

LENT

2016

prayer guide

The Season of Lent

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

the early Christians observed with great devotion
the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,
and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration
there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation.

During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.
It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins
and had separated themselves from the community of faith
were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,
and restored to participation in the life of the Church.

In this way the whole congregation was reminded
of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ
and the need we all have to renew our faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,
to observe a holy Lent: by **self-examination** and **repentance**;
by **prayer**, **fasting**, and **self-denial**;
and by reading and **meditating** on God's Holy Word.

To make a right beginning of repentance,
and as a mark of our mortal nature,
let us now kneel before our Creator and Redeemer.

Each day of week, we will practice a particular one of these spiritual disciplines, in preparation to remember and celebrate Easter.

Monday—Meditating on the Word

In the desert Jesus responded to each temptation with Scripture. In imitation of him, we seek to make God's Word *part of us*—to chew and consume it—until it springs out of us naturally, even in the arid lands of stress, grief, and temptation. Spend extra time with the Monday readings, reflecting on questions like "What is God saying to me?" or "Where am I in this story?" or "What does this teach me about Christ?" Consider *memorizing* a portion of the text from that day. We will put a recommended section in **bold**.

Tuesday—Self-Denial

Our own desires often crowd and drown our attentiveness to God's voice and way. Every Tuesday, we will seek to quiet that noise by denying ourselves some pleasure, privilege, or preoccupation. In the space created, we often hear both God's voice and our own heart more clearly. Some suggestions for self-denial: internet or social media, television or any other entertainment screen-time, music, coffee and sweets, tobacco and alcohol. It may even be something like bathing, nice clothing, or speaking. Some of these things might seem insignificant or unnecessary to following Christ, but the idea to practice discipline in small things in order to *train* our hearts to be ready for when we need to sacrifice our own desires when it really matters in times of crisis and need.

Wednesday—Prayer

Whenever Christ practiced solitude—in the desert, on the mountain—it was to pray. Prayer spreads throughout the week, but we take Wednesdays to spend more focused and/or extended time in certain kinds of prayer.

Thursday—Repentance

From the beginning of the Gospel—as preached by John, Jesus, and the apostles in Acts—the immediate call is the same: *repent*—return to the Lord to

change your hearts and lives. We respond to this call throughout the Lenten season, and especially on Thursdays.

Friday—Fasting

Fasting has a way of revealing and re-orienting our desires, which is important for preparing our hearts for Jesus' death and resurrection. This is therefore the most common practice of Lent and the one we are emphasizing as a whole church family. We encourage everyone who is able to fast from breakfast and lunch on Fridays throughout Lent. Spend the time you would be eat lunching doing the Friday devotional.

Saturday—Self-Examination

If we allow, the Spirit will tend to work through all of these disciplines to open up new self-awareness. This can be uplifting, humbling, or painful (or all at once). Every Saturday, we will bring the week's insights and graces to a point in a practice of self-examination.

Sunday—Worship

Today, we gather together in worship. We bring our whole selves to the gathering of God's people to confess, listen, and proclaim God's Word together.

These daily reflections are meant to help give focus and meaning to the spiritual discipline of the day as we prepare our hearts and lives together to celebrate the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Ash Wednesday, February 10

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

—Luke 18:10–14 (NRSV)

"Blessed are the meek," Jesus tells us. And here he shows us what true meekness looks like. One of the simplest and most cherished prayers to many Christians throughout history is based on this parable and is referred to as the Jesus Prayer: "**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner**" or simply "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." The power of this prayer is its plain humility—its meekness. It can be used to focus our attention on the presence of God, to confess and ask forgiveness, to call for help, to remind ourselves of both our need and God's grace.

Say this prayer silently while breathing slowly, each phrase riding on your alternating inhales and exhales. Repeat this as long as you feel you need. Memorize this short prayer and plan on reciting it regularly throughout this Lenten season.

Thursday, February 11

All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!
Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!
Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!
Why spend money for what isn't food,
 and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?
Listen carefully to me and eat what is good;
 enjoy the richest of feasts.
Listen and come to me;
 listen, and you will live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
 my faithful loyalty to David.
Look, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a prince and commander of peoples.
Look, you will call a nation you don't know,
 a nation you don't know will run to you
 because of the Lord your God,
 the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you.
Seek the Lord when he can still be found;
 call him while he is yet near.
Let the wicked abandon their ways
 and the sinful their schemes.
Let them return to the Lord so that he may have mercy on them,
 to our God, because he is generous with forgiveness.
My plans aren't your plans,
 nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways,
 and my plans than your plans.

—Isaiah 55:1–9 (NRSV)

Part of the preparation of Lent is repentance. Repentance is not just about *feeling sorry*; it is an *action*, a *change*—turning from our own way and changing our hearts and lives. Though this can feel like death, it is the only path to life. As we travel through the desert, God calls us to the waters.

Sometimes we do not return to the Lord because forgiveness doesn't make sense to us. We don't think we deserve it. This is why the Lord must reassure us: "my ways are higher than your ways." Even when we don't want to forgive—or even be forgiven—God, the only true Judge, beckons us back to himself.

From what do you repent today? From what don't you think you can be forgiven and restored? How do you resolve to change your life? What behavior, habit, or situation to you need to abandon in order to truly repent and not just feel sorry?

Closing Prayer

Lord, I abandon my way to seek you; in your generous mercy, forgive me and restore me to yourself. Amen.

Friday, February 12

John's disciples and the Pharisees had a habit of fasting. Some people asked Jesus, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples fast, but yours don't?"

Jesus said, "The wedding guests can't fast while the groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the groom with them, they can't fast. But the days will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast."

—Mark 2:18–20 (CEB)

Lent is a season of fasting, as we prepare to remember Jesus' death and celebrate his resurrection. Jesus reminds us that fasting is not for its own sake; its meaning is wrapped up in relationship. Our fasting not an empty exercise but a response to Christ, seeking communion with him.

Part of our fast is *mourning*—remembering the suffering of Christ, and lamenting the reality of death that still grips creation in the Groom's absence as we wait for his return. We fast remembering when we ourselves were far from God—rebels and estranged children to him—in order to more deeply experience the reconciliation that he brings with his death and resurrection. Pray that our fast would not simply be a demonstration or obligation, but would deepen our experience of this reconciliation.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, return to your Bride to bring resurrection and renewal. Restore us to yourself. Amen.

Saturday, February 13

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.

—John 1:35–39 (NRSV)

Today we allow Jesus to reveal our hearts. Imagine Jesus turning to you and hear him ask you, "What are you looking for?" During Lent, by challenging our hearts through fasting and prayer we open ourselves to answer this question. Deep down, what is it you seek? What desires and dreams truly drive your decisions everyday? Why do you follow Jesus? Take time of self-examination in Jesus' presence to reflect on his question. Knowing what we seek helps us to "come and see" Christ for who he is, not for what we want him to be.

Closing Prayer

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world; purify our hearts, that we might see you. Amen.

Sunday, February 14

Today, if you hear his voice,
don't have stubborn hearts
as they did in the rebellion,
on the day when they tested me in the desert.

That is where your ancestors challenged and tested me,
though they had seen my work for forty years.

So I was angry with them.

I said, "Their hearts always go off course,
and they don't know my ways."

Because of my anger I swore:

"They will never enter my rest!"

Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that none of you have an evil, unfaithful heart that abandons the living God. Instead, encourage each other every day, as long as it's called "today," so that none of you become insensitive to God because of sin's deception. We are partners with Christ, but only if we hold on to the confidence we had in the beginning until the end.

—Hebrews 3:7–14 (CEB)

Today we hear a warning given to Israel in the desert, spoken afresh to us. We wander confused and stubborn through the wilderness just as they did. Our own pilgrimage out of the desert and into the promised land is lifelong, and we take it together—with Christ and with one another. Remember God's promises to us—to faithfully lead us together into a new heaven and earth. Pray for humility but confidence in these promises, and seek out a brother or sister in Christ to encourage with these promises today.

Closing Prayer

Living God, by the presence and work of your Holy Spirit, soften our hearts, straighten our steps, and strengthen our unity every day, as long as it is called "today." Amen.

Monday, February 15

Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

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

—Hebrews 4:11–16 (NRSV)

When we read Scripture honestly, bringing our whole broken selves into its light, the experience can be humbling, even painful. It splits us apart and reveals things we didn't want to know were there: prejudice, assumptions, blindspots, habits, etc. Prayerfully reading Scripture can be exposing. Because of this we tend to cleverly avoid seeing ourselves in the mirror of Scripture by treating it as interesting study material rather than hearing it as God's Word to us and about us. We create distance between ourselves and the Bible by seeing it as a book, rather than part of a conversation. We seek to overcome this distance by meditating on the Word, meaning that we *listen*—searching, chewing, consuming, making the Word a part of us.

Fortunately, the Word of God does not strip us down just to leave us alone and exposed. In Jesus, the Word becomes Incarnate; he comes to us in our weakness, suffers with us, and lifts us up. Reflect on the mystery that God himself comes near to us, enters into solidarity with even our suffering and

fragility. Hear his voice speaking to you through his Word. Pray for those who feel that God is far off, unconcerned with our struggles (even if you feel this too). Pray for boldness to approach God, trusting in his mercy and grace.

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, who suffered with us and made a way to the Father, speak to us and help us in our time of need. Amen.

Tuesday, February 16

Better is the little that the righteous have
than the overabundant wealth of the wicked.

—*Psalm 37:16 (CEB)*

Fasting extends to more than food. Lent is a season when we practice a certain kind of *poverty*: a self-denying freedom from our possessions and desires that says, “my food is to do the will of God.” We *detach* ourselves from competing comforts and compulsions in order to *attach* ourselves more completely to God. Even a very small “lack” that we aren’t used to often reveals how attached we are to simply doing and having whatever we want. While this can be difficult and discouraging, it also makes tremendous space for us to remind ourselves that God is our true portion and power.

What will you deny yourself today and/or every Tuesday during Lent? It may be some form of entertainment or distraction. It may be precisely the thing you aren’t letting yourself consider giving up. Take time with this. Pray that God shows you what may be distracting or disconnecting you from him, and pray for his help to find freedom from whatever that is.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father who cares for his children and knows what we need, make us poor in spirit, that your kingdom would come to us. Amen.

Wednesday, February 17

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

—Hebrews 5:7–9 (NRSV)

Jesus prayed. Jesus prays. If the Son of God himself, in his humanity, practiced prayer to commune and communicate with his Father, how much more must we commit ourselves to the same thing? If Christ “learned obedience,” how much more must we? Pray for opportunities, even if they involve suffering, to learn obedience.

This passage teaches us that God does not simply pluck us out of suffering; he enters into it with us and leads us through it. Jesus promises to pray with us, in us, and for us.; we never pray or suffer alone. Pray for all those who carry pain, and pray about the suffering that has entered into your life and heart—that we would know we are never alone, and that it be used by God to teach us obedience and trust.

Closing Prayer

Father, hear the prayers of your children; come to us in our suffering and save us, through Jesus Christ your Son, who intercedes for us. Amen.

Thursday, February 18

I wrote to you in my earlier letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. But I wasn't talking about the sexually immoral people in the outside world by any means—or the greedy, or the swindlers, or people who worship false gods—otherwise, you would have to leave the world entirely! But now I'm writing to you not to associate with anyone who calls themselves "brother" or "sister" who is sexually immoral, greedy, someone who worships false gods, an abusive person, a drunk, or a swindler. Don't even eat with anyone like this. What do I care about judging outsiders? Isn't it your job to judge insiders? God will judge outsiders. Expel the evil one from among you!

—*1 Corinthians 5:9–13 (CEB)*

We tend to get all this backwards—ganging up to judge outsiders while failing to keep one another accountable. Sometimes we get so caught up attacking the outside world, demonizing "culture," that we forget our responsibility to care for the family of Christ. Paul's language here is shocking: it is our job to judge insiders? How can this be?

Repentance is communal. Our sin—mine and yours—is not private. The sin of a member belongs to the Body. One of the most destructive tendencies of sin is to hide itself by any means possible. We fight against this tendency with honesty, confession, mercy, forgiveness, and—when necessary—discipline. If we believe what we read last week that repentance is the way to life, then we must help one another all the time by calling and responding to repentance.

Often, we do not confront the sin of our brothers and sisters because it would force us to confront our own. Our community is a reflection of ourselves. It is easier to look outside and scoff than it is to look in the mirror and change. So when it comes to "judging," we balance these words of Paul with the words of Jesus: "First take the log out from your own eye, then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5).

Pray for the purity of the Body of Christ. Pray first for the lust, greed, idolatry, abusiveness, and dishonesty in your own heart. Then pray for evil throughout the members of the Church, that it would be cast out and that those wounds would be healed.

Closing Prayer

Christ, you give yourself up for your Bride, the Church, to present her to yourself in splendor, holy and cleansed. Help us to do the same. Amen.

Friday, February 19

In the meantime the disciples spoke to Jesus, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” Jesus said to them, “I have food to eat that you don’t know about.” The disciples asked each other, “Has someone brought him food?” Jesus said to them, “I am fed by doing the will of the one who sent me and by completing his work.

—John 4:31–34 (CEB)

Jesus echoes what he told the enemy in the desert. Obedience is his sustenance and nourishment. Today, do not let yourself dwell on the *feeling* of hunger. Instead, let the sensation be a trigger for you to look to do or say something kind for someone around you, to make amends with someone, or to pray for someone else. This can be difficult, because hunger tends to make us cranky, but refusing to give into the emotional effects of fasting is a powerful practice for learning to set aside ourselves for others and for obedience. It also teaches us to trust that we act not on our own strength—that we are fed by the one who sent us to do his work.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, send me to do your work; for my food is to do your will. Amen.

Saturday, February 20

But watch yourself! Don't forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commands or his case laws or his regulations that I am commanding you right now. When you eat, get full, build nice houses, and settle down, and when your herds and your flocks are growing large, your silver and gold are multiplying, and everything you have is thriving, don't become arrogant, forgetting the Lord your God:

the one who rescued you from Egypt, from the house of slavery;
the one who led you through this vast and terrifying desert of poisonous snakes and scorpions, of cracked ground with no water;
the one who made water flow for you out of a hard rock;
the one who fed you manna in the wilderness, which your ancestors had never experienced, in order to humble and test you, but in order to do good to you in the end.

Don't think to yourself, "My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me." Remember the Lord your God! He's the one who gives you the strength to be prosperous in order to establish the covenant he made with your ancestors—and that's how things stand right now. But if you do, in fact, forget the Lord your God and follow other gods, serving and bowing down to them, I swear to you right now that you will be completely destroyed.

—Deuteronomy 8:11–19 (CEB)

Just before they finally leave the desert to enter the promised land, God warns Israel through Moses that this transition from poverty to prosperity will obscure their memory and threaten their trust in God. Security is dangerous. Those of us who live in comfort with plenty are vulnerable to being destroyed by forgetfulness. Reflect on the things you take for granted as your own doing (job, possessions, money, success, stability, etc.) and confess that these do nothing to change our complete reliance on God's grace. Thank God for his promises and provision, and pray that we as a people do not grow forgetful and complacent in comfort.

Another more specific self-examination for today: At the end of our Friday fasts, we transition from poverty to plenty, from desert to dessert. Finishing a time of fasting always comes with the temptation to over-indulgence. We get to our evening meal and let loose. Even though it *feels* good—maybe even feels like gratitude and celebration—this kind of release actually counteracts the benefits of fasting, by training our minds, hearts, and bodies that self-indulgence the reward of fasting rather than a *problem* fasting seeks to address. So even in the meal we *do* eat on Fridays, it is important to keep a measure of restraint. Think back to yesterday's evening meal. What was your attitude when you broke your fast? Was it one of gratitude or one of indulgence? Did you eat *whatever you wanted*—whether how much or what kind of food? For future Friday meals, consider eating with others, focusing on the fellowship rather than the food.

Closing Prayer

Creator and Provider, you are the Vine and we are the branches. In times of little and in times of abundance, let my heart remember you, because apart from you I can do, be, and have nothing. Amen.

Sunday, February 21

His mother and brothers arrived. They stood outside and sent word to him, calling for him. A crowd was seated around him, and those sent to him said, "Look, your mother, brothers, and sisters are outside looking for you."

He replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Looking around at those seated around him in a circle, he said, "Look, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother, sister, and mother."

—Mark 3:32–35 (CEB)

Too often, we desire Jesus on our own terms. We want him to come to us, outside and away from the crowd. We want a private Jesus, rather than a Jesus out of our control. Earlier in the story, we find that Jesus' family was coming to get him because they thought he was out of his mind.

If we are honest, the Church is messy. If we think we have our "act" together, we are probably more like Jesus' relatives than the people actually crowding around him. The joy and hope is that Jesus is *present* in the mess. Drawing near to Jesus means drawing near to broken people (as well as the brokenness in our own lives). If we are unwilling to cross the threshold into that crowded room, we isolate ourselves from Christ himself. We do not associate with Christ based on pedigree or familiarity. Being the *family* of Christ means doing God's will, alongside other broken people. Pray for eyes to see those gathering around Christ as family.

Closing Prayer

Son of God, free us from the desire to control and command you; instead draw us into your broken, holy family to learn obedience together. Amen.

Monday, February 22

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "**Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.** Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

—John 3:1–15 (NRSV)

During Lent, we look toward the mystery of Christ crucified and the defeat of death. The Son of Man is lifted up in the wilderness so that we can be born again into eternal life. So in this season we travel through a desert of death to find new birth in water and spirit. We put to death the old self that is slave to selfishness and rebellion to be reborn in Christ a new self that is free in the Spirit of grace and love. What does this look like—to live as someone who has passed through death and been reborn?

Notice Nicodemus' curious heart, and the mixture of courage and cowardice with which he approaches Jesus. What questions are we afraid to ask Jesus? What are we afraid to admit we don't understand? Boldly ask these questions of him today.

Closing Prayer

Son of Man who was lifted up and crucified for our deliverance, shine in our darkness, that we might see you and live in your light. Amen.

Tuesday, February 23

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

—John 5:19–24 (NRSV)

We live in a culture founded on putting freedom, independence, and choice at the top of its value system. Yet the call of following and becoming like Christ demands the surrender of our very will—the breaking down of our “liberty” to find true freedom in obedience to God. *Perfect freedom is not being able to do whatever we want, but harmony between one’s own will and the will of God.* This is why we practice denying ourselves, even with things that may seem unrelated or unnecessary to our following Christ. Imagine a small child attentively imitating his father’s every movement. Obeying isn’t always about doing what God says; it is often about doing what we see him do, especially in Christ, who gives up his “free will” as we often understand it. Pray for opportunities to obey and imitate God, even against your “will.”

Closing Prayer

Father I desire to do as you do, to love as you love. Show me yourself through your Son. Amen.

Wednesday, February 24

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.

But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord.

At an acceptable time, O God,
in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.
With your faithful help rescue me
from sinking in the mire;
let me be delivered from my enemies
and from the deep waters.
Do not let the flood sweep over me,
or the deep swallow me up,
or the Pit close its mouth over me.

Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good;
according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.
Do not hide your face from your servant,
for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.
Draw near to me, redeem me,
set me free because of my enemies.

—*Psalm 69:1–3 (NRSV)*

At the intersection of God's Word to us and our words to God, the Psalms give us praying voice when we have none. They reach into the depth of the human

experience and give honesty voice to every pain, joy, and uncertainty. Praying these Psalms is not just a therapeutic release of emotion; they re-orient us toward God, helping us to find God at every edge and depth of our lives. Read these lines again as a prayer. Reach into a past or present experience of desperation and need, and lift it up in prayer.

Closing Prayer

Lord, I offer my prayers to you. In your time, answer and rescue me, by your steadfast love and abundant mercy, through Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

Thursday, February 25

This is what the Lord says:

"What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that made them wander so far?

They pursued what was worthless
and became worthless.

They didn't ask,

"Where's the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us through the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and ravines,
in a land of drought and darkness,
in a land of no return,
where no one survives?"

I brought you into a land of plenty,
to enjoy its gifts and goodness,
but you ruined my land;
you disgraced my heritage.

The priests didn't ask,

"Where's the Lord?"

Those responsible for the Law didn't know me;
the leaders rebelled against me;
the prophets spoke in the name of Baal,
going after what has no value.

—*Jeremiah 2:5–8 (CEB)*

Just as God warned them in Deuteronomy, Israel entered into a land of plenty, where the distractions of prosperity caused them to wander and forget God.

Jeremiah here powerfully reminds us of a truth of human nature: we become like what we desire. What things in your life are ultimately *worthless*? How much of yourself do you invest in them? Are you already denying yourself those things?

Pray for lasting change in your heart and life—that your desire for worthless things would be directed back to worthwhile things.

Closing Prayer

Loving Creator, you have set a restless desire for you in our hearts, which that we waste on worthless things. Call us back from our forgetful wandering. Amen.

Friday, February 26

I have the freedom to do anything, but not everything is helpful. I have the freedom to do anything, but I won't be controlled by anything. Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, and yet God will do away with both. The body isn't for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. God has raised the Lord and will raise us through his power.

—1 Corinthians 6:12–14 (CEB)

At some point during this season, the thought *will* occur to us all that this fasting business seems unnecessary: "We don't have to fast to follow God. Surely he wants us to have what we need." Such unnecessary acts of self-denial offend our sense of *freedom*, being able to to what we want.

Ironically enough, *fasting* is freedom. By detaching us from the most basic desire, fasting teaches us not *controlled* by anything, even a perfectly natural impulse. Although we *have* freedom to do what we want, not everything is helpful. So we force fiction and even collision with the controlling desires of our heart and body in order to shake them off and discipline ourselves to freely seek after that which *is* helpful.

Pray for fresh resolve in our fast this season. Pray for true liberty, to be beyond the control of selfish desires and free to sacrifice oneself for others and for God.

Closing Prayer

Creator and God, you made us for yourself and you offer us the fullest and best life. Grant us freedom from our own desires and devices in order to take hold of new life in your Son. Amen.

Saturday, February 27

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting.

—Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24

Self-examination is not something we can do by ourselves. We seek a God who is closer to us than our very selves.

Part of self-examination is learning, like the Psalmist, to find God everywhere at all times, even at the farthest limits of our life—in the darkness, in heaven, and even in hell. Today, we will practice opening our eyes to see his presence and work in the ordinary stuff of our everyday lives.

1. Pray for God to guide your reflection and reveal himself.
2. Give thanks for your life and for God's grace and provision. Think of some specific things to give thanks for. This frames our reflection in a mindset of gratitude and openness to God's gifts.
3. Reflect over the past week, paying special attention to a select few events that stuck in your mind or had strong emotional impact on you. This should take the most time. It may help to pray and process these things out loud or in writing. Ask yourself: Where did I see God? How might God have been speaking to me? How did I respond? What has been on my mind a lot? Why is that, and how might God be present in that?
4. Respond to God. Thank God for his presence, guidance, and care. Confess your failures, ask for forgiveness, and pray that God would transform your heart.
5. Resolve to be more open to God's presence and voice in similar situations over the next week. Ask for help and guidance for the future.

This exercise is called the Examen, and it helps us to be more mindful of God at all times and in all situations (especially when practiced regularly).

Closing Prayer

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

 test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me,

 and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen.

Sunday, February 28

Just like a deer that craves streams of water,
my whole being craves you, God.

My whole being thirsts for God, for the living God.

When will I come and see God's face?

My tears have been my food both day and night,
as people constantly questioned me,
"Where's your God now?"

But I remember these things as I bare my soul:

how I made my way to the mighty one's abode,
to God's own house,
with joyous shouts and thanksgiving songs—
a huge crowd celebrating the festival!

Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed?

Why are you so upset inside?

Hope in God!

Because I will again give him thanks,
my saving presence and my God.

—Psalm 42:1–5 (CEB)

Together, Psalms 42 and 43 contain three movements just like this one, each ending the same way. David is surrounded inside and out by doubt and distress. Overwhelmed by longing for God who seems far off, he returns again and again to the same word of hope. This is a comfort to us, who do not seek God in a straight line. We take detours and steps backward. Sometimes the terrain is wild and unknown; sometimes it is all-too-familiar. We feel we have grown and moved on, only to find ourselves back in the same old place. We ache with longing when we recall times past of peace and strength. Over and over like David we must *learn* and *remember* how to hope in God.

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, comfort us in times of mourning and doubt; increase our hunger and thirst for your righteousness, that there would be space for you to fill us. Amen.

Monday, February 29

Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me." Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, "When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?"

The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him. Jesus then said, "I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, 'You will search for me and you will not find me' and 'Where I am, you cannot come'?"

—John 7:28–36 (NRSV)

Stand in the temple among all these people. Try to hear Jesus say these mysterious things with the ears of all the different people present, with all their differing expectations, experiences and agendas:

- his disciples, who have been following him as the Messiah for a long time now. They might be in danger if he is arrested, though they also still don't completely understand his mission.
- visitors in Jerusalem for the festival, who know the prophecies and may have heard rumors of a new Messiah-figure traveling around healing and teaching.
- religious authorities, who are threatened by Jesus. Their way of life, their social status, their identity, security, and power are all in question—not to mention the very way they serve, understand, and worship God.
- those sent to arrest Jesus, who may fall on either side. They may be stuck between personal belief and obligation to authorities.

Where do you find yourself? In all this confusion, what do you learn? What is Jesus actually saying—both to his hearers and to you?

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, you were sent from the Father and to him you returned; draw us with you into the life and love you share. Amen.

Tuesday, March 1

Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.

—*Galatians 5:1 (CEB)*

Many of the passages and our spiritual practices have led us to reflect on the nature of freedom. What freedom is often understood to mean—the ability to do what we want—more often turns out to be spiritual enslavement to doing what is easy. Being free to do what I want becomes me being enslaved to doing what I want, unable to resist my own desires. True freedom must involve struggle—standing firm and not submitting—especially with oneself.

The fact is that we don't always (or even usually) want what is truly best for us. For instance, I usually don't want to eat vegetables, but I do because freedom does not consist in my being able to refuse vegetables, but in my body being healthy enough that it does not prevent me from living a full life. In order to live in this freedom, I have to overcome my own desire to not vegetables.

How does this understanding of freedom affect the way you look at your habits and choices? In what ways might you be controlled by your desires?

Closing Prayer

Christ, you have set us free; help us deny ourselves and cling to you, that we would know what freedom truly means. Amen.

Wednesday, March 2

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
 God will help it when the morning dawns.

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
 he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
 see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
 he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
 he burns the shields with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God!
 I am exalted among the nations.
 I am exalted in the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge.

—*Psalm 46 (NRSV)*

Today, practice the prayer of silence. Simply breathe deeply and be still for 10–15 minutes. Rest in the assurance that God our refuge is with us.

Closing Prayer

God, our refuge and strength, be with us. Lift us up and protect us. Amen.

Thursday, March 3

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

—John 7:37–39 (NRSV)

Jesus echoes the call of Isaiah we heard near the beginning of this season of Lent to come to the waters. This passage gets more specific about what this means: The Spirit of God itself is the source of water in the desert, who came to us in fullness at Pentecost, after Jesus ascended to continue his work. The waters to which God invites us is nothing other than his Spirit at work in us.

In John, one of the promises Jesus makes about the Spirit is **conviction of sin**. Part of what it means for the Spirit to flow through us is that we are a people of conviction, confession, and repentance. Honesty about our failures is life-giving; confession makes our conscience more active and makes room for the Spirit to change the way we think and act. Pray for the conviction of the Spirit in your heart and life.

Closing Prayer

Spirit of God, flow into and out from my heart like springs of living water, spreading life throughout and all around me. Amen.

Friday, March 4

A large crowd followed Jesus, because they had seen the miraculous signs he had done among the sick. Jesus went up a mountain and sat there with his disciples. It was nearly time for Passover, the Jewish festival.

Jesus looked up and saw the large crowd coming toward him. He asked Philip, "Where will we buy food to feed these people?" Jesus said this to test him, for he already knew what he was going to do.

Philip replied, "More than a half year's salary worth of food wouldn't be enough for each person to have even a little bit."

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, "A youth here has five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that for a crowd like this?"

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass there. They sat down, about five thousand of them. Then Jesus took the bread. When he had given thanks, he distributed it to those who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, each getting as much as they wanted. When they had plenty to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather up the leftover pieces, so that nothing will be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves that had been left over by those who had eaten.

The next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the lake realized that only one boat had been there. They knew Jesus hadn't gone with his disciples, but that the disciples had gone alone. Some boats came from Tiberias, near the place where they had eaten the bread over which the Lord had given thanks. When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus replied, "I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted. Don't work for the food that doesn't last but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the

Son of Man will give you. God the Father has confirmed him as his agent to give life."

—John 6:2–27 (CEB)

Jesus discerns that many of the crowd were not following him but their stomach. We can trust God to provide for our needs—consider the birds and lilies!—but that is not the only reason we follow Christ. This story calls us to raise our expectations of the kind of life God provides for us.

By fasting we set aside our desire for one kind of bread to focus our desire on another kind. We raise our eyes from the food in our hands to the bigger picture, to see not just God's material provision but the eternal life he provides through his Son. We will explore what this means next Friday.

In the meantime, we ask ourselves once again: what are you looking for? What needs and desires make you return to Jesus? What *kind* of expectations do you have of God's provision? Do you just want food, shelter, and security? Or do you want abundant, challenging, vibrant, eternal life?

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, Son of God, you came so that we would have life in its fullness; through our fasting teach us to desire that life. Amen.

Saturday, March 5

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

—John 8:12 (NRSV)

We do not walk in darkness. Seek the light of Christ and practice the Examen again today (using the guide from Saturday, Feb. 27).

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, Word of God in flesh, in you is life and light for all humanity. Shine in and through us that we may walk in that light. Amen.

Sunday, March 6

Some of the redeemed had wandered into the desert, into the wasteland.

They couldn't find their way to a city or town.

They were hungry and thirsty;

their lives were slipping away.

So they cried out to the Lord in their distress,

and God delivered them from their desperate circumstances.

God led them straight to human habitation.

Let them thank the Lord for his faithful love

and his wondrous works for all people,

because God satisfied the one who was parched with thirst,

and he filled up the hungry with good things!

God turns rivers into desert,

watery springs into thirsty ground,

fruitful land into unproductive dirt,

when its inhabitants are wicked.

But God can also turn the desert into watery pools,

thirsty ground into watery springs,

where he settles the hungry.

They even build a city and live there!

They plant fields and vineyards

and obtain a fruitful harvest.

God blesses them, and they become many.

God won't even let their cattle diminish.

—*Psalm 107:4–9, 33–38 (CEB)*

We gather as this people today to worship. Until the Lord comes, this gathering is our human habitation in the desert, the city God is building in the wilderness. So today let us thank the Lord for his faithful love and his wondrous works for all people, because he satisfied the one who was parched with thirst, and he filled up the hungry with good things!

When Mary is pregnant with Jesus and lifts up her famous song in Luke 1, she repeats a phrase from Isaiah: "He has filled the hungry with good things." However, she adds, "and the rich he has sent away empty." As we set aside our "riches" of various kinds to practice poverty during Lent, we prepare our hearts to receive the grace and goodness of God at Easter, when through Christ's resurrection a new creation dawns and a new garden begins to be planted.

Closing Prayer

Creator come and till the soil of our dry and wild hearts, that the seed of your Word would bear fruit and fill us to overflowing with living water. Amen.

Monday, March 7

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.

The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

**So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.**

—Psalm 90:1–12 (NRSV)

We remember from Ash Wednesday that part of the season of Lent is meditation on the reality of death: From dust we have come and to dust we return. How can numbering our days give us wisdom? How can the reality we fear most actually change the way we live? The brevity of human life and the inevitability of death can fill us with either dread and despair or humility and gratitude. To truly grapple with the fragility of life, we must honestly face the fragility of our own life. Morbid though it may seem, meditate on the reality of death—your own death, the death of those around you, the decay of our world, the fugitive nature of our encounters with beauty. What thoughts and feelings fill you?

This meditation also prepares us to remember the death of Jesus. Now meditate on the crucifixion—the death of God himself, source of life in the flesh. How does this paradox affect you? What then does the resurrection mean in light of all this?

Closing Prayer

Everlasting Creator, our life is nothing, like grass that is here today and gone tomorrow; teach us to number our days, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Prepare us to remember your death and celebrate your defeat of death. Amen.

Tuesday, March 8

We were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his. This is what we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin. That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore, because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power. But if we died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him. We know that Christ has been raised from the dead and he will never die again. Death no longer has power over him. He died to sin once and for all with his death, but he lives for God with his life. In the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.

—Romans 6:4–11 (CEB)

We not only reflect on death as we did yesterday; we carry it with us as those crucified with Christ. And as those not only crucified but also resurrected with Christ, we put death itself to death in our very selves. As followers of Christ, we are constantly passing from death into life.

Reflect on *baptism*, the action we take and remember together to symbolize precisely this: our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. Baptism is not a one-time event; we are always *living baptism* by dying to our old selves—the corpse controlled by sin—and being resurrected in the freedom, love, and life of Jesus. How will you practice your baptism today?

Closing Prayer

Crucified and Risen Lord, we follow you through death into life; help us today to remember and make real our baptism in our lives. Amen.

Wednesday, March 9

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

—Luke 4:1–12 (NRSV)

Pray through each of these temptations to see where they operate in your own life and heart. When you are able to identify a temptation, "talk back" to it with the Scripture that Jesus quotes.

The first temptation of turning stones into bread could be the temptation to be "relevant," to satisfy our own desires, to give up on our devotion, or to indulge in self-pity.

The second temptation, to bow down to the enemy, though it seems the most extreme, can come to us in the most subtle forms: the temptation to seek and seize power rather than surrender it, to take the easy way out, to go after the right things in the wrong ways.

The final temptation, to throw himself off of the Temple to us could be the temptation to lead and serve by spectacle, to seek attention and popularity, to test God's faithfulness, to make our faith about *us* rather than *others*.

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, who was tempted like us in every way and yet without sin, strengthen us as we follow you through the wilderness this Lenten season. Let your word be present to us, to resist temptation and cleanse our hearts. Amen.

Thursday, March 10

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

—Psalm 51:1–6

At the beginning of this psalm of confession, we hear an echo of the Jesus prayer that we learned at the beginning of the season of Lent: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”—or simply “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” In this psalm, David reflects on his sin, not just as a specific action but as a state of *being*. Sin is not just something done but something broken inside us that Christ in his mercy wants to heal. He desires “truth in the inward being,” for us have freedom from inner conflict, freedom from self-deception, freedom from doing things that deep down we do not want to do.

Spend time praying the Jesus prayer again, this time as an act of repentance, giving to God not just your actions but the state of your heart. Breathe slowly and deeply, aligning the phrases of the prayer with your inhaling and exhaling.

Friday, March 11

They asked, "What must we do in order to accomplish what God requires?"

Jesus replied, "This is what God requires, that you believe in him whom God sent."

They asked, "What miraculous sign will you do, that we can see and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus told them, "I assure you, it wasn't Moses who gave the bread from heaven to you, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

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

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I told you that you have seen me and still don't believe. Everyone whom the Father gives to me will come to me, and I won't send away anyone who comes to me. I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me. This is the will of the one who sent me, that I won't lose anything he has given me, but I will raise it up at the last day. This is my Father's will: that all who see the Son and believe in him will have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

The Jewish opposition grumbled about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

They asked, "Isn't this Jesus, Joseph's son, whose mother and father we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

Jesus responded, "Don't grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless they are drawn to me by the Father who sent me, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets, And they will all be taught by God. Everyone who has listened to the Father and learned from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God. He has seen the Father. I assure you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.

Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that whoever eats from it will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Then the Jews debated among themselves, asking, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "I assure you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me lives because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. It isn't like the bread your ancestors ate, and then they died. Whoever eats this bread will live forever."

—John 6:28–58 (CEB)

Last Friday we read about the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus calling those following him to seek the bread that endures for eternal life. We pick up this story to find Jesus explaining himself more thoroughly, though still with obscurity.

Jesus calls them to believe in him, but the Jews continue to ask for food, saying that is how God showed himself and provided for his people in the past. Jesus then offends the Jews by comparing *himself* with the manna from heaven that Israel ate in the desert. For Jesus to say this was tantamount to blasphemy in their ears, and it was so offensive that the passage goes on to say that even many of his followers left him after this conversation.

For us, this parallel becomes especially significant during Lent. Just as Israel was sustained by manna for forty years in the desert, so the body and blood of Christ sustains us during our forty days in the desert. Even more than that, in his body he offers not temporary nourishment but life undying.

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The Son of God came into the world in flesh to give us his own life—not just by dying, but by resurrecting and continuing to be present among and within us by his Spirit, his Church, and his presence at the Communion Table. As we continue to fast, let us give thanks for the Incarnation of Christ—the true source of life for us. Reflect on the mystery that God himself takes on human life—body and all—in order to heal it, perfect it, and offer it to us in Christ. Reflect and on the practice of Communion, when we gather together to partake of the body and blood of Christ and receive a share of this perfect life.

Closing Prayer

Bread of Life, give us yourself all the time, that we would be resurrected to live with you forever. Amen.

Saturday, March 12

You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

—James 1:22–25 (CEB)

We hear James' words today as a caution and call not to let our reading, prayer, and discipline go to waste this season. None of this matters if we forget it and do not put it into practice.

Take time today to look back through all the reflections you have done so far to savor the lessons and graces of the past weeks. Remember what you have learned about yourself and God. Revisit and recommit to any convictions, resolutions, or insights God has revealed to you through his Word this season.

Closing Prayer

Light of the world, open our ears and eyes to hear you speaking and see you working; save us from forgetfulness and make us doers of your Word. Amen.

Sunday, March 13

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

—Mark 9:30–32 (NRSV)

During this last week before Holy Week we turn our faces with Christ toward Jerusalem to prepare to remember his death and resurrection.

“But they did not understand.” When we think of Christ’s suffering, we usually go straight to the cross, but here is one of the most tragic dimensions of his suffering. To be so alone, to undergo everything he did and yet have no confidant, no friend—that even those closest and most devoted friends misunderstood and abandoned him in their confusion.

Give thanks that we do not follow alone—that God has blessed us with a common life and mission in the Body of Christ, to build each other up and support one another. Imagine being alone in your faith, and reflect on the blessing of the Church that we often take for granted.

Closing Prayer

Good Shepherd, even your sheep scattered from you; give us understanding and faith to follow you even when we are confused and afraid. Amen.

Monday, March 14

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

—John 10:11–18 (NRSV)

Dwell on this image of the shepherd and flock. The shepherd *lives with* his flock, feeds and fights for them, never leaves them, even to the point of endangering himself. Consider meditating on Psalm 23 reading Christ as our shepherd. Given this image, what does it mean to follow Christ our Shepherd—head of the Body?

This is also what Christ calls us to be as members of his one Body. To be a hired hand means you have no personal stake in the health and safety of the flock. It means you can go home and forget about it. To be a shepherd means personal sacrifice and responsibility. It means that the flock is your very life and livelihood, to which your own fate is attached. You care for them above yourself. Ask yourself: in Christ's flock today, am I a hired hand or a shepherd? Am I willing to sacrifice my self—my safety and security—for others in the Church? In your own life, how can you better imitate Christ to pour yourself out in love for his people?

Closing Prayer

Good Shepherd, make us all one flock who follow you; speak to us and open our ears that we would know and listen to your voice. Amen.

Tuesday, March 15

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They answered, “John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”

He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?

—Luke 9:18–24 (CEB)

This is the point in Luke’s gospel when Jesus begins to share about and anticipate his death and resurrection. Not only that; he calls us to participate.

Christ reveals the true depth and character of self-denial and beckons us to follow. As we read yesterday as well, Jesus’ own self-denial extends to his *rights* and his very *life*. He scorns not only the things he *desires*, but even the things that he *deserves*. Taking up our cross and following Jesus may sometimes mean that we do not demand for ourselves even that which we defend and do not deny others—respect, justice, freedom, even being understood.

This is the paradox of the Christian life: we lose ourselves to save ourselves. We forsake what we desire and deserve in order to find and follow Christ. We die in order to truly live.

Closing Prayer

Messiah of God, I take up our cross today and every day to follow you. Amen.

Wednesday, March 16

Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers;
 protect me from those who are violent,
who plan evil things in their minds
 and stir up wars continually.

They make their tongue sharp as a snake's,
 and under their lips is the venom of vipers.

Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked;
 protect me from the violent
 who have planned my downfall.

The arrogant have hidden a trap for me,
 and with cords they have spread a net,
 along the road they have set snares for me.

—*Psalm 140:1–5 (NRSV)*

The Psalms take on a new depth and dimension of meaning when we imagine them on the lips of Jesus. As he approaches Jerusalem, knowing the fate that awaits him there, the prayers of the psalmist echo in his mind and heart. He feels the threats and plots of his enemies pressing in around him as he nears the belly of the beast. And yet, to all appearances, God does nothing to protect him from the violent. The deliverance for which he prays does not come until after he has suffered every device of darkness, even death itself. God shows his power not by keeping him *from* death but by *resurrecting* him (and all creation with him).

What does all this mean for the way we pray these kinds of psalms? Our prayers for protection are not superstitious guards against pain and hardship; they are expressions of trust that God will have the last word, working all things together for the good of those who love him. Pray this passage with Christ, contemplating his journey to the Jerusalem and the cross.

Closing Prayer

Suffering Servant, teach us to trust as you did, even to the point of death. Amen.

Thursday, March 17

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

—John 12:1–8 (NRSV)

The story immediately before this in John's gospel is the raising of Lazarus from the dead (which causes the Jewish leaders to plot Jesus' death). With Lazarus himself at the table, then, Jesus saying that he is being prepared for burial takes on a new sharpness. He has just brought his friend out of the grave—claiming "I am the resurrection and the life"—and now he himself prepares to face the grave.

In the midst of this somber scene, Judas complains that it is wasteful. Even if it is not as obvious as stealing, what "pious" concerns do we have that mask a selfish motive? How do we talk about "caring for the poor" in ways that actually dishonor Christ? (For instance: do we give with a spirit of superiority or to seen and praised for our good works?) Pray that we would repent from the ways we dishonor both Christ and the poor. Pray that we would both know how to care for the poor and love Christ in a way that looks wasteful to the world.

Closing Prayer

Lord, forgive us our petty and selfish concerns. We humbly sit at your feet to worship and learn from you. Amen.

Friday, March 18

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

—*1 Corinthians 9:24–27 (NRSV)*

A couple weeks ago, we read from 1 Corinthians about freedom and self-denial. We return to Paul's letter again to expand on those themes. This passage summarizes in a compelling metaphor the purpose of the spiritual disciplines that we have been practicing during this season of Lent. A word that is often misunderstood today but is used frequently in Christian history to refer to this kind of self-discipline is "ascetic." The word itself originally referred to athletic training—the exact metaphor Paul uses. Just as athletes train and practice—running laps or repeating exercises—to prepare for the actual event, so we exercise our hearts and bodies by fasting and self-denial to train ourselves to be ready for the storms of life. Fasting is not purposeless, but fasting is also not the main event; it trains us to be ready when we have to deny ourselves—even our most basic desires—and take up our cross and follow Christ in love of others.

Closing Prayer

Lord and Teacher, take our discipline and train our hearts to desire you and love others above ourselves. We can only learn this and truly change by your grace working through our faithfulness. Amen.

Saturday, March 19

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

—John 12:27–36 (NRSV)

We once again hear Jesus beckoning us to *walk in the light*. Practice the Examen (as laid out on Feb 27) one more time. Be especially attentive to times when you felt *drawn* toward God and try to discern *why*. What was it that drew you to be mindful of him—a conversation, a feeling, something you saw? How can you follow through on that *pull* to find Christ at the center of it?

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, be glorified and lifted up to draw all people and unite us under yourself, Word of God and Light of the World. Amen.

Holy Week

We will spend Holy Week meditating on the last days leading Jesus' crucifixion. With every snapshot we **immerse** ourselves in the story, getting our feet on the ground and engaging our imaginations to investigate everything around us—characters, conversations, details, thoughts and emotions, and even the sights, sounds, and smells. Especially pay attention to what Christ says and suffers as he approaches his passion. This kind of immersion helps to foster new insights into what may be familiar stories, as well as engage us as a whole person, not just mentally. Patience and repetition can be essential to this kind of deep reading. Consider doing each meditation twice, once in the morning and once in the evening. Read slowly, allowing yourself to soak everything in.

Palm Sunday, March 20

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden.

Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

—Luke 19:28–48 (NRSV)

This event is (as Jesus himself says) the long-awaited arrival of God himself to his people in Jerusalem. Riding in on a donkey fulfills prophecy from Zechariah, and the people of Israel have been waiting for a Messiah to come and deliver them from other nations for centuries.

Follow alongside Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. Place your hand on the donkey; feel the cloaks beneath your feet as people lay them down before him.

Look around at the crowds that are there for the festival in Jerusalem. Hear the celebration and desperation in their voices as they chant words from the psalms about Jesus. Try to imagine what this—the arrival of the Messiah—means to them. Hear their certainty and faith, and yet their incomplete understanding.

Hear Jesus respond as he gets close to the city. See his grief and tears. Notice the suffering he must feel, even in the midst of the celebrating, because he knows what is to come. He refers to the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple that would happen 40 years later.

Closing Prayer

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full or your glory.
Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest. Amen.

Monday, March 21

Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, "It is written,

'My house shall be a house of prayer';
but you have made it a den of robbers."

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

—Luke 19:45–48 (NRSV)

This is the first thing Jesus does upon entering Jerusalem. They have long been awaiting this: God's arrival in the temple through his Messiah, who would deliver the nation of Israel and make Jerusalem (and the Temple) a gathering place for all nations. Jesus enters the temple, and quoting two different Jewish prophets, drives out people who were selling animals for visiting and local Jews to make sacrifices with.

See who all is there: those selling things for people to make sacrifices, those who were there to worship, the poor, the priests who oversee the religious rites of the temple, the teachers of the law who are experts in Scripture, some people from Jerusalem and some people visiting for the festival. How do Jesus' actions affect each of these groups of people? If he is the anticipated Messiah, what is the meaning of what he says and does?

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, enter into our hearts and our gatherings and cleanse us; teach us to be a people of prayer and practice justice. Amen.

Tuesday, March 22

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!” Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

—Luke 22:14–23 (NRSV)

Just as Jesus came in and turned the temple upside down, he took this Passover meal that Jews had been eating for thousands of years and re-centered it around himself. “Do this in remembrance of **me**. This is the **new** covenant in **my** blood.” Jesus is now the sacrificial lamb that delivers us from slavery.

Seat yourself at the table in the upper room. Taste the bread and wine. Hear Christ’s heartfelt eagerness, mixed with sadness. Feel the tension in the room; hear the weight in Jesus’ words. Look around at these, his closest companions, hearing him say these confusing and ominous (and even accusing) things. What are they thinking? What are they feeling? Hear the suspicious murmuring around the table. Choose one specific disciple—maybe Peter or maybe even Judas—and try to have an imagined conversation with them.

Closing Prayer

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world; have mercy on us, and grant us peace. Amen.

Holy Wednesday, March 23

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

“You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” And he said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.”

He said to them, “When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “No, not a thing.” He said to them, “But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.” They said, “Lord, look, here are two swords.” He replied, “It is enough.”

—Luke 22:24–38 (NRSV)

Return to the upper room, where Jesus has just revolutionized the meaning of the Passover meal and told them he will be betrayed to his death by one of them. Immediately, the disciples break into a misguided argument. In disputing

who will betray Jesus, they begin comparing and competing who is greatest. By what measure do you hear them comparing one another? What experiences or accomplishments are they claiming to put them above each other?

Again, feel their confusion, and hear Jesus' obscure words. He tells his disciples not only that one will betray him, but that even Peter—his most confident and insistent follower—will disown him three times before dawn. Jesus tells Peter he is praying for him—that he would gather, comfort, and lead his followers after the events that are about to take place. Hear the desperate assurance and genuine love in Peter's voice.

Closing Prayer

Lord, you did not come to be served but to serve; create in us your own heart of humility and sacrifice. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, March 24

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still

speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?" They kept heaping many other insults on him.

—Luke 22:39–65 (NRSV)

Once again place yourself among them all on the Mount of Olives—scared, confused, exhausted, trying to understand what all this means. Breathe in the night air. Squint through dark of the garden, lit only dimly by firelight.

Follow Christ away from the others. This story of Jesus is one of the most important for challenging our often too "robotic" imaginations of him. Allow yourself to enter into his anguish, his prayers, his fear, and ultimately, his faith. Consider his loneliness—being universally misunderstood, having his closet companions falling asleep during his most dreadful hour, and knowing that he is about to undergo a death that many will celebrate and none will understand.

Imagine everyone's reaction when Jesus not only refuses to defend himself from arrest but actually reaches out in a hand of healing to the one wounded, who came to seize him. Recall his mysterious words about a sword yesterday, and now see what he does when the sword is actually used. Now imagine the garden empty and silent after all have left, like Eden after Adam and Eve were cast out.

Stand with Peter around the fire. Ask him about what is going on. Ask what he is following Jesus at a distance. He has just leapt to the defense of his friend and teacher—his Lord, only to have Jesus stop and rebuke him, watching him heal the wound he gave. Imagine the suspicion of those around him, who now know Jesus as a criminal. Try to feel everything he feels—from confusion to fear to defensiveness to despair to regret and shame.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, who suffered for us, teach us to love one another as you love. Amen.

Good Friday, March 25

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am." Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!"

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him

back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

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One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

—Luke 22:66–23:49 (NRSV)

As we have been doing, engage your imagination and senses to immerse yourself in this whole story. Pay attention to the characters as real human beings throughout: Herod, the soldiers, Pilate, the crowds, the Jewish council, Barabbas, the women in mourning (including Mary, his mother), Simon of Cyrene, the two criminals hanging with Christ, the centurion. Spend time with each, trying to understand what this event means to them.

Hear the venom and mockery from all sides. Hear the responding mercy, sadness, and faith in every word of Christ. Focus on his suffering—not only the physical pain but the rejection and hatred of those he himself created, loves, and is saving in his very death. See the day suddenly darken as Jesus dies. Stand before the enormous torn curtain in the temple, which represented the partition between God and man, behind which only the High Priest could traditionally go.

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, as you are lifted up and crucified, forgive us our sins and draw us to yourself. Amen.

Holy Saturday, March 26

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

—Luke 23:50–56 (NRSV)

Feel the body of Christ as they hoist it down from the cross. Dwell in the reality of his death, that it was nothing other than the real and complete death of the man Jesus. Get into the shoes of Joseph of Arimathea, a Jewish leader who had not consented to accuse Jesus, who may have even believed in him as the Messiah. Feel the exhaustion of grief, the emotional struggle of preparing Jesus' body for burial. Feel the hopelessness, and yet the heart of the women to still devote themselves to honoring him. Imagine the quiet as they work. Smell the spices and ointments that for them conjured up feelings of death and loss.

Spend a good amount of time—at least 30 minutes—in total silence today.

Closing Prayer

The seed is in the ground.

Now may we rest in hope
while darkness does its work.

Amen.

