



People of the Passion

LENT 2019



DEVOTIONS

As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's messages. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

THE FIRST PEOPLE OF THE PASSION—ADAM AND EVE

Wednesday, March 6, 2019

TEXT: *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 1 Corinthians 15:22*

In old paintings of the crucifixion you will often see a human skull, right at the base of Jesus' cross. Ask a museum guide and they will tell you that the skull is supposed to be Adam's skull. It is a reminder of when human beings first disobeyed God and fell into evil. It is a reminder of the time when death first became a part of the human experience.

Surely Adam and Eve weren't thinking of Jesus' cross when they first reached out to pick the forbidden fruit. They were looking at a tree in paradise—one that was beautiful, green, full of fruit, lovely to the eye and tempting to the taste. They could not have imagined the very different tree they were bringing about by their rebellion against God.

That tree would stand at Calvary, not in Eden. Instead of beauty, there would be horror; instead of green leaves, dry, rough wood. It made no appeal to the eye or taste; people turned from it in fear and disgust. And what hung on its branches was the dying Son of God.

Adam and Eve didn't foresee Jesus' cross—but God did. Walking in the garden that evening, He called out to His lost children. "Adam, where are you?" He knew what had happened. Still He heard their half-hearted confession, warned them of the consequences to come, and covered their shame—all the while knowing that the cross lay in His future. God Himself would rescue His sinful children at the cost of the life of His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are also many old paintings of Jesus visiting hell, triumphant after breaking the power of the devil by His death on the cross. The artists always show Him leading humanity out of the gates of hell to freedom. If you look closely, you will see that He is shown leading Adam and Eve first of all, in memory of His first Gospel promise in Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

THE PRAYER: *Lord, thank You for saving us through Your death on the tree of the cross. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever planted a tree? Tell about it.

Have you ever loved someone who made a bad choice? How did you try to help?

What does it mean to you, knowing that God foresaw the cross?

OF ONE HEART AND MIND

Thursday, March 7, 2019

TEXT: *Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." Genesis 22:8*

Imagine what it must have been like for Isaac. His father, obviously upset, organizes a three-day trip and says, "We're going to go offer a sacrifice." Nothing more. No information about the who, what or why of the sacrifice—and where is the lamb, anyway? When Isaac asks, he gets only the mysterious "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

At some point Isaac must have figured it out. Was it when his father loaded him up with the wood for the sacrifice—probably more than Isaac expected for a small lamb? Or maybe it was when his father took out the rope and began to bind him. Did he panic? I would have.

But Isaac submitted. Surely he could have overpowered his dad and escaped—after all, Abraham was well over a hundred years old, and Isaac was a strong young man capable of carrying large loads of wood, even up a mountain. He could have escaped. But he chose not to. He allowed his father to bind him without putting up a fight. He even seems to have lain down on that altar himself—it's not likely that Abraham alone could have lifted him. However strange it seems, Isaac and Abraham were of one heart when it came to this sacrifice.

Jesus, too, was of one heart and mind with His Father when it came to the sacrifice of the cross. As a human being, He knew the full effect of terror and dread. He had the option of escape, just as Isaac did—as He told Peter, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53) But Jesus refused to take it—because He loved us.

There was no last minute reprieve for Jesus. He suffered, He died, and was buried. But the hope that Abraham had—that his son would be resurrected—came true for Jesus (Hebrews 11:9). Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again. And because of Him, we too have the hope of resurrection and everlasting life.

THE PRAYER: *Lord Jesus, thank You that You were of one mind with the Father when it came to saving us. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What are you most afraid of?

Have you ever done something you were afraid to do because you loved and trusted the one asking you to do it? If so, what?

Does it make a difference for you, to know that Jesus voluntarily lay down His life for you—that He was not forced? How?

PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

Friday, March 8, 2019

TEXT: *knowing that you were ransomed ... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. 1 Peter 1:18-19*

What must it have been like to be an Israelite father on that first Passover night? The Passover lamb had just been slaughtered; now each father had to complete the strange job Moses had given them. With the smell of roast lamb in the air, each man dipped a stalk of hyssop into a basin of lamb's blood and used it to smear blood on the doorframe of His house. One smear for the lintel across the top; one for each doorpost, on the left and the right. As night came on, the door was shut; no one would go out till the morning.

It was a strange thing Moses had them do. No doubt their Egyptian neighbors asked them what they were up to, smearing blood all over the place. Maybe they even made fun of them. But no man would dare disobey God's word, because Moses warned them, "The Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you" (Exodus 12:23).

The blood of the lamb was the safety for their children. Because the lamb's blood was shed, no Israelite child would lose his life in the final plague of Egypt. They would be protected, safe at home. The lamb died, and the children lived.

It's like that for us too, isn't it? Our lamb is Jesus, the Lamb of God (as John the Baptist called Him). He willingly lay down His life for us so that we would be saved from the power of death and evil. His blood marks us as God's own family. Nothing, not an angel of death, not even the devil himself, can destroy God's children. Jesus' blood marks the door to our hearts.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, thank You for saving us through Your blood. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What seemingly odd things do you do to protect yourself and your family?

When you think of blood, what else do you think of—good or bad?

The blood of Jesus marks the door to our hearts. Does carrying that thought impact what you let go through that door?

A GLIMPSE OF THE FUTURE

Saturday, March 9, 2019

TEXT: *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? Psalm 22:1*

I wonder what it was like for King David, writing his songs to honor the Lord, and knowing that God was speaking through him. What did he think when God inspired him to write Psalm 22? It speaks very clearly of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. David must have wondered what the Holy Spirit was referring to.

To be sure, David himself had some experience with feeling forsaken. "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest" (Psalm 22:1-2). David could have cried out those words at any time while he was hiding in the wilderness, staying away from King Saul who wanted to kill him.

Or this part: "All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; 'He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!'" (Psalm 22:7-8) It's a very good description of what happened to David when his son Absalom rebelled against him and David had to leave the capital city. But it fits even better as a description of what people said when Jesus hung on the cross, mocked by the very people he came to save.

But as David continued to write, there could be no confusion about what came next. "For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:16-18). None of that ever happened to David—no piercing, no being stretched out on the cross as a bony skeleton of a man, no gambling for his clothes. That was clearly about Jesus, David's greater Son. Did David tremble when he wrote those words?

I don't know. It's a mystery. But it's a mystery that reveals Jesus' great and everlasting love for all of us for whom he suffered—for David, for you, and for all of us.

THE PRAYER: *When I suffer, Lord, be with me and keep hold of me. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Did you ever pass on a message you didn't understand to someone else?

How does the way you pray change when you are suffering? Give examples, if you are willing.

When have you felt forsaken by God?

LOVING ATTENTION

Sunday, March 10, 2019

TEXT: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. Colossians 1:15*

Have you ever tried to draw or paint another person? If you have, you know how carefully you look at him or her; you notice the texture of his skin, all the subtle colors in her hair; you gaze, you fill up your eyes with the way the person walks and moves and sits. It's rather like love. You notice and pay attention to everything.

Isaiah the prophet did this for Jesus. The Holy Spirit helped him to know, hundreds of years in advance, exactly what Jesus would be like when He came. And Isaiah painted His portrait, lovingly and exactly, in chapter 53 of the book of Isaiah.

How did he show us Jesus? He saw that Jesus would be humble, with nothing in His appearance to attract us. He would be a man well-acquainted with sorrow and grief, someone marked by loss. More than that, He would be familiar with rejection—and that by the very people He came to save. Jesus would be misunderstood and mistreated and finally killed. And He would rise again.

Isaiah had his eyes fixed on Jesus. Jesus was the heart of what he wanted to know, of what he intended to pass on to everyone who would listen. And this is true for us too, isn't it? Jesus is the one we love, the one we watch with all our hearts. And that's because He has loved us first.

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). It's easy to feel forgotten by God when bad things happen. But Isaiah shows us that never, for a single moment, has the Lord turned His attention away from us. He not only knows our griefs, He has carried them. Our suffering has become His own—because He loves us.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, Your love and mercy shine from You. Draw us closer to You every day. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When have you studied someone intensely because you loved him or her?

Which verse in Isaiah's description of Jesus (Isaiah 53) means the most to you, and why?

Since Jesus is the image of the invisible God, what does that tell you about God's personality? About His attitude toward you?

ONLY JESUS

Monday, March 11, 2019

TEXT: *And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Matthew 17:8*

As Moses and Elijah stood on that mountaintop with Jesus, they stood for the whole Old Testament—the Law and the Prophets combined. And they were talking to Jesus about His “departure,” as Luke calls it—his death, which would shortly happen at Jerusalem. Both men had spent their lives pointing people to the one true God. Now, hundreds of years after their earthly lives, they came one last time to serve as witnesses to the Savior promised for so many years throughout the Old Testament.

We don’t know how Peter, James and John recognized them for who they were. Surely they weren’t wearing name tags! And yet they did recognize them—and Peter was foolish enough to propose building three shelters, one for each of them—Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

Poor silly Peter! It sounds like he thought he was honoring Jesus by placing Him on the same level with those ancient heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah. He did not yet recognize that, great as the two visitors were, Jesus was and is someone even greater—God’s own Son. God the Father corrected that mistake immediately: “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!” And after that, they saw Jesus only.

Moses and Elijah would be the first to tell us—keep your eyes on Jesus. Jesus is the one who matters—not any prophet or lawgiver, not any pastor or church leader, however great and holy they may be. What we see in such people is a shadow, a reflection—Jesus’ own light shining through them. For that we honor and love our leaders. But Jesus has our hearts—because He is the Son of God, who loved us, and gave Himself for us. No one could love us more.

THE PRAYER: *Father, keep our eyes focused on Your Son, Jesus. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever been tempted to honor someone more highly than you ought?

Who is a person you see Jesus’ light shining through?

What are aspects of your life that you reserve for God alone?

THINKING OF DEATH

Tuesday, March 12, 2019

TEXT: *Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip ... and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." John 12:20-21*

It seems like a strange disconnect. Some foreigners from Greece ask to meet Jesus, and Jesus immediately starts talking about dying. After several minutes of increasingly scary talk, Jesus "departed and hid Himself from them" (John 12:36). It looks like the Greeks missed their chance—Jesus didn't even answer their request!

Or did he? Something about the Greeks touched off these words: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:23-24). The Greeks were foreigners—non-Jews. They were not the first foreigners Jesus ever met, but they were apparently the first who actively sought Him out with the goal of hearing Him and possibly coming to faith in Him. They were, in fact, the first tiny trickle of the great wave of Gentile converts who would begin to come into the Christian faith, several years later.

The tide was turning. Jesus had said: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). But now other sheep were starting to come to Him, the rest of the human family. It was time for Jesus' church to take over and to "make disciples of all nations" as He would command them after His resurrection (Matthew 28:19). No wonder His thoughts turned to His death!

We don't know what happened to these Greeks after Jesus left and hid Himself. Possibly they had to make do with the disciples to answer their questions. And that's okay. Because that's exactly what God does with us today, whether Jew or Gentile. We learn about Jesus through the Holy Spirit speaking through Jesus' followers. And that continues until the day we do indeed meet Jesus Himself, face to face.

THE PRAYER: *Dear God, make me a good witness to Jesus my Savior. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What are the signs you see that tell you that summer is almost over?

When you think about your own death or that of someone you love, how do you lean on God for help?

How did you come to know Jesus your Savior? Which of His followers helped you in this?

A PLACE FOR THOMAS

Wednesday, March 13, 2019

TEXT: *[Jesus] said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ... So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." John 11:11, 16*

I love Thomas. Here's Jesus saying incomprehensible stuff about Lazarus being asleep—no, dead—wait, what exactly do You mean, Jesus? And why are You planning to go back to Judea, where everybody wants to kill You? Thomas doesn't understand it at all, and he's as gloomy as Eeyore about Jesus' decisions—but he's still loyal: "Fine, let's go with Jesus, then. If nothing else, at least we can die with Him."

Steady, sober, faithful. It's not the worst attitude in the world. Thomas is sticking with Jesus. And if he grumps along the way, well, that's human, isn't it?

This is what my faith is like a lot of the time, and maybe that's true for you, too. Plenty of endurance, a dogged determination to keep on with Jesus—but not much imagination, really. Not much excitement and joy. A lot of what someone called "dailyness."

But that's okay. Because every so often Jesus astonishes us, as He did Thomas. Lazarus is raised from the dead, and a funeral becomes a party. Jesus Himself rises from the dead, and the first thing He says to us of little faith is "Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe" (John 20:27).

All of us, even the gloomiest, will one day see Jesus face to face. But until we have that joy, we have His own presence with us—his Holy Spirit living in us—and our daily faith gets transformed, day after day, by His amazing love. We belong to Jesus, and there is a place for us at His side—even for earnest, unimaginative Thomas, even for you. Even for me.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, keep me with You, keep me faithful, even when I can't see anything good to look forward to. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do you do when you're down in the dumps?

How's your life with the Lord right now—dull, exciting, painful?

Tell about a time when God was with you though you couldn't recognize it at the moment.

BETTER THAN WE DARE TO HOPE

Thursday, March 14, 2019

TEXT: *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39*

I love the conversation between Martha and Jesus on the day He comes to her home late after her brother has already died. It starts with what sounds like blame—“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” Yet Martha can’t resist adding a hint for a favor so outrageous she won’t ask it directly: “Even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give You.”

Jesus is no fool. He knows what she’s asking, and He responds directly: “Your brother will rise again.” Careful, cautious Martha isn’t sure what she’s hearing: “I know that He will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Is that what You mean, Jesus? Are You just offering me a religious platitude about hope in the distant future, far, far away? Or are You offering me something real and firm, right now?

Martha is afraid to hope—and yet she does. She is afraid to ask for what she wants—and yet she asks, though indirectly. Martha is just like us, isn’t she? We have our hopes and worries. We have our fears and doubts. And we approach God, hoping, praying—nervous, perhaps, about asking at all.

Jesus settles Martha’s concern directly. It doesn’t matter whether the resurrection is today or in the far distant future; Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25-26). The resurrection from the dead is a person, who is right here walking and talking to you. It is not a distant hope. It is as close as Jesus Himself.

Those who have died in the Lord are with Christ, right now (Philippians 1:23). They are not lost or far away. They are living even now in the care of the one who rose from the dead Himself (Luke 20:38). Our shepherd Jesus knows the way through death. None of His people will be left behind in death. He has promised to share His victory and life with us all.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, help us to hope in You when we face death. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When have you asked God for a favor?

What important thing are you praying and hoping for right now?

How does it help you to know that Jesus himself is our resurrection, and will shepherd us through death?

WHY?

Friday, March 15, 2019

TEXT: *Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” John 11:21*

I wonder what Lazarus thought of it. He was very ill—his sisters were worried, and they sent word to Jesus so He could come quickly and heal him. Then they waited. And waited.

I can just see Martha leaning out the door of her house, looking down the road. Why didn't Jesus come?

John tells us, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was” (John 11:5-6). A strange way to show love! You love someone, so you avoid helping them right away? What kind of a God is that?

And yet it's true, isn't it? We have a God like that. We see people who have been in the Christian faith for years—people whose characters have been shaped by Jesus, who are clearly walking closely with Him—and they are the ones whose prayers seem to go unanswered. They suffer. They grieve. They go through loss. Why?

We don't have the answers we want. But in the case of Lazarus, at least, we have a clue: Jesus' words, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (John 11:4).

Jesus must have really trusted Lazarus and his family. What a test of faith they went through! Perhaps this is why John makes a point of saying that Jesus loved them. You don't place that kind of burden on anybody but those you know and love with all your heart. Those you are close to—they are the ones you ask the most of. You trust them. You have the hope that they will trust you.

We know the end of this story—that Jesus raised Lazarus, and many came to faith because of him. We don't often see the result of the suffering in our own lives. But like Lazarus, we trust that Jesus cares, and is going to use it for good. Somehow. Some time. Some way. Because He loves us.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, we often don't understand what You are doing or why. Help us to trust in You and to endure the hard times. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When did you do something your loved ones couldn't understand?

When have your prayers seemed to go unanswered?

When you suffer, how do you keep trusting in Jesus?

FOR THE LORD

Saturday, March 16, 2019

TEXT: *And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" And they said, "The Lord has need of it." Luke 19:33-34*

"The Lord has need of it." What a beautiful message Jesus sent to the donkey's owner that first Palm Sunday! No wonder the donkey's owner let the disciples take it immediately. Wouldn't you, if Jesus sent a message like that? What an honor to do anything for Him!

When I was a teenager, I was the one who wound up doing most of the dishes for our church's soup suppers during Lent. You'd find me in the kitchen, up to my armpits in suds—washing box after box of dusty glass communion cups first, and then stack upon stack of white china bowls as they came in from the tables. And the spoons! (We had a pretty high attendance.)

Doing dishes is not my favorite thing. Ask my family if you doubt it. But this time was different—because it was for the Lord. "The Lord has need of it." Well, if you put it that way, how can I refuse? Why would I want to?

Now that I'm older, I hear that voice more clearly—as I suspect you do too. Care for a sick child? Take the car in for repairs? Help somebody with their taxes? "The Lord has need of it." Yes, indeed, He does, because "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40).

THE PRAYER: *Lord, help me to see and recognize the opportunities You give me to serve You and Your people. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is a small thing you do for the Lord's sake, to serve Him?

What is the strangest thing you can recall doing for His sake?

What are some specific ways the Lord has served you—besides His dying and rising again for you?

HARDER THAN A STONE

Sunday, March 17, 2019

TEXT: *And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." Luke 19:39-40*

Crowds of people had come to Jerusalem during Passover. When they heard Jesus was coming, they took palm branches and went out to meet Him. Others cut branches from the trees in the fields. They lay their cloaks in the road for Jesus' donkey to walk over. And they cried out, "Hosanna! "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" What a time to celebrate!

But not everyone was happy. There were religious leaders in the crowd who said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples."

Why? Did it seem uppity to them—like Jesus was claiming too much? After all, these words were things people would say to the Messiah. Perhaps they thought Jesus should be modest and quiet, pretending to be less than He really was, refusing to accept the praise that was rightfully His.

Jesus wasn't having it. He answered, "I tell you, if they were quiet, the very stones would cry out!" Their joy needed to be expressed.

The disciples were doing what came naturally—praising God for His great works. But not the religious leaders. Their hearts were even harder than the rocks Jesus spoke of. They couldn't see or believe the wonderful thing God was doing right in front of their noses. What a shame!

But their hearts didn't have to stay this way. Long ago God promised, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). This is what God has done for all of us who believe in Jesus. He has shown us such great saving love that now even our once stony hearts cry out to Jesus, "Hosanna!"

THE PRAYER: *Lord, soften my heart and keep it responding to You with love and praise. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do you do when you feel joyful?

Remember a time when you praised God, openly or quietly. What event caused that?

When your own heart is feeling hard, how do you seek help?

WHAT SHE COULD

Monday, March 18, 2019

TEXT: *"She has done what she could ..."* Mark 14:8

Six days before Passover, Mary and Martha gave a dinner party in honor of Jesus at the home of Simon the leper. This wasn't long after Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead, and no doubt their hearts were full of thankfulness and joy. Mary was so moved that she took the opportunity to pour extremely expensive perfumed ointment over Jesus' head and feet.

This was a customary way of honoring an important guest, but she carried it to an extreme! And several of the guests there criticized her. But Jesus defended her. He said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to Me. ... She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for burial" (Mark 14:6, 8).

That was a strange and jarring thing to say! I doubt Mary was consciously thinking of Jesus' burial at the moment when she poured the ointment on Him. And yet Jesus took her action that way. He knew, if nobody else did, that within the week He would be dead—and His burial would be a hasty one, with no time for much preparation. "She has done what she could"—and Christians around the world still honor her for doing what we could not, and showing that love to Jesus.

But it didn't end there. After Mary did what she could, Jesus did what HE could—which was to willingly be arrested, suffer, and die, all to save us from everlasting death and damnation. He did what He could for the same reason as Mary—overwhelming love. And what He did was effective! For now that He has risen from the dead, He gives everyone who believes in Him everlasting life and joy. He did what He could—and that is enough for us forever.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord, for doing what You alone could do to save us and make us Your own. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What particular gifts, skills, or advantages do you have that you use to serve the Lord?

Think of someone you know who did what they could for the love of Jesus. What is that person's story?

What one small thing will you do today for love of God?

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Tuesday, March 19, 2019

TEXT: *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? I Corinthians 3:16*

What happens when “business as usual” is sin? Think of the merchants and the money changers, sitting there comfortably in the large temple court, doing business just as they had done every day for years. Listen to the lambs bleating and the pigeons calling from their cages. Don't breathe too deeply—the smell is pretty bad. Over in the corner, men are arguing over the exchange of ordinary money for the kind used in the temple. Who is cheating whom?

It was business as usual—a strange business, we might think, to be going on in the very temple of God. Oh, it was convenient, all right—for the pilgrims who needed to buy sacrifices to offer, and even more so for the temple authorities who made money from the market. Very convenient indeed—except for the worshippers who were supposed to be there. For this marketplace was the Court of the Gentiles, and the only place where anyone, even a non-Jewish foreigner, was welcome to come and pray to the God of Israel. If they could concentrate, of course!

Into this unholy mess comes Jesus, eyes flashing, hands busy braiding a whip. “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17). Bang! and He tips over the tables, and all that money falls into the dirt. Crash! and the chairs of the bird-sellers go flying. “Get these things out of here!” He says.

Very shortly a different kind of business was going on. Worshippers were using the place for prayer. Blind and lame people came to Jesus in the temple, and He healed them. Jesus taught anyone who would listen about the kingdom of God. And the little children were singing, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matthew 21:15)

What is “business as usual” in your own heart? It is the temple of God—has anything crept in that should not be there, like concerns for money or power? If so, ask Jesus to clear it out and replace it with what should be usual there—worship, prayer, learning, service. He will gladly do it. Your heart is His home.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, make my heart a fitting home for You. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When have you seen improper business going on in a holy place?

What improper business is going on in your heart that you would like to see evicted? Only answer if you wish.

What specific “proper business” would you like to see the Holy Spirit establish in your heart?

DOING HIS JOB

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

TEXT: *His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Matthew 25:21*

It was an odd thing for Jesus to say: "Look for a man carrying a jar of water." This was Judea; men didn't normally carry water; that was a woman's job. The disciples must have wondered. Still, they were used to Jesus by then; they did it without arguing.

I also wonder about the man carrying the water. How did he end up there doing such an odd job? Perhaps his master had made an arrangement ahead of time with Jesus to get the disciples safely and secretly to his house: "Look for one of my man-servants carrying a water jar and follow him home," he might have said.

Or maybe there was no arrangement at all, and Jesus simply knew the future and used it. "Go," He says, and it happens that day that a brother helps out his sisters who are busy cooking, or a strong son decides to tote water for his elderly mother. However it happened, it was effective. The man fetched the water; the disciples spotted him, and they got to the right house to prepare the Passover feast.

One thing is clear, though. The man with the water jar was doing his job, however odd or embarrassing it might have been to him. And because he was doing his job faithfully, Jesus' plan worked out perfectly. The disciples made it to the safe house, got things ready, and Jesus and His followers had one last dinner in peace before His betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

We have the chance to be faithful in the little things of our life, too. Taking out the trash, getting gas for the car, replacing the toilet paper when it runs out—these are such tiny acts of service, we don't usually think about them (unless they go undone, of course!). Yet they can make a huge difference when Jesus uses them in His service. This is the way He honors us, giving us a part to play in His plans—a role that involves faithful service, even when it seems tedious or embarrassing. He who served us at the cost of His own life now allows us to serve others—and Him.

THE PRAYER: *Dear Father, thank You for the many people who serve You faithfully and are a blessing in my life. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When have you done something that was unexpected for your age, gender, or other social classification?

Think of someone you know. What small acts of faithfulness do they do that you notice?

What is an area of your life where you want to ask God to help you serve faithfully?

JESUS FOR DINNER

Thursday, March 21, 2019

TEXT: *“Tell the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?’” Luke 22:11*

Have you ever thought what it would be like to have Jesus over for dinner? Just imagine the storm of cooking and cleaning that would go on! You’d want to have everything perfect—a table beautifully set up, dishes and utensils and napkins and serving dishes... It would be a lot of work. But it would be worth it, wouldn’t it?

One family in Jerusalem had this experience at Passover time. Jesus was planning to eat His last supper with His disciples, and they needed a family in Jerusalem that would be willing to take them in. It must have been a family with a large home; Jesus and His disciples meant thirteen people for dinner, even if none of His other followers came. Where would they put them all?

It was common in that country to build extra rooms on the flat roofs of the first floor. That’s apparently what this family had done, and they furnished it with a table and dining couches or cushions enough for all the men to be comfortable. They probably supplied other things, like the basin and towel Jesus used to wash His disciples’ feet; it’s likely that they shared their cooking—special family dishes served at holiday time. And of course, there was clean-up. Someone had to do the dishes!

This kind of hospitality is something we’re never going to be able to give to Jesus—or is it? After all, He did say “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). You yourself probably enjoy showing hospitality to others, whether at home or as part of a joint effort at church. Perhaps you invite people who are lonely, or people who are hungry or homeless or far away from home. Perhaps you are reaching out to refugees or to international students. Perhaps you take a casserole to a family with a new baby, or buy toothpaste and toilet paper for the local homeless shelter. If so, you are showing hospitality to Jesus. What an honor to be able to do so!

THE PRAYER: *Dear Lord, help me to show care to others for Your sake and in Your name. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Is there a special time when you celebrated with family or friends that shines in your memory? Tell about it.

Are you involved in showing hospitality, or have you done so in the past? How?

How can you make your heart a place of hospitality for Jesus and His people?

LIVING AMONG HOLY THINGS

Friday, March 22, 2019

TEXT: *They said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” Matthew 27:4*

What kind of men are these? Though they are priests—chief priests!—they seem to feel no shame at all about offering silver to Judas to betray his master. I hope they at least had the decency not to use money that came out of the temple offerings!

And when Judas shows up later, full of remorse, and tries to undo the betrayal, they answer him with one of the most cold-blooded replies on record: “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” They offered no hope, no mercy, nothing to hang on to—and Judas went and hanged himself. Did they know? Did they care?

The priests are scary. Not because they are villains, but because they manage to be what they are while spending all their lives around holy things, serving in the very temple of the Lord. My mind can’t process that. How is it possible for a man to walk from “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” just a few dozen steps to a meeting that ends up with “What is that to us? See to it yourself!”?

It scares me the more because as a Christian, I too spend my life among holy things. I read the Bible. I go to church. I take communion. And I don’t want to end up like these men, arguing over blood money in the midst of holiness.

But only one thing can prevent that—and that’s if Jesus is actually living in me, holy in the midst of my unholiness. Nothing short of that can protect me. Nothing short of that can protect you.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). This is our protection. Because we are His temple, God guards us jealously from the attacks of the devil. Jesus lay down His life to make us God’s holy and everlasting possession. The one who died and rose for us will keep us safe—and holy—in His hands.

THE PRAYER: *Dear Father, keep me holy and safe from evil in Your hands. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What “holy things” do you live among on a daily or weekly basis?

When have you been surprised by evil in a holy place or situation?

How do you guard against having a hardened heart like those of the chief priests?

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Saturday, March 23, 2019

TEXT: *The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" John 7:46*

The crowd of soldiers and officers who came to arrest Jesus must have been disconcerted. Jesus wasn't behaving like anyone they'd captured before. To begin with, He stepped forward to meet them, instead of hiding in the darkness. "Who are you looking for?" He asked. When they answered, "Jesus of Nazareth," He calmly identified Himself: "I am He."

The Gospel writer John says that when Jesus said that, "they drew back and fell to the ground." There was power in Jesus' words, and they couldn't help responding! What power? When Jesus said, "I am he," He was basically saying the very name of God, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). It was as if He had said, "I am YHWH, your God." No wonder they fell to the ground!

But rattled as they were, they pulled themselves back together—only to start taking orders from the very man they came to arrest. Jesus said, "So, if you seek me, let these men go." And that's what happened.

But that wasn't the end of it. Jesus' disciple Peter pulled a sword and hurt a man—only to be stopped by Jesus, who rebuked him and healed the man's ear. And as far as we can tell, the soldiers simply let it happen. Jesus was in charge.

But Jesus had one more thing to do before submitting to arrest. He made it absolutely clear to everyone what was happening in the garden that night—and that it was foolish and evil: "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:52-53). And having said this, He submitted—and the soldiers finally took Him away.

Did the soldiers wonder about Jesus in years to come? Surely a man of such power could have avoided the cross. But that wasn't what Jesus was doing with His authority. He was in charge, that night because He was about the business of saving us. And now that He has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, we know that He is in charge of everything in heaven and earth—and we are safely His forever.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, I'm glad You're in charge. Help me to trust You. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Are you comfortable being in charge of events at work, at home, or at church? If yes, in what situations?

When do you feel like events are spinning out of control? What do you do to feel better?

Have you ever had an experience when you sensed the power in God's word? Tell about it if you like.

HEALING HIS ENEMIES

Sunday, March 24, 2019

TEXT: *“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you ...” Luke 6:27*

Just a man, rubbing his ear now and then. I suspect that’s what we would have seen if we could have visited the high priest’s house during the weeks after Easter. The man was a servant, and his action would probably go unnoticed. What could be less important? But to the man, it was probably the most important thing in his life.

Malchus worked for the high priest, and somehow he ended up in the crowd of people sent to arrest Jesus. It must have been a motley crew, with torches and swords and clubs. Some were soldiers, but not all. And in the middle of them, Malchus.

Opposite them in the garden, what? A group of scared men who had just woken up. A rabbi with a reputation as a healer. And one frightened fisherman with a sword, swinging wildly, trying to protect his master from the enemies who had come to arrest Him.

Searing pain. An ear lying on the ground. And then Jesus, stooping forward to heal one last person before His death less than twenty-four hours later. Healing His enemy.

Because that’s what Jesus does, isn’t it? He heals His enemies. He makes us whole again. He reaches out in compassion and deals with our wounds, making us the way God intended us to be. And He changes us from enemies to beloved children.

Did Malchus end up in the Christian faith? It seems likely. The apostle John knew his name, after all. But what’s certain is that you and I have been called to Jesus. He knows our names, and He heals our wounds. Let us stay with Him forever.

THE PRAYER: *Dear Lord, thank You for healing me and making me Your own, though I was once Your enemy. Keep me close to You. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Did you ever get caught up in a bad situation? When?

How do you deal with your enemies?

When has God done something good for you that you did not expect?

GLORY AND SHAME

Monday, March 25, 2019

TEXT: *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Galatians 3:27*

What an embarrassing story! A young man tried to follow Jesus when He was arrested in Gethsemane, but the crowd seized on him, and grabbed his clothing. He escaped by running away completely naked.

Who was this young man? What do we know about him? Not a whole lot, though we can guess at a few particulars. Some think this was Mark the Gospel writer himself, telling what happened to him the night Jesus was arrested. Since Mark is the only one who writes down this event, it makes sense that it might be his personal story.

Clearly the young man was a follower of Jesus, though he wasn't one of the twelve disciples. He was out in the garden of Gethsemane, which suggests he tagged along with the disciples when they left the house where they celebrated Passover. Perhaps he was a son of that family. He clearly had some courage, to try to follow the arrest squad—though when they grabbed him, he lost his nerve and fled.

But in the end, what do we truly know of him but his most glorious—and inglorious—moment? Glorious because he loved Jesus and attempted to follow Him even when his own life was at risk; inglorious because he lost his nerve and fled naked. That one moment sums up all we really know about him—his love, his glory and his shame, all rolled into one.

But it's like that for us, too, isn't it? We love Jesus; we attempt to follow Him; and all too often, what we're trying to do ends up as a total fiasco. Our good intentions don't survive the actual doing of them. We may even find ourselves running away embarrassed, covered in shame.

Fortunately for us, we have a Savior who won't leave us covered in shame. He comes to us and clothes us in His own righteousness. We don't have to be embarrassed about our failures. They are taken away, covered by His own holiness. We are forgiven, healed, washed, clothed. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). He covers us in Himself. Thanks be to God.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Father, that You take all of me, glorious and shameful together. Cover me in the grace of Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Do you have a funny embarrassing story about yourself you're willing to tell?

If you are willing, tell about a time when you tried to do good and it backfired.

When have you seen God bring a blessing out of an inglorious moment?

CURIOUS

Tuesday, March 26, 2019

TEXT: *The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” John 18:17*

She was a servant girl minding the front door. It was a busy night—the whole Sanhedrin assembled, and the preacher Jesus of Nazareth on trial before them! She did her job, letting everybody in and shutting the door—and then one of the men came back to ask a favor. “Would you let my friend in too?” he must have said. “This man, here”—and John would have pointed out Peter.

It was no skin off her nose. John was known to the high priest’s household, and she didn’t mind letting his friend Peter in, too. But she was curious. Apparently she knew that John was a follower of Jesus. So as Peter entered, she asked him, “You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?”

That question gets asked more often than we think. At work, at school, in the neighborhood—people look at us, just as the girl looked at Peter, and wonder: “You aren’t one of these Christians, are you?” They may ask us to our faces, or they may ask other people behind our backs. But they are curious.

It’s a good curiosity to have. It can give Christians the opportunity to tell our friends about Jesus their Savior. True, Peter blew his chance when he denied Jesus. And sometimes we blow our chances, too, when we talk or behave in ways that bring shame to the name of Christ.

But that isn’t usually what happens. If non-Christians are asking, it’s usually because they see something in our lives that is good—something they want for themselves. They may not know exactly what it is, but they want to. They are curious. And that’s our chance to tell them about Jesus—who loves them, and us, enough to lay down His own life to rescue us.

Pray for your friends. Ask God to make them curious about Jesus—and to give you the right words to say at the right time.

THE PRAYER: *Father, use me to draw others to Your Son Jesus. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What kinds of topics make you curious, and why?

Has anyone ever asked you if you were a Christian? What happened?

Think of the Christians you know. What in their lives would make a non-Christian curious to know more about Jesus?

MORE THAN DUTY

Wednesday, March 27, 2019

TEXT: *“And they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together ...”*
Luke 22:55

When the guards got back to the high priest’s house, they went into the courtyard and made a fire. It was cold, and they’d be waiting a long, long time. There was no prospect of bed any time soon! The priests and leaders would be meeting for hours, they knew that. So they gathered in a group around the charcoal fire, warming themselves and watching the flames. Waiting was their duty.

The servants of the household were on duty, too. The girl in charge of the door was checking people who arrived for the meeting to make sure that no one improper got in. Other servants passed through the courtyard, making sure that the men in the meeting had whatever they needed. That was their duty—to fetch and carry whatever was needed—chairs, refreshments, messages. They, too, would have a long night.

Though they could not have known it, there was one more person on duty that night—our Lord Jesus, on trial for His life in that council room. Of everyone there He had the hardest work, for He was in the process of rescuing the entire human race. By now He was well launched into His Passion—arrested, beaten, slapped, forced to listen while people lied about Him and His ministry. It would be a very long night for Jesus, with no rest and no sleep ever again—not until His body slept in death the next evening in a borrowed tomb.

But it was more than duty that motivated Jesus. He wasn’t just doing it because He “had to”—he was doing it because He loved us. Looking ahead, He knew that everything He suffered would bring us out of spiritual death into eternal life and joy forever. As Isaiah put it, “He shall see His offspring... Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:11). Because of what Jesus did, we are God’s children, and Jesus is satisfied—joyful!—because we belong to Him.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, thank You so much that we are more than just another duty You have. Thank You for taking delight in us. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What duties do you have in your life?

What kinds of things do you do for love—not simply because you have to do them?

What does it mean to you, that Jesus delights in you?

“NOBODY HURTS MY FAMILY”

Thursday, March 28, 2019

TEXT: *One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him?” John 18:26*

“Didn’t I see you in the garden with Jesus?” Such a simple, innocent question—on the surface. But Peter knew what it meant: “You look familiar. Hey, I think I’ve seen your face before. Aren’t you the one who stepped into the torchlight just when we went to arrest Jesus? Aren’t you the one who cut my relative’s ear off?”

No wonder Peter was terrified. Peter had indeed cut someone’s ear off in the garden, the result of terror and a wild swing with a sword—the ear of a man named Malchus, who was with the group arresting Jesus. And now here was Malchus’ relative, demanding an answer. We can feel the tension in the air, the not-yet-spoken threats: “Nobody hurts my family and gets away with it.”

Peter bursts into denials. “Not me, I swear it, I don’t even know this man Jesus you’re talking about ...” and the rooster crows. Peter has denied Jesus for the last time.

Was Malchus’ relative satisfied? Did he believe Peter? Or did he look at Peter’s tears and decide he wasn’t worth pursuing any further, and let him go?

“Nobody hurts my family and gets away with it.” Malchus’ relative wasn’t the only one in the high priest’s house that night who had that attitude. Jesus Himself was taking His next steps toward the cross, willingly and deliberately, for just that reason.

For Jesus Himself had had family injured long ago in a garden—in the garden of Eden, in fact. Back at the beginning the devil came into the garden to tempt and destroy Adam and Eve, and with them the whole human race. God took this very personally. “Nobody hurts My family and gets away with it.” And so God was born as the man Christ Jesus into the family of humanity, to destroy the power of the devil and to restore us all to life and health.

You, you yourself, are the relative Jesus came to rescue and avenge. You are the one He protected even at the cost of death. And you are the one with whom He shares His resurrected, eternal life—because He loves you as family.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You for protecting me as Your own family, Lord. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever had to protect a family member, either with words or with actions?

Has anyone ever protected you because you are family? Tell the story.

What does it mean to you, that Jesus sees you as family?

POWER GAMES

Friday, March 29, 2019

TEXT: *First they led Him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. John 18:13*

Annas was the power behind the throne. He had been high priest himself, and after the Romans removed him from office, each of his five sons took a turn as high priest. So did one son-in-law—Caiaphas. Annas might have been out of power officially, but everyone knew who was pulling strings behind the scenes.

Small wonder they brought Jesus to Annas first. And Annas started meddling instead of leaving Jesus for Caiaphas to deal with. What's worse, he chose to question Jesus rather than handling things in the proper legal way—producing witnesses who could testify to a crime. Annas was hoping Jesus would incriminate Himself.

Jesus pointed out the illegality. "I have spoken openly to the world ... I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them; they know what I said" (John 18:20-21). A nearby officer hit Jesus, saying, "Is that how You answer the high priest?"

Power versus powerlessness. But who was the powerful one? On the surface, it appears to be Annas. He has the office and authority (well, sort of). He is running the interrogation. He is the one who has guards to enforce his will.

And yet Annas can do nothing with all his power. Jesus refuses to cooperate. He is not afraid to point out the wrong Annas is committing. Even a blow doesn't change Jesus' mind. It merely gives Him another illegality to point out. Annas gives up and sends Jesus to Caiaphas.

These power games look familiar, don't they? The world we live in is full of power, much of it used wrongly and illegitimately. It's a scary time to be alive for many of us.

And yet, we don't need to be afraid. Our true high priest, Jesus, is with us now, whenever we are in danger or need. Jesus watches over us with God's own authority and power, and nothing escapes His notice. No evil will be able to destroy us. Jesus will keep us in His care forever.

THE PRAYER: *Father, thank You for protecting us from all the powers of evil in our world. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever been treated wrongly by those in power? How did it make you feel?

"Non-violent resistance" is another term for Jesus' behavior before Annas. Have you ever done this? If so, when?

How has God protected you when you were in danger from corrupt authorities (of any kind)?

THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD

Saturday, March 30, 2019

TEXT: *Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Matthew 10:16*

What a cold-blooded snake. Caiaphas sees Jesus as a risk, someone who could bring the whole religious hierarchy crashing down. Caiaphas isn't about to lose his job as high priest, even if Jesus is the actual Messiah. Better to get rid of Him at once. And so Caiaphas says to his fellow plotters: "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man [Jesus] should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (John 11:49-50).

Time to bite the bullet. Make the hard decision. Get rid of one man and save the whole nation. After all, we're living in the real world, aren't we? Not the pretty baby world of morality and fairy tales. We're grown-ups here.

And so Caiaphas sets in motion the events of Jesus' suffering and death.

We hear this reasoning so often—from politicians, from businesses, and even sometimes from our own coworkers, friends, or family. And we are tempted. We know what they're proposing is wrong. But it looks like such an easy solution... And we're scared. If we don't go along with it, will our own worlds come crashing down? Should we join the crucifiers with Caiaphas, or should we risk ending up on a cross next to Jesus?

But even here the Holy Spirit is at work. He takes those terribly evil words and turns them into a prophecy: Caiaphas "did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:51-52).

It is for us Jesus died—for all of us who are scared, who are tempted, who worry about what the future will bring. It is even for us who have fallen, who took the easy way out when we knew it was wrong. For us Jesus died, to bring us together again as the children of God, forgiven and made new. For us Jesus rose, that we might be set free from fear and trust in the safety of God's love for us.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, give us wisdom and strength to withstand our own fears and the tempting wrong suggestions of those around us. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Who in your world do you hear saying things like Caiaphas? How do you deal with their pressure on you?

What do you do when you're afraid? Does it help?

If you are willing, tell about a time when you were tempted to take the easy way out. How did God help you?

FALSE WITNESSES

Sunday, March 31, 2019

TEXT: *Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put Him to death. Matthew 26:59*

Caiaphas was in a bind. He needed testimony—any testimony, true or false!—against Jesus, but it had to match up. There had to be at least two witnesses according to the Law of Moses, and both witnesses had to testify to exactly the same crime. If they disagreed, their testimony was not valid.

Matthew tells us that “many false witnesses came forward” (Matthew 26:60). This staggers me. Why? Were they looking for money? Probably—we know that Judas had already been paid off for his role in Jesus’ betrayal. But there could be other reasons. Were they simply haters, people who had it in for Jesus? Were they the kind of people who liked to stir up excitement, and didn’t care what it did to other people’s lives?

This just makes me angry. I can sort of see why Caiaphas did what he did—his whole life and position as high priest was on the line, after all. But who were these false witnesses, who would throw away a man’s life for so little?

It may be that you, too, have suffered at the hands of false witnesses. It is a strange, unique pain—to know yourself true but be treated as a liar, to be innocent and yet accused. If this is your case, Jesus knows your pain. He experienced it. He who is the Truth incarnate had lies thrown at Him by people off the street, men of no account. And He stood silent.

Why? For you. Because He loves you. Because He knows all of you, both the good and the bad, the true and the false bits alike, and still wants you. Because He came to redeem you, to make you a son or daughter of the Truth, someone who will one day walk in the clear light of God’s presence and rejoice. That is the truth of why He suffered, died, and rose from the dead—for love of you.

THE PRAYER: *Father, keep us in the truth for the sake of Your Son Jesus. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Did you ever get in trouble as a child for lying? What happened?

Have you suffered at the hands of false witnesses? How did God help you through it?

Jesus calls Himself the Way and the Truth and the Life. What do you think He meant by calling Himself the Truth?

WHAT SHALL I DO?

Monday, April 1, 2019

TEXT: *Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" Matthew 27:22*

"What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" That was the problem facing Pilate that whole Good Friday. Shall I set Him free, seeing He is an innocent man? Shall I send Him off to Herod, and get Him out of my jurisdiction so I don't have to deal with His case? Shall I hand Him over to the doubtful mercies of the crowd, in the hope that His old popularity will save Him? Shall I scourge Him to work up the sympathy vote? What shall I do with Jesus?

Pilate knew a political hot potato when he saw one. His career was already in trouble before Jesus arrived on his doorstep—Pilate's old mentor Sejanus had fallen from power, and anyone associated with him was at risk. The last thing Pilate needed was for the Jewish leaders to send bad reports of him to Rome.

But Pilate wasn't comfortable just condemning the innocent Jesus either. Some of the reason might have been a drive for justice. Some of it might have been an understandable desire to annoy the Jewish religious leaders, who had been a longstanding thorn in Pilate's side. But much of it seemed to be due to how Jesus handled Himself, how He spoke and what He said. It bothered Pilate. When the leaders said, "He claims to be the Son of God," Pilate was half-inclined to believe it. There was something spooky about Jesus!

We all know what Pilate decided in the end. But what about us? What will we do with Jesus, this man who claims to be the Son of God? We face this question every day as we live our lives in a world hostile to Jesus, making choices in what we say and think and do.

May the Holy Spirit strengthen our faith in Him who laid down His life for our sake. May He give us the joy of following Jesus faithfully and sharing His story with others.

THE PRAYER: *Father, strengthen our faith and trust in Jesus our Savior, and let all our decisions be made according to Your will. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do you do when you're trying to avoid making a decision?

What other "options" besides trusting in Jesus have you had in your life? These might be other faiths, or just other ways of trying to cope with the world.

If you're willing, share about the last time you had to choose between Jesus and an easier way out of a hard situation.

“DO A MIRACLE”

Tuesday, April 2, 2019

TEXT: *When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see Him, because he had heard about Him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by Him. Luke 23:8*

When Pilate sent the prisoner Jesus to King Herod, he provided Herod with an opportunity he'd wanted for a long time—the chance to meet Jesus and hopefully see Him do some miracle. But it didn't work out. Jesus refused to speak. He had no interest in doing miracles for Herod, like a circus performer on display.

When Herod realized he wasn't going to get a show, he became angry. He and his soldiers mocked and mistreated Jesus.

Why didn't Jesus give Herod what he wanted? Jesus had better things to do. He was in the process of carrying out God's plan to rescue the whole human race. He was on His way to the cross, where He would break the power of sin and death forever. None of this involved doing shows for Herod or for anybody else. Jesus stayed silent. Disappointed, Herod sent Him back to Pilate—who ultimately condemned Him.

It's easy to blame Herod. But there are times when we, too, would like to see Jesus do a miracle. Sometimes our motives are good—we want to see a loved one healed, or a dangerous situation turned around. But sometimes our motives might not be so pure. Who of us has never wanted God to prove His existence by showing us a sign? And of course God doesn't. He has His own plans, and they do not involve showing off for people who refuse to believe.

What do we do when Jesus refuses to do miracles we want—when He won't speak—when we are face to face with a silent God? We can do what Herod did—reject, mock, and send Jesus away. Or, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can humble ourselves and trust in Him, knowing that He will do what is best. After all, that's what Jesus did after Herod's interview. He went on to suffer, to die, and to rise again—so that He could bring all of us who trust Him to eternal life.

THE PRAYER: *Dear Father, help us to trust in You even when You are silent and we are afraid or grieving. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

If you could choose one miracle for God to do, what would it be?

When did you face a time when you asked God for a miracle and He did not do it?

How do you cope with the silence of God?

SAVING THE SAVIOR?

Wednesday, April 3, 2019

TEXT: *While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of Him today in a dream." Matthew 27:19*

Pilate's wife is one of the more interesting minor characters in the Passion story. All we know about her is that she had a dream about Jesus, and it concerned her so much that she tried to get her husband to set Him free as a righteous man. Where did the dream come from? Coincidence? God? We don't know. But wherever it came from, she was right. And she did everything in her power to rescue the innocent Jesus from His fate.

Pilate was apparently worried by his wife's dream—no surprise, since the Romans put a lot of stock in omens, portents and dreams. At the very least he would have been deeply uneasy at his wife's report. He was already aware that the case against Jesus was based purely on jealousy—that the religious leaders hated Him for His popularity, and not for any real wrongdoing. So Pilate tried to get Jesus released through a trick—offering the crowd a choice between the popular Jesus and a known murderer, Barabbas. Unfortunately, it backfired. The crowd chose the wrong man. And Pilate didn't have the guts to set the innocent Jesus free anyway.

It must have been heartbreaking for Pilate's wife. She tried so hard to save Jesus, and all for nothing. He died anyway, like a common criminal, hanged on a cross.

Or was it for nothing? Jesus wouldn't say so. He knew exactly why He had come to that day, and it wasn't to be miraculously saved by a Roman lady, however kindhearted. He came instead to save her—yes, and Pilate too, and everybody else, all who would have their sins taken away by His death on the cross. And by rising again, He gave all of us who trust in Him everlasting life. Jesus is our true and everlasting Savior.

THE PRAYER: *Lord Jesus, thank You that You chose to save us rather than being saved Yourself. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever had a particularly disturbing dream?

When have you tried to help someone and had it all go terribly wrong?

When has God overruled your plans, only to do something that was ultimately much better?

RECOGNITION

Thursday, April 4, 2019

TEXT: *And kneeling before Him, they mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Matthew 27:29*

It must have been terrifying. There were hundreds of men in a Roman battalion, and they gathered in the governor's headquarters for a sadistic game of "king" with Jesus. They stripped Him and put a reddish-purple robe on Him. They crowned Him with thorns and gave Him a reed to be His scepter.

And then they began to brutalize Him. They hit Him and spit on Him. They knelt before Him and cried "Hail, King of the Jews!" They took the reed scepter away and beat Him on the head with it. They abused their prisoner gleefully, never suspecting for a minute that this bruised, bleeding man was God who had come to save them.

This was God in disguise—the true King mocked as a false king, the one who came to help us all treated as helpless and without power. They didn't recognize Him. But He recognized them. Nothing that they did that day was unexpected. He knows what lives in human hearts. He was not surprised.

He knows what lives in our hearts, too. That is enough to make us hide our faces in shame, except that we know what those soldiers did not—that "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Our sin is not enough to make Jesus turn His face from us. He knows us through and through—and He loves us anyway. He died for us. He rose from the dead for us. And He continues to recognize us as God's own children and care for us today. As Paul says, "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Romans 8:34).

Jesus recognizes us as His own. Thanks be to God.

THE PRAYER: *Lord Jesus, thank You for seeking us out and calling us Your own. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When have you failed to recognize someone—and what happened next?

Do you think you would recognize Jesus if you met Him on the street? Why or why not?

When you finally meet Jesus face to face, visibly, what do you think He will say?

TEXT: ... and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head and put a reed in His right hand. Matthew 27:29

Has it ever occurred to you that someone must have made that crown of thorns for Jesus? Someone came up with the idea. Someone left the barracks to go looking in a field or on the side of the road. Someone (probably wearing gloves) picked those thorny branches and twisted them into the shape of a crown. Somebody took that crown and pushed it down on Jesus' head—a nice little piece of human handiwork to honor the King of the Jews.

We don't know that person's name. We don't know if he was young or old, Roman or provincial. Maybe he was habitually cruel—a man who went home at night and hit his wife and kicked the dog because it was underfoot. Or maybe he was the kind of person who just goes along with the crowd.

It doesn't really matter. Because, in the end, the one who twisted that crown for Jesus was me. It was you. It was every human being has ever done evil, however slight, knowing it was wrong but thinking, "It's such a small thing, it doesn't really matter." It was every one of us who has hardened our hearts against the needs of the poor, the sick, the unwanted, the very old and very young. A crown of thorns doesn't cost much to make. The effort is next to nothing.

But Jesus has made us a crown also, and this one cost Him everything. It's the crown He won for us when He laid down His life for us willingly, dying and rising for us in order to bring us back as God's people. The crown He offers us is His gift to everyone who repents and trusts in Him for forgiveness. James calls it "the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (James 1:12).

Now, because of what Jesus has done, we can put away those thorns forever. Jesus has given us the crown of life—and on His own head, what do we see? A very different crown—we see Jesus "now crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9).

THE PRAYER: *Dear Lord, thank You for the crown You have given us—and thank You that You Yourself are our true, beloved King. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever grown a thorny plant—a rose, a cactus, or something similar? How did you handle it?

What good thing would you like to make for Jesus with your life?

How do you glorify and honor Jesus in your daily life?

A CURSE OR A BLESSING?

Saturday, April 6, 2019

TEXT: *Pilate ... took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Matthew 27:24-25*

The roar of a crowd in a blood frenzy is a terrible thing. Pilate was hearing it that Friday morning as he tried to find some way, any way, out of his dilemma. He was more and more convinced that Jesus was an innocent man. And though Pilate was a seasoned and brutal Roman governor, even he was not willing to execute an innocent man—particularly one who spoke and acted as Jesus did.

He tried everything. A referral to another jurisdiction—to King Herod. But Herod sent Him back. An offer to release one prisoner in honor of Passover—with the only other choice a murderer. The crowd still chose the wrong man. In desperation, he had Jesus scourged and publicly displayed. Surely that would satisfy the crowd's thirst for blood. To no avail. "Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!"

Finally he took water and washed his hands publicly in front of the crowd, saying: "I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves!" to which the crowd replied, "His blood be on us—and on our children!" Pilate was defeated. He handed Jesus over to their will.

The crowd could not be placated. They would even wish a curse on themselves—and on their children. Pilate couldn't do anything against such resolute, determined evil. He could find no way to change them.

Pilate couldn't—but Jesus did. Because that crowd of people screaming "Crucify! Crucify!" were among the people He had come to earth to save. They, with us, were the reason He chose to suffer. They hated Him. No matter. He still loved them.

And so the curse turned into a blessing—Jesus' blood became the bringer of salvation to everyone who came to trust in Him, even those who once screamed for His death. His blood made them clean—new creations, new children of God. His lifegiving blood does the same for us who trust Him today. And so we can say with thankful, loving hearts: "May His blood be on us—and on our children."

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord Jesus, for giving us life through Your blood. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do you think of when you see blood?

What is the connection between ordinary blood and life?

How does Jesus' blood give us new life?

THE OTHER “SON OF THE FATHER”

Sunday, April 7, 2019

TEXT: *So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified. Mark 15:15*

Barabbas must have been shocked when they opened his cell door and called him out. He was a murder and a rebel; he knew that death was in store for him. But freedom?

How he must have questioned the guards as he stumbled through the hallways leading out of the prison. The crowds chose me? he must have asked. And who was the other guy? Jesus of Nazareth?

We don't know if Barabbas knew who Jesus was. Perhaps he had heard about His preaching, His teaching—perhaps he knew about His miracles. Maybe Barabbas had even been among Jesus' crowds listening for a while. It hadn't stopped him ending up in Pilate's prison. And yet now, here was Jesus—switching places with him, doomed to end up on Barabbas' cross.

Barabbas' name means “Son of the Father.” I hope at some point in his new, free, second life, he took the time to learn about the true Son of the Father, Jesus our Savior, who suffered, died, and rose for him. For us. For all of us, who can now become sons and daughters of the heavenly Father through Jesus' mercy.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord, for taking our place. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Can you remember a time when you switched places with someone else? What happened?

Has anyone ever taken your punishment—or consequences—in your place? If you are willing, tell the story.

What does it mean to you now, that you are a son or daughter of the Father?

CARRYING THE CROSS

Monday, April 8, 2019

TEXT: *And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry His cross. Mark 15:21*

Simon is an interesting man. It appears he was a foreigner from Cyrene, a place in Libya, but we have no way of knowing whether he was a Jew by birth or a Gentile convert. He was probably visiting Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Mark says he was coming in from the country, which might mean he was camping outside the crowded city during the holidays.

Simon wasn't there to watch the procession to Golgotha—chances are he had no idea men were going to be executed that day. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And so the Roman soldiers, realizing Jesus wasn't going to make it without help, grabbed Simon. "Here, you," they must have said, "grab this and follow Him!"

Simon couldn't get out of it. What, carry a bloody, shameful cross through the streets of Jerusalem? No doubt everybody would think that he was the condemned man! But the soldiers wouldn't listen to any arguments. They had the right to force him, and they did. Simon carried Jesus' cross.

It probably wasn't that long before Simon himself became a Christian. Mark tells us the names of his children, which means they were probably well-known in the Christian church. If so, that means the Holy Spirit Himself said to Simon and his family the same thing the soldiers would have said the first time: "Here, take up this cross and follow Jesus." That command—that honor—is repeated every time another person comes to faith.

Everyone of us who loves Jesus learns what it means to carry the cross—to follow after Him—to be exposed to shame and mistreatment for His sake. Some of our brothers and sisters learn this in very graphic ways, as they suffer persecution at the hands of those who hate Christ. For others of us, it comes in more subtle ways. But however it comes, we endure it knowing that if we carry Jesus' cross, it is because He Himself has carried our cross first, suffering, dying—and rising again!—for our sake. Because He loves us.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord Jesus, for carrying our cross for us. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When have you had to do a job you really didn't want to do?

Who (besides Jesus!) has helped you by "carrying your cross" in some way?

Does it make it easier to suffer, knowing that Jesus has suffered for and with you? Why or why not?

SAFETY

Tuesday, April 9, 2019

TEXT: *“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”*
Luke 23:28

As Jesus walks to the place where He will be crucified, a large crowd is following Him. Some of them are women who are grieving and weeping for Him. Jesus turns to speak to them.

That in itself is surprising. Jesus has already been scourged, and He is now so weak that the soldiers have had to draft another man to carry His cross for Him. In a few minutes Jesus will be nailed to the cross. If there is ever a time for Jesus to think of Himself, surely it is now.

And yet He doesn't. He is thinking of the women who are weeping. And He says to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.” He warns them that terrible days are coming. In just a few years, the Roman army will come and destroy Jerusalem, and her people will starve and be slaughtered. “For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” In other words, if human beings are willing to murder the incarnate Son of God while He is living on earth, what worse things will they do in the future when He has returned to heaven?

I wonder how many of the women recalled His words when the siege of Jerusalem started. I hope some took warning and left the city while they still could. There is a tradition that says that before the end, the Christians of Jerusalem left the city to find safety elsewhere. Perhaps some of these women were among them.

Jesus gave them a chance of safety, for themselves and their children. And yet He did far more than that, just hours after this conversation. For when He died on that cross, Jesus made Himself our place of safety—the one who protects us from the power of death, the devil, and all evil. He made Himself our fortress, our protection. When we are in trouble, we can flee to Him for help. He will never fail us or leave us alone.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord, for becoming our place of safety. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Where is the place you feel the safest?

What person in your life makes you feel the safest (besides Jesus)?

How can you help someone else find safety through what you do or say in the Name of Jesus?

STANDING BY

Wednesday, April 10, 2019

TEXT: *“Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels?” Matthew 26:53*

When we think about the people involved in Jesus' arrest, suffering, and death, we often forget the invisible ones—the ones behind the scenes watching. But Jesus reminds us when He says to Peter at His arrest, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” (Matthew 26:53-54)

Think of it. Twelve legions of angels, ready to be unleashed instantly at a single word from the Father. Roughly sixty thousand angels or more, every one of them eager, wishing, hoping to be allowed to intervene ... grieving, indignant as they saw what was being done to Jesus ... but all fully obedient to God's will, as difficult as it must have been to stand by.

It must be hard to be an angel. To know that you have the power to help, and yet have to stand by because God's will is being carried out in a slower, more terrible, and more glorious way than you could ever have imagined. To refrain from meddling, from taking over the life of someone else, even to make it better. To respect God-given free will, just as the Lord who made it does.

You may know this conflict if you are a parent, a teacher, a pastor or educator of any kind. Even for those of us who are not, there can be a terrible urge to rearrange our friends' lives for them—to “fix things for them”—because we “know better.” And yet, without an invitation from the people themselves, or a command from God, we cannot. We end up making things worse for the very people we love. How difficult it is!

Thank God that He is not under the same constraints. When He reaches into our lives to help and heal us, He does it right. He doesn't make things worse with His meddling. He knows when to respect the free will He created, and He knows when to respond to our cries for mercy. As He did in His best blessing to us—Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Father, for caring for us in Your wisdom and mercy. Please keep us when we go through difficult times. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When has it been difficult for you to stand by and watch something happen without helping?

Have you ever been glad later that you didn't intervene—and if so, in what situation and why?

Has there been a time in your own life when you wanted God to intervene—and were later glad He didn't do what you wanted?

IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

Thursday, April 11, 2019

TEXT: *They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots. John 19:24*

It's a grim picture—Jesus hanging on the cross, while beneath Him, several Roman soldiers gamble for His clothing. It's tempting to condemn the soldiers for what they were doing. It's offensive. They shouldn't be doing that!

But from their point of view, they were only doing their jobs. They had taken three condemned men to Calvary, offered them a basic painkiller (wine mixed with myrrh), nailed them up, and now there was nothing to do but watch them. The soldiers couldn't leave till the men were dead, and that would take hours, if not days.

So they decided to divvy up Jesus' clothes, which were their traditional right as His executioners. And when one piece was too nice to be divided by tearing, they decided to gamble for it. Hey, there was nothing else to do. Dice or cards have helped pass the time for many soldiers down through history. And there was nothing more interesting going on!

But that's just where they were wrong. The central event of human history was taking place, right over their heads. Jesus Christ was dying for the whole human race. God was being executed—paying the price for all sin and wickedness. If the soldiers had only known!

If we had only known, we might say. Not about Jesus' death—most of us have known that story since childhood. But God continues to do things right in front of our eyes—things in which we ought to be involved. We have neighbors in need—live near children in danger—have family who are hurting or lonely or struggling. If only we had known! we say, when some hidden disaster comes to light, too late for us to help.

But we can know—if we are willing to know. We can lift up our eyes and look around us for the signs of need. We can pray and ask God to direct us to the people He loves who need help. The main thing we need is a willing heart. God will provide the rest. Do you want to know?

THE PRAYER: *Dear Father, show me what You want me to know so I can serve the people You love. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do you do when you are bored?

When was there something happening “right under your eyes” that you didn't notice or recognize?

Tell the story of a time when God opened your eyes to a need and you were able to help.

THE SON OF GOD?

Friday, April 12, 2019

TEXT: *When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" Matthew 27:54*

The centurion and his soldiers were keeping watch over the dying Jesus. As the hours wore on, they heard those words mentioned again and again: "The Son of God ... the Son of God ..."

They heard it from the endless stream of people passing by, going in and out of Jerusalem: "Save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." They heard it from the religious leaders who came out to gloat over Jesus' suffering: "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:40-43).

The centurion might have wondered: What did they mean, "Son of God"? That was a title of the Roman emperor. Was Jesus a rebel? But then, there were also the old stories of Roman gods who had children with human women. Their sons became heroes like Hercules or Perseus. Jesus didn't look like a hero. After all, you could hardly find a weaker man than someone dying on a cross.

And then Jesus cried out with a loud voice and died—and there was a great earthquake. The rocks split and tombs were shattered. The centurion was deeply impressed by the power he witnessed. And he gave his verdict: "Surely this was the Son of God!"

The centurion was right to be impressed by God's power. And we are right to thank God for the even greater power we know He unleashed at that time—the hour Jesus destroyed death, the day He broke open the gates of hell, so that no human being ever needs to be imprisoned there forever. Now the gates of paradise are open to us. If only we trust in Jesus, the Son of God, we are set free and brought into the kingdom of God our Father.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord, for rescuing us from the power of evil. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What kinds of power do you find most impressive?

When have you seen a case of weakness that turned out to be true strength?

If "Son of God" means power to many people, what meanings do you think Jesus' title "Son of Man" means?

A DEATH THAT GAVE LIFE

Saturday, April 13, 2019

TEXT: *The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. Matthew 27:52-53*

What a shock it must have been. Imagine a family in Jerusalem, busy at home a couple of days after Jesus' death, when a knock comes at the door. They open it, only to find—"Grandpa Samuel! What are you doing here?" There he is, alive, well and smiling—but everyone knows he died five years ago.

Similar things were happening across the city as people got unexpected visits from Aunt Hannah, Cousin Dan, and others—all of them people who should have been dead, who had been dead, but not anymore. It must have been scary and incredibly joyful, all at once.

Why were they there? Eventually someone figured it out. At the moment of Jesus' death, a great earthquake hit, and many tombs were opened. At that time many people who had died trusting in the Lord came back to life again, and they eventually made their way into the city—where they no doubt surprised a great many people, and caused a joyful rearrangement of their lives and homes.

What a gift the Lord gave them, through His suffering and death. What a gift the Lord has given us! We know absolutely that when Jesus died on the cross, He broke the power of death over us and all people; and when He rose from the dead, He made His own everlasting life available to all of us, to anyone who trusts in Him, our life-giving Savior.

No wonder God the Father marked Jesus' death with such a gift of life!

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Father, for giving life to all of us who trust in Your Son Jesus. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What would you do if you saw a deceased relative alive at your front door? How would it change your life?

We are told that they didn't come into the city until after Jesus' resurrection. Why do you think they waited so long?

How do you think experiencing an event like this would change your attitude toward death—or would it?

HOSANNA

Sunday, April 14, 2019

TEXT: *Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise. Matthew 21:16*

After Jesus cleared the temple of the people who were selling animals, people who were blind or lame started coming to Him there to be healed. There were little children in the temple that day, too, probably there with their parents to worship. The little ones began shouting praise to Jesus: "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

This got the religious leaders upset. "Do You hear what they're saying?" they asked Jesus. Apparently they wanted Him to stop the children. But Jesus quoted from the book of Psalms, asking, "Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise?'"

The second "You" Jesus mentioned is God Himself, who has called even babies and children to praise Him. It seems strange that God would want praise from the weakest and lowliest of people—from children. But He does. He treasures it. In God's eyes, "the last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16).

This is good news for us, too, because if we admit the truth about ourselves, we are just as weak and lowly as little children are. More, perhaps, because we are more experienced in wickedness. We may have more years than they do, but we have not used those years wisely. We desperately need a Savior.

And so with the little children we cry out "Hosanna!" The word "hosanna" has become an expression of praise, but in Hebrew it literally means, "Please save us." Jesus hears our cry. Through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He has become our Savior. And now we cry out in glad joy, praising Him along with the children—and with all creation.

THE PRAYER: *Lord God, we praise You for being our Savior. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is the most recent thing you recall praising God for?

Can you recall a time when you were deeply impressed by a child's praise or words about God? If so, tell the story.

Why do you think praise is part of what Christians do?

TWO OF A KIND?

Monday, April 15, 2019

TEXT: *And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left. Luke 23:33*

There were two of them. Two robbers, both condemned to death, one on either side of Jesus. There wasn't much to choose between them. Both were criminal. Both were helpless. Both were dying.

And to begin with, both of them seemed to be railing at Jesus. Matthew 27:44 says, "the robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him," and Mark's Gospel agrees. They joined in the hate that was being dumped on Jesus—by the chief priests, by the scribes, and even by people passing on the road.

But as the hours went by, something changed—for one of them, at least. He wasn't yelling at Jesus anymore. Instead, he yelled at the other man. "Don't you fear God? ... This man has done nothing wrong." And he asked Jesus to remember him in His kingdom.

Look at the difference between these two men. Though they started out as two of a kind, nobody could be more different by the end. One had come to faith in Jesus. It might not have been a terribly educated faith—we have no idea whether the man who repented had ever seen Jesus before, heard any of his teaching, ever came to baptism. For all we know, his only encounter with Jesus was on the cross. But that was enough. He trusted Him. And Jesus blessed him with a wonderful promise: "Today you will be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

We, too, are not that much different from the people around us in the world. We are sinners. We do wrong. We get caught and pay the penalty, at least sometimes. We even blame and yell at God.

But by God's mercy, we have come to trust in Jesus, our Savior. We know that He forgives us and makes us new and clean—people who belong to God. We have the Holy Spirit living in us even now. And we have paradise to look forward to—all because of Jesus' promise.

None of this is because of us. It's all because of Jesus.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord, for bringing us into Your kingdom. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever had a change of heart about someone? How did it happen?

What is your experience of how different people face dying?

Have you known anyone who came to faith very late in life? Tell the story.

OUR PLACE OR HIS?

Tuesday, April 16, 2019

TEXT: *Judas turned aside to go to his own place. Acts 1:25*

How do you feel about Jesus' betrayer?

It would be interesting to take a survey. I suspect a lot of people would say very angry things. After all, what he did was terrible. He betrayed the innocent Son of God into the hands of His enemies and brought about His death. Surely many people would use words of fire to describe that.

But that's not what Peter did. After it was all over, Peter described Judas with very restrained language. He called him "a guide to those who arrested Jesus" but nothing more. He referred to him as one who "was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." And when the whole group of Christians prayed together about Judas' replacement a few minutes later, they said only, "Judas turned aside to go to his own place" (Acts 1:16-17, 25).

Why were they so restrained? I think it's for just the reasons Peter highlighted in his word choices. Judas "was numbered among us"—he was one of us, not some unique stranger who did what we could never do. That is the terror of Judas—that he is so much like us, that any of us could have betrayed Jesus the same way. That all of us, in fact, do betray Jesus in our words, acts, and thoughts on a daily basis—whenever we harm our neighbors or simply refuse to care for them, whenever we behave in ways that lead the watching world to turn away from the truth of Jesus' Gospel.

Judas "turned aside to go to his own place." How easily we could do the same! It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that keeps us with Jesus, repentant, forgiven, thankful for the mercy He has won for us. When we think of Judas, let's do it with fear and trembling—and with intense gratitude to God who has given us a place that isn't ours, a place in His own kingdom.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, keep us always with You. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

How do you deal with your anger at people who do evil?

What effect do you think Peter's own denial of Jesus had on his attitude toward Judas?

How does God help you when you are tempted to do evil? If you are willing, give examples or tell a story.

LITTLE THINGS

Wednesday, April 17, 2019

TEXT: *And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered ... Luke 22:61*

It was the little things that caught Peter. A servant girl making conversation at the front gate—“You’re not one of these disciples too, are you?” she asks, possibly with a look at John, who had just talked her into letting Peter in. Another question from someone else a little later. A remark about his accent. The crow of a rooster.

It doesn’t take much to trip me up as a follower of Jesus. An overheard remark, and instantly anger, jealousy or fear spring up in my heart. An overlooked duty comes to mind, and immediately I think, “Oh, that phone call can wait another day—I can do that chore tomorrow.” A promise I’ve made to someone else, and I think, “Oh, I can bend that a little bit—they won’t mind, or even notice it.”

No amount of willpower can fix these problems. Even if I could force myself to go through all the right motions, the basic problem would still be there, in my heart. I don’t need a life coach. I don’t need a scolder or a cheerleader. I need a Savior—just as Peter did, just as you do.

It was a little thing that turned Peter around, too. Luke tells us, “And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how He had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:61-62).

What was in that look? Sadness, no doubt—but also love and forgiveness. Nothing else could melt that hardened, fearful heart. Nothing else can melt my heart when I’ve fallen into sin. But Jesus’ love for us—oh yes, that will do it. Because He is the one who suffered, died, and rose again for our sakes. Because we are worth it to Him—because He loves us. And that’s no small thing.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, look on me with Your mercy. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What are some of the little things that trip you up in your Christian life?

What are some of the little things God uses to bring you back closer to Him?

If you are willing, tell about a time when God’s love made a difference in a difficult time in your life.

TRUSTED

Thursday, April 18, 2019

TEXT: *Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. John 19:27*

There wasn't much Jesus could do once He was hanging on the cross. He couldn't come down. He couldn't move His hands or feet much. Even His ability to talk was probably getting lesser and lesser as time went on.

But He still had a few things left to settle before dying. As He looked down, He saw His mother and some other women standing by His cross, along with His disciple John. He could see the grief in their faces. And Son of God though He was, Jesus was also the Son of Man—a human being. He had loved ones to provide for. Specifically, who would care for Mary?

Joseph was probably long since dead. There were certainly other children in the family, Jesus' brothers and sisters. But their relationship with Him hadn't always been the best, and Mary would need comfort, not "I told you so" when it looked like Jesus' mission had ended in ruin. Mary herself would want to be useful, sharing comfort with others who also loved Jesus. So to her He said, "Behold your son." And to John He said, "Behold your mother."

Jesus entrusted His mother to a disciple—that is, to the church. For all the failings and mistakes and even sins of His followers, He still chose to give His beloved mother into their care. His love would continue to live in their community, as they talked and prayed and lived together. And John fulfilled Jesus' trust in him: "And from that hour the disciple took her to His own home" (John 19:27).

What an honor this is, that Jesus should trust the church with the care of those He loves so much! For he continues to do this even to this day, as He trusts us with the poor, the sick, the lonely, the hurting, the unwanted. To us He says, "Behold your mother. Behold your son, your daughter, your brothers and sisters." He gives us one another to care for. For all of us who trust in Him are His beloved, needy family, and He gives us to one another.

THE PRAYER: *Dear Jesus, thank You for trusting us with the people You love. Help me to love them as You have loved me. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What things are important to you to take care of before your death?

Whom do you care for on Jesus' behalf?

How does it make you feel, to know that Jesus has trusted you so greatly?

SATISFIED

Friday, April 19, 2019

TEXT: *Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied. Isaiah 53:11*

Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose to suffer and die on the cross? I don't mean the usual answer; the easy answer: "Because He loved us." That, of course, is true. But if you are like me, there's something in the back of your mind that occasionally whispers: "You can love someone and still be disappointed in them. You can love someone but not like them very much. What if Jesus only puts up with me because He HAS to—because that's His job? What if He takes care of me because he's that kind of a person, but not because He really wants to? What if he's just patiently putting up with me and would secretly be glad if I vanished off the face of the earth?"

Perhaps you don't think these sort of things in the most secret, darkest, innermost part of your mind. In that case, this devotion is not for you. But if you have ever thought this way, Isaiah gives us a glimpse of Jesus' mind toward us—how He thought of us when He was walking toward the cross, and how He still thinks of us now that His suffering, death and resurrection are all accomplished. And this is what Isaiah says:

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush Him; He has put Him to grief;
when His soul makes an offering for guilt, He shall see His offspring; He shall prolong

His days; he will of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.

Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied (Isaiah 53:10-11)

"He shall see and be satisfied"—with what? With you! You are the fruit of His cross. When He looks at you, He sees His offspring—the child He has given life to. You are the result of the anguish of His soul. And He is satisfied.

This is why you don't ever have to be afraid that God is secretly disappointed in you. He has told you already what His mind is toward you. He thought you worth the cross. And He will never change His mind.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, I'm so glad that You're satisfied with having me. Keep me always with You. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Whose opinion of you means the most in your life? Name one or two people.

Have you ever tried to please someone, only to find out that you were never good enough? What did you do in the end?

What does it mean to you, knowing that God saved you because He wants you, not because He felt obliged to do it for some reason?

ALLOWED TO LOVE

Saturday, April 20, 2019

TEXT: *So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. John 19:40*

In the whole terrible story of the Passion, this is one of the bits I like best—where Joseph and Nicodemus come to take Jesus' body off the cross and bury Him. I think it's because Jesus is allowing those who love Him to care for Him. He can do nothing for Himself at this point—not even protect His own body from being dumped like trash into a mass grave somewhere. But Jesus' people can do something—and they do.

Joseph is a rich man from Arimathea, a member of the same council that condemned Jesus to death, but one who did not agree with their action. Mark says he was “looking for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43). Matthew says straight out that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. And now that everything seems to have ended in disaster, Joseph plucks up his courage and goes to ask Pilate for the right to bury his master. He doesn't seem to care what may happen when the other council members find out what he's done.

Nicodemus also comes to help—another respected leader, a Pharisee, ruler and teacher among the Jews. He brings a gift of spices, about seventy-five pounds' worth, to put around Jesus' body. It's probably safe to say that neither of these men had ever been involved in funeral work before. They were men, after all, not the women who usually handled body preparation. They were also religious leaders on the eve of the Passover Sabbath, and ought not to have been touching a dead body at such a time. They didn't care.

They loved Jesus—and Jesus our Savior allowed them to show that love in one of the most intimate, humble ways. Joseph and Nicodemus stood in for all of us who love Jesus and who are thankful for the overwhelming love He showed us through His suffering and death. We are privileged to have been allowed to love God Himself. Just for a short time—a very short time—because very soon now, Jesus will rise from the dead, and share His own everlasting life and love with all of us who belong to Him.

THE PRAYER: *Lord, thank You for giving us, Your people, the chance to love You. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever arranged or attended a funeral? How did you show love to the person who died and his or her family through your actions?

How do you show love to another person—maybe someone you live with, a friend, or a coworker—through your actions?

How is letting people love you in itself a way of loving them?

A JOYFUL MISTAKE

Sunday, April 21, 2019

TEXT: *Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. John 20:14*

It was a day Mary would never forget.

She and the other women had come to Jesus' tomb early, to finish His burial arrangements. They were worried about the stone covering the entrance. Who would move it away? But when they got there, it was gone already—and Jesus' body was missing.

It looks like Mary lost her head at this point and ran away—totally missing out on the angels' message that Jesus had risen! In fear and grief she ran to tell the disciples, and then returned to the empty tomb—where she met, first two angels, then the Lord Himself. But she didn't recognize any of them! She wasn't expecting angels—or Jesus—and no doubt the tears got in the way. What a joyful surprise when Jesus called her name!

Mary isn't the only one who expected grief and found joy. Every one of us is a sinner; we all do wrong, and we all naturally expect judgement from God. After all, wrongdoing and punishment go together. How wonderful—and still surprising!—it is to have God say instead, "Your sins are forgiven on account of Jesus."

But that isn't all. Unless Jesus returns first, we will all face death—a time of loss, pain, grief and fear. These feelings are natural. Death is the enemy. But for those of us who trust in Jesus, death is a conquered enemy, for He has risen from the dead and promises to raise us also. We know now that we will live forever, for Jesus will raise us, body and soul, and we will be forever with the Lord. Our fear and grief will be turned into joy, just as Mary's was. Thanks be to God.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Father, for giving us the joy of Your Son rising from the dead. Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever mistaken a good or happy situation for a bad one? If you wish, tell the story.

When has God surprised you?

What does Jesus' resurrection mean to you?

A CHILL DAY FOR ANGELS

Monday, April 22, 2019

TEXT: *And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. Matthew 28:2*

Have you ever noticed how much sitting the angels do on Jesus' resurrection day? An angel descends from heaven, rolls away the stone, and sits on it. Only then does he start talking to the women. Later on, Mary looks into the tomb to discover two angels, one sitting at the place where Jesus's head used to be, the other where His feet were (John 20:12). Again, they're sitting—apparently in no hurry to go anywhere or do anything. They are “chilling,” as my teenage son might say.

What does their sitting mean? When I come in to a room and sit down, it means I'm not going anywhere. I'm not in a hurry. Whatever business I may have can be accomplished right here, while I sit. There's a certain relaxation, a chance to stop and think—and perhaps talk. The rush is over.

I wonder if the angels at Jesus' tomb felt the same way. They had been there, behind the scenes, watching all through Jesus' arrest and torture and crucifixion and death. They had seen His friends take Him down from the cross and place Him in the tomb. They had lived through the glorious moment when He came back to life, breaking the power of death over humanity forever more. Jesus was alive and loose in the world again!

But now all those events were finished. The angels had one message left to deliver—“He is not here, for He has risen!” Now it would be the human followers of Jesus who were in motion, running as fast as they could, spreading the Good News to each other and ultimately to the world. The angels were done. They could sit.

That gift of calm, joyful peace is something God gives to us, too. Oh, we still run. We run to help people in need, we run to deal with emergencies and crises and the problems of every day. We take the Good News to people we love, family and friends and neighbors alike. But there are also times we can sit—and rejoice that Jesus is risen, that evil is conquered, and that God's victory is certain.

THE PRAYER: *Thank You, Lord, for the chance to rest and rejoice in the wonders You have done! Amen.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When do you take time to sit, rest and relax?

When do you feel like you're running, and why?

How does Jesus' resurrection give you rest?

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People of the Passion

LENT 2019

Centuries before Christ, God was preparing the way for His Son's arrival. From mankind's original sin through the children of Israel's on-again, off-again obedience, God was faithful, honoring His promise to Eve (Genesis 3:15), which first pointed to Jesus. In *People of the Passion*, we see God working through the lives of ordinary people to achieve His ultimate aim: our salvation. There are prophets, priests, and kings, servants, soldiers, and civilians—each with a role in the high drama of Christ's passion. Readers may see themselves in some of these people—ordinary individuals who, like us, need a Savior.



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