! So, keep His countenance ever before you.

*Jesus, keep me near the cross
There a precious fountain.
Free to all a healing stream,
Flows from Calvary's mountain.
In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever;
Till my raptured soul finds rest beyond river.*

Amen, and amen.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You came into the world that lay in darkness, and You pierced that void with Your own brilliant light.

Sometimes we are overwhelmed by life's events, and then we sit in the shadow of despair. But in Your great mercy, You pull us into Your presence, and restore us again, and again, and again. For this immeasurable gift, we give You thanks and praise. Amen.

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! (Psalm 27:13-14)

February 29, 2024 | Thursday of the Second Week in Lent

Genesis 42:29–38; 1 Corinthians 6:12–20; Mark 4:21–34; Psalms 27 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{42:29} When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰“The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land. ³¹But we said to him, ‘We are honest men; we have never been spies. ³²We are twelve brothers, sons of our father. One is no more, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan.’³³ Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, ‘By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴Bring your youngest brother to me. Then I shall know that you are not spies but honest men, and I will deliver your brother to you, and you shall trade in the land.’”

³⁵ As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man’s bundle of money was in his sack. And when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were afraid. ³⁶ And Jacob their father said to them, “You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.” ³⁷ Then Reuben said to his father, “Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.” ³⁸ But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.”

– Genesis 42:29–38 ESV

I love the story of Joseph and his brothers. In his forgiveness, Joseph is a Christ-like figure. But the forgiveness does not come easy for those rascally brothers. In today’s reading, Joseph challenges his brothers to prove that they are “honest men.” He knows that they carry a heavy burden—a burden of guilt—and that they need to confess and repent. And yet, they cannot do it.

When they return to Jacob, their father, they make light of the fact that another brother, Simeon, has been lost to him. They neglect to tell Jacob that they had been imprisoned by Joseph for three days and that Simeon remains there in prison. I’m sure they know deep in their hearts that they are not “honest men.” Not that they are spies, as Joseph accuses them. It’s much worse than that: they are, or believe themselves to be, murderers, for they suppose that their brother Joseph is dead.

And yet, this is a sin that they cannot confess even though it is causing so much grief for themselves and for their father. Joseph wants them to “come clean.” And because they have a guilty conscience, the discovery of the money in their sacks is especially worrisome! What is this man, the lord of the land in Egypt, trying to do to them? Now they may not only be accused of spying, but of stealing as well!

There may be times when we too carry the heavy burden of guilt. And we too may find it hard to “come clean” and confess the sins which we have committed. In the season of Lent, we are encouraged to examine ourselves and confess those things that burden our consciences and receive the gracious absolution that our hearts and souls need from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Like Joseph, Jesus wants us to be honest about our sinful words and deeds, to “come clean”—and, in receiving forgiveness, begin anew to be faithful and true.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me!”

Prayer: O Lord our God, You love innocence, and You restore it in those who have sinned. Turn back to You our wayward hearts and inflame them with Your Holy Spirit, that we may be steadfast in faith and fruitful in works of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

March 1, 2024 | Friday of the Second Week in Lent

George Herbert, Priest, 1633; David, Bishop of Menevia, Wales, c. 544

Genesis 43:1–15; 1 Corinthians 7:1–9; Mark 4:35–41; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{4:35} On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

– Mark 4:35–41 ESV

Here we are in the middle of Lent. To be honest, the season of Lent has always been my favorite. The longing for our risen Savior, the music in its minor tones and dissonance—perhaps a different pattern for worship—all helps to bring me into a holy place in my spiritual life.

Without knowing it at the time, the disciples were in a holy place out on the sea that day. They set off to the other side in the evening, and found themselves in the middle of an unanticipated storm. The wind and rain battered them for a while, enough that the disciples probably needed all the help they could get to keep the boat from overflowing with the storm’s rising waters. All the while, Jesus was in the stern of the boat, asleep on a cushion. The disciples’ perception was that Jesus didn’t care, but what He was really doing was bringing them into a holy place.

A place where the wind and the rain are commanded by the voice of one with authority, where in the middle of chaos and what feels like near death, words of peace and stillness are commanded and obeyed. A place filled with wonder by the Holy One that leads us from the storm’s darkness into the light of calmness and peace.

How about in your faith life? Have you ever thought of the places of chaos that you encounter as being holy places? I know it might seem hard at the time—it certainly has been in the past for me, when the storms of life were clobbering me. Still, we have a reminder that Jesus is with us in the darkest of times and stands up in the middle of it all, rebukes the chaos, and brings us peace and freedom. Then, we realize that life’s storms are holy places and holy moments, and Jesus is with us through it all.

Prayer: Gracious God, in Lent’s midst, help us see holiness in life’s storms. In the middle of chaos, may we find peace, knowing You are with us always. In Jesus name, Amen.

March 2, 2024 | Saturday of the Second Week in Lent

John Wesley, 1791; Charles Wesley, 1788; Renewers of the Church; Chad, Bishop of Lichfield, 672

Genesis 43:16–34; 1 Corinthians 7:10–24; Mark 5:1–20; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{31:1}In you, O LORD, do I take refuge;

let me never be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me!

²Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily!

Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me!

³For you are my rock and my fortress;
and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;

⁴you take me out of the net they have hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

⁵Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

– Psalm 31:1–5 ESV

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Suffering has a way of stripping us bare. It peels back layers of pretense and self-deception, exposing the truth of who we are, and what we truly care about. Most of us do not like what we learn about ourselves in the midst of suffering. We perhaps find that we are less patient than we thought we were, and more easily prone to irritation. Like the law, suffering exposes us and casts light into deep places of our soul which we prefer to keep hidden, or prefer not even to know about. We are created to fear, love and trust God, but we struggle to relinquish control and to entrust ourselves to God when it really counts. Our overwhelming impulse in times of difficulty is often to squeeze the steering wheel more tightly than ever before.

Psalm 31 offers us a glimpse of something different. Here we witness the mysterious union of bitter suffering with perfect trust. The text by no means minimizes the agonies of suffering. The psalmist is harassed by enemies and abandoned by friends (v. 11–13). He is completely worn out, and at the end of his rope, with eyes “wasted from grief” and bones that “waste away” (v. 9–11). He feels as though his life is utterly “spent with sorrow” (v. 10). And yet, despite these bitter torments, the Psalmist abandons himself completely to God’s loving care. “But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand” (v. 14).

Psalm 31 would not be good news for those who suffer if the implicit message were simply to “go and do likewise.” Like faith, hope, and love, radical trust in God is not the sort of thing we are capable of conjuring up within ourselves by force of willpower, and this is true not just when we suffer, but even when we are operating at full strength. Thankfully, Psalm 31 is more of a gift than a command. Although the Psalms offer guidance for how to pray, their fundamental purpose is not to motivate better prayers of our own. It is rather to invite us to join in the prayer of One who prays perfectly in our place. Psalm 31 is not a rebuke, but a precious gift for those who discover in times of struggle and weakness—to their dismay—that they do not trust God as deeply as they wish they did. There is ample space in the wounds of Christ for such as these.

We too are invited to pray the words of Psalm 31; not on account of our own strength, but rather on account of our wondrous union with the Lord who suffers with us and for us. Christ prays on behalf of His body the church. Our feeble prayers are thus gathered up into His, and we become real participants in the perfect prayer of yielded-ness which our Lord offers up from place of his deep suffering on the cross: “Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God” (v. 5).

Prayer: Almighty God, You are always worthy of our trust. Grant that in our times of weakness and discouragement we may find comfort in communion with Your beloved Son. By Your Holy Spirit, conform us to His image, and strengthen the faith with which we cling to Your certain promises. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.



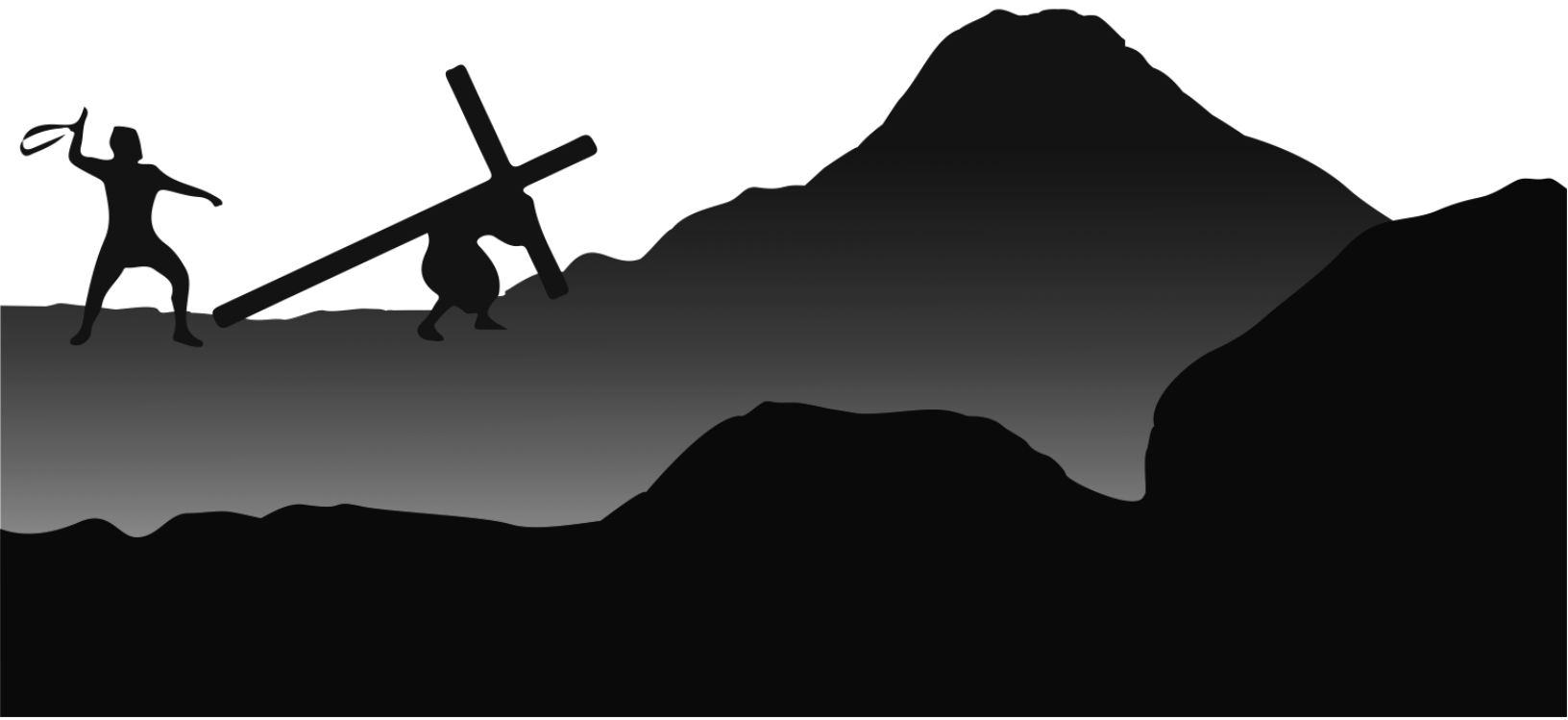
The **THIRD WEEK** *of* **LENT**

*God of life, You are the source of all things living, the maker of all that exists.
Help Your people to hear your voice and to live fully into the life You have given us.*

*Let us always seek the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life —
the One who put an end to death so that all who believe may live eternally.*

Give us eyes to see and ears to hear Your call on our lives.

We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen



March 3, 2024 | Third Sunday in Lent

Genesis 44:1–17; Romans 8:1–10; John 5:25–29; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

- ^{32:1} Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- ² Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- ³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*
- ⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*
- ⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.
- ⁷ You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. *Selah*
- ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- ⁹ Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you.
- ¹⁰ Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.
- ¹¹ Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

– Psalm 32 ESV

Saint Augustine describes Ps. 32 as “a psalm about God’s grace, and about our being justified by no merits whatever on our own part, but only by the mercy of the Lord our God” (*En. Ps.* 31(2).1). Augustine, whose exposition will guide us today, interpreted our psalm as a warning against two sorts of presumption: (1) presuming upon God’s mercy and (2) presuming upon our own virtue. In presuming upon God’s mercy, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we have license to go on sinning before the God of mercy who will not finally punish our sins. In presuming upon our virtue, we attempt to justify ourselves with self-assurance as though the God of justice will reward our righteousness with membership in His kingdom.

The opening verses of our psalm commend as blessed the one whose true self-perception leads to sincere faith and repentance. The one whose “transgression is forgiven” and “sin is covered” can be no other than one who is *in* Christ. We are deceiving ourselves unless we receive the forgiveness of God who has *covered*

our sins with the blood of Christ and we are justifying ourselves unless we give thanks to God for any of our virtues or works of love which are, above all, gifts of His grace.

When we read this psalm as speaking with the voice of the Church, we come to recognize that we all grow weary when we keep silent about our sins and failures while droning on about our merits and accomplishments (v. 3). As we die to ourselves in union with Christ's death on the cross, let us humble ourselves like the tax collectors and not exalt ourselves like the pharisees.

Unless we put away our pride, our self-deception and self-justification, we will be like the horse or mule in verse 9, exalting ourselves so as to be humbled rather than humbling ourselves so as to be exalted to the right hand of God in Christ.

As verse 10 warns, the proud are left without understanding and permitted to follow their desires to their own ruin. The one who trusts in the Lord, however, who follows the way of faith and repentance, is surrounded by "the steadfast love" of the Lord.

God's free expression of love for us in Jesus should cause us to rejoice, not in ourselves, our accomplishments, or our various attempts at self-justification, no, in our being just because justified by the grace of God in Jesus by whose mercy we have faith. For us to be "upright in heart," is to be the kind of people who trust the just will of our God in all circumstances, before all trials, and through all sufferings.

As Saint Augustine reminds us, when we are on the road the psalmist lays out for us, let us keep watch, lest we be sluggish and go astray, and when we wander off of it, let us not be obstinate in response to his correction. May we take heed of this psalm during this season of Lent by confessing and repenting of our sins but also by trusting and being glad in the Lord whose mercy is the source of our justification.

Prayer: Almighty God, grant that we, who have been redeemed from the old life of sin by our Baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, may be renewed in your Holy Spirit to live in righteousness and true holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. — *Lutheran Book of Worship*

March 4, 2024 | Monday of the Third Week in Lent

Genesis 44:18–34; 1 Corinthians 7:25–31; Mark 5:21–43; Psalms 119:73–80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{5:21} When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. ²² Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. ²³ He pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” ²⁴ So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶ She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. ²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” ²⁹ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

³⁰ At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹ “You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’ ”

³² But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³ Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

³⁵ While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?”

³⁶ Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

³⁷ He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. ³⁸ When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ³⁹ He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” ⁴⁰ But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, “*Talitha koum!*” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). ⁴² Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. ⁴³ He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

– Mark 5:21–43 NIV2011

In today’s reading, Jesus is approached by Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders who begs Him to put His hands on his daughter so that she may be healed and live. As Jesus is going to help, He is stopped by a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years and spent all she has on care, but instead of getting better, she grows worse. The Talmud lists 11 cures for this, which she likely tried with no results. She, too, believes the touch of Jesus would be healing. Both she and Jairus’s daughter are healed.

The woman is healed immediately when she touches Jesus’ garment, but Jairus is left waiting. What must he be thinking? “Hey, what about me?”

In this, Jesus gives Jairus, a Jewish leader, an insight that power is from Him and, when one encounters that power, the invitation is there to confess faith.

Jesus says, “Who touched my garments?” to open the door to the faith conversation. The woman’s *faith* made her well, not her work and effort to get well. Faith was the means by which her healing was received from the grace of Jesus.

Jairus must wait. Not unlike Israel waiting for a Messiah. Jairus receives a powerful example of Jesus’ mastery over death and the promise of the resurrection.

How might you be like Jairus, possibly worrying about the slowness and seemingly empty answers to your prayer? Jesus, who overcame death and rose, has a different timetable in His actions and answers your concerns. Trust Him. Allow your faith to make you well.

Prayer: God, only You know the new thing that You are gradually forming within me. Help me know Your hand is leading me, and help me accept the mystery of being incomplete and waiting.

March 5, 2024 | Tuesday of the Third Week in Lent

Genesis 45:1–15; 1 Corinthians 7:32–40; Mark 6:1–13; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{6,3} He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴ And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” ⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief.

And he went about among the villages teaching.

⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ¹⁰ And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

– Mark 6:1–13 ESV



When I first started officiating varsity basketball, my observer offered this evaluation: “Bradosky, you care too much about what other people think. You have to realize that no matter what call you make, 50% of the people love you and 50% of the people hate you. The next call you make, the people that loved you now hate you, and the people that hated you now love you. If you can’t get used to that, get out now.” Then he added, “There is only one person in the stands whose opinion of you truly matters, and that’s me. I know the rules, I know where you are supposed to be on the floor, and I determine your future as an official.”

I have reflected on those words many times throughout my ministry. We can never let fan support either encourage us too much, or their rejection deter us from doing what is faithful. Our future does not depend on our popularity. There is truly only one person in “the stands” whose opinion of us truly matters—Christ Jesus our Lord.

It was only after the disciples witnessed Jesus’ rejection that they were fully prepared to be sent out. They too would certainly encounter a similar fate. He sent them out in pairs so they were never alone, gave them power and authority, and details on how to prepare. No suitcases were permitted. He was honest with them about anticipating both hospitality and rejection.

With that preparation, they went out preaching repentance, proclaiming the kingdom of heaven, casting out demons, and healing many people. So too our ministry should prepare us for what we are bound to face and in the midst of rejection. We focus on the ministry entrusted to us and the responsibilities of those first disciples—to preach, to teach and to heal, to bring hope through the Gospel, to provide instruction through the Word and to provide faithful caring for people’s needs.

When we face rejection, rather than dwelling on it, or being overwhelmed by our own emotions, it is a perfect time to refocus on the mission and the One who sends us out to do ministry in His name. Then, go and do it!

Prayer: Gracious Lord Jesus, in the midst of facing rejection from others, help us to remember Your own rejection in Your own hometown among people who knew You and Your family. Let us respond as You did, not turning in on our own emotions but turning our attention outward to Your mission, sharing Your Gospel, bringing hope, life-giving truth, and healing to every person in the world who will receive it. Remind us that rejection is just part of the preparation for what it means to be Your sent ones. Keep us from depending on the world for approval. Let us be undeterred from the world's rejection. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

March 6, 2024 | Wednesday of the Third Week in Lent

Genesis 45:16–28; 1 Corinthians 8:1–13; Mark 6:13–29; Psalms 5 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{45:25} So they went up out of Egypt and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. ²⁶ And they told him, “Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.” And his heart became numb, for he did not believe them. ²⁷ But when they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. ²⁸ And Israel said, “It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.”

– Genesis 45:25–28 ESV

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In today’s reading, we see that from the very beginning Joseph was the favorite. From the long-sleeved coat given to him by his father Jacob, to the grand dreams given to him by God, Joseph was clearly favored. But being favored came at a price—his brothers hated him. So much so, that they wanted to put him to death; but they settled for selling him into slavery. In the years that followed Joseph suffered much, spending time in prison for a crime he did not commit. That all changed when the time was right. God caused Pharoh to dream dreams that warned of a future famine. No one could interpret the dreams. Then Pharoh’s cupbearer, who had served time in prison with Joseph, remembered Joseph’s gift of interpreting dreams that came true. Joseph was called before Pharoh and told the dreams. Joseph interpreted them and became second in command of Egypt. Through his God-given wisdom, Joseph set in place a plan to store food for Egypt and the surrounding nations. When the famine hit, Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt to buy food. Joseph recognized them, and, long story short, brought his father and his brothers and their families to live in Egypt. God brought good out of evil, restoring Joseph to his family, and saving the whole nation of Israel.

Likewise, soon after He began His ministry, things went badly for our Lord Jesus. He was harassed by the religious leaders until the time was right and they put Him to death. But the evil that happened to Jesus on the cross, God worked for our good. Our Lord’s suffering and death defeated sin, death, and the devil resulting in reconciliation and new life for all who believe in Him. When things in life seem to go badly, remember Joseph and Jesus and how God brought good out of evil.

Also remember God’s promise in Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father, as You brought good out of evil for Joseph and Jesus, help us to trust that You will bring good out of the trials we endure in life. May the way we face our trials be a witness to others of Your presence with us as we rely on You for strength and peace. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

March 7, 2024 | Thursday of the Third Week in Lent

Perpetua and Her Companions, Martyrs at Carthage, 202

Genesis 46:1–7, 28–34; 1 Corinthians 9:1–15; Mark 6:30–46; Psalms 27 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{6:30}The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.

– Mark 6:30–33 ESV

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

When we think about what that means in our everyday lives, we typically think of the many ways God provides for our physical needs: things like food, clothing, our homes, our families and friends, and, the skills and vocations God has placed us in that provide the means we have to provide these things. What we sometimes forget, however, is the reality that not only does God promise us in His Word to provide for our physical needs, but He also provides for our spiritual needs by showering us with forgiveness and life through the Word and the Sacraments.

In today’s familiar Gospel reading from Mark 6, we often are drawn to that familiar miracle of Jesus feeding the thousands, gathered there with just five loaves of bread and two fish. While our focus is usually on the miracle itself, what we easily overlook is why the crowd was there in the first place—they were “like sheep without a shepherd.” So Jesus begins teaching. The Word made flesh, the bread of life, is sharing with all who will hear the Gospel truth that He is our Savior from sin, death, and the power of the devil, and in doing so, through everything He says and does, He is providing for the spiritual needs of those crowds, being the Shepherd of these lost sheep, leading them to the spiritual food and drink they need to sustain their lives in Him.

God provides that bread of life for us yet today through the Word and the Sacraments. Today, Jesus provides our congregations, and the faithful pastors who serve us, to proclaim His life-giving Gospel to us and equip us for living out our lives in Christ and to proclaim Him to our world. He also uses us in our congregations to provide daily bread to our pastors, as illustrated by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9.

As you take the time to reflect on those words “Give us this day our daily bread,” be sure to give thanks for the ways God provides for your needs of body and soul this day and always. But more importantly, let us always give thanks for God’s gifts to us in Word and Sacrament, and for those whom He places into our lives to deliver our Lord’s gifts of forgiveness and life each and every day.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, We give You thanks and praise for the many ways You lead us in our lives, and provide for our physical needs. We also give You thanks that through Your crucified and risen Son, we have our spiritual needs of forgiveness of our sins and life everlasting provided for as well. We thank You for giving us faithful pastors and others who deliver those gifts to us. Use us to be a means to continue to share the Bread of Life with our world, and may we always hunger and thirst for the things of Your kingdom. Amen.

March 8, 2024 | Friday of the Third Week in Lent

Genesis 47:1–26; 1 Corinthians 9:16–27; Mark 6:47–56; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{6:50} for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

– Mark 6:50 ESV



Today’s passage about Jesus walking on the water to meet the disciples in their storm-tossed boat on the Sea of Galilee seems to raise as many questions as it answers. Why did He “make” or “compel” them to get into the boat (6:45)? Did Jesus plan to walk on water when He sent the disciples ahead of Him? And why would He appear to walk *past* them (6:48) as if he was racing them across the water?

If any of those details jumped out at you from today’s passage, perhaps these other aspects did as well. Although Jesus had been praying by Himself to recover from His recent ministry activities, He didn’t remain aloof, or content to continue praying for His friends, when He saw they were in trouble. He climbed down the mountain and entered the chaos of the storm. He experienced everything they experienced to meet the disciples where they were. He encouraged them using words that echoed God’s encouraging presence with Israel during their wilderness wanderings—like “I AM” and “do not fear.” With this divine pronouncement, Jesus stilled the storm, bringing calm out of chaos. Finally, He continued with His friends to the destination to which He had appointed them.

This is not a one-time event; this is what Jesus does for us as well.

When we find ourselves tossed about by life’s storms, Jesus does more than pray for us—though He does this, too (John 17:9, 20). Through His life, death, and resurrection, He entered the storms of this life. He experienced everything we experienced to meet us where we are (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:14–18; 4:15). As the divine Word made flesh, He stills the storm of sin that swirls around and within us—and He accompanies us on our journey through this life to the eternal destination which He has prepared for us. What a beautiful example of divine power and action at work in our world and in our lives!

Prayer: Dear Lord, what a blessing it is to know You pray for us and that You come to us in our time of need. Work through those You have placed in our lives as instruments of Your loving presence—our family and friends, roommates, coworkers, classmates, even those random strangers we meet any given day. May they be a source of encouragement today as You meet us where we are and walk with us into the future You have prepared for us through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

March 9, 2024 | Saturday of the Third Week in Lent

Genesis 47:27—48:7; 1 Corinthians 10:1–13; Mark 7:1–23; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{7,9} And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)—¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

– Mark 7:9–23 ESV

“That’s not what I said!”

Have you ever reached the point in a discussion or argument with somebody where you had to go back and hash out what was said versus what was heard? Well, in a manner of speaking, this is what our Lord had to do with the Pharisees and scribes in our Gospel lesson for today. They had turned away from the actual words of Scripture to things that *sounded* like the Word of God, but were not actually the Word of God. Instead, these things were their own rationalizations, speculations, and mutilations of that Word.

As Jesus specifically points out, they had taken their own theorizing and used it to nullify the fourth commandment. Perhaps their thinking went something like this: “Surely it is better to give gifts to God than to give things to one’s parents. Therefore, if someone dedicates everything to God, they are exempted from the demand that they take care of their parents.” But this isn’t what the Scriptures said. They’d essentially done the same thing with requirements about washings; thinking it would be better to make ceremonial requirements into universal requirements. It all sounds very reasonable, of course.

Obviously there are a lot of problems here, not the least of which being the ways in which it rejects and disrespects the actual Scriptures. These problems were also preventing God’s Law from doing its work of revealing what actually defiles a person: their sinful thoughts, impulses, and desires that are inextricably seated in their hearts. Consequently, these problems were also preventing them from hearing Christ as the answer to the problem of such defilement. He had come to fulfill the actual words of Scripture, including fulfilling the requirements of the Law on our behalf, so that we might be reckoned as “undefiled” by God through faith in Him.

Today, we might be tempted by a lot of things. Things that are not the Word, but sound roughly *like* the Word, and furthermore seem perfectly reasonable. These may get in the way of hearing what the Word has

to say to us. But Christ our Lord continues to turn us back to what the sure and reliable Word actually says, so that we might both recognize our need and receive Him as our Savior.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank you that You came to fulfill the true Word of God. Forgive me for when I have allowed my own rationalizations and speculations to prevent me from hearing that Word. Continue to turn me back to what You have actually said, so that I may recognize my need and receive You as my Savior—and so that I may faithfully confess You as Lord all the days of my life. Amen.



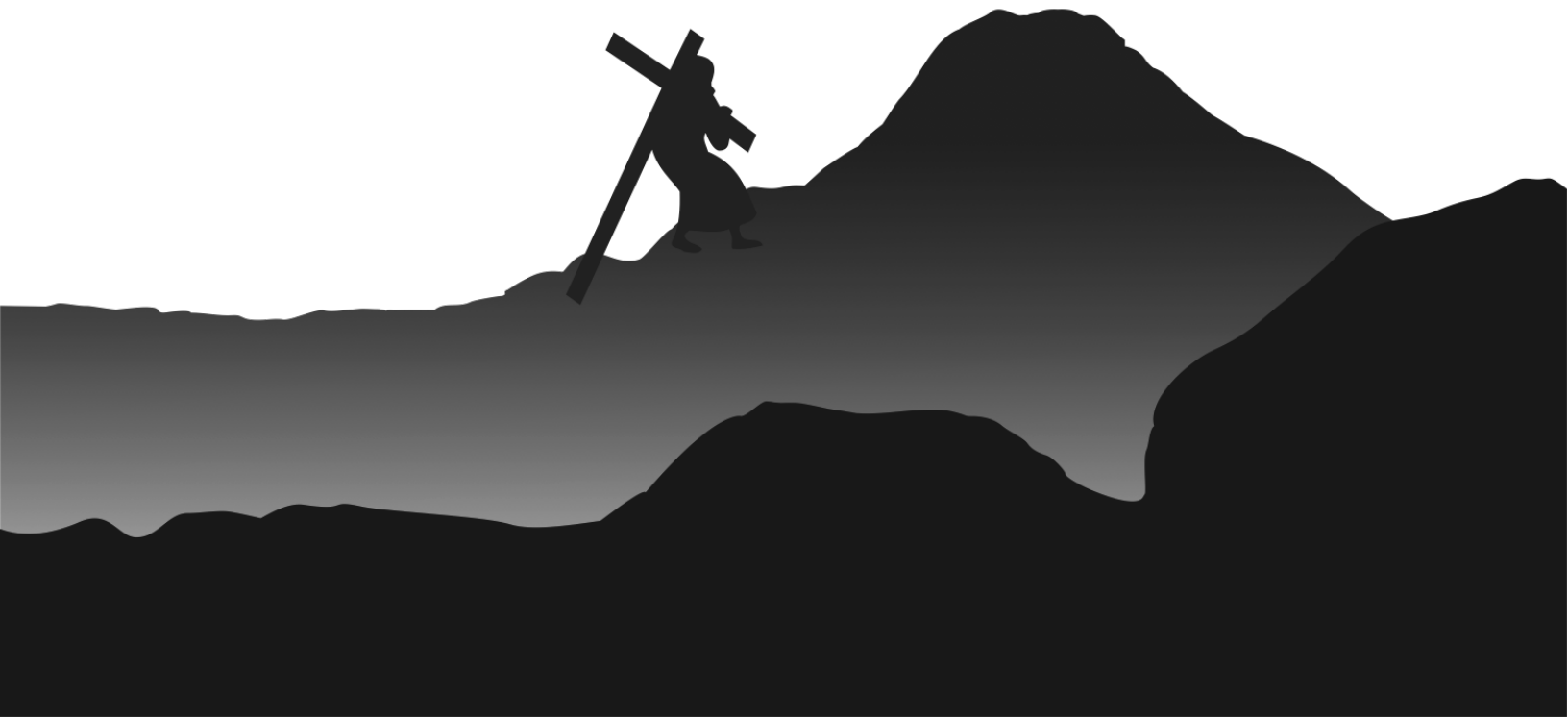
The **FOURTH WEEK** *of* **LENT**

*Holy Father, Giver of all good things, help us to work for the food that endures to eternal life,
rather than wasting our time and effort on things that are perishable.*

May our eyes always be fixed on the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Savior.

*Let our lives be sustenance for a world in need,
that Your love would pour through us and into the world You love.*

We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



March 10, 2024 | Fourth Sunday in Lent

Genesis 48:8–22; Romans 8:11–25; John 6:27–40; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{8:11} If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

– Romans 8:11–25 ESV

We are half-way through the season of Lent. Many Christians choose to fast during Lent by giving up things like sweets, alcohol, or social media. Others adopt new disciplines such as attending mid-week Lenten worship, participating in Bible study or creating a more active lifestyle. How are you doing with your Lenten discipline? Some of us might be successful, while others may be disappointed that we haven't kept to our disciplines as we had hoped.

Many things in our lives are not as we had hoped they would be. We're disappointed when that new job possibility goes to someone else, a relationship ends, or the weather ruins our plans. We hope for better days for ourselves and others in our lives. We even speak of hope for our communities, government, and churches.

In today's text, Paul reminds us of our mortality—the flesh is weak, we live in fear, and even creation has been cursed through the Fall in the Garden of Eden. But more importantly, Paul reminds us that we are not just flesh and bones but are children of God, having the very same Spirit living in us that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Living with the power of the Holy Spirit, we have hope for the glory of God that is to be revealed to us.

Shopping at a local gift store, I bought a sign that read, “Hope changes everything.” This little wooden sign reminds me of the hope to which Paul spoke—the same hope that was with the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness, the same hope with which the prophets proclaimed, and the same hope that was with Mary and Elizabeth as they were with child.

Hope is one of the words that can be both a noun and a verb. It's something we have, or hold, or something we can do. In hope, we trust that God's promises are true. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection allows us to live in hope, as we patiently wait for not only our redemption, but the redemption of all creation. And hope changes everything.

Prayer: God of mercy and grace, You are present in our joys and our sorrows. Let us look not to our own strength, but to You. Help us to remain hopeful of the glory You have promised through Your son, Jesus Christ. Give us patience while we wait, and courage to share our hope in You with others. In the name of Jesus, amen.

March 11, 2024 | Monday of the Fourth Week in Lent

Genesis 49:1–28; 1 Corinthians 10:14–11:1; Mark 7:24–37; Psalms 119:73–80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{49:1}Then Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.

²“Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob,
listen to Israel your father.

⁸“Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;

⁹Judah is a lion’s cub;
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.

He stooped down; he crouched as a lion
and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?

¹⁰The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

¹¹Binding his foal to the vine
and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine,
he has washed his garments in wine
and his vesture in the blood of grapes.”

– Genesis 49:1–2, 8–11 ESV

One of my favorite hobbies is researching ancestry, looking at old family photos, and spotting similarities through generations. Scripture, at times, can take on the qualities of a family photo album. You can’t help but, as you turn the pages, notice a family resemblance that we share with our faith ancestors: Abraham’s dishonesty, Sarah’s jealousy, Jacob’s sons’ scheming and betrayal. Our stories are different, yet the family resemblance comes through. We know we struggle with the same things as our ancestors did, all the way back to Adam and Eve.

By now the ashes of Ash Wednesday have faded from our foreheads, but not from our hearts. This human family tree is covered in dust—all the way through.

However, the mercy of scripture is that it is not just *our* story, it is *God’s* story. In today’s scripture from Genesis, we can catch sight of God’s hand in this complicated family story.

Jacob’s blessing to his heirs carries the promise that “*The scepter shall not depart from Judah*” ... “*and to him shall be the obedience of all peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes*” (Genesis 49:10-11).

This sounds like a strange inheritance, until a son of Judah, and Son of God, is born into this sin-filled family, fulfilling Jacob’s blessing as a king like the world has never received before. He is the Savior and eternal vine from which all of humanity will be redeemed. As Jesus turns the pages of His own messy family album, He doesn’t recoil from the sin and suffering it carries. He chooses to enter right into the midst of it all, even into death.

Jesus will redeem this family tree on a *new tree* on Golgotha's hill, making it possible for these sons of Adam and daughters of Eve to call upon a better inheritance; to be sons and daughters of God. The inheritance that Jesus rightfully fulfilled is now our own. Not by the schemes of man, but through God's mercy. Praise be to the Lion of Judah and King of kings!

Prayer: Merciful Savior, You are all-powerful, and yet humble, all-worthy, and abounding in love and grace. Uncover the patterns of sin in our lives, in our families, in our history, and lead us to repentance and new life. Remove the branches that do not bear fruit and redeem our broken places. Help us to live not according to the old story of sin, but according to our inheritance found in You, as sons and daughters of the King almighty. Amen.

March 12, 2024 | Tuesday of the Fourth Week in Lent

Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, 604

Genesis 49:29—50:14; 1 Corinthians 11:2–34; Mark 8:1–10; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{91:1}He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.
²I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”
³For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.
⁴He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
⁵You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
⁶nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.
⁷A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
⁸You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.
⁹Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—
¹⁰no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.
¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

– Psalm 91:1–11 ESV



There is a beautiful hymn in the *With One Voice* hymnal, entitled “You Who Dwell in the Shelter of the Lord,”—which is also known as “On Eagles Wings,” (WOV 779). I am convinced that the writer of this beautiful hymn had the 91st psalm open as he wrote it. In fact, as I began to read through this psalm, I automatically began singing the hymn. It is one of my favorite hymns, for it reminds us in such beautiful words and music that our God is in fact our refuge and our strength, and our fortress. This psalm reminds us that we can trust in our God’s eternal protection of us.

Today, we are almost at the midpoint of our Lenten journey to the cross. The season of Lent is a time for us to answer our Lord’s invitation to return to Him and to put our trust and our faith in Him. This psalm serves as a powerful statement that we can put our belief and trust in our God.

All of us go through times in our lives when we do not feel the presence of our God, times when we doubt that our God is with us in the midst of our troubles. It is at those times that we can call upon a psalm like this one to remind ourselves that in the midst of everything bad that is going on in our lives, our God is with us, and His love covers us.

My final thought and prayer for you is that you would remember this: God is not near because I feel His presence; God is not far away from me because I do not feel His presence; God is here with me because He promises to be here with me.

Prayer: O God, our loving Father, help us to remember that You are here with us because You promise to be here with us. Help us to trust that under Your wings we will find our refuge, and that Your faithfulness is our shield and our buckler. Give us the faith to trust, totally and completely, in Your eternal love for us. In the name of Jesus, Your Son, our Savior, we offer our prayer. Amen.

March 13, 2024 | Wednesday of the Fourth Week in Lent

Genesis 50:15–26; 1 Corinthians 12:1–11; Mark 8:11–26; Psalms 5 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{50:15}When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

¹⁸His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

– Genesis 50:15–21 NIV2011



Lent is the season of fulfillment. It encompasses the love that God has for His people and the faithfulness to fulfill His promise for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

In the book of Genesis, God called Abraham, and promised that through his family, He would make a great nation—and bless them for generations to come. However, as the story of future generations unfolded through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and into the generation of Joseph, sin took hold of Joseph's brothers, filling them with anger, deceit, and betrayal.

But God had not forgotten His promise, and He had not given up on His people. He reunited Joseph with his brothers in a humbling act of faith.

Sin is always working against us, separating us from one another, as it had for Joseph's brothers, and trying to separate us from the love of God. But there is hope that the Holy Spirit is right there with us. Comforting us, strengthening us, and guiding us back to the cross, and all that Jesus had done for us and for our salvation. For we have been saved by grace through faith.

A promise given and blood shed for you. For in your Baptism, you were gifted the power of the Holy Spirit as a child of God, and an heir to His heavenly kingdom.

This is why, during the season of Lent, we are called by God to join together in unity with one another to hear His Word and the good news of all that Christ has done for us. And, by His Words and deeds, we are enlightened with the blessed gifts of the Spirit by whom we have been given in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Although we may have been led astray, betrayed, or filled with anger or deceit, there is hope. And where there is hope, there is always forgiveness in the mercy and grace of Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, You sent Your only begotten Son to die on the cross in our place. Guide us and lead us through the power of the Holy Spirit to embrace, with faith, the truth of Your Holy Word. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

March 14, 2024 | Thursday of the Fourth Week in Lent

Exodus 1:6–22; 1 Corinthians 12:12–26; Mark 8:27–9:1; Psalms 27 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{8:31} He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

– Mark 8:31–35 NIV2011

The promise of God in all of Scripture is to redeem and save that which is lost.

The first messianic prophecy of God’s power coming to redeem the world is heard in Genesis 3:15: “...I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The same Spirit that hovered over the waters of the deep, bringing order out of chaos, is the same Spirit that carried the prophetic voice of the Messiah into fulfillment in the New Testament. And this promised messianic fulfillment, as we see in the Gospel reading for today, is not quite understood by Peter who heard that Jesus’ purpose was to “suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (vs. 31). A Messiah that is to die? Of course not—that cannot be so! Upon hearing such disturbing words, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him.

And yet Jesus said to him, “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Human concerns can be understood as the ways in which we make a god for ourselves—a god of our own creation. Peter might have thought: “Certainly Jesus did not come to die on a Roman cross; He came to live and conquer the power of Roman rule and those agitators who oppress us.”

How often is this true not only for Peter, but for us as well? When we place our plans over what God wants to accomplish in and through His church, we make for ourselves a god of our own creation. When we ascribe to a theology of glory and believe that God’s blessings only appear in the good times of life, then we also make for ourselves a god of our own creation. When we walk in our fleshly desires, we, too, will hear the voice of the Spirit say to us: “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

And to such a rebuke, we must repent of our sins and say, “Lord, please forgive me for making a god of my own making. Restore me back into right fellowship with You.”

Prayer: Holy Father, lead us to repent of our sins and the various ways in which we have made a god for ourselves. You alone are the Lord in whose name is righteousness, peace, and joy for all who believe. Rebuke us in Your holy love, so that we might be restored by Your redeeming grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

March 15, 2024 | Friday of the Fourth Week in Lent

Exodus 2:1–22; 1 Corinthians 12:27—13:3; Mark 9:2–13; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{2:1}Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” ⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

– Exodus 2:1–10 NRSV



The King of Egypt (Pharaoh) was becoming very concerned that there were simply too many Israelites, and he feared that one day the Israelites would be too powerful and could take over Egypt. In order to control the population of Israelites, Pharaoh ordered that all baby boys were to be killed. When Moses was born his parents couldn’t bring themselves to kill their son and they hid him as long as it felt safe to do so. We all remember the story of Moses floating on the Nile River in a papyrus basket. When Pharaoh’s daughter finds the baby, God uses her as a way to save the baby boy. Moses’ sister suggests that Pharaoh’s daughter allow a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby; and so Moses ended up being cared for by his own mother. Pharaoh’s daughter named the baby, Moses, which means, “I drew him out of the water.”

The baby Jesus’ life was also threatened by a king, who feared that his reign could be threatened by a newborn king. Again God intervened, telling the holy family to flee because king Herod was having all baby boys killed.

God had a plan to use Moses, for one day Moses would lead the Israelites and he became God’s instrument to deliver His people out of slavery and to the Promised Land. God also had a plan to send Jesus into our sinful world, so that through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, Jesus would provide a way for our relationship to God to be restored. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection would deliver us, so that one day we, too, would have eternal life.

Prayer: Gracious God, As we journey through this Lenten Season, encourage us through the prophets of old, as we recall Your faithfulness to Your people, whether in the days of the prophets or in our current life. Strengthen and nurture our faithfulness as we keep our eyes focused on Your love and promises. In the name of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

March 16, 2024 | Saturday of the Fourth Week in Lent

Exodus 2:23—3:15; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; Mark 9:14–29; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{9:20} And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²² And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” ²³ And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” ²⁶ And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁹ And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

– Mark 9:20–29 ESV



In the book of Exodus, Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the law, and God sent him down to confront the evil spirit of idolatry that had invaded the camp of the Israelites. Aaron had made a golden calf and many of the Israelites were worshipping it.

Just before today’s text in Mark 9, Jesus has been up on the mountain, and He comes down and to also confront an evil spirit.

There are times in our lives when we, like the nine disciples, feel powerless before evil and evil spirits. Moses did not exorcize the spirit of idolatry for the Israelites—they continued in their history to struggle with idolatry. But Moses did lay his life on the line, pleading in prayer for forgiveness for God’s people, the Israelites, in Exodus 32. Moses’ act of intercession clearly prefigures and points to the atonement Jesus will accomplish on the cross.

The evil spirit that Jesus confronted was no match for Jesus. Jesus hears the cry of the father who says: “if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

“Why could we not cast it out?” the disciples ask. Jesus answers: “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer (and fasting).” This reference to prayer, and in some texts also fasting, tells us that the way to confront evil is by relying on God’s power. This text in Mark assures us that even though we have imperfect faith, Jesus has all the power necessary to overcome the evil forces at work in this world and in our lives.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we battle not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places. Come to our aid. Help us stand in the victory You have won at the cross, and to wage our spiritual warfare with the weapons You have given us. We believe; help our unbelief. Amen.



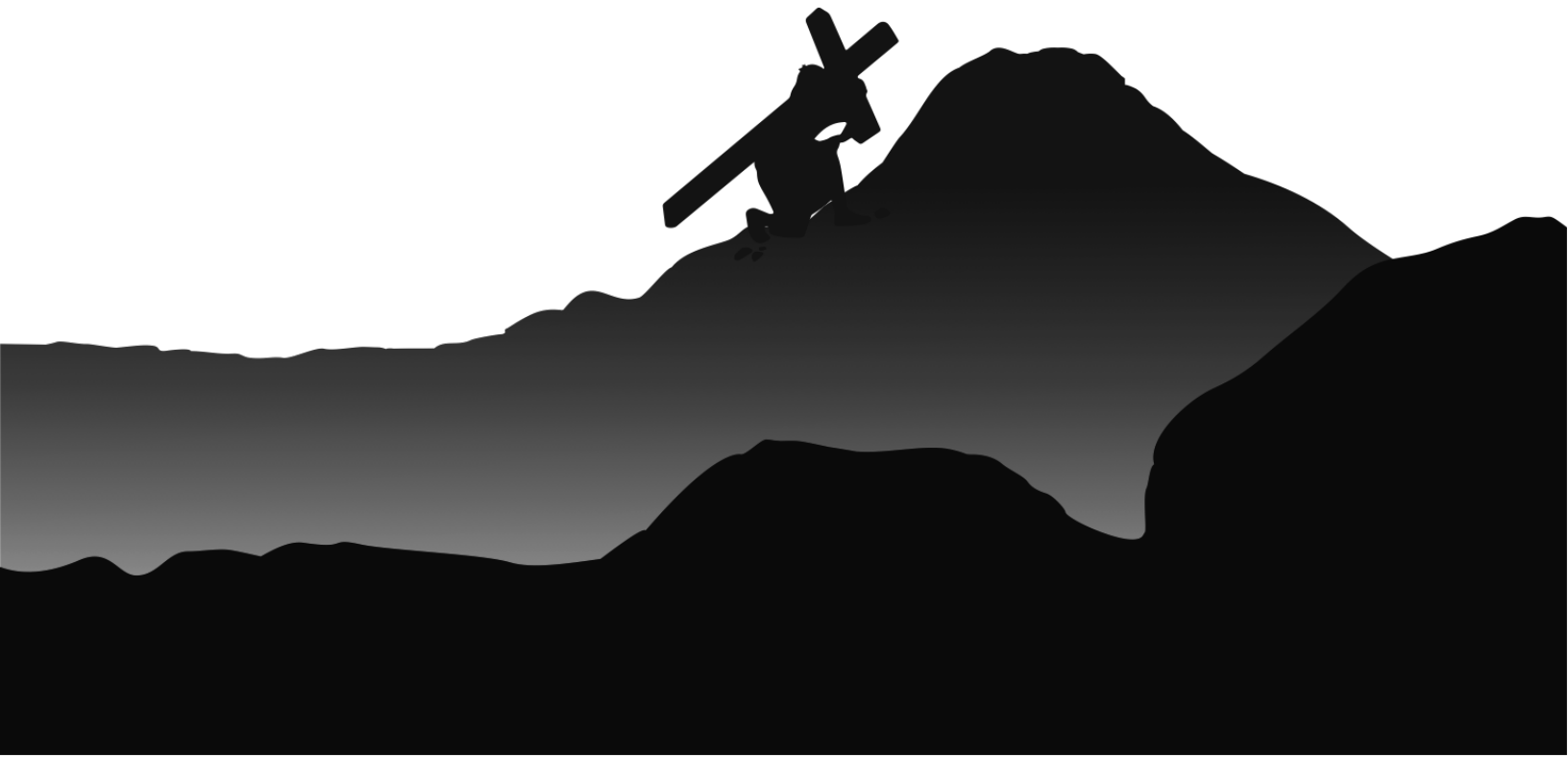
The **FIFTH WEEK** *of* **LENT**

*God of all glory and might, You grant new life through Your Son, Jesus,
who gave His life for all who trust in Him.*

*Help us, as followers of Christ, to keep His Word and to live according to His holy will.
May we be willing to risk scorn, rejection, suffering and trials for the sake of the Gospel message,
trusting that we will never be alone, but that our lives are securely in Your hands.*

*May we reach out with Your love to the ends of the earth,
giving our very best in service to the lost, alone and in need.*

We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



March 17, 2024 | Fifth Sunday in Lent

Patrick, Bishop, Missionary to Ireland, 461

Exodus 3:16–4:12; Romans 12:1–21; John 8:46–59; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{8:46}Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

⁴⁸The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?”⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”⁵² The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ ⁵³Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” ⁵⁴Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ ⁵⁵But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

– John 8:46–59 ESV



A Challenge for Christians when standing on their faith is facing criticism from non-believers. Christians are sometimes mocked for being so-called “do gooders” or for acting “holier than thou” in front of those who refuse to believe. But, truth be told, non-believers in Christ will never understand what it means for a Christian to take a stand on faith. More often than not, such a stand means contradicting the world and all its empty promises.

Our text finds Jesus in the temple, confronted by a crowd opposed to Him. Some in the crowd would even plot to have Him put to death. Yet, the severity of their actions did not preclude Jesus from speaking the truth of the Gospel. They attempted to discredit Jesus by hurling insults and accusations at Him. Jesus faced harsh scrutiny because they would not believe and did not hear God’s voice in the words that Jesus spoke.

Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” Our Lord then used Abraham as an example of faith. Abraham believed God’s promise and longed to see the fulfillment of it. Those who criticized Jesus neither listened to God’s words, nor did they believe in the Son of God standing before them, because in their view, Abraham was dead. The crowd scoffed since they didn’t understand, and they refused to believe what Jesus was saying.

We, however, know it’s true. Those who keep God’s Word and believe Jesus is Lord and Savior, even though they die, will live forever in God’s heavenly kingdom. As a Lenten discipline, strive to remain in God’s Word. Read Scripture daily and share the Good News of Jesus Christ, even in the face of ridicule. Remain in the Word, speak the truth, and give God the glory due His name.

Prayer: Holy God, Your Holy Spirit gives faith that we may believe Your Word. Give us the will, the desire, and the passion to remain in Your Word, and to speak the Gospel to a disbelieving world. Surely as we face ridicule for our words, let Your Word of truth be heard among those to whom we speak. Open their ears, their hearts, and minds, that they may come to faith and trust in Your promises. For we speak Your truth in the powerful name of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we pray. Amen.

March 18, 2024 | Monday of the Fifth Week in Lent

Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, 386

Exodus 4:10–31; 1 Corinthians 14:1–19; Mark 9:30–41; Psalms 119:73–80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{4:10} But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” ¹¹ Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? ¹² Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” ¹³ But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.”

– Exodus 4:10–13 ESV



I lived for a while in Finland, the home of my grandparents. At the time, many single Finnish women went to various countries as missionaries, bearing the Good News of Jesus to those who have never heard. The joke was, then, that if a Finnish male heard the call of God to go as a missionary, he would reply, “*Here I am. Send my sister!*”

There’s a scene from *The Fiddler on the Roof*, which takes place in a Jewish village during pre-communist Russia, where the father is faced with the challenge of marrying off his five daughters. The father, Tevye, is a poor Jewish milkman and says to God, “*I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can’t You choose someone else?*”

We are all not so different, nor was Moses. “*Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.*” And God did. He eventually sent a better Moses, a better Abraham, better Sarah, better Deborah, a better David, Solomon, Isaiah and Elijah, a better you and a better me.

He sent Jesus, God-with-us, who knew no sin. And for our sake, He set his face toward Jerusalem, to His sufferings and death, becoming sin on our behalf. He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You are the author and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that was set before You, You took our place and endured the cross, despising the shame, and You are seated at the right hand of the throne of God. You are worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing! Amen.

March 19, 2024 | Tuesday of the Fifth Week in Lent
ST. JOSEPH, HUSBAND OF MARY AND GUARDIAN OF OUR LORD

2 Samuel 7:4, 8–16; Romans 4:13–18; Luke 2:41–52; Psalms 89:1–29 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{2:41} Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³ And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴ but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵ and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." ⁴⁹ And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. ⁵¹ And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

– Luke 2:41–52 ESV



One of the times in my life when I experienced a truly sinking feeling was the day I unintentionally left our middle son at preschool. It was a classic case of miscommunication between my wife and I. She thought I had him, and I assumed she did. The designated time for picking him up from preschool passed, and shortly after, we received a phone call asking if we were coming to pick up Liam that day. My heart sank. When I finally reached Liam from my office, he came bouncing down the ramp with a spring in his step.

"Dad!" he exclaimed, "I met so many new friends." I felt relief knowing he wasn't sobbing or afraid, and I hadn't accidentally scarred him for life—a story that could be passed down through generations.

I've often reflected on Liam's comment, "Dad, I met so many new friends!" in light of the biblical text where we find young Jesus in the temple. Jesus was left in the temple under similar circumstances, with Mary thinking He was with Joseph, and Joseph assuming He was with Mary. The thought of being a day's journey away from Jesus would have been more than a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Jesus sat, listened, learned, and asked questions of new people in His Father's house. His inquiries astonished those who heard them. Jesus was precisely where He needed to be.

Perhaps this offers us a lesson as well—to sit and listen to the Lord in His house, to learn and ask questions with childlike faith, and to occasionally get lost in the Word. Lent provides this opportunity for us—a renewed time of devotion or a new perspective in a unique environment.

I encourage you to sit with new people in this season or the next, to glean from the experience of a matriarch or patriarch of the congregation, or to hear the fresh voice of a young child among you. Who knows? Maybe you'll even make some new friends. Regardless, it is in our Father's house, surrounded by the Word and nourished with the Sacraments, where we belong.

Prayer: In moments of miscommunication and sinking feelings, may Your comforting presence be our solace. Like young Jesus in the temple, guide us to sit, listen, learn, and ask questions with childlike faith. As we navigate life's journey, may Your Word be our compass, leading us to new friendships and experiences. During this Lenten season, grant us a renewed devotion and a fresh perspective. Bless our interactions with others, that we may glean wisdom from all generations. In Your house, surrounded by Your Word and nourished with the Sacraments, may we find our true belonging. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

March 20, 2024 | Wednesday of the Fifth Week in Lent

Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, 687

Exodus 7:8–24; 2 Corinthians 2:14—3:6; Mark 10:1–16; Psalms 5 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{2:15} For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

– 2 Corinthians 2:15–16 NRSV



In the quiet of dawn, we find ourselves within the sacred walls of a Lenten bakery, where the air is warm with the promise of sustenance and the scent of fresh bread is *the very aroma of Christ* (2 Corinthians 2:15). Can you recall a time when the scent of fresh bread felt like a warm embrace, reminding you of God's nurturing presence? Here, the ancient narratives and timeless truths of Scripture are kneaded together, as the baker, with flour-dusted hands, works the dough of our faith. The tactile sensation of kneading the dough mirrors the shaping of our spiritual lives, the warmth of the oven reflects God's enveloping love, and the bread's taste is as sweet as the Gospel's truth.

The baker's motions are deliberate, echoing the meticulous signs of God's power in the story of Moses. As *the Nile turned to blood* (Exodus 7:20), so too does the yeast work through the dough, a transformation that speaks of both judgment and deliverance.

The morning psalms are the melody in the bakery, a song of preparation and *praise that rises* with the dough of the *finest of wheat* (Psalm 147). They form the crust and crumb of our daily bread, the textures of our morning offering to God. As the day progresses, the bakery does not rest; it is a place of continuous creation. The leaven of the Word *expands* within us, and we grow into the shape that our divine Baker intends. The evening psalms then turn the bakery into a space of reflection—a time to *inspect the loaves of our hearts* for any sign of hardness or hollow spaces, inviting the kneading of repentance and the heat of transformation (Psalm 51:11).

On this particular day, as we also remember Bishop Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (c. AD 634 – 687), his essence infuses our Lenten loaf as the salt—preserving, flavoring, and enhancing the Body of Christ. His life, a single grain of *good salt* ground and baked into the greater story of faith, feeds us still (Mark 9:50).

As you savor the nourishing bread of the Word, what fragrant flavors of the Spirit are you called to share with those who hunger around you? How might you, like the dough beneath the Baker's hands, be transformed and rise to the occasion of this day?

In this bakery, we are all apprentices, learning the art of being bread for the world—bread that nourishes, bread that satisfies the deepest hunger. And as children who delight in the simple joys of bread and blessings, we are invited to *taste and see the goodness of the Lord* in the breaking of the bread (Psalm 34:8).

Prayer: Bountiful Baker of the Bread of Life, let our lives be mixed, kneaded, and shaped by Your hand. May the aroma of our days be pleasing to You as we learn the art of living faithfully. Teach us to rise in Your service and to be nourished by Your Word. As we remember the saints who have seasoned our faith, help us to savor the grace that You have so richly provided, through Jesus Christ, the Bread of Heaven. Amen.

March 21, 2024 | Thursday of the Fifth Week in Lent

Thomas Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1711

Exodus 7:25—8:19; 2 Corinthians 3:7–18; Mark 10:17–31; Psalms 27 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{10:17} And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” ²¹ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” ²² Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³ And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” ²⁸ Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹ Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

– Mark 10:17–31 ESV

I am a rich man. Often, I don’t want to admit this. It would be easy (and true) to say that there are millions of people richer than I am. But, that doesn’t make me less rich because others are richer! No, I am a rich man. I live in a nice house and drive a nice truck and own many different things. Not to mention the fact that I am rich in relationships and have a very fulfilling calling as the president of the North American Lutheran Seminary. I could go on and on counting my blessings. I’m rich.

In our Gospel lesson, a rich “young” man comes to Jesus. (Okay, I’m a rich “mature” man.) He comes to Jesus as a seeker. He wants what money cannot buy. He wants eternal life. Good for him! He has a mind and heart for God and God’s Commandments. He is not living as if his riches in were all that mattered. Jesus loved him for it.

So, with tough love Jesus tells him to sell all he has, give to the poor, and become a disciple, but sadly he turns away. Of course, this is where most of us get creative in order to avoid what Jesus is obviously saying. For example, we’ve all heard people say when commenting (or preaching) on this story, “Jesus doesn’t tell everyone to do this, but only those who love their riches too much! And I don’t love my possessions too much,” or “This rich man was much richer than I am!” In other words, Jesus is talking about other people, not me! The offence of the Gospel is conveniently avoided.

The truth is that many of us love our riches more than we want to admit. Very few if any of us will “sell all we have and give to the poor.” This is why it is so hard for us to enter the kingdom of God! Of course, the disciples go bonkers when they hear this. They thought that wealth was proof that God loves us. Jesus turns

their theology on its head. “It is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Again, we get even more creative to dull the edge of this teaching. It’s even been imagined that there was a gate in Jerusalem called “the eye of the needle” which was very difficult for a camel to pass through—difficult but not impossible. Unfortunately, there is no archeological evidence for such a gate. In other words, it’s another way to remove the offence of what Jesus clearly says!

However, there is good news. Even though it is impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Even though it is impossible for this rich man to enter the kingdom of God by *his* own power. God’s grace is a power that can save even the rich! Wonder of wonders and glory of glories, God’s grace can save me! “What is humanly impossible, is possible for God.”

It is in the confidence of this faith, that the rich receive the power to do what they—apart from grace—could not do. Be free, give it away, share with the poor, give joyously for God loves a cheerful giver! The power of God is at work!

So, be of good cheer my rich and poor friends and give freely because God in Christ is able to save us all.

Lenten Discipline: Give an extra gift to support God’s work in the world.

Prayer: “Almighty God, all that we possess is from your loving hand. Give us grace that we may honor you with all we own, always remembering the account we must one day give to Jesus Christ our Lord.” – *Lutheran Book of Worship*

March 22, 2024 | Friday of the Fifth Week in Lent

Jonathan Edwards, *Teacher, Missionary to the Native Americans, 1758*; James De Koven, *Priest, 1879*

Exodus 9:13–35; 2 Corinthians 4:1–12; Mark 10:32–45; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{4,1}Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing clearly the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

– 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 ESV

How easy would it be to just calm the fire of the Gospel down every now and then? Couldn't we mold the Word of God for not only their ears, but the hearts and minds of the people we come in contact with every day? A tweak on occasion to make everyone happy, including ourselves? St. Paul warns us here in this passage not to give into the pressures of this world. It is all too convenient at times to try to avoid a confrontation by giving the Gospel Word a world appeasing meaning. This temptation can arise everywhere; at work, in the market, on the front porch with neighbors, and even around the family dinner table.

Then why are we tempted? Paul opens the passage saying, "we do not lose heart." How many times must we defend the truth? How many new rationalizations will we endure from the old problem found in Judges 21:25, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes?" Paul is urging us not to give into the fallenness of sinful people and lose the passion of the Gospel.

Instead, Paul states that it is the god of this world that veils the Gospel from the people of the world. Their problem is not our particular proclamation of His Word's truth, but it is their own rejection of it. During this season of Lent, let us not look to ourselves and what we can achieve—but look instead to Christ and what He has already done. The light of the Gospel has pierced the veil that covered our hearts and we now bask in the great light that has come. As Augustine writes about this passage, "This is the knowledge of His glory whereby we know that He is the light which illumines our darkness." We know He is the light; let us be bold to proclaim it.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father, I pray that I always keep the promise of Your Word's truth pure and true. Help me to avoid the temptation to present falsehood by trying to please the world around us. As Your Son has pierced the veil of darkness before me, may He also use me to proclaim the truth and bring the light of the Gospel to this darkened world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

March 23, 2024 | Saturday of the Fifth Week in Lent

Gregory the Illuminator, Missionary Bishop of Armenia, c. 332

Exodus 10:21—11:8; 2 Corinthians 4:13–18; Mark 10:46–52; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{10:48} And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart. Get up; he is calling you.”

– Mark 10:48–49 ESV

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I remember the day I was made to appreciate what blindness is. It was in my second year of seminary, and we were assigned to a nursing home to learn the skills of ministering to the elderly. The nurses really took training the seminarians seriously. During our initial encounter with them, we were instructed to select the wheel chair we’d be sitting in for the next four hours. After settling in to the uncomfortable chairs, we were instructed to select our glasses. Some got glasses smeared with Vaseline. I got the pair spray painted black. There was a reason they called this training “pastoral contextual education.”

Wow! A blind man was healed! All the Gospel writers want us to know that Jesus healed the blind (and many other healings). They *mention* Jesus’ healing the blind many times, but we only have a few accounts that tell us details. In today’s reading, we get details about poor old Bart. Telling the details of healings has a point. It’s not just *historical* data. With Bart, I think the point has something to do with the incredible risk he takes; the incredible leap he makes is shouting above the crowd. He shouts a dangerous truth. He addresses Jesus as the Son of David! Bart identifies Jesus, publicly, as royalty (a threat to kings), and the anticipated messiah (a challenge to religious leaders). In other words, Bart can see—even though he’s blind. This is probably the point all the Gospel writers are making when they give us details about the healing of the blind. Usually, there are sighted people around that suffer from spiritual blindness. You can even hear in this encounter the residual blindness of Jesus’ disciples. Bart takes that big risk by calling Him Son of David! Their response? “Be quiet old man!”

Since sitting in the wheel chair 38 years ago, I’ve ministered to many physically blind people. Indeed, I’ve always been struck by how well they “see” with their souls. Lent is a great time for us to take stock of what our faith, and our faith walk, does for us. It makes us see. The most powerful verse in the story about Bart is one that Jesus said many times. “Your faith has made you well!”

Strange: He didn’t say “God made you well” or “I made you well” but indicated that it was Bart’s faith. I think Jesus was pointing to Bart’s (and our) actions generated by his faith.

Bart shouted. Bart took off his cloak. Bart pushed his way through the crowd. Bart asked to see! Most of us aren’t physically blind, but we sure do risk spiritual blindness if we don’t put our faith into action. My prescription for that is always the same—and I hope you are following it, even by reading this devotion—read Scripture daily! Have a daily prayer life! Connect with the believers at least once a week, but preferably two or three times! It’s the only way I know to remain spiritually sighted.

Prayer: Let us pray. We thank You Lord Jesus, for bringing light into the darkness of our lives. Help us to constantly turn from the darkness of our pride; to the light of Your Word, prayer, and Your people. Help us to always be Your spiritually sighted people. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.



HOLY WEEK

Most gracious Father, You know the deepest needs and desires of our hearts.

It is our desire to walk with Jesus in faithfulness, and yet when life gets rough, we often fail.

Help us to run this race of faith with perseverance, clinging to Your strength rather than relying on our own.

This week, may we refrain from all the busyness and slow down so we can hear Your voice amidst the clatter that is all around us.

Help us to dwell in silence so that it is only Your Word we hear.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.



March 24, 2024 | Sunday of the Passion

Óscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, Martyr, 1980

Zechariah 9:9–12; 1 Timothy 6:12–16; Luke 19:41–48; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{9:9} Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

– Zechariah 9:9 ESV

^{19:41} And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side ⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

– Luke 19:41–44 ESV



A former member of a congregation I once served called me recently for a word of advice and encouragement. He was on his way to meet a friend with whom he has been sharing his faith. He has been telling his friend about Jesus, and about who we are and what we as Christians believe. Why is he doing this?

In our first reading Zechariah prophesied that one day God’s righteous and humble Messiah will come and save His people. He will come riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey, and this will be a day of great celebration and rejoicing.

That prophesy is fulfilled in our Gospel reading. Jesus is riding toward Jerusalem on a young donkey and is accompanied by a large crowd of His disciples. As He draws near the city, in the midst of the cheering and rejoicing crowd, Jesus begins to cry.

Why is He weeping? Jesus weeps over Jerusalem’s failure to see He is the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus weeps because they do not recognize and receive their Savior. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem’s impending destruction. Jesus weeps over the lost and sinful state of humanity. Jesus weeps because, by the end of this holiest of weeks, He will be called upon to suffer horribly and give His life on a cross for the sins of the world.

Do you know Jesus still weeps? Jesus still weeps for those who have not heard the Gospel. Jesus still weeps for those who refuse His gift of salvation from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus still weeps for those who don’t know Him and His gifts of faith, hope, and love. But Jesus does more than weep. He calls you and me to reach out to those for whom He weeps.

So, yes, on Palm Sunday we do celebrate the salvation we have received from God because Jesus faithfully entered Jerusalem, was betrayed, and died that we might live. But we also weep for the lost and hear God’s

call for us to do more than weep. We are to pray for our family, friends, and others who are not Christians. And we are to be Jesus' disciples, introducing others to Jesus and inviting them to receive God's gift of saving faith.

So, why is my friend intentionally telling others about Jesus? Because he is weeping for the lost and answering Christ's call to do something about it. How about you?

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, we rejoice with fellow disciples in celebrating Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. May we like Jesus weep for Jerusalem and all who are lost. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, use us to reach the lost with your saving Gospel. We ask in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

March 25, 2024 | Monday in Holy Week

THE ANNUNCIATION OF OUR LORD TO THE VIRGIN MARY

Isaiah 7:10–14; Hebrews 10:4–10; Luke 1:26–38; Psalms 40:1–11 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{1:26} In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

– Luke 1:26–38 ESV



Three months ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus, the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary. Or if you prefer, exactly nine months from today (March 25), we shall again celebrate the birth of Immanuel, God-with-us. Today, while being Monday of Holy Week, is also the Annunciation of Our Lord to the Virgin Mary. Our texts declare that He shall be called Immanuel, God-with-us. Gabriel also proclaims to Mary that He shall be given the name Jesus, that is, "God-saves." If Christmas is about the good news that God is with us—born as we are born, taking on our lot and our flesh, entering into our history, our lives and our story—this Holy Week shall culminate in the fullness of His name given by the angel Gabriel: God saves. Accompaniment and salvation, Lord and Savior.

While it is important that we seek to grasp the accompaniment of Jesus in our lives as He teaches, proclaims the kingdom, heals the sick, makes whole, and calls us to follow—so much so that those who follow Him declare Him as Lord—Jesus also is Savior. This journey through Holy Week has us gaze upon this man who is God, this God who is man, crucified and raised up for us and for our salvation. God with us and for us.

As I read through Paul's letters to the churches, I notice how often Paul refers to Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior. I think it important to pause, embrace, and confess both together. I suppose one might see Him as a 'lord' and not a 'savior', in the same way one might see Him as a 'savior' and not necessarily a 'lord'. What does that mean for us in our discipleship? That not only will He enter into our suffering and death, and accompany us to the grave, but also defeat, by His own sacrifice and death, the very sin, death, and the power of the evil one to which we are in bondage. Our texts for today bring Christmas and Good Friday together as we begin our Holy Week journey. We follow Him on our way to the celebration of the new life God would bear in us. This is one of the reasons Mary is the exemplar of discipleship as well as *Theotokos*, or mother of God: "Let it be unto me according to thy word."

As this week we call holy unfolds, let us ponder. Will I let this Savior of the world, this Savior of me, also truly be my Lord? Will I let this Lord of my life, who bids me follow and take up my cross, and gives me the template of the godly life, also be my Savior and the Savior of the world?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, abide with me through the darkness and when the shadows lengthen. Accompany me on this difficult journey as I grasp that I too am the cause of You being lifted up upon the cross. Then speak to me and reassure me, lest I flee, that You are laying down Your life for me, that I may find forgiveness and new life in You, my Savior and my friend; for it is through You, my Lord and Savior, that I pray. Amen.

March 26, 2024 | Tuesday in Holy Week

Lamentations 1:17–22; 2 Corinthians 1:8–22; Mark 11:27–33; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{11:27} And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, ²⁸ and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?”²⁹ Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ³⁰ Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.” ³¹ And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ³² But shall we say, ‘From man?’—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. ³³ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

– Mark 11:27–33 ESV

By what authority are you doing these things?

In today’s Gospel reading, the first century religious leaders have had enough of Jesus’ teachings and activities. Jesus is making incredible claims, claims they can’t accept, and they demand to know: *by what authority are you doing these things?*

It is an appropriate question, and it is a question that I believe is also asked of us. We today as the Church are involved in teachings and activities that many of the modern day finds impossible to accept. You have to admit, we make incredible, mind-boggling claims, claims that many in our day find unimaginable. Let me list a few:

- We claim that our sins are forgiven.
- We claim that broken and hurting people, even scoundrels like us, can be made new.
- We claim not only that there is a God (a claim many in our day find unacceptable) but that this God is active in our lives and our world.
- We claim that a whole new kingdom, a kingdom of grace and forgiveness and mercy and goodness, is breaking into this world.
- We claim that death is not the final reality, but rather life in God.

We make audacious claims. The question has to be asked: by what authority do we do this? If we make these claims on our own authority, we are way out of our league.

But we *have* an answer, and the answer is that it is not by our own authority. We make and do these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus, crucified yet risen. Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus, the Savior of this world. We preach and teach and live and act solely in His authority. And He will not let us down!

The incredible fact on which we stand is that Jesus Christ is making all things new. That is His promise, and that is His authority!

Prayer: Holy Lord, lead us to proclaim You as Lord and Savior. Lead us to follow You and serve You in Your kingdom as it breaks into this world. In all that we do, let us stand on Your authority, for You are the Son of the Living God. Amen.

March 27, 2024 | Wednesday in Holy Week

Charles Henry Brent, Bishop of the Philippines and of Western New York, 1929

Lamentations 2:1–9; 2 Corinthians 1:23–2:11; Mark 12:1–11; Psalms 5 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{12:1} And he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country.² When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. ⁶ He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ⁷ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ ⁸ And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹ What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this Scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
¹¹ this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?”

– Mark 12:1–11 ESV

I have a member of my congregation who rents properties and manages others, and he has a lot of stories to tell when it comes to bad tenants. Some refuse to pay their rent for months, while others are habitually late. A few abuse the properties, while some won’t report when things need repaired. He’s even encountered those who have actually stolen appliances, and other items, while leaving in the dark of the night. Some tenants have a lot to be desired. And we see this in the parable of the wicked tenants.

On this Wednesday of Holy Week, as Jesus begins His walk to the cross, He tells a story about a vineyard that is rented out to some tenants. When the owner of the vineyard, God, wants to collect the rent from the tenants—the religious leaders—they don’t want to pay. When the owner sends his servants, the prophets, they are beaten and killed. Thinking that they would never harm his own son, the vineyard owner sends him to retrieve what is owed. But, believing that if they kill the son the vineyard would become theirs, the tenants decide on that course of action.

Christ is foreshadowing what is going to happen, and it will come true. The Son is going to be killed. He will be crucified on the cross—but His death will not be in vain. It will literally pay the price for the world’s sins, and save both Hebrews and Gentiles alike.

Jesus’ crucifixion does not rid the religious leaders of their perceived “false messiah.” Through the fuel of the Holy Spirit, the Lord’s death and resurrection will spread throughout the world for thousands of years, as people come to saving faith in Christ. Jesus has to die in order for humanity to live.

Prayer: Father, on this Wednesday of Holy Week, we know what is about to happen. Your only Son Jesus will be unfairly persecuted, suffer mightily, and will be crucified on the cross. While the darkness thinks that it wins, it is wrong! Christ will rise from the dead to save the world. In our sadness, let us find hope and joy. Because of God’s love for us, we will live forever. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

March 28, 2024 | Maundy Thursday

Lamentations 2:10–18; 1 Corinthians 10:14–17; 11:27–32; Mark 14:12–25; Psalms 27 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{14:12} And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, “Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?” ¹³ And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, ¹⁴ and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵ And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us.” ¹⁶ And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

¹⁷ And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. ¹⁸ And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” ¹⁹ They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, “Is it I?” ²⁰ He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. ²¹ For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” ²² And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” ²³ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. ²⁴ And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

– Mark 14:12–25 ESV



In today’s reading, Jesus says, “This is my blood of the covenant.”

The Lord’s Supper is a covenant, like a legal agreement, or even, the last will and testament of Jesus Christ.

You see, the bread and the wine hold a place equivalent to the piece of paper which is a person’s last will and testament. Just as the piece of paper really *is* the last will and testament of a person, be it your mom or dad, your grandma or grandpa, or your Great Aunt Mable. The bread and wine really *is* Christ’s last will and testament. They are not mere symbols, just as the piece of paper establishing a person’s last will and testament is not merely symbolic.

The piece of paper isn’t the entire inheritance, the inheritance is the estate and all its goods, the money, the property, the jewelry, and even Great Aunt Mable’s handmade ashtray collection. Yet, without the piece of paper, the inheritance wouldn’t be your inheritance. It wouldn’t exist, for you.

The same is true for the Lord’s Supper. The bread and the wine are the covenant. They are means by which we receive our inheritance because without bread and wine and the words, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,” there would be no body and blood, the means for which we are given the forgiveness of sin, eternal life and salvation, which are your inheritance in Christ.

This is the covenant.

When you next take and eat the Lord's Supper, be it today, on Maundy Thursday, or another occasion, take it knowing that this is your inheritance from Christ Himself. When you receive the body and blood of our Savior hear and believe these words, "It has been given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins."

Prayer: Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, You have blessed us with this amazing inheritance. Grant, that we who partake in this sacrament of Your body and blood may be blessed with Your gifts of forgiveness and eternal life and live forever with You in the kingdom of God. Amen.

March 29, 2024 | Good Friday

Hans Nielsen Hauge, *Renewer of the Church*, 1824; John Keble, *Priest*, 1866

Lamentations 3:1–9, 19–33; 1 Peter 1:10–20; John 13:36–38; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{13:36} Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” ³⁷ Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

– John 13:36–38 ESV



Earlier in this chapter from the Gospel of John, Peter reacts strongly to Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet. Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet,” and Jesus calmly replies, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Peter’s intentions were good but his understanding was greatly lacking. He wanted to do for Jesus what only Jesus could do for him. In today’s text, Peter continues to misunderstand. He offers to give his life for Jesus, but the irony of the conversation is that Jesus isn’t the one who needs to be saved.

Today is Good Friday, a day with a name that is confusing to many, especially those outside of the Church. They wonder, “How can Christians possibly call the death of an innocent man good?” Like Peter, they fail to understand what is at stake, and who is truly at risk in this unfolding drama.

As Christians, we call this day “good” because we see it in the context of both what has gone before and what is to come. Good Friday can only be understood from the perspective of our human predicament and the joy of Easter.

The Holy Scriptures teach us two things about our human predicament: that we are sinful and the wages of sin is death, and that, because of our sinful nature, we deserve to die. It sounds harsh but Scripture tells us it is true. And this is exactly why we preach Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Both the death and resurrection of Jesus are necessary in order for the events of Holy Week to be “Good News.”

“Good Friday” without Easter would not be Good News. Jesus would have died for the sins of the world 2000 years ago. Good for them—but not for us. Without the resurrection Christ wouldn’t be with us today. Christ would be just a memory of the past and not alive and present with us in the cleansing waters of baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He would be but a memory of things past, and if that were the case, this Friday would *not* be good.

Likewise, Easter without Good Friday would also not be Good News. Without the crucifixion, the empty tomb of Easter would be a victory for Jesus but not for us. Without His sacrifice on the cross we would still be left to die in our sinfulness.

This Friday is only good, and Easter is only joyful, when seen together as the fulfillment of God’s plan to save His people. We call this day good because our Savior Jesus did for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves. Out of love for us He lifted the weight of our sin from our shoulders and bore it on a cross. Today is Good Friday, a day to bow at the cross in wonder that God could love us so much. It is a day to observe with awe the price Jesus was willing to pay to free us from our sin. Today is a day to celebrate the coronation of a King.

Prayer: Precious Jesus, help us to be fully focused on You this day as we stare in wonder at Your great sacrifice. We may never understand why You love us so much, but we are ever thankful for the healing You have given us by Your wounds. Help us to live each day as a people who have been freed from their sin, and who look with anticipation to the day of resurrection. We pray this in the name of the One who was, who is and who is to come, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

March 30, 2024 | Holy Saturday

Lamentations 3:37–58; Hebrews 4:1–16; Romans 8:1–11; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 23 & 114 (PM)

^{130:1} Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;

² Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

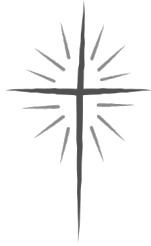
– Psalm 130 NIV2011

Recently, we had a two-hour delay of school because of dense fog. The youth love this since they get to sleep in. Bus drivers are waiting for the fog to lift for safety's sake. Parents are waiting for their children to be picked up for school so that their own daily routine may commence. Waiting for the next event to happen can be challenging—or it can be a Godsend.

The people of Israel were waiting on the LORD for the promised one to redeem Israel. The people of God were waiting on His perfect timing for the Christ to appear. All of Scripture was pointing to the one who would be Israel's hope. You might only imagine that Jesus' disciples were sorely grieved not only by the death of their beloved, but also feeling hopeless that the one they thought would redeem Israel had been laid in a tomb. God's people went about their worship on the Sabbath, repeating the promises of God. At that time, the women who were to embalm Jesus' body were waiting for the Sabbath to end so that they might care for Jesus' entombed body. Little did they know that God was redeeming His chosen ones through the crucifixion of His beloved Son. The fog of misunderstanding had not yet lifted.

On this Saturday of Holy Week, the Church waits. In worship, the sanctuary is prepared for Easter worship. The Scripture texts highlighting salvation history are read. We wait on the Lord's timing for His full redemption of all people coming through the fog of misunderstanding to the light of Christ's revelation: that He is the one for whom we have been waiting. He is the one to redeem Israel. Jesus Christ is the one to forgive sin and reconcile us to the Father. He is the one for whom we wait for our healing, forgiveness, and grace. Jesus Christ is our Godsend.

Prayer: Jesus, I wait for you. I wait for Your full redemption of this world, the full reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth to Your glory. During this time of waiting, make me useful for Your work, the redeeming of Israel. God of all time, hear my prayer for Jesus' sake. Amen.



The **SEASON** *of* **EASTER**

God of life and light, we rejoice this day of Your promise of being made new.

The stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty, and Jesus is alive!

*Grant that we may live every day as if it's the day of resurrection —
without fear, without regret, but with open hearts and joyful minds.*

He is risen! Sin and death cannot hold us captive!

We bless You and praise You, O Lord, for Your mighty works. We praise the holy name of Jesus. Amen.



March 31, 2024 | The Resurrection of Our Lord

John Donne, Priest, 1631

Exodus 12:1–14; John 1:1–18; Luke 24:13–35; Psalms 93 & 150 (AM); Psalms 136 & 117 (PM)

^{24:13} That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹ And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. ²² Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

²⁸ So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, ²⁹ but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. ³¹ And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” ³³ And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, ³⁴ saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

– Luke 24:13–35 ESV



Have you ever been unable to find something that was right in front of you? This happens with more important things than keys, billfolds, and cell phones. Sometimes it’s hard to see Jesus.

Cleopas and his companion surely heard the report that Christ had risen from death, as He said He would. Why was it so hard for them to see the Lord when He met them on the road? Unmet expectations often blind us to Christ’s presence in our lives. And unless we challenge our assumptions about Him, we remain blind.

We expect Christ to work through what Martin Luther called, “right-handed power,” which is the power of force and coercion. Parents committed to right-handed power raise their voice when their child refuses to listen. When that doesn’t work, they take something away, like a toy or phone. When that doesn’t work, some parents resort to spanking. But if the child still doesn’t comply, you reach a point where right-handed power spins out of control and fails to accomplish what you intended.

So, wise parents eventually embrace left-handed power, which is the power of love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice. Left-handed power means that *you* absorb the pain of your child's rebellion, because you realize that this is the only possible way to get your relationship back on track. Right-handed power doesn't work: which is why God's left-handed curve-ball to save the world is His Son on a cross.

"They were kept from recognizing Him," Luke notes; maybe because the risen Christ can only be "seen" by faith in the promises about Him in all the Scriptures. Jesus is the Passover Lamb of Exodus. He's the High Priest of Leviticus. He's the Wisdom of Proverbs, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and the preincarnate "Word of the Lord" who appears to multiple people throughout the Old Testament.

It's easy for Christians today to be blinded to Christ's presence by declining worship attendance, cultural opposition, and personal setbacks. When we can't "see" Jesus, it's almost always because we've trusted our feelings, circumstances, or performance to determine whether He's with us. But these are unreliable measures. When you can't see Jesus, look instead to the places where He's promised to be: in His Word and in the Sacraments. For all who are slow of heart to believe, He gives bread which is His body and wine which is His blood. His real presence sustains us in our joys and sorrows, in our witnessing and serving, until that day, coming soon, when He will return in glory.

Prayer: O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to His disciples in the breaking of bread, open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold Him in all His redeeming work. To Him who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

April 1, 2024 | Easter Monday

Amalie Wilhelmina Sieveking, *Renewer of Society*, 1859; Frederick Dennison Maurice, *Priest*, 1872

Exodus 12:14–27; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11; Mark 16:1–8; Psalms 97 & 145 (AM); Psalms 124 & 115 (PM)

^{15:1} Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. ³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

– 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 NRSV

On this Easter Monday, we reside in the reverberation of Christ's victory, a day fresh with the promise of our own resurrection in Him. In the light of this profound truth, we recall the faithful endeavors of Amalie Wilhelmina Sieveking and Frederick Dennison Maurice, not as heralds of their own deeds, but as examples of lives transformed by the Gospel. In what ways has the reality of the Resurrection deepened your understanding of *God's grace at work in your life*? How might this grace lead you to acts of kindness and mercy within your family, church, and community, reflecting the Gospel in everyday life?

Amalie Sieveking served out of the overflow of grace she received, her care for the poor and infirm was a natural outpouring of Christ's love *within her*. As we meditate on the freedom and salvation given to the Israelites (*I will pass over you*), let us contemplate how the grace we have received might move us to love and serve in our own communities, not as a burden, but as a joyous reflection of our gratitude to God (Exodus 12:14–27).

Like Sieveking, Frederick Dennison Maurice engaged the intellects and hearts of those around him, always pointing back to the foundational truth of the Resurrection as the catalyst for personal and communal renewal (*so we proclaim and so you have believed*; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11). How does the Resurrection embolden us to grow in wisdom and stature, that we might be beacons of His light in our spheres of influence?

The awe surrounding the *empty tomb* as recounted in the gospel (Mark 16:1–8) is not the end, but the beginning of our journey in the risen Christ. As it was for those first witnesses of the Resurrection, and as it was for Sieveking and Maurice, it is still true for us: it is He who works in us, enabling us to bear witness to His life in word and deed.

As the morning psalms of Easter Monday call us to recognize the *majesty of God's rule* and to recall His mighty works (Psalms 97 and 145), the evening psalms remind us of our help and hope in the *Lord, the maker of heaven and earth* (Psalms 124 and 115). Thanks be to God!

Prayer: O Risen Lord, whose triumph over the grave has liberated us from the bondage of sin and death, we give thanks for the faithful witness of Your servants, Amalie Wilhelmina Sieveking and Frederick Dennison Maurice. In the light of Your Resurrection, may our lives bear the fruit of your grace, displaying love, mercy, and compassion that flows from Your Gospel. Grant that our actions may always be a testament to Your redeeming work, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

April 2, 2024 | Easter Tuesday

James Lloyd Breck, Priest, 1876

Exodus 12:28–39; 1 Corinthians 15:12–28; Mark 16:9–20; Psalms 98 & 146 (AM); Psalms 66 & 116 (PM)

^{12:29} At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. ³⁰ Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. ³¹ Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, “Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD, as you said. ³² Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!” ³³ The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land, for they said, “We shall all be dead.” ³⁴ So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders. ³⁵ The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, ³⁶ and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians. ³⁷ The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. ³⁸ A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds. ³⁹ They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

– Exodus 12:29–39 NRSV

Our reading today is not an easy one, for who can be happy about the death of so many firstborn children, even if they are the oppressors? The people of Israel had grown to be a great number, and the Egyptians were afraid of them so they held them in bondage and treated them badly. In their misery, Israel cried out to the Lord and the Lord heard their cry, sending Moses to win their release. But Pharaoh was stubborn and, no matter what the Lord did through Moses, he refused to let Israel go. He refused until that night we remember as the Passover of the Lord.

“At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock” (Exodus 12:29).

It took something really terrible to finally make Pharaoh release the people of Israel from bondage and oppression, to set them free!

In the same way, it took something really terrible for us to be set free from our bondage to sin and death. We must never forget that our Easter celebration came at a terrible cost: the horrible suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. God Himself made this sacrifice for our sake, doing battle with sin and death that we may be set free! In rising again from death, Jesus won the battle! He has conquered our worst enemies, once and for all. We now are free to live as God’s faithful people, free to rejoice in our risen Lord Jesus who now lives with death behind Him. Therefore, nothing can prevent Him from keeping His promises to us. Jesus lives that we may have life and have it abundantly and eternally in and with Him. Christ is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Prayer: O God, through the paschal mystery You have healed the world. Continue to bless Your people with heavenly gifts, so that we may attain true liberty and enjoy the blessedness of heaven which we have begun to taste on earth. Through Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

April 3, 2024 | Easter Wednesday

Richard, Bishop of Chichester, 1253

Exodus 12:40–51; 1 Corinthians 15:29–41; Matthew 28:1–16; Psalms 99 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 9 & 118 (PM)

^{28:1} Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

– Matthew 28:1–16 ESV

Good news travels fast! We are quick to share news about a good movie at the movie theatre, or a new restaurant in town. When something in our life is worth sharing, we can’t help but pick up the phone, take a picture, and share with everyone about what we have experienced.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were told twice—once by the angel and once by Jesus himself—not to be afraid and to share the good news that Jesus had indeed risen, just as He had foretold. Imagine if this were in the modern day. We wouldn’t hesitate to snap, tweet, or post on Facebook about what we saw and heard—that Jesus was risen indeed. Hallelujah!

This exciting news traveled fast, and it should be the same today. When the good news of Jesus Christ is indeed so good, how can we hold back? How can we be afraid to share this news at all? I know that not all of us are teachers and preachers—we’ve all been called for different times and with different abilities. However, the good news of the risen Savior is hard to keep to ourselves, much more than that great new movie or the good food at the restaurant down the street. Maybe you are called to share this good news around your breakfast table, or with someone you encounter on a daily basis—not in a big, bold way, but in a simple way, with love. The fact of the matter is that Jesus is risen today for you, and this good news is for everyone to hear.

Prayer: Lord, may the joy of the risen Savior inspire us to share His good news with love, simplicity and boldness. Help us spread the message that Jesus is risen for all. In Jesus name, Amen.

April 4, 2024 | Easter Thursday

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Renewer of Society*, 1968; Benedict the African, *Friar*, 1589

Exodus 13:3–10; 1 Corinthians 15:41–50; Matthew 28:16–20; Psalms 47 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 68 & 113 (PM)

^{28:16} Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

– Matthew 28:16–20 ESV



The disciples seem to be struggling with seeing Jesus. In the middle of doubt, Jesus appears to them with empowerment and a command. The empowerment comes from His authority. He says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus can enable the disciples and us to fulfill his commands. “He can also powerfully effect and do everything He says and promises” (FD SC VII 43). He commands us to make disciples because of His power and authority.

But how is it done? He shares with us the basics: Baptism and the teaching He has given, which is for all people. We are commissioned as disciples to go and make disciples of all nations through Baptism and teaching. He will be with us, as He promises. And the work is His as he brings people to faith through baptizing and teaching.

This commission is not a suggestion; it is a command. As our Savior, Jesus has the right to call us to work to reach a lost world with the Gospel. People need to hear about the love of God and the salvation offered through Christ. “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9 ESV). God empowers what He asks of you as you help fulfill God’s great plan, as shown throughout the Old Testament.

So, what is your role in this? As a church, we baptize people into the faith, and in the baptismal promises we make as a people of God, we pledge to support and pray for the newly baptized with a hearty “We do.” This is where it starts for you.

Are these empty words, or are they filled with the exciting potential that you will support? What might it mean for you to take this seriously? During this Lenten journey and the day, we remember we are to are to wash feet and serve, what is your service going to be? The good news is that you will be empowered to do what Jesus leads you in.

Prayer: *Grant, O merciful God, that as Thy holy Apostle St. James, leaving his father and all that he had, without delay, was obedient to the call of Thy son Jesus Christ, and followed Him, and at last cheerfully laid down his life for His gospel's sake, so I, forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, may be evermore ready to follow Thy holy commandments, and, whenever Thy providence shall make it my duty, may readily and cheerfully embrace death, though armed with his utmost terror, rather than forsake or deny Thee. Let me rejoice in every happy occasion of testifying the sincerity of my love, by suffering for Thy truth, and let the firm belief of those glorious eternal rewards which Thou hast prepared for them who lay down their lives for Thy sake, support me under all the cruelties of the most merciless persecutors. Grant this, O blessed Lord, who didst die for me, and didst rise again, and now sittest at the right hand of the Father, to intercede for me, and all Thy faithful disciples. Amen. — Liturgy of St. James.*

April 5, 2024 | Easter Friday

Exodus 13:1–2, 11–16; 1 Corinthians 15:51–58; Luke 24:1–12; Psalms 96 & 148 (AM); Psalms 49 & 138 (PM)

^{24:1} But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” ⁸ And they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹ but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

– Luke 24:1–12 ESV



What started out as an obligation to finish a task they only had time to start, the women plodded to the tomb on that first Easter morning to anoint the dead body of Jesus with spices in order to prevent the decomposition of His body from creating a stench. While they had prepared their spices and were willing to tend to His grief-filled work, they were not prepared for an open tomb, the vision of angels, or their proclamation. They were overwhelmed by the question, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” The direction the angels gave them was to remember His words. Remember how He described His suffering, death and the promise of His resurrection. What He said was going to happen, did! He has risen!

Not only did they remember His words, but they dropped everything and returned to the disciples, still gathered together in fear, and reported everything they had experienced. The disciples heard the report of the women but dismissed it. “These words seem to them to be an idle tale” that they refused to believe.

Perhaps their assessment of what the women reported was the result of their own verdict on Jesus’ words when He informed them multiple times about what He would face in His suffering, death and resurrection. They refused to give His words a place in their heart. His words were too difficult to hear and so emotionally troubling that perhaps they thought of His words as an “idle tale.”

Some define the term “idle tale” as the ranting of a person suffering from delirium. Others define it as a story without purpose or effect, pointless. A story for which it is impossible to take action. Yet there was one among them who was prompted to take action. Perhaps Peter along with the women remembered Jesus’ words and that sent him running to the tomb in order to determine the accuracy of the report of the women. Peter saw the open tomb, looked in, noticed the folded grave clothes and went home “marveling” at what had happened, to Jesus and to the women.

Is Easter an “idle tale” for us, a story without purpose or effect, a story for which it is impossible to take action? When we get to the book of Acts, we see the powerful transformation Easter had on the lives of each of the disciples. What Jesus accomplished for us in His suffering, death, and resurrection fills us with power, purpose and through the work of the Holy Spirit prepares us for proclaiming the Gospel. The

resurrection of Jesus changes everything in heaven and on earth. May it have the same impact on our lives and everyone who hears the proclamation of this life-giving Gospel. It was not, and never will be, an “idle tale.”

Prayer: *Almighty God, who through the death of Thy Son hast destroyed sin and death, and through His resurrection hast restored innocence and eternal life that we, being delivered from the power of the devil, may live in Thy kingdom. Grant that we may believe this with our whole heart and steadfast in this faith, ever praise and thank Thee, through Thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Grant dear Lord that the blessed Day of Thy holy advent may come soon, so that we may be redeemed from this bad, wicked world and our bodies redeemed from all physical and spiritual misery and made like unto Thy glorious body, dear Lord Jesus Christ, that we may at last come to our glorious redemption. Amen. – Luther’s Easter Prayer of 1533*

April 6, 2024 | Easter Saturday

Albrecht Dürer, Painter, 1528; Lucas Cranach the Elder, Painter, 1553; Matthäus Grünewald, Painter, 1528; Michelangelo Buonarroti, Artist, 1564

Exodus 13:17—14:4; 2 Corinthians 4:16—5:10; Mark 12:18—27; Psalms 92 & 149 (AM); Psalms 23 & 114 (PM)

^{13:17} When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.”¹⁸ But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.”²⁰ And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.²¹ And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.^{14:1} Then the LORD said to Moses,² “Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea.³ For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’⁴ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.” And they did so.

– Exodus 13:17—14:4 ESV



Dear friends, greetings in the name of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. The passage we just read, taken from the 13th and 14th chapters of the book of Exodus, is an appropriate one for this Easter season. It comes as part of the much larger story of how God led the nation of Israel out of captivity in Egypt and how, faithful to His promise, would eventually lead them into the Promised Land where they would become a great nation.

It’s a story of hope. It’s a story of deliverance. It’s a story of how the hopes of the people for being delivered from their slavery were fulfilled by the power and the presence of God. Before that was to happen, however, there were certain obstacles in the way, things that had to be dealt with before that deliverance, promised by God, would be fulfilled.

A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night were the outward and visible signs of God’s faithfulness. The people of Israel needed to know where in the desert they were to go, and that in their going whether they were on the right course. God gave them those signs, led them on their way, and, in so doing, assured them that they were not alone.

The not so visible signs and the inward assurance they would ultimately need came not so much from the things they could see, but from the things that were yet to be seen in their future. The nation was delivered. Pharaoh and his army were destroyed. And a land, promised by God, was given to them, as was a hope and assurance for their future.

And so, what does that mean for us, as we look back on their story and as we consider our own stories? What does that mean for you, as you face the challenges of your life and the uncertainties of what lies ahead in the future?

The story of Easter is the story of God's deliverance for all of us from the things in this life that would bring us down. Our sin, our failings, the shortcomings of our lives that stand in the way of our relationship with God. They have all been destroyed in Jesus. They have all been overcome in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Our deliverance has happened. Our freedom from our greatest enemy has been given to us in the person and the work of Christ.

In similar ways, even though we might not be able to see how and where it is happening, God is present with us, as He was with the nation of Israel, and He is leading us, as He did with them, through the days and the nights of the things we face. Not by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, but by the guiding Word we have in the Bible and in the living Word offered to us in Jesus. Sometimes outwardly visible, as it was with them, there will be times when we can clearly see how and where God is at work. Often times, however, we will only be able to see as we place our faith in Christ and trust in His promises to us.

Regardless of whether they are seen by us or not, the promises of God are real—and His promises to you have been, and are being, fulfilled. And someday soon, for all of us, we will find ourselves in the Promised Land, eternally with God and each other forever.

Prayer: Gracious God, on this side of the Easter event, we thank You for the work You have accomplished for us in Jesus and for the assurance that Your promises to us are being fulfilled. Help us, each day, as we find ourselves in the wilderness of this life, not always sure where we should go and how we should live, to be at peace with Your continuing presence and with the resurrection promise that a land eternally with You is in our future. In Jesus' name, amen.

April 7, 2024 | Second Sunday of Easter

Exodus 14:5–22; 1 John 1:1–7; John 14:1–7; Psalms 93 & 150 (AM); Psalms 136 & 117 (PM)

^{14:13} And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

– Exodus 14:13–14 ESV

^{14:1} “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

– John 14:1–7 ESV



The Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt is the quintessential story for our Jewish brothers and sisters. It is also a precious story for Christians. After King Pharaoh of Egypt reluctantly let Moses’ people go free, they entered the wilderness to head toward the Promised Land and came upon the barrier of the Red Sea. It was a watery dead end.

God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he thought to himself, “What have I done in freeing the slaves?” *Or, how dumb was I to let free labor just walk out of town?* So, he gathered all his troops, chariots, and weapons and went after them. Pharaoh’s army caught up to the Israelites at the edge of the Red Sea. Understandably, Israel was terrified, even to the point of questioning the Lord, “What have you done to us? We would have been better off slaves than dead people.” Moses tried to calm their hearts by reassuring them that God is a God who makes a way where there seems to be no way. “Fear not,” he urged them, “stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

We know how the story continues. With God’s mighty power, Moses struck the water of the Red Sea, which parted into two columns. The Israelites walked through to safety on dry ground.

Dry ground! Think of it. The ground wasn’t muddy. There were no puddles to navigate. It was absolutely dry. Not only did God make a way for Israel, but he made it so there was no mistake about who’s in control of the universe.

Moses’ words are for us when we feel stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place. The Lord will fight for you, and you only have to be silent. Easier said than done, right? We aren’t great at silence. We’re talkers who like to solve our own problems. We aren’t great at letting God be God, but He promises us that He will fight for us because he loves us.

Fast forward to Jesus teaching His disciples about what God can do. “Do not be troubled, believe in God and believe in me ... I will go and prepare a place for you,” He promises. He tells the twelve that they know the way, to which Thomas, the doubter, says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus assures them that if they know Him, then they know the Father, and they also know the One who is “The way, the truth, and the life.”

Friends, the Lord in His mercy goes before us in this life. Whether it’s to cross a sea to safety, or through a trial we aren’t sure we can bear. He is with us always and makes a way when it seems like there is no way. The ultimate way with Christ is salvation—life with Him, now and forever. These words bring us comfort when we feel like we are at a dead end, a roadblock, or a giant hurdle put in our path. We don’t do this alone. We *can’t*. Instead, we lean on Jesus.

Trust Him. He will fight for you. He will prepare a place for you.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, we follow you, but we can only come at your bidding. No one can make the ascent without you, for you are our way, our truth, our life, our strength, our confidence, our reward. Be the way that receives us, the truth that strengthens us, the life that invigorates us. Amen.* – St. Ambrose of Milan³

³ Thomas C. Oden and Cindy Crosby, eds., *Ancient Christian Devotional: A Year of Weekly Readings: Lectionary Cycle A* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 124.

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