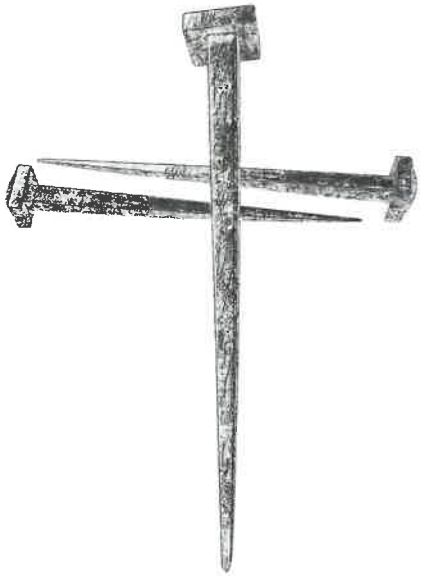

MAN OF SORROWS, PEOPLE OF JOY

In *Man of Sorrows, People of Joy*, we learn how God through Jesus reconciled the world to Himself (see 2 Corinthians 5:19). Taking on our humanity, Jesus—God in the flesh—defeated sin, death, and the devil on the cross. This was sealed by the Heavenly Father with Christ's resurrection victory on Easter Sunday. Now, we have our own orders to follow: Go and share this Good News with the whole world.

DEVOTIONS

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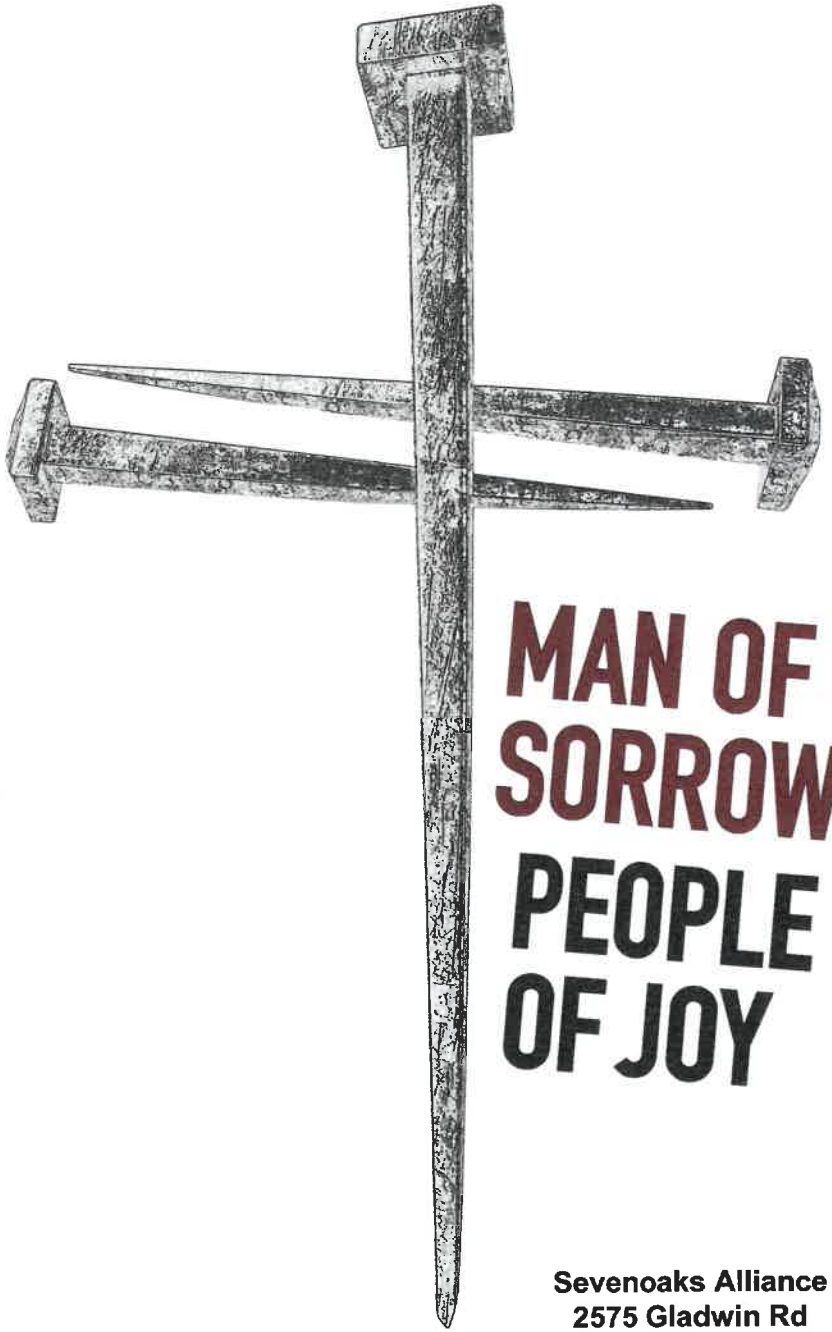

MAN OF SORROWS, PEOPLE OF JOY

DEVOTIONS
Lent 2023

Sevenoaks Alliance
2575 Gladwin Rd
Abbotsford, BC
604-853-0757
sevenoaks.org

MOPPING UP

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, ... and when they saw *Him [Jesus,] they worshiped Him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16a, 17-20)*

Have you ever heard of the "mopping-up" stage of a war? It's what we call the time when it's clear to everybody who has won this war, but there's still fighting going on.

This is the mopping-up stage of Jesus' war. The devil knows he has lost—he has known it ever since Jesus' death and resurrection. But he's still spreading lies. He is still trying to get us to doubt Jesus. He can't win the war, but he can try to take down as many people with him as possible.

And so Jesus sends us out with a job: "Go and make disciples of all nations." Jesus wants as many people as possible to share the life, hope, and forgiveness He won for us at the cross. And to encourage us, He reminds us: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me." He promises to be with us always. Who can be afraid with Jesus nearby?

Thank You, Lord, for giving me a share in Your work. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What dangers should you watch out for when you know the devil is still fighting?
- If Jesus has all authority, can anyone get away with evil forever?
- When you are anxious, how does it help to know Jesus is with you?

MAN OF SORROWS, PEOPLE OF JOY

Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord! O Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! If You, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness, that You may be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His Word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with Him is plentiful redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. (Psalm 130)

Waiting. Hoping. Trusting. In the darkness of our lives, what do we have to hold on to? Jesus. The Lord has not forgotten us. He saw our need and came to save us.

During these weeks of Lent, we'll see Jesus in action—teaching, healing, comforting, saving. As Isaiah promised, Jesus bore our griefs and carried our sorrows—all the way to the cross (see Isaiah 53:4). And when He rose from the dead, He gave us life and joy forever.

May God make these weeks a time to see, as never before, how much He has loved us.

Open my eyes, dear Lord, and help me to see Your heart. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Is waiting difficult for you?
- Why or why not?
- How do you lean on the Lord when you are suffering?

STANDING IN OUR PLACE

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

Why would Jesus get baptized? He never did anything wrong!

Jesus stands in our place as the one Man who represents all humanity before God the Father. He is not a sinner, but we are—and so He is baptized for our sake, so that the blessings of Baptism come to us.

And what are those blessings? "The heavens were opened to Him"—and now they are open to every one of us who belongs to Jesus. The Spirit of God came to rest on Him—and since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes also to us and lives inside us. And a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Yes indeed—because of Jesus' death and resurrection on behalf of all of us, we, too, are God's beloved children. He is well pleased with us—because of Jesus.

Dear Lord, thank You for standing for us, so that we can share in Your life and joy. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who else stands for you in some area of your life?
- Why do you think Jesus chose to become a human instead of saving us in some other way?
- What other gifts that belong to Jesus has He shared with us?

"DON'T BE AFRAID ... GO AND TELL"

The angel [at Jesus' empty tomb] said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him. See, I have told you." So they ... ran to tell His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them ... Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me." (Matthew 28:5-8b, 9a, 10)

That first Easter morning, both Jesus and the angel give two simple commands to the women. They say, "Don't be afraid." And then they say, "Go and tell."

"Don't be afraid"—why not? Because Jesus has risen from the dead, and will never die again. Jesus is with you forever. Because you, too, will rise from the dead, for you belong to Jesus and nothing can take you out of His hands. God has triumphed, and the devil is defeated forever.

"Go and tell"—tell who? The disciples, those who learn from Jesus and follow Him with their whole hearts. "Tell My brothers," Jesus says, because now everyone who believes in Him is a child of God, brother or sister to Jesus and dearly loved by Him. And eventually—tell the world; for Jesus is calling all of us, everyone who will listen.

Be with me forever, Lord, and help me to tell others Your Good News. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do you think the angel said "Don't be afraid" to the women but not to the guards at the tomb who fainted?
- Who told you about Jesus?
- How does Jesus' resurrection help you against fear?

MINI-RESURRECTION

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit. ... And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:50, 51b, 52-53)

The whole story is very odd. Jesus dies, the tombs break open, and many people are raised from the dead, making their way into the city of Jerusalem a couple days later. There must have been a lot of freaked-out people!

The first, I imagine, would be the resurrected people themselves. Some of them would have been dead for weeks, months, maybe even years. Now suddenly they find themselves back in the life they thought was over. No wonder it took them a while to find their way home again!

And then there's the families, opening the door to find Uncle Ephraim or Grandma Sarah standing there smiling and alive. Imagine the fear, the joy, the utter confusion. Because these people weren't zombies—they could eat and drink and hug and dance. They were truly alive—but why?

Someone finally figured it out. They were alive because Jesus had died—and somehow His death broke the power of death. Their mini-resurrection is a foretaste of the time when Jesus returns in His glory and the whole earth rises to stand before Him. Already His death has broken the power of death over us, and His resurrection means that we, too, shall rise—to be with Him in joy and love forever.

Lord, thank You for bringing me from death to life, even now. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you imagine the newly alive people did next?
- If this happened to your family, would you have publicized it? Why or why not?
- What difference does the promise of your own resurrection make in your life right now?

AVOIDING THE CROSS

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. [And he] said to Him, "If You are the Son of God ..." (Matthew 4:1, 3b)

How terrible it must've been for Jesus. Though He is the Son of God, He is also truly Man—and in all of these temptations, the devil was offering Jesus a way to avoid His suffering and death.

It would be easy to convince people to follow you if you were willing to do miracles to meet their every need, like turning stones into bread. Or if you commanded angels to protect you from every disaster. No need for repentance, no trust or faith—just an easy life for everyone. No cross.

And then the last, most direct temptation—where the devil offers to turn over all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus for such a tiny price—just a little kneeling, a single lie—an act of idolatry. No wonder Jesus drove him off! Better to suffer and die—better to be crucified naked between two thieves, then to betray God the Father, whom Jesus loves. Jesus will give that worship to no one else.

And that is our salvation. The devil's shortcuts lead only to death. But Jesus' own freely chosen suffering and death on the cross lead to life not only for Jesus, who will rise from the dead, but for all of us as well, who trust in Him as our Savior.

Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for standing firm for our sakes. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why did the devil take aim at Jesus so early in His ministry?
- Which of these temptations—safety from need, from danger, or the whole world on a silver platter—would be the hardest for you? Why?
- What do you think helped Jesus stand strong under attack?

FISHERMAN

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and He called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him. (Matthew 4:18-22)

I wonder if John remembered this moment on the day he stood under Jesus' cross? What a contrast—going from a bright, hopeful morning on the seashore to the darkness of grief and fear on a small hill outside Jerusalem. And yet the cross was there, waiting, even in Jesus' first call: "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

It wasn't as if the disciples didn't know death. Fishing involves death by its very nature, though not usually for the fisherman! But this is Jesus' kind of fishing—where the fisherman dies so the fish will live, and the fish are caught in God's nets—only to live forever in freedom and joy.

We are some of those fish—you, and I, and everyone who has come to trust in Jesus because the disciples told people about Him. They spread the word, and people around the world came to faith in a God who loved them so much He would lay down His life for them. Now we, the fish, get to be fishermen as well—telling our friends and family about Jesus.

Lord Jesus, I'm so glad You caught me! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like to fish? Why or why not?
- Who was your fisherman, who first brought you to Jesus?
- Pray for a "fish" you know and love who doesn't yet know Jesus.

EARTH-SHAKING

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land ... And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ... When the centurion and those who were with Him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:45a, 50-51, 54)

I am glad that God the Father allowed the world to express itself at the death of Jesus. It just feels right that the sun went dark and the rocks split when He died. Think of it—God Himself came among us as a human being, and now His own creatures have nailed Him to a cross. Of course His death is world-shaking.

And that's terrifying. Most of Jesus' followers are missing from the cross—where are Peter and Andrew and Matthew and James? My best guess is that they are terrified and hiding somewhere in Jerusalem. They are in shock. Their world has ended.

And yet. And yet! Jesus has promised to rise from the dead. All those promises they forgot are still there. A new world is about to dawn, and it will be a world utterly changed, changed forever—filled with mercy, love, and forgiveness. Because of Jesus.

When my own personal world is ending, Lord, stay with me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever felt like your own world was ending?
- In your new world, how are things different?
- Looking back, how can you see God holding you up through this time?

CLOSENESS

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:26-29)

Think back to a time when you had to say goodbye to someone you loved—especially if you were going into danger. How did you say goodbye? Did you embrace? Did you cry? Did you give your loved one a picture or some small keepsake to take with them?

Jesus wanted to stay close to the disciples He was leaving. But He did far better than we do—He gave us Himself in His own body and blood.

Jesus' gift brings with it so many other wonderful things—forgiveness, life, a stronger faith. And yet, the thing I long for most of all in times of trouble is just this: Jesus' own real presence, given to us through bread and wine, body and blood. It's one of the best comforts we have, as we wait for the One who died and rose for us—and who promises to return to bring us where He is, so we will never be separated again.

Lord, draw me closer and closer to You through the gift of Your body and blood. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What are some specific ways you stay close to the people you love?
- What gifts besides Communion has Jesus given to us to keep us close to Him?
- At this time, what do you focus on most when you think about Communion?

JUST COME!

And He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So His fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought Him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and He healed them. And great crowds followed Him ... (Matthew 4:23-25a)

Have you ever looked at the content of your prayers and felt guilty? I know I have. Somewhere, long ago, someone said to me it was wrong to pray so much for healing and practical help with my life. They said that this was just using Jesus, and that Christians should mostly say prayers of praise and gratitude and quit asking so much.

But now I think they were wrong. For in this story we see people all over Galilee and Syria coming to Jesus—why? Because they are sick! Because they are suffering with demons, or they are in pain, or they love someone who is dying. They aren't coming to Jesus for high-minded spiritual reasons; they're coming because they're desperate.

And Jesus helps! He doesn't complain, and He doesn't turn anyone away. His attitude seems to be, "Come to Me and I will give you real, everlasting life. I don't care why you come to Me—just come!" And when they come, He gives them even more than they asked for—through His life, suffering, death, and resurrection.

Jesus says this to us, too, doesn't He? "Just come." Don't worry about your reasons for coming. God is calling you, and He doesn't mind if you are using Him. Let Him bring you near.

Dear Father, bring me close to Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you spend the most time praying about?
- Do you ever feel guilty about any of your prayers?
- How has God made you welcome in His presence?

THE COMPANY HE KEEPS

As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me." And he rose and followed Him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when He heard it, He said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:9-13)

"A man is known by the company he keeps." If this is true, then what must we think of Jesus? In this story we see Him with the outcasts of society—the tax collectors and other unnamed "sinners." And Jesus is comfortable with them! What's worse, they seem to be comfortable with Him! How can this be, if Jesus is a holy man?

Jesus is holy, but He is a healer first. Doctors go where the sick people are; they are not surprised or disgusted by their problems. In the same way, Jesus comes to us, no matter how sick with sin we are. He is not surprised and He is not disgusted. Instead, He reaches out to make us well again. He takes our sin and brokenness upon Himself, and in exchange, He gives us His own life, holiness, and joy. He takes our cross and gives us a share in His resurrection.

How wonderful You are, O Lord! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who do you feel most comfortable with—respectable people or disreputable people?
- Why do you think you feel that way?
- What effect do you think Jesus' visit had on Matthew's friends?

NOT FORSAKEN

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46)

At about 3 p.m., just before He died, Jesus cried out with a loud voice: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus is quoting Psalm 22, the first verse. I don't know if He had strength to continue with the rest of the psalm. He surely had it memorized. Because Psalm 22 gives us Jesus' perspective on His own crucifixion—what it was like for Him.

And the first half is exactly as horrific as you'd expect. Hands and feet pierced, bones out of joint—surrounded by enemies. He barely feels human. And He cries out to God so high above Him, seated in glory—will God help Him?

Yes! Right in the middle of verse 22 Jesus goes from crying for help to joyfully announcing that God's help has come. God has delivered Him. God has raised His Messiah from the dead. And as a result of His suffering, death, and resurrection, all the ends of the earth will believe and be saved.

Jesus was not abandoned, though it must have felt that way. We, too, are never abandoned. Even at the darkest moment of our lives, God is there and He hears our cries for help. He who raised Jesus from the dead will surely save us also.

Lord, be with me even when I can't sense Your presence. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever felt abandoned? Looking back, how did God help you at that time?
- While you were suffering, were you aware of God's presence and help?
- Why do you think God sometimes seems to hide Himself?

WORDS OF ANGER, WORDS OF TRUTH

And those who passed by derided Him ... So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked Him, saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matthew 27:39a, 41-43)

It takes something special—something horrible—to make fun of a dying man. Jesus had done no harm to any of them, and wasn't likely to do any in the future. A man nailed up on a cross is surely the most harmless of men.

It would have made far more sense for the angry words to be going the opposite direction.

But that's not Jesus' way, with them or with us. He came to us out of love, to rescue us—it was love that took Him to the cross. As the priests put it, "He saved others, He cannot save Himself." They were right. He could not save Himself, because by His own choice He was making His lifeblood the ransom for our lives. And they were right, too, when they said, "He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now." God *did* deliver Him, three days later when He raised Him from the dead. And when Jesus rose, He raised us too—all of us who trust in Him, who will receive everlasting life from His hand on the day He returns.

Dear Savior, thank You for saving us at the cost of Your own life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have people made fun of you? How hard was it to bear?
- Do you see the words "Let Him come down from the cross and we will believe in Him" as a real temptation? Why or why not?
- Why do you think God waited three days to raise Jesus?

ARMS AND LEGS

And He called to Him His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him. These twelve Jesus sent out ... (Matthew 10:1-5a)

Very early in His ministry, Jesus called disciples to learn from Him. But they would do more than that—they would go out into the cities and villages ahead of Him and teach and preach and heal. They would get things ready for Him to come there. You could call them His arms and legs. They did the work that a single man could never do.

So early on we see Jesus assembling the body of Christ around Him! These are the people who will serve Him, yes; these are the people who will be eyewitnesses to His suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection. And these are the people who will ultimately carry the Good News to the ends of the earth—to you and to me, so that we can believe.

I am so glad Jesus chose these people! If He had not, how would we know about Him at all? They told us the Good News faithfully, and gave their lives to make sure that we would hear it.

Now it's our turn. Who will hear about Jesus from us?

Dear Savior, use me so that others will trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What kind of people did Jesus choose for His disciples?
- Why do you think He chose these kinds of people?
- How is Jesus using you right where you live?

DOUBT—AND COMFORT

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me." (Matthew 11:2-6)

Poor John. Stuck in prison and unable to see for himself what this Jesus, the One he baptized, has turned into. Is He really the Messiah? John thought so, the day the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended.

But now John has nothing to do *but* think. And he worries: Did I make a mistake? Wasn't the Messiah supposed to set the prisoners—like me—free? Who is this man, anyway?

Jesus has mercy on him. He doesn't say a flat "Yes"—any liar could do the same. No, He invites John's disciples to take the evidence of their own ears and eyes back to their teacher. These are the miracles of the Messiah. The Good News *is* being preached, even if John is sitting in darkness. God's plan is going forward.

From this time on, John's disciples will be able to comfort him any time he falls into doubt. They are witnesses—and ones he can trust.

And we, too, can comfort our fellow Christians during times of fear and doubt. We can sit with them and listen. We can remind them of all the times God has been there for them—starting with Jesus' own suffering, death, and resurrection.

Lord Holy Spirit, use me to strengthen my fellow Christians. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you doubted?
- Who or what helped you the most in those times?
- How could you comfort and strengthen a doubting friend?

IN THE MIDDLE WITH US

And over His head they put the charge against Him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. (Matthew 27:37-38)

It's a good place for Jesus, don't you think? Crucified between two thieves. Given the kind of people He welcomed during His life, I'm sure He felt right at home!

And that's good for you and for me—because we need Jesus just as much as those two dying men did. Oh, we may not be robbers; but we have our own sins, just as deadly, even if they're a lot less conspicuous. Hatred; gossip; pride; back-biting; cheating just a little, here and there; resentment; self-centeredness—all the ordinary sins that add up to have such a life-destroying effect. We may not be nailed to a cross like those robbers, but without Jesus, we'd be just as hopeless—just as surely heading for death.

But we do have Jesus—right here next to us, within call if not within physical reach. We can ask for the help we need, the same way one of those men did when he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42b). Jesus will surely give it. After all, it's the reason He came into our world—to seek out the lost and to bring us home to God through His own suffering, death, and resurrection.

Lord, bring me too into Your kingdom. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think the thief who asked for mercy understood what he was asking for?
- If so, how do you think he knew it?
- How did you come to know Jesus and what He has done for you?

Sunday, April 2, 2023

WATCHING

And when they had crucified Him, they divided His garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over Him there. (Matthew 27:35-36)

The soldiers were keeping watch over Jesus as He hung there on the cross. That was their job; and though it was highly unlikely that anyone would come and try to take Him down by force, still they watched.

Jesus, too, was watching.

What did He see? A group of soldiers gambling for His clothes at the foot of His cross; several women, including His mother, watching Him and weeping; two men dying on either side of Him. He saw His enemies passing by and laughing at Him. He doubtless saw a lot of plain, ordinary people too who didn't understand at all what was going on as they passed by.

All of these were people God created, people God had given into His care.

And so He watched. I'm sure He prayed. And body and soul, He suffered for our sake—a watchman over us sinners, who needed Him so much.

You suffered, died, and rose for us, dear Lord. Help me now to live for You—and for Your people. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When is the last time you "kept watch" over something or someone, big or small?
- Who or what do you feel protective about—enough to stand watch over them, if necessary?
- What does it mean to you, to know Jesus watches over you?

Thursday, March 2, 2023

ON THE EDGE

Many followed Him, and He healed them all ... This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved with whom My soul is well pleased. I will put My Spirit upon Him ... He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets; a bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not quench ... and in His Name the Gentiles will hope." (Matthew 12:15b, 17a, 18a, 20a, 21)

Have you ever seen a candle about to go out? A thin long trail of smoke rises, and there is almost no orange left. In a minute it will be out.

Or think of a reed, once someone has stepped on it and crushed it. "Well, that plant isn't coming back," we say. "Might as well get rid of it."

There are people like this too—people who are so harmed, so battered by the circumstances of their lives, that we are tempted to give up on them. "After surviving that hell, he'll never find love or friendship." "I could never live like those people." "Sick as she is, it would be better if God just took her home."

But God doesn't think so. Jesus doesn't think so. And in Isaiah's prophecy, God makes this gentle, long-suffering compassion a hallmark of the Messiah. Nobody is too far gone for Him. Nobody is past His mercy, His love, His attention. It doesn't matter who you are or what you have done. Jesus is here for you. His arms are waiting for you—those arms He once stretched out on a cross, for you.

Dear Lord, help me to see and believe in Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name a tiny act of care someone did for you that meant everything to you.
- What is one small way you remember God cares about you?
- Who can you show love to today?

HOLY ROBBER

Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to Him, and He healed Him, so that the man spoke and saw. ... But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." Knowing their thoughts, He said to them ... "How can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house." (Matthew 12:22, 24-25a, 29)

Have you ever noticed how oddly fond Jesus is of comparing Himself to a robber? He does it again right here, when He talks about a man invading another man's house and tying him up. Then he steals all the good stuff the man has.

So when is it okay to steal? When you're stealing from the devil. And that's exactly what Jesus came into this world to do—to overcome the "strong man" we call Satan and to plunder his house. He will leave not a single treasure in it—no valuable human being, nobody God loves. He will search every nook and cranny to find us all.

But notice how He does it! Jesus isn't sneaking in this time (see Revelation 3:3). No, He's going straight through the door. He's wrestling down the devil by main force.

That's the kind of robber we need, isn't it? One who carries us off, away from the house of slavery—only to make us free, valued citizens of heaven. One who is forever strong enough to protect us against all comers. One who will risk His life for us—and share His resurrection with us, and all who trust in Him.

Thank You, Lord, for stealing me back for Yourself! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it bother you that Jesus pictures Himself as a robber?
- How do you think the devil feels about it?
- How could Jesus use you to help someone else get free?

PAIN KILLER

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered Him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when He tasted it, He would not drink it. (Matthew 27:33-34)

Jesus refused to drink the painkiller they offered Him just before they hammered in the nails. I doubt the wine and gall mixture was very effective; still, He turned it down.

Why? I'm not sure. Some people think He wanted to keep a clear head for the rest of the time remaining to Him. That makes sense to me.

Because Jesus Himself wasn't yet finished with His own work of killing other people's pain. There was His mother standing right there in her grief, and His disciple John, too. There were the two men dying on either side of Him. All of these were in pain and needed something from Jesus. He had things to say and do before His final breath.

And so He did them—gave Mary into John's care, so they could comfort one another; listened patiently to the ranting of the two dying robbers; and promised paradise to the one who changed his mind and asked Jesus to remember him in His kingdom. He was still Jesus—still killing pain and bringing new life, even as He hung there dying.

And now that He has risen from the dead, He's still doing it—still reaching out to us in our pain, still strengthening and comforting us, making sure we don't go through it alone. And to anyone who will trust in Him He gives life, forgiveness, and peace.

Thank You, Lord, for helping me when I am in pain. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When is the last time you felt pain?
- Which do you think is worse, physical or emotional pain? Why?
- Tell about a time when God cared for you through something painful.

WEAKNESS

As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry His cross. (Matthew 27:32)

I wonder what it was like for Jesus, watching another man carry His cross. That's a bit of a reverse, isn't it? We're so used to Him carrying our cross—along with all our sins, guilt, and shame. But on the day He died, someone else had to help Him. And He was okay with that.

A lot of people have trouble with that—accepting help, I mean. They see it as a sign of weakness. But Jesus Himself was not afraid to let His weakness show. Through His weakness He saved us all. His death for us gave us life forever. How much weaker could He get than to die?

I am glad we have a God who knows weakness, who has experienced it for Himself. Because that means that when I am weak, I can be sure He understands what I'm going through all the way to the bottom. He knows the fear and shame it causes me; and He is there to hold on to me while I'm feeling it. And if Jesus Himself can allow others to help Him and feel no shame, then maybe—just maybe—I can learn to do that, too.

Lord, You know my weakness. Help me to bear it just as You bore Yours for love of me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do people hate to appear weak? Give as many reasons as you can.
- Why do you think having someone else carry Jesus' cross was part of God's eternal plan?
- How do you think Simon of Cyrene felt about that episode years in the future?

DYING HAPPY

[Jesus said] "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:44-46)

These are lovely stories, but what do you think happened next? The man has sold all that he has to buy the field. Now he owns a field and a treasure, and literally nothing else. What will he live on?

Okay, maybe he'll sell part of that treasure. But that won't work for the second story. The merchant too has literally nothing left to live on. He has one single pearl, and do you think he's going to sell it again? I doubt it. And you can't eat a pearl. I suppose he's just going to have to die happy!

In both of these stories, the buyer stands for God—specifically, for Jesus, who came into the world to make us His own. We are the treasure He wanted, the pearl He bought. And now that He has us, what? He won't sell us again. He, too, is going to have to "die happy."

And of course that's what He did—because His death and resurrection mean that we belong to Him forever, as God's treasure, God's children. We see His joy when He greets the women who came to the tomb on Easter; the word is literally, "Rejoice!" He will never die again, and He has shared His own everlasting life with us. Rejoice!

Dear Lord, I am Yours forever. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the most expensive thing you've ever bought?
- How did you pay for it—in money, effort, suffering?
- How do you think Jesus regards you, His most expensive purchase?

GRAB FOR HIM!

Coming to His hometown He [Jesus] taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And are not His brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." And He did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (Matthew 13:54-58)

I married into a Vietnamese family 30 years ago, and I expected them to keep me at a distance—to treat me as an outsider. That would be human, right? But no. Instead, they said, "Whoopee! Someone with perfect English and valuable skills to help the family!" and put me to work right away. I was overjoyed.

It's a pity the people of Jesus' hometown didn't take this sensible attitude. They had a miracle-working rabbi, and what did they do with Him? They tried to cut Him down to size. Jesus could do very little for them. They refused to trust Him.

God has offered us a wonderful treasure for free—forgiveness. Mercy. Guidance in our lives. Everlasting life. And best of all, His own dear Son Jesus to be our Savior and closest friend. And what does it cost us? Nothing. Jesus has paid the price at the cross.

Let's not be idiots. Grab for Him! Who cares if we don't deserve Him? He's offering Himself for free.

Dear Lord, I want You. Let me have You forever! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you agree or disagree with the idea "there's no such thing as a free lunch"?
- When did you get something good you felt you didn't deserve?
- Why does Jesus offer Himself to us for free?

CORONATION

Then the soldiers of the governor ... stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head and put a reed in His right hand. And kneeling before Him, they mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spit on Him and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the robe and put His own clothes on Him and led Him away to crucify Him. (Matthew 27:27a, 28-31)

A coronation is a ceremony to crown a new king. The planners will think about every detail, because people watching will look for meaning in it. They will look to see what the ceremony tells them about the new king and the way he will rule.

What does Jesus' coronation show us, then? It takes place in front of a crowd of soldiers—every one of them an enemy to His life. Jesus is stripped naked and humiliated; they put a scarlet robe on Him, not to honor Him but to make fun of Him. His crown is made of thorns and His scepter is a reed. And for anointing oil He has spit.

What kind of king is this? A suffering King who is about to lay His life down for the good of His people. A rejected King, one who will die to save the very people who are mocking Him. A loving King—because He could escape this abuse at any time, but goes through with it to save us all.

What better king could we have?

Lord Jesus, be my King and Savior forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you seen a coronation on TV or in a movie? If so, what struck you most?
- Would you trade that crown of thorns for any crown of gold in the world? Why or why not?
- Do you think any of those soldiers lived to realize their terrible mistake?

WATER AND BLOOD

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered Him to be crucified. (Matthew 27:24-26)

It gives me the shivers to think about Jesus standing there, watching Pilate as he washed his hands in front of the crowd. And then the crowd roaring their response: "His blood be on us and on our children!" After this day, what they said would come true—Jesus' blood would be on us and on our children—not for a curse, but for a blessing. Jesus' blood shed on the cross would rescue and redeem all of us, every one of us who trusts in Him. We meant it for a curse, but God transformed it into a blessing.

The same with the water. Pilate washed his hands of Jesus to get rid of Him and his own guilt in the situation. But Jesus took that water and transformed it. Now water doesn't separate us from Jesus—it joins us to Him forever in Baptism. When we wash, we receive Jesus forever—and with Him, love, forgiveness, welcome, and everlasting life.

How wonderful it is that God can take a curse and turn it into a blessing!

Lord, You amaze me. Thank You for Your goodness to me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you think of blood, is it usually in a positive way or a negative one? Why?
- When you think of water, is it usually positive or negative? Why?
- When have you seen God take a curse in your own life and transform it into a blessing?

TESTING

And Jesus went away from there ... And behold, a Canaanite woman ... was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and begged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, help me." And He answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21a, 22-28)

Jesus is acting really weird in this story, isn't He? When did He ever ignore someone in need—let alone insult them? He's not like that, and the disciples knew it. They should have smelt a rat. Jesus is clearly up to something.

But no, they're just so pleased that He's finally behaving the way they think a good rabbi should! They miss the test.

What should they have done? Well, they could have said, "Please help her, there's a child involved." They could have even said, "Lord, if You do what she wants, she'll stop bugging us and go away." But no. "Send her away."

And so Jesus gave up—for the moment—and went back to His usual kindness and mercy. He praises the woman and heals her child. He will heal His disciples' stony hearts too—at the cost of His own life. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus will make them—*and us!*—like Him.

Lord, make my heart like Yours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who do you have trouble loving?
- How is Jesus helping you in this area?
- What small thing could you do to help someone you don't naturally appreciate?

THE SIGN OF JONAH

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Him they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." (Matthew 16:1-4)

I really wonder about these religious leaders! By this point, Jesus has done plenty of miracles, most in public. Why do they want one more? They don't need more signs; they need to understand the signs they already have.

But by the mercy of God, they will in fact get just one more sign—the sign of the prophet Jonah, who was swallowed by a great fish. As Jesus explained, "Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). Jesus will suffer and die, and on the third day He will rise again.

Jesus' death and resurrection is the only sign we really need. It marks Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah God sent to save us. It shows that God accepted His sacrifice and it guarantees our own forgiveness and resurrection—for Jesus has promised to share His own everlasting life with all of us who trust in Him. That's a sign worth having!

Lord, help me to trust in Your death and resurrection. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do people put up signs?
- What is the purpose of the sign from God?
- What does Jesus' death and resurrection mean to you?

DREAMS AND TRUTH

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. ... Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered Him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man, for I have suffered much because of Him today in a dream." (Matthew 27:15, 17b, 18-19)

I wonder about that dream that Pontius Pilate's wife had about Jesus. Was it from God? Was it something she dreamed just because Jesus was in the news, and she was thinking about Him?

God certainly can use dreams if He wants to. But then, of course, we run into the problem of knowing whether the dream is truly from God or not. We know if a dream contradicts what we know about God from the Bible, you shouldn't pay attention to it. So a dream that leads us to do something wrong is definitely not from God. If we think we might really have a message from God, the best thing we can do is pray and consult with fellow Christians—especially the wise and experienced ones.

Above all, we put our faith and hope in Jesus Christ, who lay down His life for us and He rose from the dead to make us God's children. No dream is as important as Him. Jesus is the heart of everything for us; let's hold on to Him, for He is certainly holding on to us.

Lord Jesus, keep my attention fixed on You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you find dreams and prophecies exciting or scary?
- Do they draw you closer to Jesus or further away?
- Have you ever had a dream you thought was from God?

KING OF THE JEWS

And they bound Him and led Him away and delivered Him over to Pilate the governor. ... The governor asked Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." But when He was accused by the chief priests and elders, He gave no answer. Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" But He gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. (Matthew 27:2, 11b-14)

There are times when talking will do no good. Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and gets less of an answer than he expected. For Jesus to answer that question fully, it would take hours ... maybe days. A king in what sense? By whose standards? Why do you want to know? It would take a theology lecture!

Pilate isn't much interested, anyway. But we ought to be—because who Jesus is makes all the difference to us. Who is this King of the Jews? Isaiah gives us the answer: "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer ... I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to Me, for I have redeemed you'" (Isaiah 44:6a, 22).

Jesus is the Lord, the King of Israel and Israel's Redeemer. He has come in Person to save His people—and not just Israel alone, but all the world. He is our Redeemer too, because He Himself took away our sins on the cross. Because of His death and resurrection, all our sins are like mist that blows away on the wind—gone forever.

Thank You, Lord, for becoming our Redeemer. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think Pilate was thinking of when he said "King of the Jews"?
- In what sense is God "King" of Israel?
- Why do you think God came Himself instead of delegating our salvation to someone else?

GLORY OR SUFFERING?

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to You." But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." Then Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:21-24)

How embarrassing for Peter! He thought he knew better than Jesus. But he was wrong. His eyes were on glory—but Jesus' eyes were on the cross.

In our world, nothing lasts forever—nothing comes to glory—unless it dies first. As Jesus said in John 12:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus intended to bring back the whole human race to God the Father as His forgiven and dearly loved children. To make that happen, Jesus would be the seed that died and was buried; we would become His fruit.

As followers of Jesus, we share in His sufferings. We struggle with temptation. The Holy Spirit teaches us to put God's kingdom first. And we lean on Jesus for strength and comfort—because He is our Savior, and He will never let us down.

Keep my heart set on You, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What other examples do you know where suffering results in blessing?
- Why does Jesus talk about our lives as taking up the cross and following Him?
- When did Jesus help you through suffering?

WHAT MATTERS

[Jesus said] "What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of My Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (Matthew 18:12-14)

Do you ever feel like there's just no way you could really matter to God? You see the greatness of the universe and the holiness of God, and then you look at yourself and—well, it doesn't make sense. How could God care about someone as small and as messed up as I am?

It's a natural feeling, and it might be why Jesus told the story. After all, from a business point of view, a single lost sheep is no big deal. Why run the risk of leaving 99 other sheep on the mountains just to climb over rocks and through thorns and get tired and sweaty and possibly injured, all for a single silly sheep?

But the shepherd doesn't think this way. To him, this sheep is precious—infinitely precious. It isn't just another entry in the ledger book. He loves the sheep, and he will do whatever he must to bring it back safely.

So too with God. He isn't looking at you from a business point of view. He's looking at you with eyes of love—the same love that drove Him into this world to become your Savior, to live and to die and to rise again—for you.

I can't understand it, but thank You, Lord, for loving me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about a time when you saw someone really cared about you, yourself, as a person.
- Who or what do you care about, even though it's unreasonable?
- Why do you think God cares so much about us, though we are little?

SEEING TO IT

Then when Judas, His betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed ... (Matthew 27:3-5a)

Oh, Judas. He brings the silver back to the people who bought him, hoping desperately to undo the evil that he has done. And predictably, his fellow murderers aren't interested: "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Judas "sees to it" in the only way he can imagine: he executes himself. How I wish he had waited for Jesus' resurrection.

As for the priests and elders, they see only one loose end to tend to, and that is the proper disposal of the blood money. With Judas gone and Jesus gone, nothing is left but administrative trivia.

Or so they think. Because at that very moment, Jesus our Savior was "seeing to" us—every one of us who has ever been guilty of innocent blood. Whether it was outright murder or the lesser murders of hatred and hurting and wrecking other people's lives, whether we did it with actions or words or just in the quiet of our own hearts—we are guilty, aren't we? And Jesus saw to us. He did it by pouring out that same innocent blood on the cross—by giving His life willingly so that we might be forgiven and made clean. Nobody could do it but Him. And now He offers clean, pure, forgiven resurrection life to all of us who trust in Him.

Lord, thank You. I love You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think Jesus would have done if He had met Judas after the resurrection?
- Why is hatred akin to murder? (Consider Matthew 5:21-22.)
- Is there a guilt you've been carrying for a long time? Pray about it. Jesus will forgive.

HALFWAY

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." ... He began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the Man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:69-70, 74-75)

Peter was trying to do the right thing. Well, kind of. I mean, he did come back after he ran away in the garden, leaving Jesus alone. He and John both came back, and now Peter's actually in the courtyard of the high priest's house. So I guess that's something.

But it's not enough. Peter is not with Jesus. Instead, he's standing with Jesus' enemies around the fire (see John 18:18). And because he's in the wrong place with the wrong people, he panics. He denies Jesus. He ends up broken-hearted, crying in the street.

This is what happens to us, too, when we try to follow God halfway. Our hearts are divided. And when the test comes, we break.

Thank God for Jesus, who went all the way for our sakes! There are no half measures with Him. When He came to be a human being, He did it with all His heart. When He saved us, He sacrificed everything—even His own life. Why? Because He loves us completely and forever. And He forgives us and welcomes us home with the same complete joy.

Lord Jesus, thank You for going all the way for us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name an activity where you really have to commit yourself or you'll fail.
- When did fear lead you into trouble?
- How has Jesus helped you when your heart was breaking?

URGENCY

[Jesus said] "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace ... Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ... 'You go into the vineyard too.'" (Matthew 20:1-3a, 5b, 6a, 7b)

Jesus tells this parable not long before His suffering and death to save us all. That might explain why there's so much urgency in the story. Very soon now Jesus will put the responsibility for telling others about Him in our hands.

The owner of the vineyard starts hiring at dawn. But then he goes back for more workers at 9 a.m.—and at 12 noon—and again at 3 p.m. Even at 5 p.m. just before quitting time, he's still at it! This is a man who really wants to get his harvest in. Not tomorrow, not next week—today.

God is urgent about gathering people into His kingdom. He wants us forgiven and brought home to Him as soon as possible. He will not be happy with any delay. He doesn't want any of His harvest to be lost.

And so Jesus tells the story looking at the believers around Him. They are His workers, and He is sending them out—He is sending *us* out—to bring in the rest of the harvest. He has already saved us, and now He honors us by giving us work to do in His own saving mission.

Lord, send me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever told anyone about Jesus?
- If not, ask Him to show you the first baby step in doing this joyful work.
- If so, how did it go? How do you feel about it?

LOSS AND GAIN

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to Him with her sons, and kneeling before Him she asked Him for something. And He said to her, "What do you want?" She said to Him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your kingdom." Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able." He said to them, "You will drink My cup, but to sit at My right hand and at My left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father." (Matthew 20:20-23)

I really wonder if James and John were embarrassed by their mother's request. She wants them to be in the most powerful seats in Jesus' kingdom—His right- and left-hand men.

She doesn't know what she's asking for. Jesus' throne will be a cross; and at His right and left hand will be two dying thieves. No wonder He asks if they are able to drink the cup that He will drink from!

But even though they won't be crucified, they will indeed suffer. Suffering is a normal part of every Christian's life. As Jesus warned us, "A servant is not greater than his master" (John 15:20b). To follow Jesus is to put yourself at odds with the way the fallen world works—to risk embarrassment, scorn, lost opportunities, and actual harm for His sake. And what do we gain?

We gain Jesus. We have the joy of being with Him, next to Him, in the presence of the One who gave Himself for us. What could be better?

Lord, set my heart on You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name something small you have lost or suffered for Jesus.
- Was it worth it?
- Why do you think so?

SEEING JESUS

[They] led Him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. ... that they might put Him to death ... But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:57b, 59b, 63-64)

"Tell us who you are." Caiaphas clearly didn't recognize the Messiah standing in front of Him. He saw an ordinary man, someone safe to destroy.

Why? Self-interest, no doubt. What need for a high priest if God is walking among us? And then there was Jesus' appearance. Bruised, beaten, bloody—does this look like the Son of God?

So he put Jesus under oath: "Tell us if You are the Christ." And Jesus answered "yes" in the polite phrase of the time, "You have said so." But He added: "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

What does this mean? I think it's a warning. The next time Caiaphas sees Jesus, He will look much different. He will see Him in glory, the Judge and King of all.

This is a warning for Caiaphas—but for us who believe in Jesus, it is a promise of joy. We, too, will see Him—alive, glorious, and still carrying the wounds of the cross He bore for you and for me. We will see Him, the One who loved us enough to die and rise for us. And we will not be afraid.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about a time you mistook someone's identity.
- Why does it matter who Jesus is?
- How do you think you will feel when you see Jesus at last?

SEEING CLEARLY

At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture Me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left Him and fled. (Matthew 26:55-56)

Mob scenes are not places where you find a lot of logic. But here we see Jesus trying to get His arresters to *think*—just for a moment. Why? He knew He wasn't going to escape. No common sense would save Him now.

But thinking clearly just might save some of the people attacking Him. Oh, probably not in the moment—but Jesus' words might come back to them in the middle of some sleepless night. And they would wonder: "Why *did* we go out there armed to the teeth? Did my leaders lie to me?"

That tiny crack of doubt might let in some light. It might even, through the work of the Holy Spirit, let in repentance—and the dawning of faith in Jesus their Savior.

Most of us have been lied to before. Most of us know what it's like to fall into sin because we're confused or befuddled or because someone has stoked our emotions so high that our brains aren't working anymore. And then we can do terrible things.

But in Jesus, there is forgiveness for us, destroying the darkness and taking away our guilt. When we trust in the One who laid down His life for us, we are free—free to see the truth and to love the Lord who is Truth eternal.

Lord, You are the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Be all those things for me, too. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When do you do your best thinking?
- When do you do your worst? Why?
- When has the Lord led you to a new and better understanding of a situation in your life?

BORROWED PARADE

Now ... Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." ... The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. (Matthew 21:1b-3, 6-8)

Have you ever noticed that everything on Palm Sunday is borrowed? The colt and its mother, definitely. But what about the cloaks of the disciples? Jesus sits on them, because He has no saddle. The crowd also lend Him their cloaks, this time for a royal red carpet. Others borrow branches from the trees beside the road. And of course there are the palm branches people are waving!

It makes perfect sense for Jesus to borrow all this, because in less than a week, He is going to borrow something even greater—the sin, shame, guilt, and death of the whole world. None of that belongs to Jesus by right; it is ours, bought and paid for. But He takes it. He takes it away from us, all the way to the cross. He takes it to His borrowed tomb. And He leaves it behind when He rises from the dead.

What has He given us in exchange, then? Life. Love. Forgiveness. A new creation.

Thank You, Lord, for what You took, and what You gave me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you think Jesus knew about the donkeys and where they would be?
- If you're going to ride an unbroken young colt, why would you want the mother animal around?
- What specific gift from Jesus do you treasure most?

HOUSE-CLEANING

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant. (Matthew 21:12-15)

This is a decisive moment. Jesus' enemies have long been looking for a way to get rid of Him. But when He cleans out the temple they have turned into a marketplace, He attacks them on what they think of as their own ground.

It isn't, of course. It is God's house, and God has every right to say what is done in it. And clearly God prefers the blind, the lame, and small children over cheating merchants. Wouldn't you?

So Jesus cleans house. And His enemies will kill Him for it this same week.

But they don't realize that Jesus' suffering and death will cleanse more than just the temple. By laying down His life, Jesus will cleanse the hearts of God's people—my heart and yours. He will throw out the evil that has lived there far too long, and replace it with healing, teaching, and praise. What we cannot do, Jesus does for us—making us the clean temple of God.

Lord, make me clean and live in me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Would you be able to worship with an animal market going on beside you?
- What are some modern ways people abuse the worship of God?
- What is the place of small children in worship? Why?

"I MUST DO IT"

... Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (Matthew 26:50b-54)

There are a lot of excuses for what Peter did. He woke up suddenly—he panicked—an innocent man was in danger. He was defending the Son of God! So why did Jesus blame him?

Well, Peter is outnumbered and likely to die. Plus it's ridiculous for a fisherman with a sword to defend someone with a zillion angels at His command!

But the deepest problem is one we share, too. Peter didn't ask Jesus—he just pulled out his sword and started swinging. In his mind, everything depended on him. "I need to deal with this problem. I alone can fix it. I'm going to use force to make this come out the way God wants it to happen." Sound familiar?

The truth is, we are not the Messiah. God can run the universe without us. He has all the power and wisdom—not us. And so when bad things happen, we look to Him in trust and obedience, asking what He wants us to do. Because Jesus *is* the Messiah—and He lay down His life for all of us, friends and enemies alike.

Lord, keep my eyes on You instead of my own plans. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What you think of Peter's aim?
- Do you tend to act first or think first?
- When something bad happens, how do you go about dealing with it?

KISS OF LIFE

While He [Jesus] was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs ... Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize Him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed Him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." ... (Matthew 26:47a, 48-50a)

It's really weird that Judas chose a kiss to indicate the man he intended to betray. Oh, I know that in those days, kissing was the way that you greeted people, much like a handshake today. But still, how could he stand it? To get that close to someone you were handing over to die, actually touching Him—it gives me the creeps.

But human kisses can be like that, aren't they? So many marriages, so many friendships, even the relationship between parent and child—our love is tinted with betrayal. We break faith, we tell lies, or we just turn cold to the people who depend on us. And we can't seem to stop it.

Who can help us? Only Jesus. He can take betrayers and remake us as faithful, loving human beings. He can do this miracle because He took all of our faithlessness upon Himself and carried it to the cross. He destroyed it there forever. And now that He has risen from the dead, He offers us the kiss of life—everlasting life, as God's true and dearly loved children.

Lord, give me a faithful heart full of Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What does a kiss mean to you?
- What does it feel like when someone betrays you?
- How does it feel to know that Jesus will never, ever let you down?

FOOLISH?

[Jesus said] "There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard ... and leased it to tenants ... When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." (Matthew 21:33b-39)

The foolishness of the master in this story always bothers me. The tenants have a long pattern of murdering servants. How could anybody be stupid enough to believe they would respect his son? Of course they're going to kill him. And they do.

One could almost say the same of God for sending Jesus. Why do that? Of course we were going to torture Him and put Him to death on a cross. As sinful human beings, we have a long track record of abusing the innocent. And Jesus being the Son of God didn't change that.

But God knew what we would do—knew it from before the foundation of the world. It wasn't naivete that brought Jesus into the world—it was love. God would use our predictable evil for His own purposes, to bring about the greatest reversal that ever was. Jesus' death and resurrection would completely remake us—changing us from wicked tenants into forgiven, innocent children of God.

Lord, open my eyes to Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Give an example of a predictable evil you know about.
- Why do you think God sent so many prophets before His Son?
- Why does God choose to use our evil to produce His wonderful good?

SEEING JESUS

[Jesus said] "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see Me again, until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord.'" (Matthew 23:37-39)

It's a lovely picture—a mother hen, gathering her chicks under her wings, protecting them from the hawk or fox that is putting them in danger. She will save them at the cost of her own life. No wonder Jesus uses this as a picture of His own love for us!

But the leaders of Jerusalem are not willing. They do not recognize their God in the Man who stands before them. And so Jesus says, "You will not see Me again, until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

And that comes true, doesn't it? Have you ever noticed how, after Jesus rises from the dead, the only people who see Him are His followers? Oh, there are some exceptions—Paul, of course, and possibly Jesus' brothers, who have a change of heart and become leaders in the early church. But Caiaphas? Annas? Pilate? No. They miss out.

But not us. Jesus comes to us and makes His home with us, as close to us as a mother hen to her chicks. He has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the world (see Matthew 28:20).

Blessed are You, dear Jesus, You who have come in the Name of the Lord. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why did Jesus choose such a humble animal to compare Himself to?
- Why do you think the risen Jesus chose to appear mainly to those who knew and loved Him?
- Why make an exception for Paul and for Jesus' hostile brothers?

THE COMFORT OF FRIENDS

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and He said to His disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, He began to be sorrowful and troubled. (Matthew 26:36-37)

Jesus took three friends with Him when He was waiting for His arrest: Peter, James, and John. He asked them to pray with Him. And He went a little further—but not too far—to do His own praying. It's a pity they let Him down. They kept falling asleep. And Jesus had to face His sadness and fear alone.

Still, in spite of their behavior, it's a good example for us, isn't it? If Jesus felt He needed friends with Him, how much more do we? When we are in trouble, we can turn to other Christians to pray for us. They can spend time with us, so we don't feel so alone.

This is in a way what Jesus Himself did for us. When we rebelled against God and became subject to the power of sin and death, He didn't desert us. He came to be with us. He went so far as to be born as one of us, to live and to suffer and to die—and rise again!—so that we could be with Him forever.

Could there be a better Friend?

Dear Jesus, You are my comfort. Use me to strengthen others. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When did a friend strengthen and comfort you?
- At what times do you lean the hardest on your friends? Give an example.
- Why is "friend" a good name for Jesus? Give as many specific reasons as you can.

STRENGTH

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered Him, "Though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." Peter said to Him, "Even if I must die with You, I will not deny You!" And all the disciples said the same. (Matthew 26:31-35)

It's easy to think we are stronger than we really are. I'm sure Peter thought he was telling the absolute truth and would never desert Jesus, no matter what. But when real danger came, he lost his nerve. They all scattered and ran.

It's a good reminder to me not to rely on myself. If Peter and the rest of them could spend three years with Jesus, only to fall apart under pressure, what help is there for me? None—except Jesus Himself. He is our strength and our help.

"Apart from Me you can do nothing," Jesus says (John 15:5b). Our natural state is weakness. But through His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus has joined all of us who believe to Himself as part of His body. Now His strength, His courage, and His wisdom are there for us when we need them. Let's ask.

Dear Lord, live in me and through me when I am in trouble. Really, all the time! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name one situation you deal with that requires courage.
- How do you find courage when you are in trouble?
- How does Jesus' humanity affect Him when it comes to fear and courage?

UNASHAMED

Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to Him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on His head as He reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to Me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have Me. In pouring this ointment on My body, she has done it to prepare Me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." (Matthew 26:6-13)

I doubt that Mary was expecting people to shame her when she poured ointment over Jesus' head to honor Him. (John 12 makes it clear the woman was Mary, Lazarus's sister—who had good reason to be grateful to Jesus!) She was only thinking of one thing—How can I show Jesus how much I love Him?—and nothing else mattered to her. Who cared how it looked to others?

And what was Jesus thinking of, when He allowed His life to be poured out on the altar of the cross? How much He loved the Father, who had sent Him. How much He loved us, the ones He was saving. His death and resurrection were a gift of love that would save us all. The shame didn't matter.

Lord, let Your love help me when other people shame me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is a specific thing you have done to show someone you loved them?
- Have people ever shamed you for something that was good?
- How does Jesus help you when you feel ashamed or embarrassed?

GOING WRONG

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver Him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray Him. (Matthew 26:14-16)

Why does Judas choose that day to betray Jesus? I think it's because of the conflict over Mary's expensive gift. When Jesus rebukes him, Judas gets angry. And so he goes off in a cold rage to betray Jesus to His enemies.

This isn't the first time Judas had stepped out of line, though. John 12 tells us that he had been stealing money from the donations people gave to keep Jesus' ministry going. And yet, this is a man who had been a preacher and healer. He got started down a bad road, and then one final thing tipped him into disaster.

It's scary. It's so easy to go further than we meant into evil. And then we can't get ourselves out again. Only Jesus can do that.

If you find yourself going down a wrong path today, don't hesitate. Don't delay another minute, or justify yourself, or worry about the shame. Ask Jesus for help. He will do it gladly. You matter so much to Him that He lay down His life to rescue you. Give Him the chance to help you today.

Lord, You see where I am in danger and need You most. Help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why is "going wrong" so easy?
- When can anger lead to disaster?
- How do you rely on Jesus to keep you safe?

VOLUNTEERING

When it was evening, He reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, He said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me." And they were very sorrowful and began to say to Him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, ... "The Son of Man goes as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who would betray Him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so." (Matthew 26:20-23a, 24-25)

Someone was going to betray Jesus. That was obvious even without a prophecy. Nobody could make the enemies Jesus made without getting killed in the end. And those enemies were willing to pay to get access to Jesus. Sooner or later, one of His followers would take the money.

But what if Judas had said no? Then it might've been Peter, or Andrew, or one of Jesus' brothers. Judas' name was not on the Old Testament prophecies. He volunteered for the job.

And what about those who say, "But Judas' action resulted in good"? Is that a good excuse? No. There are plenty of people in the world who will gladly do whatever evil is tempting us. Volunteering to do evil is wrong—and just plain stupid.

Thank God, Jesus volunteered to do the opposite. He knew exactly what He was doing when He allowed Himself to be betrayed, tortured, and put to death. He chose this, knowing that it would save the people He loves—you and me.

Keep my heart with You, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What excuses have you heard for evil actions?
- Are any of these excuses valid?
- Was Jesus a volunteer or was He drafted? Why do you think so?