

Awesome Mystery

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" ELW 334

1. Tree of Life and awesome myst'ry,
In your death we are reborn
Though you die in all of hist'ry,
Still you rise with ev'ry morn,
Still you rise with ev'ry morn.
2. We remember truth once spoken,
love passed on through act and word;
ev'ry person lost and broken
wears the body of our Lord,
wears the body of our Lord.
3. Christ, you lead and we shall follow,
Stumbling though our steps may be;
One with you in joy and sorrow,
We the river, you the sea,
We the river, you the sea.
4. From the dawning of creation
You have loved us as your own;
Stay with us through all temptation,
Make us turn to you alone,
Make us turn to you alone.
5. In our call to be a blessing,
May we be a blessing true;
May we live and die confessing
Christ as Lord of all we do,
Christ as Lord of all we do.
6. Living Water of salvation,
Be the fountain of each soul;
Springing up in new creation,
Flow in us and make us whole,
Flow in us and make us whole.
7. Give us eyes to see you clearly;
Make us children of your light,
Give us hearts to live more nearly
As your gospel shining bright,
As your gospel shining bright.
8. God of all our fear and sorrow,
God who lives beyond our death,
Hold us close through each
tomorrow,
Love as near as ev'ry breath,
Love us near as ev'ry breath.

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Wednesday, February 17 Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1–6

Our social media ecosystems urge us to display our virtue—in the language of the text, our “piety”—before the world through posts, videos, pictures, etc. We express and affirm our identity by supporting the right causes, eating the right kind of foods, including the right hashtags, and, of course, denigrating the right kind of people. In exchange, we are promised an identity-affirming dopamine hit in the form of likes and affirmations. The Gospel reading this week recognizes that the reward of recognition is a paltry one, and it urges readers to consider why they feel drawn to show their piety “before others in order to be seen by them.” Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with supporting good causes and good food. The scripture is concerned with the “why” and with the inherent human tendency toward establishing our standing, righteousness, and goodness before our neighbors.

Good and gracious God, help us to know deep in our souls that we are loved and welcomed by you. May this knowledge fill our hearts with contentment and peace. Amen.

Thursday, February 18 1 Peter 3:18–22

1 Peter 3 offers a powerful reminder of the power of baptism, which is not simply the removal of a smudge or two from the body, but a participation in the sin-forgiving, death-conquering, life-giving power of Jesus’ resurrection. In this season of the year, take time to consider your baptism. Remember that it is God’s saving power at work in your life, placing you in right relationship with God in heaven. But in the same way that Jesus’ life and ministry resulted in suffering, so will yours. Every Christian travels the rough and chaotic waters of life in the ark of baptism, tossed about by waves large and small, but ultimately assured that the God of heaven will ultimately bring us to a good resting place.

Heavenly Father, thank you for sealing us with baptism. Help us trust in your kindness, even as we sway uneasily on life’s chaotic waves. Amen.

Friday, February 19

Mark 1:9–15

When people think of the Holy Spirit's fruits, they often think of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.—and not without good reason (see Galatians 5:22–23). The Spirit energizes and enlightens, comforts and encourages. All of this is true. But Mark 1 reminds us that the Spirit also drives us into the world where we encounter adversity, resistance, and temptation. Immediately after his baptism, the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan. Lent offers us a time to reconsider how we think and talk about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work is manifold and powerful. But one thing is certain: like the Israelites, we will be led into the wilderness, where faith is tested and adversity is certain. But like Jesus, we enter that wilderness with the same baptismal promise Jesus received: “You are the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Gracious God, thank you for accompanying us in the wilderness, where we face all manner of adversity, temptation, and resistance. Give us strength to trust you. Amen.

Saturday, February 20

“Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery” (ELW 334, Verse 1)

Lent is a time to ponder the mysteries of the cross. At first glance, the cross could hardly be called a “tree of life.” In fact, in Jesus' time it was quite the opposite. It was a crude and cruel instrument of punishment, utilized by an oppressive system of domination. It represented some of humanity's ugliest impulses: to punish and deter through excruciating suffering. To this day, the tree of the cross does two things. First, it points an accusing finger back at humanity, indicating precisely what we do when Love himself shows up in the flesh—not to mention humanity's ongoing and delusional use of torture in the pursuit of order and justice. Second, however, the cross mysteriously also points to life. In Jesus' death is our life. Good Friday is followed by Easter Sunday.

Holy God, help us to see our sin as it actually is. But give us also eyes to see your love as it actually is: generous, warm, and for us. Amen.

Sunday, February 21

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 1)

Jesus' death happened thousands of years ago in a culture and time different from our own. His death and resurrection are events we can put on the calendar, albeit with some open questions. And yet, the cross and resurrection remain at the center of Christian life today, not only as memories to be recalled but also as ongoing theological and imaginative spaces where Jesus gathers his people. On the bottom panel of Lucas Cranach's famous altarpiece in Wittenberg, Germany, Martin Luther preaches from the Bible while pointing to Jesus, who hangs from the cross, partially wrapped in a dynamic, white robe. Death and resurrection are on full display. For those who worship, Jesus' crucified and resurrected body is the object of their gaze and the focus of their faith. In this time of Lent, we are summoned to the tree of life. There we will find not only his death and resurrection but also our own.

Holy Spirit, gather us around the cross, where we can see and ponder Christ's work on the cross. Help us see that this gift belongs not only to us but also to the entire world. Amen.

Monday, February 22

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Hey you! Yes, I'm talking to YOU. You who, like Abraham, have prayed for God to show up with blessings. You who have grown too weary to hear any promises of good news. You who, like Abraham, have entertained strangers having no idea that it was God coming to visit. You who, like Abraham, are lying with your face to the ground, afraid of hearing God's blessing proclaimed to you. Lift your face. Hear good news. You don't have to believe it now. Take a minute. You can laugh in disbelief with your partner if you need to. God's promises can sound a bit absurd at times, but they are just as sure as the rising of the sun. God has called you "blessed and beloved." God is on the brink of using you to bless many generations to come through your faithful actions. Trust in the one who has made you, named you, called you, and sent you.

God of Abraham, give us faith to trust in the promises that feel unanswered.

God of Sarah, give us faith to look into the barrenness of our days and see new life.

God of the promise, give us trust to remember that you are good.

God of blessing, help us to see your new mercies every morning. Amen.

Tuesday, February 23

Psalm 22:23–31

The Great Law of the Haudenosaunee from the Iroquois states, “We must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.” For many of us mired in myopic self-preservation or urgent financial anxieties for our families, it is much easier to choose expedient economic gain at the expense of our earth’s health and well-being. How do we think about all our relations (past, present, and future) when making our daily decisions to ensure that we are responding faithfully to the “afflictions of the afflicted”? How do we fashion our lives to reflect God’s economy in which “the poor will be satisfied”? As we proclaim God’s deliverance to a people not yet born, we too are delivered. As we attempt to bless future generations with God’s abundance, we too are blessed. In that moment, we are both proclaimers and receivers of God’s good news. In that moment, we become both the ancient offspring and future ancestors shouting out together, “God has done it!”

Wakan Tanka, Great Mystery, teach me how to trust my heart, my mind, my intuition, my inner knowing, the senses of my body, the blessings of my spirit.

Teach me to trust these things so that I may enter my Sacred Space and love beyond my fear, and thus Walk in Balance with the passing of each glorious Sun.

—Lakota prayer

Wednesday, February 24

Romans 4:13–25

“I promise to never let you down.” These were the well-intentioned words of some of the loving adults in my life growing up. As time progressed, however, I began to see that they were fallible humans whose word was not always reliable. Many of us have heard similar unkept promises from friends, family members, leaders, and institutions that have left us wounded and longing for someone who makes good on their word. The good news for us, and for Abraham and Sarah, is that our God is one who shows up with blessing and makes good on promises, especially for those who are perceived as too old, too weak, or too imperfect to be worthy of grace upon grace. If this is you today, rest in the presence of the risen one who promises to never let you down—and keeps that promise.

Open unto me—light for my darkness.

Open unto me—courage for my fear.

Open unto me—hope for my despair.

Open unto me—peace for my turmoil.

Open unto me—joy for my sorrow.

Open unto me—strength for my weakness.

Open unto me—wisdom for my confusion.

Open unto me—forgiveness for my sins.

Open unto me—tenderness for my toughness.

Open unto me—love for my hates.

Open unto me—Thy Self for my self.

Lord, Lord, open unto me!

—from “Meditations of the Heart” by Howard Thurman)

Thursday, February 25

Mark 8:31–38

"Ain't I a woman?" These famous words, spoken by Sojourner Truth to the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851, were packed with so much courage and truth. Where did this courage come from? It was eight years earlier, in 1843, when she heard the call of God on her life and exclaimed to her friends, "The Spirit calls me, and I must go." She packed up her possessions in a pillowcase and hit the road, preaching about the abolition of slavery. She was willing to lose her life for the sake of God's liberation because she knew that none would be free until and unless all were free. God is calling you to this same liberation project. Can you hear the call? Do you trust that one who has undergone great suffering has paved the way for abundant life on the other side of your fear? In the losing of one's own attachment to self-preservation is where God's salvation can truly be found.

God, you are calling us to freedom. Liberate us that we might be liberators.

You are calling us to compassion. Love us that we might be lovers.

You are calling us to generosity. Bless us that we might be blessers.

You are calling us to grace. Forgive us that we might be forgivers.

You are calling us to wholeness. Heal us that we might be healers.

God, you are calling us to freedom. May we hear your call. Amen.

Friday, February 26

Mark 8:31–38

You ruined "my life."
I had power and privilege.
I had beauty and blessing.
You called me to leave it behind.
It was terrifying.
You told me to come and die.
How scary is that proposition?
I tiptoed forward and then retreated.
I inched toward it, and then backed away.
You challenged me with a gracious invitation.
I let go. And then grasped for control again.
You told me that loss was the only real gain.
"Couldn't there be another way?" I wondered.
But you continued inviting.
I finally gave up "my life" that I had built for myself.
I let go like you asked.
And you completely ruined "my life."
In these ruins were where true life was found.
And it was glorious!

Jesus, ruin "our lives" so that we may discover new life in you.

Destroy our temporary false security with your eternal safety.

Shatter our ego's desires with the desire to serve you alone.

Ruin our fear with your courage

And rebuild our hearts of hate with your love and endless compassion. Amen.

Saturday, February 27

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 2)

Jesus did not say, "This is my abstract theological concept or my sound doctrinal sermon given to you." In his final words to his confused followers at the Last Supper, Jesus offers his broken body for the sake of their healing and forgiveness. Therapist and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem (author of "My Grandmother's Hands") notes that trauma in our body is either "transformed or transmitted" to other bodies. God wearing flesh matters. We find healing comfort in knowing that the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood to dwell with us. It is the wounds and scars of his savior that allows Thomas to recognize the risen Christ. And it is often our own wounds and scars that allow us to see Christ in our midst, providing healing and transformation to all of our bodies for the sake of God's kin-dom. We get to wear the body of our Lord: ears, eyes, hands, feet, heart, and all. As Teresa of Avila once said, "Christ has no body but yours."

Jesus, we thank you for your body, broken for love's sake.

We thank you for your ears, listening attentively to our cries.

We thank you for your eyes, seeing each one of your children.

We thank you for your hands, stretching out with compassion

We thank you for your heart, opening to every living thing.

We thank you for your body, given to us as a gift of life. Amen.

Sunday, February 28

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 2)

Growing up, my favorite story in the Bible was the "Lost Son" from Luke 15. What was always implied in my reading was that an individual (the youngest son) had wronged another individual (the father) and eventually received forgiveness from that same individual. Then, in seminary, my Kenyan classmate blew my mind with another interpretation: "That story is not about an individual, but a community losing a child and having him restored back into the community with dignity and grace." So now I ask "Who are the children of God that our community is losing too often?"—to hunger, gang violence, suicide, police brutality, white supremacist extremism, and other tragedies. "Rugged individualism" is forcing us to forget members of the body and that if "one part suffers, every part suffers." Because of the interconnectedness of God's family, we somehow find ourselves relegated to both "the loser" and "the lost." And on the broken wandering of that confession we find ourselves encountered by a God who runs to us, embraces us, and throws a party of forgiveness, justice, and peace for the entire human family.

The right hand of God is writing in our land,

Writing with power and with love.

Our conflicts and our fears, our triumphs and our tears

Are recorded by the right hand of God.

The right hand of God is pointing in our land,

Pointing the way we must go.

So clouded is the way, so easily we stray,

But we're guided by the right hand of God.

The right hand of God is striking in our land,

Striking out at envy, hate, and greed.

Our selfishness and lust, our pride and unjust

Are destroyed by the right hand of God.

—from "An African Prayer Book" by Desmond Tutu

Monday, March 1

Exodus 20:1–17

What guarantees our safety, health, and flourishing, even amidst diseases, disasters, and interpersonal or societal conflicts? The Ten Commandments, which Jesus concisely summarized with two great commands: Love the Lord your God with the totality of your being, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

These commands create the conditions for trustworthy relationships; they make clear that genuine love never compromises truth or justice. They free us to rebuff all false gods incapable of generating life within and among us—including the gods of wealth, fame, and power, and any human or creaturely thing that we allow to consume our energy and suck up our attention. Moreover, by rejecting any action that would violate the sacrosanct dignity of human beings, they keep us from turning others into a means for our ends, just as they call us to resist anyone who would turn us into a means for their ends.

O God, help us recognize the false gods in our lives so that we can respect and care for others with the same love that enables us to respect and care for ourselves. Amen.

Tuesday, March 2

Psalm 19

God's wisdom surrounds us—from the skies above to the earth beneath our feet. As day and night turn into each other, the very passing of time conveys truth without words or voice. Nothing can hide from the shining and heat of the sun.

Resonating with this wisdom in creation, God's law and commandments explicitly teach us how to dwell in the sanity God would have for us. Enlightening us, they call us to return to our true selves. Sweeter than honey and more to be desired than gold, they transform our childish reactions into judicious responses. Their wholesome lucidity grounds our ephemeral lives in what remains for eternity.

As we meditate on God's wisdom in creation and law, we find ourselves grounded in truth. We can acknowledge the shame we would rather hide. And we can stand up to those who would dominate us and keep us from clarity.

Permeate our lives with your wisdom, O God. Ground us in the clarity of your truth and just ways. Amen.

Wednesday, March 3

1 Corinthians 1:18–25

In many of our interpersonal and societal conflicts, our need to be right often masks what is actually at work: a need to protect our egos and the interests of the groups that secure them. Regardless of whether we see ourselves as ethically or theologically “correct”—the fact remains. We habitually use the best that secular and religious wisdom has to offer to get what we want. Moreover, we intentionally remain oblivious to the ways our entrenched patterns of perceiving and responding to life keep us from truly understanding the people around us and using what we have to respond to their needs.

Amidst all this, the message of a crucified Messiah upends our carefully constructed worlds. Neither irrational nor impotent, the “word of the cross” reminds us that there may be truer ways of perceiving our circumstances and more just ways of using our agency for the welfare of others.

O God, transform our wisdom and power with the truth and righteousness of your Child Jesus, the crucified Messiah. Amen.

Thursday, March 4

John 2:13–22

Jesus is angry. His father’s house has become a marketplace. This scene in an ancient temple is not unlike one he might also find in our day, where we turn almost every aspect of our lives into a commodity for exchange.

We carefully market our spiritual and religious identities. We turn our deepest convictions into brands we buy and sell. We develop innovative strategies for undercutting our competition and increasing our market share in an increasingly cutthroat religious and spiritual marketplace. We compare ourselves based on the amount we can charge for our services.

Amid all this, Jesus’ zealous rage indicts us. It reminds us that his body is our only temple, a body crucified by religious and political powers, and the economies of exchange that sustained them. Wherever sin, pain, and death haunt us, and the promise of resurrection brings new life—that is where God dwells among us.

O God, give us eyes to see that—even amid the insidious ways we commodify ourselves—you still dwell among us in the Messiah’s crucified body, creating life and righteousness wherever death and injustice are at work. Amen.

Friday, March 5

John 2:13–22

Jesus' zeal for his father's house rings through the centuries. In a world increasingly subject to a global market, we are often oblivious to the ways we commodify ourselves and others—even the things of God—in order to secure some advantage. Echoing the prophets and psalmists, Jesus' speech and actions in this story remind us that he is the Passover that liberates us from the demonic grip of our dehumanizing ways of perceiving and responding to other people.

Indeed, Jesus' body enacts a very different kind of exchange—one that stands in sharp contrast to the ways we turn others and ourselves into commodities measured by our value on a market. In this alternative exchange, we become signs of God's temple—the Messiah's body for one another and the rest of the world—precisely when our overflow of resources provides for another's need, even as their overflow provides for our need.

Dear Jesus, we are grateful that through your crucified body, you transform our commodifying exchanges into generative relationships that deepen our connection with you and with one another. Amen.

Saturday, March 6

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verses 1–3)

Biblical traditions use the image of the Tree of Life to depict God's Wisdom, evident in all creation and revealed in the Torah (God's law). Early followers of Jesus drew on these connections to affirm that Jesus was indeed not only the Messiah but also the Word and Wisdom of God, who was with God at the dawn of creation.

This Jesus continues to be our Tree of Life, in whose death we are reborn to new life. As we remember the truth and love he embodied, and pass it on through act and word, we wear his body, crucified and raised from the dead, for every lost and broken person. Although we frequently stumble, his is the lead we follow. As our Tree of Life, his truth and love permeate every aspect of our everyday lives, whether we are in joy or in sorrow, as the sea overflows into rivers.

O God, permeate every aspect of our daily lives with the truth and love embodied in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Sunday, March 7

“Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery” (ELW 334, Verse 3)

How do we follow the Messiah’s lead? By daily claiming the promises made in our baptism. This means daily dying to our false selves and reclaiming our birth into the Messiah’s life. It means continually having our distorted and dysfunctional ways of perceiving and responding to circumstances rewired and transformed.

We are no longer powerless in the face of forces that seem to be beyond our control—whether they be diseases, disasters, or interpersonal and societal conflicts. We are no longer commodities, whose identities are for sale in an insidious global market that tracks our every move. Jesus, the crucified Messiah and Wisdom of God, has liberated us from all that would hold us back from fully becoming who we are as those created in God’s image. Though we may stumble, the Messiah is one with us in joy and in sorrow, overflowing into our lives as the sea overflows into rivers.

Dear Jesus, be with us in our joys and sorrows as you daily overflow into our lives as rivers flow into the sea. Amen.

Monday, March 8

Numbers 21:4–9

This scripture gives a snapshot of divine love in the face of human sin. The people whom God liberated from captivity in Egypt have grown impatient on their journey to the promised land and doubt whether God can be trusted. God, nonetheless, remains committed to the people and responds to both their complaints and their repentance. Instead of removing the poisonous serpents that bite the Israelites as a consequence of their sin, God heals them when they look at a bronze serpent raised up on a pole—a remedy that requires them to continually trust God for salvation.

John 3:14–21 recalls this image, indicating that Jesus raised up on the cross is God’s ultimate way to save people by drawing them into a relationship of trust with a loving God. We can be honest with Jesus about our sin and struggles because he has entered into us and works in us to bring new life.

Faithful God, thank you that your love sustains us on the long journey of faith. Help us to trust your saving presence and provision, even in the midst of our darkest hours. Amen.

Tuesday, March 9

Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22

Gratitude might seem difficult to muster in response to this last year. All around the world people have endured illness, loneliness, violence, and loss. Rather than singing songs of joy, we may still be crying out in our trouble.

This psalm provides comfort with the conviction that there is One we can cry out to, who responds to human suffering with enduring love and undeserved favor. Our hope and trust are not to be placed in our circumstances, but in the Lord, whose very character is goodness and love.

This character is most fully revealed in Jesus, who takes our sin and affliction upon himself in order to give us new life. We give thanks to God for giving us Jesus, who walks with us in our best days and our worst. We thank Jesus for working to redeem all our suffering and sorrow, even when we cannot yet see how.

Merciful God, help us to recognize your work in our lives. Thank you for your unfailing love that encompasses our past, present, and future. Amen.

Wednesday, March 10

Ephesians 2:1–10

I have encountered many people who view Christianity as a type of self-help manual to become a better person. The words of Ephesians upend this understanding by giving a cosmic view of what God's grace has done for us in Jesus Christ.

The author asserts that all people have been gripped by an evil power that turns us away from God to a life centered on self, which is actually death. Dead people cannot make themselves good. But God, whose love and mercy is greater than we can fathom, makes dead people alive through the gift of Christ Jesus. He gave his life to break all forms of bondage and move us from the realm of death to a life that is secure in the "heavenly places" with him. Only this radical, divine love empowers us to truly do good as a reflection of who we are in Christ.

Thank you, gracious Jesus, for saving us from death and giving us new life in your presence. Help us to reflect your love and mercy to the world. Amen.

Thursday, March 11

John 3:14–21

Many of us have had painful experiences of what we thought was “love” in various types of relationships. Superficial affection, self-interest, and even abuse can masquerade as love and make us doubt if such a thing even exists.

This familiar gospel reading shows that real love is God’s love, defined as a gift (see verse 16). Not just any gift, but the gift of God’s only Son, Jesus, who willingly died humanity’s death so that all can live abundant life both now and forever. Love is manifest not only in the gift itself, but also in God’s act of giving sacrificially for the benefit of others. Divine love calls and capacitates people to give of themselves to God and others for the sake of true relationships that build up, not destroy.

As we journey toward the cross, we are called to surrender false notions of love and our very selves to the One who is true love.

Loving God, forgive us for the ways we have hurt or failed to love others. Pour your love into our lives to heal our wounds and free us to truly love you, ourselves, and the world for which you died. Amen.

Friday, March 12

John 3:14-21

Our gospel reading speaks not only of divine love, but also of divine judgment—a topic that many of us would rather ignore. But these two aspects of God’s activity are not as contradictory as they may first appear. Because Jesus embodies God’s love and offers God’s life to a dying world, to reject Jesus is to cut oneself off from the very source of life and remain in the realm of death. This separation from God is what it means to experience judgment.

The good news is that Jesus offers true life freely and equally to all people; the light he shines brings judgment upon all forms of darkness that would rob us of this life. God’s love is too great to allow hatred, violence, selfishness, and divisiveness to go unchecked. Divine judgment of these realities is, in the end, a reflection of divine love.

God of justice, expose the forces in our lives and world that do not align with your loving purposes. May the light of Christ lead us in your ways. Amen.

Saturday, March 13

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 4)

During Lent, we reflect on Christ's love as demonstrated in the giving of his life for us on the cross. But this fourth verse of our theme hymn, as well as this week's psalm, testify that this divine love for us springs forth from the beginning of time. And it never ends!

We live in a world where things are constantly and quickly changing, as we are reminded in the 24 hour news cycle or the latest viral video. Friendships can be fickle. Employment or educational opportunities we have depended on can be lost without warning.

In the midst of uncertainty and instability, our hymn exhorts us to seek grounding in Christ's love. The cross is our constant reminder that this love is not a passing emotion, but a tangible act of divine self-giving that embraces us from the beginning of time as we know it through its end.

Humble Christ, thank you for your endless love that meets us wherever we are and sustains us for a lifetime. Help us to make you our center. Amen.

Sunday, March 14

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 4)

Our hymn's mention of temptation recalls Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness. For 40 days, Jesus went without food and human company. The devil took advantage of these apparent vulnerabilities to tempt Jesus to take the easy way out of his trials and grasp for worldly power. Jesus said "no" to the devil and a resounding "yes" to trusting in God alone for all provision and purpose in life.

The 40 days of Lent allow us to reflect on our own temptations. These can be any attitude, endeavor, object, or person that seeks to gain our ultimate allegiance and motivate our actions instead of God. On our own we cannot say "no" to these idols that deprive us of life. So, the hymn exhorts us to turn to Christ alone. His perfect love and faithfulness strengthen us in trials and nourish us in the deserts of life.

Mighty God, reveal to us anything seeking to take your rightful place in our lives, and give us the strength and courage to depend on you. Amen.

Monday, March 15

Jeremiah 31:31–34

God makes four covenants in the Old Testament with human beings: with Noah (Genesis 9); with Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17); with Israel at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19–20); and with David (2 Samuel 7). But here in Jeremiah 31, God speaks of making a “new covenant” with Israel—but not the older covenants such as at Mt. Sinai, which the Israelites broke. This new covenant will be written on hearts instead of on stone tablets. Stone tablets gather dust and moss. Hearts are living organs, and what is written on the heart gives life to the whole body. And this time God will do it all—“I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

We Christians believe that this new covenant—the new relationship established by God with all of humanity—is sealed at a Passover supper we will remember and celebrate in a few short weeks: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Gracious God, the new covenant in Jesus' blood frees us from bondage to sin and death. Write your name on our hearts, so that we may know you and love you more and more as we walk in the way of the cross. Amen.

Tuesday, March 16

Psalms 51:1–17

This psalm is traditionally attributed to David, when the prophet Nathan confronts his sinful behavior (2 Samuel 12). “Have mercy on me, O God!” cries David, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

Such a prayer is countercultural in today's world. We rarely hear a public figure confess sin and ask for forgiveness. Instead, non-apologies go something like this: “Mistakes were made.” “I should have known better.” As if sin is simply a temporary lapse in judgment, a quirk to be passed over quickly.

David knows better. Unconfessed sin is heavy, too heavy to bear. So David makes no excuses for his behavior, but relies on God's abundant mercy to take his broken heart (verse 17) and create a new heart within him (verse 10).

In this, at least, David is a model for us. During this Lenten season, may we be quick to confess the sin that weighs us down so that we might walk in the way of the cross with unburdened hearts.

Create in us clean hearts, O God. Give us grace to confess our sins to you and to one another, so that we may again rejoice in your salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, March 17

Hebrews 5:5–10

Driving home from a doctor's appointment, my 12-year-old daughter Sarah was understandably disgruntled with the news that she might require yet one more surgery.

"Why is this happening to me?" she said from the back seat.

"I don't know, sweetie; I wish I did, but that's a good thing to pray about," I replied.

"Well, it's an argument prayer," she said.

"Yes, it's an argument prayer," I answered, "And that's an important kind of prayer. The Bible is full of argument prayers."

The author of Hebrews writes that Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death." As a good Jew, Jesus was not afraid to wrestle with and question God (in the book of Psalms you'll find plenty of "argument prayers").

Following the example of the psalmists, then, and of Jesus himself, we should be bold to approach God honestly with all of our questions—our fear, our anger, and our "argument prayers," knowing that God will hear us.

Jesus, our high priest, often the world around us is not what it should be, and we don't understand what you are doing about it. Teach us to pray with honesty and boldness, trusting that you hear us and will answer us. Amen.

Thursday, March 18

John 12:20–33

A week into the COVID-19 shutdown last year, my family planted some tomato seeds inside for our garden. The seeds were some that "Doc" Runge, an old friend, gave me many years ago, descended from originals received from a German immigrant after World War II—"German tomatoes" he called them.

I had little hope that those now 15-year-old seeds would germinate, but miraculously almost all of them did. Those "German tomato" plants produced abundantly from July until October—long after the nursery-bought ones had died—so many that we gave away the extra. And, yes, we saved some seeds.

Jesus says that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, "but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Those old tomato seeds, useless until we put them in soil, once broken open, produced abundantly.

In this Lenten season, perhaps we should ask, "What in us (pride, grudges, envy, hate) needs to die and be broken open so that God can bring forth abundant life for the sake of the world?"

Jesus, it is hard to follow your call sometimes, especially when it means letting go of things that we have held onto for too long. Give us grace to die to ourselves daily so that we might live for you and for your coming kingdom. Amen.

Friday, March 19

John 12:20–33

"Now is the judgment of this world," says Jesus, "now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

The judgment of God may sound frightening, but it holds the good news that all that works against God will be driven out.

Jesus' talk of being "lifted up from the earth" echoes his earlier assertion (John 3:14) that the Son of Man must be lifted up like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so that the snake-bitten Israelites could look at it and be healed (Numbers 21).

We are not bitten by snakes (hopefully), but we are sin-bitten, death-bitten, grief-bitten. In the strange economy of God, healing now comes not through a bronze serpent on a pole, but a man nailed to a cross, pouring out his life in love for the world. May we, like the Greeks at the beginning of this gospel reading, seek to know this Jesus.

When we are frightened, O God, when our hearts are heavy, raise our eyes to see the healing that you have accomplished through Jesus' death and resurrection. Vanquish the ruler of this world and draw all people to yourself. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, March 20

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 5)

"In our call to be a blessing," says the hymn. "May we be a blessing true." The lyrics recall the story of Abraham, when he is called to leave his homeland to travel to a new land, sight unseen. There, God promises him, he will become the father of a great nation, he will inherit the land, and he will be blessed.

The hashtag "#Blessed," used on social media, too often signifies material prosperity or so-called "humble bragging." But Abraham and his descendants are blessed not for their own sake, but in order to be a blessing to the whole world. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," says God to Abraham (Genesis 12:3).

We the church, along with our Jewish brothers and sisters, take Abraham's story as our own. We are also blessed, but not for our own sake, and certainly not to draw attention to ourselves. We are blessed in order to be a blessing. May God give us grace, then, to be a conduit of God's blessing to the world around us.

God of Abraham and Sarah, we thank you for all the blessings you have given us. Help us to be blessings to those around us, friend and stranger, in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Sunday, March 21

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 5)

More than 40 years ago, Gudina Tumsa, the leader of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (a graduate of Luther Seminary), was faced with a choice. At risk of being killed as a prominent critic of the brutal Marxist regime in Ethiopia at the time, the leader of the Lutheran World Federation arranged for him to escape to Tanzania. But Gudina refused: "Here is my church. How can I, as a church leader, leave my flock at this moment of trial?" He then quoted 2 Corinthians 5:15: "Christ died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." One month later, Gudina Tumsa was abducted, killed, and buried in an unmarked grave.

Now, it is unlikely that many of us will ever be faced with such a choice. Nevertheless, we are called to follow Jesus in the way of the cross; and we do so, trusting that, "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). Or, as our song says, "May we live and die confessing / Christ as Lord of all we do."

God, we thank you for the witness of the saints, including Gudina Tumsa. Grant us grace to live as your servants, knowing that whatever befalls us, in life and in death, we are yours. Amen.

Monday, March 22

Psalm 118:1–2; 19–29

It is remarkably easy to get trapped by the shadows of the past and the future. With regard to the past, we have anger about something that was done to us or we have guilt over something we did to someone else. With regard to the future, we tend to let our fears dominate our horizons. We get stuck in a "what if" way of thinking where we imagine dark scenarios about our health, our loved ones, or our nation.

Verse 24 reminds us of the importance of the present time: "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Christ is alive and in our midst, reminding us that anger, guilt, or worry does not define us. Moreover, he declares to us that we are his beloved children—right now—and therefore freed from the captivity of the past or future.

Lord Jesus, we rejoice in this day. May your Word of forgiveness and love shape our hearts and minds as we move and breathe and live. Amen.

Tuesday, March 23

Mark 11:1–11

"Those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!' (Mark 11:9). Notice how this verse describes the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It says that some are ahead of him while others are following behind. In other words, Jesus is in the midst of them.

I find it easy to forget that Jesus is not only behind or ahead of us. He is not simply a figure from 2,000 years ago or a savior who will meet us in the moment of death and bring us to new life. Our verse reminds us that Jesus is here now in our midst. He comes to us today with a Word of forgiveness and freedom. He meets us whenever and wherever we meet a neighbor—in our homes, workplaces, schools, and community.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your presence in our midst. May we and those we meet be enclosed in your gracious Word of love. Amen.

Wednesday, March 24

Isaiah 50:4–9a

I am a teacher and it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that my job is to tell people things they do not know. But I find my best days in the classroom are the ones where I not only teach but when I am being taught. This happens when students wrestle with an idea and this sparks new insights for the entire class, including me. Those are the times when real learning is taking place.

In our reading from Isaiah, the prophet speaks in verse 4 of God's servants as ones who "listen as those who are taught." In other words, these words underline that we don't have all the answers—sometimes we simply need to be good listeners to be taught. That is good advice for hearing the Word of God in the Bible. And it also applies to our relationships and the importance of real listening rather than constantly doling out our opinions and supposed good advice.

Lord Jesus, during this season of Lent we are humbled by the love you show to us, the unlovable. Open our hearts that we may genuinely listen to you and your Word of life. Amen.

Thursday, March 25

Psalm 31:9–16

We all struggle with loneliness. This has been evident during the pandemic, especially for many of our senior citizens. They often go days without meaningful human contact. The sense of isolation grows and they begin to feel life is without meaning or purpose. It has been heartening to see the way many families and congregations have found ways to reach out to those who are alone with meals, "safe" visits, and words of comfort.

Our reading from Psalm 31 foreshadows the loneliness of Jesus on the cross. He is scorned and rejected. The disciples abandon him. The religious and civil authorities condemn him. The soldiers taunt and torture him. Let's not forget that we are there, too. We cast him aside and leave him utterly alone. Our sin ultimately kills him. But loneliness and death do not get the final word. God's steadfast love does. Jesus is raised from the dead. In God's crazy logic, the empty tomb is not a lonely place but a scene of triumph.

Merciful Lord, you know how we struggle with loneliness. Fill us with the power of the crucified and risen Christ that we might comfort others who feel forgotten and alone. Amen.

Friday, March 26

Philippians 2:5–11

Martin Luther loved to compare our relationship with Christ to a marriage. He suggested that we picture Jesus as the bridegroom who falls in love with an unfaithful bride (us!). We know that when two people get married they share debts and assets as well as sorrows and joys.

So picture the scene of this absurd wedding: Christ takes us, a most unlovely and implausible spouse, and in the marriage of faith shares with us his love, forgiveness, and complete acceptance. He actually gives us these gifts! And we in turn give to him our fear, resentments, and guilt. All that we give him sends him to the cross, where he dies our death. Luther called this the "happy exchange." Others have labeled it the "sweet swap." We almost lack the right words to describe this deep and wondrous and costly love that holds this couple together. Perhaps it is better to just take a knee and bow, as Paul suggests in verse 10 of our text.

Lord Jesus, you have taken us, the loveless ones, to be your very own. May that love create in us minds and hearts to serve you and your world. Amen.

Saturday, March 27

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 6)

As I write this devotional, I am in Minnesota, and winter is fast approaching. But today the sun shone brightly and the temperatures stretched into the 50s. A neighbor of mine told me it would be a good idea to water the evergreens that line my backyard. I thought this was strange advice, but she said the trees would draw on that soaking throughout our long winter.

In a similar way our watery baptism sustains us throughout life. Each day we are reminded by the Holy Spirit of our baptismal dying and rising. Christ's love sustains us as we move about our daily callings in our families, workplaces, and communities. It is a stream that runs deep with clear and cool water, "flowing in us and making us whole," as our hymn says so well.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have forgiven us and adopted us into your family in our baptism. May this living water sustain us as we walk with you on your way to the cross. Amen.

Sunday, March 28

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 7)

The great reformer John Calvin said we can have a hazy understanding of God if we only look at the world around us. The beauty of a sunset or the sight of snow-capped mountains at least suggest that God exists. But there is a lot that goes wrong in the world as well. There is cancer and hurricanes and wildfires. So Calvin maintains our vision of God based on the created world alone is blurry and out of focus.

However, says Calvin, our vision becomes clear when we read and listen to the scriptures. He likened it to an old man with failing eyesight who puts on spectacles for the first time. Now he is truly able to see! It is the same with us. When we open our Bibles and move to its center—the story of Jesus crucified and risen—we see that God not only exists but that our Creator is also good and can be trusted. The Holy Spirit blesses us with eyes to see God clearly—a Redeemer whose love extends even to the unlovable—us!

Lord Jesus, it is easy to be confused and depressed by things that go wrong in our lives and in the world around us. As we walk toward the cross with you, keep our eyes on you and your love for us and our world. Amen.

Monday, March 29

Exodus 12:1–4 (5–10), 11–14

The word that struck me in this week's readings was "remember" (see Exodus 12:14). This led me to a study of the word in Hebrew and Greek—and to a cascade of memories. We are a people of memory, and this Holy Week calls on us to remember. Every year—every Holy Week—is filled with memories and the encouragement to remember and reflect. These stories—these memories—remind us yet again of who we are—of whose we are.

In today's reading, Israel is called on to participate in what will become an annual ritual meal (the Passover Seder) which informs their day of remembrance. Their sense of time revolves around this remembrance meal. Their sense of self and tribe does as well.

So let us, too, enter together into this holiest of weeks with memory as our theme and with the ancient rituals that help us remember yet again who we are and whose we are.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, lead us into the mysteries of this week. Help us remember and learn yet again your ancient truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, March 30

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

On a Tuesday morning we got the call we knew was coming. Mom was in her last hours. Sally and I drove as quickly as we could to Tacoma, Washington, and the group home where she was living. The sisters and their families had gathered there to keep watch. Mom was unresponsive as we talked in hushed tones around her bed.

Around noon as her breathing slowed, I led the family in the Commendation of the Dying. We didn't know if mom was "with" us or not. But the service was a comfort and marked an ending. When we reached the Lord's Prayer, as we prayed together, Mom joined in the second half of the prayer. Those were to be her last words. She died the next day.

Mom's praying that ancient prayer with us was a benediction on a life well-lived. She remembered and shared her "memory" with us. Now, every time I pray the prayer, I remember mom's whispery voice echoing in my ear—"forever and ever. Amen."

Loving, gracious God, hold us and those we love during the hard times of life. Help us to face the end with confidence and hope. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, March 31

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

The call came in late on the Saturday night before Palm Sunday. Darryl and Bernice's daughter had been involved in a car wreck. I rushed to the hospital where I found these precious people broken. Their son-in-law was dead. Their granddaughter was dead. Their daughter was clinging to life, but she had lost the child she was carrying. The nurse brought their granddaughter's body into the room, and Bernice cradled her tenderly. The hush that surrounded her—and us—was profound.

The funeral for granddaughter and father was held on the Wednesday in Holy Week. They lay at rest in a single casket. The daughter could not attend because of her injuries. It was somber yet strengthening—hearing the ancient words—remembering the ancient promises. Death did not have the last word that day. Hope did!

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand. Without you I crumble—I cry. Strengthen my faith with memories for the journey ahead. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday, April 1

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

I think we remember tactile things better—as in touches and tastes. It was Maundy Thursday—an evening for eating the Passover Seder together, for foot-washing, for marking foreheads with soot. As each person stood before me, I traced a cross on their foreheads with old palm branches burned and mixed with holy oil. As I looked each person in the eye, I said "Remember, (name), that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It was stunning to do this because I realized that some among this number would die and be buried before the next Maundy Thursday service. One year that number included my beloved mother-in-law, Gertrude.

That is why memory is so important. It ties us to the past, binds us together in the present, and prepares us for the future in whatever form it will take. How could we live without the hope that memory instills?

For all the saints who from their labors rest, we give you thanks today, gracious Lord. Blessed be the memory, witness, and example of such an amazing cloud of witnesses! Thank you for the gift of living well—and dying well. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Friday, April 2

Good Friday

John 18:1–19:42

In today's meditation I continue to follow this week's theme of "remembering." In Luke 23:39–43 we read that one of the thieves crucified with Jesus said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Because of Luke's story, this plea has been remembered.

We all want to be remembered—to matter in this life to those we love and serve. So every winter solstice we gather on the front porch of St. Paul Lutheran Church—in cold, or wind, or rain—and remember those sisters and brothers who died unmourned or unsung on the streets of Vancouver, Washington, in the past year, commending them to God's loving arms.

We gather with people like Judy and David, who serve warm meals out of their car trunk every weekend, folks from other congregations who provide shelter for homeless families and women, with the homeless men from our shelter, and with the homeless folks who join us in worship Sunday after Sunday. To remember. To honor. To name those who have died. And, to say goodbye—"God be with ye."

Jesus, remember me, throughout my earthly pilgrimage and onwards into death. But more so, remember your wandering children who don't have access to housing. May our prayers lead to action. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, April 3

Holy Saturday

"Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334, Verse 8)

In this final verse of our theme hymn we ask God to "hold us close through each tomorrow." So we recognize that in all the perils and passages of life we are not alone; we are surrounded by God's loving arms, by all the saints who have gone before us, by our memories, and by a church and faith that calls forth our deepest longing and answers our fears and sorrow.

Ours is not a morbid faith, but a living, breathing, supporting faith that connects us to the past through the gift of memories, to the present through our faith communities, and leads us into a future prepared for us from the beginning of time. In the quiet of Holy Saturday, or in the joy of Easter Vigil, we prepare our hearts and minds to yet again remember the Easter joy that has formed us and sustained us. Let the quiet of today help us to remember, and in remembering, prepare us to receive yet again tomorrow's triumphant news.

Rising, Risen Christ, hold us close through each tomorrow, love as near as ev'ry breath. Help us feel the loving arms that surround and support us day by day. Thank you for your wondrous love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sunday, April 4

Easter

John 20:1–18

We come to the conclusion of Holy Week—ending in the excitement of Easter Sunday. A young student friend of mine, Paul, told of his childhood Greek Orthodox Easter celebration, when his priest strode down the aisle roaring “Christ is risen!” The congregation roared back, “He is risen indeed!” When the priest got to the entry doors, he burst them open and shouted to the whole world, “Christ is risen!” The congregation again shouted back, “He is risen indeed!”

That is what we need to remember and proclaim with boldness and joy. We serve a risen Lord who has vanquished death. And, because he lives, we, too, shall live in the joy of Easter.

As I write this with winter and COVID-19 closing in, the future looks murky and conflicted. But one thing I know: Easter always comes on time, in time. Battered though we may be, our Easter faith will revive and renew us once again. “Christ is risen!”

Christ is risen from the grave's dark prison. So let our joy rise full and free. Breathe, O breathe, your quickening Spirit into the darkness of our lives, and lift our spirits with the hope that only you can offer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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