

Worship & Wonder: A Weekly Spiritual Resource

February 17-April 4, 2021



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Dear Reader,

We are so glad you're here! This spirituality resource is a labor of love from us to you. Each week, as you engage with the devotional materials you find here, you will need a Bible (we recommend NRSV), a writing implement, paper, and an open mind. Each week you will be invited into a practice that follows the Lutheran order of worship (gathering, word, thanksgiving, and sending). We invite you to prepare a worshipful space in your home, where you can engage with this resource. We hope this resource will help you to connect with your faith at home, during the season of Lent.

In Lent, we reflect on our shared mortality, beginning with Ash Wednesday. As we journey through this season, on the path to the cross, we notice God's presence along the way. We hope this resource will provide opportunities to pause and reflect, noticing the ways we have not lived as God intends. As we notice, we repent, and God comes near offering forgiveness.

God be with you through this Lenten journey!

-Pastor Blatt, Pastor Emily, Pastor Delaney, and Pastor
Allison

Ash Wednesday

Feb. 17

GATHERING

Meditate on the following prayerful poem:

Close the door

Pull the covers over your head

Hide yourself a while

Pray to your God in secret

God is there

God who hears your secret prayers

Answers them

Scripture:

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalms 51:1-17

Matthew 6:1-6

Lent is an opportunity for us to take time away - to spend time contemplating the mysteries of faith and the coming crucifixion - it's a reminder that daily we die to sin and are raised again to new life in Christ.

WORD

The prophetic book of Joel is a tough one to read. There is not a lot of good news. The people are plagued with suffering of various kinds - locust plague, animals are suffering from ruined pastures, famine. The first couple verses of our Joel passage remind us of this gloom. It references the day of the Lord, which is a time of judgment for the people of God in the first half of the book. The people will be judged for their iniquity; they cannot hide their sin from God. Ash Wednesday is a day we, too, cannot hide from God. It is a day that we are face-to-face with our own iniquity, our failings, our brokenness. Often, we participate in this day by getting ash on our heads or hands to remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. It is a day we are confronted with the gloom and grime of the world and within us. But, it is not a day without hope. While much of Joel leaves us with less than good feelings, we hear words of hope. "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart." God calls to the people to come back, turn away from their sin. The prophet, quoting Exodus 34:6, urges the people to lean on God's compassion, rely on God's mercy when things get desperate. Return to the Lord, for God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Sure, today we are reminded of our sin, but may Ash Wednesday also be a day when we trust in God's mercy and love for us. May we continually turn back to God who is gracious. So, no matter how hopeless you think you are, no matter how dirty and grimy your spirit feels, God offers you Godself. God offers opportunity for restoration, new life. Hear God's call to you today: return to me with all your heart.

Ash Wednesday

Feb. 17

Reflection Questions:

- What is something from which you repent this Ash Wednesday?
- What is something of which the world needs to be washed clean?
- When have you experienced God's compassion and mercy?
- How can the church be a place that models God's compassion, mercy, and grace to others?

THANKSGIVING

Read Psalm 51:1-17. This Psalm is attributed to David, who is asking for God's forgiveness after the prophet Nathan helps David confront his own sinfulness. On Ash Wednesday, we traditionally mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross and are confronted with our own sinfulness and mortality. But this Psalm also speaks great words of hope for us. God is the one whom David trusts will act to restore him to the joy of God's salvation. My favorite verse in this Psalm is verse 15, "O God, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." I like this verse because it reminds us that God is at work in us. It implies that the praises which will be declared are instinctual, second nature, as though they might just fall out of our mouths, because our inner selves are aware of God at work in us even when we outwardly are feeling the consequences of our own sins.

Try giving praise to God in this free-flowing way. Open your mouth and simply praise God—do not think about what to say or worry about getting the words right. Praise God with whatever words come to mind. Perhaps you will be surprised to discover how God is at work in you and in your life.

SENDING

In the Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday, the author warns against practicing one's piety before others. We live in a culture based on performance, where we often seek the esteem and opinions of others to tell us whether we are worthy. This week, when you notice feelings of inadequacy creeping up inside you, say aloud, "I am a good creation. I am enough. I don't have to prove it." Notice how you feel when these words wash over you, and consider sharing them with others in your life who are dealing with these same struggles.



Week One

Feb. 21-27

GATHERING

What sort of things tempt you? What tests you? What entices you to be something other than your most whole self? What makes you feel as if you must prove yourself in order to be worthy or loved? In Luke, we read about how the devil questioned Jesus' identity in the wilderness. "If you are the Son of God," the devil asks, as if to say to Jesus, "Prove it." Reflect on the things that make you question your identity in God, and pray for the Spirit to be with you:

God of mercy, you know me and love me. In you, I am whole; I am enough. Deliver me from the things that make me feel unworthy or not good enough. Deliver me from the temptations that make me think I am better than others. Set me free from all that draws me away from you, and strengthen me with the Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13

WORD

Whenever I read the story of the Devil tempting Jesus to command a stone to become a loaf of bread, I think about a book I read as a child. The book told the true story of a young boy named Josh who became lost and trapped in an old mine. Not knowing where he was or how to get out, all he could do was sit and wait to be rescued, and it ultimately took several days for him to be found. He had no food or water, and at one point, disoriented and starving, he hallucinated. He saw what he was certain was a delicious, juicy hamburger. He picked it up and held it in his hands, certain that it was a hamburger and that it was real. He tried to take a bite—and it turned out that his "hamburger" was a sandy rock which crumbled to pieces, leaving him with nothing but dust in his mouth. I think about how hungry one must be to even hope that a stone could be a hamburger or a loaf of bread. Josh had been without food for only a few days—Jesus was without food for 40 days and 40 nights. And unlike Josh, Jesus really could have turned that stone into bread if he wanted to, and I don't know how he resisted the temptation. I wonder if Jesus held the stone in his hand, as Josh did, considering it, thinking about what it would look and feel and taste like if it were bread. But Jesus knew that the loaf of bread was not what he really needed. As hungry as he must have been, he didn't need the loaf of bread, he needed God's strength to remove him from the wilderness, to end this time of trial, to bring him to a place where he would have plenty of bread and peace of mind. Most temptation is like that—we are tempted because we want or crave something that is only a temporary solution. A loaf of bread would have only helped Jesus in the wilderness for a few more days, and then he inevitably would have been hungry again.



Week One

Feb. 21-27

Even if the stone that Josh was holding really had been a hamburger, it wasn't a hamburger that he needed—he needed to be rescued! When we are tempted, we are tricked, either by the devil or by our own brains, into thinking that something transient and temporary can solve all our problems, that this time, we have truly found the answer. But usually, we discover in the end that it was nothing more than a useless stone which crumbles to dust, and we are just as hungry for something as we were before. Jesus' response to the Devil, "One does not live by bread alone" reminds us that when we face difficult situations, when the world is turned upside down like it has been this past year, our hope comes not from anything transient, not from stones that crumble or bread that is devoured, but from God. During this first week of Lent, we are called to turn away from our short-term solutions, look toward God, and take part in the world that God is bringing about where all have what they need and no one needs to long for a loaf of bread.

Reflection Questions:

- What are the stones and loaves of bread in your life?
- How can we help bring about a world where no one is tempted by short-term solutions?
- How does turning toward God help us to see the big picture?

THANKSGIVING

In this week's reading from Deuteronomy, the author describes a system of sacrifice which has come to be known as "first fruits giving." Deuteronomy instructs the community of Israel to give thanks for all that God has done and continues to do by sharing the best of what they have with God. The instructions urge the Israelites to bring their gifts to God, and to accompany this action with a litany of thanks and recognition for all that God has done. This week, read Deuteronomy 26:1-11, and as you spend some time in thanksgiving, make a list of the ways God has been faithful to you throughout your life. Perhaps this list could take the form of a timeline, divided into decades, recognizing the faithful blessings God has given you in each era of your life.

SENDING

Bow low in the Presence of God, your God and rejoice! Celebrate all the good things that God has given you and your family. God gives good things to you and the stranger who lives among you. Go out into the world rejoicing, share God's peace and love with all people.

As you venture out into the world this week, in the midst of Lent, notice all the ways in which creation is rejoicing. Write them down. On Easter Morning, read your rejoices as you rejoice in Christ's resurrection.



Week Two

Feb. 28-Mar. 6

GATHERING

During Lent, we often focus on individual sin. But this week's text reminds us that sins are systemic as well—that powerful people like Herod can use their power to oppress and harm others. We are also reminded that Jesus overcomes all the broken systems of sin in our world, including systems that we participate in. As you prepare yourself for time with the Word today, reflect on these words from the Litany of Reconciliation which is used every Friday at noon at the Coventry Cathedral:

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class, Father, forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own, Father, forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth, Father, forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others, Father, forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee, Father, forgive.

The lust which dishonors the bodies of men, women and children, Father, forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God, Father, forgive.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Scripture:

Psalm 118

Luke 13:31-35

WORD

In the Gospel lesson this week, some Pharisees come to warn Jesus that he ought to leave Jerusalem lest he be killed by Herod, the puppet king of Rome in Palestine, the same Herod whose father (Herod Sr.) tried to kill Jesus at his birth in the Gospel of Matthew. You see, the Jewish community in Roman-occupied Palestine was in a precarious position in those days. In an effort to keep the peace with the empire, they flew under the radar, keeping their customs and not causing any problems for the imperial economy. That is, until Jesus showed up and started to interrupt the status quo. Torn between their need to keep the peace, and their longing for a Messiah, the Pharisees (religious leaders of the community) come to Jesus and warn him to get out of town. Jesus, however, knows that he has work to do, a call from God to fulfill, and that he has to carry it out - even in the face of danger. We live in a time of challenging circumstances, not unlike those experienced during the time of Jesus' ministry, and there are times and experiences in our lives when we, too, feel caught between a rock and a hard place. Unable to imagine that the power structures of our lives could change, we seek to play by the rules, and to do what we can in the midst of these circumstances. Jesus reminds us this week that even when we feel trapped by the status quo, unable to imagine a just or equitable reality, that Jesus is not afraid of the structures and power systems of our world. "Go and tell that fox..." Jesus says,



Week Two

Feb. 28-Mar. 6

reminding the Pharisees and us that he is more powerful than even the most authoritarian power brokers of our day. Jesus stands up to the powers of this world that seek to crush God's people underfoot, and ultimately, overcomes them in the power of the cross and empty tomb.

Reflection Questions:

- When have you felt trapped by the status quo, frozen in the midst of a power dynamic?
- How do you relate to the Pharisees in this story?
- Put yourself in Herod's shoes...what other options did Rome have, besides executing Jesus?
- What does it mean to you that Jesus overcame, and continues to overcome, the oppressive power structures of our world?

THANKSGIVING

Let this thanksgiving echo in our hearts as we reflect on what God is doing in our world and our lives.

The boulder the builders scorned
has become the foundation; God has accomplished this,
and it is wonderful in our eyes.

God has done it today and always;
let us celebrate today and be joyful.

God, save us - bequest us triumph!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God.

From the house God we exalt you. God is God.

God has made light shine on us.

You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.

Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;
And God's love endures forever.

SENDING

How is the status quo harming a particular group of people in your community? In your state? In our country? How have you noticed the status quo active in your everyday life? As you heard in the Word, Jesus is more powerful than the systems that oppress us and others, Jesus is more powerful than the status quo. This week, write a letter to one of your local or state representatives about an injustice that is occurring because of the status quo. This is holy work to which we are all called.



Week Three

Mar. 7-13

GATHERING

Isaiah 55:1 reads, “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters”. As you prepare for a time of worship and wonder this week, consider what it is that you thirst for in your life. Where are you feeling parched? For what do you long? Take a moment and open up with God about those places of drought, and remember that God longs to quench our thirst. Wherever you find yourself this week, God finds you there too, and God draws near with the gift of living water, quenching your deepest longings.

Take a moment and pray with these or similar words:

God of grace, Thank you for your generosity. In a world where nothing is free, you promise a cool drink in the desert. This day, my heart is longing for relief. I pray that you might draw near to me in the circumstances of my life (add prayer concerns here), quench my thirst, and open me that I may be a vessel of your living water for others, through Jesus Christ, my savior and Lord. Amen.

WORD

In the previous chapter we learn that the people Jesus is speaking to, various crowds, are dealing with their feelings about the Empire. What does it mean to live as an occupied people, governed by the interests and whims of Rome? It's difficult to navigate life and wonder about faith while living under a corrupt government and biased legal system. The people of 1st century Palestine and the surrounding area knew this well, but this isn't a problem that's unique to that time and place. This is an issue that we see in our world, too, over and over again. Leaders neglect the needs of their constituents, poisoned by power, and as a result people suffer.

Here in Luke 13:6-9, Jesus tells the hurting people a parable. Jesus is speaking to a landowner, who we assume has some level of wealth, and a gardener who s/he employs. Initially, one might rush to uproot the tree because it isn't bearing fruit, but a tree cannot be expected to produce fruit without resources. A tree needs nutrients, good water, sunlight and shade. Now, of course, this is a parable, so this isn't really about a tree. It's about people. People need resources to grow. The government has created a harsh environment for the people to grow, and Jesus recognizes this reality. In Jesus' recognition of what the people are experiencing, Jesus offers empathy and support for the people. This is true for the 1st century world and us!

Scripture:

Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13:1-9



Week Three

Mar. 7-13

Reflection Questions:

- Where do you see the Empire (the ways of the world) stifling growth in your life? In your church? In your community?
- How do you feel called by this Gospel reading to action? Is there a concrete take-away for you this day?
- Do you see people digging around others in your daily life? How might you dig around others to nourish their growth?

THANKSGIVING

Jesus talks to those present about sin. He asks, “Do you think these people are worse sinners? Are these people worse offenders? Is this fig tree hopeless? Should it just be cut down?” These are heavy questions and also very relatable. When have you thought someone else was a worse sinner than you? Write their names down. When have you thought certain groups of people were worse sinners than others? Write them down, too. When do you think someone might have labeled you a “worse sinner” than someone else? Jesus tells those gathered to repent rather than cast judgments; the fig tree gets cared for rather than cut down. People are not hopeless. The troubled reality and status quo of death do not have to remain. God provides a means for hope and renewal.

Take the list of people and pray for them and the world using these words:

God of mercy, in you there is hope; in you there is transformation. No one is too far from your redemption, not even (read the list you made), not even me. Through your faithfulness to your creation, we see a pathway that leads to new life for all people. Let us not see others through the lens of sin and lost causes; rather, let us see others the way you do. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

SENDING

This week, think about something in your life that hasn't been growing or thriving. It could be a relationship with a family member or friend, it could be a situation related to your work or even your life in the church or your relationship with God. Think about what it might need to start growing or thriving again. God's grace can be given to us in these situations in many different ways. Perhaps this “tree” in your life needs more attention, time, or love. Perhaps it needs reconciliation or forgiveness. Perhaps it needs “pruned” by reorganizing your priorities. And perhaps this tree truly isn't capable of fruit—we can't make dead trees grow! Maybe it needs uprooted so that you can plant a new, more fruitful tree. Be intentional about tending to this “tree” in your life this week, whatever that looks like. Perhaps you will be surprised by the fruit that grows as a result!

Week Four

Mar. 14-20

GATHERING

We enter a time of Confession and Forgiveness.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom God imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Take time to reflect on your sins. The sins you have committed against God, the sins you have committed against your siblings in Christ, and the sins you have committed against yourself. When you have taken the time in silent meditation read the following, knowing you are connected to God's people in the recitation.

Have mercy on me, O God. I confess that I have turned from you and given myself into the power of sin. I am truly sorry and humbly repent. In your compassion forgive my sins, known and unknown, things I have done and things I have failed to do. Turn me again to you, and uphold me by your Spirit, so that I may live and serve you in newness of life through Jesus Christ, my Savior and Lord. Amen

Hear God's pardon for you this day: God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. In the name of † Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ may live in your hearts through faith. Amen.

Scripture:

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

Luke 13:1-3, 11b--32

WORD

Family dynamics can be messy. This parable shows us that. Each character in this parable has their own story and perspective. We have the older brother who is responsible, dutiful, and loyal. He has found his place, and stays there. He doesn't seem to take unnecessary risks. He is the type who always does the *right* thing. It's easy to lift him up as the "good one" and needlessly shame the younger brother. But we also see that his older brother is resentful. He doesn't celebrate that his younger brother is safe, that he is finally home. He tries to dissociate from his delinquent brother by saying to his father, "This son of yours," as if to wash his hands from the relationship.



Week Four

Mar. 14-20

Sometimes it is our own sin that shields us from the grace already in our midst. Sometimes our bitterness rots the mercy we have been receiving all along. May those barriers that get in the way of us noticing God's grace be removed. The younger brother is the one who is on the receiving end of the finger pointing. He left. He squandered. He is the prodigal, the one for whom this parable is named. He has been labeled the bad son. Why did he leave? Was he mad? Hurt? Frustrated? Scared? In danger? Stubborn? Selfish? We don't really know, do we? Was home life just too much? Was he being rebellious? All we know is that he leaves, and then he returns. Is he nervous? Scared? Regardless, he is embraced. He is celebrated. He is reminded that he is still valuable. He does not get defined by his actions, rather by the love his father has for him. No matter where or why we wander, may we trust in God's unceasing love for us. May we define ourselves and others not by the mistakes made, but by God's transformative grace and mercy.

Reflection Questions:

- Which character do you most identify with? Why?
- Which message do you need to hear most today?
- When have you been truly celebrated for who you are? What was that like?

THANKSGIVING

This parable reminds us that, like the father in the story, God welcomes us exactly as we are, unconditionally! The best way that we can give God thanks for this graceful welcome is to offer the same thing to others. Brainstorm ways you can be more welcoming and understanding this week—ways you can meet people where they are as you go about your life. Say a prayer giving thanks to God for welcoming you and ask for God's guidance as you strive to welcome others.

SENDING

The reading from Joshua this week tells a story about the end of wandering. After years of walking through the wilderness, eating manna that falls from the sky, sustained by God's direct action, the Israelites reach the land of Canaan, where they will eat the fruit of the earth. This week, take a moment at mealtimes to really consider where your food started, and give thanks to God for the many steps in the process which brought it to your table.

Week Five

Mar. 21-27

GATHERING

Blessed be the Triune God who makes all things new, who creates a path in the wilderness, for whom we declare our praise. Amen. Take a moment to confess your sins to God. God of Mercy, I confess that I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. Some of these sins I know and some are known only to you. I have not loved my neighbor as myself. I have lived out of a mindset of scarcity. I let fear get the best of me. Forgive me, Gracious God. Transform my heart; turn me outward to love and serve my neighbor. In Jesus' name. Amen. Receive God's forgiveness: You are God's beloved. Through Christ, you are forgiven; you have been made new. Renewed by God's grace, may you live rooted in the promise of abundant life. Amen.

Scripture:

John 12:1-8

WORD

This week's Gospel challenges us. It really does look like Mary is "wasting" that perfume. And Judas's words about caring for the poor really do sound noble. But in our culture where we are bombarded about current events and there is always something we are "supposed" to care about, it is easy to sound like Judas. "The people out protesting for Black Lives Matter need to remember that there is a pandemic—they should be social distancing!" "Why should we care about wildfires in Australia when there are natural disasters in our OWN country?" "Why did you buy this expensive perfume when the money should be given to the poor?" The Gospel writer in John is aware that Judas's words don't match his actions—he doesn't really care about the poor, but it looks good for him to pretend to. Sometimes it's worth checking to see if our own words really match our actions. It's easy to care about a cause in a superficial way—we can give a few dollars to the Red Cross and never think about it again. We can put up a Black Lives Matter sign in our yard or change our profile picture on Facebook while we sit idle and use the pandemic as an excuse to not really work for justice. When getting behind a cause means doing real, difficult work, having difficult conversations, and sacrificing our time and resources, more often than not we would rather fade into the background. When Judas complained, the first few words of Jesus' response stand out to me: "Leave her alone. She bought it." Mary truly cared about Jesus and decided that his life and ministry was worth investing in. Her actions showed where her heart was. 300 denarii would have been nearly a year's worth of wages. She showed Jesus that she was willing to sacrifice all of that for his sake. Mary gives an example to us for what it looks like to really care about what is important. Mary reminds us that we don't have to give in to the social pressure of trying to look like we care about the next "big thing" in the news, which burns us out and accomplishes little. Instead, we are called to prioritize - to find one thing we really and truly care about, one injustice that makes us angry, or one ministry that fills us with excitement about the possibilities. Put our 300 denarii into it. Make sacrifices and do the work.

Week Five

Mar. 21-27

People will always exist who try to claim that something else is more important than what you choose—but the important thing that Mary kept in mind is that we are not all called to care about the same things or do the same work! If all the disciples had bought perfume for 300 denarii to pour on Jesus' feet, that would have been absurd. It was Mary's particular calling and it was what Mary chose to do with what she had. She challenges us to do the same, to discern our own calling, to find what we are willing to invest in to bring about change in the world.

Reflection Questions:

- What things are you passionate about? What do you notice about the world that you wish was different or better?
- Is there any one thing you would be willing to spend a year's worth of your income on or give a year's worth of your time to?
- How do you think God could use your unique talents and passions to bring about positive change?

THANKSGIVING

Just one chapter before the story we read today, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Once separated by grief and loss, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are now reunited by Christ's power and love. Now, they're all part of the same dinner party; one serves, one sits, one anoints, but all three are present. Together. This week, in our time of thanksgiving, pause and consider relationships in your life that once were cut off, but have been restored. Notice the ways God worked to bring that connection back to life, and give thanks to God. If there are challenging relationships in your life at present that seem beyond redemption, use this time to pray that God might intervene in a miraculous way and breathe new life into a relationship that is withering.

SENDING

In life there are certain situations and issues that are met with urgency. In Jesus' discourse in John 12 he says, "The poor will always be with you, but you won't always have me." Certainly, Jesus isn't talking about neglecting the poor and turning a blind eye toward those in poverty. Jesus is speaking with urgency because he is to die soon. Much of what we do in life requires us to triage tasks and act with urgency in some instances. What are things in your life that beg for or require urgency? As you go, today and throughout the week, pay attention to the things that are urgent, give yourself a break on the things that can wait, and use the time you have to be intentional about your time and the ways you use your time. *Holy God of the Vast Universe, loving God of all the broken hearts, you ask us to act with urgency toward injustice and needs within the human family. Stir us to action where we can make a different and manifest institution and corporate change. Allow us to rest in you, recognizing when we are weary and our cups are dry. Fill us up with your goodness, mercy, and Spirit, so that we can better serve you in the newness of life. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen. Go in peace, remember the poor. Thanks be to God!*



Palm Sunday

Mar. 28

GATHERING

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! This is what the people shouted as Jesus entered Jerusalem. We heard that the “whole multitude of the disciples” had loudly praised God. There was a crowd, and they were filled with joy. What makes you scream for joy? When was the last time you shouted your praises to God? On Palm Sunday, some churches celebrate with palm branches and a processional. Go find a stick, branch, or another substitute for a palm branch. Take your branch, head outside, and shout for joy, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!” Call a friend from church and proclaim, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” After shouting for joy, as you get ready to head into the Word, pray and thank God for Jesus who is the true king and authority in our lives.

Scripture:

Luke 19:28-40

WORD

The book I use to teach Confirmation to our middle school students lists Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem as one thing under the heading “the top 3 most rebellious things that Jesus did.” It might be hard for our contemporary minds to see why this was such a rebellious act. I love reading about ancient Rome, and one of the things I have learned is that sometimes the emperors would have what was called a “triumph.” While returning to Rome or visiting another city, they would enter the city in the form of a great parade. They would ride a fancy chariot and have many signs displaying their wealth and power—often things that represented the lands they had conquered, like elephants from Africa, and women clad in silk from provinces in the east. All the people in the city would gather to watch the emperor’s triumphant parade and celebrate or even worship him as the emperor and king. On Palm Sunday when we read about Jesus entering Jerusalem, it seems like a spontaneous little parade. But Jesus and the people gathered that day knew exactly what they were doing—they were certainly familiar with the ritual of a triumph. Jesus deliberately staged his entry into Jerusalem as a king, and the people deliberately treated him like one. They held their own little mock triumph for Jesus, worshipping him as their King—who they hoped would overthrow the Roman government. Obviously, the actual Roman leaders in Jerusalem at that time were NOT happy about this. They saw it as a mockery of their power and as a seditious act of treason—how dare anyone but the emperor be hailed as king in this way? Even though we appreciate the levity of Palm Sunday after the long season of Lent, this moment sets the tone for Jesus’ crucifixion by giving the authorities a very real reason to be angry. Even as the people cried “hosanna!” they were likely already bracing themselves for the certain consequences of their actions. But this story has an important significance for us. Even though part of this processional into Jerusalem was deliberately mocking the emperor and his rituals, Jesus was not just putting on a skit for fun or pretending to be a king.



Palm Sunday

Mar. 28

Jesus knew and understood what no one else at that time truly did—Jesus knew that he was Lord, not just of Jerusalem, but of all of heaven and earth. There are many times in our lives today when we feel like the corrupt earthly powers that be are in total control. We often get caught up in the decisions made by our local and national political leaders and can feel like there is no hope, or that our only hope is to get a better person or set of people in charge. But Christ's power supersedes that of any earthly emperor. This story we hear on Palm Sunday foreshadows not just the crucifixion, but the resurrection. It is a powerful reminder for us that no earthly reign can stop the risen Christ from being at work in our world and lives.

Reflection Questions:

- In Jesus' day, Palm Sunday took on the look of an emperor's triumph because it was a symbol of what was most powerful in their world. What would that look like in our world? What symbols might Jesus use in a Palm Sunday moment today? What powerful entities in today's culture would he undermine or overthrow?
- We currently live in a volatile political climate. How can we remember that God is in control in the midst of that?

THANKSGIVING

This week, we receive a strange story about a colt being untied and led away, with only the cryptic explanation that "the Lord needs it." Sometimes it is hard to recognize what God might need now. Take a moment to consider the places you have felt God's presence, or noticed the fruits of God's Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control). Now, hold one of those experiences in your mind, and pay attention to the mundane parts of what made it possible. Who was there? What was around you? How did you perceive God's presence? Thank God for each of these tactile actors in the moment when you recognized God alongside you; these are the colts of our day.

SENDING

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Go in peace to love and serve God. Amen!

Thanks be to God.

As you depart this day, meditate on Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. We know this triumph was fleeting and fickle and the real triumph came on Easter morning. Write your feelings, thoughts, insights down. Give yourself the space and time you need to reflect.



Maundy Thursday

April 1

GATHERING

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus gathered with his friends for a meal. Prepare your worship space with table settings for your household and begin your worship time by breaking bread together. You could plan it so that you enjoy a complete meal, or you could just share a small and simple snack of bread or crackers. Say this prayer either before or after you have eaten, to prepare yourself for your time of worship and reflection:

Lord, the table is set and we are gathered. Prepare our hearts and minds to hear your Word. Join us at the table and guide our conversation and reflection so that our bodies are refreshed and our spirits are fed. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Scripture:

1 Corinthians 11:23-36

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

WORD

Maundy Thursday is often the night when we reflect on the vocation of Christian service, paying attention to Christ's act of serving his friends as an example of what it looks like to follow Jesus. But before we move to what we "ought" to do this year, I want to take a moment to pay attention to one specific pair of feet Jesus washed: the feet that belonged to Judas. We are currently experiencing a time of great division in our society. With divisions between political parties, generations, and races becoming starker with every passing week, there is something important to pay attention to here.

Assuming Jesus knew exactly who Judas was and what he planned to do, it is remarkable to recognize that the footwashing episode of John 13 takes place before Judas leaves the room to betray his teacher. Jesus bends down, and gently washes the feet of the one who will set his death into motion in just a few hours. Every year when this text comes up I think about that. I think about the people who have betrayed those I love, the people I don't know but whom I feel have betrayed our country in this time of great division. Truth be told, I wouldn't wash their feet, but I'm not sure that's what this story is about anyway. Rather than focusing solely on what sort of Christians we should be, I hope we can take a moment and focus on what sort of God we have - a God who would take on flesh, experience human suffering, frailty, betrayal, and death, and who would still choose to wash the feet of the betrayer. In a world filled with factions, it's an incredible and scandalous thing to know our God stoops down, transgressing those thick boundaries we like to erect, and loves us each equally.



Maundy Thursday

April 1

Reflection Questions:

- How do you feel when you think about the idea that God's grace is also extended to those you view as evil?
- How does Jesus do this work among us now?
- What does forgiveness mean to you, and when have you experienced it in your life?

THANKSGIVING

God is here. The Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer is with us. May our hearts be open. Let us lift them up to God:

Loving God, we praise and thank you for bestowing upon us everything we need for life's long day. We recall that you provided humanity with wholesome things to eat from the very first day of creation. We remember that you provided bread and water to your people wandering in the desert as your people moved from slavery into freedom. We remember that you showed us how to care for your people, to leave grain in the fields for those who are hungry, and time in our lives to make feasts with our family and friends. We remembered but forgot. We forgot that we belong to one another.

But you did not forget the people you made in hope and love. You came to us in Spirit and in body, teaching us that when we build a longer table and welcome people in, loaves multiply. You came to us, showing us over and over that when healing is shared, the human family is restored. You kept coming to us in love, even when we rejected you. We offer our thanksgiving to you. Amen.

SENDING

John 13:15 reads, "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." John 13:34 reads, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." It is clear that Jesus gives the disciples a commission here - serve others, even those you may think you are better than; love the world. The disciples are called to do these things but as our Word section noted: God is at work in Jesus' words and actions. God is at work in the disciples; God is at work in us. One way God's work is manifest is through acts of service. What is one thing you can do to show God's love in the world? Can you write to a state or local representative, urging for more just laws? Can you serve food somewhere? Call your local prison and ask how to support inmates? Pay for someone else's groceries? Something else? May God's Spirit of generosity and love fill you and guide you.



Good Friday

April 2

GATHERING

This year, as you head into Good Friday, take a moment to consider the role of state-sanctioned violence in our world today.

Jesus was a rabble rouser. He went against the society to which he was sent, by advocating for justice, equity, and a different way of life. Jesus crossed boundaries the society expected people to honor, and he connected with people beyond the divisions of the day. Jesus' life was so disruptive and radical that the Roman Empire killed him. As you prepare this day, take a moment and pray for an end to state-sanctioned violence, and imagine what it would be like to live in a truly just and peaceful world.

Scripture:

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1-19:42

WORD

We often spend a lot of time during Lent thinking about penitence, repentance; there's a somberness about this season. The author of Hebrews reminds us, "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. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." The author brings up themes of Lent: confession, faith, and a reminder of our sinful nature, but the thing I find most interesting is the mention of hope. Even when we experience somberness, regret, or contrition for our sins, even when we feel like we have failed, even when we feel like God is absent because of our sin, we have this hope. As Emily Dickenson writes, "Hope is the thing with feathers - that perches in the soul - and sings the tune without the words - and never stops - at all." Hope is always there. The world knows hope as a wish, something fleeting. We hear people say, "I hope I win the lottery" or "I hope I pass the test." This isn't the hope we find in the gospels or in Hebrews. Hope is a gift from God through grace. Hope is knowing that God grants us eternal life through what Christ has done on the cross. God does the work in hope.

We have hope in God because we are certain that we cannot attain salvation on our own. God's grace, freely given to us, is necessary in order for us to do what we need to do to achieve eternal life. During Lent, we take a look at our human condition and meditate on our faults, but we have this hope because of what Christ has already done for us on the cross.



Good Friday

April 2

Reflection Questions:

- Recognizing this hope, invigorated by the Holy Spirit, we are propelled to love God and God's people. Where do you see hope playing out in your section of the world?
- Reflect on Emily Dickenson's quote from her poem, "Hope." How does this relate to theological hope?

THANKSGIVING

The psalmist cries out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is easy to tap into despair when we think about Jesus' death on Good Friday. Jesus was killed as a criminal because those in power felt threatened. His friends, loved ones, and followers had to watch him unjustly die. I imagine they felt like God was far away or that God wasn't hearing their cries. I imagine they felt forsaken like the psalmist. When have you felt forsaken? When has it seemed like those around you have been forsaken? What was happening that was making you feel this way? What was bringing you despair? Let us pray. *Gracious God, where are you? Sometimes it feels like you are far away, and sometimes it seems as if no one can hear my cries or the cries of those suffering. Make your presence known. Show up. Be with me. Comfort those in distress. Bring healing to those who are sick. Bring justice and equity where there is corruption. Assure us that you haven't forgotten us. Give us hope where there seems to be none. In Jesus, the Crucified One, I pray. Amen.*

SENDING

In person worship services on Good Friday often end with the congregation leaving in complete silence. This is jarring for us because it is so different from how church usually ends, with a procession and a hymn, with talking and laughing over coffee in the fellowship hall. The silence we experience on Good Friday can seem to reflect a hopelessness—we are silent because Jesus is silent; we are silent because the disciples are hiding silently in fear for their lives. But it is more than that. One reason we leave in silence is simply because the story isn't finished yet. We don't have a closing hymn because we know that the Gospel doesn't end with what we hear on Good Friday. We leave in silence because we are waiting for Easter Sunday to finish the story. It is a hopeful silence and one that looks forward to Easter. The silence tells us that Jesus' death is NOT the end. In the midst of silence on Good Friday, we feel the power of death in our lives while recognizing it does not have the final say. This is a powerful silence that trusts in God and says "Just wait." Spend some time tonight in silent reflection. Remove the background noise that is usually part of our lives and lean into silence, as uncomfortable as it can be for us. Take note of what you do hear and how you feel. Reflect on where God is in the midst of silence as we anticipate Easter.

Easter Sunday

April 4

GATHERING

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, Indeed!! Alleluia!

So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, Indeed!! Alleluia!

Mary was weeping in the garden, presuming Jesus to be the gardener she asked him where the body of her Lord was laid. Jesus said, "Mary." Mary rejoiced!

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, Indeed!! Alleluia!

Scripture:

John 20:1-18

WORD

When was the last time you cried? Or, what makes you cry? Some folks cry from stress or when they feel frustrated. Some folks can cry at an endearing movie, tv show, or commercial (hi, that's me). People cry when they are sad and grieving. For others, crying rarely happens. Has someone ever asked you why you were crying before? I always chuckle at this question in John's resurrection narrative: "Woman, why are you weeping?" It's sort of silly, don't you think? It feels obvious why Mary is crying. She is weeping because she is upset, hurt, scared. Her Teacher was murdered just a few days prior, and she is grieving. And to make matters worse, the tomb where Jesus is supposed to be laid is empty. *Of course* she is weeping. Crying is a normal and natural response to grief. In the midst of her sadness, in the midst of the reality of death, Jesus calls out to her, "Mary!" When Mary hears her name, the reality of death is transformed right before her. Death no longer has the final say. Life has won. Naming things has a way of transforming them. Think about what it's like to give your pet a name, your child, your vehicle, etc. It is no accident that we use people's names during baptism. God's transformative love is at work in those moments, just like it's at work during Mary and Jesus' interaction at the tomb. Every time someone uses your name, may you be reminded of the resurrection. And may you receive the voice of the Risen One calling out to you - saying your name - assuring you that life is even more powerful than death. Jesus is risen! Alleluia!



Easter Sunday

April 4

Reflection Questions:

- When has someone you loved surprised you? What was that like?
- What does your name mean to you? When have you given something/someone a name? Why did you choose that name?
- Where do you see signs of life around you?

THANKSGIVING

Psalm 118:24 says “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Joy comes easily to us on Easter. After all, Christ is risen! But this Psalm reminds us that every day has cause for rejoicing. While some miracles are definitely big, like Christ rising from the dead, we experience smaller miracles and reminders of the risen Christ’s presence with us every day. Spend a few minutes and make a list of everything that brings you joy. Give thanks to God for everything that adds joy to your life. Keep your list and pull it out from time to time, especially times when finding joy in everyday life is more difficult.

SENDING

On Easter we rejoice with our risen Lord. Easter reminds us, as theologian Anna Madsen says, that “Death is real, but life is realer.” On Easter, God reveals that God’s love is more powerful than even the worst things we humans can throw at God and one another. This week, find a way to put into words what Easter means to you. Write one sentence articulating what it means in your life that Jesus rose from the grave.