

# LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2025

**HYMN OF THE SEASON: LORD, YOU SHALL BE MY SONG**

- 1. Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey;  
I'll tell ev'rybody about you wherever I go:  
you alone are our life and our peace and our love.  
Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.**
- 2. Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey.  
May all of my joy be a faithful reflection of you.  
May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song.  
Lord Jesus, I'll praise you as long as I journey.**
- 3. As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant,  
to carry your cross and to share all your burdens and tears.  
For you saved me by giving your body and blood.  
As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant.**
- 4. I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey;  
but courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side.  
And with all of the family you saved by your love,  
we'll sing to your dawn at the end of our journey.**

*Text: Les Petites Soeurs de Jésus and L'Arche Community; tr. Stephen Somerville, b. 1931 Text © 1987 Les Petites Soeurs de Jésus, admin. Augsburg Fortress. Tr. © 1970 Stephen Somerville, admin. Augsburg Fortress.*

## ASH WEDNESDAY

### LENTEN WEEK 1 – OUT OF THE DUST - ISAIAH 58:1-12

Having two boys in my life, I have discovered the magical healing powers that all parents possess. I can kiss a scrape or bandage a cut and presto! It is "all better." He smiles and go back to playing. Someday soon, I know my boys will become young men, and I no longer have that power. He will spend his days working hard in places far from home, and when he hurts he will be on his own. Sadly, he will be old enough to know that kisses do not work long distance, only in person.

I pray that my son will know the Lord, thanks to Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, mentors and other pastors. I know the world my child will navigate will be very different from the one I grew up in. Today, it seems, there is more shouting and posturing, more blatant hatred and prejudice, and evident disrespect for persons and planet on a global scale. Nearly everywhere there is rubble, covered in dust.

This is the world my child has inherited from me and the world I am in today on this Wednesday that opens onto Lent. So many dusty images flood my mind, of collapse and heartbreak, bombs and explosion, and medics and rescue personnel with their dogs searching desperately for survivors; of vitriolic talk demeaning people's rights and livelihoods and thefts of their humanity.

But wait. Listen. Did you hear that?

How in the midst of all the commotion can we hear the tiny cry, barely a breath? But the moment we do, a hush falls. Where? Here! Then there is furious digging, hand to hand, shoulder to shoulder, cobbling through earth and stone and rubble to reach the tiny one before it's too late. Careful now, hands brush away dirt and debris as the small, still form is lifted to safety. Suddenly, there are shouts: "The child is alive!" Oh, such cheering and joy must reach through tear-stained cheeks to the very ears of God. Out of the dust there is life.

Hope is there when brother and sister acknowledges brother and sister, father and mother welcomes son and daughters, and foe becomes friend. When we all gather with one cause, one intention, and one mission, our hopes are realized. We do this for our children, for all children.

*Prayer: "Dear Lord, in the midst of our daily commotion, allow us to hear your voice and the voices of our neighbors, families and friends. Allow us to see your handy work in the daily commotion of life and your face in the faces of all in the world. Amen."*

#### **THURSDAY - MARCH 6, 2025 - 1 PETER 3:18–22**

There are a lot of thoughts packed into this brief passage in Peter's letter! One idea points to Jesus' descent into hell. Peter does not quite say it that way. He speaks of Christ making a "proclamation to the spirits in prison." This is an episode in Jesus' life that Protestants don't think about much. But Christians, especially in the Middle Ages, interpreted this to mean that Jesus himself descended into hell in order to trample on the head of Satan and free all those stuck in Satan's realm. This "harrowing of hell" show that in the two days that Jesus was dead, he was not motionless or out of commission, but in fact, doing the unbelievably hopeful and dangerous work of freeing all those who find themselves separated from God. For, as Julian of Norwich has put it, God makes sure that "not one thing made shall ever be lost."

*Jesus our brother, thank you for not abandoning us to human evil or Satan. Thank you for going where we are terrified to go, and for rescuing all those who find themselves in the grips of hell. You and only you, are the Lord of all reality. Amen.*

#### **FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2025 - MARK 1:9–15**

We are used to celebrating Jesus' baptism as that lovely day when the heavens open up and God praises God's Son for all to see. However, according to Mark, Jesus' baptism celebration was a whiplash of a day. It seems that in the morning, Jesus celebrated the sacrament of baptism and was given a strong affirmation by his Father. But by the afternoon, he seems to have been banished to the desert! What's more, he had to contend with wild beasts and Satan while he was there. This could not have been fun. With these stories of Jesus in heaven, in hell, and in the desert, the New Testament authors show us that there is no place where Christ is not. He is both the eternal, cosmic Savior and the typical human being standing right in front of us. There is no place where Jesus Christ is too afraid or too weak to go.

*Jesus our brother, from the desert to the cross to hell, you go where we are terrified to go. You go there to show us that you will never leave us alone or abandon us. We praise you for your strength and courage, and most of all, for your eternal faithfulness to us. Amen.*

### **SATURDAY, MARCH 8, 2025 - "LORD JESUS, YOU SHALL BE MY SONG" (ELW 808)**

This hymn paints a picture of the Christian pilgrim walking along the journey of life. Along the way, the songwriter is belting out a full-throated song to Jesus Christ. Evolutionary biology studies suggest that humans sing when their brains depict that a task is difficult, or when the brain needs a rest from the activities that it is doing. Perhaps Jesus sang a lot. After all, his short life was full of trials. Whether the biologists are right or not, life is hard, so we should sing! Even if the song isn't happy, we can sing. Our singing is a way to carry Jesus with us. It avoids the boastful prayers in public, but it coaxes us out of our closets so that we are not alone in our faith. The divine community of God surrounds us always, no matter where we find ourselves. Let us sing!

*Lord, help me sing when I cannot sing! And when I can, Lord, thank you for giving me a voice to sing to you and to the amazing works you have done for all of humanity and for me. Amen.*

### **SUNDAY – MARCH 9, 2025 – SUCH LOVE**

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'" (John 3:16-17)*

Today's Scripture reminds me more of Christmas than of Easter. Why? Because it brings thoughts of that baby in a manger to my mind. That's where it all started and now it has accumulated in Jesus' passion and resurrection that we celebrate in a few short Lenten weeks. Such a road he traveled in 33 years!

- Starting out as a king lying in a manger
  - Growing up and preaching to learned men in the temple at the age of 12
  - Teaching and curing hundreds during the prime of his life
  - Tried for crimes he did not commit during the prime of his life
  - Sentenced to the most horrific death the Romans had to offer during the prime of his life
- His Father loved us so much to allow this. Why?

Because we are also God's children and He wants us to be with Him forever, to start loving Him in this life and continue to love Him for all eternity. The Father chose us when He could very well have condemned us for all eternity with a wave of His hand. The Father chose to save us through a tremendous sacrifice of His only Son.

What does such love do to me? It takes my breath away. It softens as well as hurts my heart to have one so mighty die for me. It was a path that neither a royal Father nor a royal Son should have to walk.

*Prayer: "Dear Lord, thank you for loving us so much to not condemn us but to save us from ourselves. Help us, Lord, always to continue to live the most faithful lives and act with greatest love to our neighbors as you did for us. Amen."*

### **MONDAY, MARCH 10, 2025 - GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-17**

Are you familiar with the abbreviation ROFL? It stands for “Rolling On the Floor, Laughing.” God showed up and repeated the covenantal promise to Abraham that his descendants would be exceedingly numerous. And Abraham—now 99 years old, with a 90-year-old wife—“fell on his face and laughed.” Abraham ROFL.

Abraham simply did not believe that God could or would keep the promise. But here is the thing about promises: What matters is whether the promise-maker can and will keep the promise. God, miraculously, was able to keep the promise. And God, faithfully, did keep the promise. And the promise wasn’t just to Abraham, but particularly it was to Sarah. God was not content to leave Sarah out of the covenant. And so 90-year-old Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were both #ROFL.

In fact, all of us are ROFL. As Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

*God of joy, turn our disbelieving laughter into the surprised joy of faith. Teach us to laugh with Sarah and Abraham and all whom you bless. Amen.*

#### **TUESDAY - MARCH 11, 2025 - PSALM 22:23–31**

When was the last time that you threw a dinner party to celebrate some direct experience of God’s salvation or blessing? Leviticus 7:11–15 describes a meal people were to throw in moments of thanksgiving. Deuteronomy 14 toward the end describes annual feasts of thanksgiving that people would throw. And note, they were to remember to include the priests, the orphans, the widows, and the “resident aliens” (displaced persons).

The author of Psalm 22 had experienced God’s salvation: God “did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.” The psalmist then says: “The poor shall eat and be satisfied” (22:26a). The psalmist may have merely been describing God’s characteristic abundance. But it is likely that the psalmist was throwing a thanksgiving meal in response to having experienced God’s mercy and deliverance—and he was including the poor. Next time you throw a dinner party, remember the poor and the hungry. If you can’t invite them, remember them in other ways.

*Merciful Savior, we thank you for all the ways that you deliver us from evil and give us our daily bread. May all the world know your love; may all be clothed and fed. Amen.*

#### **WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 2025 - ROMANS 4:13–25**

Writing to the church in Rome, Paul said, “For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” God had made a promise (really a set of promises) to Abraham. At times, Abraham disobeyed God—doubted God—and even laughed at God’s promises. But in the end, Abraham trusted God’s promises. And that trust—that faith—made all the difference.

That is the way it is with a promise. When someone makes you a promise, you either trust the promise or you do not trust the promise. The only way to receive a promise is to trust it (or not).

And here is God's promise to you: In Jesus Christ, God accepts you, loves you, forgives you, and claims you as God's very own child. Believe that promise. Trust it.

*Triune God, you promise us that we belong to you. We trust you—strengthen our trust. Hold on to us when we doubt, disobey, or dismiss you. Forgive us and cling to us for Christ's sake. Amen.*

#### **THURSDAY, MARCH 13, 2025 - MARK 8:31–38**

The assigned gospel reading occurs in Mark's Gospel immediately after Peter was the first person to say to Jesus, "You are the Messiah."

This passage is normally known as the first "passion prediction." Jesus says, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

I don't love the title "passion prediction." I prefer the language that the Gospel of Mark uses: Jesus "began to teach them..." In this and two other passages, Jesus was teaching the disciples what it meant for him to be the Messiah. These are "Teachings about the Crucified Messiah." To be the Messiah means not to be served, but to serve. Not to command, but to obey. Not to kill, but to be crucified for our sake. And not to stay dead, but to be raised so that all might have life.

*Dear Crucified and Risen Lord, put to death all our self-serving desires to rule and to be served. Raise us up to new life in you. Amen.*

#### **FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 2025 - MARK 8:31–38**

In the first half of the assigned gospel reading, Jesus says: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." In response to this (good!) news, Peter rebuked Jesus. And Jesus, in turn, rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And then, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

So here is the central problem with the gospel: the cross. Both Jesus' cross. And the crosses that Jesus calls us all to take up as we follow him. Why would anyone worship a God that suffers and dies? Why would anyone follow such a God? Why? Because the Crucified Christ—and no other—is alone the true God.

*Blessed Savior, when you call us to follow you, you call us also to die to ourselves. Give us the courage to follow you every day, to carry our crosses with humility and strength. Amen.*

#### **SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 2025 - "LORD JESUS, YOU SHALL BE MY SONG" (ELW 808)**

Our theme hymn chosen for our Lenten reflection is one of my favorite hymns, "Lord Jesus, You Shall be My Song as I Journey."

The metaphor of Jesus as “my song as I journey” is new and provocative. The psalms generally have very concrete metaphors for God: shepherd, rock, light, fortress, refuge, and the like. John goes further and says that Jesus is the Word.

This hymn creatively moves beyond Jesus as the Word and says, “You shall be my song as I journey.” The hymn then describes Jesus as a song of life, a song of peace, a song of love. Jesus as our song provokes us to think about the melodies and tunes that we hum or whistle. It invites us to reflect on the “ear worms” that are playing in the background of our thoughts. How do those tunes and melodies become our Jesus as we travel?

*Lord, you are our song, sing to us. Play in our hearts and minds the music of eternity. Let our lives sing your song of forgiveness. Amen.*

### **SUNDAY – MARCH 16, 2025 – MULES AND BEATITUDES - PSALM 32**

It’s not every day that someone says to me, “Don’t be such a mule!” or some even more blunt version. And yet, here, in Scripture, the Psalmist says just that (v. 9). Got my attention! And so I sit up and listen. Just what is it that I do or do not do that reflects such stubbornness to warrant being called a “donkey” or worse by the Psalmist?

Clues to the Psalmist’s rebuke comes in the first half of the Psalm, when a “carrot” is held out in the form of two beatitudes: “Happy (or blessed) are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (v. 1) and “Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (v. 2). By contrast, the consequence of not being forgiven or keeping silent about our sins results in unhappiness. We feel horrible. We lose our appetites, we are tormented and can’t sleep. We languish in travail, wasting away in body, soul and spirit (v. 3-4) – a rather depressing outcome.

The Psalmist is using what I once heard called, “the carrot-tipped-stick” approach. If we aren’t persuaded by incentives of blessing, then, perhaps, we’ll be shaken out of our willfulness by a misery-index. And if we’re really stubborn about it, a bit of name calling might do. “Don’t be a mule!”

The remedy to such travail is simple enough (v. 5): acknowledgement of our wrongdoing, revealing our indiscretions, going to the Lord with a contrite spirit and confessing our transgressions. And God, in turn, forgives “the guilt of our sin. Selah!” Selah, is a Hebrew word, perhaps, a musical notation, meaning something like, “stop and listen!” God has forgiven you! God has forgiven me! God forgives us!

What a perfect way to observe the Lenten season. Here we are reminded again how to become truly and fully human. The full joy, benefit and blessing of Easter is ours to receive, if we but confess our faults and our falling-short to God, who in steadfast love (v. 10) forgives us no matter what. “Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O forgiven ones, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.” (v.11). Selah!

### **MONDAY, MARCH 17, 2025 - EXODUS 20:1–17**

On this Monday morning we look forward to the third Sunday in Lent as we survey all the readings and hymns that the lectionary brings to us this week. The hymn for this week lifts up our theme, "May all of my joy be a faithful reflection of you. May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song." That is the disciple's prayer, that we may be "a faithful reflection of you, Lord."

The LORD gave the people of Israel a concrete way to reflect the image of God to the world. We see it in our reading for today in Exodus 20. God spoke the words of Law and Promise to the people from the top of Mt. Sinai. These promises show us the heart of God. When we walk in these promises we reflect the heart of God.

*God of Promise, may we be students of your Word. May our lives reflect your heart as we love you and love our neighbors, just as you taught us. Amen.*

## **TUESDAY, MARCH 18, 2025 - PSALM 19**

The other night I walked outside my front door and was overwhelmed with the brilliance of the full moon. It was nestled amongst some clouds that framed it with glowing glory. That scene popped into my mind as I read Psalm 19 today.

The light of the full moon connects to this text in two ways. First, the psalmist begins by proclaiming that the heavens are telling of the glory of God. The psalmist focuses on the glory of the sun in its daily pattern. Yet, the moon is more like us. It has no light of its own, but when it is fully facing the sun it is brilliant.

Second, the moon shines in the midst of darkness. The second half of Psalm 19 talks about how the psalmist is surrounded by the lawless, but he knows that if he follows the Word of the LORD, he will continue to reflect God's glory.

*God of Promise, give us the wisdom to focus on your Word today. Give us the strength to keep the course and not be distracted by all the voices that surround us and seek to pull our attention away from you. Amen.*

## **WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2025 - 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–25**

In our readings this week we see people who are trying to stay focused on the LORD, reflecting the light of God, while surrounded by people who want to pull them away. The Israelites received the Law from Mt. Sinai so that they would not follow the ways of the Canaanites. The psalmist looked to the heavens and to the Law as a compass pointing to God.

Today we read the words of the Apostle Paul. He was preaching a message that was hard for people to understand. First, he said that Jesus, the Son of God, was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead. Second, he said that the kingdom of God is for all people, not only for the children of Israel. The Greeks thought he was a lunatic. The Jewish leaders thought he was a heretic. Paul was surrounded by opponents and probably felt outnumbered. He needed to keep his eyes on Jesus' promises in order to reflect the love of God to all people.

*God of Promise, it is sometimes difficult to stay faithful when people around us misunderstand us and falsely accuse us. Give us strength and courage today to reflect the love that you showed us on the cross. Amen.*

**THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 2025 - JOHN 2:13–22**

Today we read the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. Note that the Gospel of John places this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It follows immediately after the story of Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. In that story Jesus shows God's abundance and joy. Now in today's reading Jesus enters the Temple in Jerusalem. This place was supposed to be the reflection of God's abundance and joy—to be a light for the nations. Instead, Jesus found the Temple full of greedy merchants who exploited the weak to make a profit.

Jesus must have felt like David when he wrote Psalm 19. He is surrounded by people who have forgotten God's words of Law and Promise. Jesus knew that the Temple had to be cleansed if it would ever be able to reflect God's light to the world.

*God of Promise, search our hearts today. Help us to see the ways that we are like those merchants in the Temple. Drive out the things in our hearts that dull the light of your love for the world. Amen.*

**FRIDAY, MARCH 21, 2025 - JOHN 2:13–22**

The religious leaders were upset with Jesus for disrupting their business as usual. "What gives you the authority to do these things?" they asked. "Show us a sign." Jesus responded with perplexing words. "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." What?!? The temple took 46 years to build. Who does this guy think he is?

We learn two important things from this story. First, the Temple is not a building. It is a body. John tells us that Jesus was talking about his own bodily resurrection. His resurrected body is the true Temple, and we, his disciples, are members of that resurrected body. We are the Temple.

The second thing we learn is that the reflection of God's light comes through the movements of the body, not through the rituals of a building. Jesus drove out the greed of the people and demonstrated love and forgiveness through his death and resurrection. Together, we are invited to be that living Temple and reflection of God's light to the world.

*God of Promise, thank you that Jesus has revealed the true Temple of God. Help us to never forget that we are part of the body of Christ and called to reflect God's light to the world. Amen.*

**SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 2025 - "LORD JESUS, YOU SHALL BE MY SONG" (ELW 808)**

Life is a journey. It is full of ups and downs, twists and turns, exhilaration and disappointment. Sometimes we follow the Word of the LORD and it feels amazing. Sometimes we get distracted by the people or things around us that pull us away from God.

The author of this hymn reflects the reality of life in each verse. Verse 1 begins with hope as we seek to sing the song of Jesus to the world. Verse 2 steps into full praise mode. Verse 3 seems to show the stumble in the journey. Our call is not to pride, but to servanthood and cross-bearing. Verse 4 takes us to the darkness of doubt and fear and fills us with courage that, even in that low place, God is with us.

We reflect the light of God, not through our perfection and perpetual brightness. No. We reflect the light of God when we remember that God's love is faithful throughout all our journey.

*God of Promise, we thank you for the ups and downs of our lives. Thank you for being with us through it all. May we never forget that you are with us and for us. Amen.*

### **SUNDAY – MARCH 23, 2017 – WRONGFULLY QUOTED - JEREMIAH 1:1-10**

I remember a few years back I was quoted in my hometown newspaper for an article—I don't remember what the article was about. I remember being particular struck by my quotation. It's not that it was particularly articulate or profound—I was struck because I had absolutely no recollection of actually having said any of those words to the reporter, at least in the order in which they were presented.

The article was not on a particularly contentious subject; I'm sure that if I were to run for a political office, these words would not be detrimental to my election. Nonetheless, I was offended. I was offended because my voice and thoughts had been infringed upon. I was offended because my own words had been deemed unworthy of repetition. I was offended because the reporter had put words in my mouth.

The prophet Jeremiah was often at odds with God. His calling as a prophet was not one that he often reveled in, but one that at times he appeared to resent. Right here, in Jeremiah's call, may lay the genesis of this deep-seated conflict.

"Now I have put my words in your mouth." (1:9, NRSV) These are upsetting words, even coming from God. We have been called to a ministry of proclamation. We are to proclaim the Word revealed in the words of Scripture, even those words we don't particularly care for. Our journey with God is often a contentious one, as we ourselves struggle with the words that God as given us to share. Yet we are tasked with proclaiming Christ crucified and resurrected.

May we persevere in the hope and knowledge that these words—this Word—is indeed truth and life.

### **MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2025 - NUMBERS 21:4–9**

God's story and God's people have always been on the move, going somewhere. Along their journey the Israelites found that things were not as they imagined they would be, and their patience was tested. They were tired, crabby, angry, and doubtful. They cried out, complained, and blamed. God responded, as always. God responded because the Israelites were God's beloved.

In 2025, we are on the move as well. Navigating next steps, seeking to find ourselves in God's narrative, and hoping to make sense of our own stories that are at the heart of our daily journey. Just like those who have gone before us, our exhaustion, hunger, crabbiness, anger, and doubt cause us to cry out, complain, and blame. Our cries evoke a response from God because we too are God's beloved. The Lenten season and this story invite our return to God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

*God of mercy and love, when we are impatient and angry because things are not going how we imagined, remind us that there is another way, another space to lean into. Help us to breathe and give us strength and patience to recognize your constant gracious presence. Amen.*

### **TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025 - PSALM 107:1–3, 17–22**

Once again in today's psalm we find ourselves wandering. Starting with thanksgiving, we acknowledge the Lord and the ways in which God has fully engaged in the journey of God's people. In a response of gratitude, the psalmist reminds us that God, our Creator, is the redeemer. In the broken places, where sickness, distress, death, and destruction hovered, God gathered up God's people from all directions. God pulled them in and held them together, not just as individuals, but also as a community.

Verses 1 and 22 of the psalm are like bookends that remind God's beloved to respond with thanksgiving and songs of joy. What are ways in which God has restored and healed you? As you ponder this question, you are invited this day to lift up words or prayers of thanksgiving, gratitude, and perhaps even sing a song of joy!

*Healing God, we give thanks for the places you have gathered us in, held us together, and reminded us that we are deeply loved. As we serve in the world, help our words to be healing, loving, and kind to all those with whom we share the journey this day. Amen.*

### **WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26, 2025 - EPHESIANS 2:1–10**

It cannot feel very good to start off with the announcement "you were dead"! Yet, as we move through the following verses, we come to see why the people were dead because of their trespasses, and how they have now been redeemed by God's grace. Ultimately, death is separation from God—a disconnection from our Creator caused by our sin. Thank goodness the story doesn't end there! Jesus was and is the re-connector, by God's grace restoring what has been broken. Even though we were dead, bound together with Christ we have been saved by grace. Grace is the healing balm between death and life. Grace allows us the freedom to know we are going to be okay. Even though we mess things up, God's work in us by grace is there to create in and for us a new future that fits God's promises.

*Gracious God, forgive us when we make mistakes and hurt others. Grace us with all that we need to restore what has been broken. Amen.*

### **THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 2025 - JOHN 3:14–21**

Today we begin with a flashback. Jesus reaches into the past to remind Nicodemus of the Moses story, recalling the serpent in the wilderness which by God's promise was lifted up in order to save the people from death. Now Jesus states that by God's promise he too will be lifted up to save people from death. Jesus' narrative propels him forward to show us he is the great link between what was, what is, and what is yet to come. As his crucifixion nears in our Lenten story, he points to the purpose and end of that story. The Good News for today is that Jesus came to demonstrate God's love for the world. It's been that way since the beginning, when God created everything. The love God has for God's people has always been at the heart and center of all God does—past, present, and future.

*God of all times and places, lift up what we need to hear, to see, to feel, to embrace, and to love. Help us in the times, places, and opportunities for love, to raise up and build up your people. Strengthen us for the journey. Amen.*

#### **FRIDAY, MARCH 28, 2025 - JOHN 3:14–21**

It takes courage and a willingness to admit our brokenness. Light reveals the ways in which we have fallen short, hurt others, and lived only for ourselves. We might find it much easier and more comfortable just to hide in the darkness, because sometimes the light feels like judgment. But when we are honest and vulnerable about ourselves, we are convicted. Because of God's grace we are given another chance—and then another, and another. That is what God's love does for us; it creates new beginnings in us. Death and darkness do not have the last word. God loves the world, wants the very best for the world, and has such abundant grace and compassion for the world that God sent God's only Son to be lifted up in order that we might have new life.

*God of light, may we use today to examine the ways which have separated us from you. Help us to be vulnerable and brave and with all that we are, return to you and your forgiving grace. Amen.*

#### **SATURDAY, MARCH 29, 2025 - "LORD JESUS, YOU SHALL BE MY SONG" (ELW 808)**

Journey, route, path, road. All of these words remind us of the walk we are on with Jesus. From the moment we are born we are on the move, made to be in relationship with God and each other. Like our biblical ancestors, on this journey of life our bodies carry us, our minds engage us, and our spirits connect us to the sacred song of God's presence. This is important, so that we may be assured that Christ, who journeys alongside us, gives us courage to face our fears and provides opportunities daily to love all people and all things. The Holy Spirit is the accompanying tune, who shows us the direction of where we were, where we are, and where we're going. With each step, we are invited to listen. Jesus is our song.

*Moving Jesus, be our song. Remind us you are with us on our journey, loving and helping us to sing whatever our hearts yearn for in this time. Remind us that you are as close as our breath. Amen.*

#### **SUNDAY – MARCH 30 – WILL YOU REALLY LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE FOR ME?**

*Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay*

*down my life for you.” Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!” (John 13:36-38)*

Sometimes a person needs a “reality check.” A reality check helps you see that the real situation is not the same as what you believe. For example, you may believe you are in perfect health, but then the doctor gives you a reality check. He helps you see the real situation through some test results.

Jesus once gave Peter a reality check by asking him a searching question: “Will you really lay down your life for me?” (John 13:38). Jesus asked this question to help Peter—and us—see the truth about our spiritual weakness and our need for a Savior.

Peter needed a reality check. Jesus warned him that he was not ready to follow him down the road of suffering and death. Nevertheless, Peter insisted, “Lord, I *will* lay down my life for you” (John 13:37). Peter ignored his spiritual weakness and underestimated sin’s great power. So Jesus gave him a reality check by asking him, “Will you *really* lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!” (John 13:38). Jesus wanted Peter to know the truth—that he would fail to fear, love, and trust in him above all things.

We also need a reality check. How easily we become complacent about the spiritual dangers in our lives. We too need to hear Jesus’ searching questions: “Will you really lay down your life for me? Do you really have the strength to fear, love, and trust in me above all things? Do you really have the power to resist all temptation and to face suffering and death for my sake?”

To each of those questions we would have to confess that we don’t have the strength to lay down our lives for Jesus. But, thanks be to God, Jesus could and would lay down his life for us and for all people! He boldly promised, “I am the Good Shepherd . . . I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:11,15). But unlike Peter and us, he made good on his bold promise. He truly laid down his life for us as he cried out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

Sometimes we need our eyes opened to the truth. Praise God that through his Word he opens our eyes to see the reality of our spiritual weakness. But more importantly, thank God that through his Word we can see the reality of Jesus’ life-saving sacrifice. rough that good news alone, our gracious God will give us the desire and strength to lay down our lives each day for him.

*Prayer: O Lord, how often we foolishly copy Peter and substitute spiritual overconfidence for humble faith. rough your dear Son forgive and restore us, even as you forgave and restored Peter. Grant us grace to trust your strength and not our own. Amen.*

#### **MONDAY, MARCH 31, 2025 - JEREMIAH 31:31–34**

The heart’s journey is a pronounced theme of this week of Lenten readings. “The days are surely coming” sets our eyes on the horizon of the Lenten pathway. Culminating the trek is a new covenant. But remember: In liturgical time, we’ve only heard about this covenant. We’ve not yet witnessed it come to fruition. Thus, we journey with anticipation for something coming—expectant, longing, hoping-against-hope.

It is a covenant of good news! From the least to the greatest, all will know the Holy One, whose law will be written within, on our hearts. A deep belonging bestowed, with God and with one another as our lives are bound up in the life of God. Forgiveness, restoration. This is the good news spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. But at the outset of this week on the Lenten journey, these are words of something to come. So, we travel on with longing hearts.

*Holy One, we long to know you more. Journey with us into the unknown pathways of our lives, and through this Lenten season, for we know something truly good is coming. We trek toward you with longing hearts. Amen.*

## **TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2025**

Luther, Melancthon, and the early Protestant reformers were pastorally very concerned about the hearts of Christians when it came to sin. Of primary concern in Article XX of the Augsburg Confession is the consolation and encouragement of “anxious consciences” and “terrified minds” that were “vexed by the doctrine of works” but hearing no “consolation from the gospel.” You can hear the “anxious conscience” and “terrified mind” of the psalmist. The writer pines over iniquity, transgressions, and sin. “I was born guilty!”

But read the psalm’s first line again. This quintessential psalm of confession, prayed the world over by those beset by failures and shortcomings, begins with trust in the love and mercy of God. In your journey through this season of repentance, make time to unburden your heart in confession. But do so with the consolation of God’s mercy and love as your opening refrain, and the joy of salvation your “Amen.”

*Merciful and loving God, who desires for me truth and wisdom, joy and gladness, create in me a clean heart, a renewed and willing spirit, and restore to me the joy of your salvation. Amen.*

## **WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2, 2025 - HEBREWS 5:5–10**

Nowhere in the liturgical year does the journey of Jesus become more emotional than in Lent. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears.” Our hearts too journey with Jesus through the valley of this season. While shadowed by cries and tears portending a terrible day of suffering ahead for Jesus—and for us, in this liturgical time—Lent also offers signs of light and hope ahead.

This passage from Hebrews is one such sign. Read in the thick of the Lenten shadows, we hear: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” “You are a priest forever.” “He became the source of eternal salvation.” We’ll need these signs of light and hope to hold onto, just as we do when we move through life’s many shadowy seasons, so that we are not overwhelmed completely.

*Holy One, who is able to save from death, hear our prayers and supplications, our loud cries and tears, just as you heard those of Jesus, our high priest and source of salvation. Reveal to us the small sources of light and hope as we travel through the shadows, now and in the days to come. Amen.*

#### **THURSDAY, APRIL 3, 2025 - JOHN 12:20–33**

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” said the Greeks to the disciples. It’s a curious scene, occurring just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the verses prior. As the Pharisees say in the verse just before this passage, the Greeks’ request is a sign that the whole world is now going after Jesus. But why did they wish to see Jesus? We aren’t told. In fact, when Jesus learns of the Greeks’ wish to see him, he moves into a monologue: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...” Metaphorically, the Greeks are a symbol of the reach of salvation into the Gentiles. But in our story, there were some Greeks who journeyed up to worship at the festival. And they wanted to see Jesus. If you could imagine your way into this festival scene, why do you suppose they wanted to see Jesus that day?

*God, through the darkness of the Lenten veil, we too wish to see Jesus. We make this journey—longing, anticipating, hoping-against-hope—that at the end, we will meet him, lifted up from the earth, drawing all people to himself. Amen.*

#### **FRIDAY, APRIL 4, 2025 - JOHN 12:20–33**

We return to Jesus with a troubled soul. He has spoken the truth! That unless a grain of wheat falls and dies, it remains only a single seed. That those who love their life lose it. That whoever serves him must follow him. But these truths don’t ward off the pending trouble. And now it troubles his very own soul. Unlike in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus doesn’t ask to be saved from this hour. Instead, coming to this hour might be a way of his glorifying the name of God.

When the voice of the Divine responds, all the crowd heard it. Some say it’s thunder. Others an angel speaking. The voice was for the crowd’s sake. But when the Holy speaks, they cannot all perceive it as the voice of God. On this Lenten journey our hearts are being prepared through lingering in stillness and shadow to perceive anew the good news for which we anxiously await. *O God, should you speak to us in the quiet of our hearts or in thunderous peals, prepare our hearts and open our ears so that we may perceive you rightly and follow you wholly. Amen.*

#### **SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2025 - “LORD JESUS, YOU SHALL BE MY SONG” (ELW 808)**

This beautiful hymn is a creation of the Little Sisters of Jesus and the L’Arche communities. The Little Sisters are a contemplative order, dedicated to living and working alongside those on the margins of society, often among nomadic peoples. L’Arche is a global network of people both with and without intellectual disabilities, living, working, and worshipping together in intentional community. Reading again the hymn’s lyrics, with knowledge of the communities that produced it, helps us to see the journey described not just as metaphor for “life’s journey,” but as our actually traveling alongside others in need of companionship. L’Arche does ministry in and around Erie area.

The hymn portrays Jesus as the focus of our journey. But companionship with others along the way of Christ is the life of discipleship. Taking inspiration from the Little Sisters and L’Arche, with whom do you need to make this journey through Lent, and through life? Who needs you to come alongside them?

*Jesus, you are our journey's origin and its end. Be now our joy, our song, our life, our peace. For with you we share all burdens and tears. Amen.*

**SUNDAY – APRIL 6 - DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I HAVE DONE FOR YOU? - JOHN 13:12-15**

Jesus asked this question because he knew his disciples of all times would have trouble grasping this point about Holy Week—Christian leaders get down on the floor.

So Jesus made this lesson clear and direct. He is the master teacher; here he took the eternal truth and expressed it in a vivid, even uncomfortable, object lesson. He laid aside all the power and glory the Father had given him, got down on the floor, and washed the feet of his followers.

What makes this hard to understand? Our pride and sense of privilege. We think we have done well when we are patient and polite with other people, especially with people who seem below us. Jesus tells us we need to bend lower.

You may be the smartest one in the room. You may be the leader—gifted, appointed, and even called. But God has put you in that position to serve others, to serve in the lowest ways. “How many times do I have to . . . tell these people? clean up after these people? do what someone else should have done?” Well, one more time, at least.

What I Have Done: Jesus—the holy, anointed Teacher and Lord—got down on the floor and showed what Christian leaders do. He washed his disciples’ feet. His action echoed the greater washing Jesus was doing that week, purifying us by paying the wages of our sins. He died for all the times I refused to lift a finger, lose a privilege, or forget a time when I was disrespected. This washing was also a literal, practical, and daily job. The dirt sticks and collects along the miles, and a bowl of water with strong hands soothes and refreshes. The cleansing feels so good when you hire someone to do it, so think of what an absolute delight it is when the one who washes your feet is your lover and lord.

For You: Jesus during Holy Week “loved [us] to the end” (John 13:1). Our Lord and Teacher got down on the floor to wash our feet. And then he got up on the cross. He did this to be the humble servant we’ve never been, and he did this to inspire us to do what we find so hard.

Do we understand? As we watch Jesus on the floor with a towel around his waist and a basin, we better understand our sinful pride. We treasure Jesus’ love and gift. And we better understand what Christian leaders do. We get down on the floor to confess. We bow down to marvel at Jesus’ love. We kneel to serve—to be a delight to one another.

*Prayer: Dear Jesus, washer of our feet and souls, forgive us for our pride and lack of love. Lead us in your grace to live new lives serving each other. Amen.*

**MONDAY, APRIL 7, 2025 - PSALM 118:1–2, 19–29**

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. These lines can be easy to gloss over since there is so much to dwell upon in this psalm, but what incredible news! Not only is God good, but God’s love endures, and we should feel secure in that, even when we face trials and

tribulations. We do not have a fickle God who tires of us, nor do we have a God that is indifferent to our lives. We have a God who is interested in us and who seeks a relationship with us. We have a God who literally took on human flesh, suffered, and died for us. As we prepare to celebrate Easter soon, we need to make sure that this does not feel commonplace or taken for granted. This is incredible news indeed. Praise be to God!

*Ever-loving God, we thank you for your enduring and steadfast love. We pray that you continue to walk with us, guide us, and love us even when we stumble. Amen.*

#### **TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2025 - MARK 11:1–11**

What must it have been like to run this particular errand for Jesus? Is Jesus really telling two of his followers to run ahead into the town, steal a horse, and bring it back? Jesus clarifies by instructing them that if anyone asks about it, just say that Jesus said to do it, but they will bring it back soon. How many times in our lives do we do things that we do not fully understand but feel convicted to do? How many times have we done things because Jesus has commanded it, but it looks like foolishness to others?

Love our enemies? Nonsense. Give away our hard-earned money to the poor? Foolishness! We may not be stealing a horse for Jesus, but we do things because Jesus has told us to, and these commands do indeed have a larger purpose, even if they look like foolishness to the world.

*Give us the strength to follow your words, dear God, even when the world, or perhaps even we, do not fully understand them. Amen.*

#### **WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9, 2025 - ISAIAH 50:4–9a**

This passage reminds me of the common phrase: “Don’t shoot the messenger!” The servant, who is speaking, is tasked with giving a weary people a word to sustain them. Yet, despite this seeming like a message that would be welcomed, it is not. The servant’s words are met with resistance and the narrative starts to sound like a lament. We will see this rejection of God’s Word again in the Easter story. The Word of God is often rejected, and those who proclaim it are ridiculed or mocked. Yet, even with the hardships that the servant faces, he stands confident. It is not confidence in himself, but in God and God’s ability to help and sustain him. “It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me?”

*Gracious and loving God, we thank you for your continued help and love. We pray that you continue to be the source of our confidence and hope even during a time of trial. Amen.*

#### **THURSDAY, APRIL 10, 2025 - PSALM 31:9–16**

The wonderful thing about the psalms is that there is generally one to fit just about any mood or situation. In Psalm 31, things are going very poorly for the psalmist. The psalmist is dealing with a variety of unfortunate events including bodily affliction, persecution from enemies, ostracization from neighbors, and even the pain of being forgotten. But the beauty of this psalm is the utter trust the psalmist has for God and God’s ability to save the psalmist from troubles. The passage begins and ends with pleas for God’s mercy and protection. The conclusion comes in a beautiful

petition of trust: Let your face shine on your servant; save me with your unfailing love. It is not a request to vanquish enemies but a desire to be saved by God's powerful and unfailing love. *Gracious God, let your face shine on us, and save us with your unfailing love. Help us endure and triumph over adversity and let us take comfort in you. Amen.*

#### **FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 2025 - PHILIPPIAN 2:5–11**

Humility is one of the greatest attributes a person can have, but it is consistently undervalued in our society. We celebrate those who are brash and arrogant—look at that confidence! But we only need to look at Jesus Christ to see the value and the necessity of humility. Jesus Christ is God; his power is unmatched. Yet he humbled himself, taking on the burdens of his people, suffering pain and humility and finally death. In turn, he was exalted by God the Father. Compared to Christ, what do we have to be arrogant about? What do we have to boast about? I am an academic, a career in which there is no shortage of ego, but many fields have similar grounds for pride. But truly what do we have to boast about? This life is transitory, and our work will not last through the ages. Everything we have is a gift from God. We can boast only in the Lord, putting off worldly honors and praise. We should follow Christ's example of humility and love.

*Gracious God, we pray that you bless us with the gift of humility and that our boasting be only in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

#### **SATURDAY, APRIL 12, 2025 - "LORD JESUS, YOU SHALL BE MY SONG" (ELW 808)**

In the ancient world people generally received their faith from their homeland. The Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, others all had their many gods. The early Christians were different. Their faith did not belong to a particular place, and with the rapid spread of the faith in the decades after Christ's death, Christianity did not belong to a particular people either. Christians identified as sojourners without a land. I am reminded of this fact whenever I hear this hymn. As Christians we are all travelers in this life. We do not really have a singular homeland. But wherever two or three are gathered, Christ is with us. Jesus is with us in our joys and our sufferings. He is with us as we journey.

*Most loving God, thank you for being with us on this journey of life. Thank you for walking with us, supporting us in our happiness and our struggles. Amen.*

#### **HOLY WEEK - PALM SUNDAY - WHOSE SON IS THE REAL MESSIAH? - MARK 12:35-37a**

Whose Son is the Messiah? It is fitting that we begin our Holy Week devotions with this as the first question. During Holy Week we focus on Jesus as he goes up to Jerusalem one last time. Here we see him humble himself and become obedient to death—even death on a cross. We see him suffer terrible indignities, cruel torture, and bloody death.

How do we view these events? As sad and depressing, or edifying and uplifting? As irrelevant to the important issues of our present-day lives, or absolutely relevant? It all depends on what we

mean when we confess that Jesus is the Messiah. Without a complete grasp of his identity we will be unable to truly grasp, appreciate—yes, celebrate—what he has done for us in his Passion. And so Jesus asks, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David?” Jesus wasn’t saying they were wrong to teach that. Certainly, the promised Messiah was to be a human descendant of David as God had promised (2 Samuel 7:11-16). But Jesus’ point was that the teachers of the law had not gone far enough.

To prove his point Jesus quotes the first verse of Psalm 110, a psalm written by King David himself by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Concerning the promised Messiah (his own descendant), David wrote: “the Lord said to *my Lord*: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’” Jesus continues: “David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”

The only correct answer to that question is that not only is the Messiah the son of David, he is also *the Son of God*. The Messiah’s purpose for coming was not to establish an earthly rule but a spiritual rule. He would come to save his people from their sins. As true human, he would serve as a genuine substitute. As true God, his sacrificial death would pay for the sins of all.

Jesus didn’t ask this question until later in Holy Week. This was one of the last things he publicly spoke in the temple courts. He asked it for the sake of both his opponents and his followers: for his opponents—one last call for them to repent; for his followers—one more opportunity to help them grasp completely who he was and what he was about to do *for them*.

This is what enables you and me to appreciate—even celebrate—the events of Holy Week. This is Jesus, our Messiah, God for us! Here we see the full extent of his love for us and how precious we are to him.

*Prayer: “Dear Lord Jesus, we are thankful for your willingness to be fully human and experience all that we experience. We are grateful that you, as God and Lord, came to remove the stain of sin from us so we may dream of a future with you. Amen.”*

### **HOLY WEEK - MONDAY - EXODUS 12:1–4, (5–10), 11–14**

Like the Israelites, we are called to remember—to remember the mighty acts of God. The Israelites remembered the Passover, when God passed over their houses because of the blood of the lambs smeared on their doorposts. We Christians are called to remember, too. We remember that night in an upper room, when Jesus celebrated the feast with his disciples—Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of all. We remember the blood of Jesus, the lamb of God, who was sacrificed for us and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. We remember this, as Jesus commanded us, in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, the meal that we repeat as a reminder of God’s sacrificial love for us. The blood of Jesus is for us the cause of remembrance of something we must never forget.

*O God of love, who will never let us go, help us always to remember your Son, the Lamb of God, our Savior and Redeemer. Amen.*

## **HOLY WEEK – TUESDAY – COULDN'T YOU MEN KEEP AWAKE ONE HOUR? - MATTHEW 26:40-41**

How are you at staying awake? Some of us probably wished for a do-over after nodding through crucial parts of the latest Star Wars movie.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, his disciples could not keep their eyes open. Picture the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus led the Eleven to a quiet place to pray. Then he urged Peter, James, and John, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Upon his return from praying, even Jesus seemed surprised that his friends could not stay awake. Consider what he had told them. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Consider what he showed them. His peaceful countenance overwhelmed with sorrow. Sweat like great drops of blood falling on him after he prayed.

How could they sleep? The Spirit through Luke tells us they were exhausted from sorrow. So the burden of suffering that weighed down Jesus to the point of death crushed his disciples too. But notice that Jesus did not sleep. He prayed. For himself. For the successful completion of our salvation. And he woke them up. He alerted them to the dangers of sleeping. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

Here is good news for you and me, the spiritually weak. Our Savior Jesus does not save us because of what we will do for him. He is not selling salvation to the ones who can best avoid temptation. His demands are more exacting than can be met by adding a few prayers.

His demands have been met, only could be met, by him. His holy life lived in our place. His innocent death as payment for our sins. And his resurrection, God's ultimate wake up call. So when he tells us to watch and pray, he is not laying out our way to earn his forgiveness. He is alerting us to the dangers of having his forgiveness through faith. Our enemies are around us. They are not sleeping. They are alert to our weaknesses and eager to use them against us. In our times of sorrow and distress, and in our times of accomplishment.

Thankfully we have a Savior who has defeated our enemies—sin, death, and the devil. In his amazing grace he is eager to help us in our time of need. Oh, how we need him. “Could you not keep watch with me one hour?” No, Lord, we cannot. But with your help and strength, empowered by your mercy, we will. Lord, help us to watch with you.

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, you suffered the temptations of our spiritual enemies and defeated them for us. In our daily struggle against the spiritual forces of darkness and in our inner battle with our sinful nature, shield us with your protection and strengthen us with your grace, that we may stand firm in faith and obtain the victory. Amen.*

## **HOLY WEEK - WEDNESDAY - 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–26**

In writing to the Christians at Corinth, Paul makes a point to remind them of the Lord's Supper, and urges them not only to remember the supper, but to celebrate it and to pass it along to future generations. Already, some 25 years after that event, Paul remembers that this good news was handed on to him, just as he in turn handed it on to the Corinthians. Like the lambs' blood on the

doorposts at Passover, the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are a repeated reminder of the depth and breadth of God's love for us. We too are reminded to pass this good news on to others, to share with them the never-failing love of God, especially through the sharing of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. This is the covenant, the eternal agreement that God has given us, through Jesus.

*Make us mindful, O Lord, of the covenant that you made with us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Every time we eat and drink, Christ is with us through bread and wine. Amen.*

### **HOLY WEEK – MAUNDY THURSDAY – MATTHEW 26:52-54**

December 21, 2012, was a date that not a small number of people looked forward to with fear. Not only was it the shortest day of the year, but according to one interpretation of the Mayan calendar it was the day the world would end. Some people lost their heads completely, doing everything from traveling to mountains in order to best experience the end to trying to overthrow communism around the world. Obviously, like every other apocalypse prediction, this one did not pan out.

During Holy Week, we know exactly what we are looking forward to. The Lamb of God will be led to the slaughter and will offer himself willingly in our place. His disciples didn't understand it. And while you and I can read exactly what happens, it's still so easy to lose our heads about it. I have found myself asking why it had to happen. Why did an all-powerful God have to die to complete his plan? I can think of ways that I think are better. Why couldn't God? Even when Jesus asks his question—"But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"—I still don't understand why God's plan had to include his own suffering and death.

We don't have answers to every "why" question. But we can answer with certainty why God chose the plan he did. Quite simply, there is not a better plan. The alternative plans we try to come up with may work in a perfect world. But this is not a perfect world. If it were, there wouldn't need to be a plan in the first place. So to remedy this imperfect world, God came up with a perfect plan.

In the days leading up to Good Friday, our Savior knew what was going to happen. There was no doomsday prediction or set date on the calendar that everyone knew about. But this date had indeed been on the calendar from eternity. Jesus knew what was going to happen in the Garden of Gethsemane—that he would be handed over to his death—but he was not going to lose his head.

Instead, he reminded his disciples of the plan they had been told about many times. He reminds us of the plan we also have been told about. And we have the joy of knowing that this plan is complete—that even as Jesus gives up his body to death, he likewise gives his body and blood for our life. Today, as we celebrate the institution of the Lord's Supper, we find in the true body and true blood the fulfillment of the plan put in place from the beginning of time: Christ's death means our life.

*Prayer: Lamb of God, you are our perfect sacrifice. Lead us to confess our lack of appreciation for your perfect will and for your suffering. Open our hearts and fill us with your love and forgiveness, found only in you. In your name we pray. Amen.*

### **HOLY WEEK – GOOD FRIDAY - LUKE 23:27-31**

On Good Friday faith's eyes (and ears) quickly and properly turn toward a hill, Calvary, to focus there on Jesus' suffering, words, and death. But this Good Friday meet Jesus before he ever reaches the hill. From Pontius Pilate's palace he carries his cross until Simon of Cyrene is forced—and privileged—to carry it for him. See Jesus and Simon, along with two criminals also sentenced to death by cross, being led by Roman soldiers who make their way to Calvary's hill through large Passover crowds. Many people follow. Do some just gawk? Do others only jeer?

Some walk along to mourn. They are women shocked into wailing over Jesus' blood, his bruises, and the wood on Simon's shoulders. For them Jesus gathers strength enough to warn of what awaits them and their city, something far worse than the bad death of a good man.

Jesus asks the women, "If men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" He's warning them that their mourning is misplaced. His question makes the point that, if the unjust cruelty of his tortured death can take place while the Messiah, the Lord of Love, lives on earth, when his words and works are fresh in the minds of all who know him, far more awful things will take place once he's gone.

Jesus knows that soon, within just a generation, the armies of Rome will put Jerusalem under a siege so terrible that childless women—up to then considered most unfortunate—will be counted as truly blessed by God, because they will not have to watch their children sicken and starve.

And far worse than even the Roman siege and Jerusalem's eventual destruction is the eternal suffering that awaits all who in unbelief reject Jesus as their Savior. The first time God's people said to the mountains "Fall on us!", the frightful Assyrians were savagely destroying the northern kingdom, Israel (Hosea 10:18), because of its unbelief. The third and final time Scripture uses the phrase, it's in the mouths of unbelievers as the world reaches its end (Revelation 6:16).

The women weep over the unjust treatment of a just man. In his battered face and striped back, they read injustice and they wail. But Jesus needs to walk on to satisfy God the Father's justice, to die for the sins of the world, and to announce that task finished once and for all.

Jesus' words were a timely warning to these women who cried because of what his enemies were doing *with* him. Jesus question asks—still asks you and me—"What would we do *without* him? What would we do *without* faith in Jesus' slow, terrible walk to that horrible, holy hill?"

*Prayer: "Dear Jesus, by your Spirit's power deepen my appreciation for every step you took to earn my salvation. In the confidence of your finished work I pray. Amen."*

### **HOLY WEEK – HOLY SATURDAY – LUKE 24:25-27**

Everything was in the past tense. As the men from Emmaus walked back home from Jerusalem, they could only think of what might have been. They had anticipated more from Jesus of Nazareth. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people," they explained to their mysterious traveling companion. "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to

redeem Israel.” Their words were measured with a tone of grief and, perhaps, even a tinge of resentment. We should not be too quick to judge them—we would have reacted in much the same way.

From a human perspective, what hope did they have? Every were aware of how much help they needed, but Jesus cried, “It is finished” from the cross. Everything was over...done...finished...gone. Then their traveling companion posed a searching question that strangely piqued their interest. He asked, “Did not the Messiah *have to suffer* these things and then enter his glory?” In other words, wasn’t this all part of God’s plan?

Put in a modern analogy: They had seen the previews, but they didn’t understand the plot. The resurrected Jesus, who had not yet revealed his identity to the men, filled them in. The Savior’s suffering was necessary, and God’s prophets had been clear all along. Jesus took them back to David’s words in Psalm 22 where he prophesied: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Yes, in deepest agony, Jesus uttered these very words from the cross. The Savior’s death had to be unjust. Sinless Jesus was not subject to death since he had done nothing in life to deserve it. He surrendered his life as a willing sacrifice—to fulfill God’s demands for righteousness.

Jesus reminded the two men that Zechariah prophesied about the Messiah’s betrayal and anguish. Human sin meant that Jesus had to suffer. His suffering brought deliverance. With earnest fervor, Jesus directed them to Isaiah’s powerful picture of the “suffering servant” (chapter 53): “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

God’s plan was becoming so much clearer. “Finished” did not mean that all hope was lost. It meant that the plan was completed to perfection. Jesus was not abandoned to the grave—God’s plan included rescue and life.

On this Holy Saturday, we stand between the memory of the cross and the expectation of Easter’s empty tomb. is reading reveals the necessity and joy of searching the Scriptures and discovering the truth. How powerfully these past events affect our present...our future...our eternity.

*Prayer: Lord God, forgive our slow and foolish ways. Forgive our weakness of faith. Help us to be students of your Word, and by your Spirit enlighten our minds to understand and believe your plans and promises. As we struggle in this sin-cursed world, keep us focused on the victory of the cross and the assurance of the empty tomb. Amen.*

#### **HOLY WEEK – EASTER SUNDAY – LUKE 24:36-39**

Once before, the disciples thought they had seen a ghost. It was pre-dawn on the Sea of Galilee. The Savior’s word was not enough for fearful hearts, hearts exhausted by a furious storm and the threat of dying. A brash disciple issued a brash demand to walk on water. And the gracious patience of a powerful Savior is revealed: “Why did you doubt?” That day Jesus calmed both troubled souls and the turbulent sea.

It is evening, behind locked doors. Once again, the Savior’s word was not enough for fearful hearts, hearts exhausted by overwhelming grief and the threat of dying. The recent death of their

Rabbi had crushed them, eroding any confidence they had in the promises he had spoken. And once more he revealed his perfect patience and gracious compassion. Jesus demonstrated convincingly that all God's promises are yes in Christ. The One who declared *I am the Life* vanquished death just as he had prophesied. Now he stood before them in the flesh.

Gently Jesus tended to the fearful hearts and strengthened their wavering faith. He fulfilled the prophet's promise that *a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope. The Shepherd of souls had each of the disciples examine their own soul. Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?* Such questions pierced the paradox in those sinful hearts—a willingness to consider the supernatural idea of a ghost, yet hesitance in accepting that the Christ of God is the Savior. He is the One sent *to destroy the devil's work*. He alone fulfilled God's plan to destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations.

And Jesus welcomed his friends to come close, to touch and see—touch the hands and feet pierced on their behalf, wounds now glorified as medals of grace gleaming with salvation accomplished. Jesus is alive, bodily and physically present. Faith is not based on an apparition. Jesus lives! Hold him close.

Friend, please confess with me how often we are like the disciples. Doubts frequently flood our hearts. Yet the promises of God stand forever. Our sinful doubts—and all our sins—have been buried in that empty tomb. *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.* Jesus still welcomes you to come close to him and receive the resurrection joy. He lovingly invites you to *take and eat, take and drink*. Through the gospel in word and sacrament, hold him close.

*Prayer: "Keep us, O God, each day in the power of resurrection, and your victory over the grave. May we each know this hope and this power in our lives each and every day. Amen.*