

Why Lent?

Lent is the season that begins 40 days (not counting Sundays) before Easter, and ends on Holy Saturday. This time – just over seven weeks – reminds us of the 40 days which Jesus spent in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan just before the beginning of His ministry (our reading for March 1 is from that time).

Today, Christians all over the world also use these 40 days to prepare ourselves for the grief of Christ's crucifixion and the joy of His resurrection, and by extension, our own death and resurrection. Many people choose to give up something (like chocolate, meat, or alcohol), live more mindfully, participate in special seasonal worship opportunities, etc., in order to deepen their faith and relationship with God.

This devotional – this small booklet with readings and reflections for every day – is another way to live mindfully and develop a deeper relationship with God during the season of Lent. This year, we focus on all forms of love, but a devotional can have several themes, or none at all and simply explore beloved or little-known scripture passages.

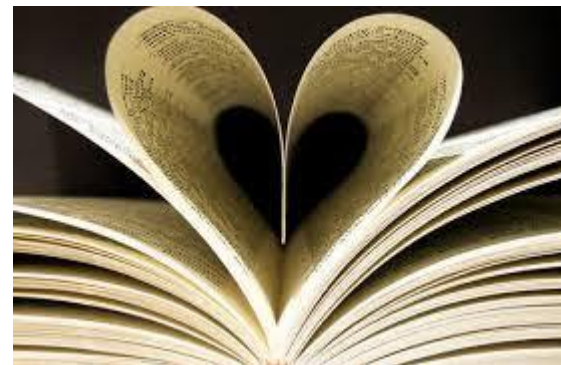
This devotional is brought to you by Healing Waters Parish, a parish of the Lutheran Church (ELCA).



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Daily Devotional for Lent 2020

Sunday, April 12

- EASTER SUNDAY -

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. (...) When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

- Mark 16:1, 4

Early in the morning the day after the sabbath, the women go to do their duty and embalm Jesus' body. Contact with the body would have made them ritually unclean for about a week, but again the women took it upon themselves to serve God and their teacher in ways that others may not have wanted to.

But what surprise when they lift their grieving eyes from the floor to ask the guards to roll aside the stone – the entrance to the tomb is already open! In Mark's Gospel the women flee, but in Matthew, for example, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary rush home excitedly, bursting at the seams with the news. What an amazing sensation after the desperation of the past few days!

This is the reason why Christianity exists. Without the resurrection there would be no Christian faith. How will you celebrate this day of overflowing, exuberant joy?

Some Suggestions for Using this Devotional

1. Center Yourself

Sit, doing nothing, for a few moments to give your mind time to quiet down. If you have not already, perhaps designate a spot in your home to which you will return every day for your devotion.

2. Read the verse(s) and reflection

Take your time! If you find it helpful, find the passage in your Bible, read the verse and/or reflection several times through, read it once and come back to it a few minutes later, or explore it in a different way that works for you. Some days may stir up more thoughts and emotions than others – that is okay.

3. Talk to God

After you explore the reading, take time to pray, write your own reflection (the lines at the bottom of each page may not be enough – feel free to write more!), discuss it with loved ones, or remain in silent reflection with God. Allow the passage to work in your mind and heart!

Wednesday, February 26

- ASH WEDNESDAY -

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

- 1 Corinthians 13:13

Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians only some 20 years after Jesus' ministry to the congregation in Corinth (close to Athens in Greece). He himself had established this congregation, and this letter is meant to address theological and ethical questions of the faithful.

This verse will be the only one taken not from the Gospels, because it tells the reason for all of our work as the Christian church – love. Fear and conformity can provide strong temporary ties, but unconditional love – for God, other Christians, the poor and oppressed, and even our enemies – is much stronger. Only love enables strong and lasting faith, hope, and trust, and lets us see mirrored in everyone around us the face of God.

In a time where divisions into 'us' and 'them' are the norm, choosing love (romantic love, but also love for family and friends, and self- and selfless love) is a radical act. Living love is also like a muscle – it needs practice. Where do you experience love, how do you give it, and where might you be able to practice?

Saturday, April 11

- HOLY SATURDAY -

It was the day of preparation, and the sabbath was beginning.

- Luke 23:54

The day after Jesus' crucifixion is emptiness. None of the Gospels write more than one sentence about the day after Jesus' death, but we can imagine what that day must have been like: the disciples huddling together, reeling from the trauma and shock of the rapid events of the past week and the loss of their beloved teacher. Of course, it was the sabbath, too, so there was nothing they could do to distract themselves.

When have you felt like that? When have you felt the vast expanse of emptiness in your soul? How did you sit with that feeling?

Friday, April 10

- GOOD FRIDAY -

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

- Matthew 27:55-56

It is significant that the majority of people mentioned following Jesus all the way to the crucifixion are women. Some men were there, of course, for example Joseph of Arimathea, who laid Jesus in the tomb, but the women witnessed it all: Jesus' birth, His ministry, and now His death.

Perhaps this is especially significant given women's connection with life and death in the Jewish faith: women are the ones bearing children – new life – but also enduring excruciating pain and often losing lots of blood – associated with death – in the process. Women know what life and death are like because they have accompanied each other through it, so it would only make sense for them to now accompany Jesus through the same process.

What do you find important to note in the scene on Golgatha? What draws your attention?

Thursday, February 27

- THE SECOND DAY OF LENT -

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

- Mark 1:17

The above verse is from Mark's telling of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He is gathering disciples – students – from many different walks of life, and the first ones He called were fishermen. Fishermen, of course, lived off nature – tending to the environment that sustained them, fishing only as much as they needed to sustain their community.

The closest equivalent in our geographical area, the Midwest of the United States, of fishermen in Jesus' geographical area (rural Palestine) would be our farmers. Farmers tend to the land, taking care of the soil, and sustaining their communities with food, feed crops, and the profits of their harvests.

Farmers as the first people Jesus called to be His disciples – how might that change our thought process? What specific, unique gifts do farmers bring to ministry? How can farmers lead in our ministry, and how can we support them as loving and beloved followers of Christ?

Friday, February 28

- THE THIRD DAY OF LENT -

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

- John 2:5

We talk much about the devotion and faith of Mary, the mother of Jesus, during Advent and the Christmas season, but then she mostly disappears from our readings and sermons until her son's ordeal during Holy Week. And yet, she is an active character throughout her son's ministry.

In the Gospel of John, for example, she brings to His attention that the groom's family had run out of wine for the party, and she is the person who encourages – no, pushes – Jesus to help out the newlyweds during the wedding in Cana. And when Jesus tries to get out of this situation, she simply turns to the servants, and walks away.

Mary is not the meek, quiet young woman we often make her out to be. She is intelligent, devoted to God and her son, and determined, and in the Gospel of John she is the reason why Jesus begins His ministry. Who are the lovingly persistent Marys in your life? How have they forced you out of your comfort zone to encounter your skills and capabilities?

Thursday, April 9

- MAUNDY THURSDAY -

But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."

- Luke 22:57

Here again, Simon Peter is so utterly human and relatable. He, the rock on which Jesus will build His church, and the “Satan” that yelled at Jesus for talking about His death, tries so desperately to stay loyal to Jesus – he follows his teacher all the way into the court, after all – but fails when it most matters: before sunrise, he denies knowing Jesus three times.

He would, of course, eventually overcome his fear (his learning curve was steep, but he became one of the church fathers and so dangerous to Rome that Nero had him crucified as well, only head-down), but for now, Simon Peter is terrified. Terrified of what might happen, terrified of doing the wrong thing, and, most importantly, terrified of death.

For many of us, that may sound and feel familiar. Unlike Jesus we cannot see into the future, we are constantly afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, and death is most definitely uncomfortable for us. Knowing that Peter was just as afraid as us, how might you handle your fears – would you do anything differently now?

Wednesday, April 8

- THE THIRTY-SEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

- Mark 14:34-35

These verses are Mark's slightly extended version of the same text from Matthew that we read on March 23. Now, however, we have finally arrived in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus will be arrested in just a few short hours – possibly even less. And here, again, we catch a glimpse of the vulnerable humanity even of the Son of God: He collapses on the ground and begs God to stop the madness, to save Him if at all possible.

And here, again, He relies on and takes comfort in the nearness of His students and friends. Of course, they struggle to be present with Him because sleep overwhelms them (which makes us wonder how late at night these events must have happened), but they are there.

When have you relied on friends to carry you through difficult times? How did it feel – did you find yourself rebelling against having to admit needing help, or were you able to accept support?

Saturday, February 29

- THE FOURTH DAY OF LENT -

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

- Luke 2:19

Continuing our discussion of Mary from yesterday, in the Gospel of Luke she is a pivotal character in Jesus' birth story; much more important than, for example, in the infancy narratives in the other three Gospels. Not only does she speak in Luke, but we also receive insight into her mind, her inner world.

Especially considering that we still have many more records on men's lives in ancient times than we do women's, Luke's move to include Mary's thoughts – however briefly – is significant. With one simple sentence we understand that Mary recognizes the impact of her son's birth, and she resolves to remember: the events leading up to her son's birth, His first few days, and the encounters she had as a result.

What are the memories you recall your mother, parents, and/or caregivers telling you, and if you have children, what are some memories that you shared with them? How did they impact you and your family?

Sunday, March 1

- THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT -

But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

- Matthew 4:4

After His baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus' first time preaching – speaking about the scriptures – happens during His 40 days in the wilderness, while He is being tested by Satan, the “tempter.”

We know, of course, that Jesus triumphs, but at the time, His success may not have been that certain: knowing at least the general trajectory of His future fate, who would not have hesitated when offered reign over all the world? And yet, Jesus uses the scriptures to strengthen His resolve, and prevail over Satan.

Jesus draws strength from the loving promise of the Torah – the first five books of our Bible, what Christians call the Pentateuch – that God will provide for us. When have you relied on that promise? How did it sustain you during your time of need? How have you leaned on the Bible to support others in their struggles?

Tuesday, April 7

- THE THIRTY-SIXTH DAY OF LENT -

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

- Mark 14:10-11

Christians are often torn about Judas Iscariot. For some he was a zealot who loved Jesus and simply thought that Jesus would not let Himself be arrested and would thus begin the revolution to overthrow the Romans. But for most (especially in our time), Judas was an evil traitor who did not care about God.

Of course, we know that Jesus loved and forgave him, possibly because He knew the pivotal, though sad, role that Judas would play (He allowed him to remain part of the 12 after all).

Unfortunately, especially considering Judas' eventual suicide, we will never know exactly what he was thinking that drove him to betray Jesus to the leadership in Jerusalem. What do you think? From the text (and the storytelling of the other Gospels), what do you gather about Judas, and how does that influence how you see him?

Monday, April 6

- THE THIRTY-FIFTH DAY OF LENT -

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

- John 12:1

Technically, this verse is from Jesus' visit to Lazarus in Bethany the night before he arrived in Jerusalem, but He returns to Bethany the night after His entrance in the city, so presumably He also stayed with Lazarus then. How excited Lazarus must have been to see Jesus again! After all, they had not seen each other since Jesus raised Lazarus; at least not that the text tells us.

Why would Jesus not stay in the city though? It would have been easier to get around, less walking, more time for His ministry,... But perhaps that is not what Jesus needed in those few days. After all, while Jerusalem is still celebrating, He knows that His suffering is getting closer with each passing day. Perhaps what He needed at that time was space. A few moments away, spent with friends, where He could take His mind off the fast approaching future, and leave behind His anxiety for a while.

Have you ever felt this way? What did you do to get away? Who or what place was your refuge? How did you feel after you returned?

Monday, March 2

- THE FIFTH DAY OF LENT -

And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

- Mark 2:4

The friends of the paralytic from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark are friends that we would all like to have – when their first plan to help their friend does not work out, they find another way to get Jesus' attention. And what an entrance they make!

These friends prove what it means to live philios – the love between friends. Regardless of how long this person had been a paralytic, we have many more stories of disabled people being completely alone, so their devotion to their friend truly is exemplary, and in a society that historically has been quite hostile to people with disabilities, we have lots to learn from them.

When and how have you experienced philios – the love between close friends? How did it affect you? Which friend have you fallen out of touch with that you would like to see again?

Tuesday, March 3

- THE SIXTH DAY OF LENT -

...and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

- Matthew 8:2-3

Leprosy – some of the most contagious, excruciating diseases known to humankind that we still haven't been able to eradicate even 2,000 years after Jesus' contemporaries struggled with it. This skin disease is so contagious that anyone diagnosed with leprosy was immediately excluded from the community and had to live in leper colonies outside of the city walls.

Particularly for a leper, human touch would have been an impossible luxury; no one would want to touch him for fear of infection. And yet, Jesus touches this man – a man so desperate that he comes to kneel before Jesus and beg Him for healing.

Even in our time, loving, gentle human touch has become something exclusively reserved for partners, spouses, and children up to a certain age. How might we reclaim the meaning of human touch, like Jesus did?

Sunday, April 5

- PALM SUNDAY -

So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the king of Israel!"

- John 12:13

After several years of teaching all over Palestine and several weeks of traveling toward Jerusalem, today Jesus finally arrives. And what a celebration it is! He may only be riding on a donkey, not a noble horse, but hundreds, possibly thousands of people are lining the streets, waiting to catch a glimpse of the man they have heard so much about. People bring palm branches to line the road with, and some even take off their cloaks to create a makeshift "red carpet."

Can you imagine how loud their shouts must have been? "Hosanna! Hosanna! King of Israel!" Joy and expectation hang in the air – this man is going to overthrow the oppressive Roman regime, "we will be free soon!"

We now know what will happen within just the next week, but at the moment all of Jerusalem is delirious with joy. When were you last overwhelmed with happiness and excitement? What was about to happen? Did the happiness last? What about your memories now – are they happy?

Saturday, April 4

- THE THIRTY-FOURTH DAY OF LENT -

The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

- Luke 8:1b-3

Luke's writing in these verses gives us significant insight into the workings of the early community of Christ's followers, and we learn that the group of disciples around Jesus was surprisingly inclusive – and very much relied on women and their resources!

Not only do we have Mary (or one of the many Marys), but we also learn of Joanna – who left her husband, a high official at Herod's court, to follow Jesus – and “many others” who supported Jesus and His students *out of their own resources*. We often see 1st century women as secondary to and reliant on men, but these few verses show us that that was not always the case: women were apparently much more independent.

When have the scriptures surprised you? What was the reading, and how did you find it surprising?

Wednesday, March 4

- THE SEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

- Mark 7:34-35

In a way, deaf- and muteness is an invisible disability: others will not be able to tell just by looking at you whether they need to communicate with you in sign language. Similarly, mental illnesses are invisible and require accommodations (though of course the two are not entirely comparable – one is an illness that can disappear or at least improve with therapy, the other is not, beyond using hearing aids, speech therapy, and possibly sign language).

Unlike Jesus, we cannot heal deaf- and muteness, and we cannot drive out the demons of mental illness with one simple word. We are not God, after all – as we are reminded particularly during Lent. Yet, we can build each of our human encounters on kindness, love, and flexibility.

Dreaming big, what could a world that is accommodating to all disabilities look like? How can we emulate the love of God in our encounters with people with disabilities, at work, at school, in the community, etc.?

Thursday, March 5

- THE EIGHTH DAY OF LENT -

*One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. (...)
Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."
- John 5:5, 8*

Forty years. Four decades were considered a lifetime, literally, by Jews of Jesus' time. And here is a man who has been sick for 38 years – almost his entire life. This man eventually meets Jesus, who asks him whether he wants to be healed. From his answer, it appears that the man interprets the question as asking why he is still there, at the shores of the lake that has healed so many others: "Because I can never get to the water fast enough."

We don't know whether this man had heard of Jesus before their meeting, but he answers Jesus, apparently without expecting anything in return. He has almost resigned himself to his situation – he still tries to get to the water when it is "stirred up," but aside from that, he has given up hoping.

Especially as we get older, chronic illnesses and ailments become more frequent, and in our humanity we often struggle to come to terms with our failure to heal. How have you experienced the love of God in such situations, whether you or someone else was affected?

Friday, April 3

- THE THIRTY-THIRD DAY OF LENT -

*"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."
- Mark 11:25*

Forgiving is hard work. It is even harder work for survivors of abuse or assault, for example, who are often told that they have to forgive to avoid ruining their abuser's life. Many survivors struggle to give themselves permission and allow themselves to feel anger at what was done to them, especially when their abuser refuses to ask for forgiveness, or sees nothing wrong with their actions.

How do we reconcile the two – our hard-earned anger and God's request that we forgive? Perhaps the solution lies in the timeline, and our response as congregations and communities to victims coming forward. The only one who can dictate the process of working through trauma and possibly arriving at forgiveness is the survivor – it is not our place to demand forgiveness for the sake of our own comfort at the expense of the survivor's safety and mental (and physical) health.

What does forgiveness mean to you personally? When have you encountered it in the past?

Thursday, April 2

- THE THIRTY-SECOND DAY OF LENT -

...For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

- Matthew 18:20

Community is crucial for Christians. Without a community of faith, what would we be? Of course, we can survive for a while on our own, like some hermits did in ancient times, but in the end, we will always need a community of other believers to encourage us, to study together, and to read scripture and share communion with.

And of course, in a time of shrinking congregations, it can seem like we may lose our communities of faith, and with them, the very basis of our faith. But Matthew reassures us: where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, *there God is*. If we can't get a church-filling congregation together, our families and friends are more than enough to celebrate Christ together.

What are your communities of faith? That doesn't just include your congregation; with who else do you share your faith? What does that look like? Where and when do you get together, what do you talk about, what do you share? How do these communities sustain you? Do you wish you had other or more communities?

Friday, March 6

- THE NINTH DAY OF LENT -

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

- John 20:27

Jesus' conversation with Thomas follows on the heels of Jesus' resurrection, and His first appearance to a handful of the disciples. Thomas, who had missed the first appearance, did not want to believe his friends' story of the resurrection until he saw Jesus with his own eyes, and Jesus indulges him.

Notice that Jesus does not reprimand Thomas for his uncertainty: He invites his student to touch His wounds, and then believe. Did it perhaps hurt Jesus to have these fresh wounds examined, however gently and carefully? Even if it did, however, He does not back away or flinch – His student's faith was more important to Him.

Realize, too, that Thomas could carry any of our names. Yes, all of us have doubted, and we have seen ourselves in Thomas' position. "Allow me to touch, Lord Jesus, so that I may have something to hold on to." And Jesus says, "come." We cannot touch Jesus like Thomas did, but there are other ways to sense God. What are yours?

Saturday, March 7

- THE TENTH DAY OF LENT -

She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. (...) He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

- Luke 8:44, 48

The healing of the bleeding woman is one of those stories that may sound strange to 21st century ears. In its 1st century context, though, its purpose becomes clearer: a bleeding woman (whether during menstruation or after childbirth) was considered ritually unclean, and a hemorrhage (which is often caused by pregnancy) prolonged the time she was unclean until she stopped bleeding – and this woman had been bleeding for 12 years!

The shame associated with her uncleanness must have driven her to approach Jesus in secret rather than from the front like the leper from Tuesday's reading, and yet, *Jesus notices*. The text says that "power had gone out" from Jesus when she touched Him, and He senses it and insists on finding her.

What do we keep hidden out of shame, what do we carry that could be healed by Jesus' love, with the words "your faith has made you well; go in peace"?

Wednesday, April 1

- THE THIRTY-FIRST DAY OF LENT -

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

- Matthew 3:16

It is significant that even though Jesus is the Son of God, He still insisted on being baptized by John. After all, He is the chosen one, on whom all of our salvation depends, and He could have just started His ministry simply under that claim and knowledge.

But there is something immensely powerful about the symbolism of dying to the old life by "drowning" in the waters of the river Jordan, and being "raised" to a new, different life when you resurface to catch your breath. Jesus must have recognized that symbolism too, and He left behind His old, "regular," life, and took on His new life as messiah and salvation for the world.

What stories have been told to you of your own baptism, and what stories do you remember from your siblings' or children's baptisms, or any others you have witnessed? How do you see the love of God in our ritual of baptism?

Tuesday, March 31

- THE THIRTIETH DAY OF LENT -

And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.

- Luke 9:16

The love of God, this overwhelming goodness that has given us eternal life, still often seems far away and elusive. It may even seem like something that we won't understand until we get to heaven. But here we have proof that God's love is much more immediate than that: the love and blessing of God is present in our sustenance, our food!

Of course, we celebrate the presence of God in the sacrament of Holy Communion once a month, but even more so, God is present in our everyday lives: in the water that we drink we are reminded of the water of our baptism, and in the food that we eat God reminds us of the entirety of creation, plants made to be cultivated and harvested, and animals made to be raised and used for everything they offer (sustainably, of course).

What is your favorite dish? Would you be willing to share the recipe? How might you remember the sustaining love of God when you prepare and eat it?

Sunday, March 8

- THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT -

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him..."

- John 3:17

This verse, immediately after John 3:16, For God so loved the world..., does not always receive the attention it deserves. Consider the impact of this statement: with Jesus' arrival we have moved from understanding God as judging us harshly, to a God of unconditional love.

And it makes sense, doesn't it? We human beings have a knack for judging ourselves and each other harshly, to the point of being cruel. And unless we are specifically being told otherwise, we project that human tendency onto God – we still often do it.

But here is Jesus, talking to Nicodemus – a man so afraid of being judged by others that he snuck out to see Jesus at night – and Jesus completely subverts his understanding of God. God doesn't want to judge the world, God wants to *save* it. And the only way to do that is through love. The Bible doesn't tell us, but what do you think Nicodemus did after meeting Jesus? What would you have done?

Monday, March 9

- THE ELEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

*The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'
There is no other commandment greater than these.'*
- Mark 12:31

For Mark's Jesus, there are two crucial commandments: love God, and love your neighbor. But who *is* our neighbor? The person or people living right next to us (or over or under, if we live in an apartment)? The people we make friends with, Mr. Rogers-style – “Won't you be my neighbor?” People we've never met, with whom we have 30-second interactions?

Truthfully, it does not even matter who it is – since we are all children of God, regardless of our life's trajectory and current situation, anyone we meet is our neighbor. And it is difficult – probably impossible – to always like everyone we meet.

But even when we cannot find a reason to like them, we can attempt to recognize them as a child of God. Whether they can do the same with us is not for us to judge, but we can influence ourselves. For example, think about a time you realized that someone was your neighbor – your kin. How did that feel? How did it change you?

Monday, March 30

- THE TWENTY-NINTH DAY OF LENT -

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”
- John 3:16

God loves the world in this way: He gave His only Son for our salvation. John 3:16 is probably one of the most beloved Bible verses of the entire book, and for good reason. This verse encapsulates what God has done simply because God loves creation and humanity.

And what a sacrifice this was! God had sacrificed before, of course, during the great flood of Noah's time when God wiped out most of creation for a “do-over,” but with Jesus, God made sure never to need a do-over again. What love must God have for humankind to send their child to the cross instead of us!

We will never be able to live up to this sacrifice – we are only human, we will continue to do bad things and make mistakes. But thank the Lord that we don't have to! The sacrifice was done for us, and we are saved simply because we believe. How will that knowledge and that freedom influence your life? How might you live and love differently, knowing that your salvation is already secure?

Sunday, March 29

- THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT -

He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep.

- John 11:34-35

This verse from the story of Jesus raising Lazarus is unusual in that Jesus becomes overwhelmed with His own emotions. Typically, the story we learn is of stoic, in-control Jesus who cares for other people without becoming too emotional, but here, *Jesus cries*. Lazarus and his sisters were – and are – His friends, and He acutely senses their pain and their grief and it becomes too much even for Him.

Culturally, almost 2,000 years later, we have made it almost impossible especially for our men to express emotions like that, to the point where many of us probably don't even notice anymore. Young boys are told to "man up," and crying in public is almost impossible for many.

And yet, we have an example in *Jesus* of a leader, someone with a great following of people who look up to Him, who permits Himself to express His emotions. What would happen if we followed His example also in this regard? If we raised our boys to recognize and allow their emotions without bullying, and permitted men of any age to express themselves – like Jesus did?

Tuesday, March 10

- THE TWELFTH DAY OF LENT -

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

- Luke 14:13-14

Jesus was an exemplar when it came to seeing, loving, and supporting those who had been written off by society: the poor, whether poor financially, in poor health, or poor in another way. He also encouraged His students to see past their conditioning, and witness to the life the disadvantaged were living. How much has changed?

We can probably say that we have a better average standard of living, 2,000 years later. And yet, over 20% of American children live below the poverty threshold. Almost 15% of college students are food insecure, meaning that they do not always know where their next meal is coming from. Almost 15% of seniors live in poverty, and single-parent households make up a third of all people in poverty.

Do you know what the landscape is like in Yellow Medicine and Lyon counties? Where are food shelves located, and are they well-stocked? How can we feed the poor?

Wednesday, March 11

- THE THIRTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,...

- Matthew 25:35

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” Perhaps the word “stranger” is a little misleading, but we can substitute any other word: Alien. Immigrant. Outsider. Pilgrim. Traveler. Refugee. How that changes the sound of this sentence!

Of course, in the upper Midwest, strangers are still not all that common – we are still the heartland of Scandinavian and German Lutheranism in the U.S. And yet, new faces are starting to appear. A thriving Muslim community in Willmar. Growing Spanish-speaking congregations in Hanley Falls and Clarkfield. A young and growing Somali community in Marshall.

We humans are conditioned, partially by evolution, to like continuity and the well-known. It is safe, unlike change and new developments. But Jesus specifically asks us to welcome the stranger – if we refuse, we refuse Him. How do we follow His call? How have you encountered others, and what did you discover?

Saturday, March 28

- THE TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF LENT -

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

- John 12:3

Mary is a fascinating figure in the Bible, not least because there are a number of different Marys and scholars are still trying to figure out whether some of them may actually have been the same person. But regardless of how many Marys we have, she is (or they are) active, loyal, and devout. Here, for example, Mary brings a pound of nard, an extremely rare, expensive essential oil, to Jesus, and anoints His feet. Just visualize that for a moment – she brings *an entire pound* of oil to anoint Jesus' feet, and wipe them with her hair.

Not only was anointing usually reserved for the forehead, but she was a woman who uncovered her hair in front of a group of men – no respectable woman of her time would usually uncover her hair in front of any man aside from her husband. Mary is the poster child of reckless abandon in her faith. Especially as Scandinavian and German Lutherans we usually tend to be more guarded, but what might happen if we followed Mary's example?

Friday, March 27

- THE TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

...and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven..."

- Matthew 18:3

This verse is from the same section in Matthew as our reading from March 14, but its message is slightly different. Not only are we to accept children, we are to become like them. But what does that even *mean*? How can we as adults become like children again?

For a start, I think we can slow down. There are plenty of wonderful stories of children dawdling for apparently no reason – until their caregivers got on their level and realized that the child was fascinated with the sunlight reflecting in rainbows off a car's tire rims, or a ladybug sprinting up a leaf.

Do you remember your childhood perspective? Many of us struggle with mobility issues so perhaps trying to sit on the ground again may not work, but do you remember being small and looking up at the world in wonder when everything was new and exciting? And what about your faith? Do you recall how you believed as a child? What was God like for you?

Thursday, March 12

- THE FOURTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

- Luke 10:33

In Jesus' time, Samaritans and Jews did not mesh well together. They lived in relative proximity in different parts of Palestine, but that was the extent of their relationship – they worshiped in different places, had different customs for eating and drinking, and typically relied on their own for help and support.

And along comes Jesus with the parable that we now call "The Good Samaritan." A man, beaten within inches of his life, is ignored by fellow Jews, who are afraid to become ritually unclean from touching his blood. But the Samaritan disregards social rules and crosses the boundaries of ethnicity and culture to care for a person he has never met before. It was most likely immediately apparent to any passerby, too, how extraordinary and strange this situation truly was.

We often like to think ourselves into the active role in any given Bible story – the Samaritan. But what if we are the person in the road? Who has stopped, and possibly disregarded rules, to care for us, and how does that feel?

Friday, March 13

- THE FIFTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

- John 9:2-3

Oh, how familiar this story sounds, doesn't it? Something is 'wrong' – someone's physical development did not follow the norm, for example, as in this case – and we immediately go into problem-solving mode. What went wrong? Who is at fault? What would it take to 'fix' them? How can we make them 'normal'?

And then there is Jesus. "Slow down, everyone!" No one did anything wrong, no one sinned for this person to be blind (substitute any other 'fault' or illness for blindness, it will be the same idea). God did this on purpose, so that God's works might be revealed.

Of course, Jesus heals the man's blindness, but He is also divine. We are not, and I think God did well not to give us the power to heal everything. Not to make the people with a disability more resilient, but to make the rest of us more flexible, accommodating, and loving. How can we show that love in our communities?

Thursday, March 26

- THE TWENTY-SIXTH DAY OF LENT -

They went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Mater, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?"

- Luke 8:24-25a

This section of the Gospel of Luke is quite fascinating, and actually somewhat funny. We have to remember here that the first disciples which Jesus called were fishermen – people who knew the sea and its temperament, and who would typically not have been surprised by a storm. And still, this storm hits and the boat starts filling up with water.

We do not know the exact timeline of the event, of course, but eventually the disciples admit that they are in over their heads, and wake Jesus for help. His response? He essentially quickly yells at the wind and the waves to calm down, and then turns around to the disciples and asks "where is your faith?"

Sometimes the situations that seem insurmountable to human beings are an easy fix for God. When have you found yourself in a situation like that? Once you trusted God, what happened? Was it an expected solution?

Wednesday, March 25

- THE TWENTY-FIFTH DAY OF LENT -

He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.

- Mark 5:41-42

The death of a child is traumatic. Fewer and fewer people in the 21st century have to suffer through such a dramatic loss, but surprisingly many parents in the Bible are not so lucky: Adam and Eve, Mary (and Joseph), the widow whose son Jesus calls back from the dead, and of course the parents of the preteen from today's verse (this is an incomplete list).

Still, with the exception of Abel, all of these children return to the living, if only for a time (as in Jesus' case). How are we to interpret these temporary deaths, especially considering the permanence of death in our lives? A thought process exclusively along the lines of, "they live on in our memory" seems... not entirely satisfactory here.

We may never conclusively be able to answer that question. But perhaps this is the central mystery of Lent: how do we make sense of death, and the fact that it still persists in the world? How would you answer?

Saturday, March 14

- THE SIXTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

"Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven..."

- Matthew 18:10

Children are often a contentious topic, not least when it comes to children in worship. It is often difficult to strike the balance between welcoming children in church (including their noise and energy), and retaining well-loved elements of quiet, contemplative services.

And yet, Jesus is very clear in His words here: if we want to be followers of Christ, we don't have a choice but to accept children. Why? Because these children's guardian angels are closest to God in heaven. And isn't that an amazing picture? Little guardian angels whizzing around God's face in heaven (drawing, of course, on the traditional picture of angels as adorable, mischievous toddlers)? Their infectious laughter reverberating around God's throne?

It is not easy to engage children in worship, particularly when taking into account everything that demands their time and energy outside of church. How can we be better? Starting with inviting our own families when they are in town, what can we do for children in worship?

Sunday, March 15

- THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT -

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans)"

- John 4:9

Various interpretations of the Samaritan woman's question exist, ranging from resentment and skepticism to simple curiosity and wonder. Our interpretation, of course, varies with each, but her surprise and wonder seem most intriguing...

In a way, Jesus interrupts her routine – she only wanted to draw water from the well, but there Jesus was, a Jewish man, not just sitting by a well owned by Samaritans, but asking for water. We don't know exactly what she was about to do, of course (drawing water from a deep well is quite an exertion, so she most likely did not just come for a drink), but she must have expected to get water and immediately return home.

But God has this habit of interrupting our routines and upending plans we have made - suddenly pulling our attention to the warm rain in the summer, or making us understand that a relationship or job is not a good fit. When have you experienced God in this way? What happened?

Tuesday, March 24

- THE TWENTY-FOURTH DAY OF LENT -

But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

- Mark 8:33

This text is part of a fascinating section in which Simon Peter is the first disciple to recognize Jesus as the messiah (the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus praising Simon Peter, "you will be the rock on which I will build my church"). On the same breath, however, Jesus foresees His own death. Simon Peter, of course, reprimands Jesus, and we read Jesus' response above.

Simon Peter's shock at Jesus' musings about death is natural – many of us would have responded in the same way. Why does Jesus get angry with him? Perhaps human psychology provides the clue: Jesus knows about His future, and has decided to share His knowledge (and possibly His anxiety) with His students. Simon Peter, taken by surprise, also reacts out of fear and uncertainty, and the two exacerbate each other – culminating in Jesus' outburst.

Have you been in a vicious cycle like Jesus and Simon Peter's before? What happened? How did you feel, and were you able to resolve the situation?

Monday, March 23

- THE TWENTY-THIRD DAY OF LENT -

He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me."

- Matthew 26:37-38

We are just over half-way through Lent, and today's reading looks ahead to the evening of Jesus' arrest. This scene clearly illuminates Jesus' human side, too: unlike His disciples, He knows what is waiting for Him at the end of the night, and He is anxious and afraid. He has seen and felt human pain and despair, and it has affected Him deeply.

And in this situation, in the garden of Gethsemane, He reaches out to others. Where strangers have reached out to Him for love and support over the past few years of His ministry, He now needs reassurance, kindness, and love. How extraordinary that even the Son of God should be in need of kinship and trusted friends!

How do we do asking for help when we are anxious, pained, sad, or overwhelmed? How do *you* do reaching out when you are in need, or when you sense that someone else is? What do you do to practice "emotional first aid" on yourself, and what do you wish you could or would do?

Monday, March 16

- THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. (...) When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

- Luke 7:2, 9

Centuriones – lower officers in the Roman army supervising 100 soldiers – play a considerable part in Jesus' story, not least by being the first to announce Jesus' identity after His death (Matthew 27:54). Here, the centurion also breaks social rules to save his beloved servant: he, a Roman citizen, believes that Jesus, a Jew, is capable and willing to heal the sick.

And Jesus recognizes and lifts up this exemplary faith. We know, of course, that many of Jesus' interactions would fall into the "unexpected" category, but for the people listening in that moment, Jesus' exclamation must have stung.

Of course, we all strive to be like the centurion – trusting Christ even when it is uncomfortable. But on the way, we may be more like the Israelites that Jesus laments. Explore a time when this happened to you:

Tuesday, March 17

- THE EIGHTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

*Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,'
or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?'*

- Mark 2:9

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' healing of the paralytic is the first instance in which He defends His ability to heal and forgive: here for the first time He takes responsibility for a task that was formerly reserved for God alone, and not possible to be done by human beings. Of course, in this situation He does both – He forgives the paralytic's sins, and later heals him: "stand up, take your mat, and go to your home."

Of course, an experience like this is difficult to translate to the 21st century. But what we do know is that for God, forgiving sins is as easy as helping someone stand up and walk home. God loves humankind so much that forgiving our failures is a given, for God, a "no-brainer."

The last time you knew you did something wrong, how did you feel about receiving forgiveness? Would it be difficult? Were you unsure of whether you would receive it? How do you feel about the situation now, knowing that forgiving God's creation is so easy for God?

Sunday, March 22

- THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT -

*Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened
his eyes.*

- John 9:14

Jesus has this tendency to offer miracles and healing on the sabbath – a move that most definitely upset the religious leadership. So here, too: Jesus encounters a blind person, and heals him on the sabbath day. Perhaps this is a direct attempt to push the Pharisees' buttons, but, more likely, perhaps these actions simply betray how Jesus feels about His work healing people: it is not actually "work."

If it is not work, however, what is it? In our Lutheran language, we would probably say that healing and miracles are Jesus' "calling" – the task that is one of the main purposes of His life. Wouldn't it be nice if everyone had a single, simple calling like that? Many people might be a lot happier...

That is not how it works for many of us, though. We may actually have multiple skills that we enjoy and have grown to excel at, but we may not be able or want to make that our life's work; instead we have a job that pays the bills and fulfill our calling on the side. What does your life look like in that regard? What do you wish it looked like?

Saturday, March 21

- THE TWENTY-SECOND DAY OF LENT -

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

- Luke 10:41-42

This section is dangerous for its possible interpretations: Martha is entirely wrong in her work serving food; the only correct way to follow Jesus is to do nothing else – only listen and contemplate. That is what the language of this section seems to imply, of course; Mary has chosen “better,” Martha is “distracted.” Poor Martha, that must have stung...

However, what if Jesus simply encouraged Martha? What if Martha was serving everyone out of the desperate feeling that she had no other choice, and Jesus encouraged her to find a way to serve God instead, whether in her household chores, in listening like Mary, or in another way?

For us, that would mean that yes, there is only one way – following Christ. But *how* we do that, how we serve God, is up to us and dependent on our personal God-given gifts, skills, and talents. What do you think? Have you been able to serve God in *your* way? If not, what has kept you?

Wednesday, March 18

- THE NINETEENTH DAY OF LENT -

Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath;...

- Mark 2:27

The above sentence was Jesus’ famous one-liner after being accused of breaking the sabbath by the religious leadership – for picking some heads of grain to eat while on their journey. To us, that may seem like a minor thing over which to fight, but Jewish law is strict regarding actions permissible on the sabbath.

That is the reason why the Pharisees, highly esteemed men who had studied the Jewish scriptures and law their entire lives, were shocked, and understandably so. Yet, Jesus holds against them: would they rather His students go hungry, or could they allow for them to eat something that they had plucked, but not processed (into flour or dough), on the sabbath?

Humankind has not lost its tendency toward literalism, either – particularly when it comes to interpreting scriptures and the law, but truthfully in all areas of life. Reflect on the sabbath – the rest day – for example: what do you like to do on the sabbath, and could it possibly be counted as work? How would you feel about giving it up?

Thursday, March 19

- THE TWENTIETH DAY OF LENT -

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

- Luke 19:7

“He has gone to be the guest of one who is a *sinner*.” We can virtually feel the resentment and disgust in their voices as Jesus’ opponents watch Him invite Himself to the tax collector Zacchaeus’ home. Rather than eating dinner with them, the people who had dedicated their entire lives to following the law, Jesus decided to visit a tax collector – a man who had sold out his moral compass to the Roman empire in order to enrich himself.

But Jesus does not turn around or go back on His word. He shares a meal with Zacchaeus and teaches onlookers perhaps the most important lesson: we can follow the rules all we want; if we resent or exclude others all of our previous devotion and rule-following will not be able to save us. Remember, the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves!

And yet, resentment, jealousy, and the need to compare ourselves to others is a quasi-innate human characteristic, and the only antidote God’s forgiveness. What does it usually take for you to ask for His mercy?

Friday, March 20

- THE TWENTY-FIRST DAY OF LENT -

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

- Matthew 21:12

When we read this text in worship we often “sanitize” the radical action of this section by reading it very calmly. But Jesus did not gently ask sellers to leave: He entered the temple (He sprinted up the stairs?), and chased out the people who were selling *and their customers*, He literally flipped tables and sent coins flying in every direction, and quite possibly He even set the doves free. This was enormous commotion! His disciples must have been shocked!

When something is not right, how do *we* react? When unarmed Black men die on our streets, when we send more and more young men and women to maimed and killed in endless wars, when religiously motivated hate crimes are on the rise, when the suicide rate among our farmers skyrockets, how do we react? Would we have joined Jesus in His quest for justice? Where do you see yourself in our 21st century landscape?
