



Let us Hold Fast

Lent Devotional • 2014

Wednesday, March 5

Romans 5:12-19

Adam and Christ, what a way to begin Lent!

Through the one man (Adam) comes the pervasive realities and all-encompassing consequences of the powers of destruction. From the very beginning of life, brokenness spreads throughout the world and holds the universe in death's devastating grip. Through the lens of the good, the right and the beautiful, most succinctly expressed in God's law, humankind becomes painfully aware of its destructive, catastrophic predicament. Adam's and Moses' legacies are revealing, but of no avail. Ash Wednesday etches the reality of the grip of death into our consciousness.

In the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, comes the pervasive realities and all-encompassing consequences of the powers of life. In Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection comes a right relationship with God that breaks death's grip and offers new life as a free gift. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, this power of life brings restoration and reconciliation in the world—most dramatically in overcoming the destructive, catastrophic grip of death. Ash Wednesday etches this reality onto our body and spirits.

Gracious God, on this day we thank you for etching onto our consciousness the reality of our brokenness and its catastrophic consequences. Through the gracious presence of Jesus Christ, grant us forgiveness, peace and the foundations of new life.

Notes:

Thursday, March 6

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus' identity, strength and authority are suddenly tested in a quick succession of encounters with Satan and his wily powers of deception. As is so often the case with temptations, these encounters come when Jesus is most vulnerable—alone, needy and unproven in his newly announced calling.

Furthermore, the trickery in the tests is primal and powerful, simultaneously raising doubts concerning God's promises and appealing to purposes that can be good in and of themselves: "feed yourself, feed the world; generate a public spectacle, demonstrate God's power for all to see; and here's political leadership, use it to free your people and save the world." Recognizing and resisting temptation is neither simple nor easy.

In the third temptation, the evil one tips his hand: "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." In temptation there is always a price to be paid. With evil the price is costly: This will, in the end, cost you your allegiance to God, your freedom and your life. The ways of evil are pathways to death.

Gracious God, in my times of testing, keep me in conversation with others in the community of faith, give me the wisdom to discern truth from deception and send your Spirit to solidify my trust in your promises.

Notes:

Friday, March 7

Matthew 4:1-11

While Jesus was newly declared to be God's son and unproven in his ministry, he was not unprepared for the wily deceptions of the evil one. "It is written ..." in each encounter, Jesus draws upon his knowledge of Scripture and is guided by the text's grounded wisdom.

"One does not live by bread alone ..." Humans live by bread, yes, but there is more: purpose, family, friends, forgiveness, serving the neighbor, communion with God!

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test." God is able and powerful, yes, but it is not our place to order God around our sense of promoting his name—and ours!

"Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Political power, rightly and justly exercised, yes, but it is not life's primary authority. Ultimate allegiance and adoration rightly and justly belong to God!

Gracious God, thank you for the Bible and my freedom and opportunities to read and study your Word, whether alone or with others. Give me the curiosity, openness and spirit to read it humbly, rightly and prayerfully.

Notes:

Saturday, March 8

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” ELW 338

Elizabeth Clephane of Melrose, Scotland, wrote this hymn shortly before she died. During her lifetime, Elizabeth knew hardship, suffering and loss. Her parents died when she was very young, she endured ill health most of her life and she died at age 39. Nevertheless, her life was spent serving others. She once sold her horse and carriage to provide life essentials for another in need. Elizabeth embodied salvation in Jesus Christ as freedom to serve the neighbor.

As a result of her positive disposition, Clephane was known as the Sunshine of Melrose. In spite of, or perhaps because of, her cheerful outlook in the face of illness and ongoing physical and financial challenges, Elizabeth could write in the last stanza of the hymn: “I take O cross, your shadow for my abiding place; I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of your face; content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss, my sinful self my only shame the glory all the cross.”

Gracious God, thank you for turning your face toward us. Might our eyes be focused on you. Might our face reflect the sunshine of your love and grace.

Notes:

Sunday, March 9

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus,”

ELW 338

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus I long to take my stand ...”

Of all the places in the world why stand here? What is it about the foot of the cross that matters so much?

The hymn writer offers theological evidence tested in the crucible of her own experience. Because the foot of the cross is “the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land” and “a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way, from the burning of the noontide heat and the burdens of the day.” Protection, belonging and refreshment all in one place, how extraordinarily good is that!

“Upon the cross of Jesus my eye at times can see ...” In her poetry, Elizabeth Clephone reaches across time and geography, inviting us to turn our eyes from our screens and the blur of our overstimulated visual culture to look into the form and face of the “one for others,” Jesus, whose glorious love for us centers, fills and resets our lives and all creation. Here is a visual compass for life. How extraordinarily good is that!

Gracious God, hold me and hold your world in the protection, love and refreshment of your embrace. Thank you, Jesus, for emptying yourself, so that I and those whom I serve might know life full and free!

Notes:

Monday, March 10

Genesis 12:1-4a

“I have been blessed.” Haven’t we all said that? Certainly Abraham and Sarah would say, “God has blessed us beyond our dreams.”

There is more. God promises, “I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing.” In fact, through you “all the families of the earth will be blessed.” The blessing of God is to be shared. Jesus pushes us even further: “Bless and pray for those who curse you” (Luke 6:28).

The typical closing words of many contemporary politicians’ speeches are “God bless America.” If we put that spin on the blessing given to Abraham and Sarah, then we would say, “God bless America so we can be a blessing to the whole earth and its inhabitants.”

Remember that this blessing is given to us every Sunday when the pastor raises his or her hands in blessing: “The Lord bless you ...” When these words were given to Moses, God added this promise: “So the (pastors) and priests shall put my name on the people, and I will bless them.” Hold fast to that promise given to you every Sunday.

O fount of every blessing, we thank you for your blessed presence in our lives. Through me, bless those whom I meet today. Amen.

Notes:

Tuesday, March 11

Psalm 121

This sounds like a burglar alarm commercial: “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4). Indeed, God gives us 24-hour protection.

Holding fast to this promise, Psalm 27 boldly says, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

We trust this promise: “God will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore” (Psalm 121:8). So we can say with Jesus, whether in life or death: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Indeed, this is a continuing blessing. And like the psalmist, we can daily pray the following from the “Night Prayer (Compline)” liturgy.

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake, we may watch with Christ and asleep, we may rest in peace. Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, March 12

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

St. Paul takes us back to the blessing of Abraham and Sarah. This couple did not gain the blessing of God through their work or merit. The promise of blessing rests in God's grace (Romans 4:16). That should be good news to each one of us. In fact, we trust and believe in the God "who justifies the ungodly!" That is why the good news in Jesus reaches out to everyone.

This is the God who gives a promising future and hope so that, like Abraham and Sarah, we walk in faith. The stunning promise is that the God revealed in Jesus "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." This means we will be continually surprised by new grace every day. We live in anticipation of how God will be active in our lives. Keep a tight grip on this promise.

Gracious God, we know that you promise new mercies every morning. Help us hold tight to the promise of your blessing. Amen.

Notes:

Thursday, March 13

John 3:1-17

Jesus uses birth as a way to talk about God's activity in baptism. It is not our decision or act, but rather it is being "born from above" and being "born of water and Spirit." It is God's blessing in baptism. So we say not only that we *were* baptized, but that we *are* baptized. It is like saying that not only *was* I married, but I *am* married. We live daily in the gift and blessing of baptism. This gift is the quality of eternal life that Jesus gives while we walk this earth, as well as the gift of an eternal future with God.

Martin Luther in his Large Catechism wrote, "Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. ... Therefore, let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time."

O God our Creator, dress us this day with the baptismal garment of salvation. Help us remember the daily gift of being born of water and the Spirit. Amen.

Notes:

Friday, March 14

John 3:1-17

In our Monday reflection, we heard how God blessed Abraham and Sarah and would bless all families of the earth through them. The blessing for all families of the earth is now focused on Jesus. God so loved the earth and everyone in the world that God sent Jesus to offer eternal life. Like baptism, eternal life is the life we live in Jesus right now, not just in the future.

St. Paul puts it this way: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation ... everything has become new! All this is from God.” Paul goes on to speak of God’s love for the whole world: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

The chaos in us and around us cries out for this inclusive love. It is a love we learn from Jesus even as he hangs on the cross. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” This is the love of God that never gives up on us.

Loving God, expand our vision and our love to others that we may love them like Jesus has loved us. Amen.

Notes:

Saturday, March 15

“Count Your Blessings,” Johnson Oatman Jr., 1897

“When upon life’s billows you are tempest-tossed;
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost;
Count your many blessings, name them one by one;
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.”

This gospel hymn is not in any of our contemporary hymnbooks. However, I remember singing this verse in church when I was young. It stuck in my memory and came to mind as we remembered the blessing promised to Abraham and Sarah in Monday’s reflections on Genesis 12:1-4.

It may be a good exercise for all of us as we journey through the 40 days of Lent. Recall the blessings of baptism, the blessings of the Word, the blessings of sharing “the cup of blessing” in communion, the blessings of God’s love in Jesus, the blessings in our families and the treasures of the earth.

Often we hear athletes saying, “I am blessed.” Yes, we are blessed! Go ahead, spend some time “[counting] your blessings, name them one by one, Count your blessings, see what God hath done! ... And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.” Yes, we are blessed to be a blessing, and that blessing is meant to bless the whole world.

Start counting!

Faithful God, flood our memories with the countless blessings you have given us. Let them invigorate this day as we anticipate the blessings of another day of grace. Amen.

Notes:

Sunday, March 16

“Built on a Rock,” ELW 652

“Christ builds a house of living stones:

we are his own habitation;

he fills our hearts, his humble thrones, granting us life and salvation.

Where two or three will seek his face, he in their midst will show his grace,
blessings upon them bestowing.”

The hymn “Built on a Rock” is a “rock star” hymn of the church. The stanza before us reminds us we are all “living stones” that make up the church. God builds us in Christ and fills us with the Holy Spirit. We, as gathered church, are inhabited by God’s Spirit. The Word proclaimed burns like a fire within us. As we share Holy Communion, Christ is made known to us in the breaking of the bread. Hymns join us with one another and the whole world in praise of God.

We hold fast to the promise of the hymn that as we gather in worship every Sunday, God “in our midst will show his grace, blessings upon us bestowing.”

Another familiar hymn invites us in much the same way to “praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise. Amen.

Notes:

Monday, March 17

Exodus 17:1-7

Clearly life in the desert was difficult for the wandering Israelites; understandably, they complained mightily to Moses. At one time, complaints arose about the lack of bread and meat. So God gave the people manna and quail to eat. In today's text, people quarrel about the lack of water. So God has Moses strike a rock and bring forth a freshet in the desert.

Two points can be derived from these stories. First, people grumbled a lot. Second, God addressed their grumbling. Like our forebears, we are likely to complain a lot too. After all, we are hungry and thirsty about a lot of things.

Complaining may get things off our chest. In the end, though, it is better to quit griping and begin recognizing our blessings. After all, we have been given the bread and water of life. Let us eat, drink, praise God and live.

We give you thanks, O God, that through water and the Holy Spirit you give us new birth. Cleanse us from sin and raise us to eternal life in Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes:

Tuesday, March 18

Psalm 95

Yesterday we visited the Israelites in the wilderness as they complained about the lack of water. After God slaked their thirst, we learned that Moses called that place Massah and Meribah, for, as the text says, the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Today’s Psalm recalls that incident. It seems that God was sensitive about those who tested the Lord.

Yet the majority of the Psalm, the first seven verses, is so upbeat that it has become the principal song in the service of Morning Prayer: “Come, let us sing to the Lord, let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation.” Even though the memory and reality of wilderness remains, it is remembered in the broader, more uplifting context of praise and thanksgiving. It is appropriate to recollect our past and anticipate the future. But in the present it is right to sing the song: “For you, Lord, are a great God.”

O Lord, memory of the past is rich and hope for the future is uplifting. In the present, however, we joyfully sing the song, for we are the people of your pasture and the sheep of your hand. Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, March 19

Romans 5:1-11

Access is something that concerns many of us much of the time. People want to have access to good jobs and a comfortable style of living. Others strive to have access to positions of power or prestige, ease or happiness. Whenever we try to Google something, we hope to gain access to the answers to life's persistent questions. St. Paul in today's text declares that we have obtained access to grace because we are justified by faith and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This latter claim is deep theology. Yet it is a comforting word to the lonely and distressed. It is uplifting to know we have access to grace and to God. It is also a challenge to see if God has access to us. We often boast of our own merits or status. But Paul points out that we should really boast of our sufferings, because suffering leads to endurance and character, which in turn leads to hope that does not disappoint. Talk about access!

Forbid it, Lord, that we should boast, save in the death of Christ our God. All the vain things that charm us most, we sacrifice them to his blood. Amen.

Notes:

Thursday, March 20

John 4:5-26

The Gospel of John contains a number of significant conversations. At one point Jesus talks about his being the light of the world; another time he speaks about being the bread of life. Toward the end of his life, Jesus converses with Pilate about truth. Today's conversation takes place near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and it is about thirst and water. Remember the story of thirst and water with which we began this week?

On one level, the conversation here is between two outsiders, a Samaritan woman and Jesus, who is keeping a low profile. It seems the Pharisees are out to get him because of his upsetting word and witness. On one level, the odd couple in this story are talking about common thirst and cool water. But these are deep waters. They are really talking about a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life. Listen to what these two are saying. And take a deep swallow.

Holy God, creator of light and giver of goodness, you give us water to drink so that we will never be thirsty. Help us drink deeply and embolden us to share that water for any and all who are thirsty. Amen.

Notes:

Friday, March 21

John 4:27-42

In the Gospel of John, three different women make significant confessions about Jesus. In the garden of the resurrection (John 20), Mary Magdalene recognizes the risen Jesus. She runs to tell the disciples the good news. Just before Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead in John 11, the dead man's sister, Martha, confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And in today's text, the Samaritan woman, who gives Jesus a drink of water, runs to tell others what he said and did. In her excitement, she poses the question, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

You bet he can! Others went to hear Jesus because the Samaritan woman challenged them to "Come and see." That invitation is at the heart of evangelism. We ask others to come and see because, at the invitation of someone, we once went and saw. What we saw—and still see—is the one who gives the water of life. He cannot be the Messiah, can he? What do you think?

Giver of the water of life, we ask you to fill us so that we will never be thirsty again. Help us to spread the good news by asking others to come, see and drink. Amen.

Notes:

Saturday, March 22

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,”

ELW 803

Earlier this week, in one of the prayers, we paraphrased the second stanza of this hymn, which is one of more than 750 that Isaac Watts wrote. This one evokes the theology of the cross, because it stresses not what we have or do, but what Jesus did. He died on the cross for us. All that we are or possess, our richest gains, are as nothing compared to what the prince of glory did.

In western art there are many depictions of the crucifixion. One painting that forcefully captures the essence of Watts’ hymn is Matthias Grünewald’s “Crucifixion,” the major part of the Isenheim Altarpiece. It was completed in 1515, on the eve of the Reformation. It depicts an emaciated Christ on an unforgiving cross. To look at Grünewald’s painting and sing Watts’ hymn is to get a sense of that all-embracing sorrow and love—love so amazing, so divine.

Almighty God, your son, our savior, suffered at human hands and endured the scandal of the cross. Grant us strength, wisdom and fortitude to walk the way of the cross so that we may find life and peace. Amen.

Notes:

Sunday, March 23

“Now We Join in Celebration,” ELW 462

When Christians hear the Word properly preached and take the Sacraments duly administered, they get to the heart of what the church is. By extension, reaching out and serving others complements this basic conviction. The words of this hymn, floating on a lovely melody, summarize well what the people of God are about in liturgy and in life. The celebration in which we join is due to our Savior’s invitation, not our own creation.

Remembering what Christ has done, we share the bread and cup, which are both presence and foretaste. As God’s children we are reconciled to one another and we live for others, serving all—both friends and strangers. As disciples we are called to press for justice, love and mercy until the final day of our Lord’s coming. That’s what this hymn and the people of God are all about. So join the celebration.

Lord, you have called us to sing and serve, to celebrate and anticipate, to care for creation and one another. Fill us with the energy and the Spirit to faithfully be what you have called us to be. Amen.

Notes:

Monday, March 24

1 Samuel 16:1-13

When Jesus was put to death, his earliest followers had little to read or study in order to learn about faith in Jesus. Some had heard him, of course. His stories were repeated and his miraculous deeds were remembered. Some followers even believed that Jesus was raised from death, although many were skeptical.

One thing that took place among Jesus' Jewish followers—the great majority at first—is that they turned to their Bible—the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible—and used it to guide them. Today we hear from 1 Samuel 16:1-13. Its words speak about the first Hebrew King, Saul, whom God had rejected, and the second Hebrew King, David, who would become the greatest king until Jesus. Suddenly, in these words the early Christians (Jew and Gentile) were given roots in the past, God's commandments in the present and hope in Jesus for the future.

Lord God, as your Spirit came mightily upon David 3,000 years ago, send your Spirit upon us, for we pray in the name of Jesus, our eternal king. Amen.

Notes:

Tuesday, March 25

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 must be the favorite of nearly every believer. This Psalm (and its God) is present in times of death and tragedy, with you when you are lonely and confused and merciful and forgiving when you sin against God and each other. Not only does this God comfort and restore, but also leads you in following your Lord.

Notice, however, how each one of us should not only talk about God but talk to God. Notice also that this is not primarily a demand but rather it is “good news.” No wonder we pray, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

O Lord, teach us to pray and to know that with you as our shepherd, goodness and mercy continue to follow us all our days and that you promise that our dwelling place will always be with you. Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, March 26

Ephesians 5:8-14

The letter to the Ephesians was most likely written some 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. By this time, splits had developed among Christians, partly as the result of a major break among Jewish groups over the place of Jesus and also the emergence of Gentile churches. Struggles also arose at this time because of interference by the Roman emperors in the eastern Mediterranean. I mention this in order that we might understand some of the emphases and issues among the Ephesians and others.

For example, see the contrasts of old and new "walks" of life. Christians are to make a witness to Christ through good deeds in order to reach new converts. (Ephesians 5:8-9: "Live not as children of the dark but of the light, which leads to the good, the right and the true.") The unity that belongs to the faith community is to result in new lives of love. The mission of the church is to reach others for Christ through the lives and witness of Christians.

Sometimes our Lenten focus directs us toward a narrow piety and devotion. This is challenged by the community emphases of the various Christian groups to which the letter to the Ephesians was sent.

Lord God, help us lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. Amen.

Notes:

Thursday, March 27

John 9:1-17

Today and tomorrow we hear the story of the man born blind; it is the gospel reading for this coming Sunday. We will consider part of this fairly long reading today (John 9:1-17) and the second part (John 9:18-41) tomorrow. This chapter teaches by asking about events that happened in Jesus' ministry and challenging the various Jewish groups to reflect on their meaning. Remember, Jesus and the disciples also were Jewish—but ones who had become followers of Jesus.

Scene 1 (John 9:1-5)—Seeing the man who has been blind since birth, the disciples think that he must have been born a sinner (and that his blindness is thus his divine punishment), but Jesus rejects that view. Instead, Jesus says he is blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

Scene 2 (John 9:6-7)—Jesus now sends the blind man to wash in a pool and the man is healed.

Scene 3 (John 9:8-12)—The many witnesses disagree about whether this is the (formerly) blind man or really someone else, despite the man's insistence that he is the one.

Scene 4 (John 9:13-17)—Some witnesses bring the man to the Pharisees (a prominent Jewish party—leaders of keeping the law and presiding at the temple), so they can discover the "facts." Next, someone suggests that since the healing took place on the Sabbath and therefore broke the law, Jesus also must have broken the law. There is much disagreement.

Gracious God, give us insight into difficult verses such as these, that we may be both careful in our study and open to God's work in our lives. Amen.

Notes:

Friday, March 28

John 9:18-41

Today we continue our reading of the “scenes” in John 9.

Scene 5 (John 9:18-23)—The power struggle increases. The enemies of Jesus do not believe the man who has received his sight, so they ask his parents: Is this your son? And, if he was healed, how did that happen? The parents are so scared of being driven out of the synagogue that they tell them to ask their son: “He’s old enough.”

Scene 6 (John 9:24-34)—The Pharisees summon the man who was blind and now (supposedly) is healed and accuse him of being a sinner. The man, who is drawing on another sort of healing, replies that all he knows is that he was blind and now can see. They keep asking the same questions. Finally the man comes back with a question: “Why do you want to hear the answer again?” Slyly, he asks, “Do you also want to be his disciple?” The Pharisees are angry! Then come the Pharisees’ theological lecture, full of certainty and—dead wrong. John 9:30-33 relays the truth of God.

Scene 7 (John 9:35-38)—Hearing what is happening, Jesus finds the man born blind and guides him through to the wonderful words of confession: “Lord, I believe.” And the man worships Jesus.

Scene 8 (John 9:39-41)—Finally, Jesus’ summary turns things upside down: “I came for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who think they see may become blind.”

Lord Jesus Christ, bend your ear to our prayers and come among us. Bring light into the darkness of our hearts and anoint us with your Spirit. Amen.

Notes:

Saturday, March 29

“God, Whose Almighty Word,” ELW 673

“God, whose almighty word chaos and darkness heard and took their flight:
Hear us, we humbly pray, and where the gospel day sheds not its glorious ray,
Let there be light.

Christ, who once came to bring, on your redeeming wing, healing and sight;
Health to the troubled mind, sight where illusions blind, and in its darkest place
Let there be light.”

Jesus frequently has been called “the light of the world” (John 9:4-5). The sun lights up the world and this allows families, society, religious practices, etc., so that life might thrive. Similarly, the light that comes from God brings a long list of things God promises to do or to prevent in a created world which also suffers from sin (darkness). Finally, note the related terms—here and throughout the Bible—light as good and important, sunlight (often used symbolically as bright or new), and Jesus the Son of God, God’s light and Jesus’ freedom from sin.

Lord God, in the beginning you created the heavens and the earth. Then you said, “Let there be light” and there was light. And you saw that the light was good and you separated the light from the darkness. Among other things, you spoke and did these things for all human beings. (Genesis 1:1-5) Lead us to be thankful and live as people of the light. Amen.

Notes:

Sunday, March 30

“God, Whose Almighty Word,” ELW 673

“Spirit of truth and love, life-giving holy dove, speed forth your flight;
Move on the water’s face bearing the lamp of grace, and in earth’s darkest place
Let there be light.

Holy and blessed three, glorious Trinity, Wisdom, Love, Might:

Boundless as ocean’s tide, rolling in fullest pride, through the earth, far and
wide,

Let there be light.”

Creator, Redeemer, Servant, Lord, Forgiver, Word, Life-giver, Light-bringer—
the Holy Trinity is our God, revealed in Jesus, the Son, crucified, and raised
from death. The names and titles for God seem to multiply each day—a result
of our understanding even better each day God’s words and actions, prayers
and judgments, hopes and fears, forgiveness and love and faith beyond all
expectations.

If we don’t find ways and time to ponder who God is and what God wants and
works for, perhaps our God is too small. Maybe we have latched on to only one
little word or event which now has become insufficient for understanding what
God is about in our world. Perhaps we, too, need the light, so we can see and be
seen and discover God’s size. We might begin by reading aloud the four verses
of this hymn, “God Whose Almighty Word.”

*Dear God, help me know you better, love you more and serve you and your world more
willingly. Remind me also that praying doesn’t require being alone. O God, you also reach
me through others—and others through me—though I often need a little push to get
going. I am very glad that we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Notes:

Monday, March 31

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones gives us a bright ray of hope in our darkest hour, which might have been the death of someone we held close to our hearts or the feeling that life is pointless. Maybe we are like the people of Israel who were convinced that their bones were dried up, all hope was lost and they were cut off completely.

But if God can make the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision rattle back together and return to life, God can quicken us as well. And if God can break down the barriers that cut us off and give us a new start and a restored life, we have every reason to hope. And if God can put our lives together when they have fallen apart, we can hold fast, face our future with faith and move on.

Unlike the New Testament, the Old doesn't say much about a resurrection, but Ezekiel catches the vision. God will create new life out of the remnants of the old. God will put the spirit within us and we shall live. That's our bright ray of hope!

Send your Spirit to me, Gracious God. Quicken me, direct me and empower me to live the new life you offer. Amen.

Notes:

Tuesday, April 1

Psalm 130

Depression can be deep and dark, coupled with the overwhelming feeling that escape is impossible. This touching Psalm goes with us into the “dark night of the soul.”

Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry unto you,” goes far deeper into life’s sorrows than a bout with the blues or a depressed feeling. For many folks, the pit is so deep and dark that they can’t climb out. Those feelings of deep sorrow, grief or profound sadness will assail all of us at one time or another.

Maybe that’s why the author of this Psalm doesn’t ask for anything beyond God’s attention. The writer doesn’t know what to ask for, or how to imagine anything besides the present depths and darkness.

That’s a despair that can surround us, pull us down and trap us in a Slough of Despond, as described in “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” a classic image of hopelessness.

So we and the psalmist hold fast and wait; that’s all we can do. We wait for the Lord who loves us and we hope that God knows the way out—because we don’t. We cry out from the depths and hold fast to God’s promises.

Hear me, O God, when I am too confused, depressed and sorrowful to know what to do or say. Hear me and show me your steadfast love! Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, April 2

Romans 8:6-31

Despite what many assume, Christianity is not anti-body. God does not declare our bodies unclean and evil—a reason for shame. Instead, God has created us as physical beings and declared his creation to be good. Psalm 139 reminds us that God formed our inward parts and we are wonderfully and fearfully made.

When St. Paul talks about the sins of the flesh, he's talking about all the degrading and evil behavior that appears in the realm of this world, in stark contrast to the peace, joy and love evident in the realm of the Spirit. We have been created as embodied persons, claimed by the promise of baptism and focused on the Spirit, who redeems us and guides us to all that is good and true. That's what it's like to be "in the Spirit" and have God dwell within us. A few verses later, Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Thank you, Gracious God, for the gift of our body, and help us live in the realm of the Spirit where you dwell with us. Amen.

Notes:

Thursday, April 3

John 11:1-45

We are pretty orientated toward the cognitive in our religious expression. We work hard to understand, to know, to figure things out and to keep our doctrine in harmony with our traditions. The head gives us guidance and insight, but the heart gives us strength and power. It's like the tiller and the sail—one gives direction and the other the power to drive the ship.

Jesus often appealed to reason when he taught and critiqued his Jewish tradition. But here, in the shortest verse of the Bible, we see his heart: "Jesus began to weep." His feelings were evident to everybody. Even the Jews said, "See how he loved him."

In this brief verse we see Jesus' empathy, his ability to know things through the heart as well as the head and his capacity for solidarity with us when we are in pain or grief. His tears remind us how deeply and strongly he loved. He was driven to the cross to redeem those whom he loved. Let us hold fast to his love!

Holy Spirit, speak to us through our minds and also through our feelings. Help us serve you and our neighbors with our hearts and heads. Amen.

Notes:

Friday, April 4

John 11:1-45

When Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” we see his commanding authority and power. So great is Jesus’ power that Lazarus is not required to wait for the day of resurrection as Martha assumed (John 11:24). His resurrection is immediate and complete. No waiting around, no reconciling the moral debits and credits of his life! Jesus summons Lazarus because he loves him and his sisters, and acts with astonishing power and grace. All he has to do is say these three words and the dead man walks.

So when you stand by that open grave of someone you love, or when you sense that your time has come, remember these words: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” All we need are those words of invitation and promise from Jesus, “Come out!”

Spirit of God, give us a firm confidence in your resurrection power and help us hold fast, so that when we are called from this earthly life, we may pass peacefully into your presence. Amen.

Notes:

Saturday, April 5

“Abide With Me,” ELW 629

Tradition says that Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847) wrote this touching hymn after visiting a dying friend, an experience that would have given a face to our need for God’s presence. Lyte himself suffered from asthma and tuberculosis. His own longing for the presence of God, no doubt, added to the depth of his empathy. Who hasn’t felt lonely, isolated and in need of the near presence of Jesus? Haven’t we all prayed, “Abide with me?”

Lyte, like the American theologian William Stringfellow, makes a connection between our feelings of loneliness and our awareness of our mortality. The images of darkness, decay, passing time, death and the grave give the hymn a somber tone, reminding us that we approach death’s door individually. No one, save God, can be with us at that moment.

Yet the hymn moves from the dark thoughts of isolation and death in the first two verses to a transitory third verse. The last two verses express our joy and confidence in God’s victory over death and our trust in the cross that will lead us through the gloom to the bright skies. We echo the hymn’s final plea, “In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.”

Loving God, remember me when I am lonely, afraid or desperate. Help me hold fast to you when the darkness deepens. When I am called from this life, grant me a peaceful departure. Amen.

Notes:

Sunday, April 6

“Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus,” ELW 802

This hymn is a lovely way to imagine our call to discipleship: It’s like walking with Jesus who longs to be our companion. To be sure, we will face tests and trials, suffering and sadness and finally death, symbolized by “the grave that shuts us in.” But we remember the resurrection and hold fast, for God can “make the grave the gate to heaven.” The hymn is a type of life review, a retrospect that helps us see more clearly the signs of God’s presence in our lives.

Yet the author is not content to simply look back and see life’s trials and then God’s blessings. He asks us to “walk [or go] with Jesus” and follow his example. The problem is that exhortations to stay on the straight and narrow path seldom help us much. The hymn does more than urge us to holy living. It reminds us of the spiritual power that comes to us through our companionship with Jesus. Jesus awakens us; he is our head and our guide. With such a companion, we will not fail to arrive at our home above.

Be our companion, Jesus, and show us the way. Amen.

Notes:

Monday, April 7

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Our text today is one of the Servant Songs from the Book of Consolation, spoken to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. It is a word of hope and encouragement to a people feeling defeated and abandoned by God. The task of the Servant is to “sustain the weary with a word.” Note how the Servant will sustain the weary: when picked on, insulted and spit upon, the Servant does not retaliate. Instead, the Servant’s face was set like flint in confidence that God would vindicate and sustain. The Servant issues a challenge to anyone or any event that might destroy hope and life. God will protect and vindicate.

In our times of exile and struggle, when we are wronged by someone or struggle, we are tempted either to doubt God’s presence or retaliate. Like the Servant, it is enough to throw ourselves into the arms of a loving God and know we will be sustained. The unshakable confidence of the Servant is our confidence and hope.

Gracious God, instill in us the spirit of the Servant, to live in strength and integrity, even when we are weary or tempted to get even. Amen.

Notes:

Tuesday, April 8

Psalm 31:9-16

We see in today's text the devastating power of grief. First, the writer's eyes, soul, body, strength and bones are all battered by the pain. Second, the neighbors, friends and family avoid the sufferer. Grief can do that to someone. It is tempting to avoid grieving people. In my seminary education, I read about grief. As a parish pastor for 16 years, I dealt with death and grief regularly. But it was not until my wife, Lynne, died of stomach cancer about two years ago that I really discovered the devastating power of grief. Several months after her death, I attended a grief support group. The co-leader described her grief experience after the sudden death of her husband. She was hospitalized with no known symptoms that could be diagnosed. Finally, the physician said her condition was caused by "broken heart syndrome." That is the power of grief.

There are many causes and experiences of grief, caused by death, broken relationships or failure. How good it is to hear the bold confidence of the psalmist saying, "My times are in your hand ... save me in your steadfast love." When we are devastated by the power of grief, we throw ourselves into the arms of a loving and faithful God, whose steadfast love will sustain and heal, no matter what. That is what sustained and sustains me—and it will for you.

Gracious God, if we have not experienced the devastating power of grief, someday we will. Thank you for your unfailing love now and we claim it for the future, no matter what. Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, April 9

Philippians 2:5-11

Holy Week is not far off. During this special week in the life of the church, we ponder once again the deep meaning of Jesus' death. As we think of what that death means for us and for the world, Paul reminds us of the humble nature of Jesus' ministry and death. He emptied himself and became obedient unto death. He did not use his status to decide who was "in" and who was "out." He submitted to the powers that opposed him and died.

As we think of Jesus' death, it would be good to ponder its deeper meaning for us. It is true that "Jesus died for our sins," but what else might his death mean? How does Jesus' death have cosmic implications, affecting the whole creation, having a deeper meaning than only our personal salvation? In this day of interfaith and inter-religious dialogue and relationships, what does it mean when Paul says that someday every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord? How will that inform our relationships with others?

Gracious God, help us ponder and discover the deeper meanings to Jesus' death. Amen.

Notes:

Thursday, April 10

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Jesus predicted that all of his disciples would desert him that night. Not only Peter, but all of them promised to stay with Jesus and even die with him. Yet, a short time later, while Jesus agonized and prayed over his coming suffering and death, the disciples fell asleep—three times. Why did they sleep? Were they bored? Tired? Or maybe they just did not sense the importance of the moment. They slept through the holy moment.

Like the disciples, we confidently promise our loyalty and faithfulness to the end. We sing piously, “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold ... take my intellect, take my will, take my hands, take my feet ...” It is difficult to live up to those promises. For us, sleeping through a holy moment is more than falling asleep during the sermon. For us, being attentive to holy moments also means sensing the holy in our relationships with family, friends or work associates, or seeking to bring healing to a hurting person. We are invited to become more aware of holy moments, whether in church, in our homes or at work.

Gracious God, we mean well when we promise to serve you faithfully, but sometimes we fail. We ask your forgiveness and claim your grace as you open our eyes to holy moments in our lives. Amen.

Notes:

Friday, April 11

Matthew 26:14-27:66

The texts this week speak of struggle, exile, grief and pain experienced by God's people. Many of God's faithful people have felt abandoned or forgotten by God in a time of deep crisis or pain. If people would be totally open about their feelings, many more would admit to this deep struggle of the soul. People often feel guilty if they admit to feeling abandoned by God in a time of grief or pain. We are supposed to be strong and courageous as we face life's challenges and sorrows. What will people say if we express our real feelings about God?

Yet the Psalms have many laments where people feel abandoned by God. Job felt God was silent or even his enemy. As the death of his wife neared, C. S. Lewis was reminded by friends that God knew and God was present. Lewis replied, "I know God knows and is near, but does God care?" Sometimes people struggle with the same questions as Lewis. Today we are reminded of a time when Jesus also felt abandoned by God. If at some time in your life you have felt abandoned by God, do not feel guilty. God can take your feelings and questions. Be honest—if not with your loved ones or friends, at least with God. God's presence and love go deeper than our momentary feelings and despair.

Gracious God, there are times when it is really difficult to sense your presence and care. In those times, speak to us through your Word or others, and assure us we are safe in your arms. Amen.

Notes:

Saturday, April 12

“My Life Flows On in Endless Song,” ELW 763

Almost two years ago, when my wife, Lynne, was in the final weeks of stage 4 stomach cancer, I went to our church early on Maundy Thursday to select six to eight possible hymns that could be sung at her memorial service. Our daughters would be with us for Easter, and Lynne and our daughters would select which hymns to sing from those I chose. At her memorial service, we sang this hymn, with tears in our eyes—tears of loss and pain but also tears of comfort and hope.

Just as the verses state, we felt peace, presence and hope, even in the midst of our grief and loss. We could really sing and say in confidence that in the peace of Christ all things were ours and we were his. It is possible to sing even when tears roll down our cheeks. We were supported by the prayers of so many people. At her memorial service we were surrounded by family, friends and colleagues who carried us along. With that kind of support and the wonderful presence and promises of God, how could we keep from singing?

Gracious and loving God, thank you for your presence and healing in Jesus that helps us sing even in the time of great loss. Amen.

Notes:

Sunday, April 13

“Shall We Gather at the River,” ELW 423

A common image of death in the Bible, literature and music—including bluegrass gospel music—is crossing the river to the other side. The night of my wife, Lynne’s, death she fell into her final sleep with a CD playing “Let Us Cross Over the River and Rest in the Shade of the Trees.” It was only natural that we also sang today’s familiar hymn at her memorial.

The hymn reminds us of two things. First, we gather at the shore of the river where others have already gone. We all have loved ones, friends or colleagues who have departed and crossed over to the other side. There are also times when we become aware that we are not that far from our departed loved ones—they are just across the river. Second, we are reminded that someday we will also cross that river; our pilgrimage will cease. The hymn reminds us that it is a beautiful river, because it flows by the throne of God!

Whether we are on this side of the river or on the other side, we are all in the arms and presence of God, celebrating Jesus’ triumph over death. It is all we need.

Dear loving and merciful God, as we stand on this side of the river, we remember those who have crossed over to the other side. When our time shall come, welcome us as you have welcomed those who have already crossed. We are all in your arms of comfort, hope and strength. Amen.

Notes:

Monday, April 14

Isaiah 42:1-9

Palm Sunday's mood is one of exuberance and hope, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the cheers of the Jerusalem crowds. Now the events of Holy Week begin to unfold. Jesus defies the religious authorities by overturning moneychangers' tables at the temple. On Palm Sunday the crowds acclaim him as "the Son of David." Now in these next days the authorities begin their campaign to change the mood of the populace, harassing Jesus with all sorts of challenges.

Jesus' goal was already articulated in one of Isaiah's servant songs: "... to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:7). But first his path will lead through suffering and death. In these next days on the streets of Jerusalem the forces of evil will gather their strength against him.

Lord, help us through whatever times of suffering we too experience. Amen.

Notes:

Tuesday, April 15

Psalm 71:1-14

Centuries before Jesus began his last week on earth, the psalmist foresaw what Jesus would be experiencing in these days: “For my enemies speak concerning me, and those who watch for my life consult together. They say, ‘Pursue and seize that person ...’” (Psalm 71:10-11). In chapters 21-26, Matthew tells how the authorities challenge and dispute Jesus during the days after Palm Sunday.

During this time, Jesus remains steadfast. He knows he will be killed, but he urges the people not to succumb to the darkness: “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you” (John 12:35). On Friday, that light will be extinguished as darkness envelops the world, but on Sunday the light will shine again even more brightly, so that we today can live in its brightness.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the light that guides our lives, that shines through our hardships and leads us into everlasting life. Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, April 16

Hebrews 12:1-3

In the middle of this Holy Week, Jesus summarizes his teaching: “I came not to judge the world, but to save the world,” and then also summarizes the commandments: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (John 12:47; 13:34). The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith, who ... endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The two verses from John summarize our faith and our life, and the verses from Hebrews summarize our future with Jesus. The next few days in Jesus’ life show us how it all happened, and these events define what we believe, how we live and what we hope for!

Lord Jesus, in the next days we will experience again all you have done for us. We thank you that you are for us “the way, the truth and the life.” Amen.

Notes:

Maundy Thursday, April 17

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

St. Paul describes Holy Communion as “sharing (koinonia) in the body and blood of Christ”

(1 Corinthians 10:16).

A parishioner once asked me, “When did you ask Jesus to come into your heart?” He was astonished when I answered, “I never have.” I explained that Jesus became part of my life when I was baptized as a baby, long before I would have been old enough to “ask him into my life.”

The popular idea of “asking Jesus into my heart” puts the matter the wrong way around: Rather than say “Jesus lives in us,” it’s biblically more accurate to say, “We live in Jesus.”

As you receive the body and blood of our Lord today, think not only of the bond between you and those next to you, but picture yourself surrounded by Christians from every continent on earth—because they are all with you at this Supper of the Lord.

*Lord, help me realize that my family includes fellow Christians from all over the world.
Amen.*

Notes:

Good Friday, April 18

Isaiah 53:1-8

The prophet, Isaiah, knew it all along, as he wrote in his servant songs: God's servant on earth would suffer death at the hands of those who will reject him. He knew that the servant "has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases ... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities ... and by his bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Jesus was killed by the religious authorities who rejected his claim of being the Messiah and by the political authorities who rejected his claim of being a king in place of Caesar. If he came to earth today, he would surely be rejected and killed by today's powers and authorities, because he would challenge them, too.

But for Jesus, death gave way to life. He did this all that your death and my death might also give way to life—eternal life!

Lord Jesus, thanks to you we live not in God's anger but in God's mercy, not in death but in life, not in guilt, but in joy. Amen.

Notes:

Holy Saturday, April 19

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 16:13-17; John 6:66-69

“Awake, My Heart, with Gladness,” ELW 378

It was surely the bleakest day of the disciples’ lives. They have finally concluded, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15); and “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:69). But now it has all come to nothing. Jesus is dead. They huddle together, not only in depression but in fear, because the authorities might now come after them.

Some of us will attend a vigil service tonight. “Vigil” means “watching and waiting.” On that first Saturday the disciples were despondent, because their hopes were dashed. We “wait” because we know that on that first Easter Sunday, Jesus lived again and the forces of death were defeated—also for us.

We know we can say with the hymnist, “Awake, my heart, with gladness” because “after gloom and sadness comes forth the glorious sun.”

Lord, help us realize that whatever gloom and sadness is in our lives, that Jesus brings us true and eternal life. Amen.

Notes:

Easter Sunday, April 20

Matthew 28:1-10

“Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,” ELW 369

I am not normally an early riser, but the Easter sunrise service is one of my favorites. In the church I served, we started when it was still dark, much earlier than most churches. In the darkness, a voice read the verses from Isaiah 53:3-6 about the suffering and dying servant of God. Then suddenly we turned all the lights on and the glorious strains of the full organ thundered out this great hymn of the Easter confession: “Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia!” We went from pitch darkness to blazing light and sound in a second.

On that first Easter morning, the disciples also went from darkness to light in a second—the moment they heard that unbelievable good news, “He has been raised!” Those four little words changed everything. Since Friday their lives had crumbled into depression, but now hope blazed more brightly than ever. We imitate that move when we sing, “God and sinners reconciled, when contending death and life.”

Lord Jesus, we thank you that the same good news which gave new life to the disciples also enlightens our lives! Amen.

Let Us Hold Fast

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