

Lent

Preparing our hearts for Easter.



CHRIST CENTRAL CHURCH

Dear Christ Central Church,

The Lent tradition began in the 3rd and 4th centuries of the early church, as a period of 40 days (a season) of preparation and repentance in anticipation of Jesus Christ on Easter Day. The word lent comes from the Latin word meaning “dawning of the sun.” This early church practice was born out of the biblical narrative of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years and Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days; the church adopted 40 days of preparation for Easter’s “dawning of the sun”—Jesus Christ’s triumphal resurrection from death, when God’s light of the world triumphed and dawned upon all of the brokenness and darkness of His creation.

Lent is a season for the church to reflect and examine the darkness that lies within our own hearts and the darkness of our world. It is a season of repentance and a cry for God to restore and redeem, all with an eye and heart anticipating Easter Day, when a crucified Messiah would powerfully resurrect and usher in His redemption. Lent is a time to enter into mourning, to ask God to help us see our own frailty and brokenness, to help us mourn for our neighbors, this city, and our world, crying out for deep personal and corporate repentance

Why Lent? If you grew up in a church tradition, it’s possible you grew up with one of two postures towards Lent:

1. Observed Lent every year. Perhaps you observed just because you were supposed to, and Lent became perfunctory and lost its potency.
2. Never observed Lent. Perhaps you grew up in a tradition that didn’t observe any of the church calendar/seasons because the church felt like every day was supposed to be lived in light of the whole gospel story (i.e. Christmas and Easter).

Personally, I have spent time in both traditions, and have come to a place where I am extremely grateful for times and seasons of focus and preparation of the gospel story, all while praying that our rhythms never become rote and lose the potency of the gospel.

How will we celebrate Lent this year? Lent begins on Wednesday, March 6th, which is Ash Wednesday. It is the beginning of this season of mourning and repentance. It is often marked by the imposition of ashes on the forehead to remind us of the frailty and brokenness of our world, the mourning we enter into, and the hope that we have because Christ took on our mortality and was raised from ashes so that we might share in His resurrection life.

Our Ash Wednesday service will take place on Wednesday, February 26 at 7:30am and 12pm at our church office (807 E. Main Street Suite 2-120).

We will also offer a Lenten devotional, originally produced by Redeemer Church in New York. We pray that this devotional will help guide your meditations and prepare your heart for the crucifixion and resurrection of our Messiah, Jesus. Please note that the 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays. Thus, there are only devotionals for the other six days of the week.

May we all grow in this season of mourning and reflection as we anticipate the triumph of Easter morning.

Grace and peace,
Rev. Daniel Mason

Table of Contents

WEEK 1

Lent Day 1: The Dust
Lent Day 2: The Bow
Lent Day 3: The Darkness
Lent Day 4: The Test
Sunday

WEEK 2

Lent Day 5: The Lion
Lent Day 6: The Passover
Lent Day 7: The Prayer
Lent Day 8: The Priest
Lent Day 9: The House
Lent Day 10: The King
Sunday

WEEK 3

Lent Day 11: The Son
Lent Day 12: The Stone
Lent Day 13: The Scorn
Lent Day 14: The Appeal
Lent Day 15: The Forsaken
Lent Day 16: The Champion
Sunday

WEEK 4

Lent Day 17: The Name
Lent Day 18: The Chosen Servant
Lent Day 19: The Servant Israel
Lent Day 20: The Sinless Servant
Lent Day 21: The Suffering Servant
Lent Day 22: The Waters
Sunday

WEEK 5

Lent Day 23: The Spirit
Lent Day 24: The Branch
Lent Day 25: The Good Shepherd
Lent Day 26: The Treasure of the Nations
Lent Day 27: The Coming King
Lent Day 28: The Mourning
Sunday

WEEK 6

Lent Day 29: The Lamb
Lent Day 30: The Fast
Lent Day 31: The Leper
Lent Day 32: The Adulteress
Lent Day 33: The Call
Lent Day 34: The Prediction
Sunday

WEEK 7

Lent Day 35: The Anointing
Lent Day 36: The Cleansing
Lent Day 37: The Plot
Lent Day 38: The Washing
Lent Day 39: The Cross
Lent Day 40: The Grave

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Week One

Day 1: The Dust

Genesis 3:14-19 (ESV)

*The Lord God said to the serpent,
"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.*

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."*

*To the woman he said,
I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."*

*And to Adam he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."*

When we come to Genesis 3, we encounter a God who curses! He responds to Adam and Eve's disobedience and the serpent's treachery decisively. With the pronouncement of each curse and judgment, there is an undoing or reversal of God's gracious creative works. Adam, who was created from the dust, is now destined to return back to it. Eve, who was created out of Adam, has now become dominated by him. The serpent, who was more crafty than any of the wild animals, is now humiliated, groveling on its belly, eating dust. In this chapter we see that sin has affected all of creation.

This text speaks to our desire to overlook our sins. God does not respond lightly to sin. Death entered the world with sin, and all manner of sorrow, suffering and despair. But the worst of the curse would fall upon a different man many millennia later as Paul said in Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" Jesus would take upon himself a curse in order to redeem humanity's status.

Prayer

Dear Father, I know you cannot take lightly the sins that I commit because you are a God of holiness who loves justice and does not allow evil to go unpunished. But I thank you for your wisdom and mercy in devising a plan that would allow the curse that was rightfully mine to fall upon your Son. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 2: The Bow

Genesis 9:8-17 (ESV)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

The Lenten season has historically been a time of solemn reflection on the human condition. Ash Wednesday reminded us that human life is fragile — for dust we are, and to dust we shall return. But we learn quickly that the human condition is marked not merely by fragility, but by depravity. In fact, by the time of Noah, human corruption and violence had become so pervasive that God was said to be grieved to his heart and filled with regret. That the all-powerful God could be portrayed as regretting the creation of man powerfully conveys the sinfulness of sin.

Yet what pierces is that the Bible is not speaking about the human heart abstractly. No, it is speaking specifically about my heart, the sinfulness of my sin and, indeed, the divine regret as to how I have lived.

Yet, in the midst of the gloom and in the aftermath of the storm of God's judgment, we see hope shine through. Noah looks up and sees against the gray clouds the dazzling glory of the rainbow

emerging where sun and storm meet. And there in the clouds he sees the bow of God's wrath laid aside in the promise of peace.

And that great promise is that no matter how dark our sin might grow, God will not turn his face against us again. Instead, God would sooner point the bow of his wrath upward, towards heaven, at his own Son, than unleash his wrath upon us again. And on the cross, where the sun of God's love and the storm of God's wrath would meet again, Jesus would die in darkness so that the brilliance of the glory of God's saving plan would shine forth into our hearts. All this without a hint of divine regret.

Prayer

Lord, help us to share your sorrow and grief at our sin. During this season, grant us the courage to look honestly into the gloom of our sin so that we might see anew the brilliance of your glorious promise and grace to us in Christ. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 3: The Darkness

Genesis 15:7-12, 17-21 (ESV)

Then he said to him, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it."

And he said, "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?"

So he said to him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. ...

And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying:

"To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates — the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

Genesis 15 presents one of the most remarkable if not macabre episodes in the life of Abraham.

For a nomad, the promise of a land to possess would have been both comforting as well as difficult to believe, so it is only natural that Abraham would respond to God's promise (v. 7: "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess") with a request for assurance (v. 8: "How am I to know that I shall possess it?"). What is surprising is not the request, but the sign that God provides.

Animals are brought before God, split in two, and then arrayed before him. The writer makes clear that as the sun goes down, Abram does not merely fall asleep, but experiences a "dreadful and

great darkness." In the thick darkness, a smoking fire pot and flaming torch pass between the pieces and the episode ends with the statement, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (v. 18).

What is going on?!? In the Ancient Near East, when parties entered a covenant it was often dramatized by a sacrifice or some other enactment of the penalty that would fall on the party who did not keep up their end of the bargain. This signified that both parties were willing to honor the arrangement at the possible expense of their lives — their fate would be the same as that of the animals. In the darkness Abraham witnesses God (represented as a fire pot and torch) passing through the pieces, and yet he himself is not required to!

The gospel writers note that when Jesus died, darkness fell over the land, and in that moment, we see the sacrifice God made in order to honor his promises to us. It is a reminder that he went to the grave to give us the skies, became alienated to give us a home, and experienced deep darkness to bring us into the light. In fact, this vision is what comforted Abraham's fear in Genesis 15:1 ("Fear not, Abram, I am your shield."). Is this your comfort too?

Prayer

Father, remind me that because Jesus experienced the darkness, you have shown me your light; because he experienced alienation, you have promised me a home; because he experienced the grave, you have given me the skies. And help me not to be afraid, because you are my shield and very great reward. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 4: The Test

Genesis 22:1-14 (ESV)

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you

have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

This is one of the most well known and difficult passages in the Bible. Abraham is introduced in Genesis 12 as the one through whom “all the peoples on the earth” will be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). And so as we arrive at the scene above we find that what started as God’s call to Abraham to leave his home has now reached a dramatic climax. God has now included in that call the ultimate sacrifice and test of Abraham’s faith — the willingness to sacrifice his only son. The pain and poignancy of this moment is heightened by the fact that Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had waited years without seeing the fulfillment of God’s promise of a son. God’s promise that a nation would come through their family seemed impossible to Abraham and Sarah, given their inability to have a child.

So now having answered their prayers and given them a son, God has asked Abraham to do something that seems completely cruel and irrational. How will God create a people through the sacrifice of Abraham’s only heir? How will this death lead to the blessings promised in Genesis 12? The answer comes as we move from the events of Abraham’s life to the events of the life of Jesus.

As you reflect on this story of faith and sacrifice in light of this season leading up to Holy Week, take the time to reflect on the way it foreshadows the faith and sacrifice of Jesus. Abraham’s declaration that God himself will provide the lamb (Genesis 22:8) reminds us of God’s gift of the Lamb to save the world (Mark 10:45; John 1:29, 36). God’s provision of the ram on Mount Moriah foreshadows his sacrifice of his only son, Jesus Christ — the true Lamb without blemish who died in our place on the cross. Like Isaac, Christ is the lamb led to the slaughter, yet unlike Isaac, Jesus didn’t open his mouth. Just as Isaac carried his own wood for the altar, Christ carried his own wooden cross (John 19:17). Go back and re-read the passage with eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith (Hebrews 12:2).

Prayer

Holy Father, I thank and praise you for sending your only Son into the world. Give me eyes to see the beauty and perfection of Jesus, the spotless Lamb who willingly sacrificed himself so that I might receive forgiveness and new life. And in light of your grace may I live a life of faith, trusting in your goodness and laying down my life for others. In Christ’s Name, Amen.

Sunday: Rest

Week Two

Day 5: The Lion

Genesis 49:8-12 (ESV)

*Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons shall bow down before you.
Judah is a lion's cub;
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He stooped down; he crouched as a lion
and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?
The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.
Binding his foal to the vine
and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
he has washed his garments in wine
and his vesture in the blood of grapes.
His eyes are darker than wine,
and his teeth whiter than milk.*

On his deathbed Jacob prophesied the future of each of his twelve children, foreseeing their future ascendancy or demise, prosperity or impoverishment. For some, the future would be full of violence and heartache. But for others, theirs would be a future of prominence and victory.

For Judah, the fourth among Jacob's sons, his was a future of distinction. He would be held in esteem by his brothers (v. 8, "your brothers shall praise you") and receive tribute from all nations (v. 10, "to him shall be the obedience of the peoples"). His reign would be enduring and unchallenged (v. 10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah") and a time of overwhelming abundance. Because grapevines require attention and care, wine was a luxury for nomadic people in the ancient world.

Yet under the reign of Judah, there would be such an abundance of vines that one could tie his donkey to one without fear that it would be damaged, wash his garments in wine without depleting the supply, and even drink until his eyes took on the color of wine itself (vv. 11-12). Judah's reign would be a glorious one indeed and it is no wonder that Judah himself would be called a lion (v. 9).

In Revelation 5, John has a vision of the enthroned Lion of Judah, and yet this vision is juxtaposed with a Lamb who was slain. Why? The Gospels show us that Jesus demonstrates his greatest power through weakness, his lordship through service, and his sovereign reign through self-sacrifice. In other words, Jesus was slain because he was the Lion and enthroned because he is the Lamb. In your moments of brokenness, heartache and hardship, do you see that Jesus Christ experienced brokenness for you so that you might experience the abundance of his reign over your life?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we are amazed that you reign not through a demonstration of power, but of service; not through exaltation, but humiliation; not through might, but sacrifice. Help me to see that you were the Lion who was slain like a lamb, so that in my humiliation I might experience your exaltation. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 6: The Passover

Exodus 12:1-13 (ESV)

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, "This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

"Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

The account of the Passover with which Israel begins its exit out of Egypt and slavery is in many ways the central story of the Old Testament. It is meant to speak profoundly to God's people. On the one hand, it is a reminder that unless God intervenes and covers us, we are in the same condition as everyone else: part of a rebel creation that stands under God's judgment and condemnation. That is always part of our identity as human beings and without it we cannot walk in humility either before God or others.

On the other hand, it is a reminder that the primary thing God wants from us is trust. He wants us to trust that he is merciful and that he cares for us. He wants us to trust that he desires to save and not condemn us. That is why he became incarnate in the person of Jesus. And he wants our lives to issue in the acts of obedience that manifest our trust in him – whether that is putting blood on our doorposts and eating the Passover meal as was the case for the Israelites, or remembering Jesus' death which saved us when we celebrate the Lord's Supper and then living lives of

forgiveness and generosity. Is your life being characterized by this kind of humility and trust? If not, why not?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, grant me to so deeply feel my need for your mercy and to know your provision of it that humility and obedient trust might be profoundly manifest in my life. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 7: The Prayer

1 Samuel 2:1-10 (ESV)

And Hannah prayed and said,

*"My heart exults in the Lord;
my horn is exalted in the Lord.*

*My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in your salvation.*

*There is none holy like the Lord:
for there is none besides you;
there is no rock like our God.*

*Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.*

*The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble bind on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.*

*The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.*

*The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.*

*The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low and he exalts.*

*He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.*

*For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
and on them he has set the world.*

*He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
for not by might shall a man prevail.*

The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces;

*against them he will thunder in heaven.
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed."*

Within these ten verses there are two stories. The first is Hannah's, a barren woman who desired to have a child and a life with meaning and who was rescued from herself by God's mercy. The second is a story of the people of God traveling each year to "worship and sacrifice to the Lord at Shiloh." These two narratives intertwine in 1 Samuel 1 and in the midst of the two accounts we see what is known as "Hannah's prayer."

One condition of a man or woman that demonstrates a broken world (particularly in ancient cultures) was that of being "barren". The pressures to produce an heir and insure an inheritance in Israel were so tremendous that "barrenness" might describe not only the physical but also the spiritual and social condition of someone's affliction. After years of this, Hannah recognized that her grief had become sin and her mourning had become an "affliction" (1 Samuel 1:11), so at Shiloh she sacrificed that which enslaved her to the Lord. Upon repenting, she vowed that if she were ever to have a child, she would dedicate him to the Lord — rather than using her child as proof of her worth to those who had been judging her. She soon conceived and later returned with her son, who she gave as an apprentice to Eli the priest. This boy was Samuel, the first of the great Old Testament prophets.

If any parent thought their child was precious, it was Hannah. Still, she must have known her role in his life was a temporary one. When we see Hannah "exult in the Lord" from her heart, and "find strength" in him (v. 1), she is being restored by the one thing permanent and true in the world (v. 2). Hannah understood then that behind every condition, physical or spiritual, the Lord's creative power is at work, and not hers. (vv. 6-8). She rejoiced in that knowledge and was liberated.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, though we may not all desire the same things that Hannah desired, we too suffer from trying to make temporary and fleeting things in life permanent. Help us to recognize and repent of our sin and put our strength in the Rock, your son, Jesus Christ. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 8: The Priest

1 Samuel 2:27-36 (ESV)

And there came a man of God to Eli and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt subject to the house of Pharaoh? Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel. Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?' Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your

house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,' but now the Lord declares: 'Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house. Then in distress you will look with envious eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel, and there shall not be an old man in your house forever. The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men. And this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you: both of them shall die on the same day. And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever. And everyone who is left in your house shall come to implore him for a piece of silver or a loaf of bread and shall say, 'Please put me in one of the priests' places, that I may eat a morsel of bread.'"

Do you want the wrongs of this world to be righted? In this text, we learn in v. 28 that the role of priests was 1) "to go up to my altar"— they should have been going before God on behalf of the people to intercede and plead for them, 2) "to burn incense"— which was a religious duty and ritual that honored God (Leviticus 16:13), and 3) "to wear the ephod"— which would mark the priests as those who counseled the people with wisdom from God. In v. 29, we see that Eli's sons, who were the priests at the time — the very ones who should have been caring for the people — were in fact "fattening" themselves on the labor of others wrongfully. Not only was this injustice, but the very people who should have been caring for others were in fact harming them. How would God right these wrongs

When we look at our own lives and the lives of those around us, we often ask the same question. How will God right the wrongs of the world? It becomes a traumatic question when we realize that we are guilty of wronging others as well. The very people we know we should love and serve are often the victims of our selfish focusing on our own interests and priorities.

We are told God does see this injustice and that he must stop it (vv. 30-31) as well as administer just consequences to the offending parties (v. 34). We need the wrongs to be stopped, but we also need someone to go before God and plead for us, as we too are offenders. Who will this be? Verse 35 says, "And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest ... my anointed forever." The Hebrew word for "faithful" also means "enduring," so this priesthood will last forever, but the fact that he is "my anointed forever" means my "king" in this context. Who is both a faithful and enduring priest who is also the king forever? Only one person history could be both — Jesus.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, enduring great high priest and king, you have opened a way for us to approach you even though we are often guilty in our thoughts, words and deeds. Give us your grace that restores, preserves, leads, guards and supplies our hope. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 9: The House

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 11-17 (ESV)

Now when the king lived in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you."

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in? ...

"'And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.'" In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

King David, finally settled in his cedar home, desired a house for the ark of God. However, the word of the Lord came to Nathan, telling David that instead of allowing him to build a temple, the Lord would establish the House of David, culminating in one who would "sit on the throne forever."

Obviously God is not simply promising that he will ensure the continuation of David's lineage as a sort of memorial to him — the common belief of many religions that we only live on in our descendants. He is promising to raise up his own Son from among the descendants of David, one who will bear our stripes and our iniquity.

How like God this is! We offer to him some grandiose plan of how we plan to honor him, and he counters with a completely counterintuitive plan, one in which he is glorified by becoming both king and substitute.

Thankfully, God reads our hearts and edits our plans and our prayers so that they are far more than we would have dared to ask or imagine. Pray, pray and pray, to the limit of your vision and faith, and then be prepared for God to do something even better.

Prayer

O Lord, you are mighty and faithful. Let your righteousness and justice, steadfast love and faithfulness go before us. Allow us to walk in the light of your face and to exult your name all the day. Remind us of your covenant with David, how you built your throne for all generations with the wood of the cross. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 10: The King

Psalm 110 (ESV)

The Lord says to my Lord:

*“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”*

*The Lord sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.*

Rule in the midst of your enemies!

*Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;*

*from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.*

*The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.”*

*The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.
He will drink from the brook by the way;
therefore he will lift up his head.*

People think of Jesus in many ways. Perhaps two of the most common is that he is a wise teacher or a great example. But this passage, which is the most cited in the New Testament, tells us of two of Jesus' roles — priest and king.

The king in Psalm 110 is unequalled in power and might. He sits at God's right hand in the place of highest authority. He is guaranteed victory over his adversaries and he rules his people in such a way that they freely follow him. He crushes opposing kings and executes judgment among the nations. He is exalted and has sure victory over all his enemies.

When Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, God restored him to his original place at his right hand. His resurrection was both a vindication of his status as the Son of God and his enthronement as the rightful king over creation. He defeated the power of sin and death and he presently reigns as king. This means that Jesus has the power and authority to protect us from all evil and wickedness and that he deserves our complete allegiance and loyalty.

This psalm also tells us that Jesus is a priestly king. Priests offer sacrifices and prayers on behalf of their people. But Jesus is a permanent priest in the order of Melchizedek, who was greater than all

other priests. Jesus offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sin and he continually intercedes for us. He clothes us in holy garments, so that through him, we can draw near to God.

Prayer

Father, thank you that you have raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at your right hand, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. Help us to trust in him daily as our priest and king. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Sunday: Rest

Week Three

Day 11: The Son

Psalm 2 (ESV)

*Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us."
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
"As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill."
I will tell of the decree:
The Lord said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."
Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.*

*Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

Lent is a season of repentance and humility, a time where we are called to consider our human sin and frailty in light of the splendor and perfection of God our King. Psalm 2 is the first of many so-called “royal Psalms,” focusing on God’s kingly character. The psalm opens with a question that answers itself, establishing rebellion and the throwing off of God’s yoke as the desire of the nations and kings who conspire against the true King. The reaction of “He who sits in the heavens” is scornful laughter, highlighting the ridicule of one who will not be mocked.

The reaction is not only derision, but action. The Lord refers to his Son, the real and true king, who will come and accomplish everything that was originally expected from David and his entire lineage. All is his and his reign over all false kings and nations betrays the attitude of rebels as not only foolish, but dangerous. In a jarring and ironic poetic image, the “potter” (Isaiah 45:9) will smash their lives like broken pottery, which becomes trampled underfoot and ultimately insignificant — trash on the ground.

While this psalm is sobering in its judgment, it also offers great hope. It points forward to the true divine Son who came to be the final and only truly righteous king, the one who obeyed his Father perfectly and broke the yoke of sin to set us free. Because Christ accomplished his mission on earth, he could definitively say: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). He is the one the scriptures call “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” (Hebrews 1:3).

Prayer

Our King and Father, where you are there is majesty and perfection. Thank you for giving us your Son, who reflects your glory and intercedes for us, advocates for us, and sends us the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. In Christ’s Name, Amen.

Day 12: The Stone

Psalm 118:22-24 (ESV)

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.*

*This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

In the parable of the tenants, the owner of a vineyard leases his property to others and travels abroad. While away, he sends his servants to collect his share of the fruit from the land, but the

tenants beat his servants and then kill them. Finally, he sends his son to collect the fruit, reasoning, "They will respect my son" (Mark 12:6). But he is wrong. They kill his son too.

Jesus explained what the parable meant by quoting Psalm 118: "Have you not read this Scripture: 'This stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" (Mark 12:10-11, cf. Matthew 21:42). In other words, God is the owner of the vineyard. The tenants are his people. They were supposed to give him the fruit of their lives through worship and obedience. But they rejected his prophets and messengers. Finally, he sent his Son. But they rejected him too. In rebellion, they would not respect or honor him as the Son of God. Instead, they killed him.

Yet Jesus was not swept away by a storm of angry and uncontrolled men. His rejection was according to the intentional plan of God — "the Lord's doing." This is "marvelous in our eyes" because the death of Christ defeated death itself. We rejoice because God picked up Jesus from the grave and made him the cornerstone of salvation for everyone who believes. In him, therefore, we will live and never die (John. 11:25-27).

— *By The Park Forum (Bethany Jenkins)*

Prayer

Lord, you work everything according to your good will. Although Christ's death seemed like defeat, you vindicated him by raising him from the dead. In him, therefore, we sing, "We shall not die, but we shall live" (Psalm 118:17). He is our salvation. It is marvelous in our eyes. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 13: The Scorn

Psalm 69:1-12 (ESV)

Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies. What I did not steal must I now restore? O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you. Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord God of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel. For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach. When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me.

David is drowning in his troubles (vv. 1-3). He is crying out in solitary agony, cast aside by his friends and family (v. 4) and set upon by his foes (v. 8). His reputation is under attack. The champion whose

name was once celebrated in the streets is now being mocked in the taverns (v. 12). Israel's savior is crying for salvation and he hears no reply (v. 3).

The pain we feel when our reputation is under attack is uniquely excruciating. No matter whether we come from cultural backgrounds that prize the family name or are individualists who seek to make a name for ourselves, that name is our resumé. Kill it and we are in danger of a full-blown identity crisis. How are we tempted to respond when it is our reputation that is being assaulted? Do we cover up our flaws? Do we succumb to despair? Do we drive ourselves (and others) crazy in a hopeless quest for perfection? David is on a different track.

Even in his distress, David's mind is not on himself. He is not preoccupied with his own honor. His zeal is for the Lord's house. This is what consumes him (v. 9). Honestly confessing his faults, he prays there would be no collateral damage from his own folly that would defame the God of Israel or those who look to him (vv. 5-6). David makes his appeal, boldly staking his claim upon the steadfast love and faithfulness of his just and omniscient Lord (v. 13). In short, he locates himself in God's own reputation.

Many years later, the one called the Son of David entered the temple in Jerusalem at Passover, driving out the merchants and money-changers. His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house has consumed me" (John 2:17). This confrontation sparked the events that would culminate in the greatest loss of dignity imaginable. The creator of the universe, humiliated as a criminal on a cross, prayed for his enemies, offering them all the benefits of his good name. In Jesus, we inherit an eternal reputation that can never be tarnished.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of God, we confess that we have sought too much to make a name for ourselves, and have considered too little the name you have given us. You, whose name is above all names, made yourself of no reputation. You humbled yourself, taking the form of a servant, and endured the violent scorn of those to whom you offered your title. Through the ultimate exchange, you have written your name on our foreheads, and written our names, indelibly, in your Book of Life. Give us the wisdom and faith necessary to humbly receive your exaltation. Teach us by the Spirit and the word to grow together into that name, and thereby to begin to reflect the traits associated with it. For your kingdom, by your power, for your glory, Amen.

Day 14: The Appeal

Psalm 109:21-31 (ESV)

*But you, O God my Lord,
deal on my behalf for your name's sake;
because your steadfast love is good, deliver me!
For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is stricken within me.
I am gone like a shadow at evening;
I am shaken off like a locust.*

*My knees are weak through fasting;
my body has become gaunt, with no fat.
I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they wag their heads.
Help me, O Lord my God!
Save me according to your steadfast love!
Let them know that this is your hand;
you, O Lord, have done it!
Let them curse, but you will bless!
They arise and are put to shame, but your servant will be glad!
May my accusers be clothed with dishonor;
may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a cloak!
With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord;
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.
For he stands at the right hand of the needy one,
to save him from those who condemn his soul to death.*

In a world that is broken, the psalmist appeals to God to deal with his false accusers. The idea of such a plea ("May my accusers be clothed with dishonor") can be uncomfortable to those of us who are not exposed to the injustices of war, genocide and sex trafficking as others throughout the world are. And yet, at some point we have all chosen to repay evil for evil. But instead of addressing injustice on his own, the psalmist takes this injustice to God and appeals to him to act on his behalf. He chooses to allow a just and holy God to deal with those who have wronged him instead of seeking retribution himself.

If God were only forgiving but not just, there would be nowhere for us to go when we are sinned against. But God's holiness will not tolerate injustice. As comforting as that sounds at first, we also are unjust, so unless there is some remedy for us, we will be judged with the same judgment as our oppressors. The only reason the psalmist (or we) can appeal to God is because Christ has already spoken on our behalf. When Christ cried out to God from the cross, he was rejected and scorned because he was taking the place of a sinful humanity. Now we can appeal to God because he looks at us through the sinless Christ who spoke on our behalf.

Prayer

God, our Father, we praise you for sending Christ to cover our own acts of injustice towards you so that we can have a relationship with you, who are perfect in holiness. We thank you that you listen to our appeals when we have been wronged and that you will hear us in your compassion and mercy. Help us to bring our pleas to you instead of seeking our retribution when we are sinned against. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 15: The Forsaken

Psalm 22:1-11, 29-31 (ESV)

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.
Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.
But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
"He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"
Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.
On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.
Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.
All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.
Posterity shall serve him;
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;
they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,
that he has done it.*

Psalm 22 is the first in a cluster of psalms that describe the suffering of someone which seems to echo the accounts in Isaiah of the suffering servant of the Lord. The first line of this psalm is likely to be familiar to us because Jesus cried out these exact words when he was being crucified on the cross. Yet this psalm was written by David, many generations before that. Whatever suffering of his own that David was recounting, he was also prophetically describing the redemptive suffering of Christ on the cross thousands of years later.

Jesus would have read this psalm many times in his life during worship at the temple. He no doubt had it memorized, for it to come so readily to his mind when he was on the cross.

Knowing what he was going to face, Jesus could have spent his life in fear or dread. Instead, he, like David before him, clung on to what he knew was true: God is holy, God is his God, and God has been trustworthy throughout his life. And then, based on these truths, David appeals to God to stay close to him. Jesus knew, though, that the greatest suffering he would face would be abandonment by God, so that God would never abandon his people.

The psalm ends with praise and a note of triumph at the end: “for he has done it.” Jesus stayed to the end, bore our sins, and purchased our reconciliation with God. The messianic nature of the psalm becomes clear as David declares that past generations that have died as well as future generations not yet born will all come to know that his God is a God who delivers his people from suffering. After all because Jesus really was completely forsaken by God (for us!), we can be confident that we never will be abandoned, even if, in our suffering, God seems far away or silent when we call out.

Prayer

Gracious God, we glorify you that because Jesus knew what it meant to be utterly separated from you, we will never have to experience that. Strengthen our faith to truly believe this especially when we think we have reasons to doubt it. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 16: The Champion

Psalm 68: 7-18 (ESV)

*O God, when you went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness, Selah
the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the God of Israel.
Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad;
you restored your inheritance as it languished;
your flock found a dwelling in it;
in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.
The Lord gives the word;
the women who announce the news are a great host:
“The kings of the armies — they flee, they flee!”
The women at home divide the spoil —
though you men lie among the sheepfolds —
the wings of a dove covered with silver,
its pinions with shimmering gold.
When the Almighty scatters kings there,
let snowfall on Zalmon.
O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan;
O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan!
Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain,*

*at the mount that God desired for his abode,
yes, where the Lord will dwell forever?
The chariots of God are twice ten thousand,
thousands upon thousands;
the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.
You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts among men,
even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there.*

Psalm 68:7-18 is a song of praise for the power of God as seen in salvation. There are three movements in this passage. Verses 7-10 describe the power of God in delivering the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. Then, verses 11-14 recount the power of God in the present to preserve his people as they lived amongst their enemies. Finally, verses 15-18 rejoice in the power of God that will safely bring his people home to the mountain of God.

These three movements describe the life of a Christian. We are those who have been brought out from the bondage of sin and death, are being preserved in our present journey, and have been given a promise that we shall arrive safely home. How are all these wonderful truths possible? These benefits are secured for us because of our champion.

Psalm 68:18 refers to one who ascended on high, leading forth a host of captives in his train. According to St. Paul, this passage is describing Christ Jesus, particularly the victory accomplished by him through his resurrection from the dead (Ephesians 4:8).

In Hebrews 12:2 we are told to keep our eyes on Jesus, the archegos of our faith. Although it has been variously translated as "author" or "pioneer," the best translation would be "champion." In other words, Jesus went toe-to-toe with sin and death and won! He fought the battle on our behalf with death and secured the victory. Now, we can rest in him, knowing that the very same power that raised Jesus from the dead is also at work in us (1 Corinthians 6:14).

Do you find yourself anxious today, maybe fearful of what the future holds? Let the truth of these verses be a reminder that the power of God is present in your life because of the work of our champion. Because of him we have been brought out of bondage, are being preserved day by day, and through his grace we shall arrive safely home.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the power present in our lives because of our champion, Christ Jesus, and would ask that today we would find ourselves equipped with courage and joy because of him who ascended on high. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Sunday: Rest

Week Four

Day 17: The Name

Psalm 72: 12-19 (ESV)

*For he delivers the needy when he calls,
the poor and him who has no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life,
and precious is their blood in his sight.
Long may he live;
may gold of Sheba be given to him!
May prayer be made for him continually,
and blessings invoked for him all the day!
May there be abundance of grain in the land;
on the tops of the mountains may it wave;
may its fruit be like Lebanon;
and may people blossom in the cities
like the grass of the field!
May his name endure forever,
his fame continue as long as the sun!
May people be blessed in him,
all nations call him blessed!
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory!
Amen and Amen!*

At the inauguration of a king of Israel, the Israelites would offer a prayer like Psalm 72. This prayer was not only an acknowledgement of the king, but also expressed a set of expectations and criteria for their leader. The king was viewed as the means by whom blessings came to the people from God and he was expected to uphold divine standards of justice and righteousness. Looking to the king for compassion and deliverance for the weak was not naive or wishful thinking, but a hope rooted in the character of the one who had anointed him. The God of Israel is by nature a rescuer and helper to the helpless, so must the king be. Prayers for the endurance of the king's name were based on that expectant hope, that the king would fulfill his commitment to the weak, so prayers for him meant safety and happiness for all.

From then until now, however, no king or leader has ever been able to fulfill these divine standards. Today many have lost faith in our leaders and distrust them all, while others spend their lives and money promoting this name or that name as the one who will finally save us. As followers of Christ,

we can know that God has given us the One in whose name the needy, poor and helpless will truly find deliverance. We can know that in Christ, we have a king who is not only concerned with our needs and suffering, but compassionately identifies with them. We can know that in Christ, prayers for the flourishing of his name and reign will mean peace and blessing for all. Do you know that the King truly cares for you and all of your needs? Have you called on his name?

Prayer

Almighty God, we praise you that your Son is the king we all want and need; that his compassion far outweighs anything we have ever seen. Help us to trust and obey you as our righteous king, and may your name be forever praised. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 18: The Chosen Servant

Isaiah 42: 1-9 (ESV)

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.
Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
"I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the Lord; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.
Behold, the former things have come to pass,*

*and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them."*

In previous chapters, God through the prophet Isaiah has been building a case; he says that though we pursue false idols, they continue to delude, enslave and ultimately fail us. In this passage, God's chosen "servant" is called to bring about justice and free those bound in "the dungeons" (v. 7). This was the lesson for Israel and remains the lesson for us today.

The nature of idolatry is that we worship and serve that which does not deserve it. At the heart of the Christian message, however, is that Jesus Christ "the Chosen One," who truly deserves worship, has served us first.

How can we know God's pleasure in such a way that we begin to replace the idols in our lives with true worship? In verses 1-4, we are taught to "Behold" the one in whom God himself "delights." To behold means to both see and consider. Isaiah calls Israel to see and consider the Lord through his servant; appointed by God, and supported by his Spirit. In beholding this servant we are able to clearly distinguish what is real from what is counterfeit, a "metal image" full of "empty wind" (Isaiah 41) to a Spirit-filled servant who has come in the flesh (John 1). This servant, who has from afar long beheld us, knows that we are wounded and always on the verge of losing hope and will complete his task with the gentleness of a friend (v. 3). Behold the pleasure the Son found in serving the Father even unto death, for you. Then, "delight" in Jesus and be free.

Prayer

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we praise you that the fullness of the Godhead is at work and in full view here in this passage to bring an end to idolatry and the suffering that comes from it. We thank you for your word that we may gaze into it and ponder how you covenant with your people. We delight in you for sending a servant-king, Jesus Christ, who truly has "set the captives free" (Luke 18:4). In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 19: The Servant Israel

Isaiah 49:1-6 (ESV)

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The Lord called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."*

*But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the Lord,
and my recompense with my God."
And now the Lord says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him —
for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength —
he says:
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

How do we know God is good? Isaiah 49 begins as a letter sent out to all nations (v. 1, "the coastlands ... and peoples from afar"), but it is being read and heard by the people of Israel. Therefore, the writer is essentially talking to everybody. The Jews had been taken into exile and longed to be brought back and they wondered where that salvation would come from. Isaiah makes the wondrous claim that "the servant" (v. 3), who has been prepared for this very hour, will be the one who brings the people back, but the manner would not be through military might, but through the power of his mouth (v. 2). That is, what he says and does will bring real salvation, not just physical deliverance.

The twist comes in the fact that this mysterious servant is named Israel (v. 3) — and while he is a person, he is the ideal person who embodies all the characteristics the nation of Israel should have had. For this text we need to remember that the nation of Israel was meant to have been a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12), a command they never fulfilled. Who will do so? This man would have to be perfect to be the ideal version of Israel, and then save not just the Jews — for God to be really glorified (v. 3), he will also have to be "a light to all nations" (v. 6).

We know God is good because he saw his own wayward people and all the rest of the world and brought them back into relationship with him (v. 5). How? Our translation says in v. 6, "that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth," but the Hebrew grammar reads more plainly, "to be my salvation to the ends of the earth." Jesus as the servant is not merely the means to God's salvation but he is that salvation — through his death and life.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, suffering servant and Redeemer, you have brought us back into relationship with you by being our salvation, purchasing us with your life, ransoming us from certain death. Give us hearts of flesh, warmed by the truths of your goodness found in the certainty of your love for us through your death and resurrection. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 20: The Sinless Servant

Isaiah 50:4-9 (ESV)

*The Lord God has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.
I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.
But the Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.
Behold, the Lord God helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.*

In these verses we observe the contrast between the obedient servant of the Lord and those who persecuted and abused him. Astonishingly, it is the obedient servant who is called to suffer on behalf of the disobedient people – to be struck, spat upon, and mocked. And yet, he “sets his face like flint” toward the road of suffering and will “not be put to shame.” He knows that his suffering is not in vain because by it his people shall be redeemed.

The writers of the New Testament recognized that the servant of the Lord, referenced in this passage, is none other than Jesus Christ. He “set his face” toward Jerusalem, knowing the pain that awaited him there (Luke 9:51). He was struck, mocked, and spat upon (Mark 15:19-20). He suffered, not because of his sin but because of ours, and his life was marked by perfect obedience, even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-9).

Through all of this, Jesus remained the sinless servant (Hebrews 12:2). How was Jesus able to endure such treatment and yet be confident that ultimately he would not be put to shame? The answer, in a word, is joy: for “the joy set before him, he endured the cross.” The joy that motivated Jesus was the fact that by his suffering his people would be redeemed.

We too have a great joy set before us today. Certainly there is pain and suffering on our journey, but being united to Christ by faith, we will not be put to shame! Let us take up our cross and follow Christ, the sinless servant.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our sinless servant. May this good news bring strength to us as we pursue joy in the midst of our pain and suffering. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 21: The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53:1-6 (ESV)

*Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned — every one — to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

Jesus was extraordinary in many ways. But if you were to judge his life by the standards of the world, by most accounts he would be considered a failure. He was poor, rejected, and died a

difficult and shameful death. In the ways that others pursue comfort, power, and recognition, he did not.

Even in his outward appearance, there was no indication whatsoever that he was the creator and sustainer of the universe. He had no beauty or majesty that would have caused others to envy him, even though he was the very source of all beauty. More than that, he was utterly rejected and despised, a man of sorrows, to the point that people turned away and hid their faces from him. He was stricken, afflicted, pierced, chastised, crushed and suffered beyond all comprehension. All this and he was the most innocent and righteous person who ever lived.

Jesus went through all these things in order that we would never have to. He experienced sorrow and grief in a way that we ourselves could never have endured. He was punished for sin, though he himself never sinned. The last verse tells us that we are all like sheep — foolish, helpless and desiring to go our own way, but the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that we by his poverty might become rich.

Prayer

Father, we marvel at the humility and compassion of your Son. It is only through his wounds that we are healed. Renew us daily in the joy of our salvation and help us to live in light of even greater things to come. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 22: The Waters

Isaiah 55:1-7 (ESV)

*Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;*

*and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!*

*Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.*

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*

*Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

*Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;*

*and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.*

*Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.*

*Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,*

*for he has glorified you.
Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

In these verses, the Holy One of Israel is crying out through Isaiah, pleading with his people on the eve of destruction to return to the true fountain of life. It is an emphatic call to come without barrier to the eternal spring of living waters. Verses 2 and 3 make clear that this water is the word of God. The invitation is to drink deeply: to receive the word, reason with it, delight in it, to listen to it like they had never listened before. "Listen diligently" (v. 2) is literally, "Listen-listen!" a call for undivided and sustained attention. Ultimately, this word is meant to save them (v. 3), transform them (v. 7), and make them a blessing to the entire world (v. 5). They are being called into communion with their compassionate God (v. 7). But they refuse to hear him (6:9).

Lent is a time for us to admit the same tendencies displayed by Isaiah's audience. For reasons conscious and less conscious, we are prone to neglect God's word, and ultimately, God himself. Given enough time apart from the Scriptures, a kind of spiritual amnesia sets in, where we forget the taste that is sweeter than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb (Psalm 19:10). Lent is an invitation to see Christ as the woman at the well came to see him — as the pure, limitless satisfaction for our thirsty souls. It is our invitation to return to that well and drink deeply. Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14).

Prayer

Gracious Lord, in compassion you call us. By your mercy, open our ears to hear your voice, and hearing you, to return. Remove the scales from our eyes and unveil for us the wonders of your word. Your glories are revealed there. Be our delight. Be our satisfaction. Awaken in us a new sense of expectancy, as those who put their trust in you will never be put to shame. Glorious LORD, we are yours. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Sunday: Rest

Week Five

Day 23: The Spirit

Isaiah 61:1-3 (ESV)

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion —
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.*

In the last of our Isaiah texts we end with a hope-giving passage about Spirit-led transformation. The Lord's anointed, who has been described in previous chapters as both a king and a servant, has come to announce good news for the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives and the imprisoned. This anointed one is both a servant who is filled with compassion for those in need and also a king who has the power to enact this transformation.

It's hard not to read this passage without a sense of yearning, joy and hope. Our hearts are drawn to the hope that our mourning can turn into beauty, gladness, praise, righteousness and glory. Our lives are far different from the world of the exiled Jews, yet this passage speaks into the deep recesses of our disillusioned hearts. We resonate with the sense that we too are impoverished, brokenhearted, alienated and trapped by prisons of our own making. We are searching for something or someone who can rescue us from the predicaments in which we often find ourselves because life is beyond our ability to control with our intelligence, money or sheer willpower. Who is this anointed one who leads us to believe that we are not alone, abandoned to our own pathetic and impotent devices?

Of all the Old Testament passages that he could have used to begin his public ministry, Jesus reads from this Isaiah passage and concludes with the audacious declaration, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). As you consider the things that lead you to feel alone and powerless, remember that the hope of transformation presented in Isaiah has been accomplished, and Jesus is the long-awaited fulfillment of the yearnings of our hearts.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you have accomplished through Christ, the anointed one, what I could never do in my own abilities. Yet, in the course of my day-to-day life I turn back to myself, instinctively putting my hope for change in almost everything but you. Help me to see more of the fullness of what Christ has accomplished so that I might place my hope in him and experience the greater healing, freedom and comfort that he graciously gives. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 24: The Branch

Jeremiah 33:14-18 (ESV)

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'"

For thus says the Lord: "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever."

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God's love and concern for us rise and fall according to how well we are doing in living the Christian life. After all, we ourselves frequently give and withdraw our love from others depending on whether they are living in a way that is pleasing to us. Thankfully, even though we are marked by inconsistency, God is marked by constancy.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, he reminds his people that they can count on his promises and that he will always be there for them. He promises his constancy and faithfulness: "David will never fail to have someone sit on the throne ... nor will the priests ever fail to have someone offering sacrifices" (vv. 17-18). Ultimately, Jesus is the king who remains on the throne and who has offered himself as a sacrifice once and for all.

Jesus is the righteous Branch who offers us his righteousness so that we never fear being rejected by God. Because of that we can bring our own failures and faithlessness to God. Jesus will not turn his back on us. Each day we can bring our repentance and know he will receive it. We can count on God giving us a fresh start because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We all need that fresh start each day. If you come to him asking for it, God will be faithful to give it to you.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I thank you that your mercies are new every morning and your faithfulness is great. Give me grace to repent today of those things which are displeasing to you, counting on the fact that you will never leave me nor forsake me as I seek to walk in your ways. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 25: The Good Shepherd

Ezekiel 34:23-31 (ESV)

"And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

"I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord God. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God," declares the Lord God.

The image of the people of God as a flock of sheep occurs several times throughout the Bible. In the earlier part of Ezekiel 34, the current shepherds (rulers of Israel) are rebuked for their abuse of power (34:1-22). The prophet describes a situation where they had grown fat and wealthy at the expense of the very people they were supposed to care for. We are told that because of that, God would bring judgment on them. The chapter changes in its focus as the warning turns into a promise for the future in the verses above. Not only will the Lord save his sheep, he will also appoint a king who, like David, will shepherd them in such a way as to bring lasting peace (v. 25). It was peace and rest which humanity lost through sin (Genesis 3:15; 4:8) and which prophets like Ezekiel had been pointing to ever since (Isaiah 9:6-7). This is where we lift our eyes to see Jesus, who is God's ideal shepherd-king and the opposite of the corrupt leadership described in the earlier part of the chapter.

The gospel writers tell us that Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind (Luke 4:18). It is Jesus who weeps over Jerusalem because they didn't know what would bring them peace (Luke 19:41). It is Jesus who lays down his life for his sheep so that we might have peace with God and one another. And it is Jesus who will one day bring everlasting peace to the world through his return (Revelation 21). In the meantime, there are seasons of disappointment and suffering that can sometimes make us lose hope that God will fulfill his promise. The injustice of the world around us can make us cynical. It is at those times that we must reflect on Jesus as our good shepherd and remember that because he laid down his life for his sheep, we will one day "dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for your love and care for your sheep. Thank you for laying down your life on the cross so that I might know your peace and be adopted into your family. During this season of

reflection, in light of your love for me, help me to find ways to seek peace in my relationships and lay down my life for others. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 26: The Treasure of the Nations

Haggai 2:6-9 (ESV)

For thus says the Lord of hosts: "Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord of hosts. "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine," declares the Lord of hosts. "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former," says the Lord of hosts. "And in this place I will give peace," declares the Lord of hosts.

The book of Haggai was written to those who had returned from Babylonian to rebuild the destroyed temple of God. It was an encouragement and a call to rebuild amidst rubble, hope despite desolation, and believe even during times of hardship and disappointment.

In verses 6 to 9, Haggai spoke of a time to come when the world would be shaken up as it had never been shaken before. Ironically, this was intended to be a comfort for people who were standing in rubble! While this may seem difficult to understand at first glance, the writer of Hebrews took comfort in the shaking of this world, as it "indicates the removal of things that are shaken ... in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain ... a kingdom" (Hebrews 12:26-28).

At the heart of Haggai's declaration that all of creation (v. 6) and all nations (v. 7) would be shaken, there is the promise that "the treasures of all nations shall come in." "Treasures" is a Hebrew word that can function as a singular or plural noun. In other words, not only will the treasures of the nations be brought to the house of God in tribute, but there will also be One, the true treasure, who fills the house and is to be prized above all the wealth of the world. For Haggai, it was only when the world was shaken that we could see what really will stand and which treasures will endure.

When your world shakes, are you shaken with it, or are you unshakable in spite of it? When the treasures of your heart disappoint you, does your heart fail, or does it take hold of the treasure of all nations?

Prayer

Father, help me to hold onto your unshakable kingdom when my world is being shaken; to remember that Jesus Christ experienced the earthquake of the cross, so I would not be moved; and to remember that while treasures in the world may fail, you are the treasure of all nations. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 27: The Coming King

Zechariah 9:9-10 (ESV)

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

In the Ancient Near East, a king entered cities riding on a warhorse in order to convey his military power, particularly when he was entering into newly conquered cities where his rule may have been regarded as illegitimate or met with suspicion or outright rejection. The exception to this custom was when a beloved king entered his own capital city. There he would ride in on a donkey — the benevolent king.

The prophet Zechariah speaks of a day when Jerusalem would see her king return. He would conquer the enemy once and for all, secure a lasting salvation and establish a new reign of peace for all. This hope of the true king, riding on a donkey, led the crowd to shout: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” when they saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem, yes, on a donkey.

And yet this crowd soon became the angry mob that cried for blood: “Crucify Him!” Jesus, who was once welcomed as the returning king, would be met with the violent rejection of a hostile people. The true king returned to his capital city to find that it had betrayed him. Yet still, he mounted a donkey, not a warhorse, and entered in peace. And he won the ultimate victory for his treacherous people by submitting himself to their violence — our violence — confirming our guilt and achieving our forgiveness in one decisive victory. The enemy this king would conquer turned out to be us, and the cost of the victory we longed for was the death of our beloved king. And he did it. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Prayer

Lord, we rejoice and shout aloud that you would give your life to pay the price for our treachery. We praise you as our beloved king we have been waiting for. Come reign in our heart, our lives and our city. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 28: The Mourning

Zechariah 12:10-14 (ESV)

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves; and all the families that are left, each by itself, and their wives by themselves.

Although Zechariah spoke these words, they were the words of the Lord. Yet how could this be? How could God say, "They look on me, on him whom they have pierced?" Could God be wounded? Even more puzzling, could God be "pierced" – which indicated a killing? In other words, could God die?

Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy. Not only was he fully God, he was also fully man. Moreover, as the prophecy predicted, Jesus was the "only child" and "firstborn" Son of the Father (John 3:16). He died and, on the cross, he was pierced: "One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (John 19:34).

The prophecy, however, said more. It said that those who pierced him would mourn because God would pour out on them "a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy." In other words, the Spirit would open their eyes to see what they had done and how grievous their sin had been. This mourning would be widespread yet intimate – "the land shall mourn, each family by itself."

In part, this prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost. Peter said to his listeners, "You crucified and killed [Jesus] by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). Then, upon hearing the gospel, they were "cut to the heart" and 3,000 were saved that day (Acts 2:37-41). Today, this prophecy is still being fulfilled. As the Spirit fills us with grace, we mourn over Christ's death because we know that "he was wounded for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:5). In our sorrow, however, we also rejoice because his death "brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

— *By The Park Forum*

Prayer

Lord, we confess that our sin pierced Jesus. Thus, we mourn and ask you to pour out your Spirit of grace and mercy. In humility, we rejoice that your lovingkindness never fails – while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). In Christ's Name, Amen.

Sunday: Rest

Week Six

Day 29: The Lamb

John 1:29-34 (ESV)

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

In Genesis 22, Abraham took his only son Isaac to Moriah because God had commanded him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Isaac questioned his father, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham responded to his child that "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering." As Abraham was about to sacrifice his own son on the altar, God stopped him and provided a ram to take the place of Isaac.

Jesus is the Lamb that God provided to take away all sins. Abraham did not have to sacrifice his only son, because God chose to sacrifice his son to atone for our sins. Because of this, God views us in the way he viewed his son when John saw the Spirit descend from heaven upon him. He calls us, both men and women, his beloved sons, with whom he is well pleased (Matthew 3:17).

We no longer have to live in anxiety laboring to justify our existence. Our justification is in Christ, the perfect, spotless Lamb of God who took away our sins and the sins of the world.

Prayer

God, our Father, we thank you that we are your beloved sons with whom you are well pleased. We pray that you will work deep into our being the truth that we no longer have to labor for our salvation, but we can find rest knowing our identity is in the Lamb of God. Give us an understanding of the depth of the sacrifice that was made to atone for our sin so we may fall more in love with you to grasp who we are and who we shall become. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 30: The Fast

Matthew 4:1-11 (ESV)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Here, we learn about three specific ways that Satan sought to tempt Jesus, each one more significant, by challenging his desire for food, urging him to display power sensationally, and encouraging him to use political power to establish God's kingdom. In this third instance, he was tempting Jesus to bypass the cross. The devil was more than willing to give us all back to Jesus, if only Jesus would worship him instead of God. Skip the suffering, save the people, deny God, do it the easy way. For each response, Jesus relied on Scripture, the "sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17), to resist.

These temptations occurred following Jesus' baptism. Right after Jesus was anointed for ministry, the Spirit led him into the wilderness for 40 days and nights of fasting "to be tempted by the devil." Jesus' time in the desert reminds us of Moses fasting for the same period on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28). After Moses' 40 days and nights, God gave him the Ten Commandments for the Israelites. Thus, here we see that Jesus is the new Moses come to fulfill the law that Moses was given.

Prayer

Gracious God, we praise you that you know what it is like to be tempted in every way, as we are. Thank you for showing us how to resist temptation and thank you for enduring the cross and for fulfilling the law, for our sakes, on our behalf. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 31: The Leper

Mark 1:40-45 (ESV)

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

Contracting leprosy was one of the most tragic things that could have happened to an individual in the ancient world. Whenever a leper was around other people, he was required to shout "unclean, unclean," so passersby would know to keep their distance. A leper was required to live "alone, outside the camp," so as to reduce the risk of transmitting his disease to others (Leviticus 13:45-46). To be a leper was to be isolated and humiliated perpetually.

And then Jesus came and changed everything. One of the great beauties of the Gospels is how frequently they record Jesus' interactions with lepers. He approached them and was approached by them. He treated them with respect and kindness. He even did the unthinkable: he touched them, and his touch made them clean. Jesus healed the lepers.

Many biblical scholars have pointed out that there is an analogy between the physical condition of leprosy and the spiritual condition of sin. Sin in our hearts isolates us, both from God and from other people. Try as we might to hide it or remove it, the stain of sin remains present. Like Lady Macbeth, we try to wash away the stain of sin crying, "out damn'd spot," all to no avail. We are unclean, and we know it.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ is the contagiously clean man. When he touched a leper, Jesus did not contract leprosy. Rather, the leper became clean. Those trying in vain to remove their sin must allow themselves to be touched by the contagiously clean man. And, like the leper in the story, may we who have experienced that touch possess an uncontainable gratitude, talking freely about our encounter with the contagiously clean man.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Son who makes clean everything he touches. By his grace may our hearts and our actions be touched by him this day and everyday. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 32: The Adulteress

John 8:1-11 (ESV)

... but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

The Law was clear — adultery was a capital offense with two guilty parties: “If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die” (Deuteronomy 22:22). In accordance with the Law, therefore, the scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus with an adulterous woman to be stoned. Where was the man? They didn’t care. After all, their concern wasn’t really with the Law. Their concern was with testing Jesus.

But Jesus wasn’t fooled. He said, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” Of course, Jesus wasn’t making a recommendation for a new judicial system; no criminals would be held accountable if judges had to be without sin. Jesus was making a point – a point he frequently made to the Pharisees. He often said things to them like, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’” (Matthew 9:13; c.f., Matthew 12:1-8; John 7:21-23). In other words, he was telling them that they were missing the most important part of the Law – that its foundation was love (Matthew 22:34-40; Matthew 7:12; Galatians 5:14). Thus, although they appeared interested in upholding the Law, they were actually breaking it because they weren’t acting on the basis of love, grace, humility and compassion.

So they went away. And Jesus told the woman, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” He didn’t say, “It doesn’t matter whether you sin.” Instead, he said, in effect, “I myself am establishing your righteousness on the foundation of love and grace. Therefore, don’t sin — not because you fear its punishment, but because you have met me and have been saved by grace.”
— *By The Park Forum*

Prayer

Lord, We exalt the name of Jesus because his righteousness has been imputed to us through grace alone! Therefore, even as we seek to sin no more, let us long for holiness and righteousness out of a deep recognition that we have been saved by grace. In Christ’s Name, Amen.

Day 33: The Call

Luke 9:18-27 (ESV)

Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.” Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”

And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”

After spending days and nights with Jesus, witnessing his words and works first hand, Peter could make an absolute confession that Jesus was the Christ, the promised one of God. Those further from Jesus were less resolute in their faiths, often believing him to be a prophet, but those who followed him regularly knew that he was not simply a messenger, but the message itself. After Peter's confession, Jesus tried to help them understand his mission and what it looked like to follow him, but Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting, and following him was not what they thought it was going to be like.

Jesus issues a clear call to those who might follow him, that allegiance to him requires denying yourself, taking up your cross daily and following him. Then and now his words are difficult. We live in a culture that teaches us to glorify ourselves and to pursue comfort, control and the satisfaction of our desires above all else. To deny oneself and pursue the things of God can feel like death, but that is what Jesus calls us to. He tells us that to follow him we will have to relinquish all control and endure suffering and rejection, but he also promises that this will make us like him. In him, triumph will come through suffering. Jesus is calling us to lose our lives as we know them, but only so that he might give us real and eternal life in him. Do you hear him calling you? Are you willing to deny yourself and take up your cross in order to follow him? Do you trust that he will lead you to life?

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you that you have revealed your Son to us, that Jesus is the Christ, the deliverer we all need. Please give us the grace we need to follow you. You alone are worthy and we want to give you our lives, but need your help to do so. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 34: The Prediction

John 12:20-33 (ESV)

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

John devotes much of his Gospel to the last six days of Jesus' life. In John 12, Jesus predicts "what kind of death he was going to die" — one that would loosen Satan's death grip on the world, raise Jesus in victory from the horrors of the crucifixion and grave, and draw people from all over the world to him (v. 32). But here he also reiterates his sobering template for all who would follow after him and be known as his disciples.

From the early days of his ministry in John, Jesus has been alluding to his "hour" — the appointed time when he would undergo suffering and death for the sins of the world. But through this humiliation Jesus also strangely radiates the "glory" of God to humanity. God "glorifies his name" not only through the earthly ministry of Christ but also his death. John foreshadows this reality early on by concluding "we have seen (or 'beheld') his glory ... full of grace and truth" (1:14).

Equally striking is the very human Jesus we encounter here, honest enough to admit "now is my soul troubled" (v. 27) as he starts to feel the agony he is about to undergo. It is an amazing picture of a person completely abandoned to God in the face of unspeakable pain, knowing that God's glory ultimately is the only thing that matters. And it becomes a teaching moment for the disciples as well.

Seeds are living things that must die in order to reproduce; they carry the promise of future life. On the surface, Christ's death looks to the world like a disaster, but by falling "into the earth" (v. 24), he is able to raise up followers and bring "many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). However, following Christ carries a cost: many of the original disciples were to die excruciating deaths themselves, leading Tertullian to conclude that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Christ's disciples must always "die" to themselves to find "living hope" (1 Peter 1:3-5) in Christ. Here Dietrich Bonhoeffer's observation on discipleship rings true: "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Prayer

Risen Lord, you loved us so much that you died to save us from sin. We pray that this reality gives us humility, leads us to praise you always, and gives us a boldness to live fully abandoned to your loving will. In your mercy make these things so, for we pray them in your name. Amen.

Sunday: Rest

Week Seven

Day 35: The Anointing

Mark 14:3-9 (ESV)

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the

ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

"What a waste!" That is the complaint made regarding the woman's use of her expensive perfume to anoint Jesus. Jesus will have none of it. He finds a purely cost-benefit analysis of our actions to be inadequate and bankrupt. Even though the money from the sale of the perfume could have been used to do a lot of good things, Jesus considers her act to be completely appropriate. Why? Because it is an act of worship. And he knows that life begins with what you worship.

Worship the wrong things and nothing else will come out quite right. But worship the living God who has given himself for us in the sacrifice of Jesus and you have a new sense of what matters and you will prioritize your life accordingly. Suddenly you find yourself "wasting" your life on Jesus by giving your life to his agenda rather than your own. That will include caring about justice for the poor.

Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, Jesus is not minimizing our responsibility to the poor in this passage. He actually is quoting from Deuteronomy 15, which encourages radical generosity to the poor. However, such generosity flows from worshiping God. First things first! Put God ahead of all else as the only one worthy of your worship and you will find you are pouring yourself out in all sorts of beautiful ways in service to the world.

Prayer

Lord, too often I worship the wrong things. Help me to see that my life is to be "wasted" on you and only then will it become something beautiful for you to use in your world. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 36: The Cleansing

Mark 11:15-19 (ESV)

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

Every year at Passover thousands of Jews came from all over Israel and Judea to offer sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. Since many traveled long distances, they often purchased their animal sacrifices in Jerusalem rather than hauling them from home and risking an injury or a blemish that

would make them an unworthy sacrifice. It was a convenience for Jewish worshippers to purchase their sacrifices once they arrived. However, the market for these transactions had been set up in the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jewish seekers of God came to worship. Thus, at Passover, the temple courtyard was filled with livestock, sellers of livestock and money-changers, who exchanged regional currencies for Jewish money.

When Jesus saw this, he was angry — so angry that he overturned tables and placed an embargo on merchandise. But why? Weren't the merchants just trying to help the travelers worship God? Perhaps. But they were doing it at the expense of those from "all nations" who were seeking God, counting their worship as insignificant. In calling them "robbers" Jesus may have been referring to their greedy financial transactions and the way they were robbing Gentiles of their place of worship.

Yet something else is going on. In a similar account of his cleansing the temple, Jesus was asked for a sign of his authority. He replied, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). But he wasn't speaking about the building; "he was speaking about the temple of his body" (John 2:21). In other words, when he died, the temple and its entire system — the priesthood, the sacrifices, the glory — died with him because he himself was the Passover Lamb, high priest and Shekinah glory. Thus, when the temple curtain split at the death of Christ (Mark 15:38), the barrier between God and humanity came down for everyone. Jesus became the "house of prayer for all nations." Today there is no need to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. Nor is there any distinction between Jewish and Gentile worshippers. Worship is no longer attached to a place, but a person. Jesus is the temple. He is where we meet God.

— *By The Park Forum*

Prayer

Lord, we worship Jesus as the final sacrifice, priest, glory and temple. Therefore, let us join ourselves to him so that we may love his name and be his servants (Isaiah 56:6). In Christ, may all nations — those near and far — come to you in prayer (Isaiah 56:8). In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 37: The Plot

Matthew 26:1-5, 14-25 (ESV)

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified."

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him,

'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'"
And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.
When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

Even when Jesus' life was slipping away from him, he remained remarkably in control. He predicted his arrest and crucifixion before the religious leaders met to conspire against him. He knew that Judas, one of his trusted apostles, would betray him. How disturbing that must have been to Judas to know that Jesus could see right through his charade. Though humans have their plots and schemes, it is God's plan that always prevails. Nothing can interfere with what he has purposed to do. And nothing is more central to God's eternal plan than that Jesus, the Son of Man, would be delivered up to be crucified. His final meal, the Passover, carried symbolic import and pointed to the purpose for Jesus' death. The Passover was an annual celebration of Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt. Jesus' death would be the new Passover. Those who trust in him experience the ultimate Exodus — deliverance from the slavery of sin. As a result, they enjoy the privilege of living in the freedom of his love forevermore.

When life seems chaotic, when things seem not to cohere, great comfort may be found in remembering Jesus' own experience at the end of his life. Though humans plotted against him and succeeded in executing their plan, nevertheless they could not thwart the plan of God. What comfort there is in knowing that nothing can interfere with the plan of him who is in control! He is at work in all the particulars for his good purposes. By looking to Jesus, particularly his death for us, we discover what is central to God's plan for us: through Jesus' death we find life, through his blood shed for us, we experience the exodus from enslaving sin and the freedom of living in his love.

Prayer

Gracious Father, thank you for being in control of our lives, especially when we feel desperately out of control. Center us in the one who is central to your plan for the ages. Enable us, Holy Spirit, to trust in Christ that we might experience the true Exodus. And having experienced the forgiveness of sin, may we live daily in the freedom of your love, wholeheartedly devoted to you. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 38: The Washing

John 13:1-15 (ESV)

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to

betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."

The NIV translates verse 1: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love." In this unexpected act of foot washing, Jesus was communicating something profound about the nature of divine love. Love is not simply what Jesus does, but love is who he is.

Often when we consider loving someone, we think in terms of actions and behaviors. We ask ourselves, "What's the loving thing to do?" But Jesus' unexpected, self-effacing act of service leads us to ask the antecedent question, "Who am I?" Without first asking this question, we can unknowingly place limits on our love because we are not operating out of a gospel-transformed identity. For example, if we functionally see ourselves as orphans needing to look out for ourselves instead of as God's beloved children, we will limit our generosity towards others out of fear of not having enough. Likewise, if we think we are righteous by our own hard work, there will be boundaries to the way we are willing to serve others because our pride keeps us from serving those who "aren't deserving."

When we look to Christ we find a beautiful freedom to serve others, arising from the security of his identity: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant ..." (Phil 2:6-7, NIV). Jesus was able to serve in a way that no one expected because he knew the Father's love intimately. The same heart that led him to wash the disciples' feet would lead him to the cross. Because of Christ we have the same privileged status and security with the Father, and so we become free to serve in the radical, loving ways in which he has served us.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I forget each day who I am in Christ and the grace that envelops my life. My love has limits because I don't embrace the truth of who you have made me to be. Help me to live out the reality of being your beloved child so that my love for others flows out of this new identity. Let

me be a bewildering servant to those around me as you dismantle the limits I have placed on my love. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 39: The Cross

John 19:1-37 (ESV)

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God." When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then

he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness — his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth — that you also may believe. For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced."

Re-read this again slowly and prayerfully, engaging your imagination as each scene unfolds. What do you see, hear, feel, smell, in each scene? What is all this meant to mean to you? Allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the story of Christ's death for you today.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it was our sins that sent you to the cross. There we beheld our king. There you finished the work of our redemption. There we looked upon you, whom we had pierced. There redemption was accomplished. Thank you for your astonishing love. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Day 40: The Grave

Matthew 27:57-66 (ESV)

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

The central claim of the historic Christian message is that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Tempting though it may be for us to jump quickly from Friday to Sunday, from cross to resurrection, Matthew pauses and brings us through the silence and stillness of the grave.

Many have tried to dismantle the hope of Christianity, suggesting that Jesus had not really died or that eager disciples had stolen his body to substantiate their claims of a risen Savior. Yet Matthew's interlude between final breath and first appearance speaks unequivocally of a death that was real, a grave that was silent, and a situation that appeared beyond hope.

Romans were thorough in carrying out capital sentences, particularly for those accused of treason. That Joseph was able to retrieve Jesus' body meant the executioners were satisfied with their handiwork. Jews, throughout the Old Testament, would heap rocks on the vilest of criminals to represent that for some, there would be no life beyond the grave. That a great stone would cover the entrance of the tomb meant that there was no expectation of life beyond this grave. The tomb is still, dark, silent.

This is the fate that should have been ours and the destiny of humanity. And yet, our hope is that through the one who went into the tomb before us, there is a way through and out into a new world of God's creating. It is the hope that because one transcended the grave itself, we too may experience new life with him. Matthew's description of the grave is a reminder that the tomb was silent and yet the silence would only last one more day.

Prayer

Our Father, remind us that the darkness of the grave will soon be overcome by the brightness of the third day. In Christ's Name, Amen.