



ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26TH

JOEL 2:12-13



Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

If you've never read Jonathan Edward's famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, you're missing out. It contains such uplifting refrains as:

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.

I feel better already!

Lent isn't the most attractive season on the church calendar. Talking about repentance won't draw in the crowds. But we make a grave mistake when we overlook this important aspect of our spiritual life.

"Repent" just means to turn around, and the prophet Joel invites us to turn around and come back to God with all our hearts. At first it's an unpleasant task that requires facing our sin through confession, fasting, and other common Lenten practices. But no sooner do we return to God than we discover his grace, mercy, and steadfast love waiting for us. When we face our sin, we are found by our Savior.

So embrace Lent this year. Make a practice of confession or fasting. Take the risk of opening your heart before God, whose anger is slow but whose love abounds. Return as you are to the Lord, and may he restore to you the joy of your salvation.

Gracious God, our sin separates us from you and our rebellion warrants your wrath. We avoid you in fear, assuming that you are like us: angry, spiteful, and ready to punish. We have forgotten who you really are. Forgive us, Lord, and open your merciful arms to receive us as we return to you with what is left of our hearts. Through Christ, Amen.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27TH
ISAIAH 58:6-8



Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

The verses prior to this passage question our motivation for fasting – to bring attention to ourselves, or to humble ourselves. Is it for selfishness or righteousness? To glorify yourself, or glorify God? Then we ask “What motivates us to serve?” Caring for the hungry, the homeless, or family members in need? Is it to bring healing and hope, and to glorify God? Or, to look good and bring attention to yourself? We are promised, in later verses, that if we offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, light will replace darkness, and God will guide us. He will protect us and guide us as we serve others in need.

Don’t oppress others – instead, reach out to help. Stop acting wickedly toward others, instead do good, and act lovingly to others. Verse 8 says we will have our prayers answered and our lives would be full of light, healing, righteousness, and the glory of God. What does this look like for you? What do you hear God speaking quietly (or loudly!) into your heart?

I hear that I should not turn away from the homeless person, but ask God, “What should I do?” I hear that it’s time to volunteer at the soup kitchen. I hear that I need to speak words of kindness to my friends and family. I hear that I will be called to something uncomfortable.

Lord, let us look at our motivation for our good works. Help us to see if it’s out of self-promotion, or a deep desire to truly serve You by serving others. And show each of us specifically what You would want us to do. Amen.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28TH
PSALM 51:10-12



Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

The opening lines of this psalm echo words from my childhood growing up in a small Lutheran Church in Dinuba. We repeated these words from Psalm 51 each time we had communion. This is a Psalm that King David wrote when he was in desperate need of a heart cleansing. He had desired another man's beautiful wife then he sent that man into a battle where he knew the man would be killed. After that David took this woman as his wife. In verse 14 David says, "Deliver me from blood-guiltiness." This is no small potatoes sinning!

David starts out this Psalm by admitting his sin and asking God to forgive him and wash him clean. A wise and contrite prayer. But David goes on to ask God for more and we can too.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God. Put a new and faithful spirit within me." Can we start over God? Make me new! Paul says we are a new creation in Christ. Then hear David plead with God:

"Please, don't throw me out of your presence! Please, don't take your holy spirit from me!" Can you feel David's desperation? He knows he has messed up big time. The guilt from his actions will weigh him down the rest of his life, even destroy him.

"Restore to me the **joy** of your salvation." Only with God's forgiveness and restoration into his family can we find joy in our life again. It lifts the weight of sin off our shoulders.

"Sustain me with a willing spirit." Hold me up God! I can't do this on my own!

So much in so few words. When I read a passage like this I find more than my feeble words can express. I encourage you to read all of Psalm 51, David's prayer. Pause after you read each line that jumps out at you and listen for what God has to say to you. Make these words your own prayer.

Dear, Jesus, help us to take these words to heart. Help us take a good look at ourselves and see where we miss the mark so that we can humbly ask for your forgiveness and turn our lives around to truly walk in your ways. Amen.



SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 29TH

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-21



So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In the verses just before this passage, Paul reminds us that whenever we accept Christ in our hearts and become part of the body of Christ by faith, we become new creations. Our old relationship of being estranged from God due to our inherent sinful natures no longer exists – a new relationship is now in effect. Best of all, this came about by the divine act of God being the reconciler, restoring us to his presence. As believers, our sins will no longer be counted against us.

The apostles, proclaimers of this good news, were acting as God’s messengers. We, too, are to be God’s ambassadors, to invite others on Christ’s behalf. What is so shocking is that Jesus, who had no sin, was treated as if he were the worst sinner of all. He became the object of God’s righteous anger and bore the penalty of sin (the horrible consequence of being separated from the Father).

It is through the intervention of Jesus that we might become righteous. We are justified by our faith and now have been given the right to stand before God on the foundation of that faith. We have been forgiven. Thank you, Jesus.

Dear Lord, we are grateful for Christ’s willingness to subject Himself to your will. By taking on the agony of crucifixion, Jesus paid our debt in full. By rising from the dead, He has given us the path to everlasting life in your presence. This gift of Grace is a blessing, a gift that we would never be able to repay on our own. Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 1ST

GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:4-5



The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

“You will be like God” is an offer we couldn’t refuse.

Trying to be like God is our original sin. The tragedy of the Garden is not that a rule was broken, but that a rebellion broke out. We wanted to take God’s place as the master of our own lives. Our sin is not merely trespass, but treason.

And it all started with a bald-faced lie: “You will not die.” You would think such an obvious contradiction of God’s word would be easy to resist. But when a lie is preferable to the truth, we *want* to believe it.

At its heart, Lent is about telling the truth. Jesus came to us “full of grace and truth” and said “the truth will set you free.” As we journey toward Easter and the cross before it, we tell the truth about our sin and the lies we believe about ourselves and others. We study Jesus’ life and ministry, recorded in scripture, not so that we can be better but so that we can be more truthful. Lent is a pursuit for the truth.

This pursuit ends with a marvelous surprise. It turns out that truth is not a philosophy but a person. Jesus said, “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life.” Jesus himself is the incarnation of God. Our sin was to try and be *like* God, but through Jesus we are joined *to* God the Son and made one with Him. Even in our original sin we were striving for less than what God wanted to freely give.

The truth is that you are God’s beloved in Christ. A rebel, yes, but one who has been pardoned and restored. Your original sin still wins a few battles, but it has already lost the war.

Sovereign Lord, we pledge our allegiance to you and forsake our idols of family, country, and most of all self. We lay down our weapons and surrender. We cast ourselves upon your mercy in Christ, asking to be reinstated as servants in your everlasting kingdom, and rejoicing that you make us even more—your very own daughters and sons. Through Christ, Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 2ND
PSALM 32:1, 5, 10



Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

Having a two-year-old is lots of fun, especially when playing hide-and-seek. For a small human who has only been on this earth for about 900 days, the fun of hide-and-seek isn't hiding; it's being found. When my two-year-old hides, as soon as I'm done counting and say "Wheeeeere's Jonathan?" he immediately squeals in delight, "Here I am!" and jumps out where I can see him. The plain truth is, he's terrible at hiding (and I love it).

When it comes to our sin, we are also terrible at hiding, although that doesn't stop us from trying. Psalm 32 begins, "Happy are those whose sin is covered." We think we will be happy if we sweep our sin under the rug and hide it from God and everyone else. If we can just keep it a secret, we can continue pretending that we're good enough.

But like a two-year-old playing hide-and-seek, our sin is always looking for an opportunity to jump out and say "Here I am!" As scary as it seems, there's a part of us that actually *wants* to be found out. "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity."

Then comes the surprise: only when our sin is exposed can it be truly covered. The Psalmist has discovered that his sins are only "covered" after openly acknowledging them before God and others. "I will confess... and you forgave the guilt of my sin." The cure for sin is exposure, not secrecy.

Lent is a good time to practice confession. This season encourages us to bring our sin openly to God and discover his forgiveness already waiting for us. Confession strengthens our trust that Christ's grace is sufficient for our iniquity. The more we confess, the more we *want* to confess. Hiding isn't the fun part; being found is delightful. God loves it when we are bad at hiding.

Merciful God, your steadfast love always surrounds us, but never more than when we confess our sins to you. Give us courage to acknowledge our sin to you. Forgive us swiftly, cover our iniquity, and reinforce our trust in you. Through Christ, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 3RD
ROMANS 5:17



If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Though Adam's sin opened the door to death in the world, that is nothing compared to the gift of life that was introduced through Jesus Christ.

While both powers entered the world, the mode of reception was quite different. Sin was *imposed* on all people; life was offered as a *gift*. Jesus did not force loyalty from his followers; he asked for it.

Every person has the choice to accept the gift that releases us from sin. Although we do make the one-time decision to follow Jesus, we still have the DAILY choice of whether or not we are going to live into that gift. Though we may declare that we are following Jesus, is that evident in our actions? Do we act as if we are living within the free gift of grace and righteousness or are we acting as if we are still enslaved to sin?

I would have to admit that I often act as if I am still enslaved to sin, even though I know Jesus offers me something so much better. This comes out each time I choose to speak harshly, gossip, look down on someone, or refuse to be generous. All of these actions are not of Christ, but instead of sin.

We are free! Let's try to live like we believe it.

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to free us from the chains of sin. Forgive us that our actions often do not reflect this acceptance of such a generous gift. Help us to not only be reminded daily of this gift, but that our ACTIONS reflect this understanding. Thank you for your grace. We sure need it. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4TH
MATTHEW 4:1-4



Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

I did not grow up with Lent. Pastor Dave gave me the timeline and told me what it stood for. Shortly after that one of the devotionals that I read (Pastor Hagee) showed up with one on the temptation of Christ. I found it interesting and appropriate.

After Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness where He fasted for 40 days. At the end of that time, Satan appeared to tempt Him. Satan waited for the fortieth day when Jesus was hungry and exhausted. Our greatest temptations come when we are emotionally, physically, and spiritually spent.

Satan tempted Him first by opening the door of doubt: "If you are the Son of God...." Sound familiar? "If you are really saved...." "If God really loves you...."

Secondly, Satan tempted Jesus by demanding: "Turn these stones into bread." He pushes us to accomplish things in our own strength.

Jesus did not argue with him. He did not point out His ability to destroy Satan and his works. He simply declared, "It is written." He did something that we can do – even when we are at our weakest. We run to the source that declares us triumphant. Whether we are in a battle for our life, our business, or our family... it is written.

When we speak the promises of God, they become the Living Word to bring us victory over the evil one's intention to defeat and destroy. God has placed him under our feet. It is written.

Lord thank you. Thank you for coming to save us and to give us your example on how we can withstand Satan when we feel tempted, unloved and unworthy. We are indeed unworthy dear Lord, but through you we are deemed righteous and clothed with your worthiness and righteousness. Through our belief in you we are saved. I submit my life to you and bow as your humble servant. I long for the day that I rise to meet you in heaven. In Jesus's name. Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 5TH
MATTHEW 4:1, 5-7



Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

All of creation, including legions of heavenly hosts, held their breath on the edge of their seats as a famished Jesus, who had divinely emptied Himself, finally met the tempter. In baseball terminology, Satan was throwing a perfect game (Adam, Eve, Babel, the golden calf, Job, divided Israel and Judah, etc.). While the Son of God, Jesus was born into human flesh. To be a true test, to be worthy of God's authority and power and to die for all our sins, the possibility had to exist that Jesus could have failed.

Jesus responded to the first temptation with God's Word in the form of Scripture. In this instance, Jesus's refusal to eat bread proved the truthfulness and faithfulness of God's Word. Therefore, in the second temptation, the adversary cunningly incorporates God's Word into the temptation.

Jesus wasn't told how long he would be in the wilderness or how many times he would be tempted. Forty days and nights without food, shelter, or human contact would be extremely challenging. We're not given details if the experience affected Jesus's faithfulness. However, given the focus of the adversary's second temptation, faithfulness was most likely on Jesus's mind.

The adversary suggests the only way Jesus could prove the faithfulness of God's Word in the second temptation would be to jump and find out. But even in his weakened state, Jesus wasn't falling for the tempter's tricks. Jesus knows true faith and testing God or asking for signs when the flesh is weak is not the way.

Jesus, you did the hard work. You remained faithful when facing enormous anguish and temptation, ultimately to your death and our eternal salvation. We in turn place our faith in you. We strive to model your behavior, but we often fail. While we grow and mature, we know our actions don't condemn us. If we believe in you and your faithfulness, we are saved. We thank you for this gift and all you have done, Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 6TH

MATTHEW 4:1, 8-11



Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

I must admit I have struggled with the temptations of Jesus by the devil. I can't really say exactly why, and I know it's silly, but it has never set well with me! Perhaps the face-to-face confrontation between the Divine and the devil is distasteful. However, it happened, and there is purpose and meaning than can be explored.

These temptations occurred at the beginning of His public ministry and show us that His ministry is not for His own gain, or for His own needs, but because He is a servant. He knew God was His Father, and He would serve and worship Him only. And it shows that He was also tempted in all the ways that you and I are tempted, so He can understand our struggles.

As human, yet God, I wonder if it was as difficult for Him to resist temptation as it is for us (Our own temptations don't come after fasting for 40 days and nights!). Was it because He was in constant communication with His Father, that He had the power to resist Satan? I know it's because He is fully God, and fully human, but it's difficult for us "mere mortals" to understand what that means. We do know that He faced temptations and struggles just as we did, so He can understand them.

When we mess up (not if, but WHEN!), we can remember that Jesus understands. We don't have to run away from Him; We can turn to Him and know there is help and forgiveness and grace. We, too, can be in constant communication with our Father, hearing His voice, leading, guiding and directing us, and can do this through constant prayer, Bible reading and study, and seeking Him first every day.

Lord, we thank You that You understand our temptations and struggles because You faced them too. Give us the strength to walk with You daily, to turn to You, and to ask for Your help. Thank You that You will help us and show us Your grace.

 SATURDAY, MARCH 7TH
MATTHEW 6:1



“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

More than two thousand years ago Jesus preached The Sermon on The Mount to a large crowd on a hillside near Capernaum. The topics Jesus spoke of are as relevant today as they were in His time on earth. Jesus warned us against practicing our righteousness just to be seen by others.

In the Old Testament God gave laws, through Moses, for the people of Israel. One very important law was to love your neighbor as yourself. We are to take care of widows, orphans and anyone who has need.

Don't do good deeds to be done for the wrong reasons. Good deeds should come from a principle of grace and be directed to the glory of God.

Heavenly Father, help us to be good stewards of all you provided. Help us to be hands and feet of Jesus. Amen



SUNDAY, MARCH 8TH
GENESIS 12:1-4a



Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

Genesis 12 marks a seismic shift in the story of the Bible. Until now it was an epic pre-history: creation, the fall, the flood, and the Tower of Babel which proved that our rebellious streak wasn’t over. Noah didn’t repopulate the world with saints. Something else would have to be done. Would God wipe *everyone* out this time, or try something new?

Abram is introduced on the biblical stage without any background, which is just as well because the first thing God did was ask him to leave his background behind. God then promised to make his descendants a great nation that would bless the world through their special relationship with God, a relationship that would culminate in Jesus Christ. Abram gave up his past for the gift of God’s promise.

What a metaphor for grace. God’s grace chooses to give us another chance. God’s grace asks us to leave behind our sinful background and step into the promise of new life. As Paul said, “Anyone in Christ is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” Grace puts our sin in the past and God’s salvation in our future. God called Abram instead of calling it quits, and God launched a new project of salvation that would eventually envelop the entire human race.

And he used us to do it. God didn’t speak directly to each individual person but called one person and his progeny to be a vessel that would carry the message of God’s salvation to the rest of the world. God is the author of salvation, but we are the translators, called to bless the world with the good news we have received. We are blessed to be a blessing.

God of grace, who calls us to leave behind the sinful past in which we’ve made ourselves at home, give us the courage to believe in your promised salvation so that we may become not only benefactors, but a blessing to the whole world as we share the marvelous news of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 9TH
PSALM 121



I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Albert Einstein said, “There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

This psalm of praise makes me feel as though everything is a miracle. It’s vivid images and poetic phrases give me such comforting assurance.

God chose the Israelites to be his chosen people. The psalmist assures them again and again that help comes from the Lord. He not only metaphorically keeps our feet from slipping, he will not even sleep because he wants to watch over us.

He will watch over us coming and going and forevermore. That is very comforting. The core conviction of the Psalms is that the gravitational center of life is God. Accept it. Believe it. It doesn’t get any better than that.

Lord, Thank you for all that you have created. We feel you watching over us as we come and go. Help us to take care of this beautiful earth and to preserve it. We know what we need to do; guide us to do it. Amen



TUESDAY, MARCH 10TH
ROMANS 4:13-16



For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us).

In Romans 4, Paul discusses how Abraham was made righteous by faith.

In verses 13-16, he says that Abraham was promised that he would inherit the world because of his faith in God. Thus Abraham's descendants would inherit the "whole world to come."

Paul suggests that righteousness comes through faith and not through following the laws as interpreted by the rabbis. Those who choose the law show that they do not understand God's promise to Abraham.

Our good works and our knowledge of the law do not represent God's will. Faith is the correct choice to reveal our righteousness and acceptance of God's grace for us.

Gracious and law-giving Lord, forgive our self-righteousness. We work and we strive to prove ourselves to you, to others, and to ourselves, but we always fall short. We have tried to earn your approval, not realizing that you already want to give us your approval for free through faith. Help us to be true children of Abraham by trusting in your grace instead of our own hard work. Through Christ we pray, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11TH

JOHN 3:16-17



“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

This was my father’s favorite Bible verse and this Bible verse is inscribed on his headstone in Ripon, California. Imagine that the person you love most is on the verge of death. Doctors and nurses keep a constant vigil, watching beeping machines, monitoring blood pressure and checking tubes to make sure none have slipped or become blocked. What would you give to keep this loved one alive? How much would you sacrifice to have a normal life with him or her again? If your love is strong and genuine, you would give all.

This is exactly what God did for us. Sin put us on the verge of death. So God in his marvelous love gave up his only Son so that we might have life. God gave his Son and his Son offered up his life. This sacrificial gift is the foundation of our renewed relationship with God.

In this most popular of all Bible verses, the apostle John is not only showing us how to receive salvation, but he is also telling us the secret to deepest love. Sacrificial giving is the secret to deepest love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

Is there something you have or something you do that is keeping you from giving or accepting the love of God and others? God wants us to give it up before we sacrifice both life and love.

God cared enough to send his own Son to pay for our failures. True faith has nothing to do with our human efforts, social achievements or material wealth. Help us all to have faith to trust your forgiveness and to accept your Son which you freely offered us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 12TH
PSALM 118:22-24



The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

My dad was a structural engineer. As a kid I remember visiting his office and playing with the big fancy calculator, and I'll never forget the strong ammonia smell of the blueprint room. In college I did some part-time work for him and learned to read the technical drawings and make small adjustments in the AutoCAD program. It was fascinating to see how buildings were designed.

Part of my dad's job was visiting job sites to make sure that things were being built according to the plans he and the architect developed. Sometimes they would have to correct mistakes, and every now and then they would have to correct attitudes. Sometimes the builders thought they knew better than the engineers. Those usually weren't good days at the office.

This excerpt from Psalm 118 reminds us that we are builders, not engineers. When God engineered a plan for our salvation through Christ's self-sacrifice, the builders said, "Nope, we don't like this plan." They rejected the chief cornerstone, the point of reference on which the rest of the design was based. They killed God's own Son and continued to try and build their own salvation according their own plan.

But then, in a brilliant and unexpected move, God raised Jesus from the dead and showed that Jesus' rejection was itself part of the plan. To our embarrassment it turned out that rejecting God's plan was just playing right along with God's plan. Jesus became the chief cornerstone anyway.

The only thing left for us to do is stand still, jaws hanging open, saying, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. Let us rejoice!" Hence the practice of giving something up for Lent. Giving up certain foods or habits is how we practice giving up something else, namely our efforts to self-engineer our salvation. We give up playing the boss and resume our place as the builders of God's kingdom.

And it turns out that we gain far more than we give up.

Sovereign God, humble our hearts and make us receptive to your plan for our lives and for the world. In your mercy let us help to build your kingdom here, through Christ. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 13TH
ISAIAH 26:19



Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

We here in the valley know about dust. We've seen "dust devils" and even real dust storms that make it impossible to drive. This kind of dust is like powder and it won't absorb water. To truly get the parched ground soaked you must leave the sprinkler on for an hour, let it soak in and then do it again.

No life is possible in this dust. We will all "dwell in the dust" someday after we die. Isaiah gives us the image of the dew falling on the dust. In his time the dew was a symbol of fruitfulness and life which gives us hope.

Jesus joined us in death but did not become dust, instead he miraculously rose from the dead. Because Jesus died and rose again our bodies will rise someday when he comes again.

The earth will give birth to her dead! We will wake up and shout for joy!

Loving God, you made us from dust and know our inmost thoughts and our deeds. We are so grateful that you joined us on this dusty earth and were willing to take our sin upon you. Thank you that we will someday wake up and shout for joy in your presence. Amen.

 SATURDAY, MARCH 14TH
ISAIAH 50:5-7



The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

The book of Isaiah frequently prophesies about Jesus, even as it was God’s word to Israel in Isaiah’s day. And in turn, Isaiah’s words are relevant to us now as we seek to be obedient to God when he opens our ear. We discover that when we face persecution like the one described in Isaiah 50:5-7, “the Lord God helps me,” and we are not “ashamed.”

Here again we have a passage that foreshadows Christ and the humiliation and suffering and injustice that He will experience without turning away from it. When Jesus faced opposition, temptation, persecution, trial and execution, he did not flee or fight back in kind. In the forty days in the desert, which we remember during the season of Lent, Jesus faced the temptation of Satan. Like this passage in Isaiah: “I was not disobedient, Nor did I turn back” Jesus overcame those temptations in the desert. He also was obedient to suffer death taking the punishment for our sins. And as verse 7 declares Jesus “[was] not disgraced” in the end as he was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven.

Let us remember Christ’s example to us of obedience to God’s word in the face of trials and trust that God will help us and save us from disgracing His name. As the next verse promises “He who vindicates me is near; Who will contend with me?” Just like Romans 8:31 says “if God is for us who can be against us?”

Lord Jesus, thank you for saving us by your death and resurrection. Thank you for showing us a perfect example of obedience to God the Father in the face of suffering and humiliation. We trust in your saving grace each day and ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us in obedience to God the Father that we may bear witness to You. Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 15TH
EXODUS 17:1-7



From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The journey of salvation always begins in the wilderness of sin.

We don't like to admit the sin in our life. We spend most of our time and energy trying to cover it up. When life is going well that's easy enough to do, but stick us in the wilderness for a few days and the skeletons in our closet come out.

And they usually come out in the form of complaining. "The people complained against Moses." Well of course they did! They were dying of thirst! Demanding water was not unreasonable, just like it's not unreasonable for us to demand fair pay from our employers, integrity in our elected leaders, or emotional support in our marriage. These are things we need to survive, and surviving in the wilderness is not easy. No wonder we complain.

But complaining will never get you through the wilderness. Only prayer can do that.

The people complained against Moses, but Moses "cried out to the Lord." Prayer is how we turn toward God instead of turning against each other. Prayer keeps us alive in the wilderness because it leads us to the water that only God can provide.

Merciful God, because of our sin we wander in a wilderness of our own making. We cannot survive here. Help us not to complain, but rather to pray and discover how ready you are to respond and provide. Lead us to the Living Water, Jesus, who alone can quench our thirst. Amen.

 MONDAY, MARCH 16TH
PSALM 95:6-9



O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

After reading this Psalm a number of times and in different versions it seems to me that to understand it we need to start near the end in verse 9. In this verse we hear God pleading with his people: “If only you would listen to me right now! Don’t harden your hearts like your ancestors did in the wilderness! Your ancestors who saw me part the Red Sea and received the miracle of food and water in the desert every day for 40 years!”

God is asking them to remember his mighty deeds and in gratitude praise him. When we remember what God has done for us in our lives our hearts are filled with gratitude and we will praise him.

What do you need to remember? What has God done for you in the past? Today? What do you need to listen for?

Listen. Remember. Praise. “O come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker.”

Loving God, open our eyes to the gracious gifts you give us every day. Open our hearts in gratitude so we may praise you for your extravagant poured out on us every day. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.



Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The opening verses of Romans 5 deal with the benefits of justification. Though justification has a lot in common with forgiveness, the terms are not interchangeable, for all have sinned and are now justified; through grace, we've been given a free, undeserved gift. However, since we are fallible humans, we have a continuing need for forgiveness.

As Paul talks of justification, we hear nothing more about The Law nor of our need to build up merit badges by obedience to it. Justification is now seen in the light of the blessings it brings to us as children of God. The emphasis is on what has been done for believers through Christ. The first blessing is peace. Because of sin, humankind had long lived in estrangement with God. 'Peace' here refers to the believer's harmony with God. (Peace with God does not necessarily bring peace with other people.) The second benefit is essential. God is now approachable. Jesus intercedes for us as his family. We belong to him and, therefore, also to the Father.

Rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God while rejoicing in our sufferings seems, on the surface, to be ironic; certainly, it seems to be the opposite of what we would expect as a blessing. However, since Christ suffered to take on the burdens of our sins, our way of dealing with tribulation can show our love for Jesus. Believers do not have to take the pressure of trials passively by just giving in to them. By resisting them, it builds character. We can choose to endure suffering rather than submitting to it as inevitable. Faith leads to perseverance, which leads to character, then to hope and, ultimately, to love. Hope is not a whimsical wish because it is coupled with God's love. Years may pass, friends may move away, but God's love is eternal.

Lord, we are thankful for the gift of grace, knowing that our faith has brought justification. While we have a hard time seeing the benefit of suffering, we thank you for our family of believers who can help us with prayer and helping hands as we deal with difficult circumstances. While you did not promise us freedom from suffering, you did promise to be with us through trying times. It is comforting to know that you are a living God who is always with us. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18TH

JOHN 4:21-26



Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Jesus is traveling through Samaria and stops at Jacobs well. He asks a local woman for a drink. This woman questions why he would ask her for a drink because Jews do not associate with Samaritans. They have a discussion and Jesus reveals that he knows she has had five husbands and has a man who is not her husband. She believes Jesus is a prophet. Jesus tells her that a time is coming when neither the Jews or Samaritans will worship on a mountain or in Jerusalem. He tells her the time is coming where true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

These are the type of worshippers that God seeks. God is spirit and his worshipper must worship in Spirit and in truth.

God is the Spirit who knows us better than we know ourselves, for us to worship him in spirit and truth we must meet him without pretense and worldly distractions. For he knows and loves us as we are. It is in truth where we will learn to draw closer to him and worship him as he deserves.

Dear God, thank you for sending your son Jesus, so we all may worship you in Spirit and truth. We pray as we draw closer to you we may learn all that you wish us to. Let our worship be pleasing to you. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 19TH
PSALM 31:3-5



You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

David was stressed because his enemies pursued him. People lied about him. The local crowd looked at David with contempt. When everything seemed bleak, when he felt ashamed and beaten down, David was able to turn to God. David took heart in the true nature of God: God is good and God is faithful.

We can relate to situations in our lives when we get stressed. We may go through illness, anger, divorce, poverty, or any other evidence of our fallen world. We begin to feel our circumstances will never end. We must be reminded constantly of who God is. We must read Psalms like this one and hear the witness of others who have been through similar circumstances and have seen His faithfulness.

Somewhere in the process of acknowledging our situation, usually when we have no choice but to just give up, God's power and faithfulness becomes real. We can let go and believe that all of our circumstances are His. We can relax, take a deep breath, and say with David, "Rescue me, Lord, for you are a faithful God."

Thank you, Lord, that you are our rock and our fortress. Help us to trust you in all of our circumstances. Help us to relax in you and know that you are a faithful God. Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 20TH

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11



Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Let this mind be in you. Wow, the Greek word for mind is *phronema*, which is the entire mind. What is an entire mind? None left, this is every thought and action that you think.

We have the same mind as Christ?? OMG!!! Look at the thoughts that Jesus Christ had. He was obedient, humble to God. Are you?? Am I?? I try but I know I fall short MANY times.

And is where humility comes in, because we cannot do this on our own, but we can bring our thoughts, turn our thoughts to Christ. That is our example, to be like Christ in mind, and body will follow, so we can help others to confess that Jesus Christ is their lord and all Glory to God.

Heavenly Father there are MANY times when we have failed you in our thoughts and actions, but you are always there to pick us up and let us start again as long as we keep ourselves humble to you and your word. Thank you for your son Jesus Christ who is our living example of how we should walk and talk. Thank you for your great love and mercy on our lives. Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 21ST
ISAIAH 42:1-3



Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

What a beautiful prophecy of the coming Messiah, Jesus! Let's look at these verses and see how it does fulfill the prophecy. As God's servant, He is God's chosen one, God's trusted representative. God delights in Jesus as His Son, and delights in His work of redemption of us, His People, through Jesus. He was publicly baptized in the Holy Spirit by John in the Jordan. And, His justice is extended to the Gentiles, not just to the Jews.

He did not shout or cry out when he was before Pilate, even though it was unfair, unjust, and unmerited, and did not cry out when He was crucified. Even though it seemed hopeless, He didn't break, and was not quenched (or "snuffed out" in the NIV). Just the opposite! He rose, and was resurrected, praise be to God!

How incredible it is that this was planned all along. Sure, we know that there are many instances in the Old Testament of prophecy concerning the coming Messiah, but this was a very specific proof of God's plan – Jesus, His Son, would come, be sacrificed for both the Jews and the Gentiles (I'm sure it wasn't even imagined that His grace would be extended beyond the Jews during the Old Testament times), and reconcile us all fully and finally to God.

Heavenly Father, we know in our head that You are sovereign, but it is amazing that You are so specific about what is to come. It reminds us that we can trust You for our life and our future, because You know what is to come, and will prepare us for it. We can never fully understand Your sovereign nature, but we are thankful, and grateful that You love us, and have a plan for us. Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 22ND

1 SAMUEL 16:11-13



Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

When I was in eighth grade my classmates awarded me the "Most Beautiful Eyes." At least two things are funny about that. First, eighth grade is when I started wearing contacts, so it was probably the first time my classmates had even seen my eyes. Second, the yearbook photo was taken with me and the female award winner looking toward the sun, so we were both squinting so much you couldn't even tell what color our eyes were.

Sometimes we lose sight of what's important and we miss what's right in front of us. In 1988, Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz led the team to an undefeated national championship. Holtz is the only college football coach to lead six different programs to bowl games and the only coach to guide four different programs to the final top 20 rankings. Part of his success came from a simple acronym: W.I.N. It stands for "What's important now," and he told his players to ask themselves that question 35 times a day.

Jesse was sure one of his older sons would be anointed king. It didn't even occur to him to bring David in from the fields until Samuel asked. In that culture the youngest never got any special honors. But God sees what we cannot. God knows what it most important now and is not blinded by past mistakes or future uncertainties.

Lent is a time for giving up distractions and focusing on what's important now. There is always a reason not to pray, not to make the phone call, not to send the card, not to take the kids to the snow, not to exercise, and so on. We miss so many moments because we fixate on the future or dwell on the past.

Ask yourself, "What's important now?" Better yet, ask God that question. Just by asking Him you're becoming aware of His presence, and that's already the most important thing you can ever do.

Holy God, open our eyes to see what truly matters now, in this moment. Anoint us with your Holy Spirit so that we, like David, would be called women and men after your own heart. May we always seek you and your kingdom first, through Christ. Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 23RD

PSALM 23



The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

This Psalm is full of God's promises, giving us comfort and assurance of His love. We have trust in God to guide us as our shepherd in our daily lives.

In our capitalistic society it is easy to want more than we actually need. There is always something bigger and better on the market to buy, but do we need it?

Green pastures and still waters, a place of peace and restfulness means different things to each one of us. Places of restfulness and peace could be the mountains, the desert, the ocean or even our backyard.

When we are in our darkest valley God is with us. If we fall down, He picks us up and carries us to safety.

When we trust God to take care of our needs, our lives will be complete and we will live in harmony with God and his creation.

Heavenly Father, thank you for all you have provided. Lead us to still waters and give us peaceful rest in your ever-loving arms. Amen



TUESDAY, MARCH 24TH
EPHESIANS 5:6-9



Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

In Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul wants the Christians in Ephesus to “walk in love just as Christ also loved...” (verse 2) and not just talk about love and Jesus. In verse 6, the admonition not to get caught up in “empty words” that merely theorize about being “children of light” comes with a warning: God will not tolerate those who sit around talking about loving others like Jesus did but fail to actually do it.

Good intentions and good theology are not enough. Love in action is what God desires just as Jesus demonstrated His great love through His death and resurrection.

So then, let us “Live as children of light” and Paul makes it clear that a key component of that is to love as Jesus loved. This time of year, during Lent, we intentionally reflect on the sacrifice and suffering of Christ Jesus who “gave Himself up for us...” (v. 2).

So how do we know if we are living as children of light, according to Paul? The fruit of that light will be evident in our lives – “all goodness and righteousness and truth” (v. 9). We cannot simply claim to love Jesus and others in His name. Our lives must bear fruit of the light and love we have in Christ. We must walk the walk not just talk the talk.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your great love for us. Thank you for bringing us out of darkness into the light by your death and resurrection. Draw us to yourself and your example of selfless love that we may give of ourselves to others as you gave yourself up for us. In your holy and precious name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25TH

JOHN 9:39-41



Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

In this text, we are presented with two sides. On the one side, the Pharisees believe they see but are spiritually blind. They are the presumed religious experts. They make the rules, determine who breaks them, and assign punishment. They condemn themselves with their proclamation of seeing while acting out of spiritual blindness.

The physically blind man represents the other side. He was labeled sinful by many and a liar to be expelled by the Pharisees. However, Jesus saw him as God's work ready for completion. Jesus freely initiated the healing act, but the man's obedience solidified his restored sight. The blind and aware man spiritually saw by believing in and obeying Jesus. Physical sight was a bonus reward when compared to the gift of eternal life Jesus would eventually complete.

With which group do you reside? I immediately associate with the blind man. Yet, I often use the truth, or more accurately my version of the truth, to act in ways that more closely resemble the Pharisees. This happens more frequently than I would like or am aware.

The text points to an unbelievable freedom... in Christ, we are free from judging. God gave that authority to Jesus. Our job is to listen and obey Jesus, who said we should love one another and be one.

As Easter and Jesus's ultimate sacrifice approach, let us focus on our job of loving and see how people and this world respond.

Jesus, one aspect of everything you did for us was freeing us from having to judge. Give us the discernment to see when we are judging and the strength to love others, especially when circumstances are difficult. Help us to curtail our instinctive urges to judge and punish but instead listen and obey. We will focus on loving others, and we will leave the judgment to you. In your name we pray, Amen.

✠ THURSDAY, MARCH 26TH
ISAIAH 49:6



[God] says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The preceding verses of this *Servant of the Lord* passage point to the Messiah’s commission to restore Israel. The Lord has in mind a new task.

God’s original covenant with Abraham was only to the Israelites. Generations later, Jews living outside of Jerusalem had taken vows invoking God’s name, but they were not righteous. Living by their own wits, they disregarded previous prophesies, refusing to change. Israel had received the light of God’s promises but needed restoration, while the Gentiles needed both light and salvation. The words, “it is too small a thing” suggest that God has a new covenant in mind and needs a better servant to implement it.

Verse 6 is quoted by Paul in Acts 13:47 when the Jews in the crowds are filled with jealousy, talking abusively against Paul when he addresses the Gentiles. They apparently are upset that, while they have rigorously followed the Law, these “other people” will get the blessings of the Lord without having to deal with the unpleasant tasks (such as circumcision) of following the Law.

The church’s mission to the Gentiles is to be viewed in the context of the mission of Jesus himself when he hands the Great Commission to the disciples in John 28:19. He tells them to “therefore go and make disciples of **all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The work of spreading the word did not end with the original disciples of Jesus; Paul and Barnabas pick up the yoke in Acts, and we are encouraged to spread the word, as well.

Dear Lord, we thank you that we Gentiles have been adopted to be a part of your family. What a blessing that we are considered your sons and daughters when we bring Jesus into our hearts. While the new covenant given by Jesus seems simpler with only 2 parts (“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... and love your neighbor as yourself”), it is more difficult than following a list of rules. We thank you for the gift of grace and the accompanying forgiveness that helps us, knowing that you will welcome us back when we fail. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 27TH
ISAIAH 53:4-6



Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

With all the news that is surrounding us this year, I decided to make a New Years resolution. “Look for the Good” is written on a post-it note and stuck to our refrigerator door.

There’s a lot of Good in these verses. It is as though Isaiah is telling us, “Don’t worry about this. The Messiah has this covered. He’ll have your back!” Just think of it: “the punishment that brought us peace was on him!!”

His suffering was voluntary. He had not sinned so his punishment was for every one of us! His suffering was in obedient submission to the will of God and it gave us reconciliation with God. His suffering turned the wrath of God away from us and we now enjoy peace with God.

Iain Gordon says it well: “We owed a debt we could not pay, and He paid the price He did not owe. It is the truth of God and the grace of God offered freely to all.”

Our world its rapidly changing. Christ provides a quiet path that we can take to find “rest for our souls”. Let’s take it!

Lord, these are crazy times. Thank you for covering for us; for the suffering you went through so that we can find peace. Help us to appreciate the extreme pain you bore for us. Help us to see the lessons we are supposed to learn from our own pain. Because of you we are healed. Thank you. Amen



SATURDAY, MARCH 28TH
PSALM 22:1a, 16-18



My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Psalm 22 was written centuries before Jesus was born.

This Psalm is a prayer of complaint that serves as a link between the Old Testament and the story of Jesus' crucifixion in the New Testament. These words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" were first uttered by David. David is expressing his own experience of feeling abandoned by God. David feels that God does not hear him and does not care about his suffering.

This is not just the experience of David. It is the experience of all God's people in the face of terrible trouble. Yet even in his extreme distress, David never loses faith or falls into complete hopelessness. His distress leads him to prayer. His first words of the prayer are "My God." Even in his suffering and wondering about the ways of God, he does not let go of his knowledge that God is his God. He remembers God's past faithfulness in Israel's history.

We have all experienced feelings of abandonment. The words in the first verse were repeated by Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross, indicating that even he experienced isolation from God the Father.

When we feel cut off from God, we may be tempted to question God's existence or doubt that he is able to rescue us. At such times, we must rely not on feelings, but on facts. We must remember who God is and what he has done for us in the past.

God, thank you that we can count on your presence at all times to protect us, especially when our problems are most intense. We know that we have hope in the future because you are more than able to help us when we call out to you for help. Help us to remember what you have done for us in the past and to know that you have everything under control. Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 29TH
EZEKIEL 37:11-14



Then [the Lord] said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”

At the end of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Return of the King*, the hobbit Sam Gamgee is reunited with Gandalf the wizard. Sam immediately exclaims, “Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?”

Nothing is more dead than dry bones. They aren’t even a skeleton, let alone a body, let alone a *living* body. To say that “these bones are the whole house of Israel” is to say that Israel is completely and utterly dead. They are beyond all hope and rescue. They are “cut off completely.” No more chances. It’s over.

There are times when God doesn’t rescue us at the last minute. An addiction isn’t cured, our finances don’t recover, hereditary dementia doesn’t skip a generation, a loved one dies despite our pleas for healing. We hope that being a Christian means being spared from the worst, but sometimes the worst happens. Death wins again, and all that is left of our dream is dry, lifeless bones.

But then God breaks the rules. “I am going to open your graves and you shall live. I will bring you back.” God does the impossible and brings the dead to life. It’s not rescue, it’s resurrection. It’s not preventing death, it’s defeating death after death has had its way. How is this possible? What’s happened to the world?

God doesn’t promise to spare you from suffering. God doesn’t even promise to always rescue you at the last minute. Sometimes the very worst will happen. But even then—*even then*—God still has the last word. Even after death, God raises us up to new life with Christ. Even if we aren’t rescued, we will be resurrected. Then we shall know that He is the Lord.

Lord and Giver of Life, we belong to you in life and in death. We pray for rescue in times of trouble, but ultimately we hope in the resurrection from the dead. Sustain us always with the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

“I hate waiting.” Those are the words of Inigo Montoya in the Princess Bride as he waits impatiently to challenge the Dread Pirate Roberts to fencing duel.

We can relate. Waiting is hard to do. Think of how impatient we get when our computer starts getting slow, or when we’re stuck behind a “safe” driver, or waiting for our toddler to put their shoes on (seriously, how long does it take to put on a shoe?!) Suddenly we go from composed grown-up to absolutely losing it. We are bad at waiting.

This is especially true when it comes to waiting on God. The hardest part of waiting on God is the fear that we are wasting our time. What if God doesn’t come through for us? Wouldn’t it be more productive to come up with our own plan? Or worse, what if God comes through for us but we don’t like his plan?

Listen to the psalmist in this passage. It doesn’t sound like someone who is struggling to wait; it sounds like someone who *enjoys* waiting. I don’t picture someone fidgeting and pacing as they wait for God to act, but rather someone sitting quietly in peace because they trust God completely. It’s almost as if waiting on God and being with God are the same thing.

Of course they are. Waiting is how we experience God now. That’s why Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Waiting is how we return to God; it brings us home and gives rest to our weary, wandering souls.

Waiting for God is never a waste of your time; it is the holiest purpose your life could have. You could spend your whole life waiting for God and it would not be a wasted life.

Immanent God, we struggle to wait for you. We have forgotten that waiting is itself a way of abiding in your presence and finding rest. Forgive our restless hearts and wandering souls, Lord, and teach us the joy of waiting for you, so that at all times we may enjoy your company and rejoice in your salvation. Through Christ, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 31ST
ROMANS 8:9-11



But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

What???? Thank goodness we are not of the flesh, because we could do nothing to please God. But we ARE in the Spirit, we HAVE the Spirit, we are ALIVE because of the Spirit that is in us.

We are raised from that death of our mortal bodies. Just like Jesus Christ was raised from the dead so are we! Your Spirit is alive in us because of righteousness.

I think of how a plant grows. The seed is put into the ground and it has the potential to grow. But it could also die. The sun and water energize that seed into life just as Spirit does for us.

We can grow because we have that righteousness of God.

Heavenly Father you gave us the most important gift, that of your son Jesus Christ. Without Him we are nothing, without you we are nothing, but with you, and your son Jesus Christ, all things are possible. That same power that raised your son from the grave, you gave to us. Thank you for our ability to use this and to claim it for our own. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1ST

JOHN 11:21-27



Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

They say hindsight is 20/20, but it really isn't.

Whether you like math or not, most of us are really good at turning the past into an algebra equation. "If x hadn't happened, then y wouldn't have happened." The more we dwell on the past, the more intricate our equations become. "If only $a^2 + b^2$ had equaled c^2 , then $J(x) = Li(x) + \sum_p Li(x^p) - \log 2 + \int_x^\infty \frac{dt}{t(t^2 - 1) \log t}$

You can see the problem.

Even in the past there are too many variables to consider. If you had gotten that job you might have been happier, but you also might have been in a terrible car accident along your new commute. If God had prevented cancer you might have been healthier, but then the friend who would have driven you to your treatments might instead have spent the afternoon shopping at a mall where a mass shooting took place. The possibilities are infinite. None of us truly knows what "would have" happened.

Jesus gently puts his hands on the sides of our face and redirects our gaze toward the future. "Your brother *will* rise again." There is no hope in the "would haves" of the past. We can't change the past any more than we can predict what it would have been if we could change it. We must look to the future.

And the surprising discovery is that the future is already here. Martha knew that the resurrection of the dead would happen someday. What she didn't know was that the resurrection was already in front of her. "I *am* the resurrection and the life." Jesus brings God's future into the present. It is "coming into the world" right now.

How might God's future be breaking into your present right now?

Lord Jesus, turn our eyes from the unpredictability of the past and toward the certainty of your future. They kingdom come, now, on earth as in heaven. Amen.

Pastor Dave



THURSDAY, APRIL 2ND
HEBREWS 4:14-16



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

I chose this scripture because I wanted to study *grace*. *Grace* comes from God. It cannot be created by us but can be allowed to enter any situation we find ourselves in.

In a meditation on *grace*, Oprah expressed that when we react to another it's a reflection of something we need to learn about ourselves; something in us needs loving attention. When we set aside the irritants and stress that come our way, we can create a new space. In that openness it is possible to show *grace* and receive it.

When we choose patience and compassion in response to what feels like stress or irritation we shift our experience and in return receive peace and a new level of personal evolution. Everything can still be important to us, but it doesn't have to carry the same weight.

Jesus is our high priest in heaven with God. He endured every temptation and he did not sin. He died on the cross for our sins. He is ready to listen and to cleanse and forgive us of our sins.

The book of Hebrews reminds us to make it a habit to constantly be going to the throne of God's *grace*. Let us create the space for *grace* through a listening heart.

Dear Lord, we come before you in humble appreciation for your grace. We know you hear our every prayer. Help us to step back and listen with our hearts and not our egos. Help us create a "listening heart" within ourselves. Amen.



FRIDAY, APRIL 3RD

HEBREWS 10:19-22



Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Whenever I walk through airport security my heartrate goes up. I'm afraid they'll find something and haul me away into a back room like they do in the movies. I have ridiculous thoughts like, "What if somehow there's a gun in my pocket that I didn't even know about?!"

It can be intimidating when people look closely at you. It's uncomfortable to be scanned, evaluated, or measured. Your insecurities flare up and you're afraid they'll find something: a secret sin, a hidden shortcoming, an embarrassing character flaw. Something that disqualifies you from whatever "club" to which you so desperately want to belong.

That must have been how the ancient high priests felt whenever they entered the inner sanctuary. Walking into the raw presence of God once a year to offer the sacrifice of atonement was not a safe job. They used to tie a rope to the priest's ankle so that if God smote him, the others could pull out his dead body without risking their own lives. After all, what if there's a sin the priest forgot to confess?

If you've ever wondered whether you're qualified to enter God's presence, I hate to spoil it for you, but you're not. Not even close. You and I wouldn't get past security. Spiritually speaking there's a gun in our pocket, or more likely, a tank. All the alarms would go off.

Thankfully we don't have to worry like the ancient priests. Jesus has opened the way for us. It is his righteousness that gets us past security and qualifies us for God's kingdom. We have confidence to approach God with a true heart and a clean conscience.

The only question is, what are we waiting for?

Holy God, we are unworthy to enter your presence, but in your gracious mercy you sent your Son Jesus to open the way for us through his righteousness and perfect obedience. Reassure our hearts as we approach you, and grant that we may abide always in your steadfast love. Through Christ, Amen.



SATURDAY, APRIL 4TH
HEBREWS 12:1-3



Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

This letter is an exhortation to Christians to not lose hope in the face of adversity.

The author points to Jesus, the perfect “witness” who changed everything while also modeling how to fully live out ones faith in this world. Though this world will throw trials and lies our way, we can win the fight if we keep our eyes on Jesus.

I don’t know about you, but sin is constantly clinging to me, trying to move my eyes from Jesus and, unfortunately, I often let it. Whether it is feeling negatively about another person, complaining about my circumstances, or refusing to forgive, that sin keeps me from fully entering into the race that God has set before me.

So what is this “race?” This is not a race with the goal to beat others, but is instead a race with an end goal. It is like running a 5k with the goal of finishing well, not placing first. The goal is to live into the person God created you to be. It is about looking to God in all circumstances and becoming part of Jesus’ team to seek God’s kingdom here on earth.

As Christ’s ambassador’s we are called to follow the example of Jesus and forsake our own preferences and comforts to serve God. It will not be easy, but we can do it if we keep our eyes on Jesus.

Lord Jesus, help us to keep our eyes on you. Even when our minds wanders, we will always be yours. Please forgive our tendencies for selfishness and pride. Jesus, you truly are the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Give us wisdom to not just speak this truth, but to live it each day. Thank you for welcoming us into this race. Amen



SUNDAY, APRIL 5TH

MATTHEW 21:6-11



The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

In 2009 no one had ever heard of Susan Boyle. She appeared as a contestant on *Britain's Got Talent* saying that she wanted to become a singer as famous as Elaine Page. The judges and the audience scoffed. Susan looked so... ordinary. She grew up in what she called "a collection of villages" in Scotland, and it wasn't hard to guess from her appearance that she was suited for country life.

Then she started to sing. She performed *I Dreamed a Dream* from *Les Misérables* and blew everyone away. Within four years she had sold over 19 million albums worldwide and received two Grammy Award nominations. She performed for the Queen of England twice. The people who had skeptically asked "Who is *this*?" no longer had to ask.

Most of Jesus' ministry took place in a collection of villages around the Sea of Galilee, including his hometown of Nazareth. Among these country folk Jesus was famous for his teaching and healing. People in the big city of Jerusalem, however, had never heard of him.

So when the city-folk saw the country crowds marching into the city, they wondered what was going on. There seemed to be a central figure in the parade, a man riding on a donkey, and the crowds were going nuts over him, even laying tree branches and cloaks along his path. The city was in turmoil asking skeptically, "Who is *this*?"

Then the procession started to sing. "Hosanna in the highest heaven! This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." The residents of Jerusalem no longer had to ask who Jesus was. Jesus was the prophet who had come to save God's people from their sins (the word "hosanna" is Hebrew for "save us"). Jesus wasn't the glamorous messiah that the city folks had been expecting, but his message of salvation was music to their ears.

God, you have often surprised us with your choice of the humble and lowly to be the bearers of good news. In Jesus of Nazareth you came not to be served, but to serve. Forgive our skepticism and open our ears. Let your salvation song get stuck in our heads and rule in our hearts. Amen.



MONDAY, APRIL 6TH

JOHN 12:24-26



Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

In journalism there is a common expression: don't bury the lead. It means every news article should start with the most important part of the story. The background can be filled in later. Turns out this is an effective way to get responses to your emails, but that's beside the point.

Jesus said that a grain of wheat will only bear fruit if it is buried in the earth. Likewise, we will only bear fruit if we lose our life. "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

This is hard advice to swallow. It runs against the grain of a culture that tells us to live life to the fullest, work hard to play hard, and to spend our lives trying to find ourselves. We've been trained to think that we are the lead in our own story. We want to be the headline of our career, our marriage, and our social media circle.

If that is our goal in life, then Jesus says we must bury the lead. If we want to follow him into eternal life and enjoy the honor of his heavenly Father, we must lose our lives. We must go where Jesus goes, and Jesus rarely spent time among the rich and famous. Instead he frequented the common dwellings of poor, outcast sinners who would never make the headlines.

If we want to follow Jesus, we must let him take the lead. That's where he belongs. Jesus is the lead in the story of your life. Lead off with him each day, and the other details will fall into place.

So I guess we shouldn't bury the lead after all.

Lord Jesus, take the lead of our lives each day. Empower us by your Holy Spirit to live in such a way that when our earthly life is over the headline will be about you and not about us. Lead us to where you are so that we may always enjoy your presence. Amen.



TUESDAY, APRIL 7TH

JOHN 12:44-46



Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness."

I am leading a photography class for LASSO this spring. In the first class I taught the students about exposure, which is all about light. When a camera takes a picture of a subject, the camera is not capturing the subject but rather the light bouncing off of the subject. The light is what reveals the subject to the camera's sensor, just as light reveals things to our own eyes. Seeing the light and seeing the subject are the same thing.

Jesus is the light that reveals God the Father. That's why Jesus could say "Whoever sees me sees him who sent me." Seeing Jesus and seeing God is the same thing. Jesus is the incarnation of God, the exact representation of God's being.

Without Jesus we are lost in darkness. We cannot perceive God. We stumble around feeling the walls for a light switch, not knowing where we're going, who we are, or what our purpose is.

Salvation is sometimes described as closing the *distance* that once separated us from God. It's a spatial metaphor. But John's preferred metaphor is *visual*: light overcoming darkness. What I love about this metaphor is that God can still be close to us even in the darkness. Our sin doesn't mean God is far away, just hidden from our eyes. God is closer than we realize; we just can't see Him.

And that's the good news of Jesus. Jesus is how God comes close to us. Jesus illuminates God's presence, reveals God's love, and calls us out of darkness.

Jesus, light of the world, you are God-with-us. We have been in the dark so long that your brightness is unpleasant at first. Be patient with us while our eyes adjust, and help us to believe in you always. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8TH

MATTHEW 26:14-16



Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Back in the mid-eighties while in Washington D.C. on business for a few days, I had a day with no appointments so I decided to explore part of the Smithsonian that I had not previously visited. While wondering through the fascinating exhibits, I came across an area that housed a collection of the Silver Shekels of Tyre – the most-mentioned coin in the Bible. Whoa, what if I could find one thought to have been circulated during the time of Jesus?

Although the coins were under glass, if could find one from around 30AD, maybe even one of the 30 pieces of silver with which the temple authorities paid Judas Iscariot, I could put my finger over it and somehow connect with one of the most mysterious events in Christian history.

Well, I found one described to have circulated in 30-32AD, and I will never forget that moment; my finger print is probably still etched in the glass.

Judas does us a favor if his story causes us to rethink our basic commitment to Jesus. We can call ourselves Christians, but are we true followers or are we just going through the motions? Are we pretenders or true believers? Have we truly turned from our sins and trusted Jesus Christ as Savior?

Whenever I think of my fingerprint on that glass, I must ask, "Lord, is it I?"

Father, have mercy on us in everything we do and say. Purge us of our sins so they do not take hold of our hearts and make us turn our backs on you – and betray you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



THURSDAY, APRIL 9TH
JOHN 13:34-35



I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In this passage Jesus reminds us to love one another as we, as a Christian community, have loved Christ and the holy ghost.

A new rule is developed by Jesus as he predicts his betrayal between the twelve disciples. The Christians have been taught to love the Lord, for he has sacrificed himself for our everlasting sins. His final command is for us to do the same; to love and forgive one another as he has done for us.

The Lord has taught us to love our enemies and to be forgiving like he has been to us. Love is what gives us faith in Jesus Christ. Because the disciples loved Jesus, they had faith in his Christian ideology. Love is what preserves our faith throughout generations of Christianity. Love and forgiveness are what Jesus offered humanity as he was crucified. To preserve the faith, we must love one another and spread the Lord's command. To preserve the faith, we must follow Christ even into death.

The Lord has always loved us because of our faith towards him. When Jesus predicted his betrayal, he wanted us to love one another as we have loved him, and to have faith in the Christian community. The disciples were informed to love one another because the prediction of betrayal could lead to division from the disciples, thus breaking the faith that the Lord had developed with them.

Our faith in the Lord is powerful if we love one another, including our enemies. It also helps the Lord identify those who are faithful to his Christian practices and beliefs.

Lord we thank you for the sacrificing your life for our sins and teaching us to love one another. It is extremely essential to our communal faith that we return our loving faith to you and pass the new command to our friends and family to cherish the sacrifices you've made for us and our future generations. Thank you, lord, for teaching us the power of true faith and guiding us to follow you in life and death altogether. In your virtuous name, Amen.

FRIDAY, APRIL 10TH
JOHN 19:16b-19



They took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

Jesus trusted and listened to God, which was a huge part of God's plan. After talking to God, Jesus was beaten, made fun of, and crucified.

Why did Jesus let this happen to him? Jesus was beaten and flogged by Roman soldiers, but he didn't fight back or refuse. Jesus was humiliated and made fun of by the Romans, but he didn't say anything in return. While Jesus was being killed, he still let them torture him.

The Romans treated him horribly with all these different sorts of terrible punishments, but Jesus and God let it happen. What the world saw as weakness was strength. Satan, sin, and death did the best they could do, and when they thought they had won, God brought Jesus back to life. They had done their best and been defeated.

Through this experience, Jesus and God now know what it is like to be in pain, to suffer, and experience loss. Jesus showed us to trust and listen to God even in the most difficult situations.

When I read the text, it made me think about how Jesus was feeling when he was being punished. Jesus must have been very brave and trusting to obey God's plans while he was being tortured.

God's decisions always end on a good matter, even if it's not during this life, and we need to listen to him.

Dear Lord, guide us towards greatness and away from sin as we spread your word to the world. Help us listen and obey to your plan you've made for each of our lives. Let us trust you with our lives and follow in your footsteps, being kind, loving, and grateful towards your world and the people living amongst it.



After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Because the Jewish Day of Preparation (the Sabbath) was fast approaching, by Jewish custom, Christ's burial needed to take place before sundown. Normally, as a crucified "criminal," the body of Jesus would have been thrown into a common pit with the other two victims. The pressure of time caused two men who had been secretly following Jesus to intervene.

Joseph of Arimathea stepped forward, asking Pilate for permission to remove the body. This was a bold act, because it would have immediately identified him as a follower of a man condemned for high treason. Jesus had no estate of his own to pay for a proper burial and most of the disciples had fled. By providing what was likely the tomb that had been intended for his own final resting place, this rich member of the Sanhedrin had more at stake than Christ's inner circle of followers.

Nicodemus, another distinguished member of the Jewish aristocracy, shared the responsibility for receiving the body and carrying it for entombment. His cooperation with Joseph blows his secret discipleship into the open. The provision of imported and expensive myrrh and aloes (about 75 pounds) also reveals both his wealth and his devotion for Jesus. Together, the two men applied the spices and wrapped linen strips, normally a task for the family of the deceased; at great personal risk, they provided the gift of loving service.

Dear Lord, we thank you for guiding believers who have come before us for their devotion and willingness to carry on in the face of threatened consequences. We are fortunate to live in a nation where it is not usually dangerous to worship Jesus. Sadly, many who say they are believers rarely darken the doorways of a sanctuary. Others choose to strive for a holy life with no attempt to involve themselves with neighbors or people in need of help. Help us not to be fearful of what other people may think but to stand up for our faith and serve. Amen.



EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 12TH

JOHN 20:11-18



But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

We all have a version of Jesus that we prefer. Some of us prefer a Jesus whose job is to make us happy. Others of us prefer a Jesus whose job is to keep us safe. We have preferences for how involved Jesus will be in everything from our politics to our purchases. What all these Jesuses have in common is that they don't exist.

When Mary recognized Jesus, she cried out with joy. You can imagine that she immediately threw her arms around him, just like any of us would do if a deceased loved one came back to life. Mary thought she had her Jesus back, and she wanted to cling to him for dear life, but Easter is not about getting our Jesus back; it's about discovering that the real Jesus is far more than our preferred version of Jesus ever could be.

Which is why Jesus said, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." That's another way of saying, "I can't just sit around with you; I still have work to do, work that your salvation depends on." Our preferred version of Jesus has already done everything he can for us. He has no more tricks up his sleeve. But the real Jesus of Easter still has work to do.

And that work is to continue adopting more and more people into his family. Jesus said, "I am ascending to my Father *and your Father*, to my God *and your God*." Jesus takes the unique relationship he has as God's son and gives it to us so that we, too, can become beloved daughters and sons of God.

The risen Jesus of Easter Sunday is alive, and he will never stop doing the work of salvation in your life. The only question is, will you let him?

O risen Christ, complete the work you have begun in us, we pray. Amen.