



## *Bread for the Journey*

*Daily Devotions by and for the People of Trinity*

### **Trinity Episcopal Church**

1500 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Parish Office: 805-965-7419 | [www.trinitysb.org](http://www.trinitysb.org)

## About the Cover

*Bread for the Journey*  
Oil on canvas  
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Lucy Bell, 2026

In thinking of the Lenten season, the movements of the rolling tomb, the rubbing of ash on a forehead, the washing of feet, and the palms on the floor come to mind. *Bread for the Journey*, the title of our Lenten book suggests nourishment for the season of Lent. I can't help but also think of the Eucharist that "this is my body, given for you," "the body of Christ, *bread* of heaven." The representation of the bread is wiped away, leaving an imprint of the bread, the body of Christ.



*Easter Morning image courtesy Julie Hayes-Nadler*

Dear Friends,

In the book of First Kings is the story of the prophet Elijah, who follows God's call and successfully stands up to false gods and an oppressive imperial regime. His success, though, draws the ire of Queen Jezebel, who vows to kill Elijah. And so Elijah flees, feeling afraid and discouraged, despite his triumphs. He wanders out into the wilderness, sits down beneath a tree, and asks God to kill him. God doesn't try to talk Elijah out of his feelings, or give him a pep talk. Instead, God cares for him in a way that's summed up in a meme I like to read when life feels difficult:

*This is your gentle reminder that one time in the Bible, Elijah was like, "God, I'm so mad! I want to die!" So God said, "Here's some food. Why don't you have a nap?" So Elijah slept, ate, and decided things weren't so bad. Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap and a snack.*

As we begin our journey through Lent, it's easy to see the parallels between the courageous, truth-telling work that Elijah was doing, and the ministry of Jesus. We might also notice that the conditions and challenges that Elijah and Jesus faced are being repeated in our own times, and how shall we respond?

While you consider that question, we hope that you'll find in the pages of this Lenten guide insights and perspectives on the scriptures of Lent—written by and for the people of Trinity—that help in your discernment, as well as comfort and respite that offer spiritual sustenance, bread for your travels through this season.



Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

## The Elemental Work of Lent

**Focus Verse:** *For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.* Matthew 6:21

One February, I was invited to bring a cohort of graduate students to a sweat lodge ceremony, led by an elder from the Piute Nation. One student asked, “What is the proper attire for a sweat lodge?” We laughed nervously, for she’d named our discomfort; we didn’t know how to prepare for this mystical, demanding ritual.

Today, Ash Wednesday, as the sign of a cross is smudged onto our foreheads with ashes, composed of burnt fronds from last year’s Palm Sunday, a priest will whisper: “Remember, you are dust, and to dust you return.” Yikes. “What is the proper attire for this Lenten ordeal?” 40 days in the desert with Jesus, walking directly into places we usually seek to avoid: betrayal, temptation, cruelty, death—the dark side of human nature.

“Why ashes?” The gritty residue after a fire serves as an elemental symbol of the work of Lent; we seek to understand what survives the conflagration of the crucifixion, of mortality. For the sweat lodge, we were instructed to strip down to the bare minimum, so we could take the heat. In Matthew 6:1-6,16-21, we’re advised to fast, pray, and give alms, and to do so privately. We fast from illusions, indulgences, and addictions that interfere with our connection with God. It is a time to orient our hearts toward the “eternal treasures” and to give our spiritual lives priority.

When someone we dearly love is dying, we are stripped of all pretense; during Lent, smudged and humbled, we undergo the journey, where Jesus shows us the way through death, with resurrection on the other side of the cross, a gift only received by participating in the arduous journey, the elemental work of Lent.

**Prayer:** *Eternally Present & Loving God,  
On this Ash Wednesday  
Grant us the courage to walk with Jesus  
Into the desert, towards Jerusalem.  
May we fast from that which interferes  
With our home in you.  
Come, Lord Jesus, have mercy,  
Amen*

**Readings:** Joel 2:1-2,12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21; Psalm 103

**Caryl Hurtig Casbon**

## Seeking My Cross

**Focus Verses:** *Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"* Luke 9:23-25

What is my cross? A year or so before the cross becomes the instrument of his death, Jesus challenges his followers to imagine what their cross might be, demanding through grim premonition that they take it up every day to follow in His way. So I ask, on my knees, daily, 'What is my cross today?' And I know that, in essence, Jesus is asking me to live honestly, to value human dignity and defend it where it is in peril, to expose my weakness to others so that their own might diminish as a result.

This has never been easy. I have lost myself in competitive zeal that I believed was essential to success in my profession. I have lost myself in seeking praise from others for my work. I have lived dishonestly with my family in pursuing my career goals – lying about where my work would take me, lying about how long my work would take, lying to please others at the expense of those I most cherish.

What is my cross? I believed it was to witness life's worst and make it legible for those with the power to end it. But that often-self-aggrandizing goal too often led to pain – my wife and children wondering if I were safe, a feeling I dismissed as unimportant as I sought glory, forfeiting myself. Life at the extremes had a heady allure – war, natural disaster, life's parade of the powerful and their many victims – and writing about the extremes amounted to a life's work. But the work changed little, a humbling admission, and left holes in my soul that bearing my cross each day can heal.

Can I find my cross each day? Will I have the courage to take it up? My cross demands that I live in each moment, live a simple, engaged life of loving action and empathy. I will seek it each morning of this Lenten season, on my knees, in gratitude for the life I have been blessed to live.

**Prayer:** *Lord, please reveal to me with loving clarity the cross I am meant to bear today, not the softer, lighter one that I may prefer to carry. May I shoulder this burden with strength, courage and grace, finding your love and the value of the life you have blessed me with in the task. Amen.*

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 9:18-25; Psalm 1

**Scott Wilson**

## Sin Comes from Forgetting

**Focus Verses:** *But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’* Matthew 9:13; *Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?* Isaiah 58:5; *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.* Isaiah 58:9

Sin is a concept I have struggled with throughout my life, but most especially in my twenties. Afraid of losing God’s approval, I collected good works as if they were an insurance policy against sinnerhood. But while this fear led me to do “good” things, it never changed me.

“Look, God, I helped underprivileged children today. Does that mean I am good?” To quote Thomas Merton, this was my “personal salvation project.” And, as is clear in today’s readings, this checklist of good deeds is not what God is looking for. She seeks a complete transformation of the heart, not merely a collection of religious actions, like a day of fasting or a ritual sacrifice—and not just for the benefit of those “less fortunate” *out there*, but also for ourselves *inside*.

Theologian Meggan Watterson writes in *Mary Magdalene Revealed* that “sin is something we produce within ourselves when we misunderstand the truth of who we are.” Sin, she says, comes from forgetting. Forgetting that we are simultaneously fully human and fully divine—embodiments of love, interconnected with all beings. When we remember this, Isaiah writes, “Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’” God answers not because we have earned God’s favor, but because we have remembered that we are not separate from God and therefore She cannot *not* answer us. Within God’s river of love, we are no longer crafting personal salvation checklists, but moved and transformed by the current.

As the mystic and poet Hafiz writes, “What excitement will renew your body when we all begin to see that His heart resides in everything? The Beloved, with His own hands, is tending—raising, like a precious child—Himself in you.”

**Prayer:** *Divine Beloved, help me to remember that you are as close as my own heartbeat, that you are as constant as my own breath. Remove the illusion—the veil that keeps me from awareness of your ever-present love. May I be transformed into an embodiment of compassion in a hurting world.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 58:1–9a; Matthew 9:10–17; Psalm 51:1–10

## Grace in the Hole

**Focus Verse:** *The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail (NIV). I will give you a full life in the emptiest of places – firm muscles, strong bones. You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry (The Message). Isaiah 38:11*

I never knew geological drought until I moved to California; I grew up in a part of Texas that had an ample water supply regardless of rain. Yet the first time I saw the earth so dry it was cracked, there was a shriveled, dried plant that stood rooted in that crack, and I froze when I saw it. I felt a kinship to that bit that was still standing in a hole, weathered until it was a shell of its former self. The words of *The Message* translation are: “I will give you a full life in the emptiest of places.” This was definitely an empty place, and an empty place by any other name is a hole. We all go through dark times that may seem like holes; Anne Lamott says three-quarters of the word “holy” is “hol[e], and it is in the holes of life that spirit works best. But how does one find the holy in the hole?”

I needed someone external to help...someone to water my garden...someone like my grandmother that I can envision holding a hose and watering her own garden to protect it from the Texas heat. I connected with a therapist who turned out to be someone who loves to garden and who sat in the hole with me and showed light in the dark places. My husband was also a gardener, and he loved me while I wasn't feeling very lovable. I was not alone in this empty space, and I was given grace...a grace that doesn't just lift us out of holes but accompanies us while we are there.

My therapist encouraged me to connect to Spirit within...my inner spring. Music has always brought me there; when I play piano or sing, I pray. Someone gave me a CD of a cantor who had rewritten Jewish liturgy with modern melodies, and it spoke to me. I began going to temple on Saturdays and sang the morning prayers she had written. In this temple, you sang from the deepest part of your soul when you prayed. So I sang. I prayed. My singing joined the gurgling of the spring that never runs dry. Slowly, I began to water my own garden and eventually emerged from this hole-y place knowing that there would be other holes and that in the holes I would face dwells mystery...and when I am close to mystery, I am close to the Holy Presence for God is Mystery.

**Prayer:** *Holy Presence, when I am parched and spiritually thirsty, remind me that this is part of the spiritual journey and not the antithesis of it. May I surrender to the uncertainty that I may feel and lean into the Mystery that is you, knowing that you are a gurgling stream that never runs dry.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 58:9b-14. Luke 5:27-32, Psalm 86-1-11

**Carolyn Roberts**

## Transgressing the Borders of Death

**Focus Verse:** *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."* Genesis 2:15-17

The season of Lent is still young. Exciting potential for good work lies ahead as we "till and keep" the soil of our hearts to support fresh life. But if you're anything like me, Lenten opportunities for spiritual growth may already have been obstructed by personal shortcomings or the burdens of daily life.

Lately I've been drawn to an obscure corner of our community garden: the compost heap. At that sacred mound, the breakdown of unfinished scraps and failed recipes into apparent nothingness is, in reality, where new riches are gathered for and from the earth. It is a place where shortcoming, failure, and rejection become a hotbed of latent life, rich and dark.

Composting has helped me see the seeds of resurrection buried in Genesis 2:17. I often read this passage as a warning: "Don't... or else!" But this reading is incomplete. The forbidden tree is not *only* a gateway to evil and death, but also to knowledge of yet-unknown goodness. Hidden in the transgression that fosters decay are the ingredients of new life!

Who has drawn the border between death and life? Who but God the Creator, whose design accounts for our limitations and our failures. The same God, who in Christ, crossed the threshold of death and in his resurrection exposed its impotence. So as we continue our Lenten journeys may we be unburdened by our weaknesses, shortcomings, and failures. And because of God's resurrection power, may we become a people whose life transgresses the borders of death.

**Prayer:** *Creator God, you have made us for abundant life. May we, who are being gathered into communion with yourself, be conformed to the image of Jesus the Christ by transgressing the borders of death. By the power of your Spirit, who is life. Amen.*

**Readings:** Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11; Psalm 32

**Gregory Conarroe**

## God With Us

**Focus Verse:** *I was sick and you visited me, I was imprisoned and you visited me ... as you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me.*” Matthew 25:36,40

I think of the chapter in *The Color Purple* often, when Shug is convincing Celie that God doesn't have to be a white man, but can, in fact, be found all around us, in everyone. This shift in the divine is important, not only to our two Black lesbian main characters in the segregated South, but also to us as a reminder that God is in the least of us, the oppressed.

Today's passage, "I was sick and you visited me, I was imprisoned and you visited me ... as you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:36,40) has stirred a call in me to act.

I imagine this person, this sheep, that God speaks to as waiting patiently, diligently even, to be asked for food, drink, shelter, clothes without necessarily needing to leave their home, their car, their space to do so, and then God speaks of this person's, this sheep's, visitation to the sick and imprisoned.

The visitation to the sick and the imprisoned offers a subtle, but important call to action. The sheep moved toward God, stepping out of their home, their car, their space, and into solidarity with another. I feel this call in myself: the scary, embodied act of visitation, of solidarity, of putting my body out into the world. This is no easy task— to not only clothe the stranger, to welcome them in, but to *go be with* the stranger, where God is. God is with the lonely, the sick, the isolated, the imprisoned, the immigrant, the stranger. God is in solidarity with the least of us. As Shug might remind me, "God is inside you and inside everyone else" and we are called to pay God a visit.

**Prayer:** *God of mercy, forgive me for forgetting your face in the stranger.  
God of courage, hold me as I step into the world.  
God of love, be with me now and forever.  
God of grace, hear my prayer.  
Amen.*

**Readings:** Leviticus 19:1–2,11–18; Matthew 25:31–46; Psalm 19:7–14

Lucy Bell

## Abiding

**Focus Verses:** *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.* John 15:5-8

Years ago, I was introduced to Malcolm Guite, an Anglican priest who writes extensively about poetry as a means of connection with God. In his poetry anthology *The Word in the Wilderness*, Guite describes Lent as “a time set aside to reorient ourselves, to clarify our minds, to slow down, recover from distraction, to focus on the values of God’s kingdom.” This Lenten season, I imagine many of us in the Trinity community feel weary in light of national and world events, personal circumstances we’re facing, and the exhausting pace at which we go about our days. The Lenten posture Guite suggests likely seems implausible for many of us; it certainly does for me.

Today’s passage from John 15, especially verses 5-8, reminds me that fulfilling God’s call on our lives— to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God— requires all of us to engage in spiritual practices that connect us with God. These practices illuminate God’s character and invite us to discern our contributions to God’s work in the world. For me, connection with God is nurtured through many practices including reading poetry, spending time in nature, and serving at Trinity. Poets, R.S. Thomas and Wendell Berry, to name a few, have taught me the importance of slowing down and paying attention as a way of identifying needs in my community and around the world. Hiking up Rattlesnake Canyon and tidepooling at Hendry’s beach bring to mind our responsibility for caring for God’s creation. And in my service with children and youth here at Trinity, I encounter the Holy Spirit as some of our youngest parishioners gather around the prayer table eager to sing.

In this season of Lent, I invite you to join me in attempting to slow down, to engage more purposefully in those practices that sustain our life with Christ, and as Guite suggests to “focus on the values of God’s kingdom” in interactions with others.

**Prayer:** *Gracious God, in this Lenten season and always, amid the fullness and distractions of our daily lives, give us the energy, desire, and time to engage those practices that help us to abide in you. May these practices continually reveal your character to us and encourage us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with you. Amen.*

**Readings:** Acts 1:15-26; Philippians 3:13-21; John 15:1,6-16; Psalm 15

Christen Foell

## Trust in God with All Your Heart

**Focus Verses:** *The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Go to Nineveh and proclaim the message that I tell you." Jonah 3:1 Create in me and clean heart, oh God, and renew a right spirit within me. Psalm 51:10*

God told Jonah that He would visit upon the city a great calamity of destruction unless the Ninevites renounced their evil ways. As God's prophet Jonah would announce this.

What did Jonah do? He bolted. He arranged passage on a merchant vessel that sailed in the opposite direction of Nineveh. While at sea, a great storm rose. The waves were taller than the masts. The sailors had never seen such a thing. They feared for their lives.

Jonah, knowing that he was to blame, told the sailors to save the ship by casting him overboard for he had disobeyed God's will. The sailors did what he asked. The seas abated and the ship was saved. And Jonah? Jonah had the ride of his life. Three days later the great leviathan disgorged Jonah and he continued on into the city of Nineveh with his message of repentance. That message was received by king and all, and God's calamity was not enforced.

Repentance from the heart preceded God's forgiveness. God is all loving and forgiving, saying to Jonah, "If I can forgive you for doing according to my wishes, how could I not forgive 120,000 Ninevites who did the same?"

On my fridge there is a prayer I read every day. It is entitled "God be in my Head." I ask God to be in my head, my understanding, in my eyes, my looking, in my mouth, my speaking, in my heart, and in my thinking. I guess you could describe me as a person of lists. Maybe, but since I ask God to "create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me," I am also claiming my responsibility to participate in that creation. And to do it every day. Over time I find myself listening more and talking less; understanding more and deploying fewer opinions.

The apostle Paul reminds us that the pathway to God's peace is through Faith, Hope and Love. It is that pathway I seek. Trinity has gently led me in this; in joyous times and in my darkest moments. I am surrounded by a truly "graceful" community and leadership.

**Prayer:** *Thank you dear Lord as each day you nourish me in your care and love.*

**Readings:** Jonah 3:1–10; Luke 11:29–32; Psalm 51:10–18

**Andrew Siegel**

## Knock Knock. Knowing Who is There

**Focus Verse:** *Knock, and the door shall be opened for you. Matthew 7:7*

I thought this passage meant that God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit is always available. I still do, but recently I have come to the door with a new meaning. A specific understanding of what kind of comfort or wisdom each of us can find when the door is opened.

I believe that the muse and even creativity itself – whether or not there is a product/outcome – is an aspect, an expression, of the Holy Spirit. Yes! Yes! Some associate the muse with writing, but I propose it includes whatever your passion is. What calms. Absorbs. Energizes. Provides what you need. Gardening...painting...cooking...hiking...dance...potting...surfing...birdwatching...travel...math equations...building furniture...

I find that engagement with the muse provides sustenance for my journey, sometimes through wilderness, again and again when I sing or write.

When we raise our knuckles to the door behind which our muse is waiting for each of us – perhaps in mystery – we participate in a connection that may be beyond logic or imagining. Opening it can invite delight, inspire action, disperse or profoundly express grief. You can name it.

If you are not aware of a personal passion, I invite you to sit quietly until you are bathed in knowing. And then your knowing will gently – or not gently – open the door to the rest of your impassioned life.

**Prayer:** *Holy Spirit Muse, we are so grateful and excited that you infuse our lives with such meaning, joy and purpose and that at times our loving practice even blesses others. Draw us to your creative door. Open our longing to wonder and our wounded hearts to healing. Amen.*

**Readings:** Esther 14:1–6,12–14 (Apocrypha); Psalm 138; Matthew 7:7-12

**Diane Wyman**

## Jesus' Call for Reconciliation

**Focus Verses:** *“But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool’, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”* Matthew 5:22–24

This passage from the Sermon on the Mount calls for righteousness focused on love, forgiveness, and resolving conflict. Holding on to anger makes you liable to judgment. Before we “offer our gifts at the altar”, Jesus calls us to find a higher version of ourselves, a higher level of consciousness, so that we may seek and find true reconciliation.

I have two elder brothers. For as long as I can remember, I’ve always been close with one of them, but not at all with the other. The relationship has been tainted by a complicated web of conflict, accusation, insecurity, jealousy, and ensuing bitterness. We’ve had lots of practice blamefully pointing the finger at one other for decades. Nowadays, we’re at the point of practical estrangement. It’s basically the English adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* - Dostoevsky probably would have liked the story. Is there a way forward, even when it seems all else has failed? Jesus would say, “definitely.”

An old saying goes, “Anger is one letter away from Danger.” Jesus teaches that if it remains unresolved, anger can lead to impurity deep in our souls that permeates even after we die. It is a natural and inevitable emotion, and it is ours to diffuse and put away, for the sake of ourselves and for all of those who we eventually leave behind.

This Lent, let’s make reconciliation a new commitment in our daily spiritual practice. There is always more to be sought and discovered, more work to be done, and more people with whom we can share our God-given capacity to show unconditional love. Perhaps, it can begin as simply as picking up the phone and making a call?

**Prayer:** *Oh God, may we discover a higher level of consciousness, guided by the sunlight of your Holy Spirit. May we find new ways to resolve division - healing, mending, forgiving, and uniting through a practice of radical empathy and love that asks for nothing in return. May we choose hope in the face of despair, courage over comfort, forgiveness over punishment, amends over contempt, integrity over dishonesty, and love over fear. May we seek the path to reconciliation with all our brothers and sisters and find true peace in our lives and for eternity.*

**Readings:** Ezekiel 18:21–28; Matthew 5:20–26; Psalm 130

**Thomas Joyce**

## Love Your Enemies. *Seriously?*

**Focus Verses:** *You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:43-45*

This new commandment makes the Ten Commandments seem like a piece of cake. At least we can *try* to fulfill them, and maybe succeed if we are sincere. But here, Jesus introduces a whole new level of what it means to be a child of God. Try as we might in our own human strength to love our enemies, it just isn't possible without a radical (at the root) shift in seeing and being. This commandment requires a transforming heart.

I find it especially hard now, no need to say why. I struggle not to hate, much less to rise to the miracle of loving my enemies, as I perceive them.

Then I remind myself to draw on what I learned about the familiar commandment in Mark 12:31 to "Love your neighbor as yourself." Mostly we have taken this to mean we must love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. But in the new dimension Jesus is calling us to, what if it means to love our neighbor *as our self*? To wake up in the reality that there is no separation, that our neighbor is not an *other*, separate from us.

Nor, gulp, is our enemy.

We are One in a Luminous Web, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, who described it as "... that singular, vast net of relationships that animates everything that is." This radical shift in seeing—not from separation but from within the wholeness that is God—opens a new possibility of relationship. Of love. Even for my enemy.

**Prayer:** *Animating God, open my eyes to see from within the Luminous Web in which we all live and move and have our being, so that I may learn to see—and love—my neighbor as my very self. Jesus, you who forgave the ones who were taking your very life, help me open my heart to be filled with what flows from your eternal heart of love.*

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 26:16–19; Matthew 5:43–48; Psalm 119:1–8

### A Fresh View on a Well-Known Verse

**Focus Verses:** *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* John 3:16-17

This verse is often used to focus on evangelizing others and getting them to believe in Jesus. However, the focus of the verse is on God's love for the world. The second verse highlights that God's sending Jesus into the world was for the world's salvation, not condemnation.

We often get tied up in the condemnation as humans, but find it harder to focus on loving. Jesus was sent on an errand of love. He came to show us by example how to love others, mostly through forgiveness and service.

So as we reflect on these well-worn verses, may we be reminded of God's love for the whole world and all the people in it no matter where they come from or what they have done. God loves all of us and Jesus' ministry was one of sacrificial love, not one of haughty judgment. May we strive to follow in our Savior's example this Lenten season no matter how hard loving gets with those in our daily lives.

**Prayer:** *Jesus, may you be the light that we follow this Lenten season as we strive to love others. May we pursue forgiveness no matter how much we have been hurt. May we seek to serve no matter how worn out we feel. May we seek kindness in a world filled with so much anger and hate. Would you help us to show others our faith in you by the love we show through our actions. Help us to not judge or condemn knowing all are created and loved by you! Amen.*

**Readings:** Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17; Psalm 121

**Ashley and Anastasia Miller**

## How To Be Exceptional

**Focus Verses:** *Remember not our past sins; let your compassion be swift to meet us; for we have been brought very low. Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your Name; deliver us and forgive us our sins, for your Name's sake.* Psalm 79:8-9

I don't really want to admit it, but I'm as guilty as anyone of buying into the myth of American exceptionalism. I mean sure, there are clearly some serious flaws in our country past and present – the original sins of slavery and our treatment of Native Americans, vast income inequality and a lack of affordable health care and housing, ongoing gun violence – the list goes on.

But when it comes down to it, this is still the land of freedom and opportunity, founded on the ideals of liberty, justice, and democracy...the “city on a hill” shining as an example for the rest of the world to emulate and follow. Right??

Mostly what I'm feeling these days is shame about being an American. Shame for how we are treating the world, the earth, immigrants, and each other. Turns out we are not alone in feeling this way. In the book of Daniel, the prophet laments: “Open shame, O LORD, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you.” And the Psalmist writes: “Remember not our past sins; let your compassion be swift to meet us; for we have been brought very low. Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your Name; deliver us and forgive us our sins, for your Name's sake.” Nations rise, and nations fall, and the shame and sins of humankind against God and each other persist.

In Luke's gospel reading for today, Jesus challenges us to a simple but truly radical paradigm shift. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* To pray for our enemies, to forgive, to give freely, to be merciful, and to do good, expecting nothing in return. Casting aside our judgment and condemnation and replacing them with the love and mercy shown to us by God, now *that* would be truly exceptional.

**Prayer:** *Merciful God, we have been brought very low. We have sinned against you and each other. Forgive us, God, and teach us the way of mercy. Help us to access your exceptional compassion and love, and for our shame to be transformed into true repentance and freedom through Christ. Amen.*

**Readings:** Daniel 9:3-10; Luke 6: 27-38; Psalm 79: 1-9

**Mitchell Thomas**

## Humility

**Focus Verse:** *All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.* Matthew 23:12

Jesus' life and teaching are full of reversals and here we find another one: those who exalt themselves will be humbled but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This can leave us pondering what it means to humble oneself in a culture that derides humility. It seems everywhere we look we find examples of arrogance rather than humility and it's easy to equate being humble with being a pushover or not knowing your own self-worth.

However, Merriam-Webster defines "humility" as "freedom from pride or arrogance." That definition gave me pause, as I haven't thought of humility as something that offered me freedom. One of the gifts of humility, though, is shifting the focus off of ourselves and onto others.

Frankly, focusing on ourselves is exhausting and thoroughly unenjoyable. As we take tentative steps toward humility, we will find freedom from the relentless myopia of proving how worthy we are to ourselves and to the rest of the world. Not only does humility benefit us, but it changes our world for the better.

As the verse just prior instructs, the core of humility is to serve the ones God places in our path. We are not to consider ourselves better than anyone else, but to care for anyone we might have the opportunity and means with which to be a blessing, in ways both big and small.

As you go through this week keep directing your thoughts away from yourself and onto others. How can you be a blessing to the people you come in contact with? How can you better care for the people you are in relationship with? As you think more of others and less about yourself, you just might find a little bit of freedom.

**Prayer:** *Spirit, lift our eyes off of ourselves to truly see others the way you see them. Stir in our hearts and minds a creativity and willingness to find ways to be a blessing to those around us. Help us to experience the freedom you offer us in humility. Amen.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 1:2–4,16–20; Matthew 23:1–12; Psalm 50:7–15, 22–2

**Donna Sugano**

## Turning Inward

**Focus Verses:** *So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.* Jeremiah 18: 3-4

We often attempt to reshape ourselves during the season of Lent. Sometimes this is through the traditional path of self-denial, or we may get the idea that it is more enlightened to add a contemplative or prayerful practice to our days. That's great, but these attempts can run the risk of becoming at best a holy checklist, and at worst, a spiritual version of Dry January. (Itself quite literally a month with no spirits. I'll pass.)

I mention these impulses towards penitence and preparation not to mock or dismiss them, but because, at this point in my life, I know that my track record of completion is not stellar. Sure, it might start out well, but if I'm trying to give something up, I inevitably end up making bargains with myself. Forty days of abstaining doesn't include Sundays! And liturgically, on some calendars at least, Sunday begins at the end of twilight on Saturday, right? My inner Lenten resolve is basically a nine-year-old lawyer who knows where the leftover Christmas treats are.

Daily meditation is 100%, absolutely a habit worth establishing. That's why I keep trying. But the routine that has emerged most strongly in my years of observing Lent is one of self-forgiveness. Even though I know I'm likely to "fail," sometimes I still give something up. And while it might not be the meditation I set out to do, taking a step back, recognizing my good intentions, and gently laughing at myself has in fact become part of my own Holy Lent. And you know what? The wheel still turns; Easter still arrives.

**Prayer:** *Great One, who turns the wheel and makes all things new, give us grace to cut ourselves some slack, get wet clay under our fingernails, and become raised vessels, renewed and filled with the peace of the First-Born, through whom all were created. Amen.*

**Readings:** Jeremiah 18:1–11,18–20; Matthew 20:17–28; Psalm 31:9–16

**David Gartrell**

**Seen and Known**

**Focus Verse:** *I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.* Jeremiah 17:10

What do my deeds deserve? What has God found in my heart and mind? These questions both comfort and unsettle me. God observes my actions, but more intimately, God searches my heart and examines my mind. There's nowhere to hide, and no neater version of myself to present.

A teacher once taught me to begin my prayers, "God, you know the desires of my heart," but then to ask anyway. We cannot rely on God's knowledge alone—we must still act, whether through prayer, deed, or both. When I pray, I know I cannot hide any part of myself from God. Paradoxically, there is profound freedom in this. I can be more honest with myself precisely because God already knows the desires of my heart.

In this Lenten wilderness, that honesty becomes bread for the journey. I don't have to perform or pretend. God already sees the shame I carry, the doubts I harbor, the hopes I barely dare to name. It nourishes me that there is nothing in myself to fear when I am known and held and loved by my Creator.

The phrase "according to what their deeds deserve" reminds me that being known is just the starting place, and that I must act on what God reveals in my heart. But I act from a place of freedom, not fear, held by a love that has already searched me and found me worthy of redemption.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, you know the desires of my heart before I speak them, yet you invite me to pray, to ask, and then to act. Search my heart and examine my mind not to condemn me but to fill me with your love. Help me trust that I am held by you, and let that love overflow into all my relationships. May my deeds flow from the freedom of being fully known and fully loved. Amen.*

**Readings:** Jeremiah 17:5–10; Luke 16:19–31; Psalm 1

**Ellen O'Connell Whittet**

## The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

**Focus Verse:** *‘Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.’* Matthew 21:43

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants offers a sharp critique of how humans handle power, responsibility, and the temptation to treat what is entrusted to us by God as if it were our own. In the story, a landowner establishes a vineyard and leases it to tenants. When he sends servants to collect its fruit, they are beaten and killed; when he sends his son, they murder him as well, imagining they can seize the vineyard. Jesus concludes that the vineyard will be taken from them and given to others who will produce its fruit. Though rooted in first-century tensions, the parable speaks directly to the challenges of modern life.

I am inspired by the central idea of stewardship. The tenants’ failure is not only their violence but their delusion that delegated authority can become absolute ownership. This mirrors modern institutions—governments, corporations, and technological systems—that often act as though their power is self-generated rather than entrusted. The parable insists that authority is provisional and accountable, meant to yield “fruit” such as justice, righteousness, and human flourishing. The vineyard becomes a metaphor for the earth itself, entrusted to nations and communities that must cultivate peace, protect dignity, and steward creation wisely.

There is an important question that begs attention: will we act like tenants who imagine ourselves owners, or like faithful stewards who recognize that the vineyard has been entrusted to us? In a time when humanity’s capacity for both creation and destruction has never been greater, the parable’s call to responsible stewardship is not only relevant but urgent.

**Prayer:** *God of the vineyard, you entrust us with a world rich in beauty, possibility, and promise. Teach us to be faithful stewards—to tend what is fragile, to honor what is shared, and to use our power with humility and care. Amen.*

**Readings:** Genesis 37:3–4,12–28; Matthew 21:33–43; Psalm 105:16–22

## We Are Never Far Off From God's Love

**Focus Verse:** *But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.* Luke 15:20

We are invited to meditate not only on how we are intrigued, inspired, or comforted, but also how we are *provoked* by scripture. As an eldest child, who fancies herself to be the responsible, caretaking, disciplined type, provocation is exactly the word for what the Prodigal Son story does to me. First, it provokes in me a sense of indignation. Am I really supposed to be happy that the younger son who squandered his inheritance in pursuit of selfish pleasure has a feast thrown for him when he returns impoverished and in need of yet more parental support? Has he learned nothing about resource management? The elder son's anger burns hot in my own chest. The father's distribution of reward is patently unfair. It does not accord with my everyday sense of justice.

And yet, this parable also provokes me to tears. The image of a father so eager to greet his wayward child that he gathers up the folds of his robes and *runs* toward the child from "far off," heart bursting with joy, reminds me of the ways in which I am a prodigal, and of how much I crave exactly this kind of exuberant bear-hug. That God seeks us when we are far off, far gone, lost to ourselves, and then rejoices over us, welcoming us back to life—that inspires and comforts me. When I am still far off, God sees me, is filled with compassion, and runs to me to fold me into God's ever unfolding and abundant love, brimming up, ceaselessly overflowing.

**Prayer:** *Teach us to receive your abundant love and compassion, replacing our fear of scarcity with boundless generosity, wiping away our rigid sense of "deserving" and "undeserving." Keep our hearts soft, so that they may overflow with joy.*

**Readings:** Micah 7:14–15, 18–20; Luke 15:11–32; Psalm 103:1–12

## Sharing Living Water

**Focus Verse:** *...but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty...* John 4:14a

As I meditate on today's passages, I carry the context of my life now: standing at the threshold of something new and beautiful. We're waiting and preparing for the birth of our first child.

The emotions ping-ponging between my head and heart are a mix of eager anticipation, impatience, nervousness, and joy—all at the same time. Yet, as I reflect, I remind myself of our journey to this point. It wasn't easy. I ruminate on the theme of putting God to the test along with how "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." Paul's progression through suffering on to hope sounds easy and noble, yet there was a point in our journey where I got hung up on the suffering. When the possibility of having a child felt so tenuous, and so faint, I didn't go so far as to completely lose hope, but I got darn near close.

Jesus speaks of a water that not only quenches thirst, "but those who drink of the water that [he] will give them will never be thirsty. The water that [he] will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." I have the same question the woman at the well poses: where can I be nourished by this mystical water? Can this water sustain me through suffering, through endurance and on to hope?

This water can be found in you and me. It can be found in nature. It can be found amongst our Trinity family. It can be shared through community. Sometimes you may be thirsty, as I was, and a friend is that fountain of support. It can be shared through tears of joy and tears of suffering. It isn't stagnant, frozen, nor hardened: it is alive, and flows between us. It is like a stream after rain offering life to the world around. It is hope.

**Prayer:** *God, in the midst of our droughts and thirst, when we suffer and begin to feel like rocks, spring up in our community your living water so that we may be nourished; and, when our cup is full, help us find the creeks and streams of connection to others in turn. In your name, Amen.*

**Readings:** Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42; Psalm 95

**Aaron Panchal**

## In Quiet Confidence

**Focus Verse:** *But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.* Luke 4:30

I am intrigued by this short line from Luke's version of the Jesus story. In just a few verses, Luke has given us a snapshot image of the beginning of Jesus' public life, a picture meant to illustrate the whole of Jesus' mission and ministry, with all the troubles that Jesus would find himself in again and again until he ends up on the cross.

We hear the sermon at Nazareth where Jesus has just told the congregation that he is the one they have been waiting for. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me," he quotes Isaiah. "I am here to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release of the captives." Jesus also announces himself as the new Elijah, the one who will cross the boundaries and bring God's presence to the one at the edge, the widow, the leper, the foreigner. This is outrageous. He has claimed the authority of the ancient prophets, even of God, and then he tells them that he will take the word and work of God away from them, out to the gentiles. The congregation moves from awe to rage, rage enough to run him out of town, right to the edge of the cliff.

And then: "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

That's the moment that catches my breath. In the crush of the crowd, Jesus passes through all the noise, steady on his own path. I see his quiet confidence, and I'm reminded of that prayer from the Book of Common Prayer (included below). Jesus shows us a way of living in close relationship to God, awake and aware of God in our midst. That relationship caught the attention of his friends and it catches us still today.

I pray, in Lent and all the time, to try to live a life of quiet confidence, a life lived awake and aware of God in our midst, so that I can be steady on the path forward.

**Prayer:** *O God of peace, you have taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: Lift us to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God. Amen.* (BCP p. 832)

**Readings:** 2 Kings 5:1–15b; Luke 4:23–30; Psalm 42:1–7

Anne Howard

## Be Not Afraid

**Focus Verses:** *Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.* Psalm 25:3-4

In 1990, the Goleta School District was planning a merger with Santa Barbara Unified. Being a low teacher on the totem pole, I was worried I would find myself without a job, so I made a plan to move to Minnesota, where I went to college and had professional and social contacts. I went ahead and interviewed there, auditioned for The National Lutheran Choir and made it, and found a place to rent on the Mississippi River.

Not long after, I received word that the school districts in that part of Minnesota tended to hire locally. I was so disappointed, worried and anxious about where my teaching career would go. That night, in the middle of the night, I woke up to a swirling cloud of flame at the foot of my bed! I was conscientiously not afraid, having in my head a double choir Bach motet “Be Not Afraid” that I had sung in college. It is based on Isaiah 41:10. “So do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my right hand.”

I got up to use the restroom. Figuring the flame cloud would be gone when I returned, I was surprised it wasn't. I then went to the living room and listened to the piece. It was clear, to surrender my personal control, trusting His guidance over my own plans, to find peace, purpose and a path aligned with divine will, rather than struggling with self-directed efforts.

In the end, Goleta did not merge with Santa Barbara. My job was secure; I did not move. And in 1992, I met Paul singing in Santa Barbara Choral Society. The rest is history.

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, sometimes I am scared, worried or anxious. I need you to hold me close and remind me that you are here, you love me, you have a plan and you have my back. Help me to trust you in all things and replace my fear with your perfect peace. Amen*

**Readings:** Song of the Three Young Men 2–4,11–20a; Matthew 18:21–35; Psalm 25:3–10

Susan Zink

## Listen Up

**Focus Verse:** *So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe...Deuteronomy 4:1*

In the home where I grew up, rules were important. My siblings and I were told that knowing and obeying the rules would make us successful. Those rules, often reinforced with Bible verses, seemed to be given, and endorsed, by God and the Church. In reality, the rules were set by my parents, mostly to maintain order in a large household with six children.

While I learned the rules at home—what to do and what to avoid, the practice of reflection in relationships was absent. Responding with a “why?” or “how?” would be met with a show of epic Biblical force, such as “Children, obey your parents.” No questions asked. Obedience (or at least feigned obedience) did indeed make me successful in avoiding punishment and gaining privileges.

Today’s Scripture readings are about God’s rules and statutes. More specifically, they are about how we respond to God’s instructions to us. I have long since learned that God is not simply an edict issuer or a tyrannical parent demanding blind compliance. I have learned that God earnestly desires a relationship with me and wants to help me learn how to live wisely.

A relationship with God asks something of us. Our part is to give heed and pay attention. The invitation is to focus on what really matters—love, relationship, community, and God. Jesus affirms this when he tells us that the greatest commandments are to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. God wants us to learn what these commandments mean in real life. God invites us to ask our questions, to listen and discern, and commit ourselves to an honest relationship with our Creator and, thereby, to gain a heart of wisdom and understanding.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, thank you for your invitation to listen and pay attention. Open the eyes and ears of my heart to see and hear what you are asking of me in my circumstances today. Speak your love and understanding into those places that are hard for me to grasp. I trust in your guidance and receive your wisdom. Amen.*

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 4:1–2,5–9; Matthew 5:17–19; Psalm 78:1–6

**Phylene Wiggins**

## The Posture of a Worshipping People

**Focus Verse:** *Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.* Psalm 95:6

Lent often draws us inward, inviting us to examine our hearts, our habits, and the quiet corners of our lives where God is still doing His patient work. Yet Psalm 95:6 reminds us that this journey is not meant to be walked alone. The call to bow, to kneel, to worship is spoken in the plural—come, let us. It is a summons to gather as one people before the One who formed us.

There is something sacred about worshipping together. When we kneel side by side, our differences fade, our pride softens, and our hearts align toward the same holy center. Lent becomes not only a personal season of repentance but a communal act of returning—returning to God and returning to one another.

In a world that often celebrates independence, Psalm 95:6 invites us into interdependence. We are reminded that reverence grows deeper when shared, that awe expands when witnessed together, and that adoration becomes more complete when lifted as a chorus rather than a solo.

As we move through this Lenten season, may we accept the invitation to come together—not out of obligation, but out of longing. Longing to be shaped by God's presence. Longing to be strengthened by the faith of others. Longing to remember that we belong to a story and a Savior far greater than ourselves.

May our worship—quiet or loud, simple or rich—be an offering of unity, humility, and love before the Lord our Maker.

**Prayer:** *Lord, gather us in Your presence, and teach us to bow with reverence and unity. Shape our hearts in this Lenten season and let our worship draw us closer to You and to one another. Let our posture - both inward and outward - honor You in all things. Amen.*

**Readings:** Jeremiah 7:23–28; Luke 11:14–23; Psalm 95:6-11

**Georgi D. Rice**

## Who is My Neighbor? Who Does Christ Ask Me to Love?

**Focus Verses:** *‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all our soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these. Mark 12:30-31*

In this passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells me that loving God and my neighbor is how I show that I follow him. In Luke, chapter 10, he tells a similar story about the Good Samaritan, reminding me that even apparent enemies are still my neighbors. I grew up loving these stories, and tried to live by them most of my life.

Over time, I became increasingly justice-oriented. I’ve come to see more clearly who Jesus spoke about when he challenged us to love our neighbors. I consider the immigrant, the unhoused, the sick, the hungry, the LGBTQ+ community my neighbors, and I use my time and money putting that love for them into action.

But something happened when the government attacked these neighbors. I began to feel hate in my heart for the people hurting them. And then I realized the difficult truth that those folks are my neighbors, too: the ICE agent, the congressperson who votes to gut human rights, the judge who supports an evil administration, the racist who lives down the street, the homophobic brother-in-law.

Based on Christ’s words, those folks are also people I am called to love. That. Is. Hard. Honestly, I don’t know how to do it. I do know that when calling out injustice and acting to bring about change, I can either speak in a voice of love, or a voice of hatred. It is a challenge to love those who “don’t deserve it”. I know I am not to accept those evil deeds, but somehow I must not allow that evil to infect my heart as well.

This will be a lifelong struggle for me, not just a Lenten one. I will try and I’ll pray for the strength to continue if I am going to “love the Lord my God with all of my heart, soul and mind, and my neighbor as myself”.

**Prayer:** *I ask you, Loving God, for the grace and courage to remember those you call me to love, even when I don’t know how to love them. May I always put my trust and hope in you so that I can be a blessing, even when the sorrows of this world threaten to turn my heart away from love. Thank you for your infinite mercy and grace to make it through these hard times, one day at a time. Amen.*

**Readings:** Hosea 14:1–9; Mark 12:28–34; Psalm 81:8–14

**Melissa Braun**

## My Heart is Broken

**Focus Verse:** *The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.* Psalm 51:18

Divine intervention isn't really a part of my concept of God. However, call it luck, or karma, or the Holy Spirit; something was working in my favor when the Lenten booklet scripture assignments were being handed out. Mine include Hosea 6:1-6, Luke 18:9-14, and Psalm 51:15-20.

Of the three, the Hosea reading resonates the least with me. The Luke reading is memorable. You know it; it's the one where the Pharisee is praying and says, essentially, "Thank you God for making me so much better than just about everyone else." Classic. I can imagine writing a sermon about it.

But, for me, the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm easily carries the day. It has been my favorite psalm since at least my teenage years. Many of the lines are etched in my memory in the beautiful old King James language. I remember being told that it was called the convicts' prayer. The core message of the psalm is repentance.

But it is more than that, it is about expectations. My favorite line in my favorite psalm is, and always has been, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." (King James Version).

Unlike the boastful voice of the Pharisee in the Luke reading, this is a voice of humility. And wisdom. It is not realistic to expect or claim perfection. We all fall short at one time or another. And we do need to recognize our failings. The divine can be experienced as universal love and compassion, both of which require humility. Feeling remorse for the times we are not acting in compassion and love and with humility is appropriate, in fact necessary.

**Prayer:** *My heart is broken remembering when I fail*

*to love*

*to give*

*to help*

*to forgive*

*to step aside*

*to lend a hand.*

*My heart is broken when I am separated from the divine. Amen*

**Readings:** Hosea 6:1-6; Luke 18:9-14; Psalm 51:15-20

**Michael Neal Arnold**

## Questioning the Darkness

**Focus Verses:** *He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* Psalm 23: 2-4

Psalm 23 is one of those texts I remember having to memorize in Sunday school. Growing up in the Baptist Church, memorizing words, and quoting them without thought – literally – was the goal. The unspoken expectation was to know the words and recite them at the drop of a hat – but you were never to question the words. And you were never to question those with authority. Questioning was a sign of doubt. Doubt meant a lack of faith. And a lack of faith meant that evil had a hold on you.

Rereading this Psalm now, my mind goes back to the memorized words, even though my current Bible has slightly altered wording. But the imagery of still peaceful waters and green pastures continues to bring me a sense of comfort and safety – especially when thinking about the news each day. I still find God among the forests and beside the ocean waves – my own version of green pastures and still waters. It's where the noise of the world quiets a bit. And in that quieting of the world, that is where my cup is refilled.

These days, it does not feel as though my cup is overflowing. Every time I read the news, talk with loved ones, look at social media, or engage with the world, I feel broken by the darkness that surrounds me. And facing that darkness feels impossible. But when I take time to find God in green pastures and still waters (or, noisy waves) my cup is refilled and ends up overflowing. Every day I feel as though I am indeed walking through a valley of darkness and death, but when I let God refill my cup, I am able to keep going – because I am not alone. God is with me for the journey.

**Prayer:** *Lord, as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we still fear evil – even when we don't want to and try hard not to. Help us remember that we need to do more than memorize words of comfort and hope. Instead, help us to see through the darkness. Guide us to our own green pastures and still waters so that we may refill our cups. And once our cups are filled, help us go into the world and question those who bring the darkness. And in doing so, let our questions bring your light to the darkness we now face.*

**Readings:** 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41; Psalm 23

**Kristina Kelehan**

## Faith in God's Peace

**Focus Verse:** *I will exalt you O Lord, because you have lifted me up, and have not let my enemies triumph over me.* Psalm 30:1

In these trying times, many of us feel marginalized and broken by life. Every day we are bombarded by negative images and news through all manner of multi-media. I feel like I am dying by inches. I pray to God for relief and often wonder if God hears me. Life continues on and the negativity keeps building. But God's promise to us is not that all the negative things will miraculously disappear, but rather that we can find relief in His peace. His promise is that He will stand by us no matter what, and through our faith we will be restored to health.

In the Gospel of John, we read that when Jesus returned to Cana, a royal official came to him pleading with him to heal his dying son. Jesus responded to the man: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." But the man would not be put off, and it was through his faith that Jesus told him to return home, that his son had been healed. I can imagine the overwhelming peace that man must have felt. His faith had been answered, not by signs and wonders but through the quiet peace and grace of God.

Only by surrendering my concerns and fears to God can I find the peace that He promises. During this season of Lent, we are tasked to focus on what matters most and leave behind what matters least. Being anxious about what we read and see is a natural response. But when we get mired down by it, we lose our connection to peace. We become diminished in our faith practice, and are not as prepared as we could be for the days ahead. Let us take these 40 days of Lent to prepare ourselves to meet whatever may come with faith, and let God's peace heal our brokenness.

**Prayer:** *Oh Gracious God, you have placed us here at this time to be witness to your healing peace. So many people are mired down by so much negativity in the world that their hearts are broken and are searching for a way out. But we must not wait for signs and wonders in order to find peace in our lives. Let us turn now to you and your promise to heal our hearts, no matter what the days may bring. Grant us your peace to heal our brokenness in this weary world and strengthen us to go out into the world as peaceful witnesses of your grace and love.*

**Readings:** Psalm 30:1-6 11-13; Isaiah 65:17-25; John: 4:43-54

Alexander D. Thomas

## Here and Everywhere

**Focus Verses:** *“Rabbi,” the sick one answered, “I don’t have anyone to put me into the pool once the water has been stirred up. By the time I get there, someone else has gone in ahead of me.” Jesus replied, “Stand up! Pick up your mat and walk.” The individual was immediately healed and picked up the mat and walked away. John 5:7-9 (The Inclusive Bible)*

The Bethesda Fountain in Central Park in New York City is one of my favorite places in the world, with its central monumental sculpture there of an angel stirring up and blessing the waters as in the story in John 5:1-18. The sculptor, Emma Stebbins, was the first woman to receive a commission for a public work of art in New York City; it was unveiled in 1873.

That angel is a favorite of many, and not only because of its incredible beauty, but also because of its subject matter. Angels bear the message of immediate, sacred presence in our world and in our lives. The story from scripture of the angel at Bethesda, coming to stir up the waters, had the same appeal: a place, an actual place, where God would come and meet the needs of those who are suffering.

Jesus goes beyond the message of the angel, both the presence of the angel and what the angel was offering, in stirring up those waters at Bethesda, but the heart of the message is the same: that God’s presence, the presence of infinite love is with us in this world, in our lives, and in all circumstances. We need not wait in a specific place or posture to encounter all of who God is for us and all that God desires to be for us.

When Jesus tells the sick person, “Stand up! Pick up your mat and walk,” he removes the limitations and reveals that everywhere is God’s realm and God moves ahead of all of our prayers and longings. Perhaps our prayer can transition in word, practice, and action to awakening to the reality of God - as Jesus sought to awaken people to what already exists in the heart and mind of God.

**Prayer:** *Generous, Abundant God, awaken our hearts and minds to your longing and your reality for us and our world. Help us to see that we need not wait for an elusive angel to walk into your future of healing presence and healing justice here and everywhere. Amen.*

**Readings:** Ezekiel 47:1–9,12, John 5:1–18, Psalm 46:1–8

**Randall Day**

**Lineage (Connection) - Linear and Reflective**

**Focus Verse:** *The Lord is near to those who call upon him, to all who call upon him faithfully.* Psalm 145:18

The passages for today remind one of the connection between God the Father and his Son Jesus' divine identity and power, revealing that He operates in perfect harmony with God. He possesses authority over life, death, and judgment, and offers eternal life to those who believe in Him. This direct lineage, therefore, challenges the faithful to honor Him as they honor God.

The readings make me think of our connection to God during our earthly journey, our time in our earthly vessels, that time between “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” How do we accept our direct connection to God, through the Holy Spirit, and outwardly reflect Jesus' call to us to be His embodiment in this world? Certainly part of the answer lies in faith and belief, that mysterious and unrelenting yearning that pulls at our hearts and souls, but I also believe that the connection to God and Jesus is more direct and reflective by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all of us that allows us to connect with Christ in the other, and in that way being one with our sisters and brothers in the world.

I used to think of prayers that included the line “by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit” as the Holy Spirit being outside myself, that I could, in my head, maybe be inspired by the Holy Spirit. At some point in my life, I began to know the Holy Spirit in my heart as indwelling divine breath that is with me, every time I breathe, every time I inspire. My faith is strengthened through the knowledge of God within me. Connection, linear and reflective and ultimately a mystery.

**Prayer:** *Gracious God, strengthen my faith every day for the work I need to do, for the connections and interactions with my brothers and sisters in the world, and strengthen my reflection of your love and light into the world, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 49:8-15; John 5:19-29; Psalm 145:8-19

**Claude Garciacelay**

## Wait. God Changes God's Mind?

**Focus Verses:** *But Moses implored the Lord... 'Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind... Remember... how you swore to [your servants] ...' And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring on his people.* Exodus 32:11-14

How well I remember that fall afternoon in the seminary classroom in Philadelphia. I was in my first semester as a commuting student, just “putting my toe in the water”, not knowing where this adventure would lead. Many of my long-held ideas about God were still intact, including the ones about omniscience and omnipotence.

We were all gathering up our things at the end of class. A senior student was talking about the end of the story of Noah and the ark, when God promised to never again bring wholesale destruction on the earth. She said, quite matter-of-factly, “well, God changed God’s mind.” And I thought “uh-oh”.

How does a God who knows everything before it happens change God’s mind? How does a God who has a perfect plan change direction? How does a God who is absolutely consistent *not* do what God said God would do?

In today’s reading from Exodus, Moses clearly is not troubled by such questions. Returning shining-faced from his time with God on the mountain, he has found the people worshipping a golden calf they constructed while he was gone. In direct violation of divine command, this is an outrageous act of disobedience. God is furious. “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and...consume them,” God says.

But instead of taking cover, Moses goes to bat for the people, and for God. He reminds God of God’s promises to Abraham, and even dares to wonder out loud how it will look to the Egyptians if, after delivering them, God then proceeds to wipe the people out. And God changes God’s mind.

This ancient story does not fit with a lot of traditional thinking about God. Rather, it depicts a dynamic relationship between Divine and human that allows *both* parties the freedom to be affected by the other. Which feels presumptuous. And risky.

And yet, at the same time, doesn’t it inspire hope? This idea of a God who engages, who listens deeply, and who leans toward mercy? This One for whom, in the end, faithfulness to the divine Self, in all its loving generosity and compassion, is what carries the day? Isn’t it enough to make us implore God for mercy, for all of us?

**Prayer:** *Holy One, hear us, remember us, and have mercy. Amen.*

**Readings:** Exodus 32:7–14; John 5:30–47; Psalm 106:6–7,19–23

Christine Purcell

## Is Goodness Boring?

**Focus Verses:** *Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training.... Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray, ... for God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity.*  
Wisdom 2:12-15, 21-23

There's an old "Far Side" cartoon about heaven that shows a new arrival with robe, wings, and halo, sitting on a puffy cloud. Overjoyed at the prospect of eternity in heaven, right? His thought bubble says otherwise: "...Wish I'd brought a magazine."

The obvious assumption here is that heaven is *boring*. And not just heaven, but heavenly things like goodness, righteousness, and virtue, too. Even the *words* sound boring. "Good" suggests goodie two-shoes; "righteous" is uncomfortably close to self-righteous; and "virtuous" means no fun at parties. ("Vice" on the other hand... nudge, nudge; wink, wink!)

But Christian mystic Simone Weil says this is a figment of the imagination: "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating."

Think about the best people you know -- not the goodie two-shoes or the self-righteous, but the *best* ones. The ones who are well-springs of love and hospitality, whose lives are marked by integrity and joy more than judgmentalism. Are *they* boring? Probably not. Probably you find them deeply attractive!

But there's a catch: goodness and righteousness are not always attractive to everybody. The writer of Wisdom 2:12-15 imagines the ungodly as saying, "Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training.... He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us...." But that tells against them and not against the righteous person, for ...God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity." An eternity so glorious that we won't want a magazine.

**Prayer:** *Lord, I love you and I want your eternal life. I want to become the kind of person who experiences that life as new, marvelous, and intoxicating, instead of boring. Give me your grace during this Lenten season that I may grow into the image of your eternity and reflect your goodness in more beautiful ways. Amen.*

**Readings:** Wisdom 2:1a,12-24, John 7:1-2,10,25-30, Psalm 34:15-22

## Holy Nourishment Through Connection

**Focus Verses:** *Let the malice of the wicked come to an end but establish the righteous; for you test the mind and heart, O righteous God. God is my shield and defense; he is the savior of the true in heart.* Psalm 7:10-11

While Lent is one of my favorite seasons of the church, it is a lonely one. We're asked to turn inward and repent of our sins, embrace solitude, and travel through the wilderness alone as Jesus did.

But when the wilderness has bombs that target hospitals and schools in Gaza and ICE agents who abduct mothers and fathers and shoot women in mini vans, and when the wilderness has unarmed Black men and women killed by police and more love for guns than children...well, traveling alone isn't an option if we are to survive.

We need connections with other humans, animals, and nature to nourish us, make us brave, allow us vulnerability and safety, and keep us rooted in love. Connections through hugs, laughter, 2am phone calls, prayers, protests, dancing, and worship create peace and bring hope.

David writes, "Let the malice of the wicked come to an end...God is my shield and my defense." I doubt that ICE will magically disappear, assault rifles will be banned tomorrow, or that bombs will stop falling on Gaza. I do believe that God will bring us through this wilderness by showing up in our love for each other and the world we can still create.

**Prayer:** *Lord, thank you for our sacred connections and the nourishment you provide through them. Help us to love and nourish others as we make our way through the wilderness. Remind us that hope is defiant and change is possible. Bless all those who did not survive the wilderness and let them know peace. Amen.*

**Readings:** Jeremiah 11:18–20; John 7:37–52; Psalm 7:6–11

Sara Kelehan

## Learning to Dwell in the Spirit

**Focus Verse:** *I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord. Ezekiel 37:14*

How easy it is, in these days, to be consumed by earthly life! Every screen flashes advertisements for all the things that can help us be beautiful or successful or healthy or desirable.

Then there are all the daily tasks to be done for oneself, for family, friends, jobs – all that human life on earth seems to require. How easy it is to fret right over the Spirit – where God dwells in us – where we recognize and receive every good thing, the place where we can feel the deep need for communion, compassion, sanctuary, love, wilderness and peace.

This passage from Ezekiel reminds me that, through every human complication, God will meet us where we live, promising to walk with us and always to act on our behalf.

**Prayer:** *Gracious loving God, remind me every day, through every distraction, that you are with me, dwelling in my deep place, connecting me to the continuum of everything that is good, whole and healing in the Universe, from the beginning. Amen.*

**Readings:** Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45; Psalm 130

**Kate Wallace**

## Comfort

**Focus Verse:** *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.* Psalm 23:4

I write this contemplation from Europe. At the Vatican, I beheld numerous depictions of The Crucifixion by Chagall, Caravaggio and more. Each artist pours out what their soul knows about Christ's suffering. I could not possibly absorb these renderings in one viewing. They gripped me, each work of truth and greatness.

I get annoyed when I hear the phrase, "Christ died for your sins", when repeated as if by rote or as a 'catch-all'. What meaning does that hold when a person is in need of comfort? It misses the point and opportunity of what God wants us to know. Christ suffered inexplicably and died a horrific death so that we could know that He knows, and that there is no pain we can endure that He has not embodied. Because He knows, He can, He will, He does comfort us. I think that is the point.

In Ephesus, I learned that while twenty percent of it has emerged, eighty percent remains underground, still being excavated by archeologists. My own relationship with God for half my life was a twenty percent sort. I hadn't come to know the power of our God. As earthquakes struck Ephesus leaving remains scattered, unrecognizable, shattered, irreplaceable, so had become my life. At rock bottom, in pain I was sure would kill me, I found a God so good, so real, so tangible. It took excavating, but that God excavated with me. We came to know each other's wilderness with an intimacy born of that excavating.

God stood behind Paul's ministry in Ephesus where miracles came about. I have come to know similar miracles, numinous events that caused a radical belief that only God could have been the saving miracle. Having been through the valley of the shadow of death, I have come face to face with God's protection. God has comforted the depths of my soul.

**Prayer:** *Merciful God, thank you for walking my wilderness and my valley with me. Thank you for holding all the broken pieces of me with such care and love. Truly, I can fear no more. May all be soothed as I have by your comfort.*

**Readings:** Susanna 41-62; John 8:1-11; Psalm 23

**Carol Ann Manzi**

## On Christ's Passion, Its Purpose, and Its Power

**Focus Verses:** *For the LORD looked down from his holy place on high; from the heavens he beheld the earth; That he might hear the groan of the captive and set free those condemned to die....* Psalm 102:19-20

Every year as we get closer to Holy Week, I try to imagine the crucifixion as it would have really looked. Not like I'm witnessing something miraculous, as it's depicted in paintings or plays, but literally, the execution of a criminal. The jeers and taunts, the nails, the blood, the wounds, the tears. It's hard to contemplate-- this is how humankind is saved from sin and death? How could such a beautiful thing happen in such an ugly way?

Of course, it couldn't have happened any other way. He could not have died for the homeless, the impoverished, the prisoners, the criminals, without becoming like them. With thieves on either side. After keeping company with the diseased and the social outcasts.

And I am filled up by this notion, the notion of a God who sends his son to die so the lowest can be raised up with him, a God who fully loves and uplifts each person who is deemed untouchable. The notion of a Savior who dies, not with heroism and dignity, but in the most disgraceful and humiliating way, much like the way he came into the world. A Savior who suffered like the worst of us.

This notion helps me to bear witness to those who suffer today. These days, we are exposed to so much suffering, from far away and close to home. I guard myself against numbness by looking for Christ in those people; to turn away would be like to turn from Him on the cross. If I can see His humanity in the Passion story, then I can see the humanity of all who are oppressed, and in so doing hold on to my own humanity.

**Prayer:** *Liberating God, who puts down the mighty and raises up the humble and meek: Remain with the poor, the wounded, those whose lives are ravaged by war, or crushed under the boot of empire; may it be a comfort to them that Your Son suffered like them, so that they may be raised up to Your Kingdom of endless love. Help us to see Your Son in them, and let us be moved by our shared humanity with them, not numbed into inaction.*

**Readings:** Numbers 21:4-9; John 8:21-30; Psalm 102:15-22

Grace Wenzel

March 25, 2026

Wednesday, Fifth Week in Lent  
The Feast of the Annunciation

## God With Us. No!

**Focus Verse:** *Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.* Isaiah 7:14

The liturgical calendar points us to blessed Mary to whom an angel appeared, announcing (hence Annunciation) her role in God's plan of salvation through her son Jesus (Hebrew: God saves). But farsighted Isaiah knew of a predecessor bearer of a divine intrusion, a heaven-favored child whose presence signaled God's.

Fast forward to now and us. Do we like this? The Lord beside, close, disruptively near, holiness calling us to account, to conform our behavior to that of a son who is the commandment-keeping Son?

To be honest, we would have God *not* be with us, leaving us, with our desires and decisions, blissfully alone. Such is the Christian diagnosis of our condition, lamentably at ease, God-without-us.

But...and this is the gospel...the Holy One arrives alongside us not as an avenging angel but precisely, inexplicably, improbably as Jesus. He is one of us who becomes all of us before heaven. In our stead he lives the commandments. To beggars, lepers, to women bent, to Lazarus dead, he was among us as the love God is.

In the end, blessed Mary ended up with her beloved at a hill outside the city. There, he was, in the dreadest, most horrible way, us without God, abandoned. "My God! Why?"

Then the unimaginable happens. God is still with him and us, not against, cancelling our sin in undeserved grace. It beckons us, this grace, to unending laud, and toward neighbors as God with them.

**Prayer:** *Holy One of Israel, we praise you for the future you open to us through Immanuel. With blessed Mary, make us ready to receive your presence in faith and thanksgiving; who with your Son and the Holy Spirit reigns, one God, now and unto ages of ages.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 45; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

**Bruce Wollenberg**

## Walk Before Me

**Focus Verse:** *When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.” Genesis 17:1*

“Follow me,” Jesus said to his disciples.

“Walk before me,” God said to Abram.

“Hold my hand,” I said to my children when they were small.

Each phrase hints at the relationship between speaker and listener, but it’s the second one I’m considering here. The instruction that God gives Abram – *walk before me* – is different from what I learned in Sunday School, which was that I should *follow* Jesus, as one of his obedient lambs.

This Genesis image – of Abram walking with God at his back – encourages me. It speaks of agency, possibility and companionship, and it revives a memory from my early childhood in South India. On the day I’m recalling, my family had left the heat of the plains for a few days of cool respite in the mountains. Five years old, and the youngest of six children, I rarely had the luxury of Mum’s undivided attention. So I was thrilled when, just before sunset one evening, she called me to walk with her to a nearby rocky outcrop. “I want to show you something,” she said.

At the outlook, Mum stood me in front of her, holding me close, as we both gazed out across the landscape. A vast terrain of hills and valleys reached into the darkening distance. Ridges here and there gleamed gold in the vanishing light, and valleys filled with purple shadow.

This earliest of memories was my first experience of awe, of being overwhelmed by beauty on a grand scale. Standing behind me, my mother gave me the gift of a safe, unobstructed view of God’s spectacular creation.

May we all find ways to support each other, as companions walking through the world together.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, may I walk before You today, feeling your presence at my back; recognizing your beauty in the world, and in each person I encounter. Amen.*

**Readings:** Genesis 17:1–8; John 8:51–59; Psalm 105:4–11

**Pauline Nelson**

## Freedom From the Bondage of Self

**Focus Verses:** *The cords of hell entangled me, and the snares of death were set for me. I called upon the LORD in my distress and cried out to my God for help. He heard my voice from his heavenly dwelling; my cry of anguish came to his ears. Psalm 18:5–7*

The afflictions that trouble me most don't come from the outside world. Yes, there are situations with people, places, and things that are troublesome and over which I have no control. Yet I am plagued most severely by my self-inflicted injuries - the stories that I tell myself about myself, and the stories that I tell myself about other people.

My selfish and self-centered narratives wrap themselves around my mind and my heart. They are worsened by my repeating of imagined conversations and outcomes, and they result in resentment and fear that strangle and smother my experience of God's love. I am living in hell.

When my awareness rises and the inner pain and torment reach a breaking point, I finally come around and raise my flag of surrender, calling out to God to relieve my suffering. I cry out inside (and sometimes outside), "Lord, save me. Make haste to help me. Save me from myself."

And at that moment my prayer is answered. I am unable to hold both selfishness and surrender to God's grace at the same time. As long as my mind and heart are repentant (that is, turned back toward God) I feel relief as resentment and fear loosen their grasp. I must pray this again, and again, and again, until I'm freed through my awareness and acceptance of God's love.

As I remember to practice surrendering my will and my life to God on a daily basis through contemplative practices, worship, and living in loving community, I get better at "picking up the phone" and asking for help from God before it feels like the world is collapsing around me. When I choose to be saved instead of selfish, I can more readily be an instrument of God's peace in the lives of those around me.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, the very thought of you is the golden key that frees me from the snare of self-centeredness. Help me to remember that I am always holding the key to my freedom, and that merely calling upon you cracks open the door through which your grace and love enter to save me, through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.*

**Readings:** Jeremiah 20:7–13; John 10:31–42; Psalm 18:1–7

**Brian Bargiel**

## Awakening to New Life

**Focus Verse:** *Show us your mercy, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. Psalm 85:7*

As I pondered these texts to find a thread of meaning, I was taken back to the icy cornfield of my childhood farm in Illinois in the midst of winter. There on the snowy ground was a nearly frozen newborn calf. My father hesitated; what was a practical farmer to do? "Please let me try to save it", I begged. I can still feel my 8-year-old emotions as we tried to bring life back into its still little body, and my unbridled joy as breath became visible from its tiny nostrils when our efforts revived it. Time seemed to stop, and I slipped into a liminal space of wonder and awe at its "rebirth". This childhood glimpse of the miracle of divine compassion gives deeper meaning to God's salvation and mercy found in Psalm 85.

Through the centuries, this text's enduring message is of one restoration and revival for God's people, wandering in the wilderness, unconscious and unaware. Perhaps there is a deeper meaning to this notion that God sent his son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. As a clarification of the word *salvation*, the word "revive" is given. In Hebrew it is "chayah", and means to bring back to life, to restore to consciousness. When I reflect on the deeper message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection this notion of "chayah" resonates with me.

Jesus implores us to "wake up"; to come alive. What does this mean? Ezekiel 37 speaks of hope and restoration for those who have been spiritually "dead" from despair, hopelessness and disconnection. John's Gospel describes those who "saw" Jesus' miracles and "awakened". We are called to awaken from our sleep, our unconscious way of wandering through our lives on automatic pilot. As we find wonder in the ordinary and extraordinary, we awaken to a sense of wholeness. Looking at the world with childlike wonder, we see as if for the first time. When memory, judgment and language loosen their grip, what is left? Time and space expand into an undivided reality, filling our hearts with wonder and awe at God's boundless love.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, we pray that you will revive our brokenness into fullness of life, restoring us to wholeness as we rejoice in your unfailing love. May we live each day fully alive, awake and surrendering our lives to your service. Awaken us to see the wonders of your creation and unending love through the "new eyes of our hearts."*

**Readings:** Ezekiel 37:21-28; John 11:45-53; Psalm 85:1-7

Mary Ann Evans

## The Demigod, the Donkey, and the Dawn

**Focus Verses:** *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human... Philippians 2:5-7*

On one side of town came the horses and the trumpets and the chariots. All the trappings and tumult of imperial might flexed on the poor, the occupied, and the downtrodden. A god in human likeness, so revered that sacrifices, temples, and public rituals demanded homage. A god who embraced victory, screamed freedom from barbarism, and imposed a Pax Romana that would be unbreakable.

And on the other side of town came a lone donkey on a dirt path. Nothing fancy, just some threadbare cloaks and hastily plucked fronds to line the way. A God in human likeness, so poor, so occupied, and so downtrodden that the only worship was one short day of song. A God who silently rode to the place of the final emptying. Releasing everything to draw near to us. Offering the gift of shalom by surrendering in solidarity.

On the Lenten journey, God's presence can feel far away. We are emptied daily by deadlines and headlines. We work hard to provide for our families and we weep as our neighbors are disappeared by ICE. We are a people who empty ourselves for love. I have seen it and I know it to be true.

So on this Palm Sunday, as the first glimpses of dawn break over the Lenten wilderness, remember that the God of the galaxies knows what it means to be emptied. In human likeness. In the likeness of one enslaved. In the likeness of one deported. We are not alone in the emptying. And so because of this, may we be filled.

**Prayer:** *(Inhale) Fill me with divine solidarity.  
(Exhale) Empty me for your shalom.  
Amen.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 27:11-54; Psalm 31:9-16

**Theo Patterson**

**Don't Fast from the Fountain of Life**

**Focus Verses:** *How precious is your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings. You feed them from the abundance of your own house, letting them drink from your river of delights. For you are the fountain of life, the light by which we see.* Psalm 36: 7-9

I have a difficult relationship with fasting. It's not the self-denial that's hard or the restraint around eating, or at least not in the way people immediately think when they see a Black woman in a fat body. I started down the garden path to disordered eating when I was sixteen, the voices of family members and society swirling in my mind, driving me to eat as little as possible. I would go through stretches of time where my eating looked normal, but I often used religious fasting as a cover for restriction.

During my first few Lenten periods at Trinity, I chose not to engage in fasting. I believe now that a god who shelters Her children under Her wings like a mother wren is uninterested in that kind of sacrifice. Instead, I let myself nest in that warm, dark place of refuge. And as I healed, not just from the eating disorder that landed me in the hospital, but also from a high-control version of Christianity that had also taught me to shrink myself, I realized that, like Martha, She continuously wants to feed me from the abundance of Her own house. It's a process, but I'm learning to accept Her unfailing love and endless hospitality. I am beginning to trust that not only does She provide a fountain of life that never runs dry, but that its source is a river of delights. I have spent the past year, in particular, learning how to live in that abundance, to let myself take up space, to believe that I deserve it, and that I won't be punished for it. It's a difficult path, but She is shining a light on a future I'm beginning to see, and I am finding joy can come even before the morning.

**Prayer:** *Mother God, You are expansive, and you created your children to contain multitudes. We were not made to shrink ourselves into conformity or to cut ourselves off from your fountain of life. Too much of the world seeks to control us, to diminish us, and too often churches make that their ministry. You have been making us a different promise. Neither the lie that endless sacrifice will make us worthy of love, nor the self-centered prosperity gospel. You offer us true abundance. Your table is set for us. Help us come, eat, and be filled. Help us drink your libations of love and quench our thirst for approval. May we come down to the river not just to pray, but to splash in delight. Let it drench us and sustain us in a world that seeks to suck us dry. Help us remember that a plant, watered regularly and fed by light, is not meant to stay small, but to grow and take up space. Amen.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 42:1-9; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11; Psalm 36:5-11

**Michelle Petty**

## A Different Story

**Focus Verses:** *Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.* 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

I had a chance a few years ago to teach a first-year seminar at Westmont. Because it was during Covid and our community was still scattered, the college wanted to give incoming students a shared initial experience, and a planning team created a seminar curriculum of poems, short readings, and questions to do with the theme of "story."

Even through the rather thin medium of our group Zoom calls, I was moved by these young people's eagerness to live stories that were good, that were useful, that were loving. But I also felt sobered, and maybe even a little overwhelmed, by what they were up against. For the motivated new college student, our culture imposes a default narrative that goes something like this: "The goal of your life is success. Success is money, and money is the ability to acquire things. You can have other values, other goals, but success is non-negotiable. It is everything."

Even for those of us who are long past college, we probably feel the weight of this prescribed story. It shapes our wants and directs our decisions. And it also, manifestly, produces a world of miseries. Its fruits are millions of professionals who choose ladder-climbing over relationships, and find at the top only emptiness; an economy that, as Wendell Berry says, trains us to be "dissatisfied and ungrateful consumers"; an ethic of exploitation that denies the sacredness of people and places, and leads to the ruin of both.

How different this story: that God lives and acts among the weak things, the low things. That God, indeed, *became* weakness, *became* lowness, to repattern us away from our own brutal and self-defeating narrative. What new things would we discover this Lent—about our neighbors, about God, about our purpose, our fulfillment, our flourishing—if we joined Christ down there?

**Prayer:** *God, in the midst of our pursuing, our learning, our growing, and even our succeeding, we pray that you would keep us close to the ground. Self-emptying Christ, root us in the humble and good soil of your story.*

**Readings:** Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36; Psalm 71:1-14

Aaron Sizer

## To Nourish to Suffering

**Focus Verses:** *After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. John 13:27-28*

I found these three statements in the story to be the most intriguing part of the reading. The obvious reason being that it appears that Jesus has given up on surviving. He tells Judas to continue betraying him and to make it quick, merciful almost. Jesus realizes and accepts his fate and decides the best course of action is to confess his knowledge to his friend.

Why did the Son of God, all powerful Jesus Christ, accept the terrible fate of leaving us? It seems like a pretty depressing ending, right? What can we learn from this?

Well as my English teachers would tell me, let's look at the symbolism. In this scene Jesus hands his flesh, bread to Judas. Out of all of his much more loyal disciples, Jesus gives the food nourishment to the corrupt and betraying Judas. Now Jesus must have known the cognitive dissonance Judas is having in this moment, the conflicting and guilty inner conflict Judas has been having. Jesus is facing up-and-coming torture and death but he chooses to hand food, symbolic offering of help, to his close friend who is suffering. He metaphorically takes a knee for his injured teammate.

In this reading we see that despite the common logic of hatred, Jesus instead made the small sacrifice in the moment to identify and heal Judas' pain. Nourishing despite the uncomfortable. So instead of "accepting his fate" Jesus acknowledges his situation, then goes on with his message of eternal healing of humans on their journeys.

**Prayer:** *Universal healing God, we learn from your teachings in the act of selflessness. May we all have someone like Jesus to guide us when we are lost in pain. And may we learn to be that someone ourselves. May all pain, for all people, be healed regardless of whether we deserve it or not. May we learn of the small nourishment of others in our intertwined lives that we have the privilege of being a part of. Amen*

**Readings:** Isaiah 50:4-9a; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32; Psalm 70

## Becoming the Body of Christ

**Focus Verse:** *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* John 13:34

When the iPhone was introduced (2007), videos show CEO Steve Jobs holding sway over a gathering of Apple enthusiasts, teasing them with bits of information about a revolutionary technology which was about to change everything. The aim was not just to have them buy the iPhone; he wanted them to feel they were part of something memorable, because that feeling is what carries the story forward, creates new adopters, new disciples.

Jesus has been with his disciples for three years. During that time they've come to know the Jesus "brand": about love, compassion, forgiveness, belonging. They know all this, they've heard it many times.

But tonight - this night - is the launch of a revolutionary thing. Soon, Jesus won't be with them, and it will become their responsibility to carry the story forward. The body of this Jesus they've been with is going away, and *they* will become the Body of Christ.

Jesus needs to make what he does this night memorable: not an idea they carry in their heads, but something they know in their bodies. He commands them to love as he has loved them, and gets down on his knees to show them what love looks like. Washing their feet, he talks about servant ministry, about spending yourself, to demonstrate for those who may not know or believe it to be true that God loves them, and that God came into the world in human form just to make sure they knew.

Picking up bread and wine, he breaks and shares it with them, because that's what being the Body of Christ means: breaking and sharing ourselves. That the way we are nourished and sustained is by and through each other. That if we hoard and withhold ourselves, waiting for someone to prove themselves worthy, we all starve.

**Prayer:** *God, help us be each other's bread, to sustain us on our journey. Amen.*

**Readings:** Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35; Psalm 116:1, 10-17

**Elizabeth Molitors**

## God Suffers With Us

**Focus Verses:** *But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.* Isaiah 53:5; *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?* Psalm 22:1; *When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.* John 19:30

Every Easter, when Good Friday arrived, even as a boy, I felt grief over the way Jesus died. It seemed deeply unfair that he had to die so that I could be forgiven. By the time I reached seminary, I had spent years trying to understand substitutionary atonement as a way to make sense of the cross, but it never fully resolved the ache I felt. The question I could never answer was this: how could a loving God sacrifice his son in such a cruel way to save me from my sins?

Over time, I began to see the cross differently. God was not inflicting suffering on his Son. Instead, God was participating with his Son—absorbing the suffering humanity has always endured and joining us in our laments of why. Even Jesus cried out in abandonment, asking God, “Why me?” After receiving a sip of wine, he did not explain his suffering or soften it with answers. He entrusted his spirit to God without knowing what would come next.

As a chaplain at Cottage Hospital, I have sat with countless families saying goodbye to their loved ones. While sadness and grief are always present, there is often a quiet relief that their loved one no longer has to suffer. In those moments, hope remains—not the hope that everything turns out okay, but the hope that God is present even here, in the midst of loss.

Good Friday allows hope without resolution because it refuses to rush past suffering to make us feel better. Nothing is fixed, the injustice is not undone, the innocent still dies, and the stone remains sealed. And yet, we are given permission to wait, to grieve, and to trust that love has not failed, even when the story feels unfinished.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, we are so sorry your Son suffered such a cruel death so that we could be made whole. Help us to join others who are suffering loss with the same love you showed for us so that they can also know that they are not alone. Amen!*

**Readings:** Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42; Psalm 22

## Go Dark

**Focus Verse:** *But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they?*  
Job 12:10

We carry the knowledge of our human mortality from a young age. When I was nine years old, my grandfather died suddenly. In that very same year, I lost my grandmother, two great-aunts, a great-uncle, and a beloved family friend. Into my nine-year-old happy-go-lucky existence came the awful truth that we all die one day, and sometimes in quite difficult ways. It propelled me into a year of anxiety, constantly worried about my own health and that death would come for me even though I was only in the third grade. "Humans expire," sighs Job, "and where are they?"

On Holy Saturday we ask the same question. Where did Jesus go after he died on the cross? And what will happen to us all? Christian tradition (in the Apostle's Creed) tells us that on Holy Saturday, Jesus "descended into hell." I appreciate how Cynthia Bourgeault (an Episcopal priest and writer) imagines this as Jesus traveling to the heart of our deepest fears, pain, and suffering, and holding it all in his sacred presence. Here, in these depths with us, he holds the reality of death and loss, and he holds it in divine love. The reality doesn't go away, but it is infused with divine holding and presence.

Before I became a priest, I briefly worked as a hospital chaplain on a palliative care team. Bearing witness to such suffering was enough to awaken the little nine-year-old within me who was still afraid of death. But something happened. In my faltering and clumsy attempts to offer comfort; in the deep grief of patients and family members; in the care with which the doctors gave difficult news; in just sitting in silence next to someone in pain...somewhere along the way I noticed that I was no longer in the grip of anxiety. On some unconscious level I must have sensed that the crucified Christ was waiting and grieving and breathing right alongside us. How is this possible?

The poet Wendell Berry writes, "To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings."

**Prayer:** *Loving God, help us to trust that when we cannot see anything but pain and loss, something else is afoot. May we remember that in the Holy Saturdays of our lives, you travel to our depths and sit there with us. Until ...*

**Readings:** Job 14:1-14; 1 Peter 4:1-8; Matthew 27:57-66; Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

**Sarah Thomas**

April 5, 2026

Easter Day

*After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb...the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said...go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."*

*Matthew 28:1, 5, 6a,7a*

God of new creation, from the womb of earth you raised the Lord of life: may we receive the word of women who braved the soldier's spears and met him in the dawning light; may we live with morning joy that love will never die, through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life. Amen.

*Prayers for an Inclusive Church by Steven Shakespeare*