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seeking: honest questions for deeper faith

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL



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Art, reflections, &
poetry for the
season of Lent





a blessing for the seekers

Blessed are you who turn your face up to the sky,
who open your arms to feel the wind,
who notice all the things that we should notice.
Blessed are you who are fluent in wonder
and familiar with awe.
Blessed are you who, even now, dream dreams,
who have not lost hope,
who swear the glass is still half-full.
Blessed are you who plant trees
and sing the harmony,
who tell the children how this world can be magic.
Blessed are you who
walk and seek
and turn over every stone,
pointing out all the corners and colors
that God lives in.
Blessed are you.
Amen.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

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a lenten quest for a love that makes us whole

REFLECTION PROMPTS FOR THE LENTEN JOURNEY
BY REV. DANIELLE SHROYER

RETURNING HOME

Reflect on your Lenten journey as a whole. Flip back and review the pages at the beginning of this devotional, then reflect on these questions:

- What do you see in God more clearly after this journey?
- Where do your explorations need to continue?
- What would it look like to follow God wholeheartedly in the season of Eastertide?

seeking: Who are you looking for?

who are you looking for?

TERRA BEATA ("THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD")

Text: Anna Strickland (2022)

Music: trad. English, arr. Franklin L. Sheppard



Who are you look-ing for? A bo-dy in the
 Who are you look-ing for? The man of Gal-i -
 Who are you look-ing for? An an-swer to pin

tomb? The grave is death but God has breath. The
 - lee? He is not here but al-ways near. Lift
 down? We can-not know where God will go. But

Spi rit's wings need room Who are you look-ing for? He
 up your head and see Who are you look-ing for? Your
 seek ing we are found Who are you look-ing for? God

is not here but raised The emp-tty tomb is
 rab - bi and your friend in Is God in flesh who
 will not be boxed What we have found is

now a womb New life! Let God be praised!
 con-quered death Whose reign is with-out end
 love un - bound Dyn - am - ic as the wind

Scan to hear
the tune!

This Lenten season, we will read many stories of Jesus encountering people who are seeking: a new beginning, a different life, a deeper faith. In these interactions, an unveiling often occurs—assumptions are disrupted, a new perspective is revealed, mystery grows.

And so, we've crafted a Lenten series founded on questions. Many of our weekly questions feel restorative ("Can these bones live?"). Some feel like a charge or challenge ("Who will you listen to?"). Some questions are hopeful and curious ("How do we begin again?"). Our questions won't necessarily lead to answers, but they can help us find clarity and a new perspective. Ultimately, we pray they lead to a new beginning, a restoration, a wider grace.

Like the characters in our Lenten scriptures, we are also seeking many things: clarity, connection, wonder, justice, balance. We are seeking our calling, the sacred, and how to live as a disciple. We hope this devotional will help you unpack some of your big questions in ways that are honest and faithful. We encourage you to journey through these weekly readings and reflections at your own pace, asking yourself often: what am I seeking? What is God seeking?

This Lent, may you engage in the spiritual practice of seeking—by asking questions, and by staying curious, open, and nimble. We hope you will soften your assumptions and expand your perspectives. We pray that these questions will create a safe space to explore—to be drawn more deeply into the fullness of life, into the heart of God.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Hannah Garrity

Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Rev. Anna Strickland

a lenten quest for a love that makes us whole

REFLECTION PROMPTS FOR THE LENTEN JOURNEY
BY REV. DANIELLE SHROYER

This Lent we are seeking: seeking clarity, seeking wisdom, seeking a love that makes us whole. Christians have a long tradition of embarking on a spiritual quest, which invites us to look with fresh eyes at our life and the world, and listen for the longing in our souls. All you need to begin is a willing heart. May you journey with bravery and discover how trust meets you along the way. And may these questions guide you closer to the heart of God and the sanctuary of your soul.

We encourage you to start your Lenten journey here and return to these pages frequently throughout the season to reflect on these questions.

PACK YOUR BAGS

As the season of Lent begins, journal, pray, or meditate on these questions:

- **What do you need for your journey?**
- **What needs to be left behind?**

EASTER SUNDAY seeking: Who are you looking for?

read John 20:1-18

from the artist | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

In the days immediately after a loved one's passing, we often muddle through life until the closure of the funeral, when it will all—or mostly—be over. What happens when it doesn't appear you'll have that closure anytime soon, or ever? Some of us have experienced delayed burials due to difficult circumstances. The closure the funeral provides helps us begin piecing life together in our loved one's absence. Without that ritual, it's incredibly difficult to move on.

This is the space in which Mary Magdalene finds herself. She arrives at the tomb to provide burial services for her dear teacher, only to find his body is gone. What grief that must have thrown her into, having her last act of love for him arrested like that! There is no reason to expect that the stranger speaking to her is her beloved teacher, and maybe that's why she doesn't recognize him immediately. It's in the intimacy of him calling her name that she realizes what's happening.

Here, I attempt to convey the grief, befuddlement, and ultimate realization that I imagine Mary experienced in this encounter. The light source is above her, as Jesus' simple address—"Mary"—invites her to shift from any potential navel-gazing and to pay attention to the heaven-crafted phenomenon before her. Moreover, Jesus' address to her comes from a deeply intimate place and is the only thing powerful enough to pierce through her grief. She is profoundly seen and known by her teacher. I want us to behold her the way that Jesus might have in that moment.



Rabbouni! | Rev. T. Denise Anderson
Oil on canvas

QUESTION MAP Throughout the Lenten season, we invite you to return to these questions often. Unpack them in conversations, include them in your prayers, and write about them in your journal.

What is your soul yearning for?

What do you need to know about God to trust God more fully?

What is holding you back from soulful, wholehearted exploration?

Is there another question your soul needs to ask during this Lenten quest?

DAILY BREAD

Choose one spiritual practice to accompany you on this journey. Choose something simple, like a daily gratitude practice, five minutes of centering prayer, or leaving burdens to God as you go to bed.

What spiritual practice will you commit to?

RETURNING HOME

On Easter Sunday, reflect on your Lenten journey as a whole (flip to the last page of this devotional to journal in response to these questions):

- **What do you see in God more clearly after this journey?**
- **Where do your explorations need to continue?**
- **What would it look like to follow God wholeheartedly in the season of Eastertide?**

A PRAYER FOR THE JOURNEY God of the Way, give us willing hearts for the Lenten quest that lies ahead. Remind us that you honor our questions and can be trusted with our longings. Help us remember that you are seeking us, and we can rest in being found, even as we venture into the unknown. Guide our steps and bring clarity and love more fully into our hearts. May our way be the Jesus way, whatever steps we take. Amen.

ABOUT THE SA CREATIVE TEAM

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Founder | Creative Director of SA

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EASTER SUNDAY seeking: Who are you looking for?

read John 20:1-18

commentary | Rev. Danielle Shroyer

Nine questions have guided us on our Lenten journey. And this Easter morning, they bring us to the culminating question: "Who are you looking for?" All this time, we have been seeking: seeking answers, seeking guidance, seeking Jesus. But the responses we get depend very much on what—or who—we are looking for.

In every question, a picture of Jesus has been forming in your mind. Who is he to you? What is he capable of? What does he want? The way you feel about that determines greatly how you hear his response.

As Mary weeps at the empty tomb, the picture she has formed in her mind is one of tragedy. Jesus has died, and now someone has gone so far as to steal his body. I imagine she thought enemies of Jesus did this, the same who wanted to squelch his voice and end his movement. This is her cry, even in the face of two mysterious figures robed in white. And then she turns around. She sees a man standing there. She does not see that it is Jesus. She sees only in her grief, and only through the lens of tragedy. (What else could she do?!) In the Aramaic translation, Jesus says to her, "Why do you weep? And who do you want?"

"Who do you want?" What an interesting question. Of all the versions of Jesus out there, which one do you believe? For which Jesus are you crying? Who do you want?

I believe the world heard the glad tidings of Easter because her answer revealed her wholehearted love of Jesus—beyond teacher, beyond healer, beyond savior. For Mary, Jesus truly became fully God and fully human. She loved all of him, because through him she had experienced a love that embraced all of her. This is the wholeness that heals the world and brings us into eternal life.

What would it look like for us to see Jesus as he is?

reflect

What would it mean for you to love Jesus with your whole heart, and live for him from that wholeheartedness?



HOLY WEEK / EASTER SUNDAY

seeking: Who are you looking for?

lost and found

Mary wept.

Standing in the garden,
soft dirt under her feet,
sun still tucked away,
sleeping under the horizon.

The other disciples left,
but Mary stayed.

Mary wept.

Shoulders shaking,
tears running down her face.

She said, *They have taken my Lord away,
and I don't know where they put him.*

But here's what Easter taught me:
if you think you've lost God,
if it feels like heaven has slipped through the cracks,
if you feel like the night will never end,
then know, there is no hide-and-seek with the divine
that doesn't end in you being found.

Stay still.

Keep breathing.

God is closer than you think.

Poem by

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

about our guest contributors

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GOOD FRIDAY seeking: Why have you forsaken me?

read Matthew 27:27-50

from the artist | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

My study for this piece began with revisiting different images of Christ's crucifixion. One art piece that was particularly intriguing to me was *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* by Salvador Dalí. It has such a harsh downward angle on the cross; it visually connected me to Christ's mockery in a new way. It pushed me to consider different perspectives from which artists and people of faith have been engaging with this horrifying event.

One visual perspective I couldn't find in my research was one looking directly down on Jesus' face. At first, I thought this would be the ultimate position of mockery, looking down Jesus' nose. But as I began to sketch Christ from this perspective, my thoughts and feelings about the piece took a hard turn. I was thinking about the text as I was holding my five-month-old little boy. He had a fever and was inconsolable. I felt desperate to offer him comfort and solace; it felt like my heart was breaking open. And then it occurred to me: this perspective I was drawing was not a position of mockery, it was metaphorically the perspective of God the Creator looking at her son who was screaming out in agony. This perspective shift reveals something profound to me about the heart of God, and I connect with it in a new way after becoming a mother.

One of my colleagues, Denise Anderson, reminded me that in Jesus' crying out, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani," he is quoting scripture. So instead of creating a mandala with mockery closing in on Jesus, I imaged the verses of Psalm 22. These images of grief and gratitude ripple out from Jesus' mouth and become a foundation, a grounding in his faith in this moment. In the visual, the moments of lament are faded while the images of praise shimmer a bit more brightly. The psalm gives him the fortitude to rest and offer up his last breath.



Why Have You Forsaken Me? | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting



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WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY

seeking: *Is this the fast that I choose?*

at the start

Is this the fast I choose?

Will I wake with the sun each morning?

Will I start with *thank you*?

Will I peel back the cage around my frame to let you in
or will I get too busy? Will my Bible collect dust on the shelf,
along with my journal, along with my sense of self,
or will I roll back the stone and wade in?

Every new season beckons something of us—
attention, beauty, the chance to create.

This season is no different.

So, like moths to the light, will we find our way toward God,
or will we hover, circling fake suns?

I am seeking something deeper.

I am kicking off my shoes.

I am starting this season on holy ground.

Poem by

Rev. Sarah Speed

GOOD FRIDAY seeking: *Why have you forsaken me?*

read Matthew 27:27-50

commentary | Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow

Have you ever experienced such pain in body, heart, or spirit that you felt that God had deserted you? While I sincerely hope not, many who will approach the cross on this day know all too well the kind of pain that could bring even Christ to plead to God, "Why have you forsaken me?"

I will never forget my moment. About 20 years ago, I had a bout of pancreatitis and as the doctors explained, my angry pancreas was digesting me from the inside out. When I first arrived at the emergency room, it was overcrowded and I found myself on a gurney in the hallway literally trying to climb the walls because I was in so much pain. They had not quite diagnosed my problem so there was no pain management plan. I distinctly remember asking God, "Why?" And from the depths of my soul, wanting an answer as motivation to not give up.

Eventually, they dealt with my acute pain, but for a month, I had to sit in the unknown and weather a pain that never seemed to subside. They tried everything, tested for everything, and still, they could not get rid of the pain. I remember how frustrating it was. I would weep uncontrollably as I anticipated another wave of pain about to engulf my body, and I would constantly ask God, "Why, God?" And, "When, God, will it end?"

They kept reminding me that I had to be patient and that it would be okay. They were right. Eventually, my pancreas stopped being angry, the pain subsided, and I went home.

Healing comes when it comes. Sometimes we are forced to sit in and with the pain longer than we want to. I am not saying that we should intentionally seek painful situations and then we must remain in painful situations at all costs, but on this Good Friday, let's not rush to Easter joy without first sitting with the pain, despair, and lament of the day. We know that healing, hope, and resurrection will come, but let's not set our feet in that direction at the expense of failing to know from what we are being healed.

reflect

On this day, what prayers of lament and grief do you bring to God?



HOLY WEEK / GOOD FRIDAY

seeking: Why have you forsaken me?

to ask why

To ask why
is to break open your heart,
to pour yourself out,
to stare into
the gnawing emptiness
of the tomb,
to peel away
any layer of security,
to walk on fire,
and stand in the rain.
It's talking about the bad dreams
after you've had them.
It's courageous and vulnerable,
painful and necessary.
To ask why
is to declare
that God is God.
To ask why is to say,
be my God
even when,
especially when,
the world falls apart.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY **seeking:** Is this the fast that I choose?

read Isaiah 58:1-12

commentary | Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow

With the beginning of Lent, it will be almost three years to the day when the world was thrust into a global pandemic.¹ Words don't have the capacity to describe what we have all been through: death, loss, anger, isolation, sorrow, and confusion—but also discovery, introspection, adaptation, and hope.

While it is tempting to try and find "silver linings" that have emerged from the pandemic, I caution us not to do so. There has been far too much pain, suffering, and death to try and negate the suffering with comparatively minimal benefits to the world. Instead, I choose to describe this time as revelatory. The pandemic has revealed much about ourselves, our communities, and the world. We have discovered that adaptation to technology is possible, creativity in curating worship is abundant, and many things that we thought were too important to change about the Church, were, in fact, not. Again, no silver linings, but certainly welcomed revelations about who we can be and become.

This passage from Isaiah does not go easy on us. It poses difficult questions that force each of us to dig deep and ask questions about ourselves and the communities of which we are a part. While it is easy to blame "them" for the problems of the world, we are being asked to explore how we may have played ambivalent witnesses or unintentional accomplices in creating the deep pain that has been brought to the surface of our world.

The revelatory nature of the past few years forces us to face questions, not only about whether hate or love will have the last word, but about how we will be part of a different story for the future. This is where we are inviting one another to sit this Lenten season, in and with the questions, no matter where the answers may lead.

reflect

As you begin the Lenten season, what are you seeking? What is God seeking? What actions or practices will you commit to?

¹ This devotional was published for the season of Lent in 2023.



Don't Look Up | Rev. T. Denise Anderson
Oil on canvas

MAUNDY THURSDAY seeking: Will you wash my feet?

read John 13:1-17, 31b-35

from the artist | Hannah Garrity

"Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."¹¹

We know that the disciples and Jesus were constantly on the move, walking from one town to the next. The dust on their feet was surely ever-present. What is the meaning of the foot washing ritual? I find that it is a show of sacrificial love, a show of intimate care. In the art for this week, I visually explore the contrast between the structures of human power and the soft, sacrificial love of God.

Vertical, diagonal, and horizontal lines are found in architecture, in power grids, in city planning. Cold, glossy marble, gold leaf, cavernous ceilings with great height: these are the materials, the lines, of human power. In this image, vertical and diagonal lines place Jesus in a grand throne room. Yet the power he offers on this Maundy Thursday is not a power understood by the cold, sharp, human power exhibited in the architecture.

By leaning down and washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus introduces a curve in the layout. Jesus' figure kneels over a bowl of water at the top of the stairs. This act of sacrificial love ripples like water through the lives of Jesus' disciples, from that year to this one. It is organic; it is mysterious. Ripples and edges intersect, expanding outward from the figure. The collision of human and heavenly power exhibits a daily phenomenon. Which power will you choose? Whose feet will you wash?

¹¹ Scholtes, Peter. "They'll Know We Are Christians." © 1966 F.E.L. Publications, assigned to the Lorenz Publishing Company, 1991.



By Our Love | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace over oil paint on golf leaf

WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY seeking: *Is this the fast that I choose?*

read Isaiah 58:1-12

from the artist | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

I love portraiture because I believe there is something deeply profound about our faces and what they can communicate. Few things are more beautiful to me than the shapes and shadows created in our faces by directional light. The pieces I have offered for this Lenten series attempt to show the drama that light and darkness create together on the human visage. Because I'm a person of color, I am careful to acknowledge how scripture's preference for light over darkness has historically been used against darker-skinned peoples. Therefore, I do not subscribe to a light/dark dichotomy that suggests one is preferable to the other. I believe light and dark work together to frame a specific part of the picture that needs our attention the most. In each of my pieces, light is coming from a specific direction and cooperates (not competes) with darkness to spotlight something.

The Isaiah text prophesies to a community preoccupied with religious observance that draws the gaze "upward" to God, but neglects the people and matters that are most important to God. God is not calling for fasts and religious rituals that only focus heavenward. As the community has focused on things above, they persist in injustice below. The people have exalted themselves above their kindred and wondered why God has not responded to them. Meanwhile, God is shining light on what they've neglected below—that is to say, their own community.

The person depicted here is fixing their gaze upon a light source that is just below and to the side of them. This is an invitation to stop elevating one's worship and oneself above one's siblings and peers, for it is there that God may be found.



THE FIRST WEEK IN LENT

seeking: Who will you listen to?

who will you listen to?

Twitter or the BBC / the ads on late-night television / the wind as she blows / the echo of children playing / the quiet of snow / the ice bucket challenge / the phone when it rings / your pastor / your mother / your doctor / your gut / the tension in your shoulders / the restaurant singing happy birthday / audio books / TED talks / the rhythm of the music / the coffee drip in the morning / your therapist / the wisdom of the enneagram / the way your heart comes alive when you're being creative / the man on the corner asking for change / the kid on the subway selling chocolate / the labels on the makeup bottle that promise timeless beauty / the magazines that tell you you need timeless beauty / astrology / the Dow Jones / the hiss of the radiator / the pitter patter of little feet / financial advisors / the top 40 pop / the top 40 country / the *New York Times* / the rumor mill / the Book of Psalms / your sense of self / Jesus, when he says, "I am with you, always."

Poem by

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

MAUNDY THURSDAY **seeking:** Will you wash my feet?

read John 13:1-17, 31b-35

commentary | Rev. Danielle Shroyer

Sometimes it is so hard to let Jesus love us. It's the love we need most in the world, and yet, sometimes within us resides a roadblock, a kind of joy barrier. And only love can wash that away.

On Maundy Thursday, we remember when Jesus washes the disciples' feet. He takes the time to do this in a week that will include his own arrest, betrayal, and death. It is *this* important to him to spend time with his students and closest friends in this way.

Priest and theologian Rev. Sam Wells says that "with" is the most important word in the Gospels.¹⁰ It is this "with" that, above all, marks the unique character of Divine Love. Jesus wants to be with us: not above us, not over us, not even in charge of us. *With us*. And on this night, he shows what it means to "love his disciples to the end" (John 13:13) by being with them as he washes their feet.

And yet, this same act of service and vulnerable love feels completely unacceptable to Peter. How can an offer of such love be so unwillingly received? It can be so hard to let Jesus love us. Is it because it will ask so much of us to follow in his example? Is it because this love will ask us to wash someone else's feet, even when our love for them is lacking?

On this night where water is poured out like attending love, and betrayal awaits in the shadows, Jesus tells his friends to love one another. He tells them this knowing he will love them to the end, and beyond. Jesus asks those of us who follow him to serve the world *in* love and *with* love.

What does it look like for Jesus to wash your feet this Lenten season? Will you let him? And... will you seek to be the kind of person who washes the feet of others, loving one another as Jesus asks?

reflect

What does it look like for Jesus to wash your feet this Lenten season? Will you let him?

¹⁰ Wells, Samuel. *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017).



of all the ways

You could show up with sugar cubes and
two plump oranges,
delivering a pep talk as you hang your coat.

You could provide a meal, filling the house with the sweet
smells of rosemary and sage,
lighting the candles, playing music through the rooms.

You could leave rambling voice memos that start with,
Hey, it's me,
I was just thinking of you, and carry on to share the details
of your day.

You could get eye-level with the little ones, ask them
questions like,
What should we put in your fort? And, what's your
favorite farm animal?

You could remember people's first and middle names,
signs of an old-school love.

You could add your pronouns to your nametag and
Zoom screen.

You could cry with her when her dog gets sick.

You could remember how he likes his cookies—
soft or crispy.

You could deliver Thai food and order extra sticky rice,
because sometimes we just need extra sticky rice.

You could drop off flowers.

You could tell the waitress, "It's their birthday!"

There are a million ways to show someone your love.
Footwashing was his.

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Scan to hear
the tune!

who will you listen to?

LEONI ("The God of Abraham Praise")

Text: Anna Strickland (2022)

Music: Meyer Lyon (1770)

The
So - voi - ces from the past
A ci - e - ty de - mands That
rush - ing flood of hate We In

ech - o through our minds more Like
al - ways strive for ten see Ac -
news we of - con -

noi - sy ghosts haunt and har - ass With
- cum - u - lat - ing wealth and land And
- ceals God's king - dom in a great Ca -

words un - kind Who will we lis - ten to? Lies
leave the poor Who will we lis - ten to? The
- co - pho - ny Who will we lis - ten to? The

that bind and a - base? Or God who coun - ters
temp ter's jea - lou - sy? Or God's pro - vis - ion
cha - os all a - round? Or God's dream of a

words un - true With words of grace?
and pur - suit Of e - qui - ty?
world made new Where love a - bounds?

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** Who will you listen to?

read Matthew 4:1-II | Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
commentary | Rev. Danielle Shroyer

In the ancient world, snakes were a symbol of transformation. Their venom held the possibility of both poison and medicine. Our human story begins in the crux of this same paradox of possibility, as the first humans embark into the fertile field God had prepared for them.

"God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened," the serpent says. And while the serpent didn't lie—indeed, their eyes did open—as it often goes with crafty tricksters, that isn't the whole story. Because while the humans wouldn't physically die as they imagined, God also told the truth. A death would happen.

It was the death of their innocence.

Before we can embark on a life of wisdom—one that requires us to choose, over and over again, between using our words and actions as poison or medicine—we must allow our naive innocence to die. This call to grow up and leave our Divine Parent's house comes for all of us. It is painful, and yet it is necessary.

Many years later, this same choice comes to Jesus as he wanders the wilderness. Will he use his gifts as a parlor trick or a sacred balm? Will he use his glory for fame or for peace? Will he use his power for domination or for justice? Jesus shows us the way by choosing medicine, every time.

And as he does so, he teaches us what we all need to know as we fumble toward wisdom east of Eden. When he refuses to turn bread into stone, it's because he knows his gifts and abilities are in service to something far greater than hunger. When he refuses to test God, it's because he already trusts God. And when he refuses the kind of loyalty that leads to worldly authority, it's because he knows power is meant for connection and not domination.

PALM / PASSION SUNDAY **seeking:** Where are you headed?

read Matthew 21:1-II
from the artist | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

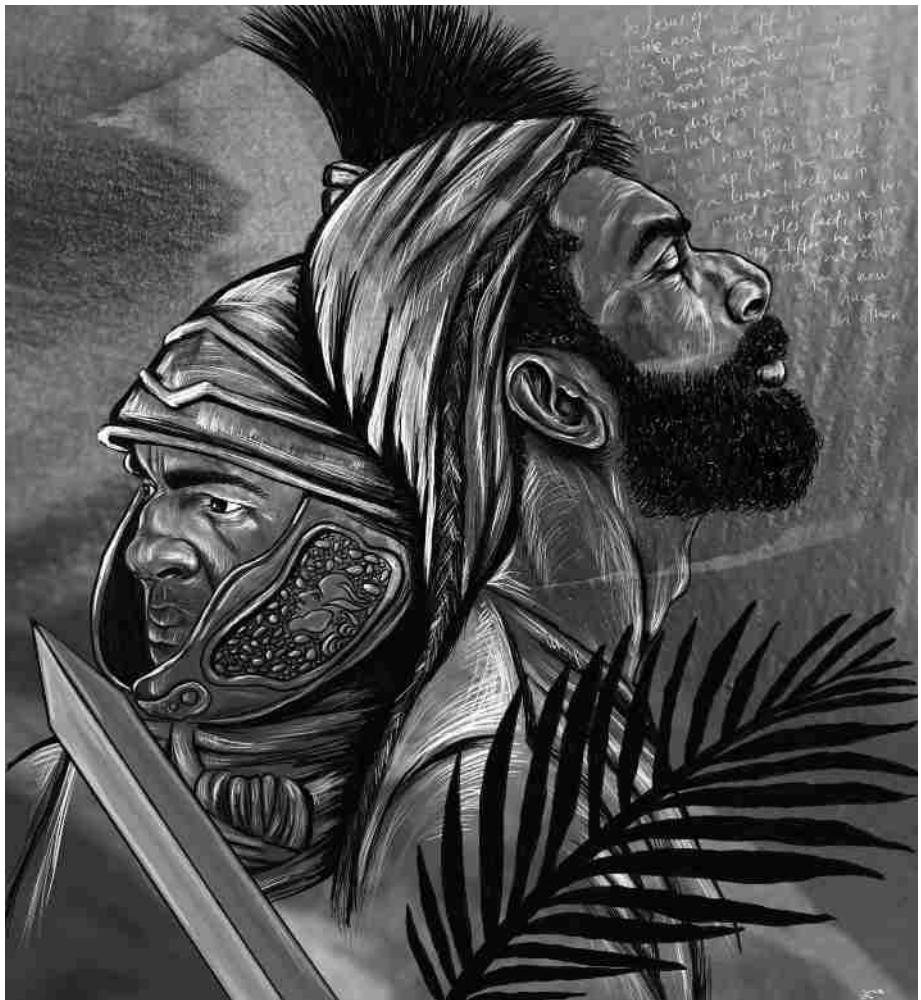
In their book, *The Last Week*, theologians Marcus Borg and John Crossman assert that there were actually two parades occurring simultaneously in Jerusalem on this day. From the east, Jesus entered on a donkey. From the west, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entered with an imperial guard. They write: "Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion."⁹

This image is a meditation on these opposing processions and the embodiment of power. Pilate processes with a pompous display of armor, accompanied by soldiers. For him, power is displayed by superiority, elitism, and weaponry. Later in the week, he will use his power to satisfy the crowds willing Jesus to be crucified, despite not finding any offense to justify it (read John 18 & 19). He uses his power for violence, to appease the status quo.

Jesus enters the city on a donkey with her young colt in tow. He wears no armor, only soft linens. In this image, I imagine if the composition were expanded, Jesus would be kneeling, humbling himself before his disciples as he washes their feet. In Jesus' processional, members of the crowd lay down their coats as a display of humility and honor. This foreshadows the way Jesus will take off his outer robe and tie a towel around his waist to wash his friends' feet. Jesus embodies power through a posture of vulnerability, through caring for those who desperately need love.

Which parade you would join in Jerusalem has a lot to say about your definition of power. If you are quick to place yourself in Jesus' parade, I encourage you to pause and consider these questions honestly: When have you aligned yourself with systems or people who have used their power for violence or to uphold the status quo? When have you embodied power through vulnerability and love for your neighbor?

⁹ Borg, Marcus J. and John Dominic Crossman. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). 2.

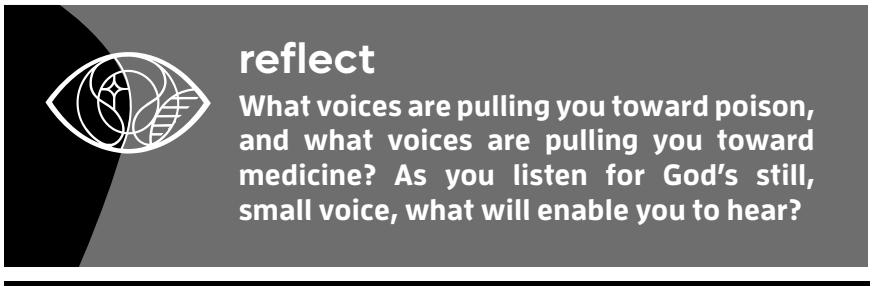


Power Play | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Silk painting with digital drawing and collage

Jesus knows all of this because he has been listening. Day after day, he dwells with his Divine Parent. He embodies the teachings he has received in the Temple, on his mother's lap, in his father's shop. Jesus shows us what it looks like to walk in wisdom, to become adept at parsing out the many voices that call for our allegiance.

If we are to be like Jesus, we also must begin by first listening to the voice of God at our center. This voice tells us, above all and after it all, we are God's Beloved. When we know this, we filter out so much of the silt and grit that traps us. We release ourselves into the arms of love. We make space for the work of transformation to be born in us.

As you begin this Lenten journey, consider what voices might be pulling you toward more poison than medicine. Carve out time for silence, that the still, small voice of God may come into fuller focus. Listen for God, who is always there, right at the center of your heart, inviting you into a life of belovedness, even as you travel east of Eden.



PALM / PASSION SUNDAY seeking: Where are you headed?

read Matthew 21:1-11

commentary | Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow

Today, let's stay at the parade, for just a moment. Because we know what comes after Palm Sunday, it is easy to quickly judge and rebuke the crowd that eventually turns on Jesus. Oh, those silly people, cheering on a triumphal entry as if he were a victor returning from war and not a human who was about to disrupt the very fabric and stability of the world, which included him dying.

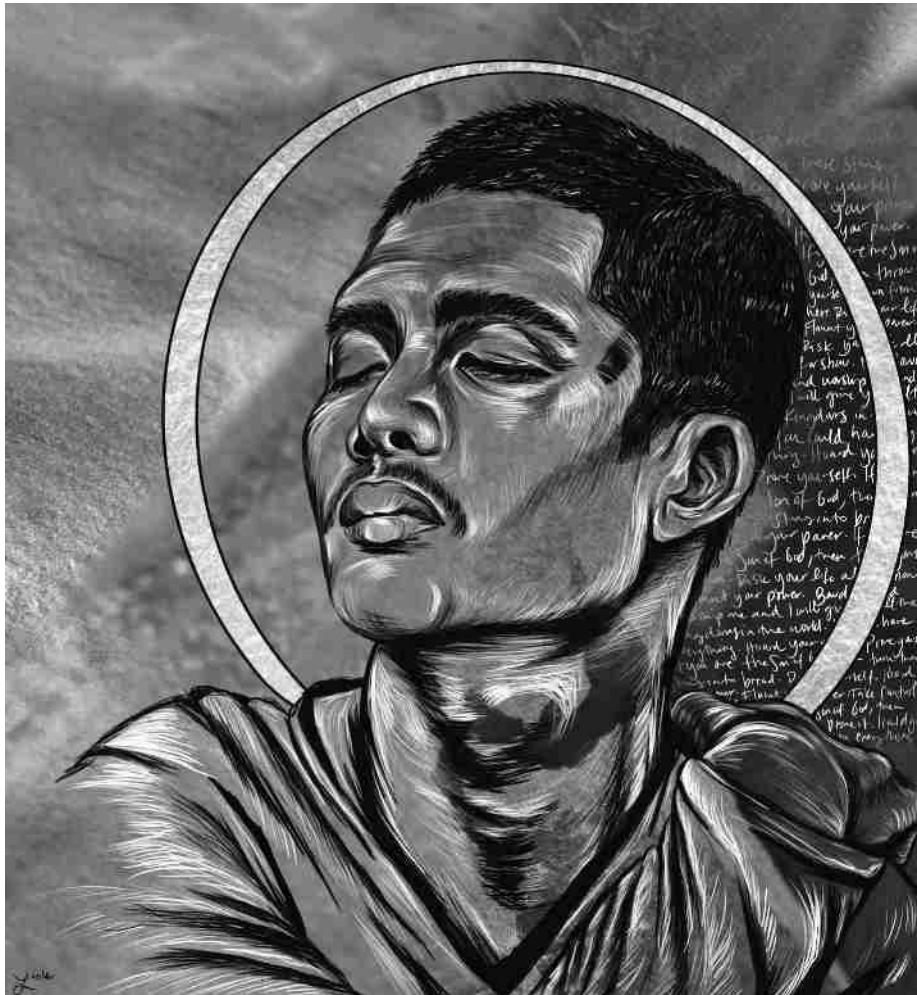
The thing is, in many ways these two things were happening at the same time; the question is which Jesus will we follow, then and now. I am certain that the Jesus we choose to follow has everything to do with our current state of being. If you have been struggling, feel set aside or ignored, or are experiencing powerlessness or marginalization, any glimpse of gaining back some power or security would not only be welcomed but cheered. I can only imagine that the deeper the struggle, the more vibrant the joy would be at the promise of some relief.

So again, let's be at the parade, but let's also be very clear about which Jesus we are cheering on: the militaristic victor or the humble subversive—for either could be born from pent-up frustration and struggle. I hope that many are resisting the wave of Christian nationalism that has been the dominant Christian narrative in our political discourse. Too many are choosing the narrative of Jesus as a wartime victor and choosing a Gospel militarized against anyone who would stray from a litmus test of beliefs—beliefs that Jesus never actually addressed and beliefs certainly not included in the commandments, that Jesus did speak to us, to love God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now that second Jesus, that one who is turning over tables, challenging power, and sitting with sinners in order to heal and love, that's the one worthy of a parade.

reflect

Which Jesus will you follow: the militaristic victor or the humble subversive? How is your faith shaped by the version of Jesus you follow?



Tune In | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Silk painting with digital drawing and collage



HOLY WEEK / PALM / PASSION SUNDAY

seeking: Where are you headed?

where are you headed?

We are trains on a track,
moving through life at warp speed.

*Please keep all arms and legs
inside the moving vehicle
at all times.*

The years pass like a flipbook,
faster than we can absorb,
but the train does not stop.

We press our faces to the windows
to try and get a good view
and we ask each each other,
Where are you headed?
And there on the train
we decide—

we want to head toward
the promised day.

We want to head toward crowded tables
and long, healthy lives.

We want to move in the direction of joyful children,
and hopeful communities.

We want to move closer to God
with every mile of track,
and that does not happen by accident.

So it's time to ask,
Where are you headed,
and who's driving that train?

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** Who will you listen to?

read Matthew 4:1-II

from the artist | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

In this image, the words of the Tempter hover in the background. The Tempter's voice lingers like a ringing in Jesus' ears, saying: "Take charge. Hoard your power. Dominate. Control."

Somehow, Jesus has deciphered that these words are simply background noise. He closes his eyes and goes inward, wrapping himself in a posture of self-embrace. From this introspective perspective, Jesus essentially says, "Get behind me, Satan."

The backdrop of this piece resembles the dust of the desert. Like sand washing along a beach, the sediment shifts into water in the top left, hinting at what bolsters Jesus in his ministry: his belonging to God. His belovedness washes over him, giving him the courage to defy the deception of the Tempter and tune into his inner wisdom. In this way, he is given a new song to carry with him, a lullaby from God that goes, "You, my child, in you, I am well-pleased." This is a melody for singing, a song for dancing.

What are the voices that linger with you like a ringing in your ears? What are the messages that try to deceive or devour you? Let those voices buzz and fade into the background. Close your eyes, tune in, and embrace yourself. From your belovedness, what song will you sing?

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** Can these bones live?

read Ezekiel 37:1-14

from the artist | Carmelle Beaugelin

It has been over a decade since my family in Haiti experienced the most traumatic earthquake in the nation's history. If you were to Google, "Haiti" and "earthquake," images of collapsed concrete and rubble would emerge. The most disturbing images are those of survivors, covered in white and gray ash and rubble, reaching out for rescuers to salvage them from collapsed buildings. Endless images are found on the internet of arms stretched out, identity-less faces of horror covered in soot, and faces frozen into expressions of despair by the spectating photographer's lens.

When I think of Ezekiel and the story of the dry bones, I think of those images. I've often heard sermons where pastors position God's people as the prophet to call the world into life, but what about God's people who are, as the bones, facing the despair of death? Their suffering is theologized away by those who consider themselves the righteous "Ezekiels" of the world, whose privilege weighs heavy on the bones of the suffering, like the concrete rubble in Haiti.

Rubble speaks to the realities of being made alive and yet not being allowed to live—a nameless multitude of God's people resurrected yet still bearing the scent of burial spices on their bodies.

Who are we in this story? Are we the bones seeking life? Do we perceive ourselves as spectators of suffering? Or will we choose to be participants in healing as active agents of God's resurrecting power out of the rubble?



Who Will You Listen To? | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting



Rubble | Carmelle Beaugelin
Conté crayon, charcoal, acrylic, paprika paste, cinnamon paste on paper

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT seeking: Who will you listen to?

read Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

from the artist | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

As I was creating this piece, I was recovering from an unexpected postpartum surgery. I read the text, and then weeks of internal wrestling ensued. I felt angry, defiant, and it was all personal. Like a rebellious teenager, I poked holes in the text with hopes it would crumble; but why?

Reading Danielle Shroyer's book, *Original Blessing*,² truly helped me see why this text felt so burdensome, and I'm incredibly grateful for her work. She reminded me that this text has been forced to do things it was not written to do, and to say things it does not actually say.

In my youth, this narrative was taught as the origin story explaining human nature, sin, suffering, and death. It was the text I thought of when I had menstrual cramps. I would mutter, "Thanks, Eve," under my breath, blaming her, but I realize I was also blaming myself for my own pain. It was the text that justified distrust in myself. While engaging with this text, the pain I was feeling in my body from childbirth complications felt like punishment. I raged against this text because I felt it raging against me.

Beware of the ways harmful theology bubbles up in your life. Ask yourself, "Who will I listen to?" In this case, I was giving power to a hermeneutic that isn't in line with who God has revealed God's self to be, or with the image of God in me.

In this piece, the cool tones represent the heaviness and confusion I felt with this familiar story, and the high contrast mimics the way this text has made me feel separated and isolated from God. The woman's expression holds the weight and the pain caused by the ways this text has been used to subjugate women and to prop up destructive doctrines and a distorted gospel. In hindsight, I realize I was visualizing my emotional journey with the text.

² Shroyer, Danielle. *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in Its Rightful Place*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).



THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

seeking: *How do we begin again?*

how do we begin again?

Do we slide into something new?

Do we make a formal announcement? *Dearest reader, I have decided to begin again.* Do we turn gradually, a gentle yield in a new direction; or like a wave, do we crash onto the shore of a new day?

Do we grieve the change? Are there breadcrumbs on the path?

Will Nicodemus be there?

Will it ever be easy?

I'm not sure exactly how we begin again, but I know that moths wrap themselves in silk, and after quite some time, after many long nights, after days spent alone, they break out of their shell.

They pull themselves out under open sky, and they spend the rest of their days chasing the light.

Maybe it's always that way with beginnings.

Maybe it feels like the protective layer falling away.

Maybe we have to go it alone at first.

Maybe it feels like pulling and dragging yourself into something new.

Maybe there's always open sky at the other end.

Poem by

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT seeking: *Can these bones live?*

read John 11:1-45

from the artist | Hannah Garrity

As I met with this text, I was drawn to Jesus' call for Lazarus to be unbound. To represent the fabrics used in preparation for burial, I wrapped a canvas in linen. You're not really supposed to do that. The canvas was already stretched and gessoed. It was ready to resist the oil paint medium I was applying. However, the texture of the binding cloth matters for this tactile text. I began to scrape the paint onto the woven strands. The linen fabric absorbed the paint as I scraped it on with a palette knife. In the final image, the linen shows through the paint and the paper lace design, representing the bindings.

Jesus' call for unbinding also includes the community. The foreshortened hands of the community, tasked with unbinding his body, reach in toward Lazarus. They reach through the concentric binding lines so that he can go free. *Can these bones live?*

In the strength of community, they can. The community made up of Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, and others all joined one another at the tomb to grieve for Lazarus that day. They came to support Mary and Martha. Jesus arrives as the community mourns together. Jesus cries in his grief. Their collective tears create the backdrop for this paper lace design. This diverse and neighborly community is who Jesus calls on to do the unbinding. Jesus makes sure that the community knows about this miracle so that they can share the news. *Can these bones live?* Lazarus lives, and Jesus' miracle lives on in the telling.



Unbind Him | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace over oil paint on linen

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT
seeking: How do we begin again?



Scan to hear
the tune!

begin again

DIX ("For the Beauty of the Earth")

Text: Anna Strickland (2022)

Music: Conrad Kocher (1838)

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** How do we begin again?

read John 3:1-17 | Genesis 12:1-4a

commentary | Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow

In December of 2021, our family, four generations strong, remotely surrounded my grandmother through our screens and said our goodbyes. There she lay, prone on a hospital bed, her family bathing her with words of love, gratitude, and permission to let go. Soon after our call, she was removed from life support and succumbed to complications from COVID. In the days and weeks to follow, my heart ached and broke over and over again, not only for our family, but for so many others whose future had one more empty chair.

Not a year later, I too found myself lying prone in a hospital bed suffering from complications from COVID. While I was able to avoid being placed on a ventilator, for days I was unable to walk on my own or complete sentences of more than a few words. Fully vaxed, a breakthrough case of COVID had my family again terrified that heartbreak and sorrow would soon make their mark and that the empty chair would be mine.

My grandmother, friends, colleagues, and thousands of others did not make it back home, but I did. To this day, I give thanks for my life and hold dear the questions that it has forced upon me as I venture into a new life, a new beginning, and, in many ways, an experience of being born again.

After my release, it became clear that long-COVID would have a grip on me for the long haul. With great trepidation, I made the decision to leave the church I was serving. During that discernment period, the battle in my mind raged. On one side, the voices of toxic productivity and misplaced martyrdom were causing me to doubt what I was feeling, and screaming at me to push through it. On the other side, persistent whispers reminded me that I need not progress to a physical or mental crisis before tending to my health, prodding me to choose to heal before my health made the choice for me. Contrary to so many cultural cues, I thought, "I choose me today, so we may all have a better tomorrow."

Many years later, Mary and Martha must answer this question in the face of two contradictory realities: their belief in Jesus, and a brother who has been dead for three days. They understand enough to know that Jesus brings life. But now this question asks more of them: "Do you have faith that life is possible, *always*?"

Jesus resurrects Lazarus for many reasons. But I want to believe that a good part of his purpose was to answer that question for all of us who will exist on this side of Easter. Can we trust that life is always possible in God? Can we find hope, and even faith, when we are sitting in a valley of dry bones and literal death?

God doesn't ask us to believe the situation will get better. God asks us to believe that life itself will not, in the end, cower under the pressure of human destruction. Abundant life persists. This is what makes it eternal.

Even when we have that trust, God asks for more. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. Jesus told those gathered to unbind Lazarus and let him go. This ridiculous, radical hope is ours not only to hold, but to proclaim.

Where is fear or cynicism holding you back from seeing life right now? Can you find glimmers of God's abundance even in this valley of the shadow of death?



reflect

Where is fear or cynicism holding you back from seeing life? Do you have faith that life is possible, *always*?

read John 3:1-45 | Ezekiel 37:1-14

commentary | Rev. Danielle Shroyer

To be quite honest, very few things feel more ridiculous than hope these days. We're facing a world of climate emergency, war, a growing immigration crisis, a terrifying surge in hate groups, rising global fascism, technological overload, and, in case we forget, an ongoing pandemic. If fear were an energy source, we could all power our homes and cars for a year. What kind of particular insanity is a Christian, who stands before all of this and says: "God is love. Peace is the way. Justice will arrive."

If God personally came to my door and asked me if this world was going to make it, most days I'd probably say no. I'm not even sure our country is going to make it. How will we not fracture under all of this pressure, all of this collective anxiety wreaking havoc on every institution and system we have?

The good news for us is that God doesn't seem as interested in that question. The question God has for Ezekiel is something else entirely: "Can these bones live?" God doesn't ask if it's likely, or if the forecast looks promising. God doesn't ask for pie charts and percentages. And, perhaps best of all, God doesn't say, "Do you know how you're going to get out of this?" Because God knows, Ezekiel feels just as overwhelmed by that question as we would.

God asks: "Can these bones live?"

This is a question not of probability, but possibility.

What God wants to know is: "Can you see past the rubbish, the damage, the crisis, the violence, the signs of decay... and can you imagine that life still lingers there? Do you dare to believe—and even trust—that the power of life does not ever go underground in such a way that God cannot revive it in glory?"

The beauty of holding the question about being born again—raised by Nicodemus side-by-side with the promise of a thriving future made to Abraham—speaks to my soul and what it means to start again. I made the choice to start over or to be born again, not out of the immediate urgency of a crisis, but out of a yearning for what could be.

I grieve the loss of the ministry that would never be for that particular calling, but I know that it was the right act for me and for the community if either of us is to thrive in the future.

As you think through these two narratives: being born again and being promised an expansive future, ask yourself, "Do I believe in the possibility of new beginnings?" And, when the opportunities are revealed before you, "Will I be willing to step into the promise of what may be?"



reflect

Do you believe in the possibility of new beginnings? Will you be willing to step into the promise of what may be?



Renacimiento | Carmelle Beaugelin
Conté crayon, charcoal, acrylic, gold gild on paper

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT
seeking: Can these bones live?



Scan to hear
the tune!

can these bones live?

LAUDA ANIMA ("PRAISE MY SOUL, THE KING OF HEAVEN")

Text: Anna Strickland (2022)

Music: John Goss (1869)

When the past is dead and buried
When our hearts are bowed in sorrow
When our spirits feel so broken
Life - less in the barren ground
And the grief is new - ly wrought
Wrapped in lin - ens and en - tombed
What good can e - merge from ash - es?
Cry - ing "If you'd on - ly been here"
With - out hope and with - out feel - ing
Where can an - y life be found?
Weep - ing for what we have lost
As the storm clouds round loom
Breathe in deep the rush - ing Spi - rit
Re - sur - rect our hearts and spi - rit
Hear the words of life from Je - sus
Life is grow - ing all a - round
Liv - ing God whom we ex - alt
"Come out, be un - bound" and bloom



THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

seeking: Can these bones live?

the answer is yes

It's the question we ask at the end of our rope,
when the storm is raging,
when the monsters under the bed have
introduced themselves.

When everything around us seems to be on fire.

It's the question we ask when hope slips through like
sand in a bottle,
when the mockingbirds stop singing,
when the news reporter leads with another mass shooting.

It's the question we ask when the depression moves in,
making herself at home, making a mess of it all.

It's the question we ask
when we're not sure if Easter will come.

Will it be Lent forever?

Will the sun ever rise?

Will this hope lead to something?

Can these bones ever live?

Poem by

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** How do we begin again?

read John 3:1-17

from the artist | Carmelle Beaugelin

I was raised in a Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church in Miami called "Renacimiento." A simple translation of *renacimiento* to English means "rebirth" or "renaissance." For my small Pentecostal church, *renacimiento* meant far more than the symbolism of being "born-again" Christians. It was a perpetual reminder that each time the saints gather to encounter Jesus, the Spirit calls us to continuous transformation, calling dead things into new life and Holy Spirit-filled revival.

It is no wonder that Nicodemus seeks Jesus in the cover and darkness of night. It is in the quiet of night that our deepest fears startle us awake, that our anxieties of the day keep us from sound rest, and that the fear of the death of our dreams and bodies looms. As rapper Nas wrote in his debut album, *Illmatic*, "sleep is the cousin of death."³

Yet Jesus challenges Nicodemus' seeking in the night with a call to be born again, to *renacimiento*. Not just improvement, but transformation. Not simply resuscitation of what is and was, but a complete resurrection of what could and will be.

In this image, a metaphorically disrobed, aging, and vulnerable Nicodemus, surrounded by the milky gray swirls of water and spirit, wonders: *How can this be? Haven't I reached past my benchmarks? How is it that you are calling me to begin again?*

We may see ourselves in Nicodemus today, holding the same questions in the sleeplessness of our darkest nights. Yet, what if we chose to hold fast to the faith that responds to our seeking? Jesus promises us that the winds and waters of the Spirit will lead us toward our own new beginning. Each of us will experience *renacimiento* if we dare to seek it.

³ Nas. "N.Y. State of Mind." Track 2 on *Illmatic*. Columbia Records, 1994.



To Be a Blessing | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace and pencil over oil paint on paper

THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT seeking: Who sinned?

read John 9:8-41

from the artist | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

In seven verses, the gospel writer tells us that a man born blind is given sight. But after that, the narrator devotes thirty-three verses to the details of disagreement that swell after the healing takes place. I used to find this second part of the story tedious and exhausting. In a world with constant conflict, I'm tired of listening to endless bickering.

However, this second half of the story makes me realize that this encounter is hardly about physical healing or literal blindness. It's about how harmful theology can prevent us from seeing people—truly seeing them. It's about how our narrow imagination can harden into accusation and blame. It's about how we can be threatened by new ideas or shifts in someone's identity. It's about how our doctrine can lead to exile. Ultimately, it's a story about our resistance to change. Can this be a cautionary tale for us?

In this image, hands expressing denial and exclusion press in on the man. In the background, I wrote a barrage of questions I imagine emerging from the crowd: *Why did God heal you? What did you do to cause this? Who sinned?* Alongside those questions, I wove in contemporary statements I've heard spoken in situations when we think a tidy rationale will comfort us: *Everything happens for a reason. God only gives you as much as you can handle. Pray harder.*

I wonder what this story would look like had better questions been asked. What if his neighbors had instead asked the blind man, "How do you feel?" What if the man had asked the crowd, "What are you afraid of?" What if the Pharisees had asked one another, "What if it's time to change?"

Surrounded by remnants of narrow vision, the man has new insight. He looks beyond the words, beyond the crowd, beyond the accusations driving him out of town. Can we seek understanding without denigrating or objectifying humans in the process?

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** How do we begin again?

read Genesis 12:1-4a

from the artist | Hannah Garrity

"I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." —Genesis 12:2 (NRSV)

As I began to study this text, the motion we are in as a human species came to mind. God calls Abram. She tasks him with relocating; she's not really explicit as to why. Contemporary theologian Norman Wirzba speaks of our current ability to rely on global positioning systems, or GPS, to travel without needing to know where we are.⁴ What do people carry when they are forced to begin again? Medicine and technology, that's what people are carrying across borders right now as they sustain and navigate life through the journey ahead.

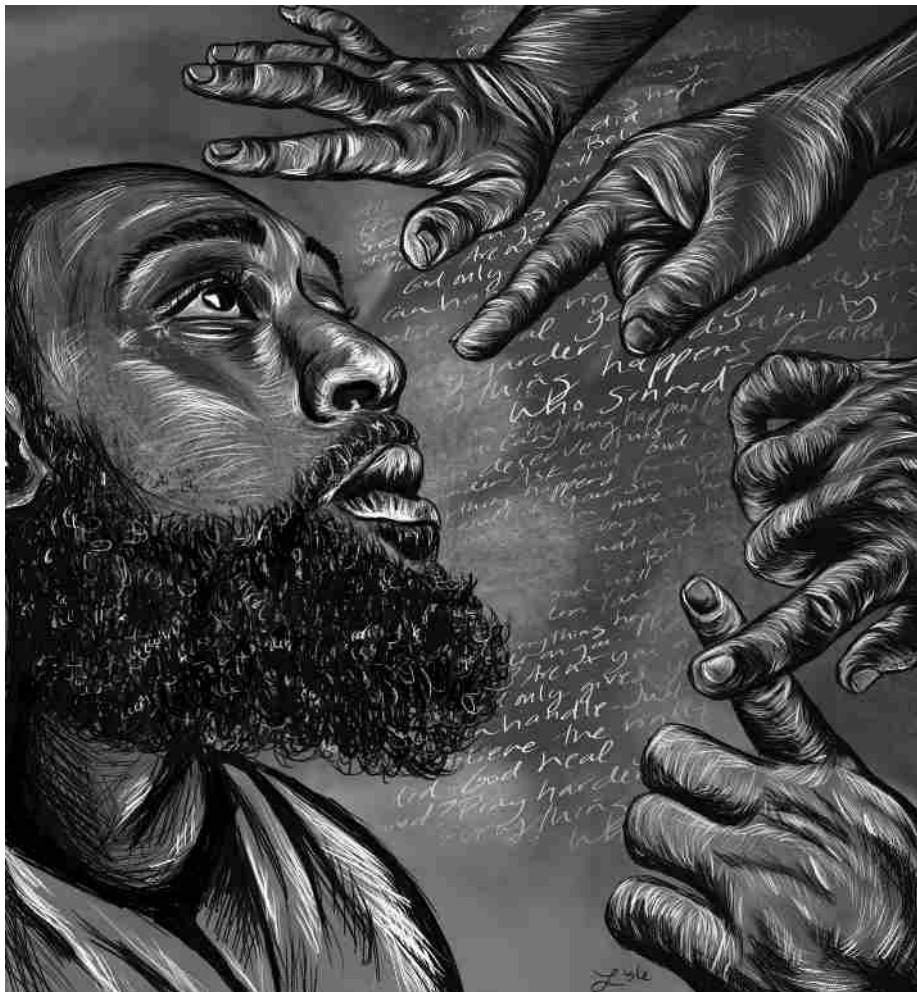
How did Abram begin again? He was wealthy. He was called, not forced. He traveled with his entourage. In this image, the globe subtly depicts the route that Abram and his wives, his children, his servants, and his animals took. The lines of countries are suggested as they ripple outward. Tools for navigation used to read the stars and the shadows are echoed below the globe. Stars in the corners represent the twelve tribes of Israel.

How do we begin again? Through the paper lace, the book of Genesis overlays a canvas. The text is hard to read, clouded by oil paint. How do we begin again? Listen through the haze, through the clouded reality, for God's call. God is calling as we begin again.

"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
—Genesis 12:3 (NRSV)

Dear God, it doesn't feel like much of a blessing these days. We carry on in this journey, beginning yet again. We are called, like Abram—to navigate, to persevere, to be a blessing.

⁴ Wirzba, Norman. *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). 50.



Insight | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Silk painting with digital drawing and collage



THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

seeking: Will you give me a drink?

anything and everything

I'd give you a drink,
a warm cup of tea with lemon and mint,
a confetti cannon, roses from the garden,
my favorite sweatshirt, a bed to lay in,
homemade bread, a hand to hold.

I'd give you my full attention.

I'd give you my phone,
and say, *put your number in.*

I'd give you the melody line,
a standing ovation,
a sense of security.

I'd give you anything and everything
if it made you believe
that you were enough.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** Who sinned?

read John 9:1-7

from the artist | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

Jesus' community saw this man's blindness as a curse or a punishment for sin (either his parents' sin or his own). While it is true that blindness comes with challenges in a world made for sightedness, it is important that we do not problematize blindness in preaching and teaching this story the way they did. What happened here was an apocalypse—a revelation of the nature of Jesus and the heart and mind of God. That revelation challenged the epistemologies of the community, and it is the ones in the story who'd been sighted all along who were ironically unable to perceive what God was doing.

Jesus said that he "must work the works of him who sent me while it is day" (John 9:4). Daybreak is also an apocalypse of sorts; it reveals what we couldn't readily see at night and allows us to perceive the work in front of us. In my portrait, I've lit this man's face as if the earth and the sun's light are moving slowly across the surface, signaling the dawn of a new day. His eyes remain closed in my portrait because, for me, his newfound sightedness is not the miracle or the most important part of this story. What's most important is the revelation of who Jesus is. Jesus has been revealed to this man in a way that even the witnesses around him could not comprehend. His encounter with Jesus raises him to a new life and offers the whole community a new understanding of God's works. It's a new day for everyone, though that proves to be a difficult gift to receive.



Son, Rise | Rev. T. Denise Anderson
Oil on canvas

THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT
seeking: Will you give me a drink?



Scan to hear
the tune!

we all come thirsty

ST. COLUMBA ("The King of Love My Shepherd Is")

Text: Anna Strickland (2022)

Music: Irish melody

We all come thirsty
Through dif - f'ren - ces
We care for God's com - mun - i -

well to seek the li - ving wa - ter With
reach to care and hold each oth - er There
- ty Our mu - tual aid shared free - ly To

wounds and pasts we'd ra - ther hide But
are no stran - gers for they are Our With
all we give as we re - ceive

let - ting our hearts sof - - ten thers
sib - lings, sis - ters, bro - - ly
grace and lov - ing deep

THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT seeking: Will you give me a drink?

read John 4:5-42 | Exodus 17:1-7

commentary | Rev. Danielle Shroyer

"Give us a drink," the Israelites ask. God hears them, readily responds, and calls Moses to bring forth water from a rock. But do the people know what they truly thirst for?

In the seasons of our lives, we all have felt frustrated and lost in the wilderness. During these times, our fear gets the better of us. Survival mode reigns. Sometimes our focus on survival is so loud we miss the cry underneath: "God, have you abandoned me?"

What would it have looked like, I wonder, if the Israelites had instead cried out for God's assurance? "Show us you're still with us, God," they could have prayed with open hearts. "We feel alone and unmoored." Where could the water have come from, if the question had come from a softer place than the rock of our human defenses?

This is the way Jesus himself taught us to pray. He gave us full permission to ask for what we needed, to request of God our daily bread. He knew, I think, that it's also a prayer for God to walk with us. It's an honest admission that none of us rely only on ourselves. We need God. We need each other.

Many years later, Jesus asks this same question of a Samaritan woman at a well. Everything he risks by speaking with her—crossing cultural, religious, and social lines—demonstrates his willingness to be vulnerable. When he asks for what he needs, he shows that even he cannot make it alone. What a risk for the Son of God to be so openly human. And yet, it is this question—and his willingness—that leads to this woman's transformation. Despite a long list of good reasons why she shouldn't be vulnerable to anyone, she boldly asks Jesus for living water instead. And she did so fully trusting he would give it.

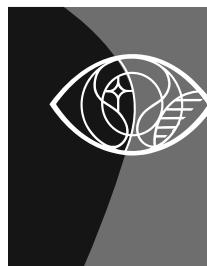
- "They must be poor because of X, so let's solve X by doing Y..."
- "She must be incarcerated because..."
- "The reason they are being deported must be because..."
- "He must be experiencing mental health issues because..."
- "He must be sick because..."

We turn genuine struggles of the human condition into solvable formulas of cause and effect, which then gets warped into the idea that if something bad is happening to us, it is because God has determined that we deserve it. And the need for security does not stop there. Rather than give God credit for the healing and new life—because it would lessen the perception of power and authority of the religious leaders—the rational cause-and-effect argument from the beginning is ignored and replaced with a position of, "We know what we know and nothing you do or say will change our minds."

Again, it is not a difficult leap for today's application:

- "We know people are poor because..."
- "We know people are incarcerated because..."
- "We know people are sick because..."
- "We know...We know...We know..."

The truth is, we don't know, but the hope is that we could know more if only we would take the time to ask better questions.



reflect

What assumptions have you made about other people? What are examples of some of the bad questions you've asked? What are better questions you can ask?

read John 9:1-41

commentary | Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow

First let us name the ableist notion that "blindness" is an inherent deficiency. Metaphors using blindness are built on the idea that this physical state of being is somehow "less than" and, regardless of the cause, is in all cases a problem, malady, and affliction that must be solved, healed, and fixed. The culture of Jesus' time did not think any differently, thus the many examples of physical limitation being the stand-in for sin and brokenness.

The passage today uses physical affliction as a vehicle to point out how humanity always wants to be sure and secure about the world. The crowd is certain that there must be a cause (someone's fault) and effect (God's judgment) at play, and when the effect is made known, they refuse to believe the cause that has been given credit.

We want to believe, but only on our terms.

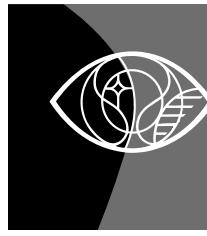
We want to believe that people should be held accountable for their actions; generally speaking this is not a terrible thing for society, but in this case, we are talking about a human's personhood and the assumptions made about the person. The disciples' first reaction is to debate the blindness and not deal at all with the human. Intellectualizing and theologizing outside of seeing the created being right in front of them led them to ask the wrong questions. Rather than ask, "How can we heal and help?" they ask, "Whose fault is it?"

We do the same thing today when suffering, pain, and affliction are revealed right before us. Empathetic inquiry is set aside and we rush to diagnosis and treatment before we even know the nature and depth of the problem we are trying to address . . . or if it is a problem at all.

We too easily view one another through a one-dimensional lens so much so that all we can do is start down a path toward misplaced questions and actions based on mistaken assumptions:

We often see this Gospel story as a bridge-building one. It's a reminder to be brave enough to cross boundaries and offer a drink to those society may separate from us. And it is. And also, it reminds us that God designed this whole world to run on benevolent connection. And that requires us to not just be charitable, but vulnerable.

The question for us this Lent is not only whether we would extend a drink; it's whether we will be brave enough to ask God for one when we need it.



reflect

What are you truly thirsting for? Will you be brave enough to ask God for a drink when you need it?



Scan to hear
the tune!



Living Water | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

we come with questions

LOBE DEN HERREN ("PRAISE TO THE LORD,
THE ALMIGHTY")

Text: Anna Strickland (2022)

Music: Erneuerten Gesangbuch (1665)

We come with ques - tions as - sum - ing that
Here is the mys - t'ry we claim as the
God help us live in - to mys - t'ry be -
there will be an - swers Set - ting the
fol - lowers of Je - sus: Christ has died,
- yond com - pre - hen - sion Qui - et our
world in an or - der that o - beys our
Christ is raised, Christ dai - ly comes to re -
minds al - ways clam - or - ing for some di -
gram - mar We want to know
- deem - us Grace free, not earned,
- rec - tion Give us your peace
where Spir - it's riv - er will flow Frus - trat - ed
whe - ther or not we de - serve God works be -
with all that we can't per - ceive Hold - ing us
by her me - an - ders
- yond rules and boun - dries
with - in the ten - sion



Jesus in the psych ward⁸

He's in group therapy, plastic chairs in a circle.
Paper cups with weak coffee. Everyone in the room has
seeking eyes.

The Pharisees admitted him. They said things like,
He's more than we can handle. They let the rumors fly.

The other patients like him. They say, *He listens to me.*
He calls them by name.

And when one of them asks,
Is this our fault? Are we here because we sinned?
Jesus does not wait for the facilitator to speak.
He crosses the circle. He kneels down. He grabs their hands
in his and says,

*Child of the covenant, God loves you too much to ever
wish you pain.*

*Bodies and minds crumble sometimes, but God's love
for you does not.*

And after that
there were happy tears and the group was dismissed
to lunch,
where they broke bread and no one talked of sin.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

⁸ Inspired by the poem, *Jesus at the Gay Bar*, by Jay Hulmes. Published in *The Backwater Sermons*. (Canterbury Press, 2021). A note from the author: "In Jay's poem, Jesus offers words of grace in a modern-day setting. In a similar fashion, I placed Jesus in a psychiatric setting to continue dismantling unfair stigmas around mental health. For me, the image of Jesus in therapy with me offers immense comfort and validation. I hope you find the same to be true for you."

read John 4:5-42

from the artist | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

The positioning of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is inspired by the work of Karoline M. Lewis in her commentary on John. She introduces a fresh way of looking at this text, with a focus on their "mutuality of need."⁵ Jesus needs water to drink, and the woman needs living water. She writes: "Jesus needs her to be a witness, and she needs Jesus to invite her into this new identity."⁶

In this image, their body positioning is mirrored, with their eyes on the same plane. Where their arms overlap becomes a vibrant blue, creating a water drop with a dove in it, representing the living water that springs forth from their mutual need and relationship. Each of their clothing is patterned with the other's need. In Jesus' clothing are simplified "springs of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). In the Samaritan woman's clothes, her water jar is positioned upright and poured out, representing her wrestling with whether she will interact with this man—and further, whether he is the awaited Messiah.

The image is subtly divided in half by slight shifts in color value. There is a chasm between them socially, culturally, religiously, etc. Referencing a primary dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans, their places of worship are in the background: on the left is the temple in Jerusalem, and on the right is Mount Gerizim.

In the center is the Samaritan woman's vessel. Her need is not the water in the well; her need is for grounding in a new identity,⁷ and to be seen for who she really is. She needs to not be defined by social stigmas, but to be seen through the lens of mutual need. One of the first witnesses of the Messiah, she becomes a vessel of living water herself.

⁵ Lewis, Karoline M. *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014). 55.

⁶ Ibid. 56.

⁷ Ibid. 56.

THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT **seeking:** Will you give me a drink?

read Exodus 17:1-7

from the artist | Carmelle Beaugelin

On a recent search to remedy dull kitchen knives, I found myself learning about wet stones. Sharpening a knife used to be called "whetting," so to sharpen a blade was to "whet" it. Stones used for sharpening were called "whetstones," or a "wet rock." Natural whetstones are typically formed of quartz, but today can be formed into pumice stones from all kinds of materials. This interesting play on the words "wet" and "stone" led me to ask of this Exodus narrative, "In focusing on their perceived lack, how had the Hebrews' trust in God begun to dull?"

In Exodus 17 we find the first encounter involving the Hebrews where a perceived lack of water, a necessary resource for survival, is in question. When collective despair and the threat of abandoning the journey to God's promised land is aroused, God aids Moses in providing water from rocks along the way. This fear of scarcity dulled the once sharpened faith of the community to the extent that they longed for their former life in Egypt where water was abundant but sipped under the oppression of slavery. How is it that seeking freedom could cost so much?

Like the Hebrews in the wilderness, our fear of scarcity may cause us to struggle in our confidence in God's provision as we seek our own promises along our life's journey. In seeking to quench our thirst, like the figures in this image, perhaps we may find the provision of God in the grace of relief and from unexpected places that sharpen our faith.



Wet Stones | Carmelle Beaugelin
Conté crayon, charcoal, acrylic, gold gild on paper