

THE SANCTUARY FOR **Lent 2023**

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ASH WEDNESDAY

February 22

Psalm 103:15-18

*The days of a human life are like grass:
they bloom like a wildflower;
but when the wind blows through it, it's gone;
even the ground where it stood doesn't remember it.
But the LORD's faithful love is from forever ago to forever from now
for those who honor him.
And God's righteousness reaches to the grandchildren
of those who keep his covenant
and remember to keep his commands.*

On warm summer days I sometimes sit on my front porch when I drink my morning coffee. As I look over the bright green and growing grass, I'm often reminded that it will soon be time to mow again. It seems in those moments that the grass will never stop growing, and yet, inevitably, winter comes and the grass is stopped in its tracks by the frost.

The season of Lent begins with a similar reminder: Ash Wednesday. The imposition of ashes calls our attention to the fact that, like the grass, our human lives are temporary. The psalmist compares our lives to a wildflower that blooms and then is blown away by the wind.

Yet this psalm offers a reason to hope: God's faithfulness is not temporary. While our lives may be brief, the faithfulness of God to us, and to our descendants, continues long after we are gone. During this Lenten season, may we hold and reflect on both of these truths: Life is short, and God is with us.

*Take some deep breaths.
On the breath in, say, "Life is short."
On the breath out, say, "God is with us."*

Thursday, February 23

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
(vv. 12-13 printed below)*

*Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your hearts,
with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;
tear your hearts
and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is merciful and compassionate,
very patient, full of faithful love,
and ready to forgive.*

The prophet Joel has some bad news to deliver. “The day of the LORD is coming,” and it isn’t going to be a good thing. It will be a day of darkness, not light, because of the injustice that has become commonplace in the land. Yet, Joel offers hope in a picture of a God that is chomping at the bit to extend forgiveness, a God whose faithful love for us remains always steady. The solution, Joel says, is to return. *Return* here is actually the Hebrew word for “repent.” It’s the image that we’re heading in a direction, then decide to turn around and go the opposite way. The truth is that the faith journey is marked by regular moments of repentance, of changing direction to move toward life and transformation.

*What has your relationship been like with the word repent?
Can you think of moments in which you’ve done this about-face?*

Friday, February 24

2 Corinthians 5:20–6:10
(vv. 5:20–6:2 printed below)

So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God. Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. He says, I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation. Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!

If I'm honest, I can be a bit of a procrastinator. Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow, right? Some things, however, carry an urgency within them. *Today* is the day of salvation, Paul says. The opportunity to experience transformation can't wait, because life is both short and precious. We have this opportunity to become all that we can become, to partner with God to experience the fullness of life, and to join God in the work of transformation in the world while we are here. Lent is about this urgency, this focus. In these days we are taking intentional time to center ourselves and engage the opportunity before us.

What do you hope to gain from the Lenten journey this year?
Are there areas in which you are longing for transformation?
How will you begin this journey?

Saturday, February 25

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

(vv. 1-4 printed below)

“Be careful that you don’t practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

“Whenever you give to the poor, don’t blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.”

When I was a kid, someone gave me a small chunk of pyrite, which you might know by its other name, *fool’s gold*. It looked gold-ish, but the chemical composition is just different. That notwithstanding, I’m sure more than a couple of people have been fooled by the similarities in appearance between pyrite and gold. Jesus is warning his disciples (and us) against a kind of approach to ritual and practice that is like fool’s gold. It seems really spiritual and righteous, but it’s actually void of transforming power. The point is not about what people see, but about what’s happening inside of a person.

*How can you be intentional and focused on internal transformation during this season?
What practices do you find most engaging and helpful?*

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

February 26

Genesis 2:15-17

The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it. The LORD God commanded the human, "Eat your fill from all of the garden's trees; but don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it, you will die!"

The story of the Bible doesn't get very far before introducing a tension. That's an understatement; it's actually not even two full chapters into the first book. God creates a human out of the earth, places that human in a lush garden, and calls him to care for and cultivate the land. This first human is a co-creator with God, a holy mixture of soil and spirit. What could possibly go wrong? Enter the tension. This human is offered the generous bounty of the garden, except for this one particular tree. The fruit of this tree is off limits because it is destructive. This is the tension with which we humans live. We can pursue that which brings life and fulfillment or that which takes away life and ultimately brings pain. The season of Lent is about this choice, about acknowledging the ways we've chosen the path that moves us away from living our most abundant life and listening to the call of the Spirit as it invites us toward that which makes us fully alive.

Take some time to reflect on this tension between that which brings you life and that which takes it from you. How are you fulfilling your role as a co-creator with God, and what gets in the way of your participation?

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Monday, February 27

Genesis 3:1-7

(vv. 6-7 printed below)

The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves.

When the first humans eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they discover it lives up to its name. Their eyes are opened, the text says, and they realize that they are naked. The first loss from eating the forbidden fruit is the loss of innocence and unreserved vulnerability. This new knowing causes them to fear being judged by the other (that's the whole good and evil part). They respond by cobbling together a makeshift covering out of fig leaves, but even that isn't sufficient.

So they hide from one another, and eventually even God. It doesn't take a lot of effort for me to have empathy for these first humans. After all, I know exactly what it feels like to fear vulnerability (and I bet you do too), to wonder what others are thinking about me, or if they'd even still like me if they knew the real me. That fear that we know all too well in our own experience is the same fear that sends these first humans into hiding.

Take time today to reflect on how you feel when you think about vulnerability.

With whom can you be your most authentic, vulnerable self?

What are some barriers to vulnerability that you feel in yourself?

How does a lack of vulnerability harm us?

Tuesday, February 28

Psalm 32

(vv. 3-5 printed below)

*When I kept quiet, my bones wore out;
I was groaning all day long—
every day, every night!—
because your hand was heavy upon me.
My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. Selah
So I admitted my sin to you;
I didn't conceal my guilt.
"I'll confess my sins to the LORD," is what I said.
Then you removed the guilt of my sin. Selah*

One of the most important parts of a movie or TV show is the soundtrack. Finding the right songs to enhance the action or dialogue happening on screen helps create an experience that connects at a deeper level. If the Genesis 3 story had a soundtrack, I'd imagine Psalm 32 to be on that record. This psalm expresses so much of the feeling and drama of the Eden story. Verses three through five are especially powerful. The psalmist writes of groaning day and night, of feeling the weariness in one's bones. This evokes the scene in Genesis 3 of the first people sewing up fig leaves and hiding among the trees of the garden. Then, they emerge from hiding at God's invitation, and find, as the psalmist does, that they are safe in their vulnerability with God. The fear of guilt and shame is met with compassion and covering. The voice of shame had convinced them that God would abandon them if they were vulnerable, but God did the exact opposite.

*How does the voice of guilt and shame work in your experience?
How has it affected your life and relationship with God?
How would silencing that voice change your life?*

Wednesday, March 1

Romans 5:12-19
(vv. 17-19 printed below)

If death ruled because of one person's failure, those who receive the multiplied grace and the gift of righteousness will even more certainly rule in life through the one person Jesus Christ.

So now the righteous requirements necessary for life are met for everyone through the righteous act of one person, just as judgment fell on everyone through the failure of one person. Many people were made righteous through the obedience of one person, just as many people were made sinners through the disobedience of one person.

The problems in the world all have something in common: they are the products of human beings behaving subhumanly. To put a finer point on it, they are the result of what happens when human beings eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When we take it upon ourselves to judge, to decide who lives and who dies, who counts and who doesn't, things get ugly in the world. In Romans 5, Paul uses Adam as a representative for all of humanity. We've all eaten from that tree, he's arguing, and the results are before our eyes. That's the bad news. The good news, Paul argues, is that while the problems of the world are human products, so is the solution. Specifically, Paul says, Jesus also represents all of humanity. Instead of grasping the destructive fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, Jesus embraces vulnerability, and in doing so calls all human beings out of hiding. The question for us is, how do we want to be human: the Adam way or the Jesus way?

*Today as you are faced with decisions or responses, take a moment to ask this question:
What is the Adam way here, and what is the Jesus way?*

Thursday, March 2

Matthew 4:1-4

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread."

Jesus replied, "It's written, People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God."

The Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus as a new Israel. That becomes pretty apparent when, right after his baptism (crossing the sea), he is sent into the wilderness for forty days (Israel spent forty years wandering in the wilderness). This forty-day period of time is significant in Matthew, because during these days Jesus will face temptation. This temptation isn't just to somehow bend the rules slightly. It's a temptation that gets to the core of his mission. How will he go about being the Messiah? Many translations render the tempter's statement as a question: "If you are God's son . . ." Jesus has just experienced the affirmation of God in a dramatic way. He was baptized, and afterward the heavens opened and the voice of God affirmed Jesus as the "beloved Son." Now, the tempter attacks that identity. Are you really God's son? Can God be trusted to take care of you? Just act on your own, take things into your own hands. Sounds like a certain snake in Genesis 3, doesn't it? Jesus passes the first test, because he knows and trusts who he is.

*How differently would you live and move in the world if you trusted,
at the core of your being, that you were a beloved child of God?
Today, remind yourself often that this is exactly who you are.*

Friday, March 3

Matthew 4:5-7

After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone."

Jesus replied, "Again it's written, Don't test the Lord your God."

I have a confession to make: I am unbelievably scared of heights. *Terrified* is probably a better word for it. Even if I am in no danger of falling, if I look down, I get dizzy and nauseous. I have no idea how Jesus might have felt about heights, but this particular temptation isn't about facing that fear. The tempter once again zeroes in on Jesus's identity. "Since you are God's Son" is less of a statement and more of a question. This time the temptation to somehow prove that he really is the beloved Son involves a direct challenge to the relationship Jesus shared with God. "Does God really have your back? If so, make God prove it." This temptation, no doubt, came again in Gethsemane and then again on Calvary. Is God with you, Jesus? Then prove it. Once again, Jesus responds from a deep reservoir of trust. He knows who he is, and he knows and trusts the love of God. The second temptation fails.

Today, notice the times and moments in which you feel the need to prove something.

How much time and energy do we spend trying to prove ourselves—that we are valuable, worthy, loved, or belong? What if we went into the world today living from a place that trusted our belonging and value? How would that change our experience?

Saturday, March 4

Matthew 4:8-11

Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."

Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him." The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Have you ever attempted to take a shortcut? Not too long ago I was driving home on the highway when traffic gradually began to slow until it hit a dead stop. My GPS alerted me that there was an alternative to the route I was driving, one that would shave off some time and put me home faster. Unfortunately, a lot of other people had the same idea. I ended up trading one traffic jam for another, and I actually arrived home later than if I had just been more patient and stayed on the original route. This final temptation is similar; it's about a shortcut. Jesus is not going to fit the familiar mold. This messiah won't be violent or take up the sword against his enemies. Instead, he will break himself open and pour himself out in love for them. If that sounds costly, it's because it is. The tempter offers a shortcut: "You want to lead a kingdom? Worship me and you'll get that and more." Jesus sees through the temptation. He's resolved to be a different kind of messiah. The third temptation fails, and Jesus is ready to take his work public.

*As this week comes to a close, reflect on the journey we've taken.
What has stood out for you? What have you noticed about yourself?
Take a few moments to jot down some of the thoughts
and feelings this week has raised for you.*

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

March 5

Genesis 12:1-4a

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

*I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you."*

Abram left just as the LORD told him, and Lot went with him.

I have friends who get frustrated by spoilers. If they know what's going to happen, they'd prefer to just not watch, read, or experience whatever has been spoiled. I struggle with suspense. I love spoilers. When I'm watching a movie that has me on the edge of my seat, when the tension has me at the breaking point, I give in and google the plot. Then I can watch the rest of the movie from a more relaxed place. Yet, life doesn't offer that to us, does it? We are creating the future moment by moment. All of this makes me think about Abram. When we meet him we are told very little about him, except that he had been told to pull up stakes and leave the familiar. Where would he go? The only clue proved by God is that Abram is to go to "the land that I will show you." Abram's response is remarkable: "Abram left . . ." He faithfully stepped into the unknown, and the rest is history.

*Take a moment and imagine yourself in Abram's shoes
when he heard the call to go. How do you feel?
What emotions and responses does this journey into the unknown raise for you.*

Monday, March 6

Psalm 121

*I raise my eyes toward the mountains.
Where will my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the maker of heaven and earth.
God won't let your foot slip.
Your protector won't fall asleep on the job.
No! Israel's protector
never sleeps or rests!
The LORD is your protector;
the LORD is your shade right beside you.
The sun won't strike you during the day;
neither will the moon at night.
The LORD will protect you from all evil;
God will protect your very life.
The LORD will protect you on your journeys—
whether going or coming—
from now until forever from now.*

Abram was called to undertake a journey that came with a promise. His obedience, God told him, would transform not just his family tree, but the entire human family. This psalm, just like Abram's story, does not promise that the journey will be without difficulty. There will surely be darkness and enemies along the way. Yet it does promise that God goes with us, that there is light in the darkness, and that when we do justice we are leaving a transformative legacy for future generations.

*Think of someone whose faithfulness and courage has been impactful on your life.
Take a moment to write a short note, email, or text to let that person
know about what she or he has meant to your journey.*

Tuesday, March 7

Romans 4:1-5

So what are we going to say? Are we going to find that Abraham is our ancestor on the basis of genealogy? Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Workers' salaries aren't credited to them on the basis of an employer's grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous.

When I was younger, I gave little thought to my genealogy. It never crossed my mind to wonder about relatives past who lived their lives and, as a result, made mine possible. The older I get, however, the more curious I've become. I've even considered doing one of those DNA tests that would help me fill in the missing branches of my family tree. Which leads me to Romans 4, in which Paul is talking to two groups of people: Jews and Gentiles. One group can trace their genealogy back to Abraham, and one cannot. DNA, Paul says, isn't the only way to participate in Abraham's ancestry. There is another way: faith. For Paul, participation in the Abrahamic family tree happens when we respond faithfully, as he did.

*What does it mean to you to "have faith"?
Is it a mental exercise or is it something more?
How does that look in your life practically?*

Wednesday, March 8

Romans 4:13-17

The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. As it is written: I have appointed you to be the father of many nations. So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence.

There are so many things that can be a source of division in the world. Politics, religion, sports, the person cast to play the next Batman or James Bond—and those are perhaps just the tip of a much larger iceberg. The ancient world wasn't all that different. Paul is writing to a community that is made up of two groups (Jews and Gentiles) that, previously, didn't have much in common. How could they become one community, considering their differences? The solution, Paul said, was the faith they shared. Their faith in Jesus offered a way to transcend their differences, making them all descendants of Abraham.

Why would Paul appeal to faith here?

How might shared faith enable a community to overcome division?

What does this mean for us, today?

Thursday, March 9

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good that we’re here. If you want, I’ll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!” Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe.

But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anybody about the vision until the Human One is raised from the dead.”

The story of the Transfiguration is full of symbolic meaning that invites us to see the Law and the Prophets as being united in Jesus. It must have been a powerful, meaningful moment for Peter, James, and John to witness. We can see that in Peter’s impulse to camp out there. We’ve all felt that, haven’t we? A desire to just stay put, to keep things the way they are. Yet, just as with Abraham, Peter learns that faith always invites us to keep moving. We never arrive, we are always on the journey. These kinds of moments aren’t intended to stop us, but to propel us on the path ahead.

*Think back over your faith journey.
Have there been moments like the one in today’s reading?
How did it serve to strengthen you for the road ahead?*

Friday, March 10

John 3:1-8

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “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 anew, 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?”

Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

I bet we’ve all been in Nicodemus’s shoes before. He wants to understand and experience what Jesus is teaching, but he’s unable to see beyond what he’s always known. Yet, that is where the Spirit seems to always lead us—like Abraham, Peter, James, John, and Nicodemus—to leave the place in which we’ve settled and to follow the Spirit’s wind wherever it blows.

*Is there a place in your life right now where you sense the Spirit
inviting you to pull up stakes and follow into the unknown?
How does that feel? What would happen if you said “yes”?*

Saturday, March 11

John 3:9-17

Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"

Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

John 3:16 might be the best-known verse in all of the New Testament. In context, it's about the call to follow the Spirit into new adventures. That's how Jesus explains what he's doing to Nicodemus. He will be lifted up and, in doing so, draw people into the adventure of full and abundant life, beyond the boundaries of the known. This isn't an invitation to just believe some doctrinal points, but to participate in the something new the Spirit is doing in the world.

How does the meaning of faith change if it's not primarily about maintaining beliefs, but instead about joining in on an adventure?

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday, March 12

Exodus 17:1-7

The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the LORD commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses said to them, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the LORD?"

But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?"

So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me."

The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel's elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink." Moses did so while Israel's elders watched. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the LORD, asking, "Is the LORD really with us or not?"

The Israelites learned a powerful lesson during their time of wandering in the wilderness: God not only liberated them, but also journeyed with them. As you think about those Abraham-like moments, when you pull up stakes and follow God to who-knows-where, the good news is that you are never alone. The God-who-is-with-us always journeys with you.

*Can you think of a time you were aware of God's with-ness on your journey?
What did that realization mean to you? How did it urge you to keep going?*

Monday, March 13

Psalm 95

(vv. 6-9 printed below)

*Come, let's worship and bow down!
Let's kneel before the LORD, our maker!
He is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
the sheep in his hands.*

*If only you would listen to his voice right now!
"Don't harden your hearts
like you did at Meribah,
like you did when you were at Massah,
in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me
and scrutinized me,
even though they had already seen my acts.*

My kids know exactly what to do to melt my heart. They know that with a smile and a cuddle I'll likely become putty in their hands. It usually has something to do with them wanting a piece of candy before breakfast or dinner. In today's reading the psalmist recounts the story from yesterday, a time when the people's fear led to mistrust the provision of God in the wilderness. Through the words of the psalmist, God implores, "Don't harden your hearts . . ." Perhaps one of the goals of the spiritual life is to keep our hearts soft and open. After all, it is difficult to transform a heart of stone.

*How do you keep your heart soft and open?
Are there practices or experiences in which you regularly
engage to ensure your heart remains alive and beating?*

Tuesday, March 14

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

We are to take pride in our problems? That's an interesting phrase, isn't it? I don't think Paul is telling us that it's our spiritual responsibility to go looking for trouble, or that if life is going, well, we are somehow not doing the right things. I think he is making the opposite argument, actually. Just because you have troubles doesn't mean you are somehow doing the wrong thing. Sometimes doing the right thing—that which is just, generous, and compassionate—might cost us; yet Paul invites us to see that reality through the lens of God's love and hope for the world. Through that lens Paul was able to see his struggles differently, and it encouraged and strengthened him as he kept going.

*Is there a struggle or difficulty you're experiencing right now?
How does seeing it through the lens Paul offers us
in Romans 5 change the way you understand it?*

Wednesday, March 15

Romans 5:6-11

While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. So, now that we have been made righteous by his blood, we can be even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. If we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies, now that we have been reconciled, how much more certain is it that we will be saved by his life? And not only that: we even take pride in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom we now have a restored relationship with God.

It's very easy for religion to become a kind of bartering system. An approach like, "I'll do x if God does y" is very familiar to me, and I bet it might be for you too. What if that's not how it works at all? What if, as Paul invites us to see, God does the heavy lifting? What if our only responsibility is to trust the love of God, to open our hearts to be transformed by this love, and then to live out of that love in the world? That might be a message worthy of being called good news!

*What would happen if we shifted away from
the barter system approach to our relationship with God?
How would that affect the way we see God,
ourselves, and the world around us?*

Thursday, March 16

John 4:4-12

(vv. 9-12 printed below)

The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.)

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, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

Recently we had chicken for dinner, and while our kids usually have healthy appetites, on this occasion one of my daughters ate even more than she usually might. My wife said to her, "If you keep eating you might turn into a chicken!" My daughter responded by screaming, "Noooooo! I don't want to be a chicken!" She didn't realize her mom was joking.

Something similar is happening in John 4. Jesus isn't joking, but he is misunderstood. This Samaritan woman is offered living water, and she starts looking for Jesus's bucket. She doesn't yet understand that he's speaking of a different kind of water. Maybe the journey of faith is about developing an awareness of what's happening below the surface and beyond what meets the eye.

*Have you experienced this kind of awareness?
What are some practices that might help us develop and nurture it?*

Friday, March 17

John 4:13-26

(vv. 19-24 printed below)

The woman said, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You and your people worship what you don't know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. But the time is coming—and is here!—when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth."

One of the most important lessons I have learned as a parent is that it really doesn't matter what we are doing; it's actually far more important that I am present and attentive with my kids. I can often get so focused on the experiences I want them to have that I lose track of the thing they really need: to know I see them, hear them, and am with them. In our text today, Jesus is asked about a hot-button issue between two groups of people with differences. This woman asks which is the proper place to worship God. Jesus seems to assert that place is not as important as presence. Wherever we are can be a proper place to experience and engage God. Too often, our focus on all the accoutrements—style, location, time—can cause us to miss the *why* of our gathering.

*Can you remember a time the where or how got in the way of the why for you?
How do we resist that tendency of misplaced focus?*

Saturday, March 18

John 4:27-42

(vv. 34-35 printed below)

Jesus said to them, "I am fed by doing the will of the one who sent me and by completing his work. Don't you have a saying, 'Four more months and then it's time for harvest'? Look, I tell you: open your eyes and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest.

Not only do we develop assumptions about the where or how (as we saw yesterday), but, more often than not, those assumptions also extend to the who. For Jesus's followers in this story, the who and the why are about God's embrace of the Samaritans. Yet, throughout Christian history we have forgotten this lesson many times. We've developed rigid understandings of who, exactly, God might be including in God's faithful love. Jesus invites us to see that God's love extends far beyond the boundaries and limitations we've set for it. When we begin to see God's love for everyone, everywhere, it transforms how we show up in the world.

*Today, reflect on the words to the hymn,
"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy,"
by Frederick Faber (1854):*

*There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.*

*There is welcome for the sinner,
and more graces for the good!
There is mercy with the Savior,
there is healing in his blood.*

*For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.**

* "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," Frederick W. Faber, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 121.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 19

1 Samuel 16:1-13
(v. 7 printed below)

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I haven't selected him. God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the LORD sees into the heart."

Do you remember those Magic Eye pictures that used to be popular? They looked like a big blur of color and shapes, but if you were to concentrate an image would emerge. When the picture became clear you'd often hear someone exclaim, "I can see it!" To be honest, I could never see what I was supposed to see. It always looked like a blur of color to me. In today's reading, Samuel is doing something not unlike staring at a Magic Eye picture. He's trying to discern who might become the next king of Israel. Initially, he gravitates toward candidates who "look" the part of a king. Yet, God tells him that it takes more than looking the part; it will require a certain kind of heart. Part of the journey of faith is learning to see, isn't it? It's about focusing our vision on that which actually matters, that which has the potential to transform us, and as a result, the world around us.

Today, embrace this prayer in your interactions:

Give me eyes that see beneath, behind, and below the surface.

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Monday, March 20

Psalm 23

(vv. 1-4 printed below)

The LORD is my shepherd.

I lack nothing.

He lets me rest in grassy meadows;

he leads me to restful waters;

he keeps me alive.

He guides me in proper paths

for the sake of his good name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no danger because you are with me.

Your rod and your staff—

they protect me.

As a pastor, I can't begin to tell you the number of times I've shared this psalm with people who are experiencing a dark, difficult moment in their lives. It's full of hope and comfort—that God cares for us like a shepherd cares for sheep, guiding and sustaining us throughout our lives. Verse four comes like a record scratching. It startles us. What happened to the grassy meadows, restful waters, and proper paths? Now, we enter the darkest valley. Older translations even render that phrase, "The valley of the shadow of death." The truth is—and Lent is an annual reminder of this truth for us—we will all face dark moments. Trips through the darkest valley are a universal guarantee for all human beings. The psalmist, however, offers hope: none of us walk through that darkest valley alone. We are guided and cared for by a Shepherd.

How have you experienced God during the darkest valleys of life?

Can you think of an experience in which you became aware of God's guidance and care?

Tuesday, March 21

Ephesians 5:8-14

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your life as children of light. Light produces fruit that consists of every sort of goodness, justice, and truth. Therefore, test everything to see what's pleasing to the Lord, and don't participate in the unfruitful actions of darkness. Instead, you should reveal the truth about them. It's embarrassing to even talk about what certain persons do in secret. But everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light. Everything that is revealed by the light is light. Therefore, it says, Wake up, sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Sometimes one of my kids will wake up in the middle of the night from a bad dream. When we get to them they are often trembling, crying, and in desperate need of snuggles from Mom or Dad. In those moments, in the darkness and fear, we become a light for them. We become a place of hope and trust that allows them to calm down and know they aren't alone. Light dispels darkness, after all. In Ephesians, the writer says that followers of Jesus don't just carry a light into the world; we *become* light in the world. That's a big difference. As we tend and cultivate our light by being kind, compassionate, generous, and loving, we can dispel the darkness of hate, indifference, and greed. The result isn't that we send people running for cover in shame, but that when they experience the light they will long to remain in its warmth.

*How can you embody the transformative light talked about in today's reading?
What are some practical ways to be that kind of person today?*

Wednesday, March 22

John 9:1-7

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.

The question "why" is a natural one for us to ask. We want to make meaning out of the events—especially the tragedies—of life. Too often, however, that can lead to all sorts of unintended consequences, like searching for a place to lay blame. Jesus's disciples are seeking to find meaning, and the source, of this unnamed man's blindness. Jesus redirects their focus. This isn't about blame. Instead, it's about doing the work of being light in the world. The truth is we may never really know "why" things happen the way they do, but what we can control is our response, the "what now," to the things that happen.

Are there situations you are aware of in which Jesus's invitation to think about the "what now" would offer light and hope? How will you respond?

Thursday, March 23

John 9:8-17

(vv. 8-11 printed below)

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."

Have you ever watched one of those makeover shows? Someone is nominated by a friend or family member to get a totally new look—new hair, new clothes, the works. The truth is, however, those shows aren't really just about someone getting a new look on the exterior. Most often these shows also address the interior, about how the person feels about himself or herself. That's the real work, isn't it? Which brings us to today's reading. The formerly blind man has stumped those who knew him previously. He can't be the same person, can he? He looks the same in some ways, but in others he seems radically different. It's just how transformation works. The exterior may not change in major ways, but the interior is being renovated in every way imaginable.

*Again, today we are invited to a new awareness, a new way of seeing.
How do you see differently now than you did in the past?*

Friday, March 24

John 9:18-34

(vv. 24-25 printed below)

Therefore, they called a second time for the man who had been born blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner."

The man answered, "I don't know whether he's a sinner. Here's what I do know: I was blind and now I see."

Every time I am on an airplane I have the same thought during takeoff: I have no idea why this works, but I am so glad it does. Of course I know how, theoretically. That's easy enough to look up. But at a deeper level, it's so strange to me that this huge hunk of metal full of hundreds of people and their luggage can leave the ground and reach 35,000 feet above the earth. When we first met the unnamed man who was born blind, he was the subject of debate among Jesus's disciples. Whose fault was it? Whose sin caused this, his parents or his? Once again, but now no longer blind, the man is the subject of debate among some of the religious community. How had this happened? Who healed him? Who is this Jesus? I love his response when they press him. Is Jesus a sinner? A Law breaker? This man doesn't know who or how. All he knows is that he was blind, but now he sees. He knows his experience, how he's been transformed, and that is enough for him.

*What is your "I once was blind, but now I see" story?
Chances are you have more than one.*

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Saturday, March 25

John 9:35-41

Jesus heard they had expelled the man born blind. Finding him, Jesus said, "Do you believe in the Human One?"

He answered, "Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him."

Jesus said, "You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you."

The man said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped Jesus.

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."

Have you ever assumed something was a certain way, only to find out it wasn't? This happens to me with song lyrics sometimes. I'll belt out a song in my car, singing the lyrics I think are correct, only to find out later that I've been singing the wrong words the whole time. I think Jesus is getting at something similar in today's reading. There are those who assume they can see and, conversely, that others are blind. Jesus says that his work is to reveal the truth, that often it's those who claim to see—who claim to have all the answers—who don't see. At the same time, Jesus says, many that are assumed to be blind are actually those who can really see. This is a paradox at the heart of Jesus's teaching, and it should give us pause to reflect. Is it possible that I assume I am seeing clearly, when in fact, I am not?

Meditate or pray this invitation:

Examine me, God! Look at my heart!

Put me to the test! Know my anxious thoughts!

*Look to see if there is any idolatrous way in me,
then lead me on the eternal path!*

(Psalm 139:23-24)

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 26

Ezekiel 37:1-14

(vv. 1-6 printed below)

The LORD's power overcame me, and while I was in the LORD's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?"

I said, "LORD God, only you know."

He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the LORD's word! The LORD God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the LORD."

When you think about new possibilities, I bet you'd tend to think more about delivery rooms than cemeteries, right? Perhaps a freshly planted and fertilized field in springtime, not the cold hard ground of that same field in winter? That makes sense, and yet God upends that notion in today's reading. Israel had been defeated and exiled. That's what this valley of bones symbolized to Ezekiel—dry, brittle, void of life or potential. Yet, God is calling Ezekiel to be a messenger of hope, of possibility, that new life can be possible.

Have you ever felt like those dry bones?

The good news is that in these valley-of-dry-bones-moments, hope is never far away. What would it look like for you to open yourself up to the possibility that hope brings?

Monday, March 27

Psalm 130

*I cry out to you from the depths, LORD—
my Lord, listen to my voice!*

Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!

*If you kept track of sins, LORD—
my Lord, who would stand a chance?*

*But forgiveness is with you—
that's why you are honored.*

I hope, LORD.

*My whole being hopes,
and I wait for God's promise.*

*My whole being waits for my Lord—
more than the night watch waits for morning;
yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!*

Israel, wait for the LORD!

*Because faithful love is with the LORD;
because great redemption is with our God!*

*He is the one who will redeem Israel
from all its sin.*

Today's reading is a psalm of ascent, meaning it would have been sung by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for a festival. It would also be sung while the pilgrims ascended Mount Zion, the hilltop home of the temple. Notice how this psalm is brimming with hope—that God will be a source of forgiveness and faithful love. Yet, there is also a waiting involved. On the journey to the temple, the psalmist must wait patiently for the experience that they are anticipating once they arrive in Jerusalem. Patience is a virtue, but it's also a tough practice to learn (at least for me).

*Are you waiting for something right now? What?
What are you learning while you wait?*

Tuesday, March 28

Romans 8:6-11

The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't. People who are self-centered aren't able to please God.

But you aren't self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, they don't belong to him. If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.

It's always exciting to discover you have something in common with someone else. I'm originally from the Appalachian region. I grew up in a town on the border of Kentucky and West Virginia. When I happen to see a license plate or a decal of some sort from back home, I immediately feel like, whatever our differences on other things, that person and I share an experience of "home." In today's reading, Paul says that we share something incredible in common with Jesus: the same Spirit that raised him up from death also lives with us. We share an experience of God with Jesus, and for Paul that means we are empowered to do Jesus-like things in the world.

Read verse 11 again.

What does it mean to you that you share the Spirit in common with Jesus?

Wednesday, March 29

John 11:1-16

(vv. 5-15 printed below)

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?"

Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world. But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them."

He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up."

The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well." They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death.

Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him."

In today's reading, we become privy to one side of a story. Jesus hears of Lazarus's illness but decides to stay put. I wonder about the other side, the Mary and Martha perspective. What must it have been like to be kept waiting, wondering, hoping? Waiting isn't something I am particularly good at, but sometimes it's what life brings us. We don't always have a choice when it comes to the circumstances of life; our choices are found in how we respond.

What can we do when we are left waiting?

How can waiting be a transformative, even if frustrating, experience?

Thursday, March 30

John 11:17-27

(vv. 20-27 printed below)

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

Today's reading reminds me of that valley of dry bones, and God's question to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live again?" That's basically what Jesus asks Martha. "Do you believe that your brother can live again?" It's that question of possibility, isn't it? Jesus is asking if Martha, and by extension us, has the capacity to trust that even in the most dire and impossible moments, new life can find its way to us. Can these bones live? Can Lazarus? Can we? That is the question. Jesus invites us to open ourselves to the possibilities that, even after four days of death and decay, resurrection and life can be ours.

As you read today's passage, place yourself in the text as a stand-in for Martha.

Allow yourself to play that role, to really enter the story.

What do you feel? How do Jesus's words affect you?

Friday, March 31

John 11:28-37

(vv. 32-37 printed below)

When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, "Where have you laid him?"

They replied, "Lord, come and see."

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?"

There's something so powerful about this scene. That Jesus loved Lazarus is not in doubt. In fact, we are told three times in this story of Jesus's love for Lazarus and his sisters (11:3, 5, 36). That love finds Jesus standing outside his tomb, weeping. We might wonder why Jesus would respond with tears. After all, he's about to raise Lazarus back to life. Yet, even with hope, loss always hurts. Tears must be shed; grief must be grieved. In the example of Jesus, we are invited to feel and process our feelings, all the while holding on to hope. The two are not mutually exclusive. Hope that is real and trustworthy doesn't avoid the shadows of life but walks into them with us.

*Why is it important for us to see Jesus embodying both grief and hope together?
Have you experienced them being at work simultaneously?*

Saturday, April 1

John 11:38-45

(vv. 41-44 printed below)

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 them, "Untie him and let him go."

In my experience the spiritual life is a process. There isn't a moment in which we get everything all at once, emptied out onto us from a heavenly dump truck. It's about a continual journey of learning, trusting, and growing. That's what I see in this story of Lazarus's resurrection. He comes out of the tomb alive once more, yet he is still bound up in the graveclothes. Those have to be removed, too, for him to be set free. The journey for us is about removing those things that bind us and keep us from experiencing the fullness of transformation. It takes time, of course. The good news is, we are on the way.

*Have you experienced an awareness of graveclothes during this season of Lent?
What are some of the barriers to growth and transformation that need to be removed?*

HOLY WEEK-PALM SUNDAY

April 2

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
(vv. 19-25 printed below)

*Open the gates of righteousness for me
so I can come in and give thanks to the LORD!
This is the LORD's gate;
those who are righteous enter through it.*

*I thank you because you answered me,
because you were my saving help.
The stone rejected by the builders
is now the main foundation stone!
This has happened because of the LORD;
it is astounding in our sight!
This is the day the LORD acted;
we will rejoice and celebrate in it!*

*LORD, please save us!
LORD, please let us succeed!*

Palm Sunday begins that final, fateful week of Jesus's life. This week begins, not with somberness or gloom, but with a celebratory, expectant march into Jerusalem. No doubt the Gospel writers were reflecting on these words from Psalm 118 as they told the Jesus story. In Jesus they discovered a hope for a different kind of world. They saw Jesus as the one through whom God would act to bring deliverance and salvation to them, and they entered Jerusalem in celebration of all that would mean. Yet, as we know, that would look far different from what they, or we, might have expected.

*As we begin Holy Week, take time to reflect and prepare yourself for all this week will bring.
We will experience the highest of highs and the lowest of lows.
There is no way around, so we must go through.*

Monday, April 3

Matthew 21:1-11

(vv. 6-11 printed below)

The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked. The crowds answered, "It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Try to imagine yourself as a participant in the crowd on Palm Sunday. You are caught up in the rush and joy of celebration. It's Passover season, a time of remembering the liberating work of God, freeing the enslaved Hebrews from their captivity in Egypt. There's a feeling in the air, a hopeful expectation that God would once again act, this time to liberate this same family of people from the oppression of the Romans. For all the darkness and pain that lies ahead, this is a moment of wondrous joy and deep hope. Then there is the question, "Who is this?" Who is the person stirring this joy and hope? Perhaps that is the question to which we must respond.

Who is Jesus to you?

What does it mean that Jesus is called a "prophet" in our reading?

Tuesday, April 4

Matthew 26:14-75

(vv. 36-41 printed below)

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. He said to the disciples, "Stay here while I go and pray over there." When he took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, he began to feel sad and anxious. Then he said to them, "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying. Stay here and keep alert with me." Then he went a short distance farther and fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it's possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want."

He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, "Couldn't you stay alert one hour with me? Stay alert and pray so that you won't give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak."

Jesus's final hours are filled with many heart-wrenching moments. He is betrayed by one of his disciples and denied by another. Eventually, he would be abandoned by them all. Even in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, as he's wrestling with what lies ahead for him, his closest friends can't stay awake and keep watch. Gethsemane, and indeed this final night, was a lonely path to walk. Yet, Jesus found himself that night where he found himself consistently throughout his life and work: leaning on his Father, drawing strength and courage for the next step.

*Imagine yourself journeying with Jesus through the events of today's reading.
Has there been a time in your life when your faith strengthened
and encouraged you in a difficult moment?*

Wednesday, April 5

Psalm 31:9-16

Have mercy on me, LORD, because I'm depressed.

*My vision fails because of my grief,
as do my spirit and my body.*

*My life is consumed with sadness;
my years are consumed with groaning.*

*Strength fails me because of my suffering;
my bones dry up.*

*I'm a joke to all my enemies,
still worse to my neighbors.
I scare my friends,
and whoever sees me in the street runs away!*

*I am forgotten, like I'm dead,
completely out of mind;
I am like a piece of pottery, destroyed.*

*Yes, I've heard all the gossiping,
terror all around;
so many gang up together against me,
they plan to take my life!*

But me? I trust you, LORD!

I affirm, "You are my God."

My future is in your hands.

*Don't hand me over to my enemies,
to all who are out to get me!*

*Shine your face on your servant;
save me by your faithful love!*

The Psalms played an influential role in how the earliest Jesus followers understood the events they had experienced. Psalm 31 reflects both the grief and pain, and the ultimate trust, they saw in the death of Jesus. We see the same tension in Jesus's words from the cross. The cry of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" sits alongside "Into your hands I commit my spirit." That is the paradox of not only Jesus's death, but also the life of faith. "I believe, help my unbelief" isn't a lack of faith, it is the very heart of the human experience of faith.

*Have you experienced this paradox of doubt and
belief in your faith journey? How did you process it?*

MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 6

Philippians 2:5-11

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

*Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus everyone
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

“Even death on a cross.” That line always stands out to me. It’s likely Paul is quoting an ancient Christian hymn here in Philippians 2, which gives us insight into how the earliest Jesus followers talked about him. There’s a tension reflected here in this hymn, and that is that Jesus’s exaltation only happened after his humiliation. Death on the cross precedes Jesus being given the name above all names. Holy Week reminds us that there are no shortcuts along the journey, not if we are to experience the transformation for which we long.

*Read through this hymn a few times.
Each time, notice what stands out.
Perhaps a line, phrase, or word.
Allow those to guide you as you reflect on Holy Week.*

GOOD FRIDAY

April 7

Matthew 27:1-66
(vv. 57-61 printed below)

That evening a man named Joseph came. He was a rich man from Arimathea who had become a disciple of Jesus. He came to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate gave him permission to take it. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had carved out of the rock. After he rolled a large stone at the door of the tomb, he went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting in front of the tomb.

Good Friday can only be named so in hindsight. Today's reading takes us through the brutality of Jesus's death. Those who lived through these events must have felt so confused, heartbroken, and dejected. The finality of Jesus's life must have been too much to even process. Still, the two Marys accompany him. They wait, momentarily holding vigil for their friend and teacher. These final days of Lent invite us—challenge us—to not just be disinterested observers, but to seek to enter the story, to empathize and imagine what it must have been like for those who had known and loved Jesus.

*What stood out to you from today's reading?
Can you seek to imagine being in the place of the two Marys,
near the tomb as they rolled the stone in place? How would that feel?*

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HOLY SATURDAY

April 8

Isaiah 50:4-5, 6b-9a

*The LORD God gave me an educated tongue
to know how to respond to the weary
with a word that will awaken them in the morning.
God awakens my ear in the morning to listen,
as educated people do.*

*The LORD God opened my ear;
I didn't rebel; I didn't turn my back. . . .*

*I didn't hide my face
from insults and spitting.*

*The LORD God will help me;
therefore, I haven't been insulted.*

*Therefore, I set my face like flint,
and knew I wouldn't be ashamed.*

*The one who will declare me innocent is near.
Who will argue with me?*

*Let's stand up together.
Who will bring judgment against me?*

Let him approach me.

*Look! The LORD God will help me.
Who will condemn me?*

When we read these words from Isaiah 50, originally referring probably to Israel as a people, it is no surprise to us that those who experienced the life of Jesus would read them and within them find a portrait of him. They saw in Jesus the embodiment of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Notice the last verse from today's reading. After all the agony endured, the Servant is confident that God would bring vindication, that God would be with them. It's a good reminder that, on Good Friday, God never abandoned Jesus. Jesus was embodying the Divine, demonstrating the love and compassion of God, even as he died.

*Today we exist in an in-between space.
We know of Jesus's suffering, yet we await his vindication.
What do you think this in-between felt like for Jesus's first followers,
especially not knowing how the story ends?*

EASTER

April 9

John 20:1-18

(vv. 11-16 printed below)

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).

We began Lent with the story of a garden and of human beings neglecting their call to be the caretakers of God's good world. John's Gospel ends with another garden, and a new gardener who will tend the new creation that is springing forth. That's what Easter is partly about, a new creation that is beginning to burst into the old, infusing transformation, hope, and healing to everything that had previously been neglected and harmed. The risen Jesus invites all of us to join in this work of new creation as we live and move in the world.

Our journey through Lent has reached an end.

What have you discovered in this season?

What will you do with the invitation to join Jesus in co-creating transformation, hope, and healing in the world?