



“Journey to Easter”

A Lenten Devotional by

Rev. Dr. Don Wagner

with

Photographs by

Fr. Jerry Schweitzer

All proceeds from the gifts made for this devotional will be evenly distributed between:

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Your generosity of spirit in this Lenten season transforms the lives of those you meet—and countless more whose faces you will never know—simply by walking the way of Jesus.

Bless you, one and all.

Fr. Jerry Schweitzer & Rev. Dr. Don Wagner

~ Preface ~

This project began innocently enough, really it did. I emailed my good friend, colleague in ministry and co-conspirator in previous devotionals, Fr. Jerry Schweitzer, and inquired if he might be interested in taking another run at a Lenten devotional.

I could see his wry smile as he emailed me back, “The Spirit is in this,” he said, “I was just preparing to email you the same thing.” Indeed, the Spirit is in this.

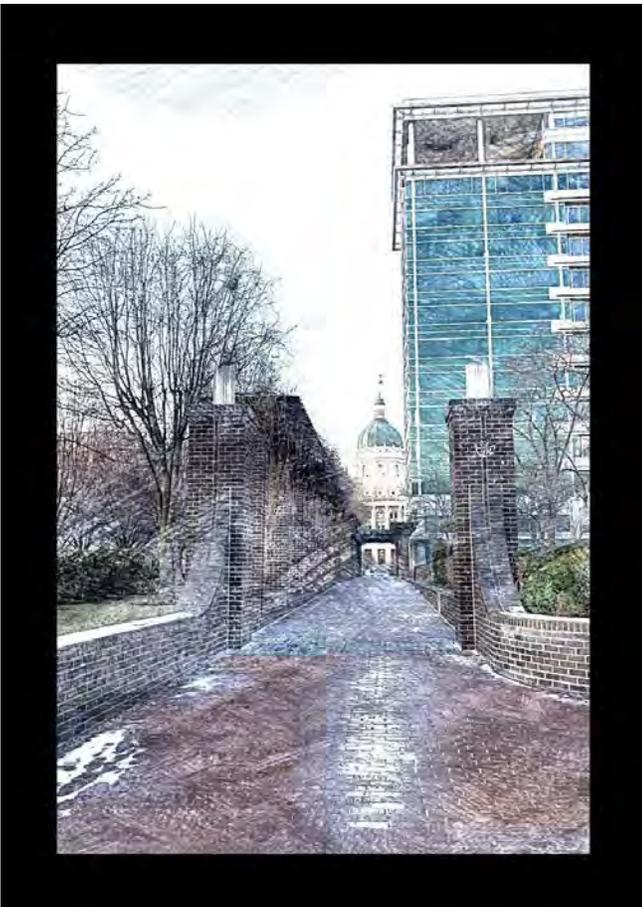
Soon after, we conversed by telephone, exchanging ideas and discussing a possible process. In that conversation, Fr. Jerry broached the idea of using this moment in time to consider the impact of Jesus on those He meets along the way of His ministry, as it is recorded in the Gospel according to John. Fr. Jerry has done some work in this area and suggested that there is ample material to go the distance. Indeed, the Spirit is in this.

I shared with Fr. Jerry the mulling of my soul on the concept of the Jesus, Himself, being Easter. It has long troubled me that we relegate Easter to a day, a moment in time, an event to be celebrated then left in the rearview mirror of our liturgies. If Easter is not Jesus, then what is it? If Jesus is not Easter, then who is He?

We talked, we pondered, we prayed, then this Lenten devotional, *Journey to Easter*, came to life, a collaboration of two servants who happened to listen to one Spirit. Indeed.

One very personal observation: Please take the time to study each of Fr. Jerry’s pictures. His eye for the particular in the midst of a larger subject, his capacity to sense the sacred in the

ordinary, and his heart for the holy in the midst of God’s creation—is unlike any other. Receive the gift, each gift, Fr. Jerry shares with us all throughout this Lenten journey—and don’t forget to subscribe to his daily devotionals throughout the rest of the year.



To set the stage for the study of John during Lent, the first four days of the Lenten journey focus on the Ash Wednesday Psalm, Psalm 51, and our collective and personal need to constantly and fully repent, which opens us to new Life, Easter, in Jesus.

Sit back, take in, ponder, receive the Spirit, and live into the faith God has in you.

The prayer Father Jerry and I have for you is that this *Journey to Easter* will be the gift, challenge and refuge you need in this Lenten Season. Blessings!

Pastor Don

~ INTRODUCTION ~

Look, I am sending my messenger before you.

He will prepare your way, a voice shouting in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”

Isaiah 40.3

The Word became flesh and made his home among us.

We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son,

Full of grace and truth.

John 1.14

What we cannot or are unwilling to do for ourselves, God finally does for us. Easter.

Isaiah calls humanity to repentance and preparation, then God arrives to show humanity the Way, the Truth and the Life. In Jesus, the paths are made straight, the valleys are brought up and mountains made low. In Jesus, the marginalized are welcomed in and the comfortable are discomfited. In Jesus, the waters are set to work in the Spirit, washing away the stains of our wounds, brokenness and arrogance, all the while lifting up the good in all Creation and granting Hope to all who turn to Him in faith. In Jesus, faith becomes real—and faithfulness a way of being.

This Lenten Devotional is being offered in a time of tremendous difficulty, upheaval and fear. The Caesar’s of the world are risking the gift of the earth for the sake of their power. The Herod’s of the land are increasingly ruthless in the application of their will and authority. What is not claimed in taxes is fair game for overcharging. Those not dying from disease or virus are subjected to the worry of not being able to receive care at all. The shepherds in the pastures and the farmers in the field see little return for their efforts, while the corporations, politicians and big business muscle up their profits and sell stock dividends as the next great opiate of the masses.

The mountains of unshared wealth are re-exerting their height and the valleys are, again, becoming the residence for the poor. Death is casting a long shadow over the lands as the earth warms, the storms increase in strength and the seas and landfills fill with waste.

Maybe now, as never before, humanity is in need of Easter. Yet, the question remains, do we even know it? Jesus, Jesus is God’s answer.

The Journey to Easter is the journey to Jesus.



ASH WEDNESDAY

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love! Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

Wash me completely clean of my guilt; purify me from my sin!

Because I know my wrongdoings, my sin is always right in front of me. I've sinned against you—you alone. Psalm 51.1-4a

Psalm 51 is King David's impassioned plea to God for mercy after being caught in his guilt of raping Bathsheba, then arranging to have her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. Poetic, true. Accurate, hardly—and God knows it. David did not offer this prayer of repentance until Nathan announced God's awareness and judgment and, even then, David hedged in

his plea, "I've sinned against you— you alone", conveniently overlooking the sins of both rape and having a hand in murder. The lives of Bathsheba, Uriah and David's soon-to-be-born son hung around his neck like an anchor and he knew it, but could not name it. The son, never named, died on the seventh day, the day before he would have been traditionally circumcised and named. We know him only for the sin of David, not the gift of God he was to be. David knew that, too.

The train of presumed anointed royal privilege at the expense of all others, including God, has left the station. Accountability before God includes responsibility for and to each other. Before reconciliation and hope can have traction, the ashes must have meaning.

Like David, we are confronted this day by our sin and our earthiness: Our sin, in that we make many poor choices which do, in fact, disrespect the Love and Trust of God in us; Our earthiness, in that we tend only to see what we want to see and admit only what we want others to know, conveniently leaving unnamed the others whose futures we harm. The lives of those around us matter to God. The child born to Bathsheba, along with the lives of Uriah and Bathsheba all know the difference. So does God. Do we?

Prayer: Forgive me, Lord God, all that I am willing to admit, along with everything and everyone You know I did not speak or admit. This day, in naming it all, may I prepare for the Easter You bring. Grant us all mercy, in the name of Jesus. Amen.



THURSDAY, LENT DAY 2

Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin, from the moment my mother conceived me.

And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places; you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.

Psalm 51.5-6

Is our penchant for making poor choices the fault of the egg in the womb? Or the seed in its arriving? Is the sin of the children forever put upon the parents in the moment of conception? Or linked to Adam and Eve for their lack of self-control in the garden?

If, as King David declares, God wants truth in the most hidden of places that we might learn wisdom

in the most secret of space, then does not such truth begin in *not* heaping blame on our ancestors for the outcome of our behaviors? Can wisdom find a fertile home in the casting of dispersions on others to avoid accepting the fullness of our own recklessness, both against God and each other?

Is the forgiveness of God so limited that God cannot hear our most heartfelt cry for mercy in full acknowledgment of our weaknesses and brokenness? Is the God who creates all beings not capable of discerning the difference between going through the motions of the liturgy just saying the words— or owning every decision?

God chose and anointed David to be king, not because he was without sin but, rather, because God saw in David—as God sees in you and me— the pregnant possibilities of faithfulness in the midst of a world of choices. Wisdom, God’s Wisdom, arrives in accepting that we are not God—and trusting our ashes and dust to the Mercy and Grace of the One who is Eternity, from Beginning to Never Ending.

The truth of which David speaks can only be named in recognition of our need for God’s Truth in our lives, which comes through humble contrition. Such is the way of Lent and the Journey towards Easter.

Prayer: Lord, inspire in me the kind of truth that kneels before Your Love in prayerful Hope, that I not spend the days I have in blaming others. Open me to the Joy which is promised to all who walk with You and trust Your Forgiveness. Amen.



FRIDAY, LENT DAY 3

*Hide your face from my sins; wipe away all my guilty deeds!
Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me.*

Psalm 51.9-10

Is the physician able to fully and accurately diagnose and treat the patient without ever seeing them?

Is the secret wish in each of us that the physician not ask of our habits? Not inquire of our indulgences? Not take into account our daily choices?

Is our hope that we be declared 'healthy' with the stroke of a pen on a chart? Or by a nod of the head and a wink of the eye? That all our past behaviors suddenly no longer exist and their impact on our living no longer have effect?

"Hide your face from my sins; wipe away all my guilty deeds!", prays King David. Is the gaze of the Great Physician so without Compassion that we prefer not to be seen, just announced as 'well'? Is our faith in the Creator of Heaven and Earth so skewed by fear that we dare not reveal the shattered pieces of our living, thus foregoing any thought of being a part of being made whole once again?

Truly, is there anything in our daily lives that is not already in the sight of God? And, is not this God the God of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Aaron, Ruth, Naomi and Esther who all, one by one, came to understand that there is nothing in our lives which is outside of the Love, Forgiveness and Healing of God? The wholeness and newness for which King David strives, the Easter in

each of our lives for which we pray arrives, not by God turning a blind eye to our being, but in praying God sees us, all of us, from top to bottom and there has Mercy, for in such Divine Notice the one cleansed leper returns, the Samaritan woman at the well drinks deeply and Zacchaeus comes down out of the tree. What is shattered is made whole and what is irredeemable is restored.

Prayer: Holy One, see me, all of me, through and through. Put your Spirit within me that I not die in fear, but live with Vitality and Peace each day. Amen.



SATURDAY, LENT DAY 4

Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise.

You don't want sacrifices.

If I gave an entirely burned offering, you wouldn't be pleased.

A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.

You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.

Psalm 51.15-17

Make the check out to the church for as much as you can afford, please. Build the edifice needed for ministry and dedicate it in memory of someone you love or admire, please. Spend all of your time mopping the bathroom floors, cooking for funeral luncheons or directing the Christmas pageant, please.

Do it all, please, if it appeases your guilty conscience and allows you a sense of well-being yet, know this, there is nothing God desires of you, of King David or of me, more than our heart poured out in the humility of honesty before God's Throne. If you learn no other lesson in the classroom of daily experience in your relationship with God, learn this: Before you speak it, God already knows it. Still, to move beyond the stain of petulance and self-righteousness before God, one is required to say it, own it and, most importantly, to earnestly repent of it . . . whatever 'it' may be—even if you are the king.

David finally, awfully, came to the realization that he had to be honest with himself and with God before he would ever arrive at a place of healing or reconciliation. God does not want our spirits broken, God desires us wholly open to the Truth which abides in our soul, the Divinity brooding in wait for humanity's honest assessment of self and action—and, yes, sometimes that is brutally hard, so egregious our behaviors, yet patiently God waits until we pour it all out. Therein is our Hope.

When the wound is exposed, the hurt named, the dirt washed out, what remains is able to be Healed and the journey to Easter can begin. The Life which flows from Creator to created was never meant to be broken and crushed, only to be valued and loved so much that Truth would always win.

Prayer: Loving Teacher, open to us the lessons of Life which deepen our faith and make us ready to walk with You. Amen.



FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT



What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light. The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. The light was in the world, and the world came into being through the light, but the world didn't recognize the light. The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him. But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children, born not from blood, nor from human desire or passion, but born from God.

Selected verses, John 1.3b-13

The Gospel according to John begins with a birthing narrative unlike any other. The Gospel, the Good News, begins with the telling of a new Creation Story, lodging the appearance of Jesus as that of Creator stepping into creation, of Light shining into a world not seeing Him, as the Homeowner by whose children He is not readily welcomed. Still, the Word becomes flesh, the Light shines and the Glory is like that of a Parent's only Son, full of grace and truth. He cannot be hidden away, even if He wanted to, neither will He be ignored.

John the Baptist is called to a very particular ministry. It is observed of John the Baptist that, *He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light. The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world.* John the Baptist observed of Jesus, *This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'* John 1.7 and 15

The Light of Easter shines precisely because God will not be relegated to books, the Temple, Synagogues, churches, liturgies or law. The Light of Easter shines from the beginning of time until time never ends. Do not cease looking for the Light, for His greatest Joy is in us opening our eyes to see Easter in Him.

Prayer: On this Journey to Easter, open my eyes to see Your Light of Life in the world. Amen.

MONDAY, LENT DAY 5

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots.

*The Lord's spirit will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
A spirit of planning and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.* Isaiah 11.1-2

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son." John 1.29-34



The relationship of John and Jesus, between John and Jesus, could have been complicated. Though we are aware of the kinship between them because of Mary and Elizabeth, still the Biblical narrative is largely silent about how well they knew

each other growing up. What is clear is that each has a particular call, a focused mission into which they are living and, in this Gospel, it is John who sets the parameters for our understanding what that is, "He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me." John says later, "I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son." This naming is the parenthetical emphasis to those who were following John: John is not the Son, the Savior, for whom they are waiting. They should turn to Jesus, the One who is before him.

John understood, the blood lineage he shared with Jesus was secondary to the Authority of Jesus over him in the Spirit. Before John ever was, Jesus already is. The Son comes into the world, sent to baptize with the Holy Spirit, sign and seal of God's imminent Presence, a new Beginning that was John's mission to announce. Now the stump of Jesse is poised to grow, the waters of Baptism nurturing the New Life God has forever intended. Easter is not far away, prepare your heart.

Prayer: God of Easter's arrival, make us ready to receive Jesus, to believe Jesus and, like John, to bow before the One who is before us always. Amen.

TUESDAY, LENT DAY 6

The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus walking along he said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus.

John 1.35-37

John the Baptist enters the delivery room of the world and, without fanfare, speaks the words of midwifery to those around him, 'He is arrived! God's Son is here!' Immediately those who had been following John turned from him to see the newly Baptized Jesus. With the waters of God's calling still fresh upon his feet and ankles John spoke what Heaven already knew and declared. The One of God's own birthing is now ready to walk the earth, as the Spirit initiates a new Divine Beginning.

In the gift of Jesus stepping into the waters of Baptism, then walking out into ministry, the Womb Waters of Creation touch the earth waters of Baptism and declare them Holy. Spirit permeates spirit, Love overshadows love, and Mercy transforms mercy. God's Will now be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

John's work before Jesus had not been in vain, yet it is Jesus who clarifies the purpose and meaning of such sacred ministry in John. *He who comes after me is really before me . . .*

The Journey to Easter is revealed in this scene as the Son of God lifts up the lowly and brings down those of high estate, as the drought of spirit finds refreshment in the Rains of Baptism, as the hungers of human meaning are met with the Food of Divine Ministry. The Journey to Easter is prepared for you and me by the only One who is able.

Have you met Him along the way? Stayed there with Him along the shores of Baptism? Sat with Him and listened? Walked with Him and learned?

Now is the time. This Lenten season is the place. Be washed in His Presence. Be transformed by the Spirit. Be readied in His Grace.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, at the sound of your Name turn me around to follow you. Holy God, I am not all that I pretend to be—and You know it. In Your Son, shape me to be the vessel of discipleship and blessing You intend me to be. Wash me, again and again, and make me clean. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, LENT DAY 7

*When the wine ran out, Jesus' mother said to him, "They don't have any wine."
Jesus replied, "Woman, what does that have to do with me? My time hasn't come yet."
His mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." John 2:3-5*

Some contend that Mary was Jesus' first disciple. Others posit that Mary was Jesus' first apostle. If a disciple is 'one who follows', and an apostle is 'one who is sent', then this first picture of Mary in the Gospel of John might suggest that she is neither apostle, nor disciple, but something more, something intimately more. She is the parent we long to be.



We have no Biblical canonical record of how Jesus grew up in Nazareth, the games He played, the school He attended, the hobbies He pursued. We have no idea if He listened to Joseph, but sought out Mary's permission when He didn't get His way—or listened to what Mom told Him, then did as He observed Joseph doing. We have no earthly idea if, when Jesus went fishing He used a net or just stuck His hand in the water and brought out a fish OR when He stood and watched a bird fly in the sky, if He offered His hand for it to land on. No, all we really know is that He stayed in the Temple when they went to Jerusalem and, then, when he went to a wedding His Mother simply said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Mary knew something about Jesus, believed something of Jesus, loved something in Jesus which no Story can convey. Mary possessed a Mother's Heart and Soul.

Mary saw in Him what the Angel Gabriel declared of her, *Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!* Luke 1:28.b She held in her heart all that shepherds spoke and magi murmured. She had traveled to Egypt with Him to avoid Herod's wrath—and returned to Nazareth that He might grow up immersed in His heritage and nurtured as a Tree on the shoreline. She saw in His eyes her own soul finding life and felt in His touch her life given meaning. More than any disciple who follows and above any apostle who is sent, Mary possessed God's greatest gift in Jesus, a Mother's Heart and Soul. Prayer: Lord God of Jesus and His mother, Mary, grant us each a measure of such belief on the Journey to Easter! Amen.

THURSDAY, LENT DAY 8

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night,
*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God,
for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.
Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born from above,
it's not possible to see God's kingdom."*

*Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the
mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?"* Luke 3.2b-4

Nicodemus arrives at night to speak with the Light of God. He acknowledges the Rabbi, the Teacher, but wrestles with being a student. He speaks of what he knows, yet cannot fathom that he knows so little. Heaven has come to earth and the impossible has become real. The teacher of Israel, Nicodemus, is a duck out of water and not sure what to do. Still, he stays, he listens, he ponders.

Nicodemus is given a hard time by many who study this story, his lack of understanding and stated objections stand as seeming proof of his unworthiness. Still, he stays, he listens, he ponders.

And to Nicodemus, Jesus becomes the Light. Jesus becomes the Rabbi. Jesus becomes the Teacher. For Nicodemus, Jesus never gives up, for nothing is impossible for God.



Being born again is about more than diving into the waters of Baptism, then saying that is all which is necessary. Being born again is about staying, listening, pondering. Being born again is about coming to Jesus in the first place, regardless the time of day. Being born again is about staying with Jesus when everyone has left. Being born again are the distant daffodils in the cemetery, the fog lifting from death and life being exposed.

Being born again is Nicodemus being there to take down the body of Jesus when the world crucifies Him and wrapping His body with myrrh and aloe, nearly seventy five pounds in all, that the world not win and all Hope be destroyed. Being born again is standing outside the tomb, seeing the rock in place then, later, seeing it rolled away in Triumph. Being born again is staying, listening and pondering . . .and, now, serving.

Nicodemus, among all those named in the Gospel of John, is among the first to be born again, and again, and again, and again. Are you?

Prayer: Lord God, help me to be more like Nicodemus standing before you on the Journey to Easter, sinner and questioner that I am, and stay with You to be born again, forever. Amen.

FRIDAY, LENT DAY 9

John, in answer to his disciples concerning Jesus and the crowds now going to Him, *You yourselves can testify that I said that I'm not the Christ but that I'm the one sent before him. The groom is the one who is getting married. The friend of the groom stands close by and, when he hears him, is overjoyed at the groom's voice. Therefore, my joy is now complete. He must increase and I must decrease. The one who comes from above is above all things. The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all things.* John 3.28-31

Change can be hard, hard to do, hard to understand, hard to believe. When, finally, we feel like we have come to some sort of positive place in life, things are looking up and we have made the move from being the one in need to the one with answers, as had John's disciples, changing the basis for that understanding can be really hard. What was black and white now has hues and texture. What was boxed in and manageable now is subject to question. When once we felt comfortable and important in our role, now we are forced to step back and reevaluate. Doubt creeps in as to whether we have made some sort of mistake in our initial judgment and trust, and anger seeps in that we may have been made the fool. 'John, what do we make of this Jesus?' 'Are we just wasting our time with you?'

The outsiders were having an effect on the solidarity of his ministry among the people and with his disciples— and John had to respond. The Light had to shine.

Heaven is as Heaven and earth is as earth. Now Heaven has come to earth and earth, who announced Heaven's coming, bows before heaven's Light.

The best man has done his work and smiles as the Groom arrives to meet the bride. The Groom steps forward, the best man steps back. The bride takes the hand of the Groom, moving in even closer as the best man, who had prepared all things for this moment, now diminishes in the Joy before him. Change is only hard for those who claim a place which is not theirs to keep.

Prayer: God, open me to Your Will in me, to Your change for me. Amen.



SATURDAY, LENT DAY 10

A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water.

Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink."

The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!" John 4.7, 9a, 10, 15

The heat of the day was not nearly as intolerable as were the heated judgments the other women spoke to her. Coming to the well at noon was far preferable to enduring the insufferable antagonism the righteous heaped upon her in unmeasured indignation. That said, nothing could have prepared her for a meeting at noonday with Jesus.

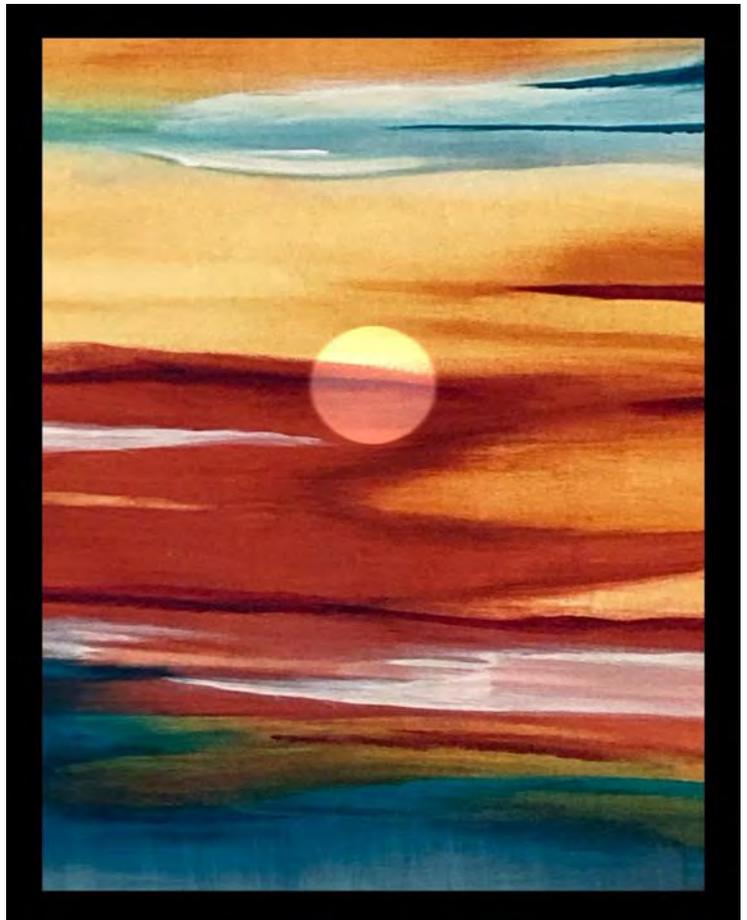
A Jew talking to a Samaritan? A Jewish man talking with a Samaritan woman he did not know? A Jewish man asking for something from a Samaritan woman he did not know?

Yet, this man spoke to her with a familiarity that quieted her, a welcoming which calmed her, an understanding which made this moment right. He offered her more than He ever asked of her, soothed her spirit in a well of Water from which she had never before received, and affirmed in her God's knowledge and love of her, just as she was, broken as she was, wounded as she was, marginalized as she was, and offensive as she was told she was. In His eyes, she-who-has-no-name has an identity, and she-who-has-no-worth has value, a place, even a home.

The woman said, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us." Jesus said to her, "I Am—the one who speaks with you." John 4.25-26

Yahweh, Messiah, speaks to you, meets with you, loves you. . . . And that is all you will ever need to know. You are not alone. I Am is speaking. Are you listening?

Prayer: Holy One, may I not be so down on myself on this Lenten journey that I miss Easter arriving in You where I am. Amen.



SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

In Capernaum there was a certain royal official whose son was sick. When he heard that Jesus was coming from Judea to Galilee, he went out to meet him and asked Jesus if he would come and heal his son, for his son was about to die. Jesus said to him, "Unless you see miraculous signs and wonders, you won't believe." The royal official said to him, "Lord, come before my son dies."

Jesus replied,

"Go home. Your son lives."

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and set out for his home. While he was on his way, his servants were already coming to meet him. They said, "Your son lives!" The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son lives."

John 4.46b-51, 53

Sometimes, sometimes life is messy.

One day you are a royal official with all the trappings of the kingdom, including servants, wealth, prestige, an office, a retirement account, health insurance, a nice home, multiple nice cars, up-to-date clothes and a gaggle of hangers-on who wait for your every word. The next day your son is dying, the doctors cannot figure it out, the nurses talk in hushed tones, the rest of the family is standing in line at the coffee shop whispering to each other, your best friend gives you that 'I know what you are going through' look, then steps away—and all you have left is your son who is dying.

The messiness rules.

The title does not matter, hangers-on do not matter, cars do not matter, friends who do not understand do not matter, clothes do not matter, the work you are supposed to do does not matter . . . All that matters is your son is dying, your heart is breaking and, though you would do anything for him, there appears nothing left to do—until you hear that Jesus the Healer, the miracle worker, is in the region. All other bets are off.

Messy or not, you run to Jesus and ask the gift no one else can give you: Your son. A father's eyes peer into the Son's gaze and faithful persistence is his only offering. "Lord, come before my son dies." And that is all it takes for the messiness to clear, just call Him, 'Lord' and the healing begins in the one for whom you pray, as well as yourself. Just ask the royal official.

Prayer: In the midst of the messiness, Lord, heal my unworthy soul by your Word. Amen.





MONDAY, LENT DAY 11

“ . . . Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethesda. It had five covered porches, and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there (waiting for the water to move).

A certain man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

The sick man answered him, “Lord, I don’t have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I’m trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Get up!

Pick up your mat and walk”

Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath. John 5.2-9

In one way or another, are we not all waiting for the water to move? Longing for that day of wellness? Yearning for the advocacy of another to help us walk? *“Lord, I don’t have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up.”*

When was the last time you stopped all the busyness, took a breath, looked up into His face, rolled up your shirtsleeves, and offered a hand to someone around you who is, like you, waiting for the water to move? When did you see in others that which is buried deep in your own soul? When did you last connect with another’s longing in the same way you pray the Lord connects with yours and makes you well?

Being in Jerusalem aside, this happening on the Sabbath aside, when was the last time you moved from the prayers of constant supplication into becoming the answer to someone else’s prayer? When was the moment you perceived the world and all of God’s goodness is not reserved just for you? How many times have you, like the accumulation of others who saw this man at the pool of Bethesda, stepped over him or stepped around him, rather than stop and become one with him? What was it you said you longed for as you wait by the pool? Could it be someone else needs it, too?

Truth be told, the journey to Easter begins in the moment of our conception. If so for you in this moment of devotion, so it is for others. Truly, what does it mean to call Him, ‘Lord’?

Prayer: Lord, teach me not to step over others as I pray You not walk by me. Amen.

TUESDAY, LENT DAY 12

“The Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, ‘It’s the Sabbath; you aren’t allowed to carry your mat.’ He answered, ‘The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” They inquired, ‘Who is this who said to you, ‘Pick it up and walk?’” The man who had been cured didn’t know who it was, because Jesus had slipped away from the crowd gathered there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said, “See! You have been made well. Don’t sin anymore in case something worse happens to you.” The man went and proclaimed to the Jewish leaders that Jesus was the man who had made him well. As a result, the Jewish leaders were harassing Jesus, since he had done these things on the Sabbath. Jesus replied, “My Father is still working and I am working too.” John 5.10-17

When Easter touches your life and invites you to stand up, pick up your mat and walk, who among us would not do exactly that, regardless the day? Ah, but the law says, ‘No work on the Sabbath’, and there are many who are well-versed in the law. Even as our eyes are drawn to the beautiful visage of Easter, among us are those whose hearts find it easier to negotiate and maintain life, privilege, power and authority if only the daily experience can be limited to a straight line, like those of a train track. They huff and puff, they make deals and threaten serious consequences, position becomes more important than connection, and a day of the week has more meaning than the life to be lived in that day.

In the moment a lame man carrying his mat and walking loses awe in our soul, we name ourselves as the overhead power of the train granting movement. In the instant we are more inclined to spend time trying to figure out the trick of how it happened, rather than give glory,



we put ourselves and everyone else on the same track, condemned to move only in directions our track allows. Or when in conversation we find ourselves limiting the Wonder of God to that which we can dictate by law, we have ever-so-subtly become the time schedule completely missing early Easter morning, firmly declaring, ‘God cannot work that way!’

As surely as the man made well simply had to declare to others his good fortune, the Good News as it were, so must we, even when some would complain, harass or deride in their disbelief. The Father is still working, Easter is still working, so must we. The journey is just beginning.

Prayer: Soften my certainties, Lord, and open me to new vistas of Easter in You, in whomever they may be revealed. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, LENT DAY 13

Jesus responded to the Jewish leaders,

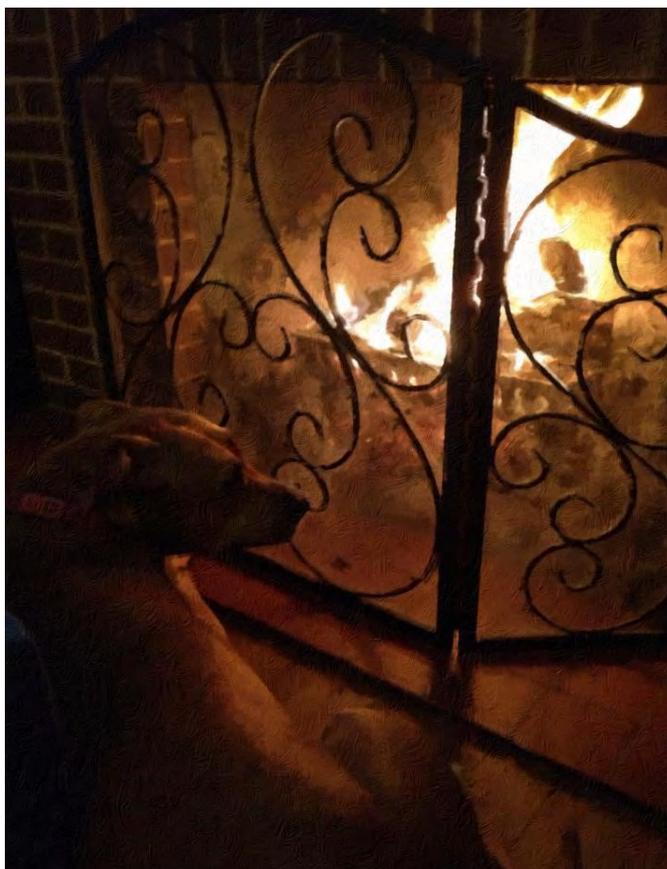
“I assure you that the Son can’t do anything by himself except what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him everything that he does. He will show him greater works than these so that you will marvel. As the Father raises the dead and gives life, so too does the Son give life to whomever he wishes.” “I assure you that whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and won’t come under judgment but has passed from death into life. I assure you that the time is come—and is here!—when the dead will hear the voice of God’s Son, and those who hear it will live.” “Don’t be surprised by this, because the time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice.” John 5.19-21,24-25, 28

It is midweek of the second full week of Lent and already the season seems long. What began with earnest desire and hopefulness has already gotten roughed up by the realities of this world to which many ascribe. Our job or joblessness, home or homelessness, family or loneliness, health or illness, friends or friendlessness, and faith or apathy all crowd into our minds, troubling our intentions, stifling our dreams and narrowing our vision. We look around to our leaders, in the church, in our land and in our world and, often, too often, they contribute more to the confusion than help in clarity.

To us in these days, even as He responded to the Jewish leaders, Jesus says, “I assure you. . .” Peace, God’s Peace, God’s Certainty, God’s Wisdom, is as close as the Word of Jesus, Himself. What we observe in the Son is what the Parent chooses we should see, understand and know of God, without any earthly filters, caveats or parameters. Like snuggling close to the fire on a cold Winter day, Jesus calls us to a nearness this world has a hard time fathoming. In the long days of the Lenten journey, He stands up to the troubling challenges of our world with an assurance of Easter revealed in every moment, in every day, on every step of the path. Easter, like the journey of faith itself, is not a destination, but a Being, a Will, an Advocate guiding and protecting on the path.

Don’t be overwhelmed by the world, by your expectations or by the limitations of others, but move forward in the Confidence of One who knows you by name and says, “I assure you . . .”, now and always.

Prayer: Claim me in Your Blessed Assurance, Lord, and strengthen my faith in You. Amen.



THURSDAY, LENT DAY 14

After this Jesus went across the Galilee Sea (that is, the Tiberius Sea). A large crowd followed him, because they had seen the miraculous signs he had done among the sick. Jesus went up a mountain and sat there with his disciples. It was nearly time for Passover, the Jewish festival. John 6.1-4

Moses was at Mount Horeb tending to the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, a priest of Midian, when God took that opportunity to speak to Moses from a burning bush which was not consumed. In that moment we become cognizant of God's awareness of the human condition, *I've clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I've heard their cry of injustice*



because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey . . ." Ex. 3.7-8

It is nearly time for Passover, Jesus has just confronted the task masters concerning the heavy burdens they are placing on the people and He has taken His disciples across the Galilee Sea, with the crowds following Him. They have seen His miraculous signs, they have heard the story of His boldness before the Jewish leaders in the Temple, and they are looking for the Messiah, the new Moses, to lead them to freedom.

What this people are missing is the sacrificial lamb and the blood of the lamb upon their doorposts. What they have forgotten was the reluctance of the Israelites to trust Moses—God—in the wilderness. What they have yet to fathom is that He sees them, hears their cries and knows their pain as His own. Jesus sits on the mountain and waits to remind them, all over again.

The journey to Easter is a reminder that God has been this way before, that God sees clearly the oppression, hears the cries of injustice, feels the pain of the oppressors whips and comes down to save. God sees you. God hears you. God feels you. God saves you, not at the expense of everyone else, but for the sake of you. Do not forget, God is also the Creator of the Egyptians and their firstborn children, the firstborn of their animals and the firstborn of their dreams. Their mourning is God's mourning, their anger is God's anger, and their pain is God's pain, as well. Freedom for the chosen is not without a cost, a very Divine one.

This deliverance will be different, one Lamb for all, His blood over all and His pathway to freedom through the sea . . . the ongoing Baptismal journey to The Promised Land.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for seeing me, for seeing us all, and for coming to deliver. Amen.

FRIDAY, LENT DAY 15

Jesus looked up and saw the large crowd coming toward him. He asked Philip, "Where will we buy food to feed these people?" Jesus said this to test him, for he already knew what he was going to do. Philip replied, "More than a half year's salary worth of food wouldn't be enough for each person to have even a little bit." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, "A youth here has five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that for a crowd like this?" . . . Then Jesus took the bread. When he had given thanks, he distributed it to those who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, each getting as much as they wanted. John 6.5-9, 11

Some people see old silos on a farm, others see places from which food is ready to be fed. Some people see only scarcity, others see abundance. Some people see a problem, others see potential. On this journey to Easter, which are you?

Jesus asked Philip a question, the answer to which the author of John acknowledges Jesus already knew. Still, He asked the question. Why did Jesus do that to Philip? Just to test him? Or was Jesus asking something deeper?

When we see the homeless, Jesus is not asking us to judge them or their situation, but He is asking us how we should care for them.

When we see the hungry, Jesus is not asking us to solve the problem of world hunger, but He is asking us how to feed these particular people.

When we see a stranger, Jesus is not asking us to assess their character, but how we might extend God's extravagant hospitality to them and make them a friend.

When we see those without a coat, hat or gloves in Winter, Jesus is not asking us to form a committee against poverty, but He is asking what we have to share with them to meet their need.

The same is true for those who are sick, those who are imprisoned, those who are caught up in addictions, those who care for no-one but themselves, those who are powerless, those who are powerful, those who believe they are right all the time, those who never seem to get anything right, and the list goes on and on . . .

God comes to us in Jesus, not to solve life's problems for us, but to show us that, in faith, we have all the answers we need in ourselves, in our community and in our unity as God's creation. We need only give thanks for what we have and distribute what we have to others.

Prayer: Lord, soften my heart to see Your answers to need in our world without You having to ask the questions. Therein may be the greatest miracle of Easter each day. Amen.





SATURDAY, LENT DAY 16

When evening came, Jesus' disciples went down to the lake. They got into a boat and were crossing the lake to Capernaum. It was already getting dark and Jesus hadn't come to them yet.

The water was getting rough because a strong wind was blowing. When the wind had driven them out for about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the water. He was approaching the boat and they were afraid. He said to them, "I Am. Don't be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and just then the boat reached the land where they had been heading. John 6.16-21

We are not told how it was the disciples thought it okay for them to go on down to the lake, get into a boat and begin crossing the lake to Capernaum—all without Jesus. Jesus had gone up on the mountain alone after He perceived the crowds He had just fed were ready to force Him to be their king. He separated Himself from their expectations before they could act on them and, in separating Himself, also gave tacit permission for those who were traveling with Him to make up their own minds about their next steps. Freewill can be a reason to wait and pray or an opportunity to strike out on your own. The disciples chose the latter.

Have you ever had one of those moments? You know the moment of which the text speaks, you make a choice to strike out on your own and, without warning, the wind picks up, the boat of your decision is pushed farther from the shoreline you are seeking, you begin wondering if the option you selected was the correct one and those small drops of sweat begin to form on your forehead and upper lip, revealing your nervousness and, somehow, even steaming up your glasses? Then, just in the moment you are ready to cry out, to plead for mercy, to implore the Divine to step in—the Divine steps up. Jesus meets you where you are, sitting in the hull of your choice, clearly not having waited for His input in the first place and feeling guilty for having abandoning Him, then shocked and startled that He so easily knew where to find you.

Jesus walks on the waters of our own troubling, our own challenges, our own hard-headedness, our own self-absorption, He wraps the winds around His shoulders and dances on the waves as though with an old friend. The One who is 'I Am', has been here before, before all things, before you and me, and certainly before our choices and He has separated the waters from the waters and leads us to dry land. He leads us Home, He quiets our grief, He reveals Easter on the shores of the lake then, without judgment, He walks on ahead allowing Grace to soak in and Mercy to renew commitment. Jesus meets us in the understanding of One who is and always will be. Are you ready to meet Him on the journey to Easter today?

Prayer: You who walk on water, take us by the hand when the winds of the crowds swell, threatening to undo us in our choices, then bring us safely to Your Shores. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

[The crowds who found Jesus in Capernaum] asked, "What miraculous sign will you do, that we can see and believe you? What will you do?"

Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus told them, "I assure you, it wasn't Moses who gave the bread from heaven to you, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.

The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

They said, "Sir, give us this bread all the time!"

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." John 6.30-35

It is the Sabbath in the Christian tradition. Many throughout the Church gather around the Table to celebrate the Eucharist. Bread will be raised, the Host will be consumed. Wine will be poured and Blood will be taken in. Time and time again, in thousands of different traditions, one Sacrament. Prayers of Thanksgiving resonate off the walls and throughout the lands in myriad voices of humanity, one Lord. Then, as the congregations leave the worship space, the Church, the Body of Christ, enters the mission fields of the world in ministry, Easter being boldly proclaimed by a grateful people who cannot contain the Good News in themselves.

The Bread of Life is more than the Host in the hand of the Officiant, the Bread of Life is the compassion shared, the hurt taken in, the ear which listens, the hands which hold gently, the heart which forgives, the faith which brings healing, the soul which gives hope and the tenacity of vision which sees beyond the graves of this world. The Bread of Life meets the crowds in the same way He meets the Samaritan woman at the well, the Bread of Life calls the best out of those who truly consume Him in the same way Zacchaeus is summoned down from the tree, the Bread of Life is the bright catalyst of service inherent in the hands of those who kneel down to wash the feet of others, in the same way He teaches us still. The Bread of Life cannot be contained in a building, by a tradition or even by a priesthood, for there is only One Priest, there is only One Lord, there is only One Church—and His Name is Jesus, and He calls us this day to, "Follow me." So we must, if we are truly to be a people who believes He is the Bread of Heaven—and that He is the One who gives Life forevermore. Easter meets us at the door of the tomb and calls us by name to 'go and tell'. Amen! Amen!
Prayer: Bread of Heaven, feed me in You, then send me out for You. I am Yours. Amen.





MONDAY, LENT DAY 17

Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave Galilee. Go to Judea so that your disciples can see the amazing works that you do. Those who want to be known publicly don't do things secretly. Since you can do these things, show yourself to the world." His brothers said this because even they didn't believe in him. Jesus replied, "For you, anytime is fine. But my time hasn't come yet."

John 7.3-6

I have heard it said that without the ant the peony could not bloom. It is probably true, yet can even the ant cause the peony to bloom before its' time? Anymore than Jesus' own brothers could force Him to 'show all that He could do' before His time?

Believing in Jesus is one thing, whether for his brothers or for you and me, but coming to terms with Jesus being on His own time frame? Then, as now? Well, that is quite another unique thought to ponder on the journey to Easter.

Consider this, what is the time frame for the Creator to create? The Savior to save? The Sustainer to sustain? We are the ones who are anxious about a time frame, our time frame, mostly because we are daily more aware of our humanity, our mortality, our limited time for life itself to happen. We try to push as much as we can into every moment, expecting others to do the same, largely because we have been taught that 'idle hands are the devil's workshop'. To avoid giving ourselves too much latitude for luxury or time to waste, we press on, anxious to get things done, make things known and reveal the relevance of our lives. I suspect God does not buy our time-anxiety, nor does God buy into getting things done when we push for them. God is on another timeline of God's own choosing—and Jesus is God's expression of that Truth.

We really have to be careful of that time thing, too. God will not be pushed. As the peony opens when it is ready, the worker ant assisting, so the Kingdom will be made known as Jesus lives into the Will of God, day by day. You cannot get to an empty tomb without the Via Dolorosa. You cannot get to the Via Dolorosa without the trial. You cannot get to the trial without the betrayal. You cannot get to the betrayal . . . if you do what everybody else wants you to do. Jesus exists on a Time Frame which even His own brothers do not understand and, truth be told, neither do most of us. After all, are we not the ones who insistently strive to make Easter a day and the preparation for Easter a single forty day season called Lent? Walk with Jesus to savor the meaning of the Easter He is for all humankind.

Prayer: Slow us down, Lord, that we savor the Bloom of Easter in Your Time. Amen.

TUESDAY, LENT DAY 18

The Jewish leaders were looking for Jesus at the festival. They kept asking, “Where is he?” The crowds were murmuring about him. “He’s a good man”, some said, but others were saying, “No, he tricks the people.” No one spoke about him publicly, though, for fear of the Jewish authorities. John 7.11-13

Not everyone looking for Jesus wants Easter, is seeking to be saved or cares if He brings a new message from God. Some just want Him to shut up, stop teaching as though He were trained, stop healing as though He had a special Gift of the Spirit, and stop forgiving the sinners as though He were God.

Some believe the Law is enough and should be used to keep God’s people in their places. Others believe themselves worthy by their bloodlines, destined for power by their lineage, set aside by their privilege. The thought of a Messiah actually appearing is more a farce to be propagated among the uneducated than to be believed by those truly trained—and this Jesus is muddying the waters of their flow of income.

They look for Him to disprove Him, to overshadow Him, even to threaten Him. Not everyone looking for Jesus wants Easter, some just want Him dead, because He is getting in the way. He is a threat to the status quo and Rome will not take kindly to another king in town, much less the Jewish leaders who profit by acquiescing to Rome before serving God.

This Jesus is too radical, too inclusive, too hospitable, too generous, too merciful and way too gracious. This Jesus appeals to the wrong crowds— the sinners, tax collectors, fishermen, laborers, carpenters, people of other lands and faiths and—even women. This Jesus is dangerous. This Jesus lives in the fullness of the colors around Him, not separating the world by black and white standards. His eyes twinkle in the sun as though He sees right through the illusions and frauds being perpetrated by God’s people, upon God’s people. This Jesus is separating the chaff

from the wheat and the shovel He is using is dangerously close to the place those who fear Him work. Do you see it?

Soon Easter comes. Be ready.

Prayer: Lord, cause me to look for You as You are, not away from You seeking what I want You to be. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, LENT DAY 19

Halfway through the festival, Jesus went up to the temple and started to teach. Astonished, the Jewish leaders asked, "He's never been taught! How has he mastered the Law?" Jesus responded, "My teaching isn't mine but comes from the one who sent me. Whoever wants to do God's will can tell whether my teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own. Those who speak on their own seek glory for themselves. Those who seek the glory of him who sent me are people of truth; there's no falsehood in them. John 7.14-18

As the story goes, a young professor said, "It's like the cold that comes when there is no heat, or the darkness that comes when there is no light." That professor was Albert Einstein, and the words he spoke assisted a new generation to perceive that Light itself is eternal, darkness only exists in the absence of Light.

For those who seek their own glory, rather than the Light, darkness is the final outcome. Yet, in those who seek the glory of God, the Light shines forth unceasingly, brilliantly, unerringly. Such a Light confounds those in the dark and reveals in them—and for others—the way they have chosen to go.

Jesus shines brightly, not of His own accord, but of the Light which is emanating in Him. Truth cannot be silenced, neither can it be hidden. Those who seek the glory of God in their living are people of truth.



In this journey to Easter, for whom do you seek glory?

In this journey with Easter, whose Light guides your way?

In this journey for Easter, in whose word do you trust when the darkness gathers around you?

"It's like the cold that comes when there is no heat, or the darkness that comes when there is no light."

Those who are taken aback by the teaching of Jesus—along with those who are offended by Him— have missed the Gift of Light which shines in His coming. *The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him.* John 1.11

Listen. Seek His truth and allow His Light to separate the darkness in your journey.

Prayer: Jesus, Lord Jesus, shine on me, in me, for me, that Your Light might shine through me, pushing back the darkness for others to see You, too. Amen.

THURSDAY, LENT DAY 20

On the last and most important day of the festival, Jesus stood up and shouted,

“All who are thirsty should come to me! All who believe in me should drink!

As the scriptures said concerning me,

“Rivers of living water will flow out from within him.”

Jesus said this concerning the Spirit. John 7.37-39a

God’s salvation history among God’s people has much to do with water. God separated the waters to reveal dry land. God covered the dry land with waters to start again. God led the Israelites out of Egypt through the sea. When Israel complained and tested God at Horeb, God gave them water to drink from the rock. God led the Israelites through the Jordan into the promised land. John the Baptist announced a new deliverance from sin through baptism in the Jordan.

Now, Jesus stands before the Israelite children in Jerusalem and, in the new Massah and Meribah of their existence, (read Exodus 17) proclaims a living water which will flow directly from the very Rock of God’s choosing to those who believe. Living Water. Not the kind fitness trainers and physicians tell you to drink by the gallon. Living Water. Like nothing you could ever receive from this world. Drink of His Spirit.

In days of calamity, as the days of Jesus certainly were in Jerusalem, in the days of Roman occupation, of overlording political hacks, of high taxation with absolutely no representation, of government oversight which ensured each person’s ongoing servitude, of no available healthcare, no retirement plans, no vacation days, no sick days, and the guarantee of plenty of days to work for Caesar until you die . . . Jesus offers refreshment from the Water Cooler of God’s making. God sees the oppression of the people, God hears your cries. God’s Spirit quenches the thirst of despair with Life—and Jesus is the Rock from whom we are to drink.

On this journey to Easter, are you drinking of Jesus? Not the institution of the Church, but of Him? Are you trusting Him with all that makes you dry along the way?

Prayer: River of Life, Rock of Living Water, let me drink You in always. Amen.



FRIDAY, LENT DAY 21

The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?" . . . Jesus stood up and replied, "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone."

. . . Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?" She said, "No one, sir." Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore."

John 8.3-5, 7b, 9-11

It is far easier to create and apply Law, than to exercise grace. Through Jesus, in the courtrooms of all the world, God chooses to exercise grace on our behalf.

We do not know her name, just her sin. The fact that the person with whom she had been

committing adultery had not also been brought to Jesus is disingenuous at best, its own condemnation at worst. Still, there she is. There we are, standing before the crowds and Jesus, our sins on parade, like an episode of Maury Povich gone bad. Everyone present is certain of the outcome, everyone that is except for the Judge who bends down and writes in the dust, as recording their accusations before heaven.

'What say you?', they insist.

The Judge stands up, the crowds, sensing blood about to be splattered, falls silent, and He speaks, "Whoever hasn't sinned should cast the first stone."

Whoever hasn't sinned—is a mighty high bar to set. They look around at each other, chances are some of them not only knew of this woman's wrongdoing, but were a part of it. Who among them would dare to pick up a stone and risk being exposed in their own sin by someone in the crowd? One by one they leave.

God sees the beauty in the canvas before the paint brush ever makes a stroke. God sees the Life in you where others only sense the wrong, the hurt, the shortcoming, the challenge, the sin . . . God chooses to exercise grace when others have stones in their hands, and because of such grace, the cross is empty, the tomb bereft of death, and Easter stands up among us saying, 'Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore.' Receive the gift on the journey.

Prayer: Lord, my guilt is before You, still I pray for grace. Set me free in Jesus. Amen.





SATURDAY, LENT DAY 22

[To the Pharisees] Jesus replied, "I'm exactly who I have claimed to be from the beginning. I have many things to say in judgment concerning you. The one who sent me is true, and what I have heard from him I tell the world." They didn't know he was speaking about his Father. So Jesus said to them, "When the Human One is lifted up, then you will know that I Am. Then you will know that I do nothing on my own, but I say just what the Father has taught me. He who sent me is with me. He doesn't leave me by myself, because I always do what makes him happy." John 8.25b-29

Jesus is nothing if not consistent. What He said to Nicodemus in the dark of night, He now says to the Pharisees in the light of day, "When the Human One is lifted up . . ."

Yahweh, I Am, is the One who gives Life. We have to look up if we are to see God at work in

salvation. The Israelites learned that lesson in the wilderness when serpents bit them and they died because of their complaints against God. The people begged Moses to intercede on their behalf, as they named their sin and sought the removal of the serpents from among them. God heard Moses' prayer and instructed him to create a poisonous serpent and place it on a pole and when a person was bitten by a live serpent, they had only to look at the serpent on the pole and they would live.

God did not remove the poisonous serpents of their complaints, but provided for the people an avenue for life, if only they remembered to look up.

Looking up is not one of our strong suits, is it? We look to our inner best self, at our parents, at our children, at our boss at work, at the leaders of our community, at those who are in positions of leadership in our state and country, at our religious leaders, at the institution of the church, at our spouse or significant other, at the color of our skin, at our ethnicity, at our nationality—at everything, everyone and everywhere except up. Up. From Up is where our Salvation comes. From Up is by Whom our name is known. Those who look Up will see Jesus as He is, from Whom He is, and as the Salvation He is. It is both, a hard sight to see and a humbling notion to receive. When the Human One is lifted Up, so are we, purely because God does not hold our sin against us, for Jesus intercedes for us. Still, first, we must look Up. Prayer: I Am, Holy One, forgive my sins as You give me confidence and strength to look Up and see Your Son, our Lord, and live. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

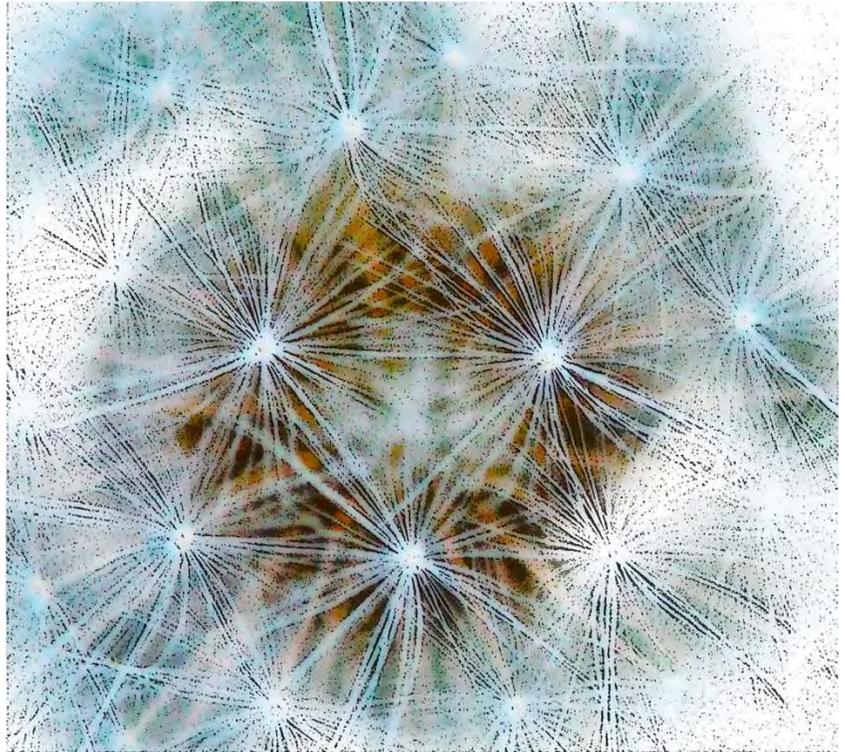
As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth.

Jesus' disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?"

Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him. While it's daytime, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's

eyes. Jesus said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (this word means 'sent'). So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see. John 9.1-7



Stop. Take a breath. Breathe in slowly, exhale slowly. Sabbath has been given you by the Lord of all creation. Does God not know what is going on in your life? Has God not heard your prayers? Stop. Take a breath. Breathe in slowly, exhale slowly.

Jesus *saw* the man born blind. The contrasting images of the Gospel of John should give us pause. How did Jesus know the man was born blind? How did Jesus know the hearts of the Pharisees? How does Jesus know you? Stop. Take a breath. Breathe in slowly, exhale slowly.

We wrestle to make difficult circumstances manageable in our own mind: The man or his parents must have sinned; The baby was miscarried because something was wrong; The relationship couldn't be salvaged because trust had been broken; The accident happened because someone did something wrong; and the list goes on. Jesus reminds us, life happens, make the most of where you are and what you have at your disposal, namely your faith—and God's faith in you.

Stop. Take a breath. Breathe in slowly, exhale slowly. Spit on the ground. Make a mudball and roll it in your hand. Of such as this God made you. Think about that. From dust God creates us as we are, perfect in God's eyes, without blemish or reason to blame. What others see as flaws, God perceives as our opportunities. What others want to find blame for, God perceives as a heavenly purpose.

It is the Sabbath. Wash away your blindness and see Jesus as He is for, truly, He sees you.

Prayer: Lord of Sabbath, open the eyes of my heart to see You, in me and in others on this journey to Easter. Amen.

MONDAY, LENT DAY 23

The man's neighbors and those who used to see him when he was a beggar said, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is," and others said, "No, it's someone who looks like him." But the man said, "Yes, it's me!" So they asked him, "How are you now able to see?" He answered, "the man they call Jesus made mud, smeared it on my eyes, and said, 'Go to the Pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and then I could see." They asked "Where is this man?" He replied, "I don't know." John 9.8-12

Being blind is not always about not having the capacity to see, just like the capacity to see does not always mean you perceive everything.

This is one of those stories in the Gospel of John which should evoke both laughter and dismay: Laughter in the fact that no one seems to get it that this man would not be able to identify the person who healed him, *because he was blind*; Dismay because those same people who stepped over the beggar for years, likely while making not-so-quiet derogatory statements about him as they did, now seem completely committed to keeping him as the beggar in the street, rather than celebrating that he is now ready to contribute to the wider community. What an dichotomy!

As He listened to them grill the now-sighted formerly-blind man, Jesus must have thought He was at a carnival waiting for a ride on the Ferris wheel. Round and round they go, never going anywhere meaningful at all. The healing of the blind man is lost on everyone except the blind man who, in the end, believes in this Jesus who comes to stand with him after he was thrown out of the synagogue. Jesus is the only one left who sees him, even as he now sees Jesus: Face to face.

Lent itself can sometimes have such a quality. We are so fixated on repentance as the core for deliverance that we sometimes forget that grace and mercy are the hallmarks of Jesus'

earthly ministry—and such grace and mercy are not ours or the church's as possessions, only to share and celebrate.

Lest we fall victim to losing sight of Jesus' power and purpose, the journey to Easter must be about believing Him as He is, or we will not be ready to receive Him as He is to be.

Prayer: Lord, open the eyes of my heart to believe in You, that I not lose my sight to others. Amen.



TUESDAY, LENT DAY 24

Jesus said, "I have come into the world to exercise judgment so that those who don't see can see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with him heard what he said and asked, "Surely we aren't blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you wouldn't have any sin, but now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." John 9.39-41

Motivation and opportunity, pure and simple, have much to do with our capacity to see, to recognize Jesus and, in so doing, to perceive Easter in Him.

The blind man never told Jesus he wanted to see, his being given sight was an answer to the disciples about the nature of sin. Still, Jesus gave the unnamed blind man sight, which also opened his eyes to the nature of those around him, while allowing him to rise up from the death of begging to a life of faith and purpose.

The blind man had plenty of motivation to see, but little opportunity. The blind man had plenty of motivation to recognize Jesus, but because of his blindness, little opportunity. The blind man had plenty of motivation to desire Easter in his life, but little opportunity. Add the presence of Jesus into the equation of the blind man's motivation and suddenly you have tremendous opportunity at every level.

Conversely, the Pharisees, content in their positions, had little motivation to see Jesus, thus gave away their opportunity. The Pharisees, certain of their insights and wisdom, had no reason to recognize Jesus, thus forfeiting their opportunity. The Pharisees, secure in their hierarchical status, had no motivation to be delivered by the Easter in Jesus, thus snubbing their opportunity at the door of an empty tomb. Again, add the presence of Jesus into the equation of the Pharisees lack of motivation—and the sin of their self-inflicted blindness condemns them at the most primal level.

Jesus only has to announce that judgment, not make it. It is self-fulfilling with motivation and opportunity being the ever-present parameters.

What of each of us on this journey to Easter?

Jesus comes into the world that the Light of Life would shine before us, so the opportunity is glaringly present, yet do we have the motivation to see Him, to recognize Him or the seek out the Easter in Him? Or are we so secure, so certain, so content that we give away our motivation for Easter in clinging to the ease of the world?

Prayer: Lord, unclench my hand—hold on ease and inspire my motivation to see Easter in You. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, LENT DAY 25

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice. John 10:3b-5

To this day I can still hear my Dad's voice early in the morning calling our herd of Holsteins to come up out of the pasture for milking, "Sooookkkke, Sooookkkke, Sooookkkke! Sook, Sook, Sook, Sooookkkke!" (Believe me, these are the words he called out—and taught me in calling the cows, but I am not certain the English language actually has a spelling for the way he said it!) He stood next to the gate, just to the side of the milking parlor, the herd usually a football field or two away, yet they heard. The older cows got up first, steam pouring from the places in the grass where they had been laying, and started their plodding walk up the paths through the pasture, the younger ones following suit. No questions, maybe a few

hesitations, but no hold outs, unless they had a problem. They all came, one after the other, into the upper lot, then into the holding area for milking.

Dad walked among them like old friends, patting one, scratching the head of another, talking to them, calling them by name, sorting the milking herd from the dry herd, taking care to check each one over before heading into the milking parlor

to start the process there. It was a delightful dance of joy and intimacy to watch and at times even I as his son felt the part of the intruder, so trusting were they of him.

Yet, over the years, the herd began to come when I called, the friendlier ones pushing up close to have a head scratched, the younger ones taking it in, learning the ropes, the hungry ones heading straight into the holding area, each waiting their name to be called. The dance of life passed from one generation to the next, rooted in the steady call of the shepherd who knows each one by name. Yes, all of our cows were named and known, kind of like the sheep of whom Jesus speaks, kind of like you and me in the eyes of God.

None of us are anonymous, regardless how nondescript we try to stay. We are known, even as we know. Go to the furthest end of the pasture, still His voice reaches our ears. Go through the fence if you can, still His call brings us safely Home. Go your own direction and find yourself at odds with where you are, still His voice overshadows all others and quiet seeps into your soul. The journey to Easter is an answering to the Shepherd's Voice. Listen. He is calling you by name.

Prayer: Open the ears of my heart to hear Your call and follow, Lord Jesus. Amen.



THURSDAY, LENT DAY 26

I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. John 10:7b-9

Gates, like fire escapes, serve two functions, to hold in and to let out.

A gate on the farm which cannot do both functions easily and well is little better than a wall. A fire escape on a high rise which cannot allow people access from below will have just as hard a time allowing people to leave from above and serves little more purpose than as an expensive outside decoration—and possibly a fatal one at that.

The Law was being used to hem people in, with little recourse for escape. Their lives and livelihoods threatened, their bellies empty and their souls thirsty, fearing further abuse by the ones who promised them the world and seldom delivered anything but pain, the people were caught with no way out. Rome around them, the Law above them, the shadows of Egypt enslavement seemed near again. Yet, Jesus stood between the people and the Pharisees, a Gate never seen before.

Jesus was never meant to be a gate that hems people in, He is the way to freedom, to salvation. His life and presence is the way through the impassable sea, in the midst of the storm and in their wilderness experience. Thieves and outlaws, comfortable rulers and manipulators of the Law, have been little more than closed gates and unusable fire escapes, threatening to undo the people of God, the sheep of the Pasture. Still, Jesus stands between the people and those who would rule them, a Gate, not a wall.

I am . . . the gate of the sheep. I am . . . the good shepherd. I am . . . the good shepherd. He repeats it

twice for emphasis in rabbinic style. I AM speaks—and His words are not lost on the Pharisees or the people. Something new is taking place and they are all witnesses.

Those below are climbing up, those inside are shown the way out. The wall now has an Opening, the tomb is now Vacant. The once blocked escape now has a Ladder, those once forbidden now have access to Safety by the Word of I AM.

To some this may seem just another Biblical story, a hard-to-believe lyric, but to those who are truly fearing, to those who are alone, to those for whom hope seems distant and to those who just never seem able to get anything right, the Gate is exactly what they need, the Reality for which they have been praying in the journey to Easter. How about you?

Prayer: Be the Gate which sets me free for pastures sweet and waters clear, Lord. Amen.





FRIDAY, LENT DAY 27

“My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them from my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” Again the Jewish opposition picked up stones in order to stone him. Jesus responded, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of those works do you stone me?” The Jewish opposition answered, “we don’t stone you for a good work but for insulting God. You are human yet you make yourself out to be God.”

John 10:27-33

Stones can be used to construct a path or to deter the way of an enemy, they can be a foundation for a strong building or they can be the rubble of destruction. The use of stones is up to the one in whose hand they are held yet, beware, the One who made the stones might have something to say about how they are used, even by you, maybe especially by you.

There are days when the words of Jesus just become an affront to the way we are used to living life and faith. We become like Pharisees who slam the door of the Temple in His face because His claims are so audacious, His understanding seems offensive and His bearing is untenable. We who are the insiders of the community of faith become distressed that anyone might suggest we do not have every answer, are privy to every secret of God or are in some manner existing outside the Will of the very One by whose Name we claim to be known. To have Jesus stand there, as He is, uncannily steady, uncommonly authoritative and deeply wise to both what is written, as well as to what is implied, by the words we speak and the actions we take—is unnerving. Still, He stands there, answering every question before we have words to ask or even a thought to consider it.

Suddenly, Jesus is the Insider and the tables are turned. The powerful are powerless, the comfortable are discomfited, and certain become uneasy. Slowly, almost stealthily, we stoop to pick up one stone, then another, and another, filling our hands, then our pockets with little rockets of anger and frustration to be vented at just the right time so as to prove our superiority— and then He asks us why. There is no reasonable answer—because You are God and we are not, and we cannot stand that thought yet, are unwilling to speak it either.

Drop your rocks, along with your guilt. Drop your dis-ease, along with your anxiety. Drop your fear and anger, along with your displeasure at being found out. Receive forgiveness and acceptance from the One who is Easter calling you by name. You are Beloved. Follow Him.

Prayer: Empty my hands, Lord, of my self-loathing and restore Your Life in me. Amen.

SATURDAY, LENT DAY 28

A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. . . . So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where



he was. After two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again." The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?"

John 11:1, 3-8

To some, it is a picture of a pine cone. To others, an idea of for a craft. To even others, the symbol of changing seasons left lying on a bed of pine needles.

To Jesus, Lazarus, like the pine cone, is a seed waiting for the right time. Death has no place, no power, no authority in the eyes and heart of the One who is the Creator of Life. Those whom He loves have called His Name. They have come to Him, as He said they would. He will not disappoint, but neither will this be hurried. There is a point to be proven about the purpose of stones—and Jesus will make God's point in God's time.

We pray fervently, feverishly, sweating out the Will of God when it is the life of one we love which is in the balance. We put out requests for intercessory prayers on prayer chains, on social media, through family connections and, when possible, implore the unblinking eye of the news camera to record our plight. We perceive ourselves to be, in that moment, the persistent widow in the court begging for justice, not stopping until we get that for which we pray, then we pray even more. Hands are held, stories are told, memories are shared, the sacred way through life's transitions closing in fast around us, as with tears we call out one more time to Jesus.

Two days does not seem that long, unless it is your brother who is dying. Two days is just forty-eight hours, unless time and agony seem to be dragging the very life out of you. Two days is what Jesus waited—before He made His way back to His friends—and to face again those who wanted Him dead.

Pine cone seeds, when properly stratified, will germinate in one to three weeks. What of the life of one who appears to have died? What of Lazarus? What of you and me?

Timing is everything, God's timing, that is. The timing of the Lenten season is forty days, not including Sundays. For some, it cannot be over soon enough, for others it never existed, and still others long for more time. What kind of time do you pray for in the journey to Easter?

Prayer: Lord, I call on You, in Your time, with Your love and as You choose, always. Amen.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?"

Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." Having said this Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to the,

"Untie him and let him go." John 11.35-44

The buzzards are perched, waiting, the smell of death has brought them near. A stone is all that separates them from meeting their hunger, so they watch intently for an opening.

Nothing is quite so final as death, so the crowds think. They watch Jesus weep for his friend. They watch as He weeps for the lack of understanding and belief among those gathered. They watch in stoic silence as He weeps for the nearing day when such a place will be a part of His story. The taunts of the crowd are not lost on Jesus, neither is the faith which is inside of Him. God hears every word. God knows the deepest thought. God acts in ways we cannot imagine.

This is to be a disappointing day for vultures, for Life is more final than death and Lazarus will be proof of that. ". . . if you believe, you will see God's glory . . .", said Jesus to Martha, but really, who would have believed the dead man would rise? That death is a prelude to Life?



That tears are the gift of the heart which anoints the sacred journey in Jesus?

"Lazarus, come out!"

Come out from your weariness. Come out from your despair. Come out from your questions. Come out from your pain. Come out from the stench of other's expectations. Come out from being disdained for your belief. Come out from the death this world would impose on you. Come out!

"The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth." The dead man came out. On this Fifth Sunday in Lent, will you dare to come out of your fears, anguish and pain along the way? Life in Jesus awaits, if only we believe.

Prayer: Lord of the Sabbath, raise me up in you. Be the Easter in my heart not defined by a day. Amen.

MONDAY, LENT DAY 29

Then the chief priests and Pharisees called together the Sanhedrin and said, "What are we going to do? This man is doing many miraculous signs! If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our people." One of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, told them, "You don't know anything! You don't see that it is better for you that one man die for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed." He didn't say this on his own. As high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would soon die for the nation—and not only for the nation. Jesus would also die so that God's children scattered everywhere would be gathered together as one. John 11:47-52

Who would have imagined that the beauty of Mary holding Jesus, the sacred nature of Madonna and Child, would become marred by the will and wishes of those in whose hands He would eventually be held in arrest? Some see Him as threat to the status quo. Some view Him as enemy of the state—an enemy to be vanquished. Others view Him as necessary collateral damage, the cost of maintaining the house built on the sands of human will. Everyone is a child of someone, even Jesus.

When we no longer see the child, but only our cause; When we obscure the history to serve our own purpose; and, When we usurp the Wisdom of God for the security of humanity: We shatter the image of Parent and Child with a caustic belief that everyone's life is a pawn to be set upon a chessboard, with our hands being those who decide the next move. Damn the faith, damn the history, damn anyone getting in the way, our will be done. Sorry, Momma. Sorry, Daddy . . . And, in so believing, we give away our own right to be children of God. It is as simple as that.

Children are not pawns to be used in our warring madness, neither are they to be used or abused by our callous desires. Call all the Sanhedrin's you want, argue the efficacy of 'one dying for many' all you want, even defend your position with prophecy which fits your purpose all you want—still, Jesus in the arms of Mary is the Easter towards which we journey. "Suffer the children to come unto Me." Come, He waits for you to see Him as He sees you: A child of God worthy of Love.

Prayer: Lord Jesus in Mary's arms, help me to see in You that for which I pray in myself: An Easter Child. Worthy of Life. Amen.



TUESDAY, LENT DAY 30

Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples . . . Complained . . . Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor among us, but you won't always have me."

John 12:1-4, 7-8

Born May 26, 1820 in Dernbach, Germany, the 8th child of a peasant farmer and his wife, St. Katharina Kasper understood the plight of the poor and underprivileged. Her journey of faith, her journey to Easter, is marked by her life of service with others.



The foundress of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ, St. Katharina was given the name 'Mary' in her ministry—a name with a powerful meaning. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God", said Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, and so it is in those who live for the sake of the other.

As Mary poured her life and faith out on the feet of Jesus, as she wiped them dry with her hair, she established the baseline of purity of heart in caring, far beyond the acceptable bounds of this earth. She prepared Jesus for that which she had seen

in her own brother, Lazarus, in her own faith, as death gave way to Life—and she did so in the only manner she could, not counting the cost, only the privilege. The prophetic power of Mary to name the future of Jesus, even as Judas argued the cost and Mary's intimate access, pauses the frame of events in a Love rivaling that of the angels.

When was the last time you washed the feet of another? Much less, poured out nearly everything you had in doing so? When was the last time you loved so deeply and were so filled with gratitude that the only acceptable sacrifice of praise before Heaven in your life was in devoted service to the poor among us?

Instead of judging, serve. Instead of threatening, show mercy. Instead of turning away, kneel down and wipe the feet of Jesus with your hair. The journey to Easter is of such as this. "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news." Isaiah.

Prayer: Remind me, Lord, that the journey to Easter in the way of Mary begins at your feet in devotion and love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, LENT DAY 31

Some Greeks were among those who had come up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and made a request, "Sir, we want to see Jesus." Philip told Andrew, and Andrew and Philip told Jesus. Jesus replied, "The time has come for the Human One to be glorified. I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever.

Whoever serves me must follow me. Where I am, there my servant will also be.

My Father will honor whoever serves me." John 12:20-26

For a lighthouse to have the greatest effect, it must be established in the place of greatest dangers. When so established, the lighthouse faces the ever-changing currents and tides of time, weathering storms and surges, in order to shine a light in the deepest night and to sound a warning to travelers of jagged shorelines and uncertain landings.

Lighthouses, too, are beacons of safety, sentinels of security and keepers of hope. Where the Lighthouse stands, there the weary traveler can find rest along the shorelines of God's creation.

Jesus is the Lighthouse—and the nations are coming to His Light. The Greeks seeking Jesus are seeking more than signs and miracles, they are searching for understanding and wisdom. His ministry is now reaching beyond His own people and the gathering din of popularity sounds its own call for

silence. It is time for the seed to be planted. The ground has been prepared. The Sower surveys the field, anticipating what now might grow. All heaven and earth stand ready.

We are taught to cling tightly to life, or at least to hold tenaciously to our hopes, dreams and visions. We are taught to pursue an education, to train in a vocation or to find that which allows us to have the 'things' which are important visuals of status and having made it: a home, car, relationship, retirement savings, money-saving memberships, the correct faith, the proper liturgy, enough guilt to keep us humble—yet not so much to weigh us down, and the list goes on and on . . .

Jesus turns earthly rationales upside-down. "Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever." The journey to Easter requires a look in the mirror of motive and faith. If we desire to serve the Christ of Easter, we must follow with all our heart, mind and soul. To do otherwise is to risk the shoals of believing we have already landed at the open tomb of Life.

Prayer: Open my eyes to your Light and bury my life in Your Wonder, that I would live. Amen.



THURSDAY, LENT DAY 32

*“Now I am deeply troubled.
What should I say? “Father,
save me from this time’? No,
for this is the reason I have
come to this time.*

Father, glorify your name!”

*Then a voice came from
heaven, “I have glorified it and
I will glorify it again.”*

*The crowd standing there
heard and said, “It’s thunder.”
Others said, “An angel spoke to
him.”* John 12.27-29



Why does the willow weep? Or the sun shine? It is their purpose. What is yours?

Wrestling with our purpose in the days of our living, whatever they may be, is not limited to Jacob—or Jesus. The journey to Easter invites us into a conversation in the hidden places of our choices and decisions. It requires us to be participants in a conversation with God about the nuts and bolts of our being, the essential truth of the gift we are to be among other pilgrims on the journey who are also having similar conversations, and to know that it is in the midst of community that God is most likely to respond. Some will hear thunder. Others will think of angels. You will know that the Living Word of God is all there is—and will be inescapably drawn to obey. As God named Jacob, as God confirmed in Jesus, so God speaks to you and me—if we are truly on a journey. Easter emerges where God’s Voice leads.

That thought alone is a caution to many. Jacob had his hip put out of joint in his conversation. Jesus was betrayed, tried and crucified after His conversation. What might it mean for you and me?

Should we ask to be excused from class? Should we step away from our chair in the circle? Is there any room left for an alternative choice when God declares God’s intent?

Wiggle-room is what we are best at establishing. We have vast courtrooms of professionals who are skilled in such law management. We look at things like intent, motive and means. God cuts through all of that, as God does with Jesus, and lays it out for us: Where there is a desire and willingness to serve, the Life of Easter will be discovered, again and again. God’s Name will be glorified.

Your choice. My choice. Our Lord. One Lord. What does He say about such choices? “Father, glorify your name!” What will we say?

Why does the willow weep? Or the sun shine? It is their purpose. What is yours on your journey to Easter?

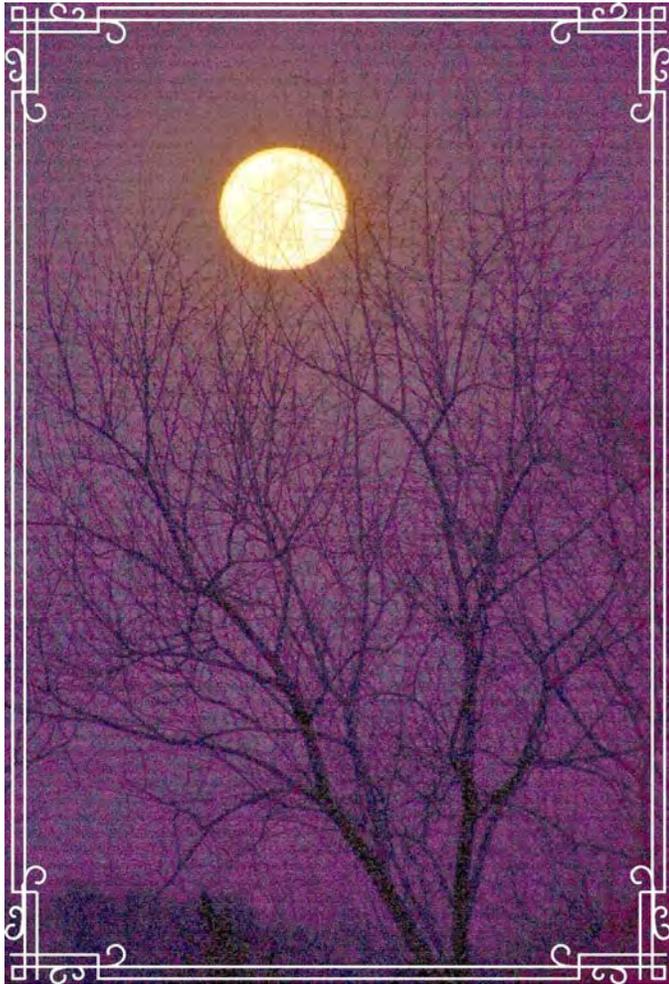
Prayer: Lord God, glorify your Name in me on this journey—and give me the courage to do what you have birthed me to do in Jesus’ name. Amen.

FRIDAY, LENT DAY 33

*Now is the time for judgment of this world.
Now this world's ruler will be thrown out.
When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw
everyone to me." (He said this to show how he
was going to die.)*

*The crowd responded, "We have heard from
the Law that the Christ remains forever. How
can you say that the Human One must be
lifted up? Who is this Human One?"*

*Jesus replied, "The light is with you for only a
little while. Walk while you have the light so
that darkness doesn't overtake you. Those who
walk in the darkness don't know where they
are going. As long as you have the light,
believe in the light so that you might become
people whose lives are determined
by the light." John 12:31-36a*



Darkness, especially in the woods, can be disconcerting, disorienting, even confusing. Just ask any hunter who has walked a path

through the woods at an early morning hour—or any one who enjoys being in the woods just for the sake of the peace which is found there. Darkness can be unsettling.

Add just a sliver of moonlight into the equation and suddenly the paths are bright as day. Make it a full moon and you feel like home is exactly where you are. You may not see as clearly as the animals, but you know you are part of something far bigger, embracing and, ultimately, holy.

Jerusalem is filled with brooding darkness. Too many knees have bowed to Caesar. Too many of God's little ones have been burdened, even extorted by the religious community. Taxes are high and morale is down. Prayers for a Savior and deliverance have been squashed by reality. Still, the Light shines in the darkness. A full moon rising offers a way on the journey to Easter. The God of all creation, the God who separates darkness and light, is the God who sends Salvation. One who is to be lifted up, as once a serpent was lifted on a pole in the wilderness to heal the people, stands before them, yet the darkness is thick, His words seem improbable.

Those who believe will see the Light. Darkness does not overtake them. Do you believe?

In a world filled with Light, do not be dissuaded by the purveyors of darkness. God will have the final say—and Easter will meet you face-to-Face in Jesus.

Prayer: Lord God, pierce the darkness of this journey with the Light of Easter in Jesus. Amen.

SATURDAY, LENT DAY 34

Jesus shouted, "Whoever believes in me doesn't believe in me but in the one who sent me. Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me. I have come as a light into the world so that everyone who believes in me won't live in darkness. If people hear my words and don't keep them, I don't judge them. I didn't come to judge the world but to save it. Whoever rejects me and doesn't receive my words will be judged at the last day by the word I have spoken. I don't speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me regarding what I should speak and say. I know that his commandment is eternal life. Therefore whatever I say is just as the Father has said to me." John 12.44-50

At the end of the day it boils down to you, to me, to all of us, and to what we believe about Jesus.

We can dress it up a hundred ways, add deep theological language, discuss the practical merits of our position and vet the bibliography of our research until the cows come in, which may not be long from now. Still, Jesus makes it clear, without pretense, shadow or subtlety: What we believe about Jesus—we believe about God.

The line is straight, without deviation. Jesus is sent to save the world, not judge it. Jesus is sent to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom, but it is God who is commanding eternal life. What do you believe?

Maybe the answer to this, and all Jesus' questions, are rooted in an unspoken truth which tends to brood in each of our hearts: Where will we be found on Easter?

On Easter Sunday we have a tendency to linger at the tomb, to sing the hymns of praise, to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, to listen to the Easter Gospel and a related homily, mutter the words of a liturgy, perform the practiced kneeling, touch Holy Water to our heads, give high fives to the Ushers as we depart and spend the day with family, if possible, or with friends, as available. We laugh at the kids scurrying for eggs in the lawn, engage in a couple of games, visit with folks we have not seen for a while, loosen our belts after the feast and doze like a champion as soon as we can find a quiet private spot. This is the day on the calendar.

Still, the heart has not answered the question of where we will be found on Easter? In breathless joy, unable to contain the wonder? Running back to other disciples to tell them what we have discovered? Or just giving in to the same old routine, believing that God understands.

God does understand. That is the point Jesus makes. What do you believe of Jesus? Your answer is before God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I believe in You. Turn my unbelief into action. Amen.



SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT: PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They shouted, "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the king of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Don't be afraid, Daughter Zion. Look! Your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt."

His disciples didn't understand these things at first. After he was glorified, they remembered that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

John 12:12-16

The expectations are running high. Many in the crowd have been witness to the dead man, Lazarus, walking out of the tomb. They have observed the enmity of the religious rulers towards Jesus, suspecting their anger had more to do with fear of replacement, than concern for the faith. They have heard Him teach and open the scriptures in ways no one among them could imagine. They are searching for a Messiah, a Savior, the Christ, and they believe this Jesus is the One for whom they have been waiting.

It is an odd way for a conquering king to enter the city, to ride on a foal of the donkey, rather than some sort of grand stallion prancing through the crowd. Yet, does this not make Him all the more accessible, all the more believable, all the more relatable? This Jesus is a Man of God and a man of the people, human and yet Divine, and the crowds are ready to ride His shirttails all the way to whatever throne is needed for Him to rule. Little did they know.

How could they possibly know or understand? Their decades and generations of oppression are waiting to be resolved, hopefully by someone other than themselves. They long to be

the dominators, after being nothing for so long. They are welcoming a king to lead them—and He is ushering in a Kingdom no earthly citizenry could imagine. They sing in anticipation of victory—and He is preparing a Victory that can only, finally, be announced in Easter.

The journey to Easter is being made on Jesus' terms, not ours. He is aware of our expectations, but not bound by them. He is arriving to do the Will of God, not His own. We would do well to listen and follow.

Prayer: Lord, prepare in me a heart for your Kingship. Amen.



MONDAY, LENT DAY 35

“Don’t be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. You know the way to the place I’m going.” Thomas asked, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.” John 14:1-7

The pilgrimage of Lent, the journey to Easter, is entering new territory this week—and Jesus is the only one who fully understands the implications of what is building. Looking around the room at those who remain with Him, how does He prepare them for what they will see? How does He strengthen them in a faith which will be sorely tested in the days ahead? What words can He speak which will steady their hearts and give confidence to their souls?

Jesus looks at you and me, where we are, how we are, on the road as we are. He takes into account all that we see each day, all that we will see in the days to come and, when our minds cannot wrap themselves around what is happening, He gives us reason to look up: “Don’t be troubled.”

The events of the world push in upon us via the unrelenting reporting being done, the world grows smaller and control over our days and dreams diminishes by the minute. We long to be faithful to Jesus, to care for others as we pray He cares for us, but the crowds are seemingly still calling to crucify Him, to persecute those who would follow Him and to silence any pretense of Hope beyond that granted by the powers and principalities of the earth. Our courage melts, as Jesus knew it would in His disciples that night. We run away from Him, we run away from ourselves. We deny Him, as we deny our connection to Him. We melt in shame and tears—and He lifts us up with a Hand of Mercy and Tenderness.

Remember, none of this ever depended on you. “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, said Jesus. In this first day of Holy Week, receive the gift He gives and take heart. The best is yet to come.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, grant me reconciling Grace in remembering You are at work here. Amen.



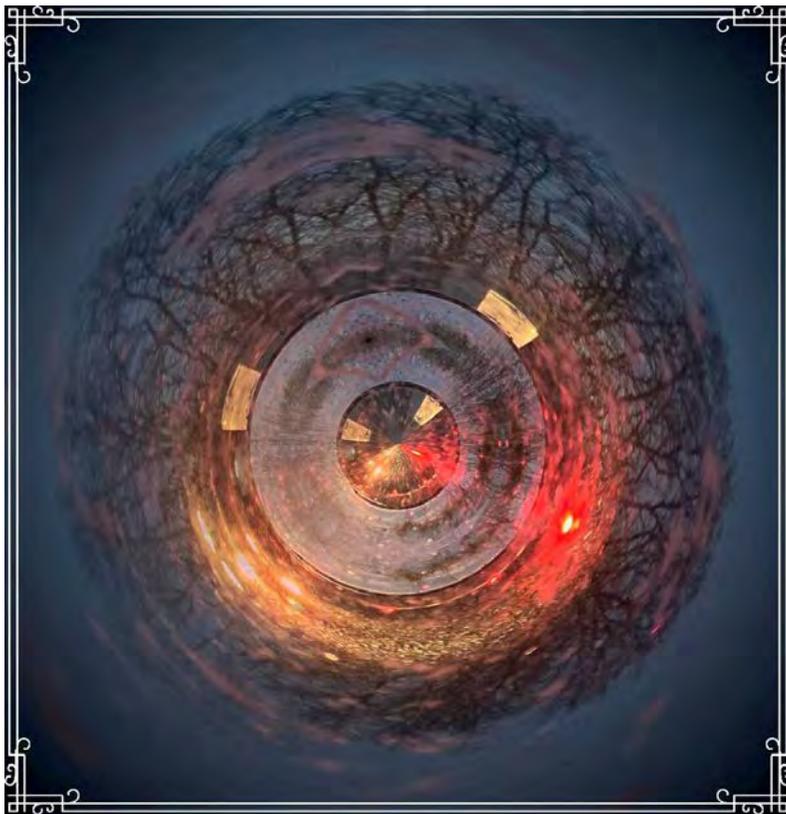
TUESDAY, LENT DAY 36

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. This Advocate is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can’t receive because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You will know him, because he lives with you and will be with you. I won’t leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.

Because I live, you will live, too.” John 14.15-19

Of all the things Jesus could have asked of His disciples in that moment, He asks that if they love Him, “. . . you will keep my commandments.”

‘How hard can that be?’ they thought. If only they knew, if only we knew. That is why Jesus



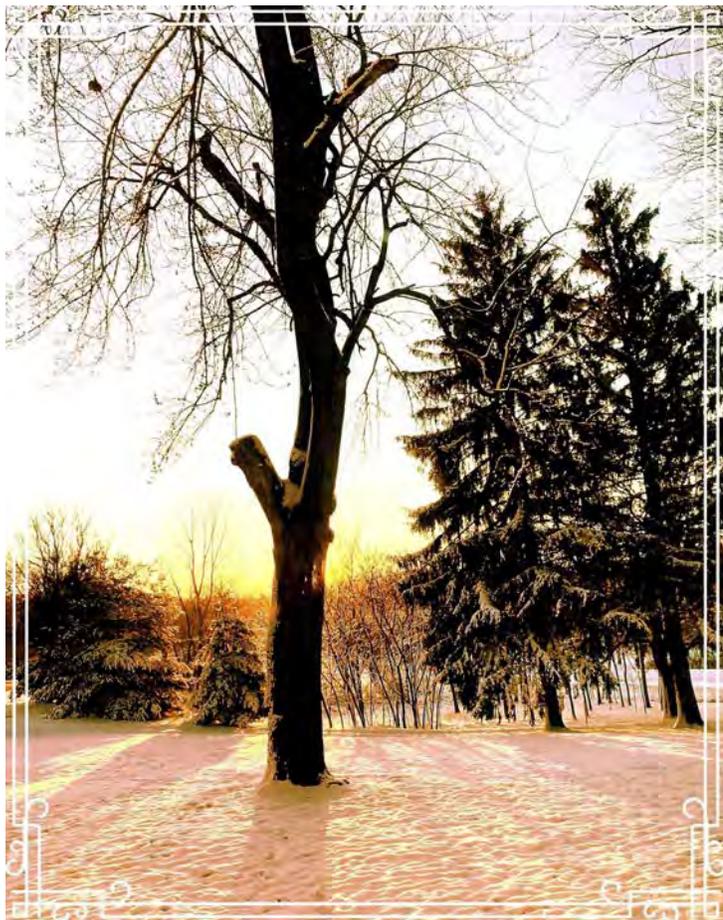
promises the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Companion, because keeping the commandments of Jesus to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength—and our neighbors as ourselves—will require more than any of us can do alone. We need help.

At the heart of the matter is this: In the Love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are never, ever outside the Presence of God. Though circumstances might conspire to cloud that Truth, though crosses may be raised and bodies be laid away, though culture may cause questions to arise and doubts to creep in, still the Advocate will remain vigilant, standing before us in the courtrooms of the world, giving

us the words we need, the faith for which we long to make the good confession, to stand firm in Jesus. At the heart of the matter, it is about God granting more than we could ask, caring more than we deserve and extending a forgiveness far beyond our perception. It is about God.

On this second day of Holy Week, we would do well to ponder the Gift before us, the Gifts in us, the Gifts meant for the world, for such as this was never intended to be a possession. Were that true, Jesus would have not been necessary. Instead, it is the life, ministry and Passion of Jesus which calls us to be bold in our witness to God’s glory. To live anything less is to forfeit our place as children of the Living God—and God does not leave us as orphans. We are kept secure. Dwell in the Presence of the Companion, keeping Jesus’ commandments.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, Loving God, Gracious Jesus, cause me to walk in your Way this day. Amen



WEDNESDAY, LENT DAY 37

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything.

John 15:1-5

To you and me, it is the third day of Holy Week. To the disciples, this was just another day of the week. Little did they know, little do we know.

All this talk of vines and a vineyard keeper, of cutting off unproductive branches and trimming those that are productive to make them do better, seems out of place, counter-intuitive, even misspoken. Still, there it is, on the night He is betrayed, Jesus articulates His relationship with the disciples—and each of us, in a manner we can visualize, understand and live into. Jesus says He is the true vine and we are the branches—we are the branches.

The Church, the Body of Christ, is a branch, He alone is the true Vine.

It is a humbling thought for some, a radical change in identity for others yet, there it is: On the way to the Praetorium, Jesus is the true Vine. Standing before the chief priest, Jesus is the true Vine. Beaten before Pilate, Jesus is the true Vine. Hearing the cries of, "Crucify him!", Jesus is the true Vine. Carrying the cross down the Via Dolorosa, He is the true Vine. Nailed to a cross and lifted up in Golgotha, He is the true Vine. Blood-spattered, dying and helpless before Mary and others who stood there, He is the true Vine. Dead, pierced, taken down and closed up in a tomb, He is the true Vine. Rising from the dead and emptying the tomb of its' power, He is the true Vine. Jesus is the true Vine, we are the branches.

Do not presume to be more than you are, but be everything you were created to be, be branches of the highest productivity and faithfulness. Reflect the Vine of which we are a part, noting that the expectation of the Vineyard Keeper is that the branches are productive. Anything less will be cut off. Yet, even the productive branches will be trimmed to be kept even more sustainable. We have a place, we are part of God's plan of life. Live in the Vine.

Prayer: Strong and Tender Vine, send your Life into my spirit to produce good fruit. Amen.

THURSDAY, LENT DAY 38

MAUNDY THURSDAY

So Jesus got up from the table and took off his robes. Picking up a linen towel, he tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he was wearing . . .

After he washed the disciples' feet, he put on his robes and returned to his place at the table. He said to them, "Do you

know what I've done for you? You call me Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you speak correctly, because I am. If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example: just as I have done, you also must do. I assure you, servants aren't greater than their master, nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them. John 13.4-5, 12-16



The God of all creation stoops and washes the feet of the created. Think about it.

On the night Jesus is betrayed, He pauses in the midst of the meal and does the completely unexpected: He takes on the role of the most lowly servant in the house. He is purveyor and definer of radical hospitality. He welcomes guests and family alike in the home of His heart and, that they not feel the unnecessary grit of life itself, He washes their feet.

God does not flood a world of woe away, God washes the feet of the world, even of the ones who betray.

Jesus does not turn away the ones who do not believe as He does, neither does He make an example of them. He simply takes off his robes, puts on a towel and washes their feet, in the midst of all other feet He washes that night. Think on that as an example.

He could have turned Judas away at the door, He could have pointed at him and excoriated him in front of the others, and He could have justifiably condemned him but, no, Jesus washed His feet. Then, were that not enough, Jesus fed Judas of the bread and wine from the table before he left the room to do what he intended. That moment is poignantly illustrated for the reader as John quietly states, "And it was night."

Jesus said it earlier, He did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. You save the world by washing the feet of others, by being servant of all, not judge. We are not the gatekeepers of the kingdom, we are the servants at the door. On this night when Jesus is betrayed what He does with water and a towel are, perhaps, as powerful as that of Bread and Wine. Go and do likewise on the journey to Easter.

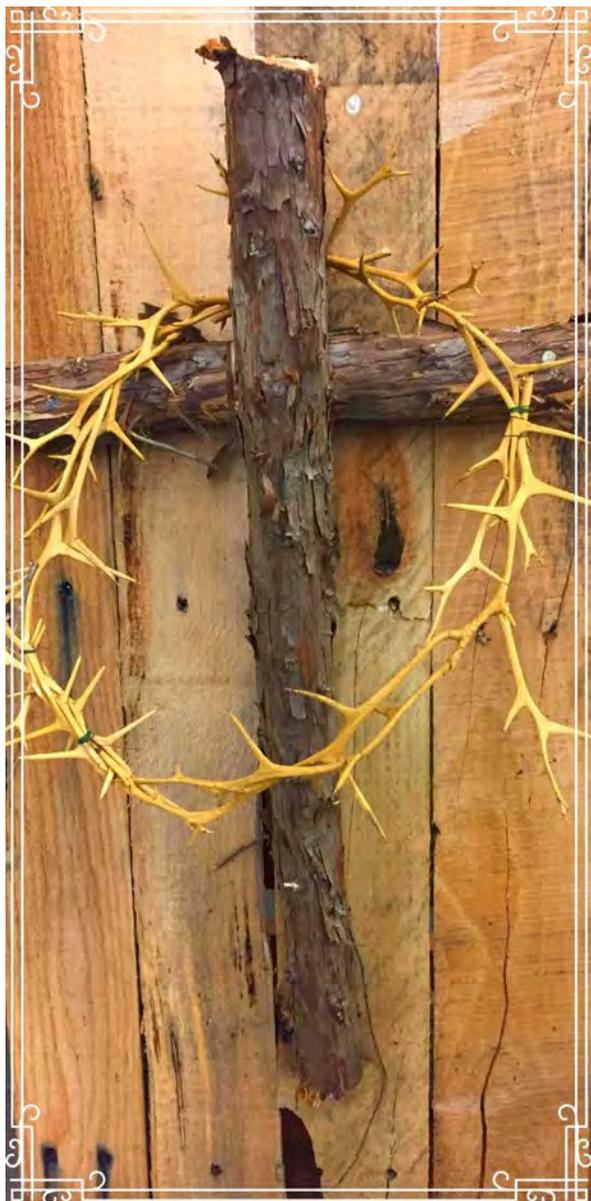
Prayer: Servant of all, Jesus, Lord, teach me to do as You, that You may be glorified. Amen.

FRIDAY, LENT DAY 39

GOOD FRIDAY

The soldiers took Jesus prisoner. Carrying his cross by himself, he went out to a place called Skull Place (in Aramaic, 'Golgotha'). That's where they crucified him—and two others with him, one on each side and Jesus in the middle. Pilate had a public notice written and posted on the cross. It read "Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city and it was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. Therefore, the Jewish chief priests complained to Pilate, "Don't write, 'The king of the Jews' but 'This man said, "I am the king of the Jews.'"" Pilate answered, "What I've written, I've written." John 19.16b-22

. . . After this, knowing that everything was already completed, in order to fulfill the scripture, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was nearby, so the soldiers soaked a sponge in it, placed it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed." Bowing his head, he gave up his life." John 19.28-30



His body was beaten, torn, ripped, shredded. Blood covered Him from the top of His head to the tips of His toes. As if the trial were not enough, the crucifixion only made it worse.

Nails were driven through His wrists and feet. The jarring pain of being on the cross as it is lifted up, then slammed down in the hole to hold it, seared through His being. Blood loss, combined with asphyxiation by drowning, which is what happens in crucifixion when the body can no longer keep the lungs clear of fluid, conspired to do death's work quickly.

The irony of humanity and Divinity in this moment meeting, as the waters of creation present in the birth waters of Mary, gave way to Baptismal waters, which became Living Water, then were transformed into the waters for washing feet—and now, the waters, which once flooded the earth, overwhelm this One, the Beloved Son, who bows His head and dies. It would seem that the world has gotten its' way, that the powers and principalities have the final say, that the ministry of Jesus is now silenced.

His body is removed from the cross and placed in a nearby tomb. The journey to Easter has not ended, it is beginning a new chapter. Watch and pray.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for Your precious Gift. Amen.

SATURDAY, LENT DAY 40

HOLY SATURDAY

Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home. John 19:25-27

In her article in the *Christian Century*, dated January 28, 2022, "We Need A Word for Mothers Whose Children Have Died", Liz Charlotte Grant shares that her research led her to the work of an English professor at Duke University, Karla F. C. Holloway, who herself had lost a child. Struggling with her loss and seeking a word for the feeling inside, Holloway writes that she felt "punished by this empty space of language." Noting that the word, *orphan*, comes from *Sanskrit*, Holloway looked there for another word which might speak to her own soul. There she found the word, *vilomah*, which means, 'against the natural order'. It is the inversion of what is right, against the natural order. It is a beautiful and provocative article to read, especially in a moment such as this. *Vilomah*.

Mary had brought this Child of God into the world. She had struggled through the pains of labor and delivery. She had watched Him grow up, uniquely human, yet truly Divine. She watched as He began His ministry, as people flocked to Him, sometimes overwhelmed Him. She smiled as He tended to the least among God's children and gave life when others gave up on it. She listened to His teaching and took in His leadership among the disciples. She followed as no disciple could, for she was His Mother. *Vilomah*, against the natural order, and Mary felt in her soul the inversion of what is right as only a Mother could. She wept the tears of a Mother and, though Jesus had given her into the care of the beloved disciple, no one could replace Mary's oldest son, God's Son. Today, the journey to Easter is pondering with Mary, *vilomah*, wondering how God's angels will sing of this. We wait with her.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we wait with your Mother, Mary, to see what Easter in You reveals. Amen.



EASTER SUNDAY

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her." John 20.11-18

'Easter' is in hearing your name on the lips of Jesus after searching for Him and weeping for Him. 'Easter' is in becoming Jesus' first Apostle, as one who is sent to proclaim Good News to others. 'Easter' is in experiencing Life, when what you sought was death, and in discovering Hope when all your heart was left with was hopelessness. 'Easter' is finding the Sonrise in the Sunrise and all things being made right in the Will of God.

Easter is Jesus, birthed in power, risen from the dead, making all things new. Easter, Jesus, will meet you when most You need Him. Rejoice! Jesus lives and Easter reigns! Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Holy God of Easter, thank You for the Risen Christ in my life. May I serve Him, You, all my days. For it is in Jesus' Name I joyfully pray as the journey to Easter continues. Amen.

