

LUTHERAN CONGREGATIONS IN MISSION FOR CHRIST



Lenten Devotional
2025



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WELCOME TO OUR 2025 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL. THIS YEAR OUR DAILY REFLECTIONS ARE BASED ON THE HYMN "MY SONG IS LOVE UNKNOWN" BY SAMUEL CROSSMAN. EACH DAY WE WILL LOOK AT A LINE OR TWO FROM THE HYMN IN CONNECTION WITH A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE. THIS WILL NOT TAKE US ON A STRAIGHT LINE THROUGH THE LIFE OF JESUS, BUT IT WILL TAKE US TO THE CROSS, THAT MOST REMARKABLE ACT OF LOVE THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN. IF YOU'RE SO INCLINED, I ENCOURAGE YOU TO SING THE VERSE THAT IS PART OF OUR REFLECTION EACH DAY. IT IS FOUND AT THE TOP OF EACH PAGE AND THE TUNE IS FOUND IN LUTHERAN BOOK OF WORSHIP #94.

BLESSINGS TO YOU, BELOVED OF GOD!

-JS-



Wednesday, March 5

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?*

GENESIS 1:1-5

There is a basic question that has preoccupied philosophers, scientists, and theologians down through the ages. “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Why does the world as we know it, the universe as we know it, exist at all? Philosophers, scientists, and theologians do not all arrive at the same answer to that question, the core question of our existence.

Genesis 1:1-5 offers us a clue to how we might think about that question, while giving us no direct answer to it. In the beginning, God decided to do something. God decided there would be something instead of nothing. God decided to make things – including you and me. Genesis is not deeply concerned with the how or the why. Those are more modern concerns. Genesis accepts the deep mystery at the heart of creation.

In the beginning, before there was anything to love, God moved to create. God's Word burst forth into something that had never been before – a universe in relationship with its creator. Our instinct, whether as scientist, philosopher, or theologian, is to want to get back before the beginning. We want to speculate on how this all came to pass. Why it came to pass. But that is not ours to know. That remains hidden in the mystery of God.

But deep within the order of creation, the love of God is constantly moving toward that which he has made. A love of unknown depths sings the creation into existence, in every moment, in every place. All this he does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, the Catechism tells us. What we see over and over and over again in Scripture is that even our most grievous sin and rebellion does not quench that love, does not find the bottom of it, the limit of it.

My song is love unknown, not in the sense that we do not know God's love. Rather, this is a love that we can compare to no other. We've known nothing else like it. It's a love beyond any we have known. And it's a love that will not let you go.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where have you seen the creative power of love?
- What difference does it make to know God as one who loves what he has made rather than as a detached observer of his creation?
- Do you think there are limits to God's love?

PRAYER

God of love, in the beginning you moved over the face of the waters. You brought this world into being. You created relationship. Thank you for this wondrous gift, this song of love unknown. Open our hearts to you and to one another, that we might rest in and share the unknown depths of your love for us and your unending mercy toward us, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thursday, March 6

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?*

JOHN 1:1-5

There is a kind of disconnect in the season of Lent between what is happening in the world and what is happening in the church, at least in the Northern Hemisphere. As the days are getting longer, as the light is returning, the church is marching into the darkness of our rejection of the Word made flesh. Many churches have evening services this time of year, gathering around dusk and departing in darkness, heading relentlessly toward the great and terrible events of Holy Week. This year, with a late Easter, some of those evening services may end while there is still a hint of light left in the day. In this season, light and darkness are in a kind of tug of war, but the outcome of that tug of war is not yet certain.

The beginning of John's gospel contains echoes of Genesis 1, including the shared conviction that the One at work is at work for a good purpose. The one who created life, the one who created all that is, the one whose love poured forth in creation, is also at work bringing light into our darkness. John tips us off right from the start that, even when it looks like the darkness has won, in fact, it has not overcome the light and life that is the Word made flesh.

This is great good news for those of us who find ourselves groping around in darkness, with all the terror and confusion that entails. There is a darkness unleashed in the world and in our hearts that is constantly threatening to swallow us up. We turn on the news and become enraged. We see the actions of our neighbors and want to lash out. We experience conflict in our homes and see no possibility for resolution. We go to work and are resentful of those we work with and for. Even within the so-called "sanctuaries" of our churches, we experience conflict and strife.

But we've already been tipped off. This darkness has not, will not, cannot overcome the light that is Christ, who has come to bring his life and light for you. Your Savior simply refuses to leave you in darkness. His love to you, his love *for* you is without end and there is simply no power in the whole creation that can overcome that light and love.

FOR REFLECTION

- When have you felt like darkness is overcoming the light?
- Where do you find hope in those times of darkness?
- What difference does it make in your life to have been given this assurance that the darkness will not prevail? How does that shape how you might share the promises of Christ with others?

PRAYER

Merciful God, the darkness of this world is more than we can bare. It has the power to drive us into despair and hopelessness. Shine your light into our lives and into our hearts. Go to work on the sin and rebellion that infect our hearts and our world and chase away that darkness with your light. Fill us with the hope that comes from knowing that the darkness is no match for your light and move us to share that hope with those caught in the darkness of despair. Amen.

Friday, March 7

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?*

GENESIS 1:26-31

There's a song that pops up on my music feed from time to time with the refrain, "I want a house with a crowded table." As someone who lives alone, that image is striking to me. There is nothing in my house that is not where I put it. There is nothing in my house that belongs to someone else. The order (or disorder) is the order or disorder that I've created. I picked the colors, the furniture style, the artwork. All of it is, in some way, a reflection of me. From time to time, I like to fill up the house with other people. I like to have a crowded table. But usually not for more than one or maybe two meals at a time.

In the opening chapters of Genesis, God creates this beautiful world. He puts everything where he wants it. The order is his order. But he is not content to keep this creation to himself. It seems that he doesn't want to just walk around his beautiful garden and admire his handiwork or congratulate himself on his good taste. But rather than having a dinner party for guests who will go home again, God creates a person and makes him a resident of this beautiful world.

What a remarkable thing to do. Who knows what these people will do? They might rearrange the furniture. They might bring in some of their own stuff. They might introduce a different color scheme. They might not do their laundry. They might leave their dishes in the sink. In other words, they might wear out their welcome. They might crowd the table in a way that is entirely unpleasant. And then what is to be done?

Genesis 1 reflects no concern for this. God's love moves him to create humankind, without any concern for the possibility that humankind will prove to be loveless. God's creative love is fearless, and so, into this beautiful creation is introduced one who, as we know, will prove to be a bad guest. One who will make quite a mess. And while some house rules are going to have to be added because of these people, the Lord's love for these people he has made will move him, not to evict these terrible tenants, but to redeem them.

FOR REFLECTION

- What does the creation of humankind reveal to us about God?
- What are some of the ways we have proven to be terrible guests?
- Why doesn't the Lord just show us the door?

PRAYER

Creator of all that is, we marvel that you created us at all. Thank you for the gift of life in your world. Forgive us for the messes we have made and continue to make. Continue to pour out your love upon us, even when, especially when, we prove to be loveless. When we are tempted to hate, remind us once again of the power of your love when it is poured out upon loveless ones. When we are hated, preserve us from bitterness, filling us with the peace that comes from knowing we belong to you. Through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, March 8

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?*

JOHN 1:6-9

I wonder about this line from John's gospel – “which enlightens everyone.” It is not even a little bit difficult to look around our world and see darkness. But John promises us that the true light enlightens everyone. The true light that came into the world in Jesus Christ, enlightens everyone. What does that mean in the face of so much darkness?

I'm not a very sound sleeper, so I try all sorts of tricks to help myself sleep, including making sure the room is as dark as possible. This is challenging for someone who spends around 100 nights a year in hotel rooms. Whether it's the slight opening that remains when the curtains are drawn, or the little red or blue lights on every electronic device, or the nightlight in the bathroom, or the light from the hallway coming in under the door. I go around turning off, covering up, closing out as much of this light as possible. But I have yet to be successful in achieving a truly dark room. Light is quite difficult to contain. It finds every crack, every opening.

Christ Jesus, the true light, which enlightens everyone, has made his way into this world that is darkened with sin. Sinners make every attempt to block this light out. We pull the curtains, we close the doors, we turn our backs, we put on blindfolds, but we simply cannot block out the light of Christ.

When I'm wide awake in a hotel, sometimes I can't figure out where the light that is bothering me is coming from. There's just light, of unknown origin. Despite the fact Christ is the true light which enlightens everyone, not everyone knows him as such. Not everyone knows the source of the light that shines in their darkness. That's why first John the Baptist, and since then, countless others, have been sent to bear witness to the light. We are sent to let others know the source of the light that has already come to lighten their darkness.

When we prefer darkness, we do not exactly rejoice in this light that has come to enlighten us. But without light there is no life, and sleep becomes a permanent state. The light that is Christ is a life-giving, love-inspired, light. It is redeeming light, and in that light, the darkness is finally banished from our hearts.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where do you see evidence of people living in darkness? Is it easier to see in people close by or people far off?
- How do react when your own darkness is exposed? In what ways is it terrifying? In what ways is it freeing?

PRAYER

Light of the world, shine your light upon us. Overcome all of our attempts to block you out. And makes us faithful witnesses to the love and mercy that you have for all those cloaked in darkness. Inspire in us the same love for our neighbors in darkness that you have shown to us. And when darkness threatens to grab hold of us, send us faithful witnesses as well, that our own faith would be restored. Amen.

Monday, March 10

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?*

GENESIS 3:8-13

It's hard to imagine thinking you could, literally, hide in the bushes from the Living God. In an instant, in a moment of thoughtless rebellion, in a moment that could even have a pious spin put on it, the man and woman became estranged from the one who had made them. In an attempt to "become like God," humankind created a distance between ourselves and God that we could never overcome. Somehow we thought the solution was to hide behind a tree, and then hide behind each other, and then hide behind a snake.

We've gotten rather good at hiding, since we've been doing it so long. We put on masks and costumes in hopes that no one will ever see the real person – the person who is afraid, guilty, ashamed, prideful, angry, lost, confused, doubting, rebellious, empty, sad, or just generally not as impressive as we'd like to be. And if we can just keep the mask in place, if we can just stay behind the tree or in a dark corner, maybe we will never be found out.

But that's not the life for which you were created. In Genesis, the people had been warned of the consequences of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They had been warned that their punishment would be death. It's understandable that they would think hiding was a better option than facing God's wrath. But there is no hiding from the Living God. There is no tree large enough to get behind.

There is, however, a tree that stands between us and God's wrath. But this tree doesn't hide us. It exposes us. All of our sin and rebellion are on full display in the cross of Christ. And in an unimaginable act of mercy, God leaves all that sin there, forever, choosing to see in us, not hopeless sinners, but beloved children. We catch the first glimpse of that deep mercy when the Lord does not put Adam and Eve to death. Finally, in Christ Jesus, the fullness of God's mercy is brought to bear upon his beloved, once and for all.

FOR REFLECTION

- What are some of the ways you try to hide from God and others? What drives you into hiding?
- How is blaming others for our sins a way of hiding the truth about ourselves? How are our sins and the sins of others woven together?
- Do you find it easier to believe God is merciful or God is wrathful? Why?

PRAYER

Merciful God, our sin is such a source of shame for us that we cannot even face it ourselves, let alone acknowledge it before you. Even as we want to be known we remain in hiding. Draw us out of the shadows of our sin and into your redeeming light. Give us faith to stand before you confident, not in our merit, but in your endless mercy, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, March 11

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, **that for my sake**
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?*

JOHN 1:10-13

When we read the Gospels from our vantage point it's easy for us to judge the people we meet there. How could they fail to see and recognize Jesus in their midst? How could they demand the death of one who came bringing life? We look at the disciples, at the crowds, at the religious leaders, at the political leaders, and we wonder how they could be so blind, while boldly presuming we see clearly.

John 1 tells us, not only that the world did not *know* Jesus, but that the world did not *accept* him. It's not so simple as ignorance or blindness that must be overcome. It's active rebellion, active rejection. Christ Jesus came into a world that didn't know him because it didn't *want* to know him. A world that has been hiding from God has no place for a God who comes near, who shines light into every dark corner, who goes in search of every lost sheep.

When we judge the people we meet in Scripture, we want to imagine that if we had been there we would have seen what they failed to see. *I* would have welcomed Jesus. *I* would have had a place for him. *I* would have accepted him. *I* would have died beside him. That's an easy stance to take 2000 years removed from the events in question. And it's not only a lie, but it misses the point entirely.

Jesus came into the world precisely because we did not know him, would not know him. He came to gather to himself all those who were lost and wandering, adrift in a world in the grip of sin. Some of those lost ones imagine themselves to be perfectly placed right where they belong. Some imagine themselves to be beyond the reach of God's love. Some imagine themselves quite loveable in every way. Some imagine themselves as not needing anything so naïve as God's mercy.

However we imagine ourselves, the simple truth about each one of us is that, in one way or another, we are lost. And it is for our sake that Jesus came into the world, to make us children of God. This is not a sign that we have things more figured out than those people we meet in Scripture. Quite the opposite, it is a sign of how much we have in common with them. We *are* them. And Christ has come just as near to us as he did to them, to make us his own.

FOR REFLECTION

- What are some things that prevent us from recognizing God's presence in our midst?
- What does it mean to "accept" Jesus? Why does John tie that acceptance to the will of God?

PRAYER

Good Shepherd, you have gathered us to you from all our places of wandering. Sometimes our wandering is rebellion, sometimes it is curiosity, sometimes it is inattention, sometimes we don't even realize it has happened. Give our wandering souls the peace that passes understanding, so that we can finally find our rest in you. Amen.

Wednesday, March 12

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?*

JOHN 1:14-18

The Word became flesh. We've heard this line so many times that we are somewhat immune to the strangeness of it. Word and flesh are sort of opposites in our minds. One can be held onto. The other disappears into the air. One has clear edges. The other can be twisted and contorted into whatever we want.

We are somewhat careless with words, throwing them around as if they have no real meaning, no real power, no real truth. "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me," we teach children, a deeply destructive lie that denies the real power of words. Power to encourage, to build up, to comfort, to nurture, to set free, to tear down, to discourage, to belittle, to control, to destroy.

In Christ Jesus these two things – Word and flesh – came together in a way never before known in this world. The Word that called creation into existence entered into that creation, became part of it. God became human, truly human. And in becoming human, in taking on flesh, he subjected himself to all the powers at work against him. He subjected himself to death.

This is a strange way to talk about glory, and yet John tells us that "we have seen his glory." The glory of God is revealed in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ – flesh and blood that suffered and died for his people. In doing this, the Word redeemed the flesh. The power of the Word went to work to save what sin and death were destroying. That's the glory of God that is revealed – God's glorious will to save. The one who, with a word, can call into being or wipe from existence, chooses to be Savior.

There is much we would like to know about God, much that remains mysterious to us, hidden from us. These opening verses of John's gospel remind us of one crucially important truth – what we need to know about God can be seen in Jesus Christ. In him, God took on frail flesh and died for the sake of the loveless. While that is not the entirety of God, it is more than enough for us.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where have you seen the power of words at work, either to build up or to tear down? How do you discern what voices to listen to in your daily life?
- What resistance do you have to recognizing Jesus as fully human? What hope do you get from recognizing Jesus as fully human?

PRAYER

Living Word, your ways are not our ways and our ways are not your ways, and yet, you took on flesh to live among us. Conform us to your will. Redeem this flesh that has been corrupted by sin. Quiet the endless questions in our hearts and make us content to know you as you have chosen to be known, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thursday, March 13

*He came from his blest throne,
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed,
Who at my need his life did spend.*

LUKE 1:26-33

It probably seems a little out of order to read this passage at this time of year. Christmas seems like a distant memory, and quite far from where we know we are going. But on this journey to the cross we cannot forget where we started. A young woman from Nazareth was told she was going to bear a son, a son who would take up the throne of David and would be known as the Son of the Most High.

None of the gospels tell us much at all about what happened in the thirty-ish years between Jesus' birth and his arrival at the Jordan River. It seems to be of little interest or concern to the gospel writers. It's not what they thought we needed to know about Jesus. And the couple of mentions of Jesus' family we get after he began his public ministry do not put them in the most flattering light.

Perhaps that isn't so hard to understand, if we stop to think about it. Mary had been told that her son was going to be given the throne of David. Imagine having those kinds of expectations! And then imagine trying to reconcile those expectations with this son who ate with tax collectors and sinners, who seemed to be making the wrong friends and the wrong enemies.

Mary was perplexed when Gabriel greeted her as "favored one" and it seems possible that she remained perplexed. She was the first to have expectations of who Jesus would be and what he would do, and those expectations were going to have to be adjusted. Greatness, and favor, and blessing would all be redefined in this one who came from blessedness in order to bring a blessing.

Anyone who has ever had great expectations for themselves or their child or even for a favorite political figure knows that it can be bitterly disappointing when those expectations aren't met. Even before his birth Jesus is on a collision course with all sorts of expectations, but God's work of salvation in him is going to defy those expectations and this promise to Mary is going to be fulfilled in ways she couldn't have imagined.

FOR REFLECTION

- As you think of the stories of Jesus in the gospels, where do you see evidence of "greatness"? Where do you see things that don't quite match your definition of "great"?
- What kind of expectations do you think Mary had for Jesus? How did Jesus meet or not meet those expectations? How does he meet or not meet our expectations?

PRAYER

Son of the Most High, we have all sorts of ideas about how you ought to be Lord, and we are not quick to give up on our expectations. Open our eyes and our hearts to the true greatness that you embody and the true blessedness that you bestow. Amen.

Friday, March 14

*He came from his blest throne,
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed,
Who at my need his life did spend.*

LUKE 2:8-14

The first time I was anyone's boss was as a camp director, with a few dozen college students working for me every summer. One day the bookkeeper told me that she needed some additional information from one of the counselors to complete payroll. When I saw the counselor later that day I told her to stop by my office on her break. I didn't give the interaction another thought until she came by a few hours later. The counselor, meanwhile, spent those hours certain she was about to get fired. There could be no other possible explanation for why she would be summoned to my office. I learned an important lesson that day about communication and power differentials. One I have not forgotten.

Terror in the presence of God's glory is a recurring theme in the Bible. Since the third chapter of Genesis there has been a chasm of fear between God and his people. That fear comes from the recognition that God's power could, maybe even should, be turned against us. The havoc our rebellion wreaks upon God's world is worthy of punishment. There can be no doubt about that.

But over and over again, in the face of the terror that his presence strikes in us, God's word to his people is "do not be afraid." While the Lord could come to us in wrath, instead, again and again and again, he comes to us in mercy, with good news of great joy. That's the scene Luke depicts outside of Bethlehem on Christmas night. The arrival of God's messengers strikes terror in the shepherds, who are just minding their business, watching their sheep like they did every night. They are certain that the Holy One coming near to them can only be bad news. It can only mean judgment.

But that terror gives way to joy and hope in response to the message these heavenly host bring. The presence of the Holy One in their midst need not terrify them because he has not come in judgment. He has come to bring peace to his favored ones. He hasn't come to finally make them pay the debt they have accumulated. He hasn't come to finally give them due. He has come precisely *not* to give them their due. He has come with favor, with mercy, with blessing. He has come to save.

FOR REFLECTION

- How do you usually react to the presence of someone who has authority over you? Do you welcome their presence? Fear it? Worry about it? Why?
- Luther speaks of our call to "fear, love, and trust God." How do you think those three work together?

PRAYER

Savior of the Nations, you break through our fear and doubt to bring us peace and hope, love and trust. When our guilt would have us live in terror of your judgment, send your messengers among us to bring us the good news of great joy that you have declared peace with us. And when that message has come home to us, inspire us to bear that great good news to a world in the grip of fear. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, March 15

*He came from his blest throne,
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed,
Who at my need his life did spend.*

LUKE 4:16-30

At first, the hometown crowd of Nazareth seem quite pleased with Jesus. Luke tells us, “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” Jesus has told them that he has come to bring release to captives and sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed and that sounds good to them.

Then Jesus very quickly changes tone, and points out the long history of the prophets needing to go outside of the people of Israel in order to be heard. Jesus shows up announcing good news, but then seems to tell his hometown crowd that that good news is not for them. That does not sit well with them. It’s not hard to imagine why they would want him to go back to Capernaum, or wherever he was living at the moment.

But they didn’t want him to go back to Capernaum. They wanted to kill him. Their reaction to this simple truth that the history of God’s people is a long history of *not* listening to God was so deeply offensive to them that they wanted to throw him off a cliff. That is a wild overreaction to a statement of easily verifiable fact. Their own scriptures are the record of their disobedience.

What we catch here in this unpleasant episode in Nazareth is a glimpse of how deeply offensive it is to us when we hear the bare truth about ourselves. We see this in families who crush anyone who tries to break out of destructive cycles. We see this in nations that censor their own history for fear of not always being the “good guys.” We see this in churches that assume their dwindling numbers are entirely caused by the bad priorities of those who aren’t there. We see this in ourselves when someone dares to be honest with us.

The rejection that begins in small-town Nazareth will spread all the way to big-city Jerusalem. The one who has come to bring peace will first be at the heart of quite a bit of strife because he will not allow us to continue in the lies we tell ourselves.

FOR REFLECTION

- What makes it hard to hear the truth about ourselves? How much difference does it make who delivers that truth?
- What is gained by hearing the truth about ourselves?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, the truth about us is not something we want to hear. We prefer the lies we tell to justify ourselves and our actions. The truth that we cannot justify our actions is too much for us to bear. Open our hearts to your word of truth. Set us free from our endless attempts to justify what cannot be justified. Fill us, instead, with faith to trust that you are our righteousness. Amen.

Monday, March 17

*He came from his blest throne,
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, **and none**
The longed-for Christ would know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed,
Who at my need his life did spend.*

LUKE 9:57-62

It would be really nice if there were a simple formula for discipleship. A step-by-step plan, with clear benchmarks and an easily discerned process would be a best-seller. It probably already has been. There's an entire industry devoted to convincing us that if we just had the right organizational system, the right set of lists and action items, there's nothing we couldn't do. Surely something like being a disciple of Jesus could be distilled down into a planner. Things could be color-coded and maybe there would be an accompanying set of stickers with inspirational quotes to keep us going on the right path.

But such a formula might not actually match up very well with the pictures of discipleship that we get in the Bible. Today's reading gives us sense of how much following Jesus defies being systematized. The first person seems eager to follow Jesus, only to have Jesus discourage him by pointing out how difficult it will be. The next two are ready to go, as soon as they tie up some loose ends on the home front. One is told not to be concerned about burying his father. The other is told even saying goodbye to his family makes him unfit for the kingdom.

Imagine that. Don't expect to have a place to sleep. Don't take a day to bury your father. Don't even tell your family that you're leaving. It's tough to pull a system out of that. The closest we might get to a system is something like, "Do the opposite of what seems natural to you."

If we're really paying attention to what is revealed to us in the Gospels it is not that following Jesus is difficult or following Jesus is only for a few or following Jesus is the goal. The reality that smacks us in the face is that, finally, no one is willing, or able, to go where Jesus is going. No one goes with him to Calvary. No one goes with him into the tomb. No one goes with him into the realm of death. Everyone stands by and watches, some maybe closer than others, but no one follows to the end.

Following Jesus is not a checklist or a system. It's going where he goes. The trouble with that is that we would rather not go where he goes, because he goes to the cross. But even though we would rather not go to the cross, there is simply no avoiding it. You see, you've been attached to Christ Jesus. He's been attached to you. Where he goes, you're going. That's just the way it is. The good news is that, finally, he's taking you with him to the new kingdom.

FOR REFLECTION

- What are some ways that being a Christian involves sacrifice or actions that seem out of step with cultural expectations?
- Do you find yourself more likely to resist or embrace those sacrifices? Why?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, the road to the cross is a lonely one. It is one we do not willingly choose, and yet you have chosen it for us. When we seek a different path, hold us close. Keep us in your grip and bring us home at last. Amen.

Tuesday, March 18

*He came from his blest throne,
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed,
Who at my need his life did spend.*

LUKE 8:22-25

Who is this guy? The disciples have heard Jesus teach as one with authority. They have seen him heal afflictions no one else could heal. They've seen him cast out demons with a simple word. They've seen him raise people from the dead. Now they've seen him take control of the wind and the sea. In the face of all of this they wonder, "who is this?"

If we assume that God's people lived each moment in eager expectation of the arrival of the Messiah, it may seem quite strange to us that they did not immediately recognize Jesus as the one God had sent into their midst. But if we recognize God's people as more like us than not like us, it shouldn't really surprise us so much. If we can tell the truth about ourselves, most of us do not spend our days thinking God might show up in our midst at any moment. Most of us assume that life today will be very much like life yesterday and God will remain safely tucked away in the heavens. We do not assume that God is actively doing something new among us.

That said, given what they have witnessed, and given what Jesus has said about himself, I wonder what the disciples imagined the options might be. What would it take to open their eyes, their hearts, their minds? What would they have to witness to know the answer to that question? What has to happen to us to recognize God's presence in our midst?

Our inclination is to think that recognizing God in our midst is an act of our intellect or will. It's about opening our eyes, opening our ears, opening our minds to the possibility. It's a task for us to undertake – to look for signs of God's presence and activity. But that day on the stormy lake suggests something else. It's not our understanding or effort that is going to reveal our Savior to us. We're not going to put the pieces together and come to the proper conclusion about who this could possibly be that the wind and the waves obey him.

For eyes, ears, hearts, minds to be opened, God himself has to open them. And that's the mysterious, saving work of the Holy Spirit upon us. It's not about drawing the obvious conclusion. It's about being drawn to the one who creates faith.

FOR REFLECTION

- In what contexts do you expect to encounter the presence of God? In what contexts do you rarely think about God? Why?
- When are you tempted to make faith into an intellectual exercise?

PRAYER

Holy Spirit, sin closes our hearts, our minds, our eyes, our ears to you. Break the grip that sin has upon us that we might know you as you know us. Replace our fear and doubt with faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, March 19

*He came from his blest throne,
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed,
Who at my need his life did spend.*

LUKE 10:38-42

I think a lot about the role of friendships in our lives. So often family relationships take center stage in our lives, for better or worse. Friendships form around carpools and the volunteer obligations of the parents of team members. But those friendships often fade when the season ends or the kids move on to other interests. Sometimes those friendships fracture completely when kids find themselves in competition with one another. But those short term friendships, or friendships of convenience, are not really what I have in mind.

I think a lot about those deeper friendships in which we are allowed to grow and change and move and stretch while maintaining that bond of affection. Friendships in which we can be honest and vulnerable and irritable and unreasonable and trust the other with our worst selves. To borrow a line from a favorite song, friendships with “someone strong enough to love you when you’re wrong.” Those are friendships to be held onto with both hands.

Mary and Martha had such a friend in Jesus. These two sisters had very different priorities when Jesus came to visit. Mary wanted to sit and listen to what he had to say. Martha wanted to provide him with the best hospitality she could muster. Most of us tend to understand and relate to one of these women more than the other, and we may find ourselves a bit critical of the other.

What is remarkable in this story is how gentle Jesus is with Martha. Her desire to be a perfect host gives way to her irritation at her sister, and she puts that all on display in front of Jesus. This isn’t exactly a good look for Martha, to go to her guest and accuse him of not caring about or appreciating her enough. But Jesus doesn’t get offended by her. He speaks with kindness, letting her know her distraction is causing her to miss out on something even better than being the perfect host. He doesn’t suggest her concerns are foolish. It’s just that there is something better, something Mary has gotten a glimpse of.

It’s striking that Martha accuses Jesus of not caring, much as the frightened disciples in the boat on the stormy sea. This one in Martha’s living room cares more than anyone else. He cares even when her wrongness, her pettiness, is center stage. There is nothing he won’t give for the sake of this dear one.

FOR REFLECTION

- What does true friendship look like to you? Where/when have you experienced it in your life?
- Why is it significant that Jesus’ friendship with us is not dependent on us winning him over?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you are a true friend to us, in the deepest sense of that word. You know the best of us and the worst of us. With you there is no need to hide or pretend. Thank you for this gift of boundless love and compassion. Thank you for being a friend to sinners like us. Amen.

Thursday, March 20

*He came from his blest throne,
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed,
Who at my need his life did spend.*

LUKE 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan is so familiar to us that we might have just scanned it when we saw that it was the reading for today. We might have figured we didn't need to actually read it because we already know the story. If that was the case for you, I hope you'll go back and read it, even if you know it by heart. There's a reason it is so well known. It is simply stunning.

Every person we meet in this passage, every action they take, every word they say, is packed with significance. Sometimes, in our shorthand way of telling the story, we might summarize it by pointing out that the foreigner helped the beaten man, while the religious leaders of his own people did not. But that is not nearly sufficient to capture what the Samaritan did.

First, he was moved with pity at the sight of this man who, if the roles had been reversed, would most certainly have left him in the ditch. He could easily have made the case that a lawless Samaritan deserved such a fate. If you weren't going to live according to God's law you couldn't expect to be protected from other outlaws. But our Samaritan had pity for one who had scorn and contempt for him. And this pity extended well beyond giving him a drink of water and a bandaid. He patched him up and pulled him out of the ditch, taking him to a place where he could safely recuperate. And he still wasn't done. He didn't just pay for a night at the inn and figure the beaten man was on his own after that. He left a down payment for whatever care was required, with a promise to return to cover any additional expenses.

This is how Jesus extends himself to us. In the face of our need he doesn't conclude, "you got what was coming to you." He is moved with pity and pours himself out for our sake. He spends his life for us. And he does all of this for people in active rebellion against him, people who cried out for his death. He does all of this for people who desperately need what we do not deserve. And perhaps most stunning of all, he does all of this without hesitation.

FOR REFLECTION

- What detail of the story of the Good Samaritan stood out to you upon this reading? What drew your attention to that detail?
- The man beaten and lying in the ditch does nothing in this story except receive. In what ways do you find comfort in receiving Christ's mercy? In what ways does being a recipient make you uncomfortable?
- What are some ways being a recipient of kindness has moved you to kindness?

PRAYER

Merciful God, you pour out your mercy upon us. You spend your life for us in ways beyond our wildest hopes. While we are quick to ignore or judge our neighbors in need, you are abounding in steadfast love. Turn our hearts to our neighbors, that we might be faithful witnesses and bearers of your grace. Amen.

Friday, March 21

*Sometimes they strew his way
And his sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their king.
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry.*

LUKE 11:27-28

I'm sure the woman in the crowd in today's reading thought Jesus would hear her words as a kindness, a blessing. She was acknowledging that he was special, that his mother was blessed to be his mother. That's a nice sentiment. It doesn't seem like the kind of statement that would provoke something like a rebuke from Jesus. But it did. He was not interested in her words of praise. Something in them fell flat.

We do not have to speculate on whether the woman was sincere in the words of blessing she spoke. Whether she thought she meant these words or not, she didn't know what she was saying or to whom she was saying it. She was not really in a position to be bestowing blessings or honors upon Jesus.

A family member of mine described an encounter with God he had as a result of a horrific car accident. He found himself in a conversation with God and in the course of that conversation he confessed his sins, while also assuring God that he still believes in him. I was fascinated by that combination of threads. It got me wondering whether we imagine that God is waiting around for our assurances, our confessions of faith, our blessings. What does it say about us if we imagine that?

Is that pride? Naïvete? Faith? Love? Can it be more than one of these at the same time? In our tradition we do not shy away from confessing our absolute fallenness. But there are certainly moments in our lives when we think we are acting in faith, are in some basic alignment of who God would have us be. There are moments, however fleeting, in which we imagine we've said or done something right, something good, something that might be pleasing to God. Moments when we might imagine we've bestowed a blessing.

Should we expect the same sort of response the woman in the crowd received? Should we expect to be "put in our place" and reminded of the proper order of things? Perhaps that is exactly what we should expect. Any hint of self-righteousness in us is a poison to faith. There can be no little bit of us that holds on to the thought that we maybe don't need Jesus after all. And as stinging as the rebuke may sound, it is the hard truth we need to hear.

FOR REFLECTION

- In what circumstances do you feel closest to God? In what circumstances do you feel far from God?
- What do you think God wants or needs from you? What do you need from God?

PRAYER

Gracious God, forgive our false pride, our failure to recognize our place before you. Hold neither our best nor our worst against us, but pour out your blessings upon us, even when we fail to ask for them or see our need for them. Amen.

Saturday, March 22

*Sometimes they strew his way
And his sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their king.
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry.*

LUKE 9:18-20

Dear Peter has a moment of clarity in today's reading. While others are confused about who Jesus might be, Peter knows. He knows who stands before him. He knows who he's been following. He knows whose teaching and miracles he has witnessed. Only one chapter earlier he wondered with the others who this could be that the wind and the seas obey him. But now he knows. Jesus is the Messiah.

It is so rare for anyone to give the correct answer to one of Jesus' questions that it would be nice to stop and celebrate for a moment. But if this isn't our first time reading the gospel, then we know there is something not quite right about Peter's confession. He says the right words, but he does not yet really know what those words mean. He has an idea of what the Messiah of God will accomplish, maybe even an idea of *how* he will accomplish it. And while Jesus' displays of power have started to tip Peter off about who he is, he is still going to be surprised and confused by what he does. In fact, he will be opposed to it and want no part of it.

Over and over again, as he goes about his preaching and teaching, Jesus is going to run into the conflict between what he has come to do, what the work of the Messiah really is, and what people want or expect the Messiah to be and do. Peter knows Jesus is the Messiah, but his ideas about what that means are very different than what Jesus is going to do.

Singing the praises of Jesus when he behaves the way we want him to is easy. When he is doing the kinds of things we think God should do, that's great. When he is exhibiting power and giving us a code to live by, that's fine. But what about when he forgives people who don't really deserve it or want it? What about when he welcomes people we wouldn't welcome? What about when he suffers humiliation and death instead of calling down the fires of heaven upon his enemies? Do we want to sing his praises then? Can we really imagine that's what the Messiah should be doing?

Peter couldn't. His bold confession of who Jesus is would be followed by an attempt to forbid Jesus from doing what he came to do. And our instincts are not so different from Peter's. That's what makes it such wondrous good news that Peter's confession was true. Jesus is the Christ. He is the Savior. And his way of being Savior is enough to overcome even our objections and save us.

FOR REFLECTION

- What words and actions of Jesus are easy for you to get excited about and want to be part of?
- When do you find yourself wondering why Jesus doesn't do things differently?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you are the Christ, our Savior. We don't always know exactly what we mean when we say that. We're not always entirely clear about the salvation we need. Thank you for doing your work for us anyway. Open our eyes and open our lips to see and sing your sweet praises at all times. Amen.

Monday, March 24

*Sometimes they strew his way
And his sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their king.
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry.*

LUKE 19:28-36

This is more like it! A parade. A ride instead of all this walking. We call it Jesus' "triumphal entry into Jerusalem." This is the kind of Messiah Peter, and maybe most people, had in mind. One who showed up like a conquering hero. One who appeared ready to take his rightful place in the Holy City. They'd had enough of this roaming around the distant countryside, hanging around with people who were of no particular significance. Finally they're where the action is, where things happen.

As Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, expectations were high. It seemed like something might actually happen. People who had gone generations without any word from the Lord, who had long forgotten what it was like to have one in their midst who spoke on the Lord's behalf, finally had a reason to think God had not forgotten them. Maybe the Lord had sent a Messiah after all! Maybe this nation would not live out its days as a conquered vassal of Rome. Maybe the people of God would mean something once again. Maybe they would see something like the glory days of King David.

It's difficult to really imagine that kind of expectation. We certainly don't live with an expectation that something radically different might be on the horizon. People who try to warn us about significant climate change or political change or economic change or a change in the balance of international power are generally received as alarmists. We live with an expectation that things will basically continue as they have. It takes something pretty extreme to get our attention.

It doesn't seem like a guy riding a colt into Jerusalem would do the trick. We would need something a bit more spectacular than that. Such an event could pass right by us without our even raising an eyebrow. We might not even bother to go out and see who the parade was for.

And yet, this arrival in Jerusalem is going to change everything, forever. This man who arrives on a colt, with no army in tow, is going to conquer the darkest foes of all. There is triumph coming, to be sure. But it is nothing so small as a political triumph. It is the triumph of the Living God over all the powers of death, once and for all.

FOR REFLECTION

- What are some times you have expected God to act in miraculous ways?
- What makes us reluctant to imagine God appearing in our midst?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, Son of David, Son of God, forgive us for our low expectations of you. Break through the fog of our routines and habits. Wake us from the sleep of indifference. Show us the truth and power of your presence among us. Open our eyes to the triumph you have achieved and the triumph that is yet to come. Amen.

Tuesday, March 25

*Sometimes they strew his way
And his sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their king.
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry.*

LUKE 19:37-40

Even the stones would cry out! There will be no silencing the praises of that crowd on the road leading in to Jerusalem. Their king has arrived and they are ready to celebrate. They have seen wondrous deeds of power from Jesus. They have witnessed things they could not have imagined. They have heard authoritative teaching. This is the one they learned about in Sunday School, the one they had forgotten they were waiting for. They are bold in their declarations of who this Jesus is.

And the religious leaders do not like it. This sort of thing is trouble. It's religious trouble to be sure. Jesus is a real threat to the order of things. He is running around breaking the law left and right, rallying exactly the wrong kind of people. There's nothing about his way of operating that works for the religious leaders. But that's not the only problem.

This parade, this shouting also creates a political problem. The people are calling Jesus a king, but they already have a king, along with several other people in authority over them. There's Herod. There's Pilate. And, of course, there's Caesar. There's no room in Jerusalem for another king. That will only cause trouble. The religious leaders can see this clearly. And they figure Jesus should be able to see it too. He should recognize the danger in what these people are shouting and he should put a stop to it, for the protection of everyone. This parade, these praises, could ruin everything.

But Jesus will make no effort to stop them. Just as his disciples would not be forced to fast while the bridegroom was with them, so the crowd in Jerusalem would not be stopped from celebrating the arrival of their king. They could not be stopped. The very stones would fill in for them if they stopped. The creation itself recognized that this one arriving in the Holy City was worthy of praise. And praise they did!

FOR REFLECTION

- When have you been moved to praise God boldly? In what situations is that easier or more difficult to imagine?
- In what contexts have you found yourself wanting to tone down what you're hearing people say about God?

PRAYER

Gracious God, open our mouths in bold praise. Take away our shyness, our uncertainty, our concern for decorum and fill us, not with pride, but with confidence in your grace and mercy. And when we find ourselves silenced, raise up the stones to sing your praises. Amen.

Wednesday, March 26

*Sometimes they strew his way
And his sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their king.
Then “Crucify!” is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry.*

LUKE 11:37–44

There’s an ice breaker question that is often used when groups are getting to know each other. People are asked to come up with their guest list for the perfect dinner party. The usual famous and interesting people tend to get named – influential or charismatic or talented people that seem like they would be fascinating to listen to for an evening. Christians frequently include Jesus on their list. I certainly understand, and share, the sentiment that it will be a thrill to finally see Jesus face to face and hear his actual voice, rather than the voices of his messengers. But I don’t think a dinner party is the ideal setting for that. Inviting Jesus to dinner is not without some peril because he does not have an off switch. He is always on. Always ready to go. As people younger than I am might say, “he has no chill.”

We might find it a little surprising that a Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, and that Jesus accepted the invitation. But the rather disastrous nature of the party is not especially surprising. It is not really the height of good hospitality to point out that one of your guests did not properly wash his hands before eating, and that might tip us off to the fact that the Pharisee’s invitation was not entirely friendly. We don’t know what the Pharisee said, only that he was “amazed” by Jesus’ behavior, and that was enough to set Jesus off. And once he starts, he does not hold back.

In just a few sentences Jesus describes his host and his host’s friends as fools driven by greed and a thirst for glory. Their keeping of the law somehow does not call them to a concern for justice or a love for God. Their keeping of the law is for show, for credit among the people who will look at them and think they are righteous. It’s about their reputation among the people they hope to lead. And Jesus has no problem saying all of that directly to his host. He has no problem speaking the truth, even when it is cause for offense.

We might imagine we’d enjoy sitting around chatting with Jesus over dessert, but if he starts telling the truth about us, right to our face, the party might come to an abrupt halt. Much as the joyous celebration of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem will soon come to an abrupt halt.

FOR REFLECTION

- If Jesus were to tell you the truth about yourself, what do you think he would say? How eager are you to hear it?
- What do you think it would have been like to be at the dinner at the home of the Pharisee?

PRAYER

God of Truth, we do not always welcome the hard truth about ourselves. We prefer to have our hypocrisy and sin glossed over for the sake of a pleasant evening. But you came into the world to reveal the truth – about us and about you. Give us ears to hear your Word, even when it is not easy, for we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thursday, March 27

*Sometimes they strew his way
And his sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their king.
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry.*

LUKE 11:45-54

That strange dinner party at the home of the Pharisee did not get more pleasant as the evening wore on. Another guest, a lawyer, felt it was his duty to point out to Jesus that in going after the Pharisees, the lawyers had been caught up in his insults as well. Jesus did not feel especially sorry about that. His word to the lawyers was just as difficult as his word to the Pharisees had been.

By the time the dinner had ended, the lawyers and the Pharisees had joined forces. Together they were going to find a way to bring Jesus down. This attack on their character could not stand. Jesus had to answer for it. As their plot and their anger grew, they would conclude that discrediting Jesus would not be enough. Silencing Jesus was going to take more than a skillful cross-examination. It was going to take something more drastic and violent than that.

Even though we are reading Luke's Gospel a bit out of order at the moment, the sense of whiplash at how quickly and thoroughly people turned against Jesus is in keeping with the overall direction things are taking. In the span of one dinner, the Pharisees and lawyers go from thinking Jesus would be interesting to talk with over a meal, perhaps even someone recruit to their cause, to wanting him stopped. The turn is so fast and so complete it's difficult to wrap our heads around.

But the simple reality of the situation is that since the Fall, sinners have sought to avoid being in the presence of God. Our sin and his holiness, our shame and his righteousness cannot comfortably exist side by side. In the garden Adam and Eve had no choice but to hide from God because they recognized that his power was greater than theirs. But Jesus is human. Fully human. In him, sinners see an opportunity to challenge God on our turf. Jesus can be silenced. He can be killed. We don't have to hide from him. To a sinner's twisted way of thinking, we can finally solve the problem between us and God on our terms, imagining that then we will finally run the show, as we have always wanted to. Of course, God has some ideas of his own about that.

FOR REFLECTION

- How would you react to someone speaking to you the way Jesus spoke to that lawyer? What would you do to defend yourself?
- Do you find yourself pushing back on the idea that we have a problem with God? Why or why not?

PRAYER

Christ Jesus, we waver between wanting to be near you and wanting to be as far from you as possible. Thank you for taking matters out of our hands and coming near to us. And now that you have come near, overcome everything within us that is opposed to you. Amen.

Friday, March 28

*Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run.
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.*

BIBLE VERSE – LUKE 18:31-34

We tend to assume that the twelve who were closest to Jesus should have figured some things out. They should have understood some things that might have remained confusing to others. Today's reading is the third time Jesus told them he was going to die in Jerusalem. This time around, he got even more specific. He was not only going to die. He was going to die in a humiliating way. He would be mocked, insulted, spat upon, beaten, and *then* killed.

Why? When we start to make a list of what Jesus has done up to the this point, it is mind-boggling that the response this will provoke is his execution. He has come into the world pouring out God's mercy and forgiveness upon outcasts and sinners. He has brought hope and peace to those living in darkness and strife. How is this anything good news? Marvelous news? Joyous news?

Luke tells us the disciples "understood nothing about all these things." They could make no sense of any of it. But there was more to it than that. What he said was hidden from them. There was something preventing them from understanding, from hearing. There was something blocking their way.

If we imagine that we live in a world that is fallen and crying out in need of a Savior, it's impossible for us to comprehend what this world does when the Savior comes. But when we see that we live in a world that prefers darkness to light, a world in which grace and mercy have no place, a world built on power and quid pro quo, then our eyes start to be opened to what was hidden from the disciples.

Why would we reject our Savior? Because that is what we're bound to do. That's what our bondage to sin means. Imagine how our prison industry would respond if we just started setting everyone free, no matter how egregious their violations. In a world based on bondage the one bringing freedom is a threat. Jesus is received as a threat because he *is* a threat to everything that sinners have built. He's bringing in a new kingdom, a new age, a new creation, one in which our bonds are broken forever. Everything that we have made will finally crumble. That doesn't sound like great news to us. But it is, in fact, our salvation.

FOR REFLECTION

- When have you felt like you simply couldn't understand something you read in the Bible or heard in church? Have you ever felt like something of God's mission in the world is hidden from you?
- What kind of reaction do you have to the notion that everything we have built is passing away?

PRAYER

God of the Universe, you hold all things in your hands, things that are mysterious to us along with the things you have made known to us. Bring trust to our hearts, that we would hold fast to your work in Jesus Christ, rather than clinging to what we have made. Amen.

Saturday, March 29

*Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run.
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.*

LUKE 18:9-14

Whether we like to admit it or not, we have some pretty clear ideas about who is important and who is not important, who is worth knowing and who is not, who we want to associate with and who we do not. We may not all have the same standards, but we all have some kind of standard. Maybe we value wealthy people, or intelligent people, or creative people, or successful people, or honest people, or pious people, or beautiful people, or powerful people, or kind people, or talented people, or hard-working people, or humble people. Few of us, when imagining who we want to spend our time with think, “I’m looking for some friends who are dishonest and unkind and generally not very interesting to be around.”

Whatever traits we favor, we tend to grant those traits a kind of righteousness. It’s not just that we are drawn to such people. It’s that such people are inherently better than those who don’t have those traits. Maybe we never say it out loud, but there are kids we would prefer our kids didn’t hang out with. There are people we would rather not be seen with. There is an order to the world in our minds. A hierarchy.

There’s nothing remotely new or unusual about that. That’s what makes this little parable that Jesus told so effective. The Pharisee was so certain of his place in the hierarchy that he had no shame about listing those he knew were beneath him – thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors. He put a pious spin on it, thanking God for setting him in this elevated position. But that piety was quickly exposed for the self-righteousness at the heart of it. While he thanked God, he mostly pointed to his own impressive deeds. The tax collector, meanwhile, could do nothing but ask for mercy. He didn’t attempt any justification for his actions. He didn’t make any promises about changing his ways. He simply threw himself at the feet of the one who could forgive.

We *want* to agree with Jesus’ assessment that the tax collector went home justified. But everything in us chafes at that notion. That upsets the whole system we so carefully maintain. As our Lenten journey starts to make the dark turn to Good Friday, that’s the answer to the question “what has my Lord done?” He’s tipped everything upside down. And that cannot be tolerated.

FOR REFLECTION

- Can we really live in a world where obvious sinners are justified and the best among us are not? Do we want to?
- As you think about the social hierarchy in your own mind, what do those at the top have in common? How about those at the bottom? Where are you?

PRAYER

Gracious God, we find it difficult to love all those you love. There are so many that we imagine are beyond your reach. Pour your boundless love into our hearts that we could see what you see in these neighbors. And fill us with the humility and gratitude that comes with knowing that we stand before you in the same way they do. Amen.

Monday, March 31

*Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run.
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.*

LUKE 20:9-19

I have a bit of a weakness for detective shows generally, and the Scandinavian versions in particular. These are some of the bleakest stories imaginable and something about them resonates with the melancholy that goes with living in places that are very, very dark for large portions of the year. These Scandinavian stories are never in a hurry. They look at the crime in question from every possible angle. We see how it affects the victims, the investigators, the neighbors, the families of the investigators, the community at large, sometimes even the entire nation.

While they have a rich and nuanced method for telling the story, there is a theme that runs through almost every version of mystery stories. At some point you're going to discover a motive. While the motives may vary dramatically, there is usually some logic to them. At least within the mind of the perpetrator, the actions can be justified in some way.

Despite being somewhat immune to the effect of gruesome stories, the parable of the wicked tenants still has the power to shock me. Every single time I read it I am stunned by the actions of those tenants. And, truth be told, I am equally stunned by the actions of the vineyard owner. I suppose at its heart, it is a simple story of greed. But there is something about it that seems very much *not* simple. It is so twisted to beat and murder the rent collector, just to avoid paying rent. And it's even *more* twisted to murder the landlord's son, imagining that that will somehow make you an heir. And what do we even say about sending your son to collect the rent from tenants who have demonstrated a willingness to be so violent?

The power of this parable is that it shows how completely beyond reason our rebellion against God is. There is simply no way of telling the story of our rejection of our Savior that results in our being justified. There is no way to find some bit of defensible action. There is no aspect of it that can lead us to say, "Oh, well, I can see how this seemed right." The one thing about the parable that seems right to us is that the landowner will put those wicked tenants to death. But then God does something else entirely!

FOR REFLECTION

- What bothers you about this parable? What gives you comfort?
- Given humankind's endless rejection of God and his messengers, why do you think he sent his Son to us?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, your parables often are unsettling to us. Just when we think we have you under control and your word for us locked down, you show us something we hadn't seen before. Continue to come to us in your word, until, at last, you speak to us face to face and we are given to see fully what we now see only in part. Amen.

Tuesday, April 1

*Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?*

He made the lame to run.

*He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.*

LUKE 5:17-26

This could have gone so differently. A great crowd had started to gather around Jesus to see what he was going to do and hear what he was going to say. People were starting to wonder who this rabbi from Nazareth was. He had a different kind of authority than they had ever seen before. He was having some conflicts with the religious leaders because of his tendency to heal on the sabbath. But we are given no reason to think that today's reading took place on the sabbath. It's just a regular Tuesday. Jesus has an opportunity to perform a completely non-controversial miracle.

Of course, that is not exactly Jesus' style, as we have come to see. A paralyzed man is brought to Jesus by his friends, who have to lower him through the roof of the house because the crowd is blocking the door. Jesus has already demonstrated an impressive ability to heal and now with this huge crowd there, he could really put on a show. And he does. It's just not quite the show anyone was looking for. The man is laid at Jesus' feet, and instead of lifting him up to his feet, Jesus tells him his sins are forgiven.

As far as the Pharisees are concerned, this is blasphemy. Jesus has just claimed for himself the authority to do something only God can do. Random rabbis from the hinterlands do not have the authority to forgive sins. That is strictly God's purview.

While the Pharisees raised their objections and Jesus gave his answer, there remained a man lying on a mat at Jesus' feet. I wonder what he thought about this whole business. He had certainly not come there to have his sins forgiven. His friends carried him there in the hopes that he would walk home on his own two feet. I wonder if having his sins forgiven seemed like a more substantial gift than having his paralysis healed. I wonder if he was a bit disappointed to still be on the floor, even if his sins were forgiven.

And I wonder what we think when, week after week, we gather in worship and have our sins forgiven. Is that what we want? Does that seem like enough? Is there something more we wish Jesus would do for us? I suppose that depends on what is afflicting us at the moment. But whether it's what we were looking for or not, forgiveness, mercy, grace is most certainly what we need. And Jesus pours it out willingly at all times.

FOR REFLECTION

- When you think about what you would like to receive from God, where does forgiveness rank? If it's not really what you want or think you need, why do you think Jesus is so determined to give it to you?

PRAYER

Merciful God, when we are in the midst of suffering it is hard for us to think about anything else. What we want more than anything is relief from whatever afflicts us. Forgive us our sins, especially when it doesn't occur to us to ask for it. Especially when we don't think we need it. Pour out your grace upon us in whatever ways you know that we need. And help us to receive that grace with thanksgiving, through Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, April 2

*Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run.
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.*

LUKE 18:35-43

Beggars sitting by the side of the road. Hardly anything trips the guilt switch in Christians quite as effectively and consistently as beggars by the side of the road. None of the justifications we give ourselves for passing them by really satisfy our conscience as much as we'd like. That's why we stare straight ahead and try not to make eye contact with them. It's why we casually change our usual route when we know a beggar will be camped out at an intersection. Perhaps someone should have warned Jesus about what he could expect on the Jericho road.

The blind man didn't know what all the sudden activity was about. He was in his usual spot, at the roadside, begging. Suddenly the traffic increased a great deal. It was an unusually large crowd passing by. The man knew of no special events in town that day. There were no festivals on the community calendar, so he asked the passersby what was going on. When he heard Jesus of Nazareth was passing by he had an unusual reaction.

"Son of David" he cried out. Not "Jesus of Nazareth," but "Son of David." Perhaps this blind man had heard some of the stories. He knew of the miraculous power on display wherever this rabbi showed up. This man who couldn't see anything saw something in Jesus. He saw the Messiah, the Son of David. He saw God's anointed one. And he begged him for mercy.

Jesus didn't stare straight ahead, waiting for the light to change. He went right over to the man, and asked him a somewhat surprising question. "What do you want me to do for you?" It seems like it's obvious what the blind man wants. Then again, it was obvious what the paralyzed man wanted too. But what Jesus says is not obvious. "Your faith has saved you."

There's more than one kind of seeing happening on the Jericho road. The blind man sees Jesus for who he is, the Messiah. Jesus sees the blind man, one so many had passed by without giving him a glance. He sees him as one of God's beloved. And then the blind man sees the glory of God reflected in Jesus willingness to restore his physical sight. I wonder what the crowd walking with Jesus saw.

FOR REFLECTION

- What do you see when you encounter a beggar beside the road or at the church office?
- What do you think Jesus sees when you stand before him?

PRAYER

Open our eyes, Lord. Open our eyes to our suffering neighbors. Open our eyes to the needs of those around us. Open our eyes to the truth of our world and the truth of ourselves. But most of all, open our eyes to you. Grant for us to see you as you want to be seen, the Messiah, the Savior, the one who sees us. Amen.

Thursday, April 3

*Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run.
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.*

LUKE 17:11-19

This is the last of the healing stories we will reflect on on our way to the cross. We haven't read them all. But we've gotten a pretty good sampling of the sweet injuries he inflicts on those he meets. Today he encounters ten lepers, and it is quite an encounter. In keeping with the law, the lepers don't approach Jesus. They shout to him from a safe distance, asking for his mercy. Jesus' response is somewhat surprising. He tells them to go show themselves to the priests. This is the required last step for a healed leper to be restored to society. The priests have to agree that they have been healed.

We have sort of come to expect Jesus to be a little loose about legal requirements. We might have expected him to just tell the men they are healed and send them home. But he doesn't tell them they are healed. He just tells them to go to the priests. And they do it, which is also kind of surprising. After all, he hasn't done anything. What's the point of going to the priests?

But as they go, they are healed. The lesions disappear. The deadly sores go away. They are restored! It seems likely that they had long since given up hope for such a thing. But it only occurs to one of these men to return and thank Jesus, and he's a Samaritan. Sometimes we take that as another instance of outsiders being more faithful than insiders. But we would do well to recall that even if the priests declare that this Samaritan is cured of leprosy they certainly won't declare him clean. They won't declare him righteous. The priests do not have a good word for Samaritans. He will remain outside the law, outside the covenant, outside of the people of God.

So he returns to the one who does have a good word for him. He returns to the one who has made him well. He returns to the one through whom he has experienced God's grace and mercy. Sometimes we hear in this story a call to be like the Samaritan, to remember to return our thanks to the Lord. But the fact is that we *are* like the Samaritan already. Not because we have been duly thankful, but because we are outside the law. There is no hope for us except in the one through whom we have experienced God's grace and mercy.

FOR REFLECTION

- When have you found yourself filled with gratitude? When have you found it difficult to be grateful?
- In what ways are you like the Samaritan? In what ways are you like the other nine?

PRAYER

Gracious God, your power and willingness to save, to rescue, to redeem far outstrip even our deepest gratitude. We can hardly begin to thank you for all you have done for us. And yet, we are bold to ask for even more. Move our hearts to gratitude, to faithfulness, to hope, to trust. Do for us what only you can do, and draw us back to you when we go running off in other directions. Amen.

Friday, April 4

*Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run.
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise.*

LUKE 12:49-53

I recently spoke at a retreat on the topic of “Peace in Christ.” We were focused on Romans 5:1, but we looked at a number of examples of true and false peace found in Scripture and in our world. For those of us who live our lives immersed in the church world, immersed in faith, immersed in the Bible, we sometimes speak as if the Gospel has brought us perfect peace. We float along through life untouched by its darkness because we have this deeper peace.

Of course, that’s only partly true. Or more precisely, it’s not true for our whole selves. The old person lives quite completely in this world, a world filled with strife and conflict. The only way to be untouched by it is either to delude ourselves or to withdraw completely from the neighbor. Sometimes our piety can move us to either or both of those things. It can cause us to tell ourselves we’re not feeling what we’re feeling. It can give us a justification from turning away from the neighbor if we conclude they are not people of peace.

But listen to what Jesus says here in Luke 12. His work, his gospel, he himself, drives us into strife. He did not come here to gloss over or ignore the power of darkness that holds us tightly in its grip. He did not come so that we could all just get along. He came to defeat the powers of sin and death and to gather his people to himself. That comes with some strife.

And the truly devastating reality of what Jesus says here is that our sinful selves are on the wrong side of that battle. The old person has no peace because she is in a battle with the one who came to save her. But the deep promise of the gospel, the promise that makes us new, is that we’re going to lose this battle! In fact, we already have. All of our efforts to rise against Christ, to stop him from defeating the darkness in our hearts, were buried with him in the tomb. And now he has declared the peace that we could never achieve apart from him.

FOR REFLECTION

- When do you find yourself most at peace? When do you find yourself least at peace?
- What are some ways that we pretend there is peace when there is not? Why do you think we do that? What makes us think we have to pretend? Who do we think we are fooling?

PRAYER

Prince of Peace, fill our hearts with your peace. Release us from the powers of darkness that have enlisted us in battle against you. Shine your light into our lives, into our hearts. Bring an end to the battles that rage within and around us. Conform us to your will. This day we especially ask that you would bring peace to our homes and families. Reconcile us to one another as we have been reconciled to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, April 5

*They rise, and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they save,
The prince of life they slay.
Yet cheerful he to suff'ring goes,
That he his foes from thence might free.*

LUKE 22:1-6

Years of provocation had finally come to a head. The chief priests and the scribes have clarified in their own minds that the only solution here is to put Jesus to death. But this is tricky business because he's very popular. If they don't do this just right the people will side with Jesus. They need to create a situation in which the deed will be done and their people will stick with them. Then suddenly an unexpected opportunity presents itself. One of Jesus' closest friends shows up to offer his assistance. Judas Iscariot will help them find the right moment to take Jesus into custody.

We often think about the 30 pieces of silver, but in Luke's telling, the money seems to be an after thought. It's not simple greed that moves Judas in this way. Satan himself has taken hold of him and turned him against Jesus. He didn't go there looking for cash. He went there with an offer to betray Jesus. He went there to put a stop to all of this. This is the Evil One at work. Judas has really become a tool he is working through.

But so have the religious leaders, and soon the political leaders will join them, and so will the crowd. The disciples, for their part, will, for the most part, simply disappear into the night. The hymn that is guiding our Lenten reflections really wants to use "they" at this point in the story. "They" did this all of this. And it would be nice to say that, to believe. It would be nice to have had no part in any of this. It would be nice to stand by shocked at what everyone else is doing, while our hands remain clean.

But "we" are the "they" here. All of us. It wasn't that a few strategically placed and clever people were able to nudge this story in their preferred direction. It wasn't that darkness grabbed hold of Judas and Caiaphas and Pilate and Herod, and everyone else just suffered for their actions. But the darkness lined up against Jesus envelopes each one of us.

And this Jesus, willingly takes it on himself. Because for reasons beyond understanding, he loves the loveless.

FOR REFLECTION

- When you hear the events of Holy Week, where do you like to place yourself? Whose actions seem right to you? Whose actions are incomprehensible to you?
- Are you able to convince yourself you would have been on the right side? Why or why not?

PRAYER

Gracious Lord, we are quick to imagine ourselves as unlike Judas in any way. We don't want to imagine that we would betray you, that we could moved against you. But the truth of our sin reveals otherwise. We move against you over and over and over again, despite the fact that you have already completed the work of our salvation. Forgive us this rebellion for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Monday, April 7

*They rise, and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they save,
The prince of life they slay.
Yet cheerful he to suff'ring goes,
That he his foes from thence might free.*

LUKE 23:18-25

My nephew has had a resurgence in his interest in faith as the result of a major car crash. I was in the car with him one day and we had about a 20 minute drive ahead of us. Unprompted by me, he started talking about the Bible. He asked me if I had ever heard of Barabbas. I found this a rather endearing question, given that I have been studying the Bible on sort of a full time basis for 35 years. Once we established that I am, in fact, familiar with Barabbas, he started playing for me a sermon that he found on TikTok that was centered on the crowd choosing to save Barabbas rather than Jesus.

After listening to the entire thing, the second time for my nephew listening to it, he said, “I had no idea that Jesus *chose* to die for us. I was a little bit stunned by this, as I tried *not* to do a mental calculation of how many times he has heard me preach. But something in this moment, in a sermon about Barabbas, had brought home the truth of the Gospel in a powerful way for my nephew, and that was a remarkable thing to see.

What was fascinating to me was how he got from the crowd choosing to save Barabbas to Jesus choosing to save us. That wasn't really in the sermon. “A murderer they save” our hymn says, and that's how we might be inclined to tell the story. Pilate or the crowd saved Barabbas at Jesus' expense. But what it looks like to everyone in Pilate's courtyard, and what is really happening are two entirely different things.

What's really happening is that Jesus saved Barabbas *and* the crowd *and* the world. Pilate and the crowd didn't save anyone. There's only one Savior present there in the courtyard. And he chose to place himself in the hands of sinners. He chose to give his life to and for people who had absolutely no right to take it. It wasn't just one murderer saved that day. It was murderous humanity.

Pilate could find no charge against him, but that did not change the verdict he handed down. But there was still another verdict coming.

FOR REFLECTION

- Why would the crowd want to release Barabbas instead of Jesus? What made his crimes acceptable to the people?
- Describe a time when, after the fact, you could see God's hand in something you thought was in your control?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, murderers and insurrectionists make more sense to us than you do. They seem safer to us than you do. Turn our hearts around so that we would know you as our Savior and cling to you when trouble comes. Forgive us the sin that moves us to cry “Crucify him!” Amen.

Tuesday, April 8

*They rise, and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they save,
The prince of life they slay.
Yet cheerful he to suff'ring goes,
That he his foes from thence might free.*

LUKE 23:26-31

Those brave disciples who were certain they would stand with Jesus to the end are nowhere to be found on the road to Golgotha. Only some women, already wailing and mourning, and a stranger drafted to carry his cross, and a faceless, nameless crowd go with Jesus to the place of the skull. Peter, James, John, and the rest have disappeared. No one wants to be known as a good friend of an about-to-be-executed criminal.

In this moment, Jesus does not offer a word of comfort to the crowds that line the road or those following him. Instead he speaks a word of warning. There is trouble coming for the Holy City. The women should hold off on their weeping and wailing until it is time to weep and wail for their own suffering and the suffering of their children.

By the time Luke's gospel was written down, Jerusalem had, indeed, experienced a crushing and humiliating defeat. Their temple lay in ruins. The latest round of insurrectionists had been thoroughly crushed. Any special concessions from their Roman rulers were a thing of the past.

But none of that would undo what the Prince of Life had accomplished for their sake. The life he came to bring could not be stolen by the Romans. It could not be stolen by fear. It could not be stolen by political defeat. It could not be stolen even by doubt. Christ's victory over sin and death was absolute and would not be undone. Ever.

This great miscarriage of justice, this attempt to finally overthrow God completely, this moment that is rightfully an occasion for weeping is going to become the cause of our deepest, most enduring, most complete joy. When everything else we put our trust in lies in rubble, this great work of Christ remains.

FOR REFLECTION

- What kind of suffering or defeat would you imagine would make you think life was not worth living? That you would hope the hills would fall on you? Where do you turn in that kind of despair?
- What do you think it was like to be Simon of Cyrene, suddenly thrust into the most significant event in the history of humanity? Do you think he could have imagined that his name would be known 2000 years later?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, in the midst of despair we ask you to be our hope, to be our peace, to be our salvation. When the circumstances of our lives and our world move us to lament our very existence, move us instead to faith in your enduring and bountiful love and mercy. Carry us through our darkest days and bring us at last into your marvelous light. Amen.

Wednesday, April 9

*They rise, and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they save,
The prince of life they slay.
Yet cheerful he to suff'ring goes,
That he his foes from thence might free.*

LUKE 22:66-71

The betrayal and arrest had worked perfectly. Jesus had been arrested without incident, with few witnesses, and the trial was ready to begin first thing in the morning. The authorities could not have asked for a better execution of their plan. Everything was working out. And now they were ready to trap Jesus in his own words.

As far as any witnesses were concerned, Jesus walked right into the trap set for him by his opponents. All he had to do was make it clear that he was not a blasphemer. He just had to be willing to admit that these hopes that he was the Messiah were misguided, misplaced hopes. Just make it clear once and for all that he was just a teacher from Nazareth. This might disappoint some people. It might prove a little embarrassing. But it would save his life.

We've grown quite accustomed to people saying whatever they need to say to get out of whatever trouble they're in. We don't even really expect politicians to follow through on the promises they make when running for election. We assume their word means nothing. We assume they won't hesitate to backtrack, deny, waffle. That's the only way to survive in this world.

But Jesus seems unconcerned about surviving in this world. He couldn't be convinced to just make a little tweak to his message. He stood fast and would not offer a simple "no" to their questions. He would not lie or hedge to save himself. Because he hadn't come into the world to save himself. He came into the world to save the world. To save you and me.

Everything he does is so contrary to what we would do in his shoes. Everything he does is for the sake of others, for the sake of those who would destroy him. And he doesn't hesitate. Once he had turned his face to Jerusalem there was no turning back. He was going to accomplish the purpose for which he was sent, without concern for what it cost him. Willingly taking on that cost. Willingly giving everything he had to give, for your sake.

FOR REFLECTION

- What do you make of Jesus' initial response to the council? Why doesn't he give a direct yes or no?
- Why does the council see an admission of guilt in Jesus' second response?

PRAYER

Suffering Savior, you do not turn from the mission for which you came into the world. You willingly take on our sin and death to release us from their power. Yet we persist in our waywardness and rebellion. We persist in questioning whether you are who you say you are. We persist in wondering whether you have truly accomplished our salvation, choosing instead, again and again, to rely on ourselves. Forgive us this rebellion and bring about the fulfillment of your promise that we will see you seated at the right hand of God. Amen.

Thursday, April 10

*They rise, and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they save,
The prince of life they slay.
Yet cheerful he to suff'ring goes,
That he his foes from thence might free.*

LUKE 23:32-43

Jesus' prayer from the cross, on behalf of his executioners, is truly stunning. As he suffers a painful and humiliating, cursed death, he intercedes on behalf of those responsible for it. I recently heard someone offer the prayer, "may God have mercy on your souls," on behalf of his perceived enemies. In that instance, the prayer did not seem entirely sincere. It sounded more like a judgment. They were so wrong in this particular conflict that nothing but God's mercy could bring them back.

But the prayer that Jesus offers does not carry that same sense of irony or insincerity. Even in this moment, he sees before him God's beloved children. He sees people who are lost and confused and don't know what they are doing. He sees the reason he had come into the world. And he refuses to take this moment to condemn them, choosing, instead, to intercede.

The way that the people mocked and derided him reveal so much more about them, and us, than they realized. "He saved others; let him save himself . . ." The people just assume that anyone with any real power would use it, first and foremost, for his own benefit. Jesus had used his power to save others. Saving himself was only logical. The criminal beside him figured they must be allies, and expected that Jesus should use his saving power not only to save himself, but to save his fellow condemned.

Jesus, for his part, kept interceding for sinners to the very end. He made a promise to the prisoner beside him that that very day his suffering would come to an end and he would join Jesus in Paradise. Again and again and again Jesus stayed true to his purpose, stayed true to who he was. He would not save himself because saving others was precisely his mission.

When we are in pain or suffering in some way, it's virtually impossible for us to think about anything or anyone else. It becomes all consuming for us. In this moment of agony it would have been so easy for Jesus to think only of himself. But to the last he remains focused on the foes that he came to save.

FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever interceded for someone else at a cost to yourself? Was your intercession for a friend or a foe? What made you do it?
- What does it reveal about the crowd/us that we assume that if Jesus had real power he would save himself?

PRAYER

Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom. Despite our unworthiness, do not forget us. Do not leave us to our own devices, for we are lost without you. And fill our hearts with that same mercy and compassion, that it might overflow to those we see as our enemies. Amen.

Friday, April 11

*In life, no house, no. home
My Lord on earth might have;
In death, no friendly tomb
But what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was his home;
But mine the tomb wherein he lay.*

LUKE 12:22-34

One of my specialties in life is worrying. I worry when loved ones are traveling. I worry about my parents and siblings and nieces and nephews. I worry about the state of our nation. I worry about the unraveling of international relations. I worry about The Church and the churches. I worry as if it's my full time job. But strangely, my worrying about something does not seem to have any impact on what happens. The main impact is to steal peace and rest and joy from me in the meantime.

Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about anything, and when I hear that I have two distinct reactions. The first is that I feel ashamed of my worrying nature. The second is a spark of rebellion. Just telling me not to worry doesn't really make it so. And that's pretty easy for God in the flesh to say. He's got more options at his disposal than I do.

But Jesus goes on to say more than just, "don't worry." He gives us a reason not to. We have no need to worry because we are in God's hands. God knows what we need and is eager to provide it. He knows our fears, the things that keep us awake at night, and it is his good pleasure to give us more than we could imagine.

Jesus didn't just tell us not to worry. He demonstrated what it is to live in every moment by faith. He did not worry about himself. Instead, he trusted in what his Father had in store for him. And he empowers in us that same trust. A trust that allows us not to focus all of our time and effort on piling up treasures in this world. A trust that ushers us into the true treasure of his kingdom.

Have no fear, little flock. That does not come easily to us in a world that fills us with reasons for fear. It does not come easily to us when we find ourselves awash in our worries about everything that could go wrong. But the end of that sentence is not, "Have not fear little flock because nothing bad is ever going to happen to you." It's that it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. And nothing in all of creation will ever take that away.

FOR REFLECTION

- When do you find yourself weighed down by worries? What do you do in those moments?
- How does God's promise sound to you in those times? When does it give you peace? When does it increase your worry?

PRAYER

Gracious Father, you promise us a place in your kingdom, a kingdom in which we have no rightful place. Forgive us for doubting that promise or thinking it is not enough. Help us to entrust our worries to your safe-keeping, confident that you are never far from your beloved children. Send your Spirit upon us that your promise would bring peace to our worried minds, for we ask it Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, April 12

*In life, no house, no. home
My Lord on earth might have;
In death, no friendly tomb
But what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was his home;
But mine the tomb wherein he lay.*

LUKE 23:50-56

When John the Baptist was executed by Herod, his disciples retrieved the body from Herod's prison and gave John a proper burial. It is what you would expect when someone of stature dies. John was an important and beloved teacher. His followers were not going to forget about him in death.

That makes this little detail about Jesus' burial all the more noteworthy. None of his disciples go to retrieve his body. They do not want to risk being associated with him. In the end, Jesus had been declared an enemy of God and an enemy of Caesar. The disciples didn't want any part of that. So a stranger, someone we have not even heard of up to this point, takes care of Jesus' burial. The humiliation and rejection of Jesus is now complete. Even in death he is dishonored by his beloved.

Joseph is a man of faith. He's part of the council, the same council that had just cooked up these charges against Jesus. The same council that had conspired with Judas about how to betray Jesus. But Joseph had been a dissenting vote in those proceedings. He was not in agreement with his colleagues' plan for Jesus. It's not that he necessarily thinks Jesus is the Christ. He just doesn't go along with this miscarriage of justice.

Joseph, himself, went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. He didn't send someone, in order to protect his reputation as a good member of the council. He went himself, and he buried Jesus himself. The women took note of where the body was laid, and made their plans to return for a more proper completion of the burial rights. But not until after the sabbath. Some rules couldn't even be disrupted by death.

When I read the story of Jesus betrayal and death I find myself always looking for some sign that someone in the mix realized what they had done. Someone stopped and was horrified to know that they had executed God in the flesh. But there is no sign of that anywhere. It's just one offense upon another, until the very last. A stranger has to see to the arrangements because the family can't be bothered.

FOR REFLECTION

- What do you think moved Joseph to offer to bury Jesus? What are some of the possibilities?
- What do you think is the significance of the women resting because it is the sabbath? How does that connect with what Jesus has said and done with regard to the sabbath?

PRAYER

Crucified One, your death does nothing to bring us to our senses. It does nothing to wake us up. We persist in our rejection of you. Perhaps we even see some vindication that you must not be who we hoped you would be. Like all of us will one day be, you are left alone in the grave. Even the mourners have a schedule to keep. Even as we look forward to the victory of the Resurrection, open our eyes to the depth of the sacrifice you made for us and bring us to repentance for what we have done and left undone. Amen.

Monday, April 14

*In life, no house, no home
My Lord on earth might have;
In death, no friendly tomb
But what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was his home;
But mine the tomb wherein he lay.*

ACTS 1:6-11

We're skipping ahead a little bit today to Ascension. There were some things about the events in Jerusalem during Holy Week that only became clear in retrospect. They only came into focus because of what happened next. For forty days after his resurrection, Jesus continued to teach his disciples. He continued to reveal to them what had been hidden from them throughout the time they had spent following him. But when the day of Ascension came it was time for Jesus to return to his true home. It was time for him to take up his place at the Father's right hand.

This sojourn upon the earth, in the midst of his people was for a specific time. It was to accomplish a specific purpose. Now that that purpose had been accomplished, now that the powers of darkness that had held the creation in their grip had been defeated, Christ Jesus returned to his true home. His creation, despite it being his, had never really come to terms with his presence. But his Ascension concludes with a promise. He will be returning to his creation, to his new creation, and when he does those powers of darkness will finally be banished forever. Then the creation will be at peace with its Creator at long last.

It's the Monday of Holy Week. That's kind of a strange time for us. We've celebrated the glorious entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We've waved our branches and sang, "hosanna!" But we know quite clearly what is coming. Monday of Holy Week is a kind of between time. Much like the two millennia since the Ascension have been a between time. It's a time of awaiting the final completion of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

And much like today we wait knowing quite clearly what the rest of the week will bring, we wait all our days in the sure and certain hope of the fulfillment of Christ's promises. We don't have to wonder what comes next because we've been given a promise by the one who keeps his promises. We've been tipped off in advance of his intentions. So we wait with hope. But we don't wait staring up into the heavens. We wait while living the lives and carrying out the vocations he has given us in the meantime. Until, at last, the new day arrives.

FOR REFLECTION

- What do you think the disciples thought Jesus meant when he said they would receive power? What kind of power do you think they imagined?
- What causes you to lose patience in waiting for Jesus' kingdom to come? What causes you to forget we're even waiting for anything?
- What do you look forward to on the day you finally see the fullness of his kingdom?

PRAYER

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you've given us a mission and the power to carry it out in the meantime, as we await the fullness of your kingdom. Stir us from any temptation to withdraw from the world and look to the heavens waiting for you. Drive us where you would have us go. Amen.

Tuesday, April 15

*In life, no house, no. home
My Lord on earth might have;
In death, no friendly tomb
But what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was his home;
But mine the tomb wherein he lay.*

ACTS 2:29-36

As Jesus' disciples began their work of preaching and teaching in his name, they had to get some clarity on how his life, death, and resurrection were a fulfillment of ancient promises. For generations, the people had understood the Messiah would be a descendant of David. But in Jesus, they had encountered someone greater than David. David died and was buried . . . and remained dead. Like every king, great or terrible, David's time was limited by his mortality. And the limits of his *morality* contributed to a bitter family struggle when it came to succession. So the Davidic Dynasty did not last very long.

But Jesus, Son of God and Son of David, was unlike any other king, including his ancestor David. Because death could not hold him. The chains of death that hold all of humanity tightly in their grip could not keep hold of Jesus. Death would be not be his end. He broke free and defeated death forever.

And Jesus didn't do this just because he was curious about what death might be like. This wasn't some sort of interesting field trip from heaven to earth to get a taste of what it's like to be human. In his death Jesus took on *your* death. He broke the bonds of *your* tomb. He freed you from the chains of sin that held you fast.

Christ Jesus, the Word Incarnate, who was in the beginning with God, had no business being shut up in a tomb. But in going into that tomb he seized control even of the realm of death. So there is now no place where God is not. There is no place he is not present. There is no place beyond his reach.

But taking control of the realm of death, reigning over the dead, was not the end God had in mind. So he raised up this Christ, bringing him up out of death's dark realm, into light and life. And because he has attached himself to you, you can live in the holy and certain hope that you, too, will be brought from death to life. This is your Lord and Messiah. This is your Savior and friend. This is the one whose love for you knows no limits.

FOR REFLECTION

- When you try to imagine a world without death, what do you see? What limits your imagination?
- In what ways is death still an attack in faith, despite the promise of the resurrection?

PRAYER

Messiah, even as faith clings to your promises, we remain under constant attack. The relentless pursuit of death casts a long shadow over our lives, and our best attempts to tame or control it come up short. Rescue us from that last great attack on our faith and take us with you out of the grave and into everlasting life. Amen.

Wednesday, April 16

*Here might I stay and sing –
No story so divine!
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like thine.
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend!*

LUKE 9:28-36

There was a lot happening on the Mountain of Transfiguration – the appearance of men long dead, a mysterious change to Jesus’ appearance, a sudden enveloping cloud, and a voice from the heavens. That’s plenty for one afternoon’s outing. But in the midst of all that we hear Peter’s instincts kick in in a dramatic way. As he sees Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah his instinct is to build three dwelling places. His instinct is to figure out a way to sustain this situation.

I was recently in Florida speaking at a retreat. The week before I went down there it was 20 degrees below zero in Minnesota. In Florida it was sunny and 75 degrees for the duration of my stay. It crossed my mind, as I got back on the airplane to come home, that perhaps all living creatures were made to be nomads. Perhaps instead of trying to overcome hostile forces of nature – extreme cold, extreme heat, floods, droughts, storms, etc, - perhaps we were meant to move around as nature moves us. Perhaps we were meant to live in harmony with this world, and have misunderstood that charge to “subdue it.” Or perhaps this was all just the beginning of a justification for becoming a snowbird.

Either way, Peter’s instinct to stay, and his recognition that in order to stay they would have to build some shelters, struck a different chord in that context. Staying on the mountain was not an option that day. That became crystal clear to Peter pretty quickly. That mountain was not where Christ’s life and mission would take him. He would continue to be on the move, with no place to lay his head, no shelter of his own even in death.

And our encounter with this saving God is not meant to keep us sheltered and apart from the world. We might want to “stay and sing” as our hymn says. We might want to find a safe place to sing the praises of Christ, away from any of the darkness and difficulty of this world. But we’re meant to stay on the move. To take this living faith out into the world to those who have not yet heard. We don’t *stay* and sing. We *go* and sing!

FOR REFLECTION

- When have you wanted to retreat from the world and find a place of shelter? How has God’s word come to you in those moments?
- Where is some place you can imagine going for the sake of the Gospel?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we long to live in the shelter of your wings. Our instinct is to search for a place that feels safe to us and set up camp there. When that instinct would take us away from our neighbor, send your renewing Spirit upon us so that we would be inspired to go out once again, with your song in our hearts and on our lips. Amen.

Thursday, April 17

*Here might I stay and sing –
No story so divine!
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like thine.
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend!*

LUKE 22:14–23

As we mark the occasion of the institution of the Lord's Supper we are presented with an opportunity to reflect on the depth of love that moves Jesus toward his beloved. "This is my body, which is given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you." Jesus said these words while Judas, his betrayer, is at the table with him. He said these words sitting with the one who would deny even knowing him. He said these words to men who would all flee at the sight of danger. He said these words to Thomas, who would refuse to believe the reports of his brothers that Jesus had risen from the dead. He did not go looking for a more impressive group that night. He was eager to share this meal with his beloved. He was ready to give himself for them, and all the other sinners they represent.

There is no precedent in our lives, in our world, for that kind of love. There is no template for the course of this unlimited mercy. Where this love and mercy will flow from here is wide open. The Lord goes where he wills. He goes to sinners of every stripe, pouring himself out again and again and again.

But the disciples sitting around that table were distracted. They had already forgotten about his body being given for them. They had already moved on from his blood being poured out for them. They were thinking about betrayal. They were looking around the table, eyeing each other with a new sense of suspicion. Which one of them would do such a thing. That wondering was short-lived, as it quickly gave way to an argument, not about who was *most* likely to betray him, but who was *least* likely. They still hadn't resolved the matter of who was the greatest among them.

These disciples are so much like us it is almost painful to watch them. How often, as we return from the Lord's Table, before we even get to our seats, have our thoughts already shifted to what's for lunch, or what time the game starts, or what weekend tasks remain undone, or what is on tomorrow's to do list, or whether the church had switched wines, or why the pastor had preached so long on a communion Sunday, or what the closing hymn was going to be? Our minds jump to anything other sitting with these words, "given for you, poured out for you." Because if his body was given for me, if his blood was shed for me, I must have needed it.

FOR REFLECTION

- What distracts you during worship? When do you find your mind wandering?
- What are the closest parallels you see to the kind of love Jesus has for his people? Where do those parallels come up short?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus you gave your body and poured out your blood for our sake. By the power of your Spirit, give us the peace and patience to wrestle with the meaning of such love. And fill our hearts with that very same love, a love that connects us with you and one another. Amen.

Friday, April 18

*Here might I stay and sing –
No story so divine!
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like thine.
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend!*

LUKE 22:39–46

This passage is the only hint we get in Luke's Gospel of Jesus wavering for even a moment from his course. But it can hardly be called wavering. Jesus remains faithful to the Father's will. If the Father willed it, Jesus would take a different course. But he was not going to substitute his will, and certainly not a drive for self-preservation, in place of carrying out the work he had come to do.

But Jesus recognizes that the path he is on is a path of real suffering. He will suffer the humiliation of being rejected by his beloved. He will experience real pain as he is flogged and a crown of thorns is jammed upon his head. He will actually suffocate to death on that cross. This won't be an act he is putting on for the crowds, just to make a dramatic point. God Incarnate is going to suffer and die. And he's going to do this without any of his beloved at his side.

The disciples can't even stay awake to pray with him. That proves too much to ask. After all, they've had a busy day, what with the Passover meal and the argument about greatness. It seems that wore them out. So as Jesus prayed to the point of tears, the disciples took a rest. As Jesus considered the full magnitude of what lay before him, the disciples were a few feet away, completely oblivious to what was unfolding in front of them.

We are not oblivious in exactly the same way they were, but we have our own problems with what's happening here. When we get right down to it, we aren't entirely comfortable with holding together all the pieces – that Jesus is fully God *and* fully human, that his suffering and death will be the real suffering and death of God in the flesh. This doesn't compute very well for us. That's why the crowd at Jesus' feet will make some sense to us when they call upon him to save himself. He could certainly do that! Why doesn't he?

And as we ponder that question, we find ourselves tripped up again and again by the answer. It's because of us. It's for our sake that he takes on this grief, this pain, this suffering, this death. It's because we are oblivious, because we don't get it, because we don't know what to ask for or how to ask. It's because we need saving.

FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever wondered why God didn't accomplish salvation a different way? What sorts of possibilities come to mind for you?
- What does it say about us that we still imagine we could find a better way than God does?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, wake us from our slumber. Open our eyes to the truth of the suffering you took on for our sake. Give us the courage to look straight at what our sin does to you. And then fill us with gratitude for what you so willingly do for us. Amen.

Saturday, April 19

*Here might I stay and sing –
No story so divine!
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like thine.
**This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend!***

LUKE 23:44–49

One man's death. It's hard to imagine that one man's death can be the point on which the ages hinge. How many Roman prisoners were crucified the day before Jesus? How many were crucified the day after? How many people over the face of the earth died at the same moment he did? But this one death stands apart. This is the death of the friend of sinners, who remained faithful to God and to his beloved until the very end.

Darkness covers the whole earth and the curtain in the temple is torn in two. The whole creation, in which death is a constant reality, is changed by this one death. The whole way that God interacts with his people takes on a new wildness, a new set of possibilities, as he breaks out of the confines of temple and soon out of the confines of the tomb. We could run into him anywhere now.

He has given us some clues about where we might expect to find him. He told the disciples that he would go ahead of them to Galilee. He tells us that he will be found in his supper. He will be found in the waters of baptism. He will be found in the proclamation of his Word. He will be found in the community of believers. He will be found in the face of the neighbor. He will be found among the lowly. He will be found among sinners. He will be found wherever there is one who needs saving.

And he will take us all those places with him. He will take us to all those people. He will take us to the cross and to what lies beyond the cross.

There is no other love like this. There is no other lover like this. In this friend of sinners, this one who gives himself to the beloved in order to make us lovely, make us loveable, the fulness of God is pleased to dwell. In this one we see the untold depths of love God has for those he has created. We see the lengths he will go to to bring us out of death to life.

There can be no standing at a distance from this. There can be no looking on from afar, untouched by what is taking place in this one. Christ Jesus is drawing you close. And you can be certain that he will break through all your efforts to remain distant. He wants to know you and be known by you because you are precious to him.

FOR REFLECTION

- What do you think it means that the curtain in the temple was torn in two? Why is that significant?
- What has changed because of Christ's death?

PRAYER

Lover of the loveless, we sing of the unknown, unlimited depths of your love for us. Thank you for make us lovely. Thank you for taking on frail flesh and dying for our sake. Thank you for refusing to stay far off and showing up right in our midst, to bring your salvation. Thank you for setting us free. Thank you for loving us and for creating in us love for you and one another. Amen.