



There in God's Garden

Lent Devotional | 2015

 LUTHER
SEMINARY

Wednesday, Feb. 18

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Some have concerns that the imposition of ashes on your forehead goes against Jesus' words in Matthew 6:16. Concern is warranted if your purpose is to "show others."

For me, I need to hear those words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return" and be marked with ashes. I am reminded that I am mortal, broken, finite.

And at the same time, when I receive those ashes and I feel the sign of the cross made on my forehead, I am reminded of my baptism. I am reminded of the water and oil used to mark my forehead with the sign of the cross of Christ while the words of God's promise were spoken "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." It is a reminder to me that I am forgiven, redeemed, given new and eternal life through Christ alone. The ashes mixed with the oil remind me that I am both sinner and saint.

Gracious God, may the power of the cross of Christ that marks my forehead today remind me of my inheritance in your kingdom. Amen.

Thursday, Feb. 19

Mark 1:9-15

Do you remember your baptism? I don't remember mine because I was 3 weeks old, but I have pictures from that day 55 years ago. I also have the special gown, cap and outer bunting that I wore on that very cold January morning. I love to take out the pictures and see the love on the faces of my parents while they held me over the baptismal font. I love to touch the gown that their hands touched on that day that I received the promise of new life in Christ.

And while I don't remember the physical day, I do remember my baptism every day. When I am in the shower, I feel the water pouring over my body, cleansing me from all the lies, hurt and broken promises that "stick" to me during the day. I remember that I am a beloved child of God. I have been called, claimed and washed new in the waters of baptism. And that is the only promise that truly "sticks" to me.

Faithful God, thank you for the gift of baptism where I too have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the promise of life eternal. Amen.

Friday, Feb. 20

Mark 1:9-15

One of the things that I love about the Gospel according to Mark is its straightforwardness. It is both disturbing and inviting. It is disturbing because we want more information. And it is inviting because it allows us to spend time wondering and questioning. Mark 1:13 sums up in one sentence that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness for 40 days and the angels waited on him.

We don't know what happened during that time. And yet, what the author is telling us is that Jesus was tempted just as we are today. Jesus knows exactly what we experience in our human lives. We have a God who gets real with us. God in Jesus chooses to dwell with us in the humanity of wilderness and temptation.

Gracious Lord, disturb and invite us to see you in the wilderness of our lives. Amen.

Saturday, Feb. 21

"There in God's Garden," ELW 342

The vision that is so clear to me in this hymn is the Tree of Wisdom. This is the wisdom of the Lord. The wisdom that is all knowing. Not the type of wisdom that this world thinks about. Not the type of knowledge that is based on facts or skill. But instead the type of knowing that understands exactly why we do the things that we do. It is knowledge that understands our humanness and our inability to truly trust God. The type of knowledge that understands our brokenness and our self-focus that causes us to turn away from God.

That Tree of Wisdom is the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Compassion. Our Lord knows us and our limitations, and only such a knowledge can give way to ultimate compassion for our condition. This Tree of Wisdom, Jesus the Christ, is the most magnificent tree in God's garden.

Tree of Wisdom, Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Compassion, Jesus Christ our Lord, enfold us in your loving branches as we cry out in our weariness. Amen.

Sunday, Feb. 22

"There in God's Garden," ELW 342

I do not have a green thumb. In fact, I don't buy indoor plants because they never survive in my home. I start out very attentive, but I seem to forget about the needs of the plant because I get all caught up in my life. The result is that the plant starves and dies.

A few years ago, on Good Friday, I preached at the funeral service of a beloved father, grandfather and friend. The family gifted me with two beautiful African violets that adorned the room that afternoon service. And like all the other plants I have been given, I have come to neglect them too. I have gone weeks without watering them. And yet, through no work of my own, these two plants are thriving. Every day as I look at them, they are my reminder of the promise of life given by the Resurrection: Jesus Christ!

Savior Lord, open my eyes to see the holy ground, your garden, here on this earth. Amen.

Monday, Feb. 23

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

"If I don't pass this test, I'll have to take an extra semester of classes." A student shared this painful news with me, fear hijacking her otherwise chipper voice. She had grown up surrounded by promises that hard work and dedication ensure success, yet things were looking hopeless.

Similarly, Abram and his wife Sarai had done everything "right." They had even uprooted themselves to follow the leading of God; but for what? Even in the face of God's promise that Sarai would have a child, it seemed foolishly impossible. And as we read later in Genesis, they do lose hope and try to take matters into their own hands. But through it all, we hear that God's promise endures. No matter what we face, one thing is certain: We are not alone. We walk in God's garden, claimed and called by the one who spoke creation into existence.

Lord of creation, breathe peace into our lungs. Guide us to set our fears and shortcomings down before you, taking up trust in their place. For as you called forth Abram and Sarai, and later granted them new names as the father and mother of your chosen people, so too you call and send us. Amen.

Tuesday, Feb. 24

Psalm 22:23-31

"All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord" (Psalm 22:27).

I think it's easy to hear this as an invitation to reach out to the unbelieving. But it's quite disconcerting to accept the fullness of these words; that we are united by Christ even with those we disagree with. As our theme hymn suggests, Christ cries to all: "Come to me ye weary; give me your sickness and sorrow; I will give blessing." This applies not just to the outsiders that are broken and worn, nor just to we insiders who are properly "enlightened" in our belief. All the more powerfully, it encompasses even those whose different ways of interpreting Scripture draws blood to our face and furrows our brows.

Lord of unity, break through our self-imposed barriers, building bridges between all who call on your name. May we, with our complexly beautiful diversity of thought, be united in Christ your son to do your will. Amen.

Wednesday, Feb. 25

Romans 4:13-25

Sometimes it still haunts me. I was entrusted to shepherd a group of fellow college-age counselors for a week of day camp at a congregation. Rather than being a leader, I fell prey to a selfish desire for acceptance and allowed one member of our group to become an outcast.

When guilt threatens to suffocate us, reminding us of just how unrighteous we are, we have a great cloud of witnessess, like Abraham, to turn to for strength. He was imperfect but faithful, and so was forged into the father of Israel. Indeed it is our faith—our trust in God's promise and Christ's work—that saves us! What wonders might God accomplish through us when we let go and entrust our spirit to God with full confidence that he provides us not an end, but a new beginning, through resurrection?

God of faith, help us let go of those sins and failings that haunt us, in order to live as people of faith, transforming this world and building your kingdom in ways big and small each day. Amen.

Thursday, Feb. 26

Mark 8:31-38

Peter's response to Christ's revelation frustrates me. Sometimes I just want to slap some sense into that so-called rock of a disciple. After all the time he spent with Christ and everything he saw, how can he not trust him at this point in the story?

Yet maybe he isn't so off his rocker. Peter and the disciples weren't ready to lose Jesus. Together they had been stirring things up. And I can only imagine that Peter and the others felt like Jesus' protectors. For him to be taken from them would mean that they had failed. And none of us likes to face the prospect of failure.

Peter's fear clouded his mind from understanding the truth that Jesus had spoken. Capture and death were part of his passion through which he brought "mercy, healing, strength and pardon to all peoples and nations" ("There in God's Garden," ELW 342).

God of Revelation, enfold us in your spirit, giving us the strength to face the trials that come our way. For you have promised never to forsake or abandon us, and have shown that promise through Christ's defeat of death and gift of resurrection.

Friday, Feb. 27

Mark 8:31-38

"Those who are ashamed of me or my words ... of them the Son of Man will be also be ashamed" (Mark 8:38). This verse is used by some Christians to fuel the "war" against non-theists. But such outsiders are welcomed and loved by Christ. The Gospel of Matthew goes as far as placing Jesus first (after his own parents, of course) into the hands of three gentiles from the east.

Christ's admonition is for you and me as believers. Many of the Jews of his time had become so entangled in matters of law that they lost sight of God. We too become ensnared in illusory arguments, forgetting to heed the words and person of Christ—the person dining with prostitutes and tax collectors—the words urging us to "Love your neighbor" and "Turn the other cheek." Rather than reach for stones, Christ asks us to bear the weight of sowing forgiveness and love.

Lord of burdens, though we seek to perfectly understand all things, including you, the quest for such knowledge can cloud our eyes and keep us from heeding your command. Grant us the energy to join you in bearing the cross, offering grace and love in place of logic and law. Amen.

Saturday, Feb. 28

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," LW 241

There's a beautiful recording of this hymn by the group Ordinary Time. Banjo, violin and piano accompany human voices in a musical journey through the mystic, haunting and hope-filled story it tells. A story we can't hear enough.

Time and time again God made covenants with us, such as that which he struck with Abram. But sadly these promises weren't enough. Humanity proved too fragile to uphold them. And so God did the unthinkable. God came as the Word, Jesus Christ, and entered our world wrapped in nothing but human skin. And he chose to come, as we all do, through the vessel of a mother. Why? To save us from death, granting us life by offering himself, in order that it might be possible for all the ends of the earth to find their way to God.

Christ our Savior, your wisdom comes to us through word, deed, sound and song. May we slow down enough in our busy lives to remember your story, hear your promise and revel in your love each and every day. Amen.

Sunday, March 1

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,”

LW 241

“As the light of light descending from the realms of endless day.” This is a bold and beautiful image of Christ. Perhaps we each have light to share, hope to give. But Jesus was and is the light of lights, the only one capable of once and for all vanquishing the power of death and destroying the darkness that seeks to cloud our vision. It’s hard to imagine what it was like for him to enter this world fully aware of the suffering he would endure. Even his disciples, as mere witnesses to his pain, refused to hear the truth until after it unfolded. It’s a complex mystery that is both beautiful and harrowing. But it is the story of our God’s unyielding love for all of creation. And it is a story for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and all times, even the ordinary ones.

Light of lights, you bore the greatest of all burdens, entering the world in the humble vessel of a child, and marching slowly toward the cross which in this season of Lent looms not far ahead. Lift our weak bodies, open our eyes and guide us by your light of love, that united with you and all the heavenly host, we can share in the difficult task of loving all your creation. Amen.

Monday, March 2

Exodus 20:1-17

What is it about rules that puts us on the defensive? Is it because they make us feel like we’re not trusted? Or maybe because they make us feel like we’re not in control? Rules, of course, dictate how we are supposed to live and act. Though they are meant for good, they can be seen as a billboard for our shortcomings. They reveal to us that no, we are not perfect, we do not have it all together and we most certainly are not in control. And that makes us squirm a little bit—especially when we know we are bound to fail. But, thankfully, that’s not where it ends. We, exposed as sinners by the 10 Commandments, are not left to figure it out on our own. For just as the Commandments show us that we are not in control, they reveal to us who is.

God of all mercy, forgive us for our shortcomings and heal us of our brokenness. Amen.

Tuesday, March 3

Psalm 19

As a director of senior high ministry, my favorite thing about going on mission trips is the way they allow us to live. When we step outside of the comforts (and distractions) of home, we are free to focus on something different. I am amazed year after year at the transformations we all undergo by giving our full attention to serving others, building relationships and living with God. I tell my groups while we are away that THIS is the way God created us to live and I challenge them to have the courage to continue to live this way when we return home—to hold on to the certainty of God’s presence in themselves and the people around them, to remember the truth of God’s redeeming grace that they’ve experienced up close in our work and in each other and to examine how God is calling them in their day-to-day lives. In the end, there is something about experiences like this that tend to mess with our heads a little bit. Even if we get just a glimpse, getting to truly see and experience the glory of God and how we are sent as God’s children can be both crippling and inspiring. The question becomes: How can I do this on my own? To which the only answer can be: You won’t.

Gracious God, let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Wednesday, March 4

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Last summer I told my 3-year-old nephew that I had a surprise for him and took him on a walk to the park. He didn't know where we were going and the whole way there he kept asking, "For me?" I told him over and over, "Yes, Keaton, this surprise is for YOU!" It's as if he couldn't believe I would do such a thing for him.

Have you ever received a gift you didn't think you deserved? It could have been something expensive, or something that required a lot of time and effort—or even the gift of true friendship. It is both humbling and a bit confusing to accept such generosity. For some, it may be tempting to look at the cross of Christ as a foolish sacrifice for us undeserving sinners. But when you come to the breathtaking realization of how infinite God's love really is, the cross is a given. God's love IS for you. The cross IS for you. God wouldn't have it any other way.

God of love, place in our hearts the faith to believe in the great gift of your love and grace in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday, March 5

John 2:13-22

Being an older sister can be tough. As hard as I may have tried, there have been certain times in my life that I just couldn't keep myself out of my brother's business. I could use the argument that I love him and want the best for him, but I suppose that's no excuse. I am sure that if it were socially acceptable to do so, many of us would love to give our opinions to people we encounter on how we think they should live. But how can we really say what that is? Do we really even know what's best for our own lives, let alone the lives of others? If we let ourselves, it would be easy to get caught up in questioning what is right, where to go and how God wants us to live. Of course we will make mistakes, but at the end of the day the only thing we know for sure is the faith that God loves, redeems and renews us. If we hold fast to that faith, the rest will fall into place.

Heavenly father, give us faith to trust your leading in our lives. Amen.

Friday, March 6

John 2:13-22

The last time I was in New York City, I visited the Sept. 11 memorial for the first time. The memorial has a peaceful yet commanding presence. It serves as both an aching reminder of what stood there before and an overwhelming tribute to those who lost their lives on that day. One of the things that struck me most at the memorial was the Survivor Tree. The tree was discovered about a month after the attacks, severely damaged with snapped roots and burned and broken branches. Today it stands with multiple ties stabilizing it and a barrier around it so it is not disturbed as it heals. As one of the only living things to survive at Ground Zero, it is a beautiful reminder that life can (and indeed does) come out of death. You may not look quite the same as you did going in, but alas, life, hope and faith can find you again. Thanks be to God for that!

Healing God, build us up out of the brokenness of sin and death and remind us of the hope of the resurrection in our times of darkness. Amen.

Saturday, March 7

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” ELW 807

At first glance, this hymn may not seem very Lenten. We did, after all, sing it at our wedding—a most joyous of occasions. But when you look closely at the words, it makes sense:

“Oh, to grace how great a debtor; Daily I’m constrained to be; Let that grace now like a fetter; Bind my wand’ring heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; Prone to leave the God I love.

Here’s my heart, oh, take and seal it; Seal it for thy courts above.”

This hymn is full of admitting our faults. Isn’t that what Lent is about? Self-examination and acknowledging our limitations are part of preparing ourselves in the days leading up to Good Friday so that when we arrive there, we know for certain that we are unable to atone for our sin on our own. This time of reflection is not so much about making sure we feel nice and guilty; it’s about realizing the enormity of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It’s about remembering the depth of our sin set against the vastness of God’s love. How could God’s love possibly be big enough to take away our sin? It’s a question on all of our hearts as we wait, not only for Good Friday, but the Sunday that follows as well.

Lord, though we are imperfect and unworthy, we pray that you will claim us as your own and cover us in your grace. Amen.

Sunday, March 8

“There is a Balm in Gilead,” ELW 614

The first time I heard this song was in the movie “The Spitfire Grill.” It is a movie about redemption and healing, centered on an ex-con named Percy, who moves to a small town in Maine for a new beginning. There is a scene where Percy hikes out to a clearing overlooking the valley below. She sits down in the tall grass and begins to sing:

“There is a balm in Gilead; To make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead; To heal the sin-sick soul.”

I haven’t seen the movie in years, but every time I hear this song I think of the peaceful meadow and the voice of the girl in that scene. It brings me my own sense of peace as I reflect on the things in my life that need healing, and dwell in presence of God. It reminds me to be gentle with myself in the fast-paced, high-stress life that’s so easy to get caught up in. For even though we all have our fair share of missteps and shortcomings, God our redeemer forgives.

Forgiving God, our sin-sick souls are healed only by you. Reassure us of this never-ending gift. Amen.

Monday, March 9

Numbers 21:4-9

Using “highs and lows” as a conversation starter with young people can seem like an exercise in futility: “My high is that I got an ‘A’ on my math test. My low is that I have homework.” Teenage social tendencies aside, I’m convinced that God is present and cares about those grades and hours of homework. As a youth director, my role is to help articulate the connections I see to God-sightings within the tests and homework. I’m no Moses with a bronze serpent, but it’s an incredible honor to sit in the midst of conversation with young people when it has been reframed and broken open to include God in the mix.

The Israelites needed a God sighting. They needed a reminder that God still cared for them in spite of their wilderness wandering. Through the Israelites we see a God who is big enough to hear our supplication and act with mercy, even when we don’t think to bring God into the mix ourselves. During Lent, we are gifted the liturgical opportunity to slow down and make space for God sightings.

God of mercy, when life feels mundane, frustrating and even despairing, hear our cries and reveal your hope. Amen.

Tuesday, March 10

Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22

I am a world-class complainer. I can vent, steam and stew with the best of them. When done unconstructively, my complaining ways beget more complaining and lead to a miserable existence in which I am, as Martin Luther deemed it, “turned inward on myself.” And don’t you know I’ll try to drag you down with me!

The Psalmist reminds us that even despite ourselves, God’s love is persistent—it’s steadfast. When I am so caught up in my own sin-sick ways, God is on the ready to heal me and show me the life abundant that’s been in front of my stubborn, complaining nose the whole time.

I give thanks to you, Lord, for pulling me outside of myself to see that through you there is life. Help me love in a way that begets more love. Help me live in a way that serves as a visible sign of your steadfast love to others. Amen.

Wednesday, March 11

Ephesians 2:1-10

I used to think it was my job save the world. By squeezing in one more mission trip over the summer, saying a prayer with a little more fervor or displaying an act of perfect piety in the face of peer pressure, I thought I could conquer unrighteousness and God would be exceptionally pleased with me. It was exhausting, not to mention misguided.

It’s hard to pinpoint the exact moment when I began to understand that it’s God who does the saving. Thank goodness I learned it was okay to surrender God’s work to God and enjoy God’s gift of grace.

Paul points out to the Ephesians that Christ invites us to partner in God’s redeeming work in the world. It’s not up to us alone to save, nor are we given an extra star on our heavenly deeds chart for the good we do. Each of us was particularly equipped by the Spirit to serve our neighbor, and through faith we trust that God works in, despite and through us.

Lord, today help me let go. Amen.

Thursday, March 12

James 3:14-21

There it is again: the bronze serpent. While for Moses and the Israelites the serpent represented a temporary act of mercy and healing by God, for us Christ crucified represents an enduring and relentless witness of love that has the power to stir faith and transform hearts.

We never seem to be able to completely forget or shake our old ways, but because of Christ we are able to move forward. Death is not the end. Christ’s death and resurrection is just the beginning.

Lord, help us anticipate Easter as a hopeful beginning and not as a triumphant finale. Free us from our temporal thinking so we may fully imagine the capabilities of the everlasting love you’ve given us through your son. Amen.

Friday, March 13

John 3:14-21

I've always had a deep appreciation for Lent. For me, it's a time to reflect on and wrestle with the darkness in my personal life and the world around me. Through the honesty and discomfort, Lent teases out my need for a savior. Lent leads me to the weight of the cross on Good Friday—and just when I don't think my heart can take it anymore, Easter comes. My heart feels both literally and figuratively lightened. I have come to rely on this beautiful and complex cycle.

The cycle of Lent makes space for me to yearn for Easter and welcome the resurrected light that is continually reaching out and drawing me into relationship.

Lord, on this Lenten journey, break my heart open and expose my need for the light of your love. Amen.

Saturday, March 14

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” ELW 338

I am fearful of becoming complacent; that I might be “... content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss.” As a youth director, I oftentimes become so consumed by helping the young people I serve that I forget to feel for myself the magnitude of God's love for me.

No matter how well you know the story, take a moment to sit beneath the cross of Jesus today. Let yourself feel. Because whatever your station in life is, the story of God's glorious love is for you and me.

Dearest Lord, I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of your face. Amen.

Sunday, March 15

“My Song Is Love Unknown,” ELW 343

We are a fickle and easily distracted people. One would think history and experience would be enough invitation to live amid God's sweet love all of the time, but we forget how to so quickly and turn our backs on God over and over again. But like the love of a caring parent who knows better than their stubborn children, God's patient and tender love extends outward to us and draws us in again. And again. And again!

King of love, help my heedless heart remember your love for me and not be hasty in forgetting. Compel me to stay and sing a little longer. Amen.

Monday, March 16

Jeremiah 31:31-34

It's hard to watch the evening news or read the headlines and not feel hopeless by all that is happening in the world. Throughout history, God's people have strayed away from God's word. The Israelites made poor choices and were drifting farther away from the covenant God made with them on Mt. Sinai. God does not give up on them, in the midst of their failures. Jeremiah announces a new covenant. It is no longer a covenant made out of stones but written on their hearts.

We give thanks that in the midst of our unfaithfulness, God claims us as God's people. We might not be able to change the world, but we are called to do our part. With this new spirit, our response is to live out God's law each and every day, not because we have to but because our hearts are shaped that way.

God of grace, thank you for reminding us that even when we fall short, you remain faithful. Help us boldly live out your covenant. Amen.

Tuesday, March 17

Psalm 51:1-10

I recently read an article that said the average adult may make up to 35,000 choices each day. Many of them are simple ones. What do I wear? Should I have another cup of coffee? Should I turn at this street? Others are more complex. Should I change careers? Do I stay in this relationship?

Sometimes we hurt because of the choice someone else makes. And sometimes we regret our own choices because they have hurt others. Lent is a time when we are faced with the reality of our sins and our need to confess, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions" (Psalm 51:1). We hold tight to God's grace, which allows us a new beginning. And with that comes new choices to make as we do God's work in the world.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Amen.

Wednesday, March 18

Hebrews 5:5-10

One of my favorite Sunday school activities is for children to go all around the church and see how many crosses they can find. I give them a clipboard to draw what they see and let them loose to see what they can find. They see the obvious ones first—in our sanctuary, on a Bible and in pictures. But then they dig deeper, looking at windows and ceiling tiles, designs on the carpet and on each other's clothes to find the shape of a cross. I always walk away blessed by their reminder that the cross truly is everywhere. The cross is a visible reminder of the sacrifice Jesus made for you and me.

When is the last time you looked for Jesus? Jesus, though he was a son, learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:8-9). The cross reminds us that Jesus has and will always be present in our lives. Take a moment today and look for the crosses around you. God has given us the gift of Jesus to be with all people.

O God, we give you thanks that through your son, Jesus Christ, we have eternal life. Open our eyes to see you work around us each and every day. Amen.

Thursday, March 19

John 12:20-33

Have you ever been the recipient of someone paying it forward? Someone buying your coffee for you. Receiving a note on your windshield with a couple dollars to spend on something special. A complete stranger paying off your layaway. Paying it forward isn't a new thing. But it has got me thinking. What does it mean to really, truly put the needs of others before my own? What sacrifices will you have to make? We are nearing the fifth Sunday of Lent. Have you been able to keep your Lenten sacrifice this year? These sacrifices are designed to help draw us closer to God. They allow us the space to put God before ourselves. What if instead of giving up something, we would take something on? What if in these last days leading up to Holy Week, we stopped to look at the needs around us?

Jesus teaches us that in order for a grain of wheat to grow it must be buried. We are called to give up a little of ourselves for the sake of others. With these small dyings come sacrifices, but also opportunities to grow. With our hearts focusing on our neighbors and not ourselves, we can see glimpses of Easter light.

Gracious God, give us grace to look beyond our own needs, letting go of the things that prevent us from faithfully serving you. Amen.

Friday, March 20

John 12:20-33

It was a call I never thought I would get. A family's 5-year-old daughter drowned in their family pool. These are times when I feel ill equipped for ministry. But as I walked with this family during those difficult days, I found strength beyond my own understanding. In the days leading up to the funeral, the family received phone calls and visits from people asking them what they could do. They didn't say that they needed food or flowers. They told each person to find a faith community. It is during heartbreaking events like this where we need the body of Christ more than ever. And to be reminded that there is salvation even in death.

Jesus has given his life so that we might find true life. Jesus said that "and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). It is in our darkest times when we must cling to our faith and see glimpses of new life emerging around us.

Loving God, thank you for sending your son, Jesus, to die so that we might have true life in you. Amen.

Saturday, March 21

My Hope is Built on Nothing Less, ELW 596

The author of this popular hymn, Edward Mote, surprisingly did not grow up attending church. As a teenager he began listening to sermons and took an interest in singing hymns. He was a cabinet maker for most of his adulthood. While walking to work one day, he began to think about writing a hymn.

He had the refrain figured out by the time he arrived at work and wrote four verses by the end of that day. At the age of 55, he was called to ministry as the pastor of a Baptist church, where he served for nearly 20 years.

This hymn has been sung in various moments of my life and has brought comfort to many people on their spiritual journey. In Mote's words is the reassurance of Christ's righteousness as the only requirement for salvation. Our Jeremiah text from Monday reminds us of the promise of a new covenant, written on our hearts. So in our moments of trouble, may we have strength to boldly live out the message of God's grace.

God of hope, we come to you broken and in need of your grace. We pray for all those who are suffering and seeking to be made whole. Put your love within us, write it on our hearts, O God, and help us love as you love us. Amen.

Sunday, March 22

O Jesus I Have Promised, ELW 810

"O Jesus, you have promised to all who follow you
that where you are in glory your servant shall be too.

And Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end;
oh, give me grace to follow, my master and my friend."

In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." We are reminded that in our promise to serve the Lord, we will face temptations and struggles, but we are claimed as God's people and will not walk alone. Jesus is here with us now and has set the way for us. Jesus has promised that all who follow him will live with him in glory.

"Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end; give me grace to follow, my master and my friend." Amen.

Monday, March 23

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Isaiah's concern about disgrace and shame resonate strongly with me, and in the lives of the people I serve: churchgoers, wrestlers and those serving in our U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. It's one thing when we do something that's profane; it's another thing when we think ourselves to be profane. When we're shamed and disgraced, I often wonder what good news is to those people. "What exactly is gospel?" For the shamed, the disgraced, it has to be a word more than, "Be a good person." It has to be a word that says, "I am with you; you are mine." To think that God would stand and be present with us—disgraced, shamed, ugly—then maybe we're not so ugly and profane after all. Maybe we are worthy. We stand forgiven, and we can stand with confidence alongside the almighty God.

God our helper, you stand with us when no one would stand with us—profane to the world. Thank you for reminding us who we are and who we belong to. Amen.

Tuesday, March 24

Psalm 31:9-16

A teammate and classmate of mine at the U.S. Naval Academy served as a Marine Corps officer in Afghanistan in the 2000s. During his first tour of duty, he talked about being in an area of so much uncertainty and hostility and suffering—both towards him and the everyday citizens who lived there. No one was safe; it seemed that everyone there was surrounded by adversaries. Yet my friend volunteered to go back for a second tour—where he was killed in combat. My friend wrote a letter to his family, explaining his reasoning for returning. He wrote, "If not me, then who?" That is how I think about Christ, entering into a hostile world to save a suffering people who could not save themselves. Christ, seeing our reality and need to be saved from it, perhaps said, "If not me, then who?"

Christ, you came to us when we were surrounded by our enemies. Help us turn towards you always, trusting in your steadfast love. Amen.

Wednesday, March 25

Philippians 2:5-11

I wonder sometimes if we forget within our own tradition that we are made in the image of God. Yet it says so in Genesis. We have been created in God's likeness—male and female. I think that changes how we look at living a life of humility, sacrifice and obedience. It's not simply what "good little Christians do," but rather, such a life is what it means to live as one made in God's likeness and image. Such a life is to live as one in mind with Christ Jesus. Such a life confesses and points to what God is like and where God is present to all those around us. In a world where the number of people who don't know God is increasing, it is this likeness and image we have been created in—one fashioned in humility, sacrifice and obedience—that confesses and shares Christ.

Gracious God, help us live in your likeness, in the mind of Christ, so that all may know you in the powerful ways we have known you. Amen.

Thursday, March 26

Mark 14:1-15:47

It's the weirdest passage in the Bible: "A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked" (Mark 14:51-52). I like to quote it though, in part because of its strangeness, and in part because we are the young man. When we are caught hold by God, we're exposed for who we are and we go off running in fear and shame, naked. Yet the good news is that the Passion story doesn't stop there. There's a whole new chapter to come, a chapter of a man who was God who went to the cross to bear our fear and shame and nakedness so that we can stop running away—for good. It's a story of a God who takes hold of us in love no matter how hard we try to run away.

Almighty God, thank you for holding on to us no matter how hard we try to run away. We thank you that our nakedness and shame isn't the end of the story, but Christ's cross is. Amen.

Friday, March 27

Mark 14:1-15:47

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mark 15:34)? I have always found Jesus' last words disturbing and haunting. Was it a lapse in faith at the end? Was there some theological reason for them? In my relatively short life, I've come to think that these words are why we need God, and what gospel really is. We don't need God to manage our behavior and conduct, and gospel isn't a reward because we believe rightly. What these words tell me is that at our very core as humans, our greatest fear is that we are utterly and truly alone—in life and in death. What if in the end all we are is forsaken?

The ultimate truth is that as Jesus Christ was raised, we will be raised too. We are never alone—in life or in death. That truth is good news ... and a truth worth believing in.

Gracious God, your son experienced forsakenness so that we might know the truth of your gospel: We are never forsaken. Thank you for that never-ending story of your love. Amen.

Saturday, March 28

"Lord Keep us Steadfast in Your Word," ELW 517

I think about all the church and Christians are facing these days. We no longer enjoy a place of privilege in society. For most, this creates a sense of fear and lament. The responses differ; some are resigned and feel defeated, others angry and compelled to aggressive action. I think all of those responses fall short. It falls short because it takes matters into their own hands. Like Judas, we go our own way, perhaps well-intentioned. Yet our call is to place our faith and trust in Christ.

In such times, I think prayer is important, and that prayer is as simple as "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word." Lord, keep us trusting in Christ. Lord, help us wait for Jesus to reveal himself in the places and to the people who we know so desperately need him.

Lord, keep us steadfast in your son when all around us seems lost. Help us look for him as he reveals himself to those that need him—the sinful and broken. Amen.

Sunday, March 29

"Just As I Am, Without One Plea" ELW 592

In the small rural church of my Minnesota childhood, I remember Roy Erickson, well into his 70s, playing this hymn on his violin. Roy didn't read a single note of music; he played from memory. Every time he played this hymn, it was with great feeling. Free from having to follow the notes, he could focus in on one task: playing from his soul.

Today we remember Palm Sunday—a chaotic scene that begins the story of Christ's Passion. Yet as we go through the coming week, the story comes down to this one thing: we come just as we are, without one plea, in all the ways the hymn describes to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who grants us forgiveness and deals with us graciously. What amazing news! It is such a simple message, but one with great power that overcomes sin and death in our lives.

Gracious God, I stand before you this day just as I am, a sinner in need of your grace and forgiveness. Thank you so much for the promise of your son, a source of hope and power for each and every day. Amen.

Monday, March 30

Isaiah 42:1-9

I am notorious for asking, "Where'd you hear that?" Call me skeptical, but in an age of information where anyone can pretend to speak with authority, I find myself needing to always be diligent about knowing from whom exactly the news, advice or information is coming. It wasn't very long ago that to know if something was credible it just had to be "published" or "in writing." But now, with great democratization of news and publishing comes an even greater need to pay attention to sources.

Thankfully this great announcement in the book of Isaiah is up front with its source: "Who says?" God says! God, the Lord, the Creator, the Heaven-Stretcher, the Earth-Spreader—not just some smooth-talking schmo, but the one with demonstrated prowess in showing compassion, credible power to not grow faint and the verified practice of bringing justice—a reliable source, that's who.

Credible one, silence our skeptic hearts, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Tuesday, March 31

Psalm 71:1-14

Refuge. A place of shelter, protection and safety. She came to us as a surprise. An American Staffordshire terrier; aka a pit bull. Her owner had to give her up and the dog needed a home. I called dog shelters and rescues, but she was turned away. This breed of dog comes with societal baggage.

Their tremendous loyalty and bold nature have been exploited by dog fighting rings. But in the hands of loving owners, and given the right amount of socialization, training and love, they are docile, affectionate family dogs. After a month of searching, I found a home for this dog. A refuge ... somewhere safe with someone good.

God is our refuge; safe and good. "You, O God are my strong refuge" (Psalm 71:7). We know Jesus as friend, the trustworthy compassionate presence. Our refuge, our rock, our redeemer. Sink into this in times of refuge. Count them as grace. Bless them as gift. Rejoice in that safe place.

God, our salvation, our vast, granite fortress: thank you for your tremendous loyalty, tenacity and bold nature to shelter and protect us. Your heart is our home. Amen.

Wednesday, April 1

Hebrews 12:1-3

At our congregation's annual meeting, we share, celebrate and confess the ministry of the previous year, we assess our current mission and ministry and we look forward to what is coming. We also do the less romantic work of the church. We argue about finances. Someone asks where all the young people are. Young people ask why there's no childcare during the meeting. Another suggests we sing "The Old Rugged Cross" each Sunday.

Paul's invitation to set aside sin and engage what is before us begins with the announcement that the church is not just those who show up, but witnesses: a great cloud of witnesses who don't just observe, but who visibly, vocally and publicly witness to the resurrection of Christ for the sake of the world. Our witnessing may not always be bold, beautiful, clear, inspiring and uplifting, but we're church together, a cloud of witnesses looking at what is set before us and trusting Christ.

God, we thank you for the cloud of clarity that the church brings through her witness to Christ. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 2

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I'm a relatively new parent, and as such I've been thinking with my wife about what patterns of family life we'll have together. Among others, one important part of being a family is how we'll eat together. There's ample research and opinions on the importance of what goes on at mealtimes for the well-being of children, parents and families. I'm no psychologist, dietician or expert parent, but I'm certain that although healthy conversation, manners and nutritious choices are all great norms to have around meals, the most important thing we can do at mealtime is ... eat.

Paul sums up Jesus' institution of this holy meal by saying, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Theology—that is why, how, who, where, when and understanding what—we eat, is for proclamation, that is, Christ himself, received in the bread and wine, for you. Eat up!

Nourishing Lord, let us eat and drink at your table, that we might be filled with Christ. Amen.

Good Friday, April 3

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

As a young teenager, I remember being exposed to matters of social justice in the world for the first impressionable time, while at a summer confirmation camp. Mixed in with meals, Bible studies and outdoor adventures were times when we would talk about hunger, violence in the world and environmental issues about our relationship with God's creation. It was a lot to take in and take on as one person—and a teenager at that.

The end of the week concluded with a blessing service, where I heard again the promise of my baptism, that I was God's child, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Although I didn't know it at the time, that week was full of law and gospel. I was shown my own sin and the sin of the world, and further shown the promise of Christ, as Isaiah puts it: "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Saving Lord, take our excuses for sin and give us exceptional faith in our Savior. Amen.

Saturday, April 4

John 21:1-18 and/or Hymn of Choice

The proclamation, "I know that my redeemer lives"—from Job and since given music for the church to sing—is to announce that in spite of all we don't know, we know that Christ is raised.

I've encountered several families who choose "I Know That My Redeemer Lives" as a hymn at a funeral for their loved ones. In the middle of all the unknowns of life, death, illness and loss, the church says what we do know: That Christ lives and grants breath. That Christ lives and with him we conquer death. That Christ prepares a place for us with our heavenly Father. And that Christ lives to bring us in safety into his kingdom.

Resurrecting Lord, give us a blessed assurance that as Christ is raised we too shall be. Amen.

Easter Sunday, April 5

Mark 16:1-8

Resurrection Day is both an interruption in the expected pattern of the world but one we should have seen coming all along. The opening word of ELW 367 is "Now." "Now all the vault of heaven resounds," as if the heavens have been waiting for what God promised. Now Christ is Lord. Now the forgiveness of sins. Now the resurrection of the body. Now the life everlasting. All are now fulfilled. Now Christ has triumphed. He is now living!

I've only recently noticed the second part of that first line, which reads, "in praise of love that still abounds." The love of God that was shown since God created the heavens and the earth—it remains. It is still here and furthermore, it abounds still. The resurrection of Christ is God's love still abounding.

God, give us new eyes to see what you are doing new, and what you have always been up to. Amen.

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