



Transform me
O Lord

Lent 2025
daily reflections

FOREWORD

LENT 2025

As we enter the sacred season of Lent, we are invited into a time of profound transformation—a journey of renewal for our hearts, minds, and souls. This holy season calls us to embrace change, drawing closer to God as we prepare to celebrate the joy of Easter.

In Scripture, we are reminded, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Transformation lies at the heart of Lent. Just as the earth undergoes renewal in spring, so too are we called to be renewed in Christ. Through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, we open ourselves to God’s grace, allowing him to reshape us into his image and likeness.

Transformation requires us to look honestly at our lives, to let go of what hinders our relationship with God, and to trust in his mercy. Pope Francis beautifully reminds us, “The future is in our hearts and our hands.” In doing so, we are reminded of the beauty of God’s promise: that in him, we are made new.

Let this Lent be a time to surrender to the Divine Potter, who lovingly molds us into vessels of his light and love. May we embrace the challenge of transformation, knowing that “the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” (Psalm 34:18) We trust that God’s work in us will bear fruit in due time.

Together, let us walk this journey of Lent with open hearts and hope, allowing God to transform us for his glory.

Very Rev. Dat Tran, C.S.P.

Rector/Pastor, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Ash Wednesday, March 5

Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment. — Joel 2:13 (Full text, Joel 2:12-18)

I had a clever opening paragraph written that included a reference to meat rendering but then discovered that rend and render are not synonyms. If you learn nothing else in this devotion, and that's highly possible, you'll have that takeaway.

To rend one's garments was an ancient custom of showing intense grief, repentance, or holy fervor. Rending clothes may have been all the rage, but Joel (I'm no Bible expert but he's such a minor prophet that I had to check the Bible's table of contents to ensure my assignment didn't include a typo) pleaded with the nation of Judah to step up their game and rend their hearts to God. It's one thing to tear up a perfectly nice tunic, but it's another to admit one's brokenness and need for God's forgiveness. After all, it is with the downtrodden, the broken, the marginalized that God shines brightest. Joel reminds us that God's love is unconditional, and God's forgiveness is profound. Win, win.

This Lenten season, and all year long, may we remember that honoring God is less about the outward show and more about the inner doing. It's easy to talk the talk, but more important to walk the walk. As unknown as Joel may be to most of us, it's hard to argue with his message.

Maybe there's even something to be learned about listening to every voice—major prophet or not.

Almighty God,

Thank you for the assurance that we can come to you in our sinfulness and be confident that we are loved. Amen.

Bryan Bickford, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Thursday, March 6

Then he said to all, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” — Luke 9:23-24 (Full text, Luke 9:22-25)

I often think of Christ as creation. Not only the original creation but our own act of creating (an extension of God), the process of perpetual motion and change. Christ never sits still. Like our children, the moment we think we know him/them, they change! God's renewal is constant. Not a distant future but an event in and around us.

So, with this Scripture reading, I ask you to imagine one of my favorite mindfulness practices: using the eyes behind your eyes. The set that no longer allows you to be separate. When we use our eyes as we always have, everything is in relation to the self. I'm here, and the chair is there. We can't help but perceive in relation to our person and place. But the eyes behind your eyes places the “self” within the whole. Taking up our cross and rejecting the self may be the simple act of knowing that we are intimately bound to our environment, people, and enemies. I'm not separate from the chair; I'm bound to it and everything else. I simply can't destroy the earth, because the earth is the creation just as I am. I cannot ignore the poor, because I am the poor.

And it is a daily commitment. To unlearn the pretense of selfishness. To align with Christ's loving renewal. He joins us in silence. He asks you to feel your body and sense your surroundings. He asks you to join him here, and then...

*God of all creation,
May we join creation moment by moment.
Amen.*

Brent Velting, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Friday, March 7

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? — Isaiah 58:6 (Full text, Isaiah 58:1-9)

Fasting is a powerful means of grace. Jesus practiced it and encouraged his disciples to do the same. (Matthew 6:16-18) He knew fasting keeps the body and soul open to God.

In Isaiah 58 the prophet told the people the fast that God desires for them is “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.” (Isaiah 58:6).

Isaiah tells us the fast that God desires for God’s people is more than a fast from food. God wants the Church to fast from sin. How do we do that?

Remember you are baptized. The baptismal covenant is our guide for how to fast from sin: Trust in the holiness of the Triune God; continue in the apostles’ teachings and fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers; persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and turn to the Lord; proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; seek and serve Christ in all persons; strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of everyone.

This is the fast that God desires.

*God of love and justice,
Give me the grace I need to fast from sin and live as a witness to Jesus Christ
in the world by following his teachings through acts of compassion, justice,
worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The Rev. Dr. Steven W. Manskar, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Saturday, March 8

The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus said to them in reply, “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do.” — Luke 5:30-31 (Full text, Luke 5:27-32)

Jesus called Levi, a tax collector to follow him. Upon receiving the invitation, Levi dropped everything and followed Jesus. Levi was ecstatic and invited all his tax-collector colleagues and other friends to a great feast in honor of Jesus, his newly found friend.

Can you imagine how excited Levi was to have a friend like Jesus? Levi had experienced so much ridicule in his life; can you imagine how he felt not hated, shunned, and accepted as a worthy person to know? This was one of Levi's greatest days of happiness.

Of course, the Pharisees had complained to Jesus' disciples about the bad choice Jesus had made, eating a meal with sinners. Jesus' response, in today's Scripture reading, was so perfect: He announced to all that his goal on earth was to heal the sick, the ones who needed him the most spiritually. Spending some time with the faithful but working to save all souls was part of his mission. He was the sacrificial lamb that opened the gates of heaven to all who followed him.

Jesus set a splendid example for us to follow. Rather than hate a sinner, hate the sin but not the person. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This will make you children of the heavenly Father.” (Matthew 5:44-45)

Let us pray an excerpt of God's Love Prayers on a Jesuit website:

“*Bless us with love, O Merciful God: that we may love as you love! That we may show patience, tolerance, kindness, caring and love to all.*” Amen.

Cynthia Smith, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

<https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/gods-love>

Sunday, March 9

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shade of the Almighty, say to the Lord, “My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust.” — Psalm 91:1-2 (Full text, Psalm 91:1-2,10-15)

Where do you go when you have a setback at work or in life?

For my entire life, I could count on retreating to my home for love and comfort and a temporary escape from facing the consequences. A hiding place. I count myself fortunate. Sadly, the homeless do not have my residential security. And as I write this in January, neither do many Californians whose homes were destroyed by wildfires.

Today's Scripture refers us to another home in which to find comfort. This place does not have a shingled roof or plastered walls, but it is more lasting and secure to our spiritual well-being: “the shelter of the Most High.”

Some versions of the Bible refer to this shelter as “the secret place of the Most High.” I like this description, that I share an intimate place with my God. A place of love. Of trust. Of comfort. A place that cannot be destroyed by fire or natural disaster, or cannot be taken away by money woes.

I ask again: Where do you go when you have a setback? Where is your earthly retreat, and where is your spiritual refuge? In what ways are they alike or different? And does the scope of your problem or setback dictate which dwelling you choose?

Dear God,

Thank you for allowing me to reside in your secret place. I am assured that you walk with me during earthly consequences. And I rest secure in the knowledge that your Son's sacrifice removed my eternal consequences. With gratitude, Amen.

Mike McCarty, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Cathedral of Saint Andrew, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Monday, March 10

Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. — Leviticus 19:18 (Full text, Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18)

This is the quintessential commandment. So much so, that Jesus likens it to the Sh'ma, when asked about the greatest commandment. It is the defining tenet of being Christian, a litmus test steeped into the fundamental nature of our humanity, declaring not only how we should be but gaging how we are being at any moment. It is actionable.

Lately, this way of living inherent in our Christian DNA has created far too many questions. We ask too often, “Who is my neighbor?” or declare “They aren’t my neighbor.” We treat others as our neighbor only if they meet our criteria. We create the category “other” or “those people”—a clear disconnect to our Christian call. There is no biblical qualifier for neighbor. No list of traits. No physical, philosophical, or spiritual sets of rules. Which brings us to:

The story of WE. This is the story that needs to be told. It needs to be told every day and in every moment. It is a practice.

In all situations we begin by telling the story of WE and then ask, “How do WE want to be neighbors?” When doing this, I request that we close our eyes. When we close our eyes, our deep sense of listening can arise. Here, there is no leader or those who are led, no qualifiers, no I/ME. What is left is harmony.

*May we love our neighbor as ourselves
as we close our eyes, listen,
and tell the story of WE. Amen.*

Josh Zallar, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Tuesday, March 11

“This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.” — Matthew 6:9-10 (Full text, Matthew 6:7-15)

Here we are completing the first week in Lent. How have you been doing on your journey to the cross? I usually start with a bang and then begin slipping as the weeks go by. The perfection of The Lord’s Prayer can give us strength to stay on track on our spiritual journey.

I must tell a cute story from my childhood. One day after church when I was only 5 or 6 years old, I asked my father why my name was in The Lord’s Prayer. You see, my nickname was Leda. I heard “do not **Ledas** into temptation.” My Dad laughed and explained what was really being said. I have never forgotten that incident each time I pray.

This excerpt from Matthew is preceded by the Gospel reading from Ash Wednesday when Jesus says, “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.”

This part of The Lord’s Prayer teaches us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. It is one of the most perfect and succinct expressions of humility and praise. We must do this, if we expect to receive mercy and grace from God. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. We pray that earth may be made more like heaven by the observance of God’s will.

*Holy and gracious God,
Your son, Jesus, gave us the most perfect and beautiful prayer to praise you
and your kingdom. Please help us to appreciate the mercy and grace that your
son’s sacrifice made for us so we can attain everlasting life. Amen.*

Aleta Wells, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Wednesday, March 12

While still more people gathered in the crowd, he said to them, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah." — Luke 11:29 (Full text, Luke 11:29-32)

The reading goes on to say that "there is something greater than Jonah here." (New American Bible Revised Edition) Jesus is giving us a deeper meaning of the Jonah story. After Jonah spent three days in the belly of a great fish, God used the great fish to save him.

Jonah did not want to preach to Nineveh, but he did and the people repented. God saved them from destruction. Nineveh also was a Gentile city, which should have been a lesson to the unbelieving Jewish people of Jesus' day.

"Three days" in the belly of the great fish and Jesus' death and resurrection tie this comparison together. Jonah and Jesus were opposite characters. Jonah was obstinate and did not want to do God's will, but God still used him to save an unbelieving city. Jesus, who was without sin, willingly took on suffering to save the world.

Lent is a time for us to examine ourselves and see how we measure up to the teachings of Jesus. Lent offers us the opportunity to recommit ourselves to God's plan of salvation. How will we respond?

*Lord,
Bless us with believing minds and hearts.
Help us to understand Your great gift
of Salvation and to never
take it for granted. Amen.*

William Wildschut, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, March 13

“Do to others what you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets.” -- Matthew 7:12 (Full text, Matthew 7:7-12)

Lord, the time of March Madness is approaching.

Competition.

The chosen.

There will be forgotten losers and victory-at-any-cost winners

Who will trample others in the climb to the top.

Nothing matters but winning. Nothing.

Lord, help us to stop the March Madness in our lives.

Remind us to cooperate rather than compete.

Remind us of the expanse of humanity

In need of teamwork, collaboration, kindness.

Help us to redefine “victory.”

Where nothing matters but love.

Lord, help us to stop the madness.

Help us to do to others, with others, for others.

Karen Kania, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, March 14

“You say, ‘The Lord’s way is not fair!’ Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair? Are not your ways unfair?” — Ezekiel 18:25
(Full text, Ezekiel 18:21-28)

“It’s not fair!” When God’s people made that cry, they were concerned with how God weighed their actions: Why does someone who committed evil actions get to live, just because they’ve turned from their ways? Why does God forget the good deeds one person has done when they turn from God? God, are you being fair?

When I was an elementary teacher, mentors told me that when a student says “It’s not fair!” what the pupil might mean is, “I don’t like this.” This was a source of encouragement; yet as much as I wanted to be an unflappable educator, I was not. When students questioned my judgment, I was often hiding self-doubt: Am I being fair? What if they’re right? It could be tricky to help them understand that just because something felt unfair did not mean that it was unfair.

When it comes to God’s justice, I feel like a student losing faith in my teacher. Why does God let these things happen? Does God hear our cries? Surely we’re not supposed to just numbly trust God’s justice in the midst of all that is unsettling in the world?

God turns the question back to us: “Are not your ways unfair?” This reminds me that how I weigh things and how God weighs things are not always the same. God’s mercy is also not something I can fully understand or grasp. As we cry out for justice, may we also cry out for understanding.

God,
Hear our frustrated cries for justice.
Have mercy on your world. Amen.

Kat Hand, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Saturday, March 15

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” — Matthew 5:44-45 (Full text, Matthew 5:43-48)

Jesus is telling us that we need to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. In these days we need to do this for those who are angry with us, who are in a different spot than we are.

If you are being yelled at by someone you should not get into an argument with them, but stay quiet and in your mind pray to the Spirit that is within all of us. Ask the Spirit to help this person by pushing out the anger and hostility and to fill the empty spots with its LOVE. Do not do this out loud to the person but let the Spirit that lives inside you and that person to help that person calm down and turn toward God. God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” This person is part of the natural good things.

During this Lent ask the Spirit that is inside you to help others find a way back into a relationship with God through your simple prayer.

Do you feel the Spirit living inside you? Have you ever asked the Spirit to push anger or meanness out of you and fill the emptiness with LOVE?

*Dear God,
Please help us to use the Spirit within us
to help those who seem against us. Amen.*

Doug Karsen, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Sunday, March 16

He took him outside and said: Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so, he added, will your descendants be. Abram put his faith in the Lord, who attributed it to him as an act of righteousness. — Genesis 15:5-6 (Full text, Genesis 15:5-12)

Once upon a time, I went on retreat to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. One morning at about 4 a.m. (they start early at the Abbey) I went out and sat on one of the porches and looked up at the sky. I saw the most glorious array of stars I had ever seen. It took my breath away. The stars seemed so close that I thought I could touch them. And I knew at that moment I was looking into the face of my heavenly Father. I didn't know yet what God had planned for me, but I found out as the weekend progressed. It was healing.

When I think of that, I wonder if Abraham could see the face of his heavenly Father...a face of love, of trust, and making the impossible possible. Maybe he didn't think about it at all, he just felt safe and that the one speaking to him was trustworthy. It takes faith, because you absolutely cannot explain it. You just believe. And when he did believe, and Mary believed, and Jesus believed from the cross, and you and I believe in the wonders that God always seems to do, we—the sons and daughters of the promise to Abraham—are seen as righteous. Not explainable, just believable.

God is GOOD.

Lord,

Thank you for the wonders that you ask us to believe in without reason or proof. Worthy are you to be trusted. Amen.

Margo Dean, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Monday, March 17

“Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” — Luke 6:38 (Full text, Luke 6:36-38)

So, if I begin giving away \$20 bills on the street, I'll end up with an overflowing lapful? Sounds like one of those scams that we are warned about. Oh, wait, this is Jesus speaking.

Jesus' words follow his choosing of the 12 apostles and the beginning of his public ministry. They all came down from the mountainside where “a great number of people” came to listen to Jesus and to be healed in body and spirit. He began to teach the disciples by giving them the beatitudes. Verse 38 is a summary of what goes before: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (Luke: 6:27-28)

The Beatitudes and Jesus' mandate to love were hard words for the long-mistreated to hear. They are hard words today when values we hold dear are threatened; when those providing sanctuary, medical help, disaster relief, and justice are seeing their work destroyed. But Jesus communicated the same message over and over.

St. Francis said, “For it is in giving that we receive.” There is a theme here. But the “reward” for our giving may not come in a form that resembles a bullish stock market.

“We are in this together” is a phrase used by preachers, politicians, climate scientists, justice advocates, and coaches. It can be tough to part with money or goods, and it is often harder to give of time and talent. Nevertheless, we must persist.

Lord, grant us strength, courage, and the heart to give so that we will be packed down, shaken, and overflowing—side by side with our sisters and brothers in need of healing in spirit, body, or mind. Amen.

Deirdre Toeller, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, March 18

But to the wicked God says: “Why do you recite my commandments and profess my covenant with your mouth? You hate discipline; you cast my words behind you!” — Psalm 50:16-17
(Full text, Psalm 50:8-9,16-23)

I love being in church and listening to biblical texts through liturgy, prayers, hymns, and sermons. I continue my faith journey through reading and Bible study.

When leaving the Christian community, we are bombarded by secularism—in our society, TV, billboards, social media, and newspapers and other printed materials. It is easy to be obedient when surrounded by like-minded people, but more challenging in our daily lives and the frustrations we encounter. I slip in my obedience (probably daily) and ask for God's forgiveness often. During this Lenten season, I am mindful of deserving God's love through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus' life for my sins.

John 14:15 says to show our love by keeping the commandments. Hebrews 5:9 says by obeying God we will have eternal salvation.

*Dear Lord,
Forgive me for failing so often.
I need your help in staying accountable
and obedient. Make me worthy
of Christ's resurrection love! Amen.*

Marilyn Lawrence, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Wednesday, March 19

Such (divorce) was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” — Matthew 1:20-21 (Full text, Matthew 1:18-21)

At first read, this text seems out of place: a Christmas text in Lent?

While he brings in angels and Mary and Joseph, Matthew wants us to see Jesus in a bigger story, the Great Story. God has a purpose to bring people back into an intimacy with God: it's there in the genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17), and it's there when the angel echoes Isaiah, “(Jesus) will save his people from their sins.” But this mission, this Great Story, is yet to be realized; it is in the womb, on its way, to be completed on Easter.

That's just like our Lent. We are invited to enter that Great Story, to follow along. God has a purpose—to remove all that stops us from intimacy with God and from participating in God's good purpose of healing creation. And it all starts when we follow Jesus.

Like Mary, this purpose is yet to be fulfilled: Who Jesus will be for us is still taking shape. Lent invites us to look again at what is stopping us from intimacy with God: the actions, the habits, the misuse of time. Over these 40 days we learn to be attentive and name those conditions, those acts that stop us. And like Joseph, we may even confront our fears.

The good news, as the angel reminds us, is that this is a journey that God's people take together. We do not need to be afraid; we are each part of God's Great Story.

Lord,

May your life be ours. Remove all that stops us from knowing you, and grant us your peace. Amen.

Bill Harris, friend of St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Thursday, March 20

I, the Lord, explore the mind and test the heart, giving to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their deeds.
— Jeremiah 17:10 (Full text, Jeremiah 17:5-10)

It is easy to say, “Trust the Lord.” To live it—when you have lost your job, when you have been diagnosed with an incurable illness, when a loved one has passed away—is not easy.

Remember then that trust is a choice, not a feeling. And sometimes, in those moments of despair, it may be only whispering, “I trust you, Lord,” when your mind and heart disagree.

Like anything, trust takes practice. Those mere seconds of frustrated prayer are not for nothing. As this passage reminds us, God knows our hearts and our minds. To choose to trust in the Lord despite our hardships, to choose to do good despite adversity, is to honor the Lord. And we will be rewarded for that.

*Lord,
I trust in You. Amen.*

Paige Schmidl, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Friday, March 21

When his (Joseph's) brothers saw that their father loved him best of all his brothers, they hated him so much that they could not say a kind word to him. — Genesis 37:4 (Full text, Genesis 37:3-4,12-18)

The story is one of betrayal, suffering, and ultimately, redemption. The seeds of jealousy take root in the hearts of Joseph's brothers. Their father's favoritism toward Joseph kindled resentment, and their hatred grew so strong that they sold him into slavery. What began as unchecked envy escalated into a life-altering betrayal.

Then to one of my favorite passages in Genesis. In a moment of unimaginable grace, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers—not with anger or vengeance, but with forgiveness. He acknowledges that while their intentions were harmful, God had a greater plan: Amid the famine, “God sent me before you to preserve life.” (Genesis 45:5b)

Two powerful truths are illustrated in these passages. First, **God can redeem even the worst circumstances.** Joseph endured slavery, imprisonment, and years of separation from his family, yet God used these trials to position him as a leader who would save countless lives. Second, **forgiveness is the path to healing.** Instead of harboring bitterness, Joseph forgave, bringing reconciliation and healing to his family and allowing God's plan to unfold.

Jealousy and betrayal have scarred our hearts. Like Joseph, you may not understand why God has allowed these trials, but we must trust that He is at work, even in the pain. When we forgive it frees our hearts from bitterness and makes room for God's healing. Trust that God can bring beauty from ashes, just as He did in Joseph's life.

Lord, help us to see Your hand at work in our trials, and give us the grace to forgive those who have hurt us. Use our pain for Your glory and guide us toward healing and reconciliation. Amen.

Mark Miller, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Saturday, March 22

He will not always accuse, and nurses no lasting anger; He has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our wrongs deserve. — Psalm 103:9-10 (Full text, Psalm 103:1-4,9-12)

As I pay attention to the daily news, I become distressed, discouraged. Our culture has become increasingly polarized. We can barely talk to each other. As we disagree, you become my enemy.

I need reassurance that there is still a power in the universe that moves toward reconciliation, a place of wholeness, a center for healing and integration, a power that brings life, a place where we are forgiven and love wins. I need a place of safety and refuge, a place to heal, a place to hope.

The psalm begins and ends with "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Praise opens us to God's presence and grace. Worship draws us and nudges, even nags us, toward reconciliation. We say that the Kingdom of God is already present yet not fulfilled. The "already present" implants a longing in our hearts, a longing for love and connection, for safety and refuge, for respect and healing.

This longing draws us to worship. The "already present" gives us hope and a will to work toward peace. I come to worship so that I might be drawn into the waters of baptism, that my own fear and rigidity might be softened and dissolved, that my narrow view might be taken up into a larger more inclusive vantage point in the Kingdom. I come to worship that I might be formed, opened, and transformed by a loving Spirit.

*Lamb of God,
You take away the sins of the world.
Bring us peace. Amen.*

Bert Nelson, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 23

Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. — I Corinthians 10:10-11 (Full text, I Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12)

Are we there yet? An eternal question. In our reading today, things are going badly on Israel's exodus and about to get worse. The plagues, first Passover, and even Pharaoh's cruelty are only distant memories, and the collective is beyond ready to turn back. We can shake our heads in disbelief recalling this story on a Sunday School level, but as children we had not yet felt the very real fear, loss, and hardship actively experienced meeting God in the wilderness.

Jesus however doesn't shy away or turn the page. In John 3:14-16 he recalls this exact moment in history with Nicodemus, explaining God's plan was not to bring death but new life to the whole world. Why, Jesus "for the joy set before him, endured the cross." (Heb. 12.2). Perhaps then we should also pause, because as Christians, enduring the cross becomes our personal challenge and our present journey. This age of scandal, argument, and competing voices can make it easy to have overconfidence in our ideas of what God wants from us today. It is tempting to lean solely on the understanding of what is seen here and now, however the Christian hope exists in what lies ahead.

Let us live into that hope, not as grumblers, but loving God and loving our neighbor—whatever and wherever they may be—for the joy set before us. Even if we're not there yet.

Almighty God, in all we say or do, equip us to walk in love as Christ loved us, guide us by the illumination of Your Holy Spirit, and shelter us ever in Your goodness. Amen.

David Bartman, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Monday, March 24

And he (Jesus) said, “Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.” — Luke 4:24 (Full text, Luke 4:24-30)

How hard it is, sometimes, as a parent to give advice/opinion (when asked for) only to have it ignored. As parents, we want the best for our children. We have sometimes gone down the path they are pursuing only to find that the path is not what was expected. We want them to avoid the disappointment we felt. Then when things go as predicted, we have to bite our tongue and not say, “I told you so!”

Imagine Jesus' feelings after he said that the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled, but heard that his hometown people did not, would not, believe him. The burden, the heartbreak, of wanting those closest to him, those he grew up among, to know that their God had their best welfare in mind and had sent him to guide them along the way...only to have them reject him. It must have been devastating!

Jesus could have quit right there. He accepted their reluctance to believe him and went about the countryside preaching the love, mercy, and forgiveness of God to those who would listen.

As parents, we do the same. We do not stop loving our children simply because they do not follow our advice or follow in our footsteps. That's what unconditional love is.

*Heavenly Father,
Give us the wisdom to accept disappointment
knowing that you have a better plan in store for us.
In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*

Elyse Underhill, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Tuesday, March 25

I delight to do your will, my God; your law is in my inner being! When I sing of your righteousness in a great assembly, see, I do not restrain my lips; as you, Lord, know. — Psalm 40:9-10 (Full text, Psalm 40:7-11)

These verses do not describe me. Nope, nada, no way.

I must be frequently reminded how to do God's will, assuming that I can discern clearly what it is. Some situations simply don't lend themselves to clarity. I like to think that I instinctively lean toward following God's law ("your law is in my inner being!") but does that happen mostly, or only, when what I perceive to be following God's law is what I want to do anyway? Sometimes it seems that, if it weren't for the sermons I have heard, I wouldn't have a clue. (Profound thanks to all the pastors I have been blessed to hear over the years. I remember you.)

And I always restrain my lips from singing because I cannot carry a tune. My mother had a beautiful voice but her three children inherited our father's totally, hopelessly dead ear, at least when it comes to vocalizing. I really have nothing to say about these verses. However, when I turn to the last verse in this psalm, it's all good:

“As for me, I am poor and needy,
but the Lord takes thought for me.
You are my help and my deliverer,
do not delay, O my God.”

Dear Lord,

I cannot claim that I always carry your law in my inner being and I can never claim that I can sing your praises in any assembly, let alone a great one. I am the poor and needy one for whom you take thought. You are my hope and my deliverer. Thank you. Amen.

Judith Simonson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Wednesday, March 26

For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him? Or what great nation has statutes and ordinances that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today? — Deuteronomy 4:7-8 (Full text, Deuteronomy 4:1,5-9)

Today's Scripture pulled me back to the one-dimensional, developmentally appropriate, felt- board Bible stories of my childhood Sunday School. Bearded Moses, Mt. Sinai, gold calf, the Ten Commandments. My five-year-old self heard God's voice in the story as loud, authoritative, and Wizard of Oz-like. I recall a separation as God's voice disappeared back into the heavens and Moses walked down the mountain alone, commandments in tow. When I read the word "great" along with Moses' declaration about his nation's superiority, I had mixed feelings tied to our current political climate. I set this aside and used my imagination to consider what an experience with God maybe felt like to arrive at such a bold and tender statement.

I wondered if Moses encountered God's voice as more of a whisper or gentle affirmation. Maybe it sounded like someone he knew or loved intimately. Unlike the separation depicted in my Sunday School, Moses' words suggested nothing but proximity to God. Could it be that Moses danced with, sat next to, or was even consumed by a loving God who saw him in a way no one else had before? I wondered. Something shifted on that mountain that changed the God of Israel from object (gold calf) to relationship. One thing I know for certain: Moses was confident; he was bringing his people liberating principles for living a good and just life.

The word "great" doesn't begin to capture the significance.

Dear God,

Thank you for our ability to attune to you, experience you, and hear your voice within our relationships. Give us space in our relationships this Lent to listen for you with our hearts, minds, and bodies. Amen.

Martha Veling, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Thursday, March 27

Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. — Luke 11:23 (Full text, Luke 11:14-23)

Have you ever noticed all the different ways there are to sin? You could probably name a myriad of ways: addiction, blasphemy, crime, debauchery, envy, false idols, greed, heresy...

But let me offer a new take; There is but One way to Christ: His Word.

As Jesus said, "If someone has a hundred sheep, and one goes astray, won't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go and search for the stray?" (Matthew 18:12) So too as he will leave the 99 to find the one, shall we not leave the 99 false paths and search for the one path? Shall we not follow his narrow path to righteousness?

"For wide is the path of sin, but narrow is the path of righteousness." (Paraphrased) Let us not forget our ways to the Lord, and keep our path free from distractions. Even through the trials afflicted by our circumstances or our conditions.

Let us not forget or underestimate the sins. Our body is weak to them, as is our earthly mind. But let the Armor of God guide us through them, and confess our ways to Him.

So, as we continue through this period of Lent, let us not forget our ways. Let us stay strong in faith and stay firm through His Word.

Lord, through you I can do all things. Strengthen me through this period of Lent, and lead us not into temptation. Deliver me from sin, and forgive us our trespasses. For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory. Amen.

Xavier Almonte, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Friday, March 28

The scribe said to (Jesus), “Well said, teacher.... And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” — Mark 12:32a-33 (Full text, Mark 12:28-34)

When my granddaughter, Eleanor, was first learning to read, she focused on letters and letter sounds and the sight words that baffle phonetic construction. But after mastering these building blocks, and in a rather hidden and mysterious way, she saw beyond the letters, the sounds, and the words to the story itself.

In naming the most important commandments—loving God and loving our neighbors—Jesus asks us to see beyond the rules and to move into that hidden and mysterious place of transformation where we experience God's story of love.

Like children learning to read, we are tempted to reduce faith to a set of rules, treating it like a word to decode or a sentence to diagram. But Jesus did not come to grade our performance; He came to fulfill the law and to reconcile us with God's love in the person of Himself.

Consider the conversion of St. Paul. He was singularly focused on following the law and condemning those who didn't. But on the road to Damascus, he was transformed and came to understand that the heart of God's law is love.

Each of us is on our own conversion journey, and this time of Lent asks us to go beyond our surface knowing to a deeper contemplation: God's love for us is revealed in Jesus, who broke the rules of death so that we might be transformed and participate fully in the one true story.

*O God,
Through your Son, the living Word, teach us to love and to live with love in the ongoing story of your creation. Amen.*

Annie Karasinski, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, March 29

Let us know, let us know the Lord; as certain as the dawn is his coming. He will come to us like the rain, like the spring rain that waters the earth. — Hosea 6:3 (Fill text, Hosea 6:1-6)

Hosea became a prophet about 753 B.C., when the elite classes of Israel were doing well but were oppressing the poor. During the approximately 30 years of Hosea's ministry two kings of Israel were killed and Israel was invaded, leading to the fall of the northern kingdom.

Hosea's personal life included a marriage to Gomer, the birth of many children, and as God told him of Gomer's unfaithfulness, she left him to pursue her own lusts. Hosea, whose name means "Salvation," found her, redeemed her, and brought her home again. Images of God's love, judgment, grace, and mercy were evident in their relationship.

Hosea's story parallels the story of Israel during that time, and probably our own stories. Consider the privileged of our nation versus the underprivileged among us or, more broadly, the third-world countries. Compare your status to that of your neighbor living in less affluent neighborhoods or on the streets of Grand Rapids. Is our country—are we—demonstrating God's love, judgment, grace, and mercy? Are we doomed to fall as Israel did?

I don't think so. We will suffer setbacks, not willed by God, but resulting from our lusts, actions, and inactions. But, just as Hosea went after his unfaithful wife and redeemed her, God pursues us with his love. No matter what, God still loves us.

Dear Lord,

We have all strayed, individually and as a nation, seeking our own good fortune, sometimes obviously, sometimes in ways known only to ourselves. Help us to know you more. As we seek to follow your commands, please come to us "like the rain, like the spring rain that waters the earth." Amen.

Kirby Hanson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Sunday, March 30

So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation. — 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 (Full text, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

Today's text poses a challenge for Matthew 25 churches. A Matthew 25 church like Westminster Presbyterian in Grand Rapids aims to be actively engaged in the world. We believe Matthew 25:31-46 summarizes what it means to follow Jesus: feed the hungry; welcome the stranger; care for the sick and destitute.

But 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 concludes a passage that seems to celebrate our escaping earthly troubles into heavenly bliss: longing for “our heavenly dwelling” (v. 2); wanting to “be away from the body” (v. 8); no longer regarding anyone “from a human point of view” (v. 16). If following Jesus means we aim to escape our earthly condition, then why would feeding and welcoming and caring matter?

The key, I think, is to emphasize a new creation. We are called not to escape the Earth but to renew it and all who dwell here. When we are “in Christ”—when we follow the path Jesus walked and taught—we will be busy making all things new. We will actively engage with the world, not flee from it. We will continually work for the day when, in the psalmist’s words, justice and peace embrace. In our mundane activities, as simple as offering a cup of cold water and as complex as building a country that welcomes the stranger, we will practice “the ministry of reconciliation.”

Dear God,

Accompany us in this Lenten season along the path that Jesus walked. We long for the day when we and the whole Earth are a new creation. Amen.

Lambert Zuidervaart, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Monday, March 31

Hear, O Lord, have mercy on me; Lord, be my helper. You changed my mourning into dancing; you took off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness. — Psalm 30:11-12 (Full text, Psalm 30:2-6,11-13)

The first thing that comes to my mind with these two verses is joy! But then when I think more deeply, what really brings that special JOY is *gratitude*. *Gratitude* for *knowing, understanding, believing* that God is with us always. God believes in us. God is always there for us. That is the reason for joy that lifts our hearts, our visions, our belief, and washes away our fears, and embraces us with the desire, as well as the courage and the freedom to dance.

When we believe, we truly can move mountains together. It is doubt that takes away our energy, reduces our voice, and takes away our dreams. Our belief in God is combined with and undergirds our additional beliefs in the good of all people, in the ways of working together for the good of all, in our belief that together we can listen, learn, grow, and bring about positive change.

We can do this because we *believe and we are grateful for that belief!*

O God,

You have led the way from our mourning into dancing. You have removed our sackcloth and girded us with gladness. Now, help us to no longer be silent, but to always sing praises to You, our Lord, in whom we give eternal gratitude.
Amen.

Dr. Jacqueline Taylor, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Tuesday, April 1

So the Jews said to the man who was cured, “It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” He answered them, “The man who made me well told me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” — John 5:10-11 (Full text, John 5:5-16)

You broke the rules, you broke the law! Therefore, you must be punished! When you don't understand that laws and rules are written for people, not the people for the laws, it is so easy to condemn.

But, this desire to make others obey is really a mask we wear. The mask hides what we truly believe that is, a belief that because I follow all the laws faithfully (except for the times I do not in secret), I deserve and am owed paradise. You who don't, don't.

It is a tragic misunderstanding of God's nature.

The man healed by Jesus knows that what he has experienced and who he has experienced is Holy, and he has no shame in embracing his salvation.

I pray:

*In those times when I feel
the urge to judge and condemn,
remind me of your loving grace
that all of us need, especially me. Amen.*

Bob Eardley, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Wednesday, April 2

“I cannot do anything on my own; I judge as I hear, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me.” — John 5:30 (Full text, John 5:17-30)

When others heard that Jesus had dared to heal on the Sabbath, they wanted to know who gave him the authority to break the Sabbath laws. Jesus replied that his authority came from his Father, God. Then people really got upset. Claiming that God is his Father?

Jesus does not do anything that is not in accordance with God’s will. If we are to follow Jesus faithfully, we need always to be aware of the difference between our own desires and what God would have us do. When we have doubts about what to do, Micah laid it out for us:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

This is what was behind all the bracelets that had WWJD on them. Before jumping to a conclusion, before taking offense, before lashing out in anger, before any action or speech, stop to remember, “What Would Jesus Do?” Jesus always acted out of love.

*Holy Father,
Keep us ever mindful of Your will. Thank you
for all your mercies that we receive daily.
Help us to treat others with love and mercy.
In Jesus’ Holy Name, Amen.*

Patricia Baxter, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Thursday, April 3

But Moses implored the Lord, his God, saying, “Why, O Lord, should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a strong hand?” ... So the Lord changed his mind about the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people. — Exodus 32:11,14 (Full text, Exodus 32:7-14)

Does God really change God's mind? We often hear that God never changes; God is the same yesterday, today and forever. But Scripture has frequent occasions when God's mind was changed, and this encounter with Moses is one example.

Another example is God's encounter with Abram, who was renamed Abraham by God. God tells him that he has been chosen and charged to raise his children “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” As the Genesis 18 story continues God tells Abraham of his plan to destroy the city of Sodom. Abraham responds by challenging God asking, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” This begins a negotiation with Abraham asking if there were 50 righteous people would God destroy them as well as the wicked. God relents. Abraham then continues the negotiation posing 45 righteous people, then 40, 30, 20 and finally 10 righteous people. In each case God changes and says he would not destroy.

In this period of Lent, we remember when Jesus asked that God's mind be changed as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want.”

*Lord,
We pray sometimes for things to change,
but each time our prayer is not that our will
be done, but your will. Amen.*

Douglas Kindschi, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Friday, April 4

“Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him.” These were their thoughts, but they erred; for their wickedness blinded them. — Wisdom of Solomon 2:20-21 (Full text, Wisdom 2:12-22)

Take ‘em for all they’re worth. Might makes right. That’s the narrative the crowd believed in our reading today. Exploit the vulnerable and run them off. But this in-crowd had a problem. A social justice warrior was disrupting their schemes, calling out their injustice and proclaiming that God sent him. Game on. The bullying crowd conspired to test his resolve by mocking, threatening, and torturing him to death. This disrupter had to die.

Fifty-seven years ago today, they shot Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King knew it was coming. His home was bombed three times and he was stabbed. The FBI tried to bully him into suicide. He faced attack dogs, fire hoses, and beatings. Why could nothing turn him around? The answer is in our Gospel reading. Jesus, too, was a disrupter of the powerful. He faced the brutal mob and said “I know the One who sent me, and the One who sent me is true.”

Dr. King fully knew and relied on the One who sent him. So he took up his cross and followed Jesus. And beyond his suffering, he could see a better future. The day before he died, Dr. King told his audience that he had been to the mountaintop and seen the Promised Land of equality and freedom for his people. His flock. The vulnerable. He spoke of the Good Samaritan who saw the stricken traveler and did not ask, “What will happen to me if I stop to help him?” Instead, he asked, “What will happen to this man if I don’t stop?”

Holy One, our shield and defender, open our understanding to really know you, our ears to hear your call to action, our hearts to forge courage from love, and our lips to speak your truth to power. Amen.

David Taylor, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Saturday, April 5

(Nicodemus said,) “Does our law condemn a person before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?” They answered and said to him, “You are not from Galilee also, are you? Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” — John 7:51-52 (Full text, John 7:40-53)

Some in the crowd said, “This is truly the prophet.” Others said, “This is the Messiah.” Some wanted to arrest Him. The guards went to the chief priests and Pharisees who asked them, “Why did you not bring him?” The guards answered, “Never before has anyone spoken like this.” But the Pharisees said, “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or Pharisees believed in him?”

Nicodemus, one of their members who had come to him earlier, said to them, “Does our law condemn a person before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?”

They answered and said to him, “You are not from Galilee also, are you? Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.”

We as people in these current times have similar thoughts when we only hear second-hand about a person or situation. Often, we don't have enough information, and we make snap decisions and assumptions. We place that person in a category we developed based on our prejudices and lack of understanding.

Lord,

Instill in us the Holy Spirit to give us the strength to have patience, to see with open eyes and hearts, to listen and search out the truth before we make our evaluation of the person or situation. Help us seek to understand with a Christian heart. For only you, Lord, may judge. Amen.

Michael Kaminski, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Sunday, April 6

Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the wilderness I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. — Isaiah 43:18-19 (Full text, Isaiah 43:16-21)

Reminiscing is popular. That's why old TV shows and vintage movies are on their own networks. Antique shops, sports memorabilia, and trivia games also feed our fascination with the past. Sometimes, slights and mistakes from my past also enter my mind, and dwell there for a while.

But in today's Scripture, God is telling us through the prophet Isaiah to not get stuck on the past, even including some of our faith's foundational events such as the Exodus.

I don't think Isaiah would care if I watched an old episode of "Gunsmoke." Or bought a vintage baseball card. Or said to a friend, "When God parted the Red Sea, that was amazing." Surely, it's fine to remember biblical events or our own past blessings with gratitude.

God just does not want us to be so smitten with the past that we can't perceive that God is doing "something new" in our lives. That's why I like participating in and reading this ecumenical booklet, and seeing the new things that God is doing in the lives of my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. And the Sunday after that Easter. Redemption through Christ's death and resurrection is part of that "something new." What other new things are being revealed in your life?

*Lord,
Open my eyes, ears, heart, and mind
to look ahead for you, and not behind.
Amen.*

Mike McCarty, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Cathedral of Saint Andrew, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Monday, April 7

Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” So the Pharisees said to him, “You testify on your own behalf, so your testimony cannot be verified.” — John 8:12-13 (Full text, John 8:12-20)

This verse speaks to me in a way that reaffirms my belief that people are resistant to change, even if they know deep down that someone—in this case, Jesus—is speaking the truth. Sometimes, even when the truth is obvious, it can be uncomfortable, leading us to seek logic, just like the Pharisees demanded proof for Jesus’ words. They claimed that words alone, without evidence, carry no weight. However, when true words are spoken, do they really need evidence or do we just need to open our eyes and see the proof ourselves?

I haven’t always lived my life in alignment with my truth, that is, my core values. But when I did start doing that, I felt as if I had finally opened my eyes. It helped me to be more open to accept the reality of the world and try to hold space for others, so that we can all be diverse in our thinking and ways. How dull would this world be if we constantly followed regulations and not challenged anything for fear of change?

It takes courage to embrace the light. I pray that we all find that courage in these times, so that we can be each other’s lighthouse during this uncertain tempest. Just as I found clarity by embracing my truth, I believe we all have the potential to illuminate our paths when we choose courage over fear.

Divine Love,
*Help us find courage to embrace your light
and to be your light for one another. Amen.*

Arya Jadhav, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Tuesday, April 8

Let this be written for the next generation, for a people not yet born, that they may praise the Lord: “The Lord looked down from the holy heights, viewed the earth from heaven, to attend to the groaning of the prisoners, to release those doomed to die.” —

Psalm 102:19-21 (Full text, Psalm 102:2-3,16-18,19-21)

History is lived, history is written, and history is crafted into epics and songs so future generations will know how we came to be the kind of people we are and who we want to continue to be.

A Psalm that begins as a lament turns into a hymn of joy when the psalmist declares that generations not yet born should know of God's compassion. The shackles of the prisoners may have come from the oppression of Pharoah-like leaders or from ourselves as the Apostle Paul reminds us in Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Either way, Divine compassion hears our groans and releases those doomed to die.

Let it be a story that we live, that we write and that we craft into art and culture so that our generation and those to follow may know of Divine deliverance, Divine freedom, and Divine compassion.

During this season of Lent, we pray:

*O Divine Compassionate One,
Look down from the holy heights and attend to our shackles, those that are unjustly placed upon us and those shackles we place upon ourselves. Hear our groans and release us from despair that we may live in Paschal freedom. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Amy Richards-Duncan, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Wednesday, April 9

(So) they said to him, “We are not illegitimate. We have one Father, God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me.” — John 8:41b-42 (Full text, John 8:31-42)

I wonder if Jesus got frustrated with some of the Jews who did not seem to understand who He was or the message He tried to share. The next verse (8:43) seems to answer the question: “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.”

Others like Simeon and Anna who saw Jesus in the temple as an infant immediately knew who He was and gave thanks to God for sending Jesus “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.” (Luke 2:32)

Today, do we understand who Jesus really is and hear the message He tries to tell us? We can read stories in the Bible but often the messages and true meanings are difficult for us to internalize and then apply in our daily lives. Are we truly open to His message? We can just start by remembering that Jesus said, “For I came from God and am here.” Reflecting on His presence during the day, even for a few moments, will guide us in love.

*Holy Spirit,
Come and remind us that you are here with us.
Help us to learn how to share the love of God
with others as Jesus modeled for us. Amen.*

Rita Loper, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, April 10

God said to Abraham: For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages. — Genesis 17:9 (Full text, Genesis 17:3-9)

God made a promise and fulfilled his commitment.

God's directive is not just to Abraham but to his descendants for ever and ever.

Is this really fair?

Put yourself in Abraham's position. He can take responsibility for keeping the covenant. BUT his mission is to direct his descendants to do the same.

If you have raised children, you know the contrary spirit that fires them. If you have worked in business, you have seen the swings from centralization to decentralization.

If you have worshipped in a congregation, you know that the faith community of generations past held firm to tradition that has faded.

“Abraham, your descendants must keep my covenant.”

What is Abraham to do?

Keep the covenant.

Honor the spirit of the people.

Embrace the given structure.

Worship together.

God fulfilled his promise. We are people of the covenant.

Karen Kania, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, April 11

In my distress I called out: Lord! I cried out to my God. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry to him reached his ears.

— Psalm 18:7 (Full text, Psalm 18:2-7)

As a child, I was fortunate enough to have my mother's mother living in an apartment attached to our home. Her values, faith, and guidance provided (and continue to provide) calm in many storms throughout my life. Born in 1904, Grandma V, as my friends affectionately called her, epitomized a "strong woman." Her only child, my mom, does too. From these incredible women I learned two foundational practices that are an instant go-to when life's adventures (some might call them tragedies) occur. They offer reminders of God's ever-presence in times of trial.

Practice 1: Recite the 23rd Psalm.

I cannot remember not knowing these words of Scripture. Grandma taught me to use them to settle my body and brain when I was teeny, and I find great comfort in them to this day.

Practice 2: Breath Prayers.

You know that feeling when your heart starts to race, your palms get sweaty, and you're quite certain a complete and total freakout is on the horizon? But then someone nearby says, "Just breathe." My mom taught me the power for breath prayers in these moments. In the 1980s, it was mindfulness before "mindfulness" was cool.

My go-to prayer:

On the inhale - "Lord Jesus Christ"

On the exhale - "Have mercy on me"

Distress is inevitable. We live in strange and distressing times. Our cries for help come in silence, in screams, or with a breath. Here the psalmist reminds us: We serve a listening God.

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Have mercy on me. Amen.*

Karyll Russell, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Saturday, April 12

So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, “What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation.”

— John 11:47-48 (Full text, John 11:45-57)

“No one,” said the late Archbishop William Temple, “commits evil knowingly. In the offender’s mind there is always a justification.” He called it “the doctrine of the apparent good.”

Though living centuries before the archbishop, the chief priests and Pharisees were acting out his doctrine. By handing over Jesus for crucifixion, they were hoping to placate the Roman authorities and spare their tiny country from extinction. Jesus himself, they realized, may not have been urging rebellion: but he was attracting a number of dangerous radicals. Better to sacrifice him and spare the lives of thousands.

You and I may never betray the Lord to executioners, but in small ways we cause harm by attempting good. A parent instructing a youngster in assembling a Lego truck may in eagerness jump in and do it himself. Fine for the truck; not so fine for the youngster’s experience. When hearing a friend’s humorous anecdote on a particular theme, I often counter with one I deem more elaborate. My aim may be to reinforce the friend’s original story, but in the process I may be stealing her moment of limelight.

As Jesus, even while still on the cross, forgave his executioners, the risen Christ forgives you and me our blunders. In response, we attempt, next time around, to employ divine sensitivity.

Lord Christ, you forgave the misguided ones who condemned you to the cross. Forgive those of us who, with best intentions, diminish our friends and loved ones. Restore them with comfort, and us with enlightened behavior. Amen.

Hugh Dickinson, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Palm Sunday, April 13

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance. — Philippians 2:6-7 (Full text, Philippians 2:6-11)

This year Palm Sunday is different. In past years I focused on the crowd, carrying and waving palms and shouting “Hosanna.”

This year I reflect on the donkey. Jesus is riding on a donkey, which represents images of lowliness, poverty, and hard work. Donkeys help people carry out their work and daily living in poor countries.

When Jesus set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave and became human, he modeled for us that we are called to be humble and to live selfless and obedient to God’s will.

In our reading today, St. Paul encourages both the Christians of Philippi and the Christians of Western Michigan to embody the qualities of humility and selflessness.

God,
*Help me this Holy Week to become like your Son,
humble, selfless, and obedient to your will. Amen.*

Dan Pierson, Cathedral of Saint Andrew, and friend of the Catholic Information Center

Monday, April 14

I, the LORD, have called you for justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations. — Isaiah 42:6 (Full text, Isaiah 42:1-7)

This verse was written during the reign of Hezekiah, King of Judah. God had heard his prayer for healing and had granted him 15 additional years of life. So, how did he respond? Well, he thanked God for saving him from "the pit." But when Isaiah warned of the coming Babylonian captivity, Hezekiah ignored his words, thinking, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."

He passed the buck! And thousands of years later, as we read this verse, it's easy to think. "Oh, this verse was spoken to Hezekiah. I'm off the hook." But that's not how God's word works! His word is like the dew, "new every morning." It applies to all who read and hear it. And if we truly desire to be his children, then each of us are called for "justice," and as "a light for the nations."

Whether we have one, 15, or a multitude of years left of life, now is when we are to seek justice for the persecuted. Now is when we live God's love by example, to enlighten others and draw them into God's Covenant. Scripture is always for now, not just the past. Our call, and our joy, is to live into God's covenant, and with him bring his Kingdom to Earth.

Dear God,

Heighten our love and understanding of Scripture that your words may always be alive in our hearts, thoughts, and deeds. Gather us in to joyfully seek and share your love with our worlds, until your Kingdom fully comes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Donna Engstrom, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, April 15

You are my hope, Lord; my trust, God, from my youth. On you I have depended since birth; from my mother's womb you are my strength; my hope in you never wavers. — Psalm 71:5-6 (Full text, Psalm 71:1-6,15-17)

My faith journey started with my parents having me baptized. I was taught through Sunday School that we should trust in God, he/she is our rock, our savior and comforter. If we trust in him/her all things are possible. But we learn that not all things are good. That life has its ups and downs. We need to keep our faith and know that he/she will be with us. It isn't that bad things won't happen, but he/she is always there to share the burden in the bad and rejoice in the good.

My darkest days were when I was struggling with being a single mother. At times I thought, "Why wasn't God there for me?" I remember my mother saying, "God will never give you more than what you can handle." But there were days. However, I kept my faith and trusted in God, knowing that he/she will always be with me, and that I was never alone to face the world and all its challenges.

There are many people out there who need to know that God's love is always there to comfort and guide. All you need to do is put your faith and trust in him/her.

Life is a journey. Live it to the fullest knowing that God, our Father, will be with you always.

Lord Our God,

We trust in you for you are our rock, our savior, and comforter. You walk with us always, in darkness and in the light. Amen.

Victoria Parker, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Wednesday, April 16

Then one of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver. — Matthew 26:14-15 (Full text, Matthew 26:14-25)

Judas Iscariot has always been a mystery to me. Judas, a loyal follower of Jesus, is suddenly possessed by Satan to betray his beloved teacher. Biblical scholars think there are several motives that caused Judas to make such a decision. One theory is that Judas and Pilate stand together as men who cursed mankind. Another theory is that Judas was the only Judean among a group of Galileans, and he felt lonely in the group. That seems too trivial a reason to me. Yet another thought is that Judas did not betray Jesus to kill him but to force his hand to become the king of Israel and raise an army to defeat the Romans.

Judas Iscariot is an important character in the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Could it be that Judas was chosen by Jesus to carry out the role of betrayer and that information was not shared with the other followers of Jesus? It was a necessary role. Yet, the records portray Judas as the greatest sinner ever. Forever banned from the remaining group of 11 apostles. Banned from spreading the Gospel. It was a painful role because it was one that only he understood.

Beloved Creator,

Help us to accept the difficult challenges put before us. Let us be guided by your holy example to do the right thing, to spread the Good News even when it is difficult and we feel alone. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Judith Clayton, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Maundy Thursday, April 17

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. — 1 Corinthians 11:26 (Full text, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

This is a holy day for Christians and really the entire world. When we “proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes,” what exactly are we proclaiming?

Saint Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians that we “are all one in Christ.” When we partake of this sacrament and proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection, we state our unity with the entire human family, for Christ died for everyone: for male and female and non-binary people, for the religious and non-religious, for agnostics and atheists, for gay and straight people, for undocumented immigrants, for the unhoused, for the driver who cut you off on U.S. 131, and for the sibling who drives you crazy.

When we approach the altar to receive our incarnate Lord, we participate in a meal of union with both God and each other. A meal where Jesus commanded us to love one another as he washed his disciples’ feet. Jesus, the Christ, through us, washes the feet of all people, both friend and foe. Our Divine Lord does not, nor should we, draw lines between the worthy and the unworthy.

*Lord,
When we partake of the one bread of life,
may we be mindful to recognize your face
in the face of every person we encounter. Amen.*

Kurtis Hoffman, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Good Friday, April 18

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four shares, a share for each soldier. They also took his tunic, but the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top down. So they said to one another, “Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it.” — John 19:23-24a (Full text, John 18:1-19:42)

Today is Good Friday. That makes me think of an afternoon Good Friday service years ago when I was serving as pastor at Holy Cross Church in Kentwood. Readers were reading in parts the full text for today, the Passion of Christ according to John. In it we hear how Jesus was beaten, stripped, spit on, insulted, and ultimately crucified. A widow of our parish, who lived in a retirement home, had brought with her a man from memory care who did not remember the story and perhaps had never been to church. In the midst of the solemn Passion narrative this man cried out from the front pew, “The sons of bitches.” Well, he was listening!

Today’s verses about Jesus’ seamless tunic that the soldiers wouldn’t tear, however, is part of John’s account of Jesus’ triumph over even suffering and death.

This contrast of human suffering in the Passion, about which the visitor to Holy Cross on Good Friday exclaimed, and the overall message of the victory of the cross in John, is the ultimate biblical paradox. Even while dying, Jesus is in charge, directing his Mother Mary and the Beloved Disciple as well as proclaiming from the cross that his work is done.

In this passage we see that Jesus is both human and divine. And to the degree that we live by faith so are we. As American slaves and sharecroppers proclaimed in song, human masters can “kill the body but not the soul.”

Dear God,

May we remember that the dark depths of Good Friday are never the end; but are the necessary prelude to the Light of Christ at Easter. Amen.

The Rev. Charles Homeyer, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Saturday, April 19

Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. — Romans 6:3-4 (Full text, Romans 6:3-11)

Are you keeping the Easter Vigil tonight, participating in a Service of Light, or heading to a sunrise service tomorrow? Or are you keeping vigil on your own this Holy Saturday? These words from the Epistle to the Romans remind us that in the ancient church, baptism or renewal of baptismal vows was a part of the Easter vigil, for being baptized into Christ also means dying and being buried with him!

Whether you light the Paschal candle or witness the sunrise, remember that Christ died to bring light and life to all.

Tomorrow at your Easter worship service, remember that not only will you be raised with Christ, but you are already living a new life. If you have not said “Alleluia” since Lent began, say it tomorrow with all your might.

God be praised for raising Christ and us to new life!

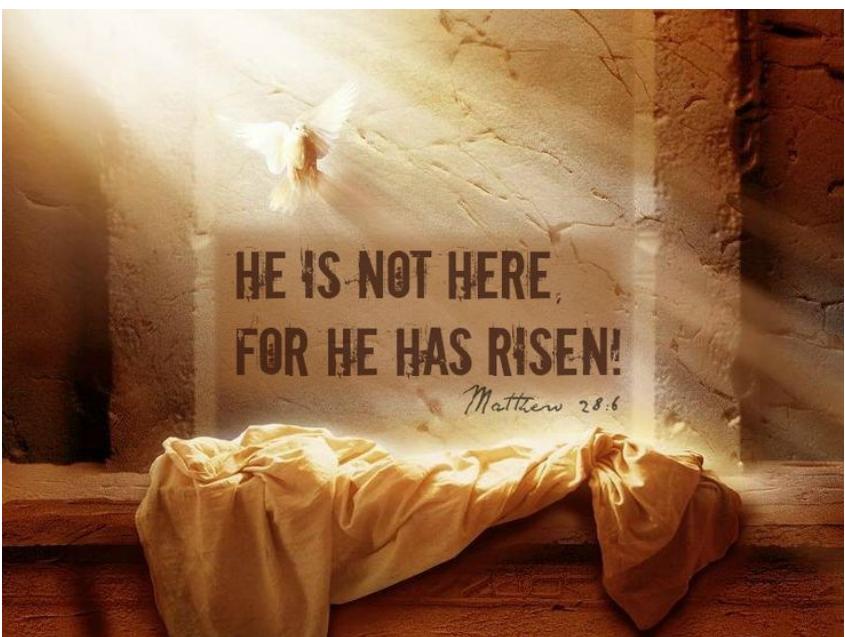
All-powerful God,

Help us today to remember the full meaning of our baptism: that we have died to sin and been buried with Christ, have already received new life through him, and will be raised from death with him. Amen.

Linda Bieze, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Easter Sunday, April 20

On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him.” So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead. — John 20:1-9



HE IS NOT HERE,
FOR HE HAS RISEN!

Matthew 28:6



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