

# Lenten Devotions 2020

*This guide will walk you through Jesus' major teachings and will help you navigate the Lenten Season prayerfully.*

Welcome to Lent, a 40-day season of prayer, personal inventory and spiritual growth. Lent calls upon the Christian to be honest about one's life, to deal seriously with sin and evil within oneself and to draw closer to God in all aspects of life.

Lent mimics Christ's 40-days in the wilderness, where he was tempted in many ways. For Jesus, these 40 days prepared him for the ministry that awaited him. They also proved the worth of Jesus' spiritual training. It is no coincidence that Jesus first major teaching after those 40 days was about the nearness of God and the importance of spiritual disciplines.

This year, throughout Lent, we will follow Matthew's account of Jesus' teachings. There are 5 major blocks of teaching in Matthew. You're likely familiar with the first: The Sermon on the Mount. By exploring these 5 blocks of teaching, several things happen.

- #1. You get a good overview of the teachings of Christ, both his public messages and his private teachings to the 12 Disciples.
- #2. You can follow the drama of his life that eventually leads to his suffering and death.
- #3. You can explore your own history and faith through these ancient teachings.
- #4. You can see the relevance of Jesus for today as the issues he addresses speak to the issues in our world today.

The format for this guide is simple: there's a daily scripture, a brief meditation and a focus question. I would encourage you to keep a notebook nearby for writing or drawing or reflections. The Sunday pages follow the same format but are geared to follow the worship themes for that Sunday. Finally, Ash Wednesday and Holy Week (beginning April 5) follow the liturgical calendar for those special holy days.

I hope this guide helps you in your faith journey through the season of Lent.

## February 26—Ash Wednesday

### Scripture

Matthew 6:1-21

### Meditation

When I think of praying in secret, I think of Mrs. Looney who lived up the street from us. Us Ohio Street kids knew her as the woman who walked a lot. Us Trinity UMC folks knew her as the preacher's wife turned widow and frequent missionary to Mexico. We ALL knew her as a prayer warrior and a joyful, peaceful and kind presence. Most of us thought that Mother Teresa must be a lot like Mrs. Looney.

When she passed away, our family helped her family clear out her house. We found many things. We found her husband's pastoral library (I took his copy of Wesley's Journals). We found piles of mail that were clear evidence that she was regularly scammed by people seeking money for illegitimate "worthy causes". We found clothes upon clothes. Then, under the stairs, we found her prayer room: a tiny closet with a lamp, hymnal, Bible and prayer stool.

The whole collection of her house helped us understand the 'warrior' part of Mrs. Looney. She clearly struggled in her later years as a widow. She clearly took solace in God. She clearly served people with grace and effort. All of these things were true about her.

I am glad to know the fuller story of Mrs. Looney. Prayer does not sanitize our life. It simply awakens us to the presence of God in our real lives.

### Focus Question

What is prayer like for you when you pray in secret? What does it mean that God sees you in secret?

Thursday, February 27

Scripture

Matthew 11:28-30

Meditation

*from "It is Well with My Soul," by Audrey Assad*

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll  
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say  
It is well, it is well, with my soul  
It is well, With my soul  
It is well, it is well with my soul  
Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul  
It is well (it is well), With my soul (with my soul)  
It is well, it is well with my soul  
My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, o my soul  
It is well (it is well), With my soul (with my soul)  
It is well, it is well with my soul

Focus Question

How is it with your soul right now?

Friday, February 28

Scripture

Matthew 5:1-12

Meditation

*from "Letters to a Young Poet," by Rainer Maria Rilke*

"Almost all our sadnesses are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we no longer hear our surprised feelings living. Because we are alone with the alien thing that has entered into our self; because everything intimate and accustomed is for an instant taken away; because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing. For this reason the sadness too passes: the new thing in us, the added thing, has entered into our heart, has gone into its inmost chamber and is not even there any more, — is already in our blood. And we do not learn what it was. We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into which a guest has entered."

Focus Question

In what ways have you been poor in spirit? In what ways did you find the kingdom of heaven near you at that time?

Saturday, February 29

Scripture

Isaiah 40:1-11

Meditation    *"Brushing Teeth with my Sister After the Wake," by Jim Daniels*

at my kitchen sink, the bathroom upstairs  
clogged with family from out of town  
spending the night after the wake  
and the after—wake—cold beverages  
have been consumed and comfort food,  
leftovers bulging both the fridge  
and the mini-fridge. In our fifties, both  
half-asleep half-awake, we face each  
other. My sister's smile foams white  
down her chin at the end of a day  
on which no one has smiled. We laugh.  
We may never brush our teeth together again.  
No mirror down here to see our haggard faces.  
We rinse, we spit. As we were taught.

Focus Question

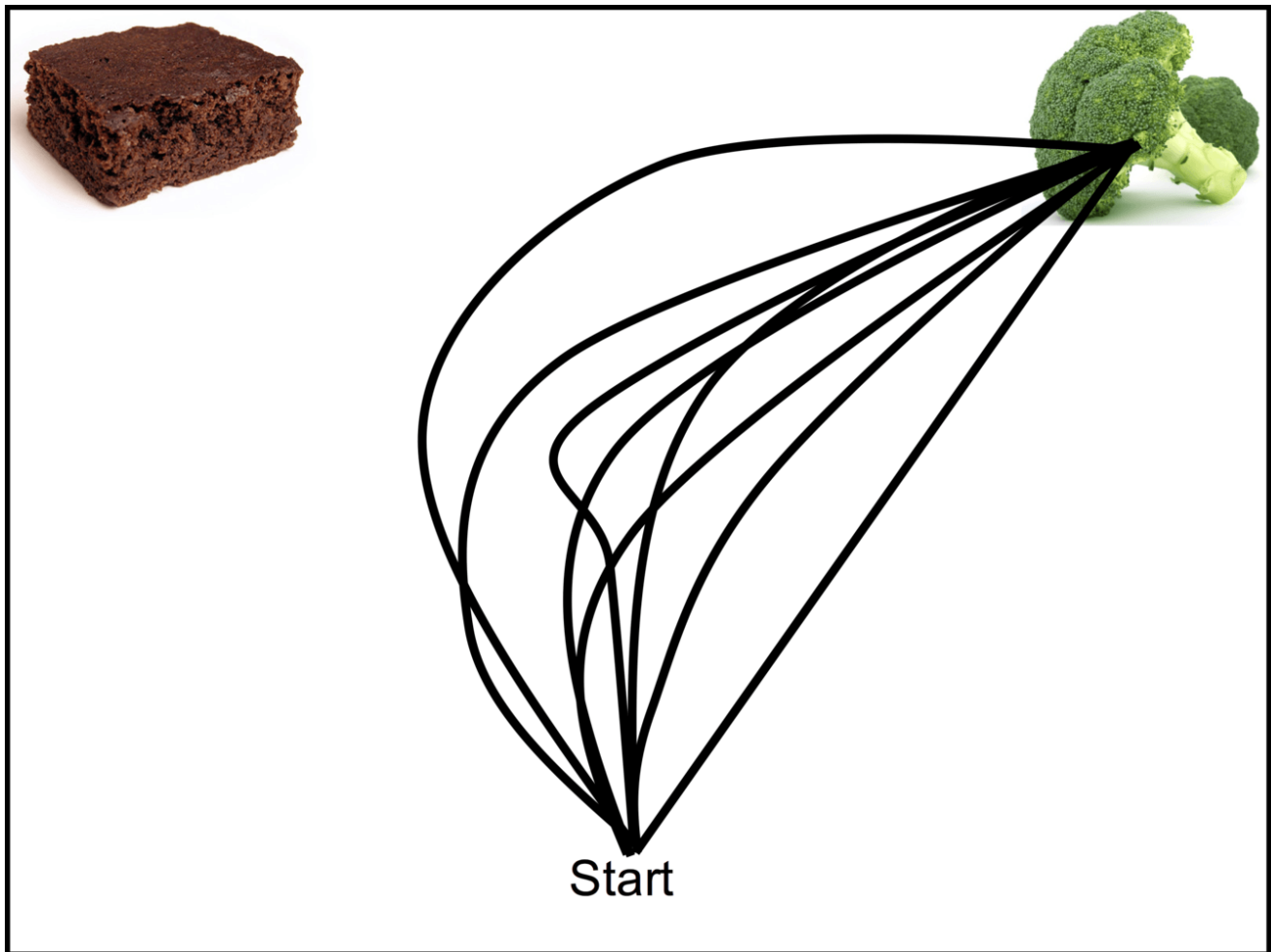
Recall a time when you needed comforting? Who or what comforted you?

## March 1, First Sunday in Lent

### Scripture

Matthew 4:1-17

### Meditation



### Focus Question

When have you been tempted? How do you resist or succumb to temptation? What does it mean to you that Christ also was tempted?

Monday, March 2

Scripture

1 Kings 19:1-18

Meditation *from a sermon by David Beckmann of Bread for the World*

The Christian experience of God's embrace is grounded in the forgiving death of Jesus Christ, and our communion with other people is powered by God's communion with us.

In Jesus Christ, we know that God loves each one of us—and everybody else. God's love includes the people who make us furious, people on the other side of the world, different racial and ethnic groups, and certainly all the people who must struggle just to feed their kids.

Some of the first-century churches started their worship with an actual dinner that led into the Lord's Supper. But in the church at Corinth, some people ate and drank to their fill while other people went hungry. St. Paul tells them that if they ignore the hungry people in their midst, their sacrament is sacrilege.

You can't be connected to God and ignore hungry people.

*Full sermon text and audio at*

*<https://www.bread.org/library/sermon-david-beckmann-duke-university-chapel>*

Focus Question

When have you 'hungered for righteousness'? In what ways was that hunger filled? In what ways is 'hungering for righteousness' essential to the Christian life?



Tuesday, March 3

Scripture

Psalm 51

Meditation *from "MIDDOT, SHELOSH-'ESREH" in the Jewish Encyclopedia*

"The thirteen forms of mercy, enumerated in Exodus 34:6-7, whereby God rules the world...

- (1) "Adonai," compassion before man sins;
- (2) "Adonai," compassion after man has sinned (comp. R. H. 17b);
- (3) "El," mighty in compassion to give all creatures according to their need;
- (4) "Raḥum," merciful, that mankind may not be distressed;
- (5) "Ḥanun," gracious if mankind is already in distress;
- (6) "Erek appayim," slow to anger;
- (7) "Rab ḥesed," plenteous in mercy;
- (8) "Emet," truth;
- (9) "Nozer ḥesed la'alafim," keeping mercy unto thousands (comp. the explanation of Samuel b. Meir in "Da'at Zeḥenim," ad loc.);
- (10) "Nose 'awon," forgiving iniquity;
- (11) "Nose pesha'," forgiving transgression;
- (12) "Nose ḥaṭa'ah," forgiving sin;
- (13) "Wenakeh," and pardoning.

*This has been edited lightly from the original to fit this page. The full article can be found <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10802-middot-shelosh-esreh>*

Focus Question

When have you needed mercy? In what ways do you see similar needs for mercy around you? In what ways does your previous need for mercy inform your approach to others?

Wednesday, March 4

## Scripture

Isaiah 6:1-8

## Meditation

Free speech leaves room for vulgarity. Like Isaiah, we live among a people of unclean lips. Add to that the amplification that comes from mass media and social media and you have a society of raucous noise that is often meaningless. One of the purposes of 'conscious quiet' is to help you listen to yourself without the bias of your own ego. It's harder to deceive ourselves when we're alone with our own spirits. Usually truths, both pleasant and unpleasant, become better known. Only when we are honest with ourselves can we deal with our own unpleasantness. The quiet leads to honesty, which leads to confession and repentance, which leads us to a newer and freer life. Don't you think God wants that for you?

## Focus Question

What 'impurities of heart' are within you? What would it mean to you to have those impurities removed?

Thursday, March 5

Scripture

Psalm 85

Meditation

*"Making Peace," by Denise Levertov*

A voice from the dark called out,  
    'The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only  
the absence of war.'

    But peace, like a poem,  
is not there ahead of itself,  
can't be imagined before it is made,  
can't be known except  
in the words of its making,  
grammar of justice,  
syntax of mutual aid.

    A feeling towards it,  
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have  
until we begin to utter its metaphors,  
learning them as we speak.

    A line of peace might appear  
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,  
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,  
questioned our needs, allowed  
long pauses . . .

    A cadence of peace might balance its weight  
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,  
an energy field more intense than war,  
might pulse then,  
stanza by stanza into the world,  
each act of living  
one of its words, each word  
a vibration of light—facets  
of the forming crystal.

Focus Question

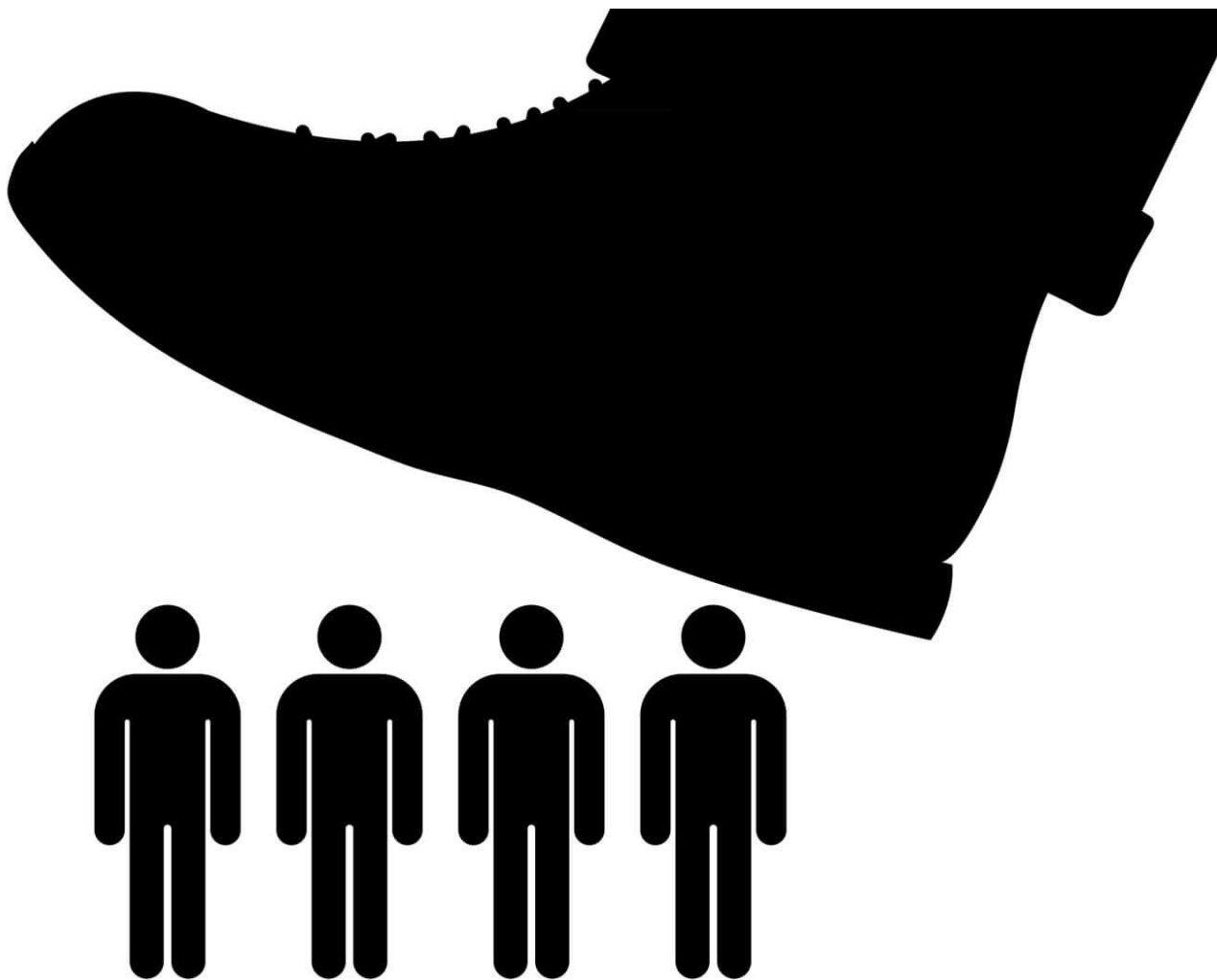
How do you make peace?

Friday, March 6

Scripture

Proverbs 21

Meditation



Focus Question

For what 'righteous cause' have you been persecuted? What righteous cause ought Christians today take on?

Saturday, March 7

Scripture

James 3

Meditation

*"Prayer for a New Heart" Um Hymnal #392*

Thou who art over us,

Thou who art one of us,

Thou who art:

Give me a pure heart, that I may see thee;

a humble heart, that I may hear thee,

a heart of love, that I may serve thee,

a heart of faith, that I may abide in thee. Amen

Focus Question

Some say we live in an age of outrage and vulgarity. What practices do you undertake to rise above the ugliness of our current world?

## March 8, Second Sunday in Lent

### Scripture

John 3:1-21

### Meditation

For Christmas one year, our parents got my brother and me an Atari video game system. It was awesome. We could play Pac-man, Frogger and a bunch of other games. Turns out, my Mom became the family Pac-Man champion. On the game console, there was a little lever on the right labeled "Game Reset". Whenever a game was going poorly, we just hit the lever and started again.

What if life were that easy?

Isaiah prophesied of a time when young people would see visions and old people would dream dreams. Part of the faith is to harness some "holy imagination" for what God would have God's people do next.

So...can I ask you (yes you...not anyone else in the church or the town or the denomination) to imagine what God would have God's people do now?

### Focus Question

What if...you could start all over?

Monday, March 9

## Scripture

Matthew 10:1-15

## Meditation

In a similar episode (Mark 1:21-27), the one with the unclean spirit was in the synagogue, not some random far-off place.

Jesus regularly upturns conventional wisdom. This time, one of *our* conventional wisdoms is upturned: the notion that church-people are better than non-church people. Unclean spirits can live in churches and church-people.

Also, Jesus gave the 12 Disciples instructions for how to live as messengers of the good news. Live in poverty, be givers of grace and peace, be generous, don't waste time with cynics.

What if the church were training ground for this kind of living?

## Focus Question

Which 'unclean spirits' around us ought the church be casting out?

Tuesday, March 10

Scripture

Matthew 10:16-23

Meditation

*from "Hope in the Dark," by Rebecca Solnit*

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes — you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone."

Focus Question

Who are today's 'lost sheep'? What would it mean if *you* took on the task of finding them?



Wednesday, March 11

Scripture

Romans 15:14-32

Meditation      *"Washing the Car with My Father," by Afaa Michael Weaver*

It is the twilight blue Chevrolet,  
four doors with no power but the engine,  
whitewall tires, no padding on the dashboard,  
the car I drive on dates, park on dark lanes  
to ask for a kiss, now my hand goes along  
the fender, wiping every spot, the suds  
in the bucket, my father standing at the gate,  
poor and proud, tall and stout, a wise man,

a man troubled by a son gone missing  
in the head, drag racing his only car  
at night, traveling with hoodlums to leave  
the books for street life, naming mentors  
the men who pack guns and knives, a son  
gone missing from all the biblical truth,  
ten talents, prophecies, burning bushes,  
dirty cars washed on Saturday morning.

He tells me not to miss a spot, to open  
the hood when I'm done so he can check  
the oil, the vital thing like blood, blood  
of kinship, blood spilled in the streets  
of Baltimore, blood oozing from the soul  
of a son walking prodigal paths leading  
to gutters. Years later I tell him the stories  
of what his brother-in-law did to me, and

he wipes a tear from the corner of his eye,  
wraps it in a white handkerchief for church,  
walks up the stairs with the aluminum  
crutch to scream at the feet of black Jesus  
and in these brittle years of his old age we  
grow deeper, talk way after midnight,  
peeping over the rail of his hospital bed  
as we wash the twilight blue Chevrolet.

### Focus Question

Who do you most want to hear 'good news'? With what gifts and talents can you proclaim this good news?

Thursday, March 12

Scripture

1 Timothy 4:6-16

Meditation

Here's a picture of a baby snake wearing a unicorn hat.



More cute baby snake pictures at [boredpanda.com](http://boredpanda.com)

Focus Question

What would it mean if church became a training ground so that we can become 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves'?

Friday, March 13

Scripture

1 Peter 2: 1-10

Meditation *from "Thoughts of being Fat and Loved by God", by Kathi Lipp*

I don't know why I overeat. Oh I know the standard answer: I have a hole in my heart that only God can fill, but I'm filling it with food. But here's the thing: That is shaming, and I don't think shaming people gets them to change. (At least it's never worked in my life.) In the past ten years I have been fifty pounds heavier than I am now, and I've also been fifty pounds lighter. My weight didn't correspond to my prayer life or my bible reading. I don't have the answer, but I'm not going to give up trying to figure it out.

This is the thorn in my flesh. This is the most humbling thing in my life. This situation right here? This is the thing that I pray about and struggle about and talk to God about. In some ways, this has been the thing in my life that has made me run to God and fall on my face like nothing else ever has.

So here's what I'm going to do: keep talking to God and trying to figure why I am the way that I am. I'm going to keep trying to believe that God loves me the same way that my husband does: He loves me just as I am. AND He wants His best for me. There is no "but" between those two statements. It is possible to be overweight and totally adoringly loved by God.

Am I alone in this? If you struggle with your weight, do you know that God loves you exactly as you are this very moment? Do you know He is not waiting for you to be "normal" before He will love you? I want you to know you are adored. You are cherished. You are a delight to Him who loves you more than you will ever understand or know.

*Full article at <https://www.kathilipp.com/2013/03/thoughts-on-being-fat-and-loved-by-god/>*

Focus Question

Do you know that God values you greatly? In what ways can you 'live into' this good news for you?

Saturday, March 14

Scripture

Matthew 10:32-39

Meditation



Focus Question

In what ways has following Christ set you against friends or family?

## Third Sunday in Lent, March 15

### Scripture

John 4:1-42

### Meditation

The Woman at the Well is a favorite Biblical character of mine. She is historically misunderstood. Renaissance painters often depicted her wearing red, the color of the adulterer. There's no actual indication that she was unfaithful to any of her actual husbands. The last bit, where it is indicated that the man she is currently with is not her husband is wide-open to interpretation. Throughout time, people have projected their own problems and biases onto this woman. Why was she alone? She must have been trouble? Why was she at the well in the heat of the day? She must have been a problem.

Jesus sees her as she simply is: a woman in need of water. Whatever her condition, she becomes the first to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. On the "Mount Rushmore of Biblical women," she deserves a place next to Mary. Let us learn the lesson of the Woman at the Well: the people of Christ must learn to refrain from the temptation to label, dismiss, categorize or minimize our neighbors. Loving our neighbors involves seeing their full humanity and their full status as beloved children of God.

### Focus Question

What do you wish people better understood about you? What barriers have you dealt with in your life?

Monday, March 16

Scripture

Matthew 10:37-42

Meditation

*from "The Problem of Pain," by CS Lewis*

"In a game of chess you can make certain arbitrary concessions to your opponent, which stand to the ordinary rules of the game as miracles stand to the laws of nature. You can deprive yourself of a castle, or allow the other man sometimes to take back a move made inadvertently. But if you conceded everything that at any moment happened to suit him — if all his moves were revocable and if all your pieces disappeared whenever their position on the board was not to his liking — then you could not have a game at all. So it is with the life of souls in a world: fixed laws, consequences unfolding by causal necessity, the whole natural order, are at once limits within which their common life is confined and also the sole condition under which any such life is possible. Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself."

Focus Question

Crosses were instruments of suffering and intimidation. In what ways does faith today still entail suffering or rejection?

Tuesday, March 17

Scripture

Matthew 13:1-9

Meditation

How to Sow Seeds - 10 Easy Steps!

- 1 Find some trays or pots
- 2 Fill the seed tray with seed compost
- 3 Moisten the surface of the compost
- 4 Sprinkle the seeds evenly over the compost
- 5 Cover the seed Tray
- 6 Place the seed tray in a warm place
- 7 Uncover the seedlings once they germinate
- 8 Transplant the seedlings
- 9 Keep transplanted seedlings in the shade
- 10 Plant out into the flowering position and enjoy!

*From <https://dengarden.com/gardening/How-to-Sow-Seeds>*

Focus Question

What does the Parable of the Sower tell us about the nature of God?



Wednesday, March 18

## Scripture

Matthew 13:18-23

## Meditation

*from "How to Compost"*

Start your compost pile on bare earth. This allows worms and other beneficial organisms to aerate the compost and be transported to your garden beds.

Lay twigs or straw first, a few inches deep. This aids drainage and helps aerate the pile.

Add compost materials in layers, alternating moist and dry. Moist ingredients are food scraps, tea bags, seaweed, etc. Dry materials are straw, leaves, sawdust pellets and wood ashes. If you have wood ashes, sprinkle in thin layers, or they will clump together and be slow to break down.

Add manure, green manure (clover, buckwheat, wheatgrass, grass clippings) or any nitrogen source. This activates the compost pile and speeds the process along.

Keep compost moist. Water occasionally, or let rain do the job.

Cover with anything you have – wood, plastic sheeting, carpet scraps. Covering helps retain moisture and heat, two essentials for compost. Covering also prevents the compost from being over-watered by rain. The compost should be moist, but not soaked and sodden.

Turn. Every few weeks give the pile a quick turn with a pitchfork or shovel. This aerates the pile. Oxygen is required for the process to work, and turning "adds" oxygen. You can skip this step if you have a ready supply of coarse material like straw. Once you've established your compost pile, add new materials by mixing them in, rather than by adding them in layers. Mixing, or turning, the compost pile is key to aerating the composting materials and speeding the process to completion. If you want to buy a composter, rather than build your own compost pile, you may consider a buying a rotating compost tumbler which makes it easy to mix the compost regularly.

## Focus Question

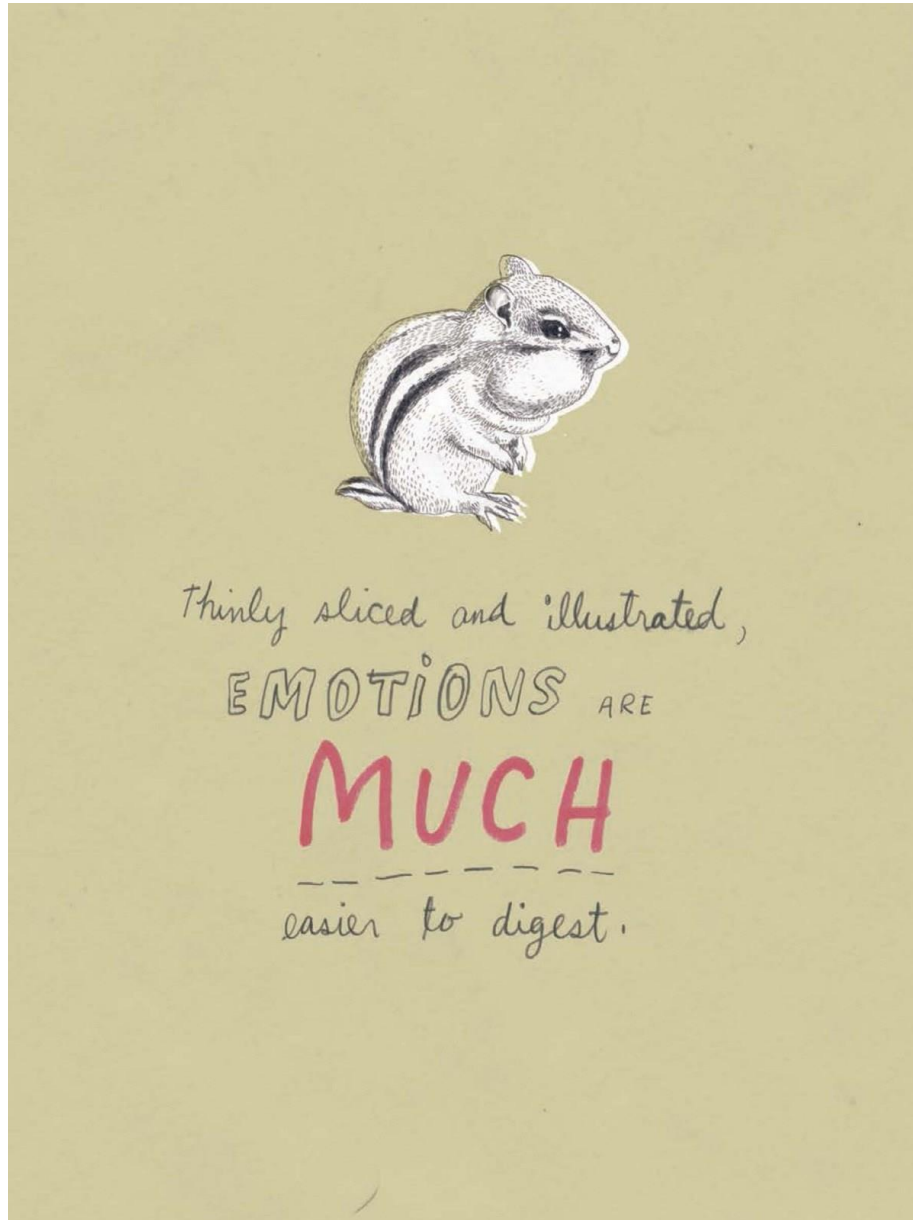
In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus describes people who are overcome with evil, saddened by the troubles of the world and choked with worry. What can one do if their 'soil' is weak in these ways?

Thursday, March 19

Scripture

Matthew 6:24-34

Meditation



Focus Question

Which 'cares of the world' keep the grace of God from growing within you?

Friday, March 20

Scripture

Matthew 13:10-17

Meditation      *from "Lasting Love: The Secret to Long-Term Relationships"*

We are born to love. That feeling of elation that we call romantic love is deeply embedded in our brains. But can it last? This was what my colleagues and I set out to discover in 2007. Led by Bianca Acevedo, PhD, our team asked this question of nearly everyone we met, searching for people who said they were still wild about their longtime spouse. Eventually we scanned the brains of 17 such people as they looked at a photograph of their sweetheart. Most were in their 50s and married an average of 21 years.

The results were astonishing. Psychologists maintain that the dizzying feeling of intense romantic love lasts only about 18 months to — at best — three years. Yet the brains of these middle-aged men and women showed much the same activity as those of young lovers, individuals who had been intensely in love an average of only seven months. Indeed, there was just one important difference between the two groups: Among the older lovers, brain regions associated with anxiety were no longer active; instead, there was activity in the areas associated with calmness.

*Full article by Helen Fisher at [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lasting-love-long-term-relationships\\_n\\_3530293](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lasting-love-long-term-relationships_n_3530293)*

Focus Question

In Matthew 13, Jesus revisits an ancient prophecy about how people's hearts have grown dull. In what ways do you see a dullness of heart around us? AND what can we as a church do to revive those hearts?

Saturday, March 21

Scripture

Matthew 13:24-30

Meditation

*by McKinley Corbley for Good News Network*

Dr. Kwane Stewart first started his labor of love back in 2011 when he was left heartbroken by the amount of animals being surrendered to his veterinary clinic during the recession. As more and more people lost their homes, more and more pet owners opted to turn their furry companions over to a shelter than allow them to be homeless.

Stewart then brought his veterinary supplies to a soup kitchen event so he could treat some of the homeless pets around Modesto, California.

“About 25% of our homeless population own a pet, and I knew that if I set up a table at a soup kitchen I could help a small group of animals,” Stewart told GoFundMe. “So that’s what I did. I called over anyone who was holding their pet and told them I’d take a look and vaccinate or treat their pet if I could.”

Upon successfully treating 15 animals in a single day, Stewart knew he had found his purpose.

He has since devoted his spare time to wandering through alleyways and city streets up and down the west coast so he can treat homeless people’s pets—and he has helped heal more than 400 animals.

*Full story at <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/veterinarian-treats-homeless-peoples-pets-for-free/>*

Focus Question

How do we preserve and promote goodness around us?

## Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22

### Scripture

John 9

### Meditation

One of the things the Bible does is it utilizes what Biblical scholars refer to as typology. Typology is the elevation of a character into a representation of a portion of humanity. It is difficult for many people these days to 'relate' to Jesus. He has reached a mythical level of popularity; many people think of him as 'larger-than-life'. In order for us to discover the God that's close to us, the Bible tells stories of Jesus' interactions with ordinary people, folks like us.

The man born blind has a two-fold problem. Firstly, he cannot see. That's bad enough. Secondly, people were afraid that his blindness might be contagious and pronounced that God must be punishing either him or his parents. In this case, God is either cruel or justly punishing him for the alleged sin.

As Jesus exposes the ungodliness of these assumptions and heals the man of his suffering, several things are occurring. Firstly, conventional wisdom about who God curses and who God blesses are shattered. Secondly, a man once thought cursed has found himself as close to God as possible.

For us, the man born blind has come to represent anyone whose suffering is real and anyone who's ever been seriously misunderstood. Who among us doesn't fit one of those categories? Praise be to God for the Lord who sees beyond humanity's silly and cruel labels.

### Focus Question

What does it mean for your life of faith that Jesus regularly defends the sacred worth of the outcast?

Monday, March 23

Scripture

Matthew 13:31-32

Meditation



Focus Question

What does the parable of the mustard seed tell us about the nature of God?

Tuesday, March 24

## Scripture

Matthew 13:44-45

## Meditation

The Kingdom of God is an enigma. Jesus says it is near, but then tells us we have to look for it. Which is it?

There was a lavender farm over on Sauvie Island that finally closed last summer. Our family would pay an annual visit and pick huge bundles of lavender that would last the rest of the year. The field also contained a series of “fairy doors,” literally little tiny doors at the base of trees, under bushes and near the stand. The kids would delight in finding the various fairy doors. They were near, but you had to look to find them. One thing that helped the kids find all the doors was their enthusiasm for finding. They had ‘prevenient joy’ over finding the doors. Perhaps that is the key to finding the Kingdom of Heaven...treat it like a game you know you will win and enjoy the journey.



## Focus Question

In what ways are you seeking the kingdom of God?

Wednesday, March 25

## Scripture

Matthew 13:36-43

## Meditation

In seminary, we were taught a biblical interpretation technique called The Four Pages of a Sermon. Essentially, you map out the trouble in the text, the trouble in the world, the grace in the text and the grace in the world. In this way, the ancient scriptures speak to our current day.

This is tough when it comes to scriptures of judgment. But just like yesterday's parable about having to seek out the kingdom of God, perhaps we need a similar approach to finding the 'good news' in stories of judgment. (Notably, this text comes right BEFORE yesterday's.)

We can map out the 'four pages' as follows.

<b>Trouble in the Text:</b> There is an enemy sowing bad seed around us.	<b>Trouble in the World:</b> There are bad seeds around us, even within and among us.
<b>Grace in the Text:</b> God saves the righteous, there is ultimate justice.	<b>Grace in the World:</b> God separates the good within us from the bad and preserves the good.

## Focus Question

What do you make of the parables of judgment? Where is the good news in them for you?



Thursday, March 26

Scripture

Matthew 13:54-58

Meditation

Jesus checking if the Facebook photo  
has enough likes to save the sick child



Focus Question

In what ways do we still 'take offense' at Jesus? What does it tell us about God that our *unbelief* can stifle God's work?

Friday, March 27

Scripture

Matthew 18:1-5

Meditation

"All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." – Pablo Picasso

Focus Question

What childlike quality will you adopt in order to draw closer to God?

Saturday, March 28

Scripture

Matthew 18:6-7

Meditation

*by Tony Fahkry for Mission.org*

1. Distance Yourself From The Drama

When faced with an obstacle, emotions run high since you're likely to react to the ensuing drama. Step back from the chaos and see the obstacle from a greater perspective.

An accomplished Australian artist once noted that when she oil paints, she prefers to take regular breaks. She said this allows her to return to her work with fresh eyes each time and approach the painting from a different perspective. You might adopt the same tactic with your obstacle and come back to it with renewed enthusiasm when the time is right.

2. Seek Out Necessary Resources

Often you may lack provisions, finances, strategies or a key piece of knowledge to conquer your obstacle. The key is to acknowledge that it is 'resource related'. For example, you may need a key software program to automate a process, freeing you up to focus on more important work. Consult those who can help you overcome the hurdle. As they say, enlist a fresh pair of eyes to see what you may be missing.

3. Gain Perspective

It can overwhelm you when an unforeseen obstacle emerges. To get caught up in the ensuing crisis redirects vital resources to make critical decisions. Gaining perspective helps you step away from the 'noise'. You might seek help from others, talk to friends or loved ones who can offer a different assessment of your challenge.

Perspective does not imply dissociating from the obstacle in resignation. It means viewing it from numerous vantage points while considering other options. It was author Robert Brault who wrote: "We are kept from our goal, not by obstacles but by a clear path to a lesser goal."

4. Evaluate The Obstacle

Can something be done to overcome the obstacle now or does it require expert help? Consider it objectively as though you were seeing it for the first time. Use logic and sound judgement to avoid becoming emotionally

enslaved to the task. “Winners know they’re going to face hurdles, obstacles, failures, tragedies, and disasters — the same as everybody else,” states Larry Weidel in *Serial Winner: 5 Actions to Create Your Cycle of Success*.

## 5. Stay Focused And Committed

Often an obstacle is not intended to weaken your actions. It is an invitation to get clear on the process to advance to the next stage. It is advising you to attend to a particular aspect now instead of the future when you have invested valuable time and energy. You might recall Thomas Edison’s well-known passage of 1,000 ways that did not work to invent the light bulb.

Be unrelenting in your commitment — do not give up. “Obstacles are figments of your thinking. That’s why as soon as your old thinking departs, new thinking arrives and obstacles fade away,” affirms sports psychologist Garret Kramer in *The Path of No Resistance: Why Overcoming is Simpler than You Think*.

Don’t allow setbacks to get you down since you are bound to fall upon many setbacks in life. Obstacles help enrich your mental experience in so far as building resilience, fortitude and strength. Every time you tackle a problem, you overcome a mental hurdle.

## 6. Develop A Growth Mindset

In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* author Carol Dweck delves into two different mindsets required for success: Fixed or Growth mindsets. She provides a comprehensive foundation how to develop a Growth mindset, which is aspiring toward continuous improvement and building on your successes.

She states: “The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it’s not going well, is the hallmark of the Growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.”

## Focus Question

What ‘stumbling blocks’ have you encountered in your life of faith?

## Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29

### Scripture

John 11:1-45

### Meditation

Remembrance is an act of unification. One of my seminary professors was fond of saying that the opposite of remembering isn't forgetting...it's dismembering. We are created to be in relationship with God, each other and creation. Life also contains times of loss. Loss of a loved one can bring us physical pain. People describe losing a spouse as like losing an arm or a leg. Grief can even make us physically ill.

With this in mind, remembering is like finding that limb and reattaching it. We recall the one whom we lost to death or conflict or relocation. Through memory we reconnect and recall the previous life shared together. We may "re-mourn" the loss. We can also celebrate and thank God for the connection.

### Focus Question

In what ways has loss (through death, conflict or relocation) impacted your life and faith?

Monday, March 30

Scripture

Matthew 18:8-9

Meditation

"A lot can happen in forty days and forty nights. More useful things will happen if we enter into this period of sweet discipline with open hearts and minds, with conscious attention. It's not about succeeding, however, but it's about simply being faithful. That's when the most interesting, enlivening things happen. It is then that our sense of God is opened, transforming everything."

*—from the book Sensing God: Learning to Meditate during Lent by Laurence Freeman, OSB*

Focus Question

What cause of wrong doing do you need to cut out of your life? What would it be like without this particular burden?

Tuesday, March 31

## Scripture

Matthew 18:10-14

## Meditation

Ecclesiology is the fancy term for “study of the church”. What is the church? What is its purpose? Generally, your understanding of the church is based on your understanding of Jesus, God and the nature of humanity. And yet, even that is based on what the church has taught you over the years. All of this is based on our understanding of scripture. We will base the purpose of the church on what we think the Bible is teaching us about God. It’s really more art than science.

When I hear Jesus teach his disciples, I get a fairly good look into what Jesus would have the church be. Jesus would have us be a place of goodness, safety, dignity, grace, love, hospitality, healing and peace. Of course, most of this teaching was done outdoors. Church is not a building. It is a group of people following Christ together. So, let us hear and understand the teachings of Christ, and Let us continue his work together.

## Focus Question

What does it tell you about the nature of the church that “it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost”?

Wednesday, April 1

## Scripture

Matthew 18:15-20

## Meditation

I prefer a traditional church. I like an ideologically moderate church. I like a church where intimacy of relationship is valued more than the quality of the worship production. I like a blended worship with old hymns and new choruses sung heartily by multiple generations. I like hands raised in praise and folded in prayerful silence. I want to hear multiple languages and musical genres. I want lush harmonies and victorious street chants. I prefer a traditional church that continues to evolve and grow as their understanding of God grows. This vision inspires me.

In these churches, not everyone gets along. Here personalities sometimes rub. But each party chooses to stay and stay connected. Ideas are shared honestly and received graciously. Disagreements are matters of substance and purpose, not merely about personalities or egos. And God resides in the center of the community's life together. This vision inspires me, too.

So as we talk about forgiveness, don't take it lightly. We live in a time where there is no wrongdoing that anyone has to apologize for. To forgive places you so close to the living Christ you can smell the nard on his feet. Don't you want to be that close?

## Focus Question

Who in the church needs your forgiveness? Who in your life needs forgiveness?



Thursday, April 2

Scripture

Matthew 18:21-35

Meditation

*"Pass it On," by Kurt Kaiser*

It only takes a spark to get a fire going,  
and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.  
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it;  
you spread his love to everyone;  
you want to pass it on.

What a wondrous time is spring, when all the trees are budding;  
the birds begin to sing, the flowers start their blooming.  
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it;  
you want to sing, it's fresh like spring,  
you want to pass it on.

I wish for you my friend, this happiness that I've found;  
you can depend on him, it matters not where you're bound.  
I'll shout it from the mountaintop (PRAISE GOD!);  
I want my world to know;  
the Lord of Love has come to me,  
I want to pass it on.

Focus Question

What can you do so that your graciousness toward others is closer to the graciousness God has given you?

Friday, April 3

Scripture

Matthew 24:1-8

Meditation

*"Lord, Speak to Me," from UM Hymnal #463*

Lord speak to me that I may speak in the living echoes of thy tone;  
as thou has sought, so met me seek thine erring children lost and lone.

O strengthen me Lord, that while I stand firm on the rock and strong in  
thee

I may stretch out a loving hand to wrestlers with the troubled sea.

O use me, Lord, use even me, just as thou wilt and when and where,  
until thy blessed face I see, thy rest, thy joy, thy glory share.

Focus Question

How can one hear the voice of God above all the other voices begging  
for our allegiance?

Saturday, April 4

## Scripture

Matthew 24 (yes all of it!)

## Meditation

I wanted you to revisit this passage from yesterday and pick up the rest. It's Jesus at his most anxious. I want you to read it out loud in your best Broadway voice: loud, dramatic, intense. With actual sound, you can ascertain the strain in Christ's soul. He is angry, suspicious and lashing out. He foresees destruction: his own and his nation's.

I hope also you hear grief. Christ arrived with a vision and a mission. He's leaving with all hopes dashed. Yes, he believes in resurrection, but for this passage, he fears the transition. Can we allow Christ at this moment to be more human and a little less divine?

In light of this grief, as you read, consider the dream he laid out three years earlier at the Sermon on the Mount. Contrast in your mind the vision in Matthew 5 with what Christ foresees in Matthew 24? Can you feel the collapse of a dream? Therein lies the crux of his agony: certainly, the physical pain of resurrection, but even before, the spiritual agony of watching a godly vision go unfulfilled.

Are we not his people?

Is his vision not our vision?

Is his work not our work?

Is the risk he took not also the risk asks of us?

## Focus Question

In what ways do the Beatitudes (from 1<sup>st</sup> week of Lent) inform your faith in light of today's 'wars and rumors of war'?

## Palm Sunday, April 5

### Scripture

Matthew 21:1-11

### Meditation

It's a parade. Of people you don't want to associate with. They've all seen God. Perhaps you haven't because you were in church and God is too big for our small room. That's the conundrum.

### Focus Question

Who is Christ to you?

## HOLY WEEK, Monday, April 6

*For Holy Week, we are going to use the outline of Jesus' week found in Mark's gospel. This outline is further detailed in The Last Week, by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.*

### Scripture

Mark 11:12-19

### Meditation

Jesus' last week of ministry begins much like his first: in a barren place, hungry with no food. It is in this state that he enters the Temple to find moneychangers. They had turned the ritual of sacrifice into a money-making enterprise. Jesus sees it all: the fraudulence, the impact on the poor, the offense to God. He prophesies with words and with physical outrage. It is an indictment on the Temple that should be a fair warning to the church.

### Focus Question

In what ways can we become a "house of prayer for all nations"?

HOLY WEEK, Tuesday April 7

Scripture

Mark 11:20-26

Meditation



Focus Question

What are you asking of God in prayer?

HOLY WEEK, Wednesday, April 8

Scripture

Mark 14:1-11

Meditation

*"Where the Wound Lies," by Angela de Hoyos*

because I go  
like the professed  
sinner repentant  
to the altar  
of your baptismal flame  
I am saved

despite your  
sculptor-love  
whose whimsy kneads  
molds  
and  
fires  
then breaks  
the free-form  
of my fasting body  
to  
make  
me  
whole  
yet thankful

I accept  
these carnal gifts  
of you  
Eros  
and wear them  
as I would  
flawless jewels

(how can you  
know that I  
have bled  
the way  
and back  
biting the dust  
to wear  
your name?)

. . . the wound lies  
not  
in your infliction  
but in my  
expectations . . .

Focus Question

What does the woman's actions and Jesus' response tell us about the nature of God?

## MAUNDY THURSDAY, April 9

### Scripture

Mark 14:12-72

### Meditation

Again, read the whole thing at once. I want you to see the progression of events. The totality of the loss is what's striking to me.

### Focus Question

What does God accomplish through the arrest and betrayal of Jesus?



## GOOD FRIDAY, April 10

### Scripture

Mark 15

### Meditation

Tonight, we'll have a full service that breaks down the whole drama of Jesus' death. John's telling is lengthy and gruesome. Mark's is more pointed: it gets to the matter of his death through the people observing.

Again, read the whole chapter at once.

### Focus Question

Where is God in the suffering and death of Jesus?

## HOLY SATURDAY, April 11

### Scripture

Matthew 27:62-66

### Meditation

We return to Matthew because there is a brief scene there from the Saturday before Easter. People who have executed Jesus are nervous and full of suspicion. There's nothing for you to do on Holy Saturday except make peace with the fact that Jesus has died.

### Focus Question

<none>

## EASTER SUNDAY, April 12

*Note: Your Bible likely contains verses AFTER verse 8, which also likely have notes about the ending of Mark. I am asking you today to finish at Mark 16:8, which seems to be the original ending.*

### Scripture

Mark 6:1-8

### Meditation

You've made it! He's risen indeed.

But first...Jesus is alive, and the followers are scared. How's that for an ending!

### Focus Question

What is the best news you've ever received? How did it change your life?

## EASTER MONDAY, April 13

### Focus Question

Look back over your journal and all the things you reflected on and remembered. What does it mean to you that God is with you throughout your life? Make a plan now to 'live into' what you've learned and discovered during this Lenten season. Who do you need to connect with? What work of the Kingdom do you want to begin? What 'old wisdom' do you need to let go of? What 'old wisdom' do you need to reincorporate into your life?