



Forty Days

2023 Lenten Devotionals Shared by the Western Iowa Synod Candidacy Committee

The forty days of Lent provide the followers of Jesus with time for contemplation, prayer, service and worship. Engaging in reflection during this time allows the disciple to deepen their awareness of God's grace and appreciation for Jesus' commitment to our salvation.

The many months and years invested in discerning one's call to ordained ministry also involves a great deal of contemplation, prayer, service and worship. And the candidate for leadership in the church is guided in reflection of their call by the candidacy committee.

In the ELCA there are three seasons of the candidacy journey. The first season is Entrance. During this time the person shares their sense of call with the committee and receives feedback from the community around them. They assess their skills for ministry leadership and deepen their theological understanding and vocabulary. In Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), they learn to recognize their own unconscious response to life challenges and how to be intentionally present with others. This season is completed with a reflective interview with the committee.

The second season is Endorsement. Together, the candidate and committee decide that it is time to put into practice the skills learned and articulate the theological understanding so that others may also grow deeper in faith. The candidate begins a supervised internship in a congregational setting. They perform many of the functions of their roster and are guided by a committee of caring parishioners. At the end of internship, the candidate often returns for a final year of learning and reflection.

The final year involves weaving the threads of the discernment journey together and welcoming the call to be a pastor or a deacon. The committee gathers and reflects with the candidate and grants approval for ordination when the committee and seminary agree it is time. The candidate finishes their seminary studies, receives a Masters of Divinity or Masters of Arts degree, and begins working with the larger church to identify a first call for service.

To express our gratitude for the vital work of congregations in identifying candidates, supporting them in their studies, working with them to develop their skills and finally welcoming them into parish ministry, the Western Iowa Synod has written these Lenten Devotions for you. With Bishop Halaas, the Committee and the candidates, we want you to know that you are a blessing!



Ash Wednesday February 22, 2023 Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

The reading from the prophet Joel begins the season of Lent with an invitation to look inward, *“to return to the Lord with all your heart.”* It is a call to repent. It is a call to obedience and to come close to God in prayer. It is a call to remember, to remember who God is and to be alert to what God is up to!

Be alert! It is Lent.

On this day, Ash Wednesday Christians around the world are marked with the imposition of ashes hearing again the stark words – *“you are dust and to dust you shall return.”* Sobering words, reminding believers that we are frail and flawed creatures and that our lives are totally dependent on God!

It is Ash Wednesday. A day to remember. To remember our baptism, the day we were brought to the font - named child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. In the waters of baptism God claimed us as God’s very own – dependent on God.

Through the waters of baptism, we were welcomed into the body of Christ and the mission we share with all believers -

- to live among God’s faithful people
- to hear the word of God come to the Lord’s supper
- to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
- to serve all people following the example of Jesus
- to strive for justice and peace in all the earth

Be alert! It is Lent.

God is disrupting the world, calling out the comfortable. Coming not in glory or power, but in weakness and service. Inviting you to live into the promises made at baptism. Inviting you into a deeper relationship, into a time of worship and prayer. Inviting you into service, offering food to the poor and washing the feet of the homeless. Inviting you to turn with forgiveness to those who hate, and to honor your neighbors with love. *To let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works, not for your sake, but to give glory to God in heaven.*

On this Ash Wednesday the prophet Joel reminds us...*Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.*

Submitted by **Bishop Lorna Halaas**



Thursday, February 23, 2023 Psalm 51:1-17

Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

Psalm 51:15-17 (NRSV)

Each Lent begins with the same psalm at Ash Wednesday Mass: Psalm 51, known as the *Miserere*. Its first words are, “Have mercy on me, O Lord. In Latin, *Miserere* means “mercy.” The Lamb of God” prayer at Mass, asks, “Have mercy on us” or *Miserere nobis* in Latin.”

While all 150 psalms are traditionally credited to King David, not all were written by this poet king. However, Psalm 51 comes directly from David’s personal history and is unquestionably his.

In a scriptural commentary on Psalm 51, the U.S. bishops’ conference noted its interlocking parts: “The first part (verses 3-10) asks deliverance from sin, not just a past act but its emotional, physical and social consequences. The second part (verses 11-19) seeks something more profound than wiping the slate clean: nearness to God, living by the spirit of God.”

Wiping the slate clean is a concept any child who has used a white board understands. Turning to the Jewish tradition for insight adds even more depth. Rabbinic teaching (dating back at least 900 years), called the *Midrash*, explains this psalm’s fourth verse in a novel way. The verse reads, “Thoroughly wash away my guilt and from my sin cleanse me.” (These are the same words the priest says at Mass as he washes his hands before the consecration.)

The *Midrash* interprets the pleas (both verses 3 and 4) as like those of a man with a wounded hand going to a doctor for help. The doctor notes that, while the wound is large, the patient’s wealth is not. The patient persists, promising to pay what he can. But here is the twist: he also tells the doctor to pay the rest. This, the *Midrash* teaches, is how we should approach God’s mercy. Ask for help and expect God to pay the cost as well. As we know, God did pay the cost — through Jesus.

St. John Paul II, in a 1997 Ash Wednesday homily, noted that “with the words of the *Miserere* psalm, the sinner not only accuses himself of his own sins, but at the same time begins a new creative journey, the way of conversion. To be converted means to enter into deep intimacy with God.”

In 2016, Pope Francis also reflected on Psalm 51. He said that “whoever prays ... asks to be granted grace and mercy. ... (God) does not hide the sin but destroys and blots it out. ... not as they do at the dry cleaners when we take a suit and they remove a stain. No! God blots out our sin from the very root, completely!”

By Patricia Kasten | The Compass | February 26, 2020 © 2023 The Compass | All Rights Reserved. Reprinted with permission. <https://www.thecompassnews.org/2020/02/the-psalm-that-starts-lent/>

Submitted by **Jane Olivier**



Friday, February 24, 2023 2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:20b (NIV)

During this time of Lent, we reflect on our walk with Christ. We remember God's grace sets us free and allows us to be reconciled to God. As we begin fresh each day, may we proceed to live as a new creation in Christ. Let us spend time each day to reflect, renew, and refresh our relationship with God. As we reflect on the ways God has blessed us, we begin our day with gratitude. As we renew our relationship with God, we recognize we are sinners and ask for the forgiveness of our sins. As we get ready to start our day, it is like hitting the refresh button on our computer, we are ready to begin our day with Christ walking along with us.

When we think of worldly ambassadors, we think of people with certain power or esteem to serve as a liaison or representative to another country. Christ asks us to be just that for him today – be that in-between person reaching out to others telling them about God's saving grace.

Today we lift up: People dealing with guilt

Prayer for the Day: Today Lord open our eyes and hearts that we may see opportunities that you have set before us to be ambassadors for you.

Submitted by **Sandy Kropf**



Saturday, February 25, 2023 Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:16–18 (NRSV)

Fasting I don't like fasting. But it reminds me Lent isn't all about me.

Jesus gave mixed messages on fasting. He apparently expected comparatively less of it from his followers (Mark 2:18–22). He also critiqued fasting for show (Matt 6:16–18; Luke 18:12). Still, he fasted (Matt 4:2). And he assumed his followers did (6:16–18). Early Christians fasted to accompany deliberate prayer (Mark 9:29; Acts 13:2–3; 14:23). In the first century, many Jews and Christians fasted two days a week (Luke 18:12; Didache 8.1). When we fast, we join people of God across the millennia.

In Lent, I fast one day a week (daytime hours). I've done so for years. I dread its first occurrence (Ash Wednesday). But by Easter I find myself grateful, more centered, and feeling strangely a bit more "cleansed" in body and soul. It's a physical experience of worship unlike others. To be

clear: fasting is not for everyone. Some of us have health risks, eating disorders, and factors for which fasting would be entirely unhealthy. Some of us should just not fast.

But some of us might. As people of the USA, we are the wealthiest, most consumerist, most privileged, and most overweight people in the world. Individually, we may not do much to contribute to this reality, but collectively we are part of it. About 10% of the world lives with food insecurity, and nearly 25% of its children experience stunted growth due to malnutrition. Further, though our country is just 5% of the global population, we consume about 17% of its energy and produce about 15% of its greenhouse gas emissions. Fasting is a form of protest against these realities. It's a way to stand with those who unjustly suffer. Fasting, finally, isn't just about food. Some of us might do far better to fast from things like doomscrolling, Netflix, screen use, social media, unnecessary spending, unnecessary driving, eating out, meat products, artificial sweeteners, soda, caffeine, alcohol, espresso drinks, energy drinks, or other things. Fasting is simply going without in order to tune in more to what we—and others—need.

I don't like fasting. Really. But it helps remind me Lent isn't all about me.

Prayer focus: those who lack access to food

Dear Lord Jesus Christ: you told the disciples to give hungry people something to eat. Use us to feed the world with nourishment and with your love. Amen.

Submitted by **Troy Troftgruben**



Sunday, February 26, 2023 Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Treasures in Heaven

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:16-21 (NRSV)

Aging has a way of humbling us. The process sorts out life's grain from the chaff. The time and energy required to acquire and accumulate status and material objects burns up much of our emotional and spiritual capital, sometimes at the expense of others whom we claim to love but have neglected to serve. The wisest among us will not have to wait to grow old to make this discovery. Accumulate friends, not just acquaintances. Invest in friendship, not just networks. School yourself in empathy. Practice subordination of the self to the service of others. What matters most will feed the soul.

Prayer I pray for you the ability to sort out life's grain from the chaff, to endure the challenges and disappointments that come with the process, to find guidance and strength from your faith, to experience the joy of touching the hearts of others, and in the process to discover where your own heart truly rests. In Jesus name, Amen.

Submitted by **Steven Gates**



Monday & Tuesday, February 27-28, 2023 Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Genesis 3:6 (NRSV)

Every morning, I have to cross a busy street that is controlled by a traffic light. At least, it's supposed to be controlled by the lights. The speed limit on that roadway is 45 mph, and even though the yellow light cycle is long, inevitably someone ends up running through the red light that follows. Often multiple cars push their luck and the cross traffic has to stop right after starting to avoid a collision.

The temptation story reminds us that it is human tendency to do something just because "everyone" else is doing it. But that's not a good idea. Our failure to respect the boundaries in community affects not only ourselves, but others around us. The time invested in doing what we are expected to do is a gift of security for all involved. God blesses us with boundaries so we don't find ourselves in situations that bring about harm.

Prayer focus: Those who have been hurt or injured by boundary violations.

Lord God, you have set us in complex situations and blessed us with wisdom conveyed through boundaries that keep us healthy. Help us wisely observe those boundaries. Amen.



Wednesday, March 1, 2023 Psalm 32

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Psalm 32: 8 (NRSV)

What a reassuring verse this is as we think about the times in our life when we are unsure of the path we should go. Do we accept help from the Lord and ask his guidance, or do we lean on our own understanding?

This verse brings up memories of times when my husband would try to teach our sons' some things mechanical. When they thought they knew all about it, "they would venture out on their own", only to get themselves in a bit of a mess. I can see many times their patient Father saying, "now, just a minute would you like some help?" I picture God also waiting patiently for us to say, God, I need some help.

How relevant this verse is to remind the "list maker" in me to pause and listen. Listen to the small quiet voice guiding me for the day he has planned for me, instead of me saying to myself, O.K. this is my plan for the day.

Today we lift up: people making important life decisions

Prayer: As we begin our day, let us pause to say, "Lord, teach me the way I should go!"

Submitted by **Sandy Kropf**



Thursday, March 2, 2023 Romans 5:12-19

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. Romans 5:19 (NRSV)

Remember the old saying, “One bad apple spoils the whole barrel”? The saying goes back as far as the 16th Century. Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales includes the story of an apprentice chef who is let go because his bad habits might influence his colleagues. Today’s scripture reminds us that one apple (or other piece of fruit) had a disastrous effect on all of humankind.

And yet, in this season, we reflect on the fruit of another person’s example, Jesus’ obedience to God. May the example of Jesus’ love for others influence our behavior daily.

Prayer focus: Those who obediently look out for the welfare of others.

Jesus, on my heart imprint your image. Help me show your life in my actions today. Amen.



Friday & Saturday, March 3-4, 2023 Matthew 4:1-11

The devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Matthew 4:8-9 (NRSV)

To get the full impact of this story, you really have to read the whole passage. In the first two situations where the devil tries to sidetrack Jesus, the devil starts the temptation with “If you are the Son of God...” Jesus immediately denies the devil’s request. In the third temptation, the devil doesn’t mention Jesus’ relationship with God. He focuses on a new relationship that will come about when Jesus worships him. It’s almost as if the devil wants Jesus to forget that he is, indeed, the Son of God.

When we are baptized, we are named beloved children of God. That is not a result of our own doing, but of God’s gracious love. It is a status that is bestowed on us by the creator of the universe, who knows our frailties and loves us in spite of them. When we are tempted to give in to the pressures around us, we can follow Jesus’ example, remember we are beloved children of God, and shut the devil down.

Prayer focus: those facing temptations today

God of grace and power, remind me that I am your beloved child, especially when temptations try to get my focus off your grace. Amen.



Monday & Tuesday, March 6-7, 2023 Genesis 12:1-4a

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him. Genesis 12:4a (NRSV)

I hope you've read the full passage. It's not too long. But is sure is powerful. It contains the words "bless" five times. And it's not just Abram that is going to **be** blessed, but Abram gets to do some blessing, too. No wonder he went, as the Lord had told him!

I remember a WELCA Bible Study from several years ago where Pastor Judith VanOsdol focused on the idea that God blesses us so that we can in turn be a blessing to others. Think of it, God supplies our needs so sufficiently that we have enough to share. And in God's great wisdom, those around us are blessed with something we need—and they can share with us. What a way to build community.

Prayer focus: those who are afraid they won't have "enough"

Prayer: God of provision, you have given us more than we need so we can share with others. We pray for the humility to let them bless us as well. Amen.



Wednesday, March 8, 2023 Psalm 121

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Psalm 121:2 (NRSV)

I am not a person that always enjoys asking for help. How about you? I like to be able to accomplish something on my own, especially in my personal life. Maybe you could say the personal power of achievement carries a lot of weight for me. I love being the one to clean off all the snow in the driveway. I love being the one to mow the entire yard. I love being the one to do all the vacuuming. However, this psalm quickly reminds me otherwise. It says, "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Our assistance comes from the God that made us. Our power comes from our creator. God is that ever living presence. May you be reminded of these words of great faith here in this season of Lent because you can say with confidence, "God is my helper."

Prayer: Let us pray, God be our helper, especially in that challenging circumstance. Remind us of your continued presence in the heart of our very lives. Amen.

Submitted by **Cole McCormick**, Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church Estherville, IA



Thursday, March 9, 2023 Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham. Romans 4:16 (NRSV)

What's the reason to which Paul refers? In verse 15 he says the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

It might sound radical, but could God have put an end to the law? Jesus did say that he didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. His message, lived and taught in real life circumstances, pointed to a motivation of love, not fear.

We try to control things when fear is running our lives. We hold tight to resources in the face of other's need. We avoid engagement when we focus on risk, not potential.

Love moves us to share God's sufficient provision, trusting that it will continue. We reach out, knowing that God does God's best work through us, even though we are as broken as the people around us.

Abraham and Sarah stepped out in faith, trusting that God would provide and care for them. They made mistakes, sometimes BIG ones, and still God worked in them and through them to bring life. Faith became their way of life.

Prayer focus: those desperate for a word of grace.

Prayer: God of love, help us trust you and to step out in faith today and each day. Speak hope and love to those around us through our words and actions. Amen.



Friday & Saturday, March 10-11, 2023 John 3:1-17

Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. John 3:5 (NRSV)

As a biological male, I have never given birth to another living being. I have, however, started new ventures and ways of living. And this scripture helps me make sense of those experiences.

The first scripture that connects water and the spirit comes from the first chapter of Genesis. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters."

Chaos, uncertainty. And the presence of God covering it all. New life begins chaotically. Those delivering it often go through pain and struggle. Entering the life informed by God's realm requires washing off the old way of being and being immersed in a new way to live, look and love. That new way is guided by the Spirit over the rest of one's earthly life.

Prayer focus: those navigating new ways of living

Prayer: God of new creation, give us the wisdom to navigate the opportunities that bring us closer to you. Amen.



Monday & Tuesday, March 13-14, 2023 Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. Exodus 17:1 (NRSV)

Spoiler alert. Sin is the name of a place, not an action. It was located as somewhere between Elim and Mount Sinai and was simply one of the places the Israelites wandered through during their Exodus journey.

Exodus tells us the whole congregation journeyed by stages, at the command of the Lord. When they were there, they began to run out of the provisions they had brought from Egypt, and

began to complain. God heard their murmuring and provided them with manna and quail as a result.

When we find ourselves lacking, we, too, tend to begin to complain. And just as God did then, God hears our murmuring. One of the realities of the Judeo-Christian narrative is that God provides us with what we need to do what God asks us to do. It's just that the distribution system means someone may have what I need, and I may have what someone else needs. It's God's way of building community. And this all happens in stages, as we become more aware of our neighbors, the resources God has provided us, and how we are designed to live together.

Prayer focus: that we might see the needs of those around us

Prayer: Gracious God, help us hold firmly to our trust in you and hold lightly the things we have in light of other's needs. Amen.



Wednesday, March 15, 2023 Psalm 95

O come let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. Psalm 95:6 (NRSV)

David's psalm challenges us to surrender ourselves to God through worship. It is there, as we open our hearts and minds to His spiritual surgery, that He convicts us of the changes He desires to bring about in us. True, surrendered worship of the Creator ("kneel before the LORD") does not end when church does. Many have noted that the greatest acts of worship take place after we leave and act on the things we have heard and learned while kneeling at His feet.

Søren Kierkegaard wrote a parable about a community of ducks waddling off to duck church one Sunday to hear their duck pastor. The duck pastor spoke eloquently of how God had given all the ducks wings to fly with. He pounded the pulpit with his beak and said, "With these wings, there is nowhere we ducks cannot go! There is no God-given task we ducks cannot accomplish! We can soar high in the sky!" Amens were quacked throughout the congregation. The duck pastor shouted over and over again, "With our wings we can fly through life! WE . . . CAN . . . FLY!" Again the congregation quacked, "AMEN!" Every duck loved the service. In fact, all the ducks present, commented on what a wonderfully convicting message they had heard from their duck pastor. "Yes, we can fly," they said. And then, leaving the church, they waddled all the way home. Many of us fail to act on what we have heard from the Lord during worship. True worship does not stop when the worship stops; it must lead to changed hearts and fresh service to God.

"LORD, as we worship, we want to both hear from You and then apply to our lives the things You teach us. Help us to put Your truth into operation in our walk this day."

Pastor Ed Rea | January 7, 2021 | <https://packinghousedlands.org/>

Submitted by **Jane Olivier**



Thursday, March 16, 2023 Romans 5:1-11

... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.
Romans 5:3-5 (NRSV)

Reverend Ronald J. Lavin was my pastor when I was in high school. One thing he said in a sermon has stuck with me for nearly fifty years. Pastor Lavin used to say, "We see what we are looking for."

I know that's not perfect English, but it is perfectly true. If I am looking for something to complain about (also not perfect English), I will see it. In today's scripture, Paul helps us refocus our vision when we are in difficult or painful circumstances. He reminds us that life even for those who trust in Christ has its challenges. And our faith during those challenges grows and is refined through them. This is because God's love, given to us by God's grace, fills our hearts. The Holy Spirit does this in those situations. And often the Spirit speaks to us in the gracious words of those around us. Thank you, God, for those faithful voices in the congregation.

Prayer focus: that my words may help others in times of challenge

Prayer: Thank you, Loving Lord, for growing my faith when I need it most. Amen.



Friday & Saturday, March 17-18, 2023 John 4:5-42

They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.' John 4:42 (NRSV)

It would not be difficult to "hear" some smugness in the words of the people who came to meet Jesus because of the Samaritan woman by the well. Yet, it is just as easy to hear their affirmation for her witness and their gratitude that she had shared her Jesus Experience.

Often in our culture we consider our faith a very personal story. We are reluctant to tell others what Jesus has meant in our lives. Yet, this is the very way that our families, friends, neighbors and co-workers feel the call to live as people of faith. Their first nudge to come to know Jesus comes as they hear about his place in our daily lives.

Prayer focus: those around us who are longing to hear about Jesus and may not know it

Prayer: Grant me, O God, the courage to share my faith story with others.



Monday & Tuesday, March 20-21, 2023 1 Samuel 16:1-13

...the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7b (NRSV)

What do you see when you look at the people around you?

Our eyes are only able to see what people do, our ears are only able to hear what they say. But God's senses go deeper. They see and hear beyond the present and perceive what the person is able to become.

What would happen if we were open to potential? Today's scripture was spoken by God to the prophet Samuel. Samuel! A prophet charged with speaking God's truth. And Samuel needed this reminder.

During the remainder of Lent may our prayer be that we would be given a glimpse of the potential God has placed in the lives of those around us. And may we be given an opportunity to be a voice of welcome and affirmation in the community of faith.

Prayer focus: that we would be open to other's potential

Prayer: Lord, build your realm in my community by helping us all celebrate each other's potential.



Wednesday, March 22, 2023 Psalm 22

But you, O Lord, do not be far away!

O my help, come quickly to my aid! Psalm 22:19 (NRSV)

It is likely that Jesus knew Psalm 22 and was quoting its words as he was dying on the cross. More than any other psalm, it is a link between the Old Testament and the story of Jesus' passion. It is often read on Good Friday.

This psalm is both a prayer for help and a song of praise. The very one who felt abandoned by God ends up confessing a strong trust in God.

Recalling God's goodness (verse 22) helps us move from fear to praise when our struggles are intense. Recall Paul's words in Romans 5 about suffering is part of the refining of our faith. Praise refocuses us to see God at work, and God present with us.

Prayer focus: those who feel abandoned by God and friends

Prayer: When we are feeling distant from you, Lord, help us see your nearness. Amen.



Thursday, March 23, 2023 Ephesians 5:8-14

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Ephesians 5:10 (NRSV)

There was a television series that used the song, "Who Are You?" for its title sequence. It was a show about forensic investigators trying to solve crimes and find perpetrators by examining the evidence they could find.

What evidence of God's presence in your own life do you find? The beginning of this chapter in Ephesians starts with the words, "... be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” Live in love. It involves sacrifice because we use the resources trusted to us to help others. When we do this, we live in the light (verse 9) and in such a way that we do not hide God’s provision for just our own use. God’s love empowers us to do this as it informs our faith.

Prayer focus: our ability to see the faith expressed in love by others

Prayer: Where there is fear, Lord, help me imitate you and live love. Amen.



Friday & Saturday, March 24-25, 2023 John 9:1-41

Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ John 9:39 (NRSV)

Jesus comes to one who is not seeking him. The blind man was given sight without even asking for it. And Jesus’ attention brought him criticism and rejection. I wonder if he had known what was about to happen, he would go along with Jesus.

The religious leaders, well aware of what would happen if they went along with Jesus, were decidedly NOT going to go with him. They were aware that the life Jesus modeled and taught would demand much from their comfort. They chose intentionally to not see Jesus and his invitation to a new way of being.

We are challenged daily to see beyond ourselves and view the world through eyes of grace and compassion. And like the blind man who was healed, we will face questions by those around us.

Prayer focus: those who see God’s actions and are criticized.

Prayer: Open my eyes, Lord. Let me see Jesus more and more each day. Amen.



Monday & Tuesday, March 27-28, 2023 Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. Ezekiel 37:1-2

There are images of desolation all around – we don’t have to look far to find them: from flood waters and mud slides in California, to the faces of people who have just lost their homes in a missile bombardment in Ukraine, to images of refugee camps where people wait while others determine their future. There are images of desolation all around us. And we think, sometimes, that things used to be so much better. Ezekiel gives us an image that reminds us that the forces of destruction have always been at play; human hearts have always known devastating loss...and the greatest loss of all is the loss of hope. Ezekiel speaks into our

desolation; Ezekiel breathes into our desolation; and Ezekiel reminds us that our God raises the dead. Our God is working life, even now. Our future is certain; and our present bears the marks of hope.

God of love, source of life, breathe into us such radiant hope that your light may shine through us into the dark and empty places within and around us, today and every day. Amen.

Submitted by **Judy Johnson**



Wednesday, March 29, 2023 Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Psalm 130:1-2a (NRSV)

“When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is put down the shovel.”

A friend shared this saying a few years ago, and it has stayed with me as a reminder to stop, when I find myself in difficult circumstances, and take stock of the situation. How often we blame others for our troubles. How often we get in our own way when we take matters into our own hands, forgetting to ask for divine guidance.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a pit not of our own making—as Joseph found himself in a pit as a result of his brothers’ jealousy, or religious martyrs found themselves thrust into an oubliette—an underground prison cell shaped like a burial pit, its only opening at the very top, out of the prisoner’s reach. But in Psalm 130 it’s pretty clear that the writer has created his own troubles. The pit of our own making burns deep in the belly with shame. Asking for help makes us vulnerable.

Thus the cry from the depths in this Psalm is also a cry of hope, because the speaker has already reached the turning point, in his state of despair, when he realizes that he can call upon a God who forgives.

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you . . .

No matter how low we sink, once we turn to God for help, we are no longer alone. Instead, the dark places and moments in our lives offer us an opportunity to enter into a conversation with a living God of forgiveness.

The attitude of the Psalmist is one of vigilance. He waits for God more eagerly “than those who watch for the morning,” and he repeats the line for emphasis. Perhaps he waits so earnestly because he needs to feel God’s forgiveness in order to forgive himself.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Lent takes place during late winter, a time of transition and to be thrust back indoors by the chill of the next. But through it all we know, deeply, that spring will eventually arrive, just as we trust in God’s forgiveness to patiently transform our lives.

Ann Hostetler, Goshen College.edu

Submitted by **Jane Olivier**



Thursday, March 30, 2023 Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. Romans 8:6 (NRSV)

Reverend Peter Marty, editor and publisher of Christian Century, and senior Pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, recently said in an article, “The mental maps we make tell us who we are and where we belong.”

When we orient our lives on satisfying physical desires, we define our priorities on things that will not last. But, when we orient our lives on the Spirit, we have the assurance that we will share in the resurrection like Jesus. We have an orientation towards life eternal, not satisfaction of present pleasures.

Where our mind is set, we filter our vision, we shape our actions, we define our community.

Prayer focus: those who model a focus on spiritual life

Prayer: Creator of life, help us focus on that which is eternal while living in the present. Amen.



Friday & Saturday, March 31-April 1, 2023 John 11:1-45

Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ John 11:25-26 (NRSV)

These words are frequently spoken at the beginning of Christian funerals. They connect us with the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Jesus spoke them to Martha, Lazarus’ sister, when Jesus finally arrived after hearing that his friend, Lazarus, was ill.

Martha thought Jesus was a day late and a dollar short. She talked about the fact that if Jesus had been there earlier, Lazarus would still be alive. Today’s passage is Jesus’ response.

How often do we pray for something that doesn’t happen? I was recently at the playoff game in Minneapolis and the young fan next to me was praying fervently that her team would win. They didn’t. Are answers to prayer the only evidence of God’s presence?

Jesus points Martha (and us) to a bigger perspective. We may not see God doing what we want at the moment, but God is working to bring all creation to ongoing life. Even when we don’t understand, we are assured that God will bring life out of death. That word resurrects our faith.

Prayer focus: Those who can’t see hope in their situation

Prayer: Lord of all, may our hearts express the faith of Martha. May we be able to say, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah.” Amen.



Monday, April 3, 2023– Isaiah 50:4 – 9a

Isaiah 50:4b – He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. (NIV)

In a world of mass communication, our sense of listening to others and to God is certainly not what it was in Jesus time or even a few years ago. In Isaiah we are reminded that as a servant, Christ, awoke each morning with his ears ready to listen to God's voice and to be taught. It becomes a terrific challenge today for us to quiet ourselves, our thinking, and our life to really listen.

As you awaken to the day – take time to **Put away** all technology, **Breath quietly**, and **Listen** to that small quiet voice.

Today we lift up: People under stress to do more or be more

Prayer: Gracious Lord help us to make time to listen to your voice today.

Submitted by **Sandy Kropf**



Tuesday, April 4, 2023 Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. Isaiah 50:7 (NIV)

The mood of Isaiah 50 changes from the gently submission of a servant at the beginning of the chapter to the determination of a servant willing to suffer, because he knows the Lord will help him. Christ voluntarily offers to suffer for us. Sometimes I find myself wondering how willing am I to go the extra mile for someone else or to serve others. At what point would I say, "No, that's too much I couldn't possible do that." On some days I don't worry what someone else might say or think and go ahead and be that servant for the Lord. But, too often, I'm afraid I miss the opportunity to be that servant, and I forget that God has promised to help me.

In yesterday's devotion, we were challenged to listen to the voice of God, and as we do that today, may we also see ways we can be willing to be that servant that maybe has to "suffer" something, knowing that the Lord will help us through it. Remember that God promised to help us in the midst of our suffering. Today I hope I can be more of the servant Christ desires me to be.

Today we lift up: Missionaries serving in dangerous countries

Prayer: Lord, show me how to serve you today knowing you will provide the strength I need.

Submitted by **Sandy Kropf**



Wednesday, April 5, 2023 Psalm 31:9-16

*But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, 'You are my God.'
My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love. Psalm 31:14-16 (NRSV)*

It is not coincidence that the lessons for this day in Holy Week speak of faith in the face of uncertainty. We hear words that may have been welcomed by Jesus as he approached the culmination of his redemptive work. The gospel writers gave us the impression that Jesus knew what was coming because they recorded his conversations with his disciples. The psalms were expressions of faith from generations of God's people.

Those words still have the power to brace our resolve, to help us hold fast to the promise of God's loving presence wherever we may go.

Prayer focus: situations where people are uncertain about the future

Prayer: Eternal God, I trust in you. Let your face shine upon your servant. Amen.



Maundy Thursday, April 6, 2023 Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

*What shall I return to the Lord
for all his bounty to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord,
I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people. Psalm 116: 12-14 (NRSV)*

This passage invites the singer of these lines to enter places where one sees more clearly what is and what is not. When one practices thankfulness for all that God has done, is doing and will do stimulates a deeper relationship with God. It helps one desire to do what God calls us to do and be in the way of Jesus. It brings the individual into an all-encompassing relationship with God and helps one see it is found in community.

The cup of salvation is connected to the celebration of Holy Communion, Jesus' reinterpreting the cups of wine in the Passover Meal. It was at that meal that Jesus taught his disciples to remember his sacrifice with an attitude of gratitude for the life given on our behalf.

Prayer focus: Those receiving their first communion on this Maundy Thursday.

Prayer: God of compassion, when we were helpless, you heard our voice and our supplications. We offer our thanksgiving and call on your name today. Amen.



Good Friday, April 7, 2023 Psalm 22

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22:1a (NRSV)

Good Friday is not for the faint of heart. The day centers on the cross of Christ. It focuses on his excruciating death. It features an imperial act of torture and capital punishment upon an innocent man who came bearing God's unconditional love to the world.

But in the cross, we see who God really is. Early in his time as a university professor, Martin Luther had an awakening experience in studying Psalm 22. Identifying its words with those Christ spoke from the cross, Luther was awestruck at the way our Savior experienced the fullest extent of desperation and alienation from God on the cross. Here Christ suffered completely, identifying fully with us. Here the Almighty becomes the All-merciful. Here the Judge becomes the Judged. Here the God of Justice becomes the All-loving. In Christ the One who knew no sin became sin for our sake so that in Christ we may be saved.

Prayer Focus: Our Salvation

Prayer: O God, in Christ you willingly took on our worst so that we might have and know your best. We gratefully embrace and receive all that you have done for us for Christ's sake. Amen.

Submitted by **Troy Troftgruben**



Holy Saturday, April 8, 2023 Isaiah 52:13-53:12

... He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53:12c (NRSV)

Have you ever paid it forward, like paid for the order of the next person in the drive through? A few bucks and not only do you make someone else's day, but you feel good yourself. What Isaiah says about the Suffering Servant in this passage goes way beyond "paying it forward." Here we have an example of the greatest love of all – to lay down one's life for another. Jesus didn't die for his friends, but also for those who had declared themselves his enemies. For the average human, that would be extremely painful. And Jesus, fully God and fully human, felt the pain and love that made this great gift possible.

Prayer focus: those who put their lives on the line for our good: law enforcement, first responders, military service

Prayer: Creator God, you know the pain of rejection and yet you love us still. Help us let that love shape our perspective and actions in our daily lives. Amen.



Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023 Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. Matthew 18:1 (NRSV)

In all the gospel accounts there is one consistent fact reported: that Mary Magdalene was there. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb to bring closure to an overwhelming week. The highest of highs came as crowds welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. She was likely present as he spoke to the crowds near the Temple. And while she isn't named in the Last Supper accounts, she probably had at least heard about Jesus' reinterpretation of the Passover Meal and what had happened in the garden where Jesus took his disciples to pray. She was there at the crucifixion, and stayed longer than the men in their group. So it is fitting that the last witness to Jesus' death be the first witness to his resurrection.

The resurrection was the ultimate reversal. Life overcame death. Victory eclipsed defeat. Hope overshadowed fear. And the whole new ordering of creation would take time to process and understand. And Mary Magdalene was entrusted with the responsibility of telling the rest of the disciples that God indeed was making all things new.

New life is what God is about. New opportunities for meaning and purpose and grace filled relationships are possible because Mary Magdalene, the first to see the empty tomb, ran to tell the others. And on that messenger-commissioned mission, she met Jesus and worshipped him. Today we celebrate the on-going resurrection and proclaim "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed."

Prayer focus: Gratitude for signs of new life around us.

Prayer: Alleluia! God, you have filled our hearts with hope and bathed our words with praise! Alleluia! Amen.