

Closer to the Heart of the Gospel: A Seven-Part Lenten Journey

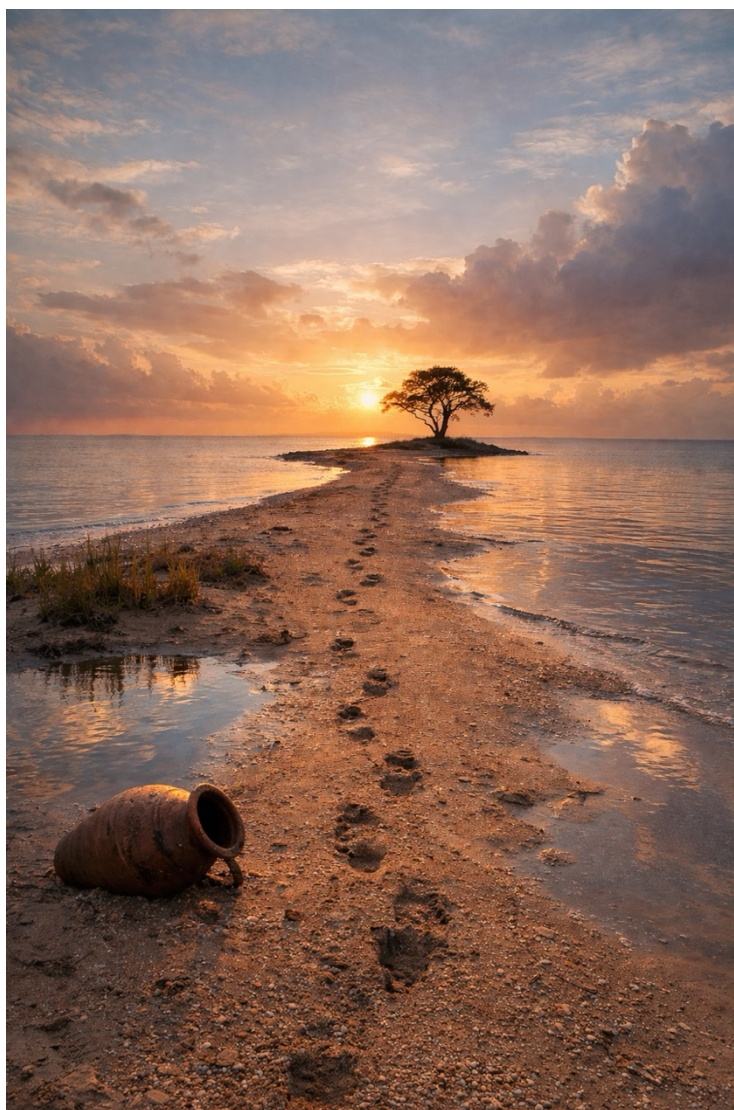
This Lent, we will walk step by step toward the heart of the Christian story. Beginning on Ash Wednesday and continuing through Easter, the sermons will trace a spiritual movement: *Return. Trust. Promise. Thirst. Sight. Life. Surrender.*

Each week's Scripture invites us to examine where we stand in relation to the gospel itself. Where are we resistant? Thirsty? Afraid to trust? Where do we need resurrection? Lent is not a season of spiritual performance but courageous honesty. It is a time to draw closer to Christ so that Christ may reshape our hearts. Join us for this intentional journey toward the cross and the hope that waits beyond it.

The anchoring image meets us about two-thirds of the way through our Lenten journey. By the fifth week of Lent, the broad causeway we started on Ash Wednesday has been whittled down from thoroughway to byway, from byway to pathway, from pathway to footpath. The *causeway* has become the *cause* for *The Way*, the name given to the original Christian movement in the first century AD (see Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22; but also Psalm 1, Isaiah 40:3, John 14:6).

The road, once broad enough for general repentance, has become quite specific in its call. The themes become more personal; listening, blindness, and death have stripped away the excess, including things we thought we needed to survive. The dust of the causeway becomes solitary footprints in the sand leading to wood. And there is no elbow room here, only space for obedience. In the distance is the promised resurrection, though we have not seen it.

This Lenten journey includes the weekly sermons (Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday, including Holy Week). Each week's theme anchors the daily reflections by centering upon the imagery and message of the Sunday sermon. It leads us on a narrowing way, to the Cross and to Easter Resurrection. *SP †, Eve of Saint Matthias*



Daily Reflections during the First Week of Lent (Feb 22-28)

Anchoring Questions: Where am I most tempted to grasp for control instead of entrusting myself to God? What “shortcut” to security or success most appeals to me right now? How might Jesus be inviting me to trust rather than prove, manipulate, or secure outcomes?

Monday in Lent I – Into the Wilderness

Scripture: Matthew 4:1–4

Reflection: The Spirit leads Jesus into wilderness. Lent is not accidental. It is intentional space. Hunger sharpens what comfort dulls. The Narrowing Road begins with all that we think we cannot live without. “One does not live by bread alone.” We discover what truly sustains us when distractions fall away.

Question: What hunger is God using to teach me dependence?

Prayer: *Sustain me, Lord, with what truly gives life.*

Tuesday in Lent I – Testing Trust

Scripture: Matthew 4:5–7

Reflection: “Throw yourself down.” The temptation is spectacle—forcing certainty. The Narrowing Road refuses manipulation. Trust does not demand proof. Lent confronts our need to control outcomes or secure visible guarantees. Jesus chooses quiet obedience over dramatic display.

Question: Where am I asking God to prove Himself to me?

Prayer: *Teach me patient trust without conditions.*

Wednesday in Lent I – No Shortcuts

Scripture: Matthew 4:8–11

Reflection: “All these I will give you.” Power without suffering. Glory without surrender. The Narrowing Road rejects shortcuts. Christ chooses worship over ambition. Lent asks whether we seek influence more than faithfulness. The kingdoms of the world promise much—but they cannot give life.

Question: What shortcut tempts me away from obedience?

Prayer: *Lord, anchor my worship and guard my loyalty.*

Thursday in Lent I – Ask, Seek, Knock

Scripture: Matthew 7:7–12

Reflection: The Narrowing Road is not silent endurance but persistent prayer. Ask, seek, knock. Lent invites deeper dependence. The Father delights to give good gifts—not always quickly, but faithfully. Or are we too self-reliant to see this?

Question: Have I stopped asking?

Prayer: *Open my hands again in trust, O God.*

Friday in Lent I – Treasure in Heaven

Scripture: Matthew 6:19–21

Reflection: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The road narrows at the point of attachment. Lent gently asks, what owns you? Our security often hides in our possessions, reputation, or certainty. Christ calls us to invest where moth and rust cannot reach.

Question: What does my heart cling to most tightly?

Prayer: *Reorder my loves, Lord.*

Saturday in Lent I – Seek First

Scripture: Matthew 6:33

Reflection: “Strive first for the kingdom.” Anxiety widens the road with endless contingencies. The Narrowing Road simplifies: seek first. Lent clears away competing priorities so that one desire becomes central—God’s reign in us and through us. Trust does not eliminate responsibility; it reorders it.

Question: What would change if I truly sought the kingdom first?

Prayer: *Center my life in your kingdom, faithful God.*

Daily Reflections during the Second Week of Lent (March 1-7)

Anchoring Questions: What voices compete with Christ’s? Where am I trying to build “tents” around a spiritual experience instead of continuing the journey? What would it mean for me, practically, to “listen to him” this week?

Monday in Lent II – Listening on the Mountain

Scripture: Matthew 17:1–8

Reflection: Peter wants to build tents. He wants to hold the moment, contain the glory. But the voice from the cloud says something far simpler: “Listen to him.” The Narrowing Road is not about capturing spiritual highs or constructing religious monuments. It is about listening in stillness and surrender. It asks us to release our impulse to manage holy moments. The disciples fall on their faces—not because they understand, but because they can’t control what they see. And when they look up, they see only Jesus.

Question: Where am I trying to build tents instead of simply listening?

Prayer: *Lord, quiet my impulse to manage, and teach me to listen.*

Tuesday in Lent II – True Greatness

Scripture: Matthew 18:1–7

Reflection: The disciples want to know who is greatest. Jesus places a child in their midst. The Narrowing Road does not climb toward prominence; it descends into humility. To “turn and become like children” is not sentimentality. It is dependence. Children live by trust, not status. The widening road competes. The Narrowing Road receives. Lent exposes how often we measure worth by influence or control. Christ redirects us toward simplicity.

Question: Where do I seek greatness rather than dependence?

Prayer: *Jesus, turn my ambition into trust.*

Wednesday in Lent II – Mercy Without Measure

Scripture: Matthew 18:21–35

Reflection: Peter wants limits. “How many times?” Forgiveness feels costly. Jesus answers with a story of absurd mercy. The servant forgiven everything refuses to forgive a little. The Narrowing Road refuses the economy of scorekeeping. We clutch grievances because they give us a strange sense of control. But mercy loosens the grip. Lent invites us to release debts we rehearse again and again.

Question: What grievance am I still clutching?

Prayer: *Merciful God, soften my tight grip on old wounds.*

Thursday in Lent II – The Rich Young Man

Scripture: Matthew 19:16–26

Reflection: He has kept the commandments. He lacks only one thing. “Sell what you own.” The Narrowing Road often narrows at the point of attachment. Jesus looks at him and loves him—and then names the one thing he cannot release. The man goes away grieving. The tragedy is not wealth; it is unwillingness. Lent asks not what is wrong in general, but what is binding me specifically.

Question: What would grieve me to give up?

Prayer: *Lord, free me from what I cannot imagine losing.*

Friday in Lent II – The Workers in the Vineyard

Scripture: Matthew 20:1–16

Reflection: The complaint sounds reasonable: “You made them equal to us.” Grace unsettles fairness. The Narrowing Road resists comparison. When we measure ourselves against others, resentment grows. The landowner’s generosity exposes how small our mercy can be. Lent invites us to rejoice when grace overflows—even when it overflows toward someone else.

Question: Where does comparison steal my joy?

Prayer: *Generous God, enlarge my heart to celebrate your mercy.*

Saturday in Lent II – Servant Greatness

Scripture: Matthew 20:20–28

Reflection: A mother asks for thrones. Jesus speaks of a cup. The Narrowing Road leads not upward but downward. “Whoever wishes to be great must be your servant.” Power in the kingdom looks like self-giving love. We resist this because service feels like loss. But Christ calls it glory. Lent trains us to see greatness differently—to measure life by love poured out.

Question: Where am I resisting the cup Christ offers?

Prayer: *Jesus, teach me the freedom of serving love.*

Daily Reflections during the Third Week of Lent (March 8-14)

Anchoring Questions: What thirst keeps resurfacing in my life — and where do I usually try to satisfy it? Where might Christ be meeting me in an unexpected place of vulnerability? What truth about myself am I avoiding that could become the doorway to freedom?

Monday in Lent III – A Divided Kingdom

Scripture: Luke 11:14–23

Reflection: Jesus casts out a demon and is accused of darkness. “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste.” The Narrowing Road requires interior honesty. We cannot walk toward Christ while harboring loyalties that pull in the opposite direction. Lent exposes the subtle divisions within us—resentment beside prayer, pride beside service. Christ does not shame the divided heart; he names it. Wholeness begins when we stop pretending unity where it does not exist.

Question: Where is my heart divided?

Prayer: *Lord, gather the scattered parts of me into your light.*

Tuesday in Lent III – Forgiven Much

Scripture: Luke 7:36–50

Reflection: A woman kneels in tears while others calculate her worth. Love flows from forgiven places. The Narrowing Road passes through humility—the willingness to be seen in our need. Those who believe they require little mercy offer little love. Lent strips away our polished defenses and reminds us that we stand by grace alone. Gratitude widens the heart even as the road narrows the ego.

Question: Do I live as one who has been forgiven much?

Prayer: *Merciful Christ, deepen my gratitude and love.*

Wednesday in Lent III – The Sign of Jonah

Scripture: Luke 11:29–32

Reflection: “This generation asks for a sign.” We often want proof before obedience. The Narrowing Road does not wait for spectacle. Nineveh repented at Jonah’s reluctant preaching. The queen of the South traveled far for wisdom. Jesus stands before them—and still they hesitate. Lent invites us to respond to the light already given. Faith matures not by accumulating signs but by acting on what we know.

Question: What obedience am I postponing while I wait for certainty?

Prayer: *Lord, make me faithful with the light I have.*

Thursday in Lent III – The Rich Man and Lazarus

Scripture: Luke 16:19–31

Reflection: The rich man’s tragedy is not cruelty alone but indifference. Lazarus lay at his gate. The Narrowing Road sharpens our sight. We cannot claim to walk toward God while stepping over the suffering at our door. Lent is not abstract spirituality; it is concrete compassion. The road narrows wherever love becomes specific.

Question: Who is at my gate?

Prayer: *Open my eyes, Lord, to the neighbor I have ignored.*

Friday in Lent III – The Rejected Son

Scripture: Mark 12:1–12

Reflection: The tenants seize what was entrusted to them. They want the vineyard without the owner. This is the old pattern—possession without accountability. The Narrowing Road remembers that all we hold is gift. Lent loosens the illusion that life belongs to us. Christ, the rejected Son, becomes the cornerstone. Surrender is not loss; it is alignment.

Question: Where am I living as if the vineyard were mine?

Prayer: *Lord, return me to gratitude and trust.*

Saturday in Lent III – The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Scripture: Luke 18:9–14

Reflection: One rehearses virtue. The other pleads for mercy. The Narrowing Road bends low. Lent reveals how easily comparison disguises itself as righteousness. The tax collector leaves justified not because he is better, but because he is honest. The road narrows wherever pride dissolves.

Question: Am I praying to be seen—or to be healed?

Prayer: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*

Daily Reflections during the Fourth Week of Lent (March 15-21)

Anchoring Questions: Where might I be blind — especially in ways I feel most certain? How has suffering shaped my understanding of God — for better or worse? What would it mean to move from information about Jesus to trust in Jesus?

Monday in Lent IV – A Prophet Without Honor

Scripture: Luke 4:24–30

Reflection: Familiarity breeds resistance. Those who knew Jesus longest struggled to receive him. The Narrowing Road requires openness beyond comfort. We often reject the voice that unsettles our assumptions. Lent invites us to ask whether we have confined Christ to what feels manageable.

Question: Where have I made Jesus too familiar to challenge me?

Prayer: *Speak, Lord, even when your word unsettles me.*

Tuesday in Lent IV – Unlimited Mercy

Scripture: Matthew 18:21–22

Reflection: Seventy-seven times. Forgiveness stretches beyond arithmetic. The Narrowing Road releases vengeance one decision at a time. Lent is not emotional denial; it is disciplined mercy. Christ does not ask us to forget pain—but to refuse retaliation.

Question: What debt am I still counting?

Prayer: *Free me from keeping score, Lord.*

Wednesday in Lent IV – The Greatest Commandment

Scripture: Matthew 22:34–40

Reflection: Love God. Love neighbor. Everything hangs here. The Narrowing Road simplifies what we complicate. Lent gathers our scattered energies and refocuses them on love. When love is central, lesser concerns find their proper place.

Question: Is love truly governing my choices?

Prayer: *Order my life around love, O God.*

Thursday in Lent IV – A House Divided

Scripture: Luke 11:17

Reflection: Division weakens what strength alone cannot sustain. The Narrowing Road calls for integrity—alignment between belief and practice. Lent exposes the quiet fractures between our confession and our conduct. Christ seeks wholeness, not performance.

Question: Where does my life contradict my prayer?

Prayer: *Make me whole, Lord.*

Friday in Lent IV – The First Shall Be Last

Scripture: Matthew 20:16

Reflection: Kingdom reversals unsettle hierarchy. The Narrowing Road reshapes ambition. In Christ's economy, humility outruns prestige. Lent recalibrates our understanding of success.

Question: What does success mean in the kingdom of God?

Prayer: *Teach me the greatness of smallness, Lord.*

Saturday in Lent IV – Persistent Prayer

Scripture: Luke 18:1–8

Reflection: The widow keeps knocking. The Narrowing Road requires endurance. Lent teaches patient trust when answers delay. Persistence is not desperation—it is faith stretched over time.

Question: Where am I tempted to stop praying?

Prayer: *Strengthen my perseverance, faithful God.*

Daily Reflections during the Fifth Week of Lent (March 22-28)

Anchoring Questions: Where in my life does something feel sealed, delayed, or beyond hope? Do I believe Christ enters grief before he transforms it? What “stone” might need to be rolled away for new life to begin?

Monday in Lent V – Neither Do I Condemn You

Scripture: John 8:1–11

Reflection: Stones fall from tightened hands. Mercy interrupts condemnation. The Narrowing Road loosens our readiness to accuse. Christ neither denies sin nor delights in shame. He creates space for new life. Lent invites us to drop the stones we carry.

Question: What stones am I still holding?

Prayer: *Lord, teach me mercy shaped like yours.*

Tuesday in Lent V – When I Am Lifted Up

Scripture: John 12:32

Reflection: “I will draw all people to myself.” The Narrowing Road moves toward the cross. What looks like defeat becomes magnetizing love. Lent trains our eyes to see glory in surrender.

Question: Can I trust that love is stronger than loss?

Prayer: *Draw me to you, crucified Lord.*

Wednesday in Lent V – The Grain of Wheat

Scripture: John 12:24

Reflection: Unless a grain falls and dies, it remains alone. The Narrowing Road passes through relinquishment. Lent names the fear of diminishment—and then promises fruitfulness beyond it.

Question: What must fall to the earth in my life?

Prayer: *Give me courage to release what must die.*

Thursday in Lent V – Troubled Soul

Scripture: John 12:27

Reflection: “Now my soul is troubled.” Even Jesus names anguish. The Narrowing Road does not bypass struggle. Lent teaches us to bring our turmoil into prayer rather than escape it.

Question: Where do I need to admit my troubled heart?

Prayer: *Hold me steady, Father, in the hour of testing.*

Friday in Lent V – The New Covenant

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31–34

Reflection: “I will write it on their hearts.” The Narrowing Road is not external compliance but inward transformation. Lent invites not mere behavior change but heart renewal. God’s promise is intimacy, not obligation alone.

Question: Is my obedience rooted in love?

Prayer: *Write your law upon my heart, O God.*

Saturday in Lent V – Waiting in Hope

Scripture: Psalm 130

Reflection: “I wait for the Lord.” Waiting narrows impatience into trust. As Lent nears its end, anticipation deepens. The road has narrowed, but hope widens.

Question: Can I wait with hope rather than fear?

Prayer: *My soul waits for you, O Lord.*

Daily Reflections during Holy Week (March 29-April 4)

Anchoring Questions: Where do I welcome Christ as king — and where do I resist the kind of king he actually is? How do I respond when faithfulness leads not to applause but to suffering? What expectations about God might need to die so that deeper trust can live?

Monday in Holy Week – Anointing at Bethany

Scripture: John 12:1–8

Reflection: Mary pours out costly perfume. The house fills with fragrance. Judas calculates waste; Jesus receives love. The Narrowing Road no longer debates efficiency but moves toward devotion. As the shadow of the cross lengthens, love becomes extravagant. Holy Week asks what is faithful, not practical. There is always a voice that measures and critiques. But Christ honors the gift freely given.

Question: What costly love is Christ inviting?

Prayer: *Receive my offering, Lord, however small or imperfect.*

Tuesday in Holy Week – “Now Is the Hour”

Scripture: John 12:27–36

Reflection: “My soul is troubled.” Jesus does not deny the weight of what approaches. The Narrowing Road leads straight into it. He does not turn aside. Instead, he entrusts himself to the Father: “Glorify your name.” Holy Week teaches us that courage is not calmness—it is obedience in anguish. Light remains, but only for a little while.

Question: Where am I tempted to turn away from a difficult obedience?

Prayer: *Glorify your name in me, even when my hour is hard.*

Wednesday in Holy Week – Betrayal in Shadows

Scripture: John 13:21–32

Reflection: “And it was night.” Judas slips into darkness while Jesus speaks of glory. The Narrowing Road now passes through betrayal. Christ does not cling to control. He releases even this. Holy Week reveals how close treachery can sit to intimacy. Yet even here, love does not withdraw itself.

Question: Where do I resist the vulnerability of love?

Prayer: *Keep my heart near you, Lord, even in shadow.*

Maundy Thursday – The Towel and the Cup

Scripture: John 13:1–15

Reflection: He kneels. The Lord of glory washes dust from weary feet. The Narrowing Road bends to the floor. In the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup, Christ gives not a theory but himself. “Do this.” Love is enacted in touch, in service, in remembrance. Holy Thursday narrows pride into humility and power into gift.

Question: Whose feet am I unwilling to wash?

Prayer: *Form in me the servant heart of Christ.*

Good Friday – It Is Finished

Scripture: John 19:16–30

Reflection: The road has narrowed to a crossbeam. No spectacle. No rescue. Only surrender. “It is finished.” The words are not despair but completion. Here, grasping finally dies. Here, love refuses retaliation. The cross is not the widening of power but the narrowing into obedience unto death. We stand at a distance and behold what our sin has done—and what God’s mercy has accomplished.

Question: Can I remain here without rushing to Easter?

Prayer: *Crucified Lord, hold me at the foot of the cross.*

Holy Saturday – The Silence of the Tomb

Scripture: Matthew 27:57–66

Reflection: A stone seals the entrance. The earth is quiet. The Narrowing Road disappears from sight. No voice from heaven. No movement. Only waiting. Holy Saturday teaches us the faithfulness of stillness. Between promise and fulfillment lies silence. We do not fix it. We do not explain it. We keep watch.

Question: Can I trust God in the silence?

Prayer: *In the stillness, O God, keep my hope alive.*

Daily Reflection for Easter Sunday (April 5)

Anchoring Questions: Where is resurrection already unfolding that I have not yet recognized? What grief or assumption might be preventing me from seeing new life? How is the risen Christ calling my name into renewed hope and courage?

Easter Sunday – The Road Opens

Scripture: John 20:1–18

Reflection: While it is still dark, Mary goes to the tomb. She expects grief, not glory. The stone is rolled away—not to let Jesus out, but to let the world see what love has done. The Narrowing Road has led through wilderness, surrender, cross, and silence. And now it opens. Not into ease, but into life stronger than death. Mary does not recognize him at first. Resurrection often stands before us unrecognized until we hear our name spoken in love. “Mary.” The road that narrowed into obedience now widens into hope. The One who refused to grasp now holds all things.

Question: Where is the risen Christ calling my name into new life?

Prayer: *Risen Lord, open my eyes to recognize you and my heart to follow where life leads.*



***Sermon for February 18, 2026 (Ash Wednesday, Year A) –
“Closer to the Heart of the Gospel I. Return”***

Lectionary readings for today: Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; Psalm 103:8–14; II Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

This Lent, we are not taking on a self-improvement project. We are taking a journey as a pilgrimage road. It begins broad and sprawling on Ash Wednesday, and we step onto that road. It is wide enough for all our distractions and egos. We begin walking toward something, and the path gradually narrows as we approach the horizon; as we approach Jerusalem; as we approach along an ever-tapering path until it is as wide as the eye of a needle, a narrow gate that only a single soul may pass. It is a journey closer to the heart of the gospel, and every step we take causes loss. But that loss is actually that of illusion, ego, and control. Ashes are the first narrowing of that pilgrimage road. That narrowing arises in honesty.

Through Lent, the Scriptures are deep calling to deep. It is calling you to return, to trust, to receive promise, to name our thirst, to see clearly, to hope for life where there has been death, and finally to stand at the cross.

Lent isn't ever about becoming impressive Christians. Rather, Lent is about becoming honest disciples, even when life incinerates the things we hold dear. And that brings us to today, Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is startlingly (and given that, I would say refreshingly) honest. We don't begin Lent with improvement, resolution, or perhaps even optimism. No; we begin with the starkness of dust. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”ⁱ

Dust has a bad name and doesn't receive our support and encouragement, except to get rid of it. But here it's not a measure of humiliation but of clarity. Because when we strip away everything, we remember our essence is our humanity: we are those who sin. But even before that, you need to hear that you are dust, a dust that God called good.

In the Creation story of Genesis, we hear of God forming humanity from the earth. Did you notice that? We aren't made of precious jewels, of gold, of rarefied air. No; we are made from soil, the ubiquitous layer that gives and sustains life. So dust, it's not an insult here at all; rather, it is intimacy grounded in belonging. And we belong to the ground of this world as creatures, not creators.

See, dust without breath is nothing. We need God's breath, the breath of life, for us to become living. So you see, Ash Wednesday isn't just about dust. It is also about recalling who breathed once into that dust and continues to breathe into it for our sake out of love.

That's nice to hear. But Lent also begins by confronting a lie: that we behave as though we are not dust. We live in a constant struggle to gain control and a constant fear of losing it. We live like we are all self-made, I lift myself up by my own bootstraps thank you very much, and I am an island, I can control myself, my attitude, and all the things around me, and forget everyone else that doesn't feel that way, that's their problem.

But remember you are dust, and dust can't control the wind. You remember the serpent in the Garden of Eden, his first temptation went like this: “Hey, you can be like God.”ⁱⁱ What we have today is a partial dismantling of that illusion.

Surprise! You are not God. Surprise! Your influence is even less than your lowest estimate of yourself. But surprise with a plot twist! That is actually good news, because we can return by first recognizing we need to turn.

Consider the prophet Joel from our first reading. You don't hear, “Well, just try harder to improve yourselves, but don't fret too much about it.” NO! He opens in DEFCON ONE, sounding the alarm on

Daily Reflections and Sermons for Lent 2026 (February 18 – April 5, 2026) – “Closer to the Heart of the Gospel”
The Rev. Stephen D. Pecot, Trinity Episcopal Church, Apalachicola, FL

the holy mountain!ⁱⁱⁱ But the call isn't to sit on your blessed assurances but to return with fasting and weeping and your whole heart not just what you need God to fix.

And that type of return is one which recalls a relationship, deep and abiding within each of you. See, you are not crawling towards a stranger; rather, we are inching our way back home, the prodigal child moving along the narrowing road. It's the journey we begin today and starts right here; not with striving to do better, but turning to become better.

On this journey, we are reminded of the need to be wary against public righteousness.^{iv} Why worry about that? I like people to know I've been to church. I want people to know I go here! I want to join the ministry that has the most interface with the public. Now I have to worry about how people perceive my practicing my piety?

But this is important to hear, because even repentance can become performance. And even the ashes for today, they are not accoutrements or *ornamentum spirituale*. Ashes are an outward sign of surrender to God who sees us in our secret corners and doesn't just love us anyway, God loves us *everyway*! That is the God we are returning to.

Now...we live in unsure times, and in our effort to provide security or grasp for certainty, we find ourselves falling into the trap of hardening our hearts when we are afraid. But we are in luck, even as we sit in that trap of dire straits, for Ash Wednesday doesn't deny fear, for it says quite plainly that we are dust. But it adds that God is merciful^v.

See, dust may not be able to control the wind, but it also has no need for a defense from it. Dust can be anywhere, including resting in the hands that formed it.

The road ahead in Lent will narrow. From now until Easter, I want you to imagine a very wide causeway going off into the distance and disappearing at the horizon. We are on this path together right now, and we can all fit with shoulders astride and plenty of elbow room. This is a big road, and while it appears powerful now, it ends in surrender; it may sound frenetic now, but it ends in silence; it may offer quick certainty with three easy soul payments of \$6.66, but it ends in faith found in the silence and surrender.

But on Ash Wednesday, it's far more simple: you are dust, and you are loved, so return. In the beginning, God formed humanity from dust and breathed life into it. Today, we remember the dust so that we might again receive the breath.

SP †

***Sermon for February 22, 2026 (First Sunday in Lent, Year A) –
“Closer to the Heart of the Gospel II. Trust”***

Lectionary readings for today: Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12–19; Matthew 4:1–11

This Lent, we walk toward the heart of the Christian story, tracing a spiritual movement: Return. Trust. Promise. Thirst. Sight. Life. Surrender.

Each week’s Scripture invites us to examine where we stand in relation to the gospel itself. Where are we resistant or afraid to trust? Where are we thirsty? Where do we need resurrection? Lent is not a season of spiritual performance but one of return and drawing closer to Christ.

We began Ash Wednesday with dust. In Lent, we are called to walk an ever-narrowing road made of dust, a path terminating at the cross, with the only way through the eye of the needle, the narrow gate for the repentant. Those attending were marked with ashes and assured that God breathes life into what seems so unworthy, ungrateful, or unlikely.

We are still walking side-by-side on this very broad causeway, with plenty of elbow room and time to load the trunk with all the things you like to bring on trips to be comfortable. But we see something in the distance coming up. The pilgrimage road today winds through the wilderness.

A wilderness can be a site of barrenness, or it might be a panacea teeming with life. A paradox like this is evident the gospel, including how we try to hold onto power we don’t have. In the Creation reading, humanity is trying grasp for control in this clothing-optional commune.

Not so with Christ. Not once, twice, but three times he refuses to grasp at the finite and temporal. And that’s a great message for us in Lent: the road narrows not because of self-improvement, but because you are learning what it is that you should be refusing.

Let’s park for a minute around this idea of grasping and refusing, because it has been around for as long as we had opposable thumbs. When we are a child and want something, we grasp for it. Grasping is very omnidirectional; it is our desire’s version of a shotgun blast. And that desire can be pernicious and underhanded.

We grasp in subtle ways too. Consider the serpent from our Genesis reading today^{vi}, who isn’t planning a rebellion; he just sashays right by, stirs the pot, and exits the scene. He says, *“Did God really say you couldn’t...ya know...skim a little off the top? It’s going in the garbage anyway...”*

How doth temptation start? With the tiniest notion of a subtle distortion of our world. We start to doubt God’s unconditional generosity. We see the garden as a place we can’t get, with a wall separating the saintly from us stuck in the DMZ where we eke out a speck of survival. And over that wall is something essential and sweet to all the senses.

See, the issue here is not forbidden fruit but misplaced trust. The issue is our concern that what will get us to heaven is, in fact, enough. And when we are unsure, what do we do? Start grasping for straws, scrambling for footing; anything that will give us control.

But when God created the garden and added two humans to the mix, the problem was not in being intellectual and knowing good from evil. The problem is in how the knowledge was used; in this case, to become like God and follow your own moral code, one that helps make sense of the gray world you live in...sound familiar? When we do that, we seek autonomy outside of the communion that is our church and polity as well as God’s intention. This can lead to isolation, of pulling off at the first rest stop on the pilgrimage to take care of your needs.

***Daily Reflections and Sermons for Lent 2026 (February 18 – April 5, 2026) – “Closer to the Heart of the Gospel”
The Rev. Stephen D. Pecot, Trinity Episcopal Church, Apalachicola, FL***

Good news: there is a counterweight to this burden, and we find it described by Paul in his Letter to the Romans^{vii}. Paul broadens the aperture from the Creation story and Adam to cosmic levels that include Christ, the Church, and us.

See, a central theme of Paul’s writing is that Christ is the Second Adam. That is, through one man, Adam, came sin and death; but through another man, Christ, came grace and life. And how did they get there? For Adam, it was in grasping; for Jesus, it was in trusting. Adam taught us the futility of clutching at certainty, but Jesus taught us how to thrive with faith. Both choices lie at your feet today.

One way to choose Jesus and to continue on this pilgrimage road with me is to recognize that all of this suffering is not punishment but rather preparation. It is getting you ready for being a person marked by the devil; not to scare you, but to instill a spiritual discipline that helps you live out your Baptismal Covenant.

Jesus prepares us in three ways by showing how to combat temptation’s angry flame.^{viii} First, there is the temptation to use power for self-preservation by turning stones into bread. But Jesus refuses to let hunger define who he is. Where we would grasp to survive, Jesus releases to trust.

Second is the temptation to pump yourself up. “Make a spectacle of yourself, it won’t matter! You’re God!” The devil manufactures certainty here, creating a situation tailor made for Jesus. But Jesus refuses to test God, because trust does not demand proof. And if there’s anything that Paul’s life (or the person we are all thinking of right now) can teach us is this: trust is its own proof. And we need that trust to make it through a life where, in true fashion of passion, there are no shortcuts.

And that leads to the third temptation: the devil offers power free of suffering. In return, Jesus must surrender his authority. This is the famous “shortcut to glory” idea, where we can put the crown on without ever learning about the cross. But stepping into relationship with the cross is going to narrow the road before you. Today, it starts with refusing what looks easier or might feel the best now.

Perhaps you are starting to feel the road constricting. When we began, you couldn’t even see the shoulders of the road it was so wide. We are still on a road but one that has trees sticking out of it and grass growing between the cracks; you start to make out abandoned cars under sand dunes; but if you stare in just the right way and in just the right light, you still see the path under all the vegetation. It starts to dawn on you that things you thought were important at the outset are becoming less so. And that includes the efficiencies of our age, because here on out, we are on foot.

And it is right here, when you realize you can’t go further with all your possessions, that a pattern is revealed. It is that in the garden, humanity grasped and lost life; but in the wilderness, Christ released and restored life. Adam hid in his leafy-print Speedo in the bushes while Jesus stood out like a sore thumb. Adam blamed, but Christ obeyed. Adam ate fruit; Jesus refused bread.

This is an inflection point where we must choose between our own security or the security from faith in God. And if you are the type to see a narrowing road as decreasing choice, perhaps you could try to see it as Christ—and the decision to follow him—becoming more obvious.

Your relationship with Christ is a dance known only between you and God. I’m asking you to consider the times you were tempted to lead or make God move to your rhythm. Where have you been tempted to turn stones into bread? Demand proof? Take the shortcut? Whether it’s the front of an altar, a home, or a battle you have a decision to make during Lent. Are you going to put down the need for people to see what you’re doing for God?

The narrowing road isn’t made of viral videos highlighting the triumph of the human spirit. No. The narrowing road is made of the person who made a conscious decision to not drink just for today, and has made it all the way to this moment, and to which I say, “Congratulations”. It is the person who is going to

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step into our new Trinity Lenten tradition, of finding that one thing in your life you’ve never quite been able to put down...and to carry it around, plainly visible, for the entire 40 days; and to reflect as you turn it in your hands, how has this *thing* changed? How has it changed *me*? And on Easter Sunday, to lay that burden, that blockage between you and restored friendship, to lay it down before the altar and to walk away free, unfettered, and forgiven.

To be that type of person takes trust, dependence, and a slow obedience; not cynicism, grasping, and choices driven by fear. But the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Maybe this will help: I don’t know about you, but I take great comfort that after Jesus had his celestial sparring match with the devil, the angels came and ministered to him^{ix}. To anyone who has ever uttered the phrase, “All will be well” or “You will be comforted”, you have expressed a hint of the hue of the gospel’s glory. And that can sustain us as we feel the pangs of loneliness, hinting at what this narrowing road might really mean. But we are not alone; Christ walks with us, having already created the path leading us back home.

As the path narrows, so too fade the once ubiquitous shortcuts. You are inching closer to a decision point: Will you trust where Adam grasped? Will you obey even when fear and anger rise in you? And will you please remember that you are not walking alone, that there are others you can help and some who might help you. Some of them might be Christ, or an angel, or God in the form of an enemy. Christ calls them friend even as they are sometimes called devil.