

# SAVED THROUGH WATER

Wednesday, February 14, 2018 (Ash Wednesday)

**Read Mark 1:9-11.**

**TEXT:** And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. (Mark 1:10)

Water is hard to talk about because it carries so many meanings. Water is a symbol of life—before birth we develop in the water of our mothers' bodies, and gushing water is a sign that a baby is about to be born. After birth we depend on water for life and health—few people can live more than three days without drinking, and who would want to go unwashed that long?

But water is also a symbol of death. People drown when floods come, or when waves or riptides sweep them away. And diseases that cause too much fluid in the brain, the heart, or the lungs can kill even on dry land.

Maybe this is why Jesus chose water to mark the beginning of His public ministry. When John baptized Him, Jesus went down into the water and came back up out of it again. He foreshadowed what He was going to do at the end of His public ministry. At that time, He freely went down into death to save us all—and then rose out of it, back to life again.

Jesus led the way for all of us through His Baptism. Paul reminds us, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

Here, at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus leads the way through the waters of life and death. He offers us new birth through Baptism into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is death there, yes—death for our old sinful nature, death for the evil that clings to us so closely and infects our hearts and minds. And that is frightening. But it is so worth it. Through Baptism, Jesus gives us everlasting life and joy as God's own beloved children, both now and on the day He returns to raise us all from the dead.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, thank You for Your gift of life through Baptism. This day and always, drown out the sin in my life and raise me up to live with You in joy and peace. Amen.

# STONES OR BREAD?

Thursday, February 15, 2018

**Read Matthew 4:1-4.**

**TEXT:** And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” (Matthew 4:3)

I suppose the stones by Jesus’ feet looked a little like loaves of bread. To someone who had gone hungry for over a month, they probably really looked like bread. But they weren’t. Nobody wants a mouthful of rocks.

And so the devil proposed a plan to Jesus. “Turn these stones into bread.” Easy, right? Never mind the fact that God doesn’t do that sort of thing—that bread comes from a living grain which grows in earth which was only rock hundreds or thousands of years ago, before it eroded. Skip that process. Never mind all the hard work that goes into farming and baking. Skip that too. Never mind that it would be for Jesus’ own personal convenience! Just do it. It’s fast and easy. Meet your own needs first.

But Jesus said no—and continued to suffer hunger. The bread He ate later, He got the hard way.

Sometimes I wonder if God was ever tempted to just wave a hand and immediately change our stony hearts into living, warm ones. How easy it would be! No trouble, no waiting, no suffering—no cross.

And that’s the problem. Jesus doesn’t take the easy way out. If He’s going to transform our stony hearts, He’s going to do it God’s way, in God’s time—through His own suffering, death, and resurrection. He’s going to do it even if it means He has to be worn down like rocks slowly becoming earth. He’s going to do it even if He must make Himself the single grain of wheat He described to His disciples, the one that “falls into the earth and dies... (and) bears much fruit” (see John 12:24).

And that’s exactly what He did. Jesus followed “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (see Matthew 4:4). Today He lives—never to die again—and we live, too.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Lord, thank You for Your patience and willingness to do what’s right. Give me a heart that is like Yours. Amen.

# NETS OR HOOKS?

Friday, February 16, 2018

**Read Mark 1:16-20.**

**TEXT:** Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” (Mark 1:16-17)

When I was a child, we would often camp at Kern River in the Sierras and go trout fishing. My family had a garage full of fishing gear. There was a tackle box and rods and reels and strange little jars of bright red salmon eggs for bait. And there were fish hooks: nasty looking things that could go right through a finger if we weren't careful.

The hooks were why I didn't like fishing much. Oh, I liked being out on the rocks and watching the water. And I understood about fish dying so we could eat, and that didn't really bother me. But I didn't want to see some poor fish come up struggling with my hook impaled in its lip. And so I was secretly glad when I never caught anything.

I think a lot of people feel this way about evangelism, too. It seems somehow dishonest to bait a spiritual hook and dangle it in front of someone else's nose, even for a good cause. It doesn't feel open or respectful. Maybe we, too, are glad not to catch anything.

But this isn't the kind of fishing Jesus calls us to do. The men Jesus called didn't mess around with bait or hooks. They were net fishermen. They caught many fish at once, and they did it openly. There was no trickery, and there was no extra unnecessary pain for the fish.

But when they began fishing for people, it was even better—because these human “fish” were destined for life, not death. These fish would become God's own beloved people, His children—because the Master Fisherman, Jesus Christ, laid down His own life for their sake. Hooks and bait, pain and suffering? Jesus took it all—so that we, His catch, might live.

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, for catching me to be Your own. Use me to bring others to faith in You. Amen.

# WHAT'S IN THE JAR?

Saturday, February 17, 2018

**Read John 2:1-11.**

**TEXT:** Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. (John 2:6)

There were several stone water jars in the house at Cana, meant to be used for washing. These were good-sized jars. They were probably nearly waist high. Filling them up with water would take some time. But once they were filled, the needs of the household would be taken care of for hours or days—even if there was a wedding going on with lots of people. Jars like that were worth something—humble, but very useful.

And that's a pretty good description of us, too, isn't it? Humble but useful—at least, we hope so! We're only stone jars—not gold or silver or anything with jewels all over it—not even copper or bronze. But full of water (after a lot of work) they're useful things to have around.

No doubt those stone jars could have served out their useful lifetime without anybody paying much attention to them. But then Jesus got involved.

"Go fill those jars up with water," He says to the servants. Fine, they do it. That's nothing unusual. But then He shocks them. "Now dip some of it out and put it in a cup and take it to the master of ceremonies." Say what? Nobody drinks washing water! But they did it, and you know the rest of the story: the washing water had become the best wine.

What a shock to the bridegroom! He knew there wasn't supposed to be wine in those jars. And what a shock to us when Jesus takes the blah, boring water of our everyday lives and turns it into the wine of God's grace and mercy, passed through us to others who need it. "That's not what we were made to carry!" we might protest. "That's too good for us!" And so it is. But Jesus gives us the high privilege of being carriers of His love to others.

During this time of Lent, pour out that love and mercy to the people around you—the love and mercy Jesus has showed you, even from the cross.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, fill me with Your Holy Spirit, and use me to Your glory. Amen.

# RESPECT FOR THE SCRIPTURE?

Sunday, February 18, 2018

**Read Luke 4:16-30.**

**TEXT:** And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place ... And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-17, 21)

Do you respect the Bible? That's kind of an insulting question, isn't it? Not too many people would say no, especially people in the church.

Jesus certainly respected the Bible. In this passage, we read that He was invited to preach in the synagogue in His home town. So He took the scroll of Isaiah and unrolled it nearly all the way to the end, found His passage, and read it aloud to the group. Then He started preaching on it.

Think for a moment. Here is God Himself, God in the flesh, planning to preach—and He starts by reading the Bible to the people. He doesn't say, "Well, I'm here Myself today, so I'll just speak directly and bypass the Scriptures—they're not necessary." No, He sets the example Himself by using the text and sticking to it. It is as if God said, "I myself value the Bible, and I won't even speak to you without using it. If I value it so much, you should do so, too."

When we stick to our favorite passages, it's easy to value the Bible. The people of Nazareth had no problem listening to Jesus read about helping the oppressed and setting captives free. It reminded them how much God cared about them.

But there was a problem when Jesus turned to other bits of the Bible. He mentioned the prophet Elijah, who helped a poor foreign widow, and the prophet Elisha, who healed a man from Syria. Suddenly the Bible lesson wasn't going so well anymore. What, the God of Israel, helping foreigners instead of His own people? Are we supposed to respect that?

They didn't. Instead, they tried to throw Jesus over a cliff.

Ultimately, they wouldn't respect the Bible. But Jesus did. And as He went on His way, He fulfilled every single promise in the Old Testament about the Savior who would rescue us all from sin and death. And now that He has risen from the dead, He continues to fulfill His promises. He saves everyone who trusts in Him and gives us eternal life.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Holy Spirit, help me to treasure the Bible and to grow through it. Amen.

# A HOLE IN THE ROOF

Monday, February 19, 2018

## Read Mark 2:1-12.

**TEXT:** And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” (Mark 2:3-5)

It must have taken a lot of faith. Imagine being a paralyzed man confined to bed when your friends show up and tell you Jesus is in town. They want to ask Him to heal you. And since you can't walk, they're going to take you to Him in your bed, just as you are. It's a good thing there are four of them to carry you!

But it gets more exciting. There's such a crowd you can't even get into the house where Jesus is. You think you'll have to give up. Then someone says the dreaded words: “We could go up on the flat roof and make a hole...”

Up the outside stairs they take you—you hold your breath and hope they don't drop you. Then they take off tiles and dig through the clay of the roof. Shouts come from below. People realize something's going on, and then your friends pull out the layer of branches below the clay. Dirt falls into the hole and sifts down on Jesus and the people closest to Him. Then your friends let your bed frame down through the hole, inch by inch, till you're hanging right in front of Jesus.

Surprisingly, Jesus ignores the roof hole, the crowd, and even your paralysis. He begins by saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” Forget the wrecked roof, the wrecked body—what matters right now is the wrecked soul. He says the gracious words that only He could say, because He is the One who will make them true by laying down His own life on the cross: “You are forgiven.” Every bad thing you've said or thought or wanted—all of that is wiped out. Only then does Jesus heal your body.

Shortly afterward, there is nothing left of this amazing miracle but the roof hole. No paralysis—that's healed. No patient—you've gone home at Jesus' command, taking your bed with you. No sin—Jesus has taken that away with Him. The only thing left is the open sky seen through the roof—because to Jesus, you matter more than any roof.

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, for how much You love me. Remind me of this when I am discouraged or afraid. Amen.

# BETTER THAN A POOL

Tuesday, February 20, 2018

**Read John 5:1-17.**

**TEXT:** One man was there who had been an invalid for 38 years.... He said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" (John 5:5, 6b)

Jesus came to the pool of Bethesda, where there were crowds of sick people lying by the pool. Legend said an angel came down and stirred the pool's water once in a while. The people believed that the first person to get to the pool after that would be healed. And so everyone lay there, day after day, watching the water to see if it would move. One man had been there 38 years!

Jesus spoke to him: "Do you want to be healed?"

On the surface, this sounds like a foolish question. Of course the man wanted to be healed! Why else would He come to Bethesda? And yet, maybe not. People can get comfortable in their misfortune. Health is a mixed blessing to someone who only knows how to be ill.

Perhaps the man thought it was a foolish question, too. Who knows? At any rate, the man didn't answer Jesus. Instead, he complained. He couldn't get into the pool fast enough—someone else always got there first. That's why he could never get well. Or so he thought.

Jesus cut through all that nonsense. "Get up," He said. "Take up your bed, and walk."

Much to his surprise, the man did! He got up and found himself completely healed. The pool was unnecessary. The Son of God, Jesus, had made him well.

We are like that man, too, aren't we? When we fall into sickness or trouble, we seek the best help we can find. We turn to doctors or lawyers or social workers or experts—anybody who can offer us a gleam of hope in our trouble. And we are right to do it. God has given us these good gifts for our protection and help.

But we are even wiser when we turn to Jesus, our Savior, and ask Him to help us. He is the giver of all good things; He is our Creator and our Redeemer. He willingly chose to suffer and die for you on the cross. Now, as our risen Lord, absolutely He will care for you now, in your need.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, You know my trouble. Please help me however You see best. Amen.

# GATHERING GRAIN

Wednesday, February 21, 2018

**Read Mark 2:23-28.**

**TEXT:** One Sabbath He was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way, His disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” (Mark 2:23-24)

“I feel like I’m being nibbled to death by ducks.” Have you ever heard anybody say that? It’s a good description of what it’s like to live with the picky expectations of others. Jesus and His disciples faced this problem when they were out walking and the Pharisees found them eating handfuls of grain.

They were hungry. Why not eat a little? Jewish law explicitly allowed this sort of thing as long as you weren’t actually taking away your neighbor’s grain in containers. But the Pharisees weren’t going to have this behavior, oh no. They said it was “harvesting,” and therefore forbidden work on the Sabbath day.

It would have been easy for Jesus to argue with them. Since when is picking a handful of something “harvesting”? But Jesus skips the question about “how much is too much” and goes straight to the heart of the matter—was the Sabbath law intended to be a burden to people, or a blessing? He reminds them of King David who broke a far more serious law to feed his men. And He winds up with “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27b-28).

There is the heart of it. Jesus is the Son of God. That makes Him an expert in His own laws. But He is also the Son of Man, the one perfect human being who is about to redeem the rest of humanity. He Himself is carrying the whole burden of God’s Law on His own shoulders—living it perfectly—preparing Himself for the day when He will trade places with us, taking our guilt and lawbreaking upon Himself, and giving us His own perfect goodness. That will happen at the cross.

And the result of His loving self-sacrifice? It will be a whole harvest of humanity gathered like good grain into God’s barn (see Matthew 3:12). And it’s not because we obeyed a huge set of laws, but because we trust in Jesus who has taken our place under the Law—and given us freedom and everlasting life.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Father, You have blessed me with so many things I need. Thank You most of all for Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.



# ASLEEP IN THE BOAT

Thursday, February 22, 2018

**Read Mark 4:1-2, 35-41.**

**TEXT:** And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke Him and said to Him, “Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:37-38)

He must have been really tired. After preaching all day, Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat, asleep on a cushion—and what was that, exactly? A cloth thrown over some bundled-up nets? Whatever it was, it surprises me that it was comfortable enough for Him to stay asleep, even in the middle of a storm, even with the waves crashing into the boat and slopping water into the bottom. That’s some kind of tired.

And that was some kind of scared the disciples were feeling, too. Several of these men were fishermen; they knew the Sea of Galilee in all its moods. They had been out in storms before. These weren’t first-time sailors! And yet this storm had them terrified—waking up Jesus with the words, “Don’t You care that we are about to die?”

That certainly woke Him. Rude as it was, the disciples’ sort-of “prayer” got Jesus up and dealing with the situation. “Peace! Be still!” He says, and the storm tidies itself away. The wind stops howling; the waves go flat. Then He turns to His disciples and deals with their personal storm: “Why are you so afraid? Don’t you trust Me yet?”

As I type this, I have just learned that someone I love is probably sick with cancer again. This is not a storm I want to be sailing in. And I’ve been down on my knees, begging Jesus to get up, to deal with the storm, I’m frightened, HELP! This boat is filling with water. Wake up, Lord! Please!

This situation is horrible. And yet Jesus is with us, here in the boat. He hasn’t gone anywhere. He will hear my prayers, no matter how scared or how rude or how “little-faithed.” And when He speaks, the storm will know its Master.

Thank God He is with us.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, keep me with You, trusting You, when I’m afraid. Amen.

# NEW CLOTHES

Friday, February 23, 2018

**Read Luke 8:26-39.**

**TEXT:** Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. (Luke 8:35)

The story of the demon-possessed man of the Gerasenes starts out as a horror tale. The poor man was afflicted with thousands of demons—thus the name “Legion,” which refers to a group of more than 5,000 Roman soldiers. As a result of their torment, he could not control his own behavior; he lived naked among the tombs. When anyone tried to lock him up, he broke the locks and escaped.

Helping this man seems impossible. Nobody can even keep him in one place long enough to do anything for him! Yet when Jesus stepped out of the boat, there was the man ready and waiting for help—and before the demons could get their first words out, Jesus was already commanding them to leave.

What a wonderful use of divine power! And yet there was one more need to meet. The man was still naked. Yet when the townspeople came to see what had happened, he was fully clothed.

Where did they get the clothes? We don’t know. Most likely Jesus and the disciples supplied them. Someone gave up their extra change of clothes to cover the man’s shame. It was the only decent thing to do.

So we have a two-part blessing here—Jesus drives out the demons, and then Jesus—Himself or through a follower—provides the man with the basic covering he needed not to be ashamed. And this is what Jesus does for us, too, isn’t it? When He willingly went to suffering and death, He overcame the power of the devil for us. He set us free from Satan’s slavery. And He rose from the dead to give forgiveness and covering from shame to all of us who trust in Him.

Now we are no longer harassed, helpless, and naked, under the power of the devil. As Paul tells us, “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27). Christ has made Himself our clothing, and we need never be ashamed again.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, You have covered my shame and made me Your own. Use me to bless other people as well. Amen.

# PAY YOUR TAXES?

Saturday, February 24, 2018

**Read Matthew 17:24-27.**

**TEXT:** When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” (Matthew 17:24)

The two-drachma tax was something that every Jewish man was supposed to pay for the support of the temple. So when the collectors came to Peter about it, they probably wanted to know whether Jesus was a good temple-supporting Jew or not. The way they phrased their question—“Doesn’t your teacher pay the tax?”—suggests they had their doubts.

Peter went to find Jesus, and Jesus asked him a strange question: “Do kings tax their own sons, or other people?” It doesn’t take much to follow the connection: God, the King of everything, doesn’t tax His own Son either. Jesus is clearly exempt from the temple tax.

But look more closely. Jesus uses the plural when He tells Peter, “Then the sons are free.” Who are these other children of the King? Why, Peter. You. Me. Every believer in Jesus. Jesus lay down His life to make us God’s own children. Now we are truly free—not just from the tax, but from all the impossible demands of the Law. Christ has fulfilled them all.

Now His Holy Spirit lives in us, giving us faith, and making us ever more like Jesus. And look what Jesus says here: “So as not to give offense to them, go do this...” and He spells out the miracle He’s about to do in order to provide both of them with temple tax money. “So as not to give offense to them.” Jesus doesn’t owe them anything, but He’s going to pay anyway—to avoid upsetting them unnecessarily, and especially to make sure nothing stands in the way of their eventually believing the Good News about Jesus.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). Now that Jesus has made us children of God, His Holy Spirit lives in us, causing us to love and serve our neighbors, even tax collectors—even when we don’t have to. The Lord is working through us to draw those around us to faith in Jesus.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Lord, thank You for making me free in You. Help me to serve others even as You have served me. Amen.

# THE IMAGE ON A COIN

Sunday, February 25, 2018

**Read Mark 12:13-17.**

**TEXT:** And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” ... (Mark 12:16b)

Here again we have the leaders trying to trap Jesus in His own words. “Does God want us to pay taxes to Caesar or not? What does His Law say?” They knew very well that if He said, “Pay them,” He would be in trouble with the people, who hated the Roman taxes, yet if He said, “Don’t pay them,” He could be executed by the Romans for rebellion. And Jesus knew very well what they were trying to do with their question.

So He cuts to the heart of the matter and asks him whose name and image are on the tax coin. Oh, Caesar’s, you say? Well, then, give Caesar what belongs to him. But more important, give God what belongs to Him. Give God your whole heart and mind, body and soul together—because you yourself carry the image of God.

What He said to the leaders, He says to us today: “Give to God what belongs to God.” Give yourselves, because God has created you in His image and has placed His Name upon you in Baptism. You are not your own, you belong to the Lord.

And to place that fact beyond the shadow of a doubt, Jesus is on the way to Calvary—to carry away your sins and mine, to remove every possible claim the devil might have on any human being as a result of our wrongdoing. His suffering and death cleared away any liens the devil might have on us. And now that He has risen from the dead, He promises us that we who believe in Him will also rise to everlasting life—new, freshly minted, with the image of God glowing and perfect on us. Because we belong to Jesus.

**THE PRAYER:** Father, You have put Your image upon me, but I have marred it in many ways. Forgive and restore me in Jesus Christ, Your Son. Amen.

# IT'S NOT ENOUGH

Monday, February 26, 2018

**Read Mark 12:41-44.**

**TEXT:** And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny... (Jesus said) "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:42, 44b)

Two little coins, which together make a penny. Not much of an offering, is it? Humanly speaking it's just foolish: somebody is now going to have to give charity to support this woman, and the cost will certainly be more than a penny. Balance the offering against that support and you have a net loss. Why should she give anything at all?

It's not enough. But it's all she has.

And Jesus honors that. He praises her: "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." She is now totally dependent on God to provide for everything she needs, both in body and soul.

And provide He does—because though she doesn't know it, God Himself is close to her, God in the flesh. And He has come to Jerusalem for the same reason she has—to make an offering of everything He has, to give Himself up for the salvation of the world. Within days Jesus will be hanging on a cross, bearing the guilt for every evil thing we have ever done. He will lay down His life there, holding nothing back, giving all He has—making Himself a sin offering for us. Because of Him we will be forgiven and cleansed, restored to God and life. And then Jesus will rise again.

Jesus also offers everything He has. And it's enough—enough for the poor widow, wherever she came from, and wherever she went. It's enough for us, too, however needy and broken we may be. Jesus will not desert us. We belong to Him. His self-offering is enough.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, we trust in You both now and for eternity. Keep us and help us when we are in need, and hold us close to You. Amen.

# EXTRAVAGANT LOVE

Tuesday, February 27, 2018

**Read John 12:1-8.**

**TEXT:** Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:3)

Put yourself in Mary's place. It hadn't been that long since she was weeping for her dead brother Lazarus at Jesus' feet. Jesus raised him from the dead, and now the family was giving a dinner party in His honor. How could she ever find a way to thank Him?

Martha did it through cooking and serving the dinner—that was her gift. But Mary wanted to do something else. So she brought out a treasure—a flask of pure nard ointment, which was probably the most expensive thing they had in the house. Then she poured it over Jesus' head and feet (see Mark 14:3, John 12:3). Finally, she knelt to wipe His feet dry with her hair—unthinkable for a Jewish woman.

Why do this? Anointing was a custom they had for honored guests. It was also the way priests were ordained and kings were installed as rulers. The very name “Messiah” (or “Christ”) means “the Anointed One.” Perhaps all these things were in her heart as she honored Jesus.

When we think about what Jesus has done for us, we find ourselves in Mary's dilemma. How can we thank Him for what He has done? He sought us out, called us to be His own, laid down His life to save us, rose from the dead to give us everlasting life—how can we ever love Him enough? It hurts trying to express such feelings. And so we look around for some action, some way to say “Thank You. I love You,” when words fail us.

Thanks be to God, Jesus has given us ways to express that love. He has given us Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He has given us our neighbors, even the lowliest, and promised that “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40b).

John tells us that the house was filled with the fragrance of the nard. As we seek to love the Lord like she did, may the world be filled with the fragrance of our own thank offerings.

**THE PRAYER:** I love You, Lord. Strengthen my love for You, and let it show in my actions. Amen.

# WASTED OR NOT?

Wednesday, February 28, 2018

**Read Mark 14:3-11.**

**TEXT:** And while He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as He was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over His head. (Mark 14:3)

My grandmother once gave me a tiny jar of expensive solid perfume from Greece. To get the fragrant ointment out, you had to reach in with your smallest finger. But Mary's stone flask would have had a long, thin neck, and the only way to reach the ointment was to break the alabaster. Mary didn't hesitate. For Jesus? Anything.

That wasn't the attitude of some people watching, though. Judas in particular complained. Why waste something so costly on Jesus? If you winced just now, you see the problem.

There will always be people who think that anything costly is wasted on God—and they're not thinking just about ointment. "Why waste your life on Jesus?" they ask. "You only live once. Make money, party hard, and enjoy your life. Jesus asks too much of His followers. Don't break your heart, don't waste your love, on a God like that."

They are right to say He asks a lot of us. "Forgive and you will be forgiven," He says. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (see Luke 6:37; Matthew 5:44-45). And finally, "Come, follow Me"—all the way to the cross. For "if anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will My servant be also" (John 12:26a).

Loving Jesus is costly, yes, but it is worth it. For this is the One who broke—not an alabaster flask, but His own body, in order to rescue us from death and all evil. Who can calculate the love involved in that sacrifice? Mary's flask is nothing to it. "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:13-14).

This world is bound to break our hearts. It's impossible to escape that fate when sin and death are in the picture. But if they must break, let's not waste it. Let's make that sacrifice at the feet of the One who loves us.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear God, when my heart is breaking, be close to me. Use that situation for my help and Your glory. Amen.

# JUST A COLT

Thursday, March 1, 2018

**Read Matthew 21:1-11.**

**TEXT:** (Jesus said) “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” (Matthew 21:2-3)

It was just a colt—a young donkey, old enough to carry someone safely, but young enough that nobody had trained it that way yet. And it was still with its mother.

That was the animal Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem as King and Savior. It was customary for Jewish royalty to ride donkeys or mules—we can read about it in the days of King David—but surely all those animals were well-trained before the princes ever sat on them. Riding an unbroken colt is a good way to end up on your backside in the dust!

That’s even more likely if the animal you’re riding has no proper bridle or saddle, just a cloak or two thrown across its back. Add in the noise of screaming crowds, the waving of palm branches, the press of human bodies—it’s a recipe for disaster.

But not for Jesus, no. That unbroken colt carried Him safely and calmly through the crowds, right through the gates of Jerusalem. Jesus’ divine power no doubt had something to do with it—as well as His kindness and forethought in having the disciples bring the colt’s older and wiser mother along as well. By evening the two donkeys would have been safely back home, sleeping in peace.

The same could not be said for Jesus Himself. Jesus’ own nights of safety could be counted on a single hand—Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Thursday evening He would eat His last meal with the disciples He loved; a few hours later He would be arrested. There would be no sleep for Him again until after the cross.

He knew this, of course—and He welcomed it. By His suffering and death, He would save all of us, young and old, foolish and wise alike. His sleep in death meant that we would be able to sleep in peace. And His resurrection in joy and power means that we who belong to Him can always wake up in trust and hope. He cares for us, even us. There can be no greater proof of it.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Lord, You gave Your life to make me safely Yours. Thank You. Amen.



# THE CLOAKS OFF THEIR BACKS

Friday, March 2, 2018

**Read Mark 11:1-10.**

**TEXT:** And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. (Mark 11:8)

“The red carpet treatment.” That’s how modern Western cultures describe a royal welcome. The crowd welcoming Jesus had similar ideas. Joyfully Jesus’ disciples threw their cloaks over the donkey’s back, doing the best they could in place of a saddle. The crowd grabbed their own cloaks and spread them on the road, making a royal carpet for Jesus to ride over. It may have been poor and improvised, but it was also full of joy and love.

I can’t help wondering what the women said when their husbands and children came home with extra laundry to do. No, actually, I can imagine it, every word—but what was their defense? “It was for Jesus,” they must have said. “I’m sorry about the extra work and all the dirt. But it was for Jesus, you have to understand.”

The women who had been there would already understand. Those who had met Him before—who had heard Him preach, had been healed and comforted by Him, had been challenged and forgiven and blessed—they too would understand. Nothing is too good for Jesus. Not our cloaks, not our hearts, not our lives.

After all, Jesus, too, is in the laundry business. But He isn’t washing cloaks with boiling water and soap. No, He is washing us—making us perfectly clean and pure, fit for a king. And He has done it with His own blood.

**THE PRAYER:** Wash me, Lord Jesus, that I may belong to You. Amen.

# THE STONES CRY OUT

Saturday, March 3, 2018

**Read Luke 19:37-40.**

**TEXT:** He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”  
(Luke 19:40)

What a scene—Jesus surrounded by people, all praising God with a loud voice and crying out, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” What a celebration! Palm branches and cloaks and the sound of rejoicing—and Jesus in the middle of it all, just as He ought to be. For once the human race got it right.

But there was one element that didn’t belong. A little patch of sour-faced men said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke them. Tell them to be quiet!” Why? What did they have against joy?

Most likely their problem was with the reason for that joy: the crowds were rejoicing because God had sent the Messiah, Jesus, the Savior and King of Israel. The Pharisees didn’t believe that; they wouldn’t even consider that the crowd might be right. Instead, they tried to shut down the celebration. It was undignified. Incorrect. Wrong.

But Jesus wasn’t having it. He answered, “If these people shut up, the stones themselves would start shouting!”

It is natural to rejoice in the presence of the Lord. It is right to give Him thanks and praise. As Amos put it, “The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8b) Joy, speech, praise—these flow naturally when God comes to us. Even the stones would cry out.

Some stones, that is—the natural stones. The Pharisees, with their unnatural stony hearts, could not join in the praise. The only words they could spit out were “Shut it down!”

There are far too many days when my heart is closer to that of the Pharisees than to that of the disciples. Cranky, grouchy, self-important, unwilling to recognize Christ standing in front of me—I need help. We all do. And Jesus came to supply that help, to take our stony hearts and transform them into living, loving hearts of flesh that respond to God with joy. Within that very week He would do it, laying down His life for our sake and then rising again to live forever—making the stones themselves, even us, cry out with joy.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Father, thank You with all my heart for Your Son Jesus. Amen.

# TABLES OVERTURNED

Sunday, March 4, 2018

**Read Mark 11:15-19.**

**TEXT:** And He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. (Mark 11:15b).

Some things just shouldn't be there—like a whole market set up inside the temple courtyard itself. Pigeons, oxen, sheep—a zoo full of noise. Air filled with smells, dust, and feathers. Men sitting behind tables to change foreign money into money acceptable for temple use, there were cheaters and liars everywhere.

Who was supposed to be there, then? This was the Court of the Gentiles—the big open area where anybody was allowed to come and pray to the God of Israel, even if they hadn't converted to Judaism. It was the place God spoke of when He said, "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, to love the Name of the Lord, and to be His servants... these I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer ... for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:6-7).

That wasn't what Jesus saw in the temple. And so He took action—turning over tables, clearing out the merchants, ordering the bird-sellers to get their cages out of there. He wouldn't even allow traders to take shortcuts through the courtyard anymore, which they liked to do since it was faster than going through the streets of Jerusalem. No. This space was going to be for God's people, for teaching, for preaching, for worship, and nobody was going to be allowed to disturb them. And that's what Jesus used it for that very day, as soon as He got it cleared.

Now what? Space to worship. A chance to concentrate. There would be peace and quiet, broken only by the voice of the Lord teaching and the sound of prayer—and the voices of happy children, praising Jesus! The Gentiles were welcome again. Everybody was welcome again. Jesus had set it right.

Is there some area of your heart or life where you need Jesus to set things right? He can and will do it. Ask Him. Because you, too, are one of those God wants to make joyful in His house of prayer.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, You know what needs to be set right in my heart. Please help me. Amen.

# A WHIP FOR THE RIGHT BACKS

Monday, March 5, 2018

**Read John 2:13-22.**

**TEXT:** And making a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen.... (John 2:15a)

Jesus with a whip—really? And not just one borrowed in the heat of anger—no, He deliberately found some cords, braided them together, and made this whip. And then used it. But on whom?

Logic would suggest the animals. If you have oxen and sheep cluttering up the place, the quickest way to clear it would be to use your whip on the animals, right? But not Jesus. In all four Gospels, it clearly says “he drove them all out of the temple.” Who is “them”? Why, it’s “those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers,” according to John; it’s “those who sold and those who bought in the temple,” according to the other three Gospels. In other words, it’s people: the people who did the wrong in the first place.

The animals seem to have gotten off scot-free. They shouldn’t have been there; true, but Jesus didn’t blame them for that. Nor did He tip over the bird cages, which might have hurt the pigeons inside. Instead, He ordered the sellers to carry them out safely. Jesus was concerned to set the temple right as quickly as possible, but He had a care to the innocents caught up in that mess.

Thank God for that, because it’s so easy to get caught up in someone else’s dreadful situation. Is God going to blame me because my marriage is ending due to my spouse’s addiction? If my family abuses me, will Jesus hate me if I find it hard to honor my parents? Did I do enough when I found out my boss and my coworkers were breaking the law? Am I even really innocent at all? Maybe I deserve punishment.

To all of this worry and grief Jesus says, “I have come for you in the middle of this mess. I love you, and I have made you clean. Guilt and innocence are Mine to deal with, and I have laid down My life for you. You are now Mine, and no one will take you out of My hands.”

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, for the mercy You have shown me, even when I felt terribly guilty. Amen.

# THE FRUITLESS FIG TREE

Tuesday, March 6, 2018

**Read Mark 11:12-25.**

**TEXT:** And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if He could find anything on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. (Mark 11:13)

This is one of the odder miracles in the New Testament. Why was Jesus looking for fruit if it wasn't the right season? And when He found none, why did He blame the tree and curse it? Was this some sort of divine temper tantrum?

Actually, no. Common fig trees produce at least two crops of fruit. The "breba crop" appears in the spring, with the first leaves. You could say it isn't really a proper fig crop at all; the breba figs aren't that great, and a lot of people don't bother to harvest them. The main crop comes later and will taste much better.

But Jesus was hungry. So He went looking for the early breba figs, which should have been there if the leaves were out—and there was nothing. Oops!

That's a bad, bad sign. A common fig tree that doesn't produce brebas around Passover isn't going to produce real figs at the right time either. The early failure is a sign of the much greater failure to come. And Jesus knew that. The words He said confirmed the disaster that was already on the way: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And within a day, the tree was withered up.

There are things like brebas in our own lives, too. Every day we live our lives in Jesus, growing in faith, and receiving His gifts of Word and Sacrament. And every so often the challenge comes—are we producing the fruits that show that Christ is living in us? Do we have figs, or just leaves?

To be sure, most of the fruit we Christians produce is like breba figs—small, relatively tasteless, not particularly good quality. Jesus must be really hungry if He wants our fruit! And yet He does. He is. And He rejoices when He finds an early fig, even a breba—because it shows that the Holy Spirit is living in us, doing God's will through us. It shows that we belong to Jesus—and one day, we will rejoice together with Him, at the real harvest time.

**THE PRAYER:** Father, make me fruitful through Your Holy Spirit's work. Amen.

# CARRYING ... WHAT?

Wednesday, March 7, 2018

**Read Mark 14:12-16.**

**TEXT:** And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him.” (Mark 14:13)

It was the first day of Passover, and Jesus’ disciples needed to get the feast ready. So they asked Him where they should go since they were visiting Jerusalem and had no home to use. The directions Jesus gave them would have raised some eyebrows: “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him.”

It was no surprise to meet a woman carrying water—women did that all the time, and particularly when there was a holiday, with so much cooking and cleaning to do. But a man? No. That wasn’t a man’s job. So when they met a man carrying water, the disciples would definitely know it was the right man. There wouldn’t be any others!

We don’t know the details of why Jesus said this—did He have some special signal arranged with His host family? Was it a pure miracle, and Jesus just knew things would happen this way? The Bible doesn’t tell us, and really, it doesn’t matter. The disciples found the right man, followed him to the right place, and got the feast ready.

“Look for a man carrying something you don’t expect,” Jesus says. To us He might say, “Look for a man—the Son of Man, in fact, the Messiah—carrying something you don’t expect, doing a job you wouldn’t expect of Him. He will be carrying a cross. Follow Him.”

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, for the surprising way You saved me and all people. Amen.

# LAMB OF GOD

Thursday, March 8, 2018

**Read Mark 14:12-16.**

**TEXT:** And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, “Where will You have us go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?” (Mark 14:12)

Perfect. Helpless. Doomed.

From 2,000 years later, those are the only words I can think of to describe the centerpiece of the Passover feast, the lambs sacrificed at the temple. Every year shepherds brought their lambs into Jerusalem. They had to be perfect, without defect or sickness of any kind at all. They were certainly helpless. And they were doomed—heading for death without reprieve.

What did Jesus think of, I wonder, that last day before His own death? He probably spent it teaching in the temple—the lambs and their cries and the smell of blood would have been right there in front of Him. His own disciples went to buy and sacrifice one of these small creatures, and then took it away to roast for dinner. Did Jesus look into the eyes of that lamb, His own picture in miniature?

Perfect, yes. A perfect man, without sin or greed or jealousy or violence. A man after God’s own heart, like His ancestor David—a man who is God’s own heart, God become flesh. There was no flaw in Him. He was acceptable for sacrifice.

Helpless?—well, yes and no. “Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels?” But helpless for all that, because “how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” (Matthew 26:53-54) Jesus will not help Himself if that means failing to save us. His love for us holds Him helpless.

Doomed—well, yes. Never was anything in the history of the world so fated to happen. God the Father willed it. Jesus’ love for us drove Him to it. The Holy Spirit had promised it again and again, all through the Old Testament. Jesus would die to rescue us all.

And yet ... and yet! Those lambs in the temple would shortly be dinner, the center of a great feast for a people set free by God. Jesus, God’s own Lamb, has become the center of a greater feast, celebrating the freedom He won for us by His death and resurrection. Through the body and blood He freely gives, we share in new life and joy. He is not only our Lamb, but our living Host—our Savior.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Father, thank You for giving Your only Son Jesus for us. Amen.

# JESUS WITH A BASIN

Friday, March 9, 2018

**Read John 13:1-17.**

**TEXT:** Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. (John 13:5)

How terribly uncomfortable that must have been. Imagine it: Jesus Christ, your Lord and Savior, kneeling at your feet with a basin, dealing with the stink and the sweat and the dirt of a long day traveled in sandals. No wonder Peter protested. "You shall never wash my feet!" he bursts out. You can almost hear the other disciples agreeing.

But Jesus puts a stop to that. "If I don't wash you, you have no share with Me," He says. It is as if He said, "Then you don't belong to me; we aren't together."

Peter is horrified. "If that's the way it is, don't just do my feet—do my hands, my head ..."

Jesus must have smiled. He assured Peter that the feet were enough. After all, anybody who has had a bath is clean already, except for those dirty feet which are always in contact with the road.

But what about you, when Jesus approaches you with a basin? What about me? God knows I need my sin washed away. I'm almost desperate to have it done. But must Jesus be the One to come in contact with it: my stinky, disgusting, horrible sin? Oh, not You, Lord!

And again He says, "Unless I wash you, you don't belong to Me." And like Peter I respond: "Fine, good, wonderful. Do all of me!"

But Jesus says to us as well: "A person who has had a bath is already clean, and only needs his feet washed. You have been baptized, you are Mine. All you need now is My daily forgiveness and cleansing." And then Jesus adds this kicker:

"Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:13-14).

As He has forgiven us, so let us get on with the job of forgiving those who sin against us. No matter how hard and stinky it will be.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Lord, we find it almost impossible to forgive others as You have forgiven us. Come, live in us, and do this work also through us. Amen.



# A PIECE OF BREAD

Saturday, March 10, 2018

**Read John 13:21-30.**

**TEXT:** So when He had dipped the morsel, He gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” (John 13:26b-27)

It was one of those little courtesies—if you wanted to honor someone, you would dip a piece of bread into the sauce and offer it to him. As Jesus was the head of this feast, Judas was doubly honored—singled out in front of the rest of the disciples to receive this gift in front of them all. But then Jesus spoke: “What you are going to do, do quickly.”

It looks like a last chance. Judas has already taken money to betray Jesus into the hands of His enemies. Jesus knows that. And Judas knows that Jesus knows that—Jesus has just told him so (see Matthew 26:25). And still, even now, Jesus says to him: “What you are going to do, do quickly.”

It is as if He said to him: What are you going to do, Judas? You still have a choice. Even now, with the bread in your hands, you have a choice. You could make the mistaken assumptions of the other disciples true—go out and give something to the poor, or buy something else for the feast. You could even stay in your place and finish dinner with us, a forgiven, restored disciple. You still have a choice.

Jesus loved Judas. But Jesus would not take his free will from him—his own personal choice, to remain or betray. Neither will Jesus take our freedom from us. He calls us to Him in love, offering us the gifts of love, bread and wine, His own body and blood. And He says to us: “The time is short. Will you stay with Me, trust in Me, belong to Me, receive My forgiveness? What you are going to do, do quickly.”

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, turn my heart to You and make me steadfast in Your love. Keep me from going astray. Amen.

# UNNECESSARY

Sunday, March 11, 2018

**Read Mark 14:43-50.**

**TEXT:** And Jesus said to them, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture Me?” (Mark 14:48)

They must have been the most unnecessary objects in the garden that night—all those swords and clubs the crowd brought with them to arrest Jesus. As if He were going to resist arrest. As if He were an earthly king, someone climbing to the top over the broken bodies of other people.

Even Judas seems to have known better. After all, he chose the sign so that the crowd would know the right man to arrest. And he chose—a kiss, a peaceful greeting. It was something that put him well within arms’ length of Jesus, in a most vulnerable position—if Jesus had chosen to fight.

But Judas knew better. Jesus would not harm him—not even His own betrayer. And Judas was proved right. Jesus took just a moment to heal the ear of the high priest’s servant, who had ended up on the wrong side of Peter’s sword—and then He submitted to arrest. But not without an acid comment on the weapons!

He said, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture Me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled.”

Jesus was no robber, using force to steal glory and power that belonged to someone else. He was and is the real thing—the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of David. And He would climb to the top, yes—that top position would be on a cross, and the broken body would be His own. No clubs or swords were necessary.

Jesus came to lay down His life of His own free choice. He freely submitted to arrest, to torture, and even to death for all of us. And three days later, He rose from the dead—not for Himself only, but to share that victory and eternal life with us. Why? Because He loves us.

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, that You gave up Your life for me of Your own free will. Now I ask You willingly, take my life and live through me to the Father’s glory. Amen.

# THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

Monday, March 12, 2018

**Read Matthew 27:3-10.**

**TEXT:** Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver Him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. (Matthew 26:14-15)

The price of a slave. The price of a cemetery. The price of God.

When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he brought his traitor's money back to the leaders who had given it to him. "I have betrayed innocent blood!" he cried out. And he tried to give the money back, as if somehow, some way, that would stop Jesus from dying.

But there was no hope of that. "What is that to us?" they said. "You deal with it. It's your problem, not ours." There was no room for repentance there—no leader who was man enough to admit their own involvement in the sin, no priest true enough to speak mercy to Judas' terrified soul. And so he went out and hanged himself.

But the silver remained, there on the floor where Judas had thrown it. Something had to be done with it. And so they set their minds to a solution, as if that were the most important decision they would make all day.

After due deliberation, they decided to buy a piece of land to use for a pauper's cemetery—a place to bury strangers who had no one to care for them in death. And so the money that led to two men's deaths ended up doing some good after all.

The price of a dead slave's life, paid as recompense (see Exodus 21:32). The price of a cemetery where the last, least, and lowest might find decent burial. The price of the God who took on the form of a slave: "But (He) emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the Name that is above every name, so that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:7-11)

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, that You paid the price for me with Your own life. Set my heart upon You that I may love You in return with my whole life. Amen.

# AN OPEN DOOR

Tuesday, March 13, 2018

**Read John 18:15-18.**

**TEXT:** But Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. (John 18:16)

The door of the high priest's house was busy that night. Once Jesus was arrested, the household swung into action. Messengers went out to gather the Jewish council for an emergency meeting; soon those elite gentlemen would pass through that door to gather in a hall off the courtyard. Jesus Himself came through that door, a prisoner under heavy guard. His disciple John was recognized and came in quietly—perhaps because of some family business relationship with the high priest's household.

But Peter could not get in. He came late and unknown, a nobody. The door only opened when John had a quiet word with the doorkeeper—doing a favor for a friend who loved Jesus.

Still, maybe Peter would have been better off if the door had stayed shut. It was the servant girl at the door who first said to him, “You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?”

“No, no,” Peter said, and scuttled off into the central courtyard. But the accusation followed him. “Aren't you one of them?... You must be one of them. ... Of course, you are. We can all tell you're a Galilean.”

There was no escape. He was on the wrong side of the door. Trapped among Jesus' enemies, Peter did the only thing he could think of—he denied Christ, loudly and repeatedly, calling down curses on himself in the hopes they would believe his lie.

And then the door didn't matter anymore. Peter had trapped himself by his lies, cursed himself with his own words, cut himself off from the fellowship of Christ. There was no escape from that. Except...

Just then, Jesus turned and looked at Peter (see Luke 22:61). What was in that look? Sadness, no doubt, and disappointment, too. But certainly, above all, there was love. Jesus knew Peter and all that he had done, and He still loved him. At that very moment, He was in the process of saving him—and all of us.

Jesus' saving love opened the door to freedom and life for Peter. It does the same for us today.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, You set me free from the sin and death that had me trapped. Teach me to live in Your freedom, loving my neighbors, and being joyful in You. Amen.

# BURNED

Wednesday, March 14, 2018

**Read Mark 14:53-55.**

**TEXT:** And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. (Mark 14:54b)

Choosing a place to sit shouldn't be a big deal, should it? Jesus was on trial for His life in the high priest's house, and Peter wanted a place to see what would happen to Him. But he didn't dare get too close—someone might recognize him as a disciple and arrest him, too.

So Peter stayed in the courtyard outside the main hall. It was cold and dark out there, and he was shivering. The guards who had arrested Jesus were cold, so they made a fire and sat around it. Peter joined them to get warm.

Oh, Peter! Must you sit among Jesus' enemies just to get warm? No doubt he thought he could pass unnoticed in the shadows. But fire casts light as well as heat, and a servant girl saw and accused him. "You were with Jesus," she said. He panicked and denied it; then his seatmates joined in: "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?" one asked.

You know the rest of the story. Peter must have bitterly regretted his choice to sit with Jesus' enemies.

But we do that too, don't we? At lunchtime, when we sit with coworkers who are tearing down someone else's reputation. Or in a conference room, when someone suggests a way to cheat the system and make more money. Or at a political rally, where angry people are cheering policies that harm "the least of these, My brothers" (see Matthew 25:40).

We could speak up. We could say something. But we are afraid. We don't want to be crucified either. And so we rank ourselves with Jesus' enemies and deny our Lord. What hope is there for us?

Only the same hope Peter had—that Jesus Himself has suffered for us, laying down His life for faithless friends and enemies alike. We know that He will meet our tears with forgiveness, our evil with cleansing, and the death in our hearts with new life. He can do this, because He has died and risen again—for us.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, cast Your light upon my life. Is there some group or situation You don't want me to participate in? Let me know, and give me a heart to serve You willingly. Amen.

# ROPE

Thursday, March 15, 2018

## Read Mark 15:1-5.

**TEXT:** And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led Him away and delivered Him over to Pilate. (Mark 15:1)

Do you have a coil of rope in your house? What about your car? Rope is a handy thing to have when you're tying down a Christmas tree to be carried home on the car roof, or wood and drywall for a remodeling project. It even comes in handy when you have a new puppy, but you still need to buy a leash for his collar.

We bind all these things with rope and think nothing of it. But rope takes on a different meaning when we think of Jesus. Think about it—when they bound Him in the garden of Gethsemane, that was it until they nailed Him to the cross. His last real freedom of movement was the quick step and reach He made to heal His enemy who had lost an ear to Peter's sword. From that point on, He went wherever His enemies wanted Him to go: to the high priest's house, to Pilate, to Herod, to scourging, mocking—and crucifixion. He would not be free again until the resurrection.

Our Lord Jesus—treated like a wayward puppy, a stubborn donkey—a dangerous criminal. This is so wrong I don't have words to describe it.

And yet He accepted this to set us free. We were the wayward ones, the stubborn ones who insisted on running into danger. As Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

He was bound so we might be free; He was hurt so we might be whole; He was killed so that we might live. This is love. This is Jesus, our Savior. And today He lives and calls us to Him to be His own in faith, and in the joyful freedom of the children of God.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, You have set me free at the cost of Your own life. Yet bind my heart to You in love, that I may be Your own forever. Amen.

# DRESS-UP

Friday, March 16, 2018

**Read Mark 15:16-20.**

**TEXT:** And they clothed Him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on Him. And they began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (Mark 15:17-18)

When you were little, did you ever play dress-up with your parents' clothes? Perhaps you tried on mom's shoes, or dad's tie. Perhaps it was an older brother's graduation cap or a sister's wedding veil. Children love to play-act—and parents love to take pictures of them!

But on this day, it was no child playing dress-up. It was several hundred Roman soldiers playing a brutal game of "king" with Jesus. Beaten and half-dead as He was, they still thought it great fun to dress Him in mock royal robes. Here a reddish-purple cloak, maybe borrowed from a lazy soldier who hadn't put his gear away properly; here a reed for a scepter. And for a golden crown—why not a crown of thorns?

And they mocked Him and bowed down to Him and hailed Him as king. They grabbed the fake scepter out of His hand and beat Him over the head with it. None of them realized they had the real King in their hands—the King of the Jews, the King of heaven and earth. None of them realized He had angel armies at His command if He chose to use them. None of them realized that the dress-up was real.

But of course it was. And they—and we!—will all stand together before Jesus' throne in the end, when He returns in glory. But then the worship will be real, not a mockery. It will be love, not hatred, and joy, not terror. Because the King that human beings dressed up and abused that day is in fact our Savior Jesus, God Himself, come to reclaim us from the power of evil. He has taken our place in death and the grave so that we might take the place He freely offers us, as children of God. He forgives and welcomes us as His own. And now that He has risen from the dead, He dresses us up in His own holy, kingly clothes—children of the Lord.

**THE PRAYER:** My King and my Savior, I love You. Thank You for everything You have borne to save us. Amen.

# NO REGRETS

Saturday, March 17, 2018

**Read John 19:1-5.**

**TEXT:** Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged Him. (John 19:1)

“Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.” Such a short sentence for such a terrifying punishment. A Roman flogging was no joke. The victim was stripped and tied facing a pillar to prevent him running or collapsing to the ground. Two skilled men held whips resembling a cat-o’-nine-tails. The limit on the number of strokes? Among Romans, it was only “Don’t kill the prisoner before he gets to the cross.”

This is pain. This is the courage that would carry Jesus through such an experience when we can hardly bear to think of it. This is love—that He does all of this to rescue us from the powers of darkness and to make us His own. How did He get through it?

The author of Hebrews gives us an idea. He urges us to run “with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1b-2).

Jesus kept you in mind. You and all Christians were “the joy that was set before Him”—all the people who would come to faith in Him and be saved by His work. The night before His death He prayed to the Father, “I have manifested Your Name to the people whom You gave Me out of the world. Yours they were, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your Word... they are Yours. All Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them” (John 17:6, 9b-10).

And Isaiah describes the result of Jesus’ work: “Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied; by His knowledge shall the Righteous One, My Servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:11). You are why Jesus thinks it all worthwhile. He has no regrets.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, You are my joy. Keep me always with You, and bring many more to faith in You as well. Amen.



# CROWN OF THORNS

Sunday, March 18, 2018

**Read John 19:1-5.**

**TEXT:** So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” (John 19:5)

Where I grew up there is a little desert plant called “crown of thorns.” It has long spidery branches so covered in thorns you can’t even touch the bark. Bright green leaves grow toward the ends of the branches, and small red flowers—round and bright, like drops of blood.

The thorns are a reminder of God’s original judgment on the sin of Adam and Eve: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17b-18a, 19)

Every generation knows the truth of this. There is no work without thorns, no happiness unspoiled by sorrow. Every human being suffers pain. And we grieve all the more because the pain we suffer reminds us of our end: dust we are, and to dust we will return.

How fitting, then, that the Son of Man should wear a crown of thorns.

God cursed the ground because of human sin, but then He turned around and made Himself a man, was born a human baby subject to the same pain and suffering we are. God Himself took up our curse, bore our guilt—wore our thorns.

Why would He do such a thing? There is no answer except for John 3:16: “God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus Christ, God-in-the-flesh, left His glory and came looking for us. He took up our sorrows and carried our griefs. The curse we earned fell upon Him, and He took it willingly—even dying forsaken on a cross. All this He did to redeem us.

Now that Jesus has risen from the dead, He is seated at God’s right hand in glory and majesty. But though He deserves every wonderful crown that exists, I doubt any will ever match the one He chose to wear for us.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, You wore the thorns we earned. You did this because You loved us. How can we ever thank You enough? Amen.

# WATER AND BLOOD

Monday, March 19, 2018

**Read: Matthew 27:24-26.**

**TEXT:** So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd ... (Matthew 27:24a)

It was so dramatic—and such a waste of time. Pilate's little act with the handwashing did no good at all. "Innocent of this man's blood"? Hardly. Everyone knew he was too scared to act justly and release Jesus, as he should have done. Jesus' blood was on his hands.

But what about the crowds, then? They certainly had responsibility. So did the Jewish leaders who handed Jesus over to Pilate. So did Herod, who could have saved Him, and refused. All of these had Jesus' blood on their hands.

And of course, so do we. It is our sins that brought Him to the cross—our wrongdoing, our guilt, our evil. His blood is on our hands. A little water will not clear us of this deed.

But thank God for that! Jesus' blood is on us; yes, and so we are forgiven. Because Jesus gave His life for us, we live. Because He poured out His blood for us, all our guilt has been taken away. We wash in water, yes—but not to be free of the blood of Jesus. Rather, God washes us in the water of Baptism to place the life-giving blood of Jesus upon us forever—to make us the beloved children of God.

Yes, indeed, may "His blood be upon us and our children!" May we, too, be among those saved by Jesus' willing self-sacrifice.

**THE PRAYER:** Father, You have made us clean through the blood of Your Son Jesus. Bring many more to faith in Him so that we may all live through Him and rejoice in Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

# COVERING FOR SHAME

Tuesday, March 20, 2018

**Read John 19:23-24.**

**TEXT:** And when they had crucified Him, they divided His garments among them by casting lots. (Matthew 27:35)

Most of us know shame. Shame for something we've done long ago, something almost forgotten until a chance word reminds us, and we cringe. Shame for something that was done to us, that we know was not our fault, but we can't shake the memory. Shame for something we can't help and we can't change, that maybe shouldn't even be shameful at all, but it still causes that kind of pain.

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took His clothes away. Almost every painting and crucifix in the world shows Jesus wearing a loincloth, but that's more a reflection of what we hope happened rather than what really did happen. The Romans normally crucified people naked. Shame was part of the punishment.

And this, too, Jesus bore for us. He came to be with us, within our pain and shame, to take it from us and onto Himself. He took our shame to give us His honor—His comfort—His glory. He died naked, in order to clothe us in His forgiving love.

There is no shame so deep that Jesus has not taken it upon Himself. And in exchange He gives us—Himself. Our Savior; our Lord, our healer. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). When God looks at us, He sees His beloved children—safe in Christ Jesus.

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You for covering my shame, Lord Jesus. Set my heart upon You to love You through everything I do. Amen.

# NOT A CHANCE

Wednesday, March 21, 2018

**Read John 19:23-24.**

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

When a man was crucified, his clothes normally went to the executioners. That’s how Jesus’ execution squad wound up gambling at the foot of His cross. There was a single valuable piece of clothing left over—a seamless tunic—and they didn’t want to ruin it. So they played for it.

The contrast is shocking to us—men gambling and chatting below, the Son of God suffering and dying above. They should have known, shouldn’t they? Some sort of spiritual insight should have whispered to them—should have said, “Pay attention! Show some respect! This isn’t an ordinary criminal, and this isn’t an ordinary death.”

But of course, nothing like that happened. The men went on with their day, like any other day, blaming chance and fortune for everything. And over their heads, Christ Himself knew that there was nothing of chance in this—everything had been ordained by God for our salvation, even from the beginning of the world.

God left nothing to chance when it came to saving us. The details are all there in the Old Testament—Jesus’ birth, His healing and preaching and teaching, His suffering, death, and resurrection. The gambling soldiers are there. The nails and the cross are there. The empty tomb is there.

But best of all, God Himself is there—there as Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us. No one else would be our Savior—no angel, no super-man or other great power. God Himself became our Savior, and laid down His life for us on the cross. God Himself rose from the dead that first Easter day, to give us life everlasting.

He trusted our fate to nobody and nothing but Himself.

**THE PRAYER:** Father, I know my life is in Your hands. Help me to trust in You even when times are dark, knowing that You love me and intend ultimate good for me. Amen.

# PAIN KILLER?

Thursday, March 22, 2018

**Read Matthew 27:33, 46-50.**

**TEXT:** And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered Him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when He tasted it, He would not drink it. (Matthew 27:33-34)

The Roman executioners were not complete monsters. Before they nailed Jesus to the cross, they offered Him wine mixed with gall—a painkiller, probably a bitter-tasting plant like opium poppy. No doubt there was a practical purpose—it is easier to deal with a human body that is half-stupefied and can't fight very well. But there was mercy there as well.

Jesus refused it.

Why?

I am so afraid of pain that my house is stocked with several kinds of pain killers, and I make sure I have them stashed away at work, too. I know what pain is like. But then, so did Jesus. He had just been flogged. How could He bear to say no?

And yet He did. He would not refuse the least bit of the suffering He bore to redeem us all. "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given Me?" (John 18:11b)

It wasn't just the physical pain. Jesus would keep a clear, unclouded mind to the end—enduring the horrific pain of being forsaken by the Father as Jesus became sin for us (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34). Paul describes why He did it: "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This is how much Jesus loves us. What can we do but love Him back?

**THE PRAYER:** Help us when we face pain, Lord. You know what it is like—have mercy on us. Amen.

# A SPONGE AND A STICK

Friday, March 23, 2018

**Read John 19:28-30.**

**TEXT:** A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to His mouth. (John 19:29)

Just before Jesus' final moments, He said, "I'm thirsty." Someone took a sponge and filled it with the sour wine the soldiers brought to drink. Then they put it on a stick and held it up to Jesus' mouth—a small act of kindness on a dark and bitter day.

What strikes me most about this story is Jesus' extreme helplessness. He couldn't get Himself a drink—couldn't hold a cup or do anything at all, really, except open His mouth. All four limbs were nailed to the cross. All He could do was ask.

Maybe this shouldn't strike me as surprising. We go through times like this in our lives too—though usually as a result of sickness or disability. A stroke, abdominal surgery, even minor things as losing our voice or having our eyes swell shut from an allergy—and suddenly, we are helpless. We need others to do for us what we cannot do.

It's no surprise, then, that God in the flesh should experience what we do.

He knew disability, helplessness, and humiliation. He who had helped so many others could now not help Himself. For us, it would have been a bitter pill to swallow. For Him?

It cannot have been easy. He is, after all, true man as well as true God. Jesus did not "cheat" when it came to being a human being. He knows our griefs because He has shared them. He shared them in His suffering and death.

And yet, now that Jesus has risen from the dead, He shares one more thing with us: His own eternal, rejoicing, abundant, everlasting life, full of joy, and power. He has had mercy on us, just like that unknown man at the cross showed Him mercy. He has given us to drink of His own everlasting life—partaking of His own body and blood.

Now, even though we are still helpless in many ways, we rejoice. The Holy Spirit has given us faith in Jesus, and we are God's children now and forever.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, You know my own disabilities and weaknesses. Help me to lean on You for everything I need. Amen.

# THE KING OF THE JEWS

Saturday, March 24, 2018

**Read John 19:18-22.**

**TEXT:** Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” (John 19:19)

When the Romans crucified someone, they often put a notice on the cross over the criminal’s head. This was called the “titulus,” and it was there to tell everybody what crime was being punished.

When Pilate wrote the inscription to post over Jesus’ head, he did it in three languages—Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. He wanted to be sure as many people as possible would be able to read it, no matter which local language they spoke. All three phrases said the same thing: “the King of the Jews.”

Jesus’ notice marked Him as a rebel against the Roman government. Pilate knew it was a lie, of course; he knew Jesus was innocent. But by posting those words over Jesus’ head, Pilate had the chance to insult the Jewish leaders who had maneuvered him so successfully into executing a man he didn’t want to kill. And so all unknowingly, Pilate gave Jesus His true title.

Because of course that is exactly what Jesus is: the Lord God Himself, the King of the Jews, the King of Israel. God claimed this title for Himself long ago, in the days of Moses and of Samuel (Deuteronomy 33:5; 1 Samuel 8:7). Pilate wrote more truly than he realized.

This is our King—the God who chose Abraham long ago to create a people belonging to Him; the Lord who taught them patiently what it meant to belong to a holy yet merciful God; the Savior who laid down His own life in order to save us all. And now He is not King of the Jews only, but the risen King of heaven and earth—Jesus, our Savior.

**THE PRAYER:** You are our Servant King, who died and rose again to save us. Thank You. Amen.

# VICTORY PALMS

Sunday, March 25, 2018 (Palm/Passion Sunday)

**Read Mark 11:1-10.**

**TEXT:** And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. (Mark 11:8)

Where I grew up, we had palm trees everywhere. There were palms at the beach, palms used as street trees, palm thickets so deep you could lose yourself playing hide and seek. There were even palms trying to grow up through the sidewalk cracks!

Palms grew abundantly in Judea as well, where they were a symbol for victory, glory, and kingship. When the crowds saw Jesus coming, riding humbly on a donkey, they cut palm fronds to strew before Him on the road. The symbolism was clear: “Here is our victorious King, the Messiah, the Son of David.”

And they were right. Jesus was their King—though His crown would be of thorns, and His throne a cross. He was victorious—though not over the Roman invaders, as many expected. Instead, He came to conquer sin, death, and the devil—the enemies of the whole human race. No one and nothing would stop Him.

And by His suffering, death, and resurrection, our King did win the victory for Himself and for all who believe in Him. That is why we, too, will stand before Him with palm branches in our hands on the Last Day, rejoicing and calling out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:10b).

**THE PRAYER:** Help me, Lord, to rejoice in Your victory over death and evil. Amen.



# WHOSE CROSS?

Monday, March 26, 2018

**Read Mark 15:21-25.**

**TEXT:** So they took Jesus, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. (John 19:16b-17)

After Jesus had been flogged, mocked, and condemned, they took Him out on the road to Golgotha, carrying His own cross. Now the cross was probably what we would call the crosspiece only—the patibulum. The upright vertical piece was probably already in place, fixed in the execution grounds.

The crosspiece alone would have weighed over a hundred pounds—a heavy load for a man in good health. Jesus was already near death—weak, dehydrated, probably in shock from the scourging and other abuse. He could not carry it. The walk was too far.

So the soldiers grabbed a bystander, Simon of Cyrene, to do the job. This was a humiliating task—to carry a cross in a public execution parade, as if he himself were the criminal condemned to die! But Simon did it—you don't say "no" to Roman soldiers.

And then Jesus was nailed to it, and the crosspiece hoisted into place. The Son of God, hanging suspended between heaven and earth, on display for all the world to see.

In the ancient world, this was a scene of utter shame. Romans even used "cross" and "crucify" as swear words. Even today Muslims refuse to believe that Jesus died on a cross—that death is too shameful, they say; God would not have allowed it, not for a holy man.

But God did allow it. In fact, God ordained it. In the council of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God—chose this death, this shameful cross. God chose our cross for Himself, our death, so He could give us in return His own life, holiness, and glory.

**THE PRAYER:** How can we thank You, O Lord, dear Jesus? There is no way. We love You and trust in You. Dear Father, grant that Jesus may have the full fruits of His cross—that people everywhere may believe in Him and be saved. Amen.

# THE NAILS

Tuesday, March 27, 2018

**Read John 20:24-28.**

**TEXT:** But he (Thomas) said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe.” (John 20:25b)

As a carpenter and builder, Jesus would have known the use of nails. Nails were expensive; if a wooden peg would do instead, no doubt that is what He used. But for some jobs, only iron would do.

But now the tools of His trade were being used against Him. The hammer, the nails—two spikes, really, driven into His wrists at the base of the hand. There they were strong enough to support the weight of His body. There they did impossible damage to the delicate bones and tendons of His hands. And the pain!

After His death, the nails would have been removed. But the marks remained.

Why? Why would Jesus choose scars to last through His death and resurrection? Those marks are visible even now (see Revelation 5:6). They are an eternal reminder of what it cost God to rescue us from Satan, death, and hell. No one can look on them and say, “It was easy for Him.”

But even more important, they are the marks of His love. They are the message of His loving-kindness, written into His very flesh, saying,

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine....  
For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isaiah 43:1b, 3a)

And when we recognize Him just as Thomas did, by the nail marks in His hands, we respond with joy:

“Behold, this is our God;  
we have waited for Him, that He might save us.  
This is the Lord;  
we have waited for Him;  
let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation.” (Isaiah 25:9b)

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord Jesus. We see the marks of Your love and we rejoice. Amen.

# ARE YOU SURE HE'S DEAD?

Wednesday, March 28, 2018

**Read John 19:31-37.**

**TEXT:** But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. (John 19:34)

They wanted to be sure He was dead. So one of the soldiers took a spear and stabbed Jesus in the side, bringing out a flow of blood and water. This was good proof He was dead, because blood doesn't separate that way, into red blood cells and clear plasma, until a body is no longer living. The soldiers were satisfied, and Pilate let Jesus' body be taken down.

If you think of it, they went to an awful lot of trouble to make sure Jesus was dead and to keep Him dead (so to speak). First the public crucifixion. Then the spear to the heart, which John witnessed. Finally the official sealing of the tomb, to make sure nobody came and stole His body and claimed He was alive again. And a guard, to enforce that.

And yet, after all that, it did no good. All their maneuvering couldn't keep Jesus in the tomb. The nails in the hands, the spear in the chest—Jesus turned those into proof of His identity when He met His frightened disciples after the resurrection. The seal on the tomb? Jesus didn't bother to open the tomb door when He left, so the seal and soldiers may have been perfectly intact when He left. Until the earthquake, anyway, and the angel who rolled away the stone and sat on it.

It is impossible to prevent Jesus from doing whatever He wants to do, and this is true even today. A set of nails and a spear to the heart couldn't do it. A sealed and guarded tomb couldn't keep Him in one place. Neither can your sin or mine.

For Christ is not dead now, and never will be again. He comes and goes as He pleases—forgiving and giving new life to everybody who believes in Him. If He wants you (and He does), your sin will not keep Him from loving you or from calling you to be His own. He has already paid the price for your forgiveness with His own life. Trust in Him.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear God, I'm glad no one can control You. Keep me always in Your safekeeping. Amen.

# FOR YOU

Thursday, March 29, 2018 (Maundy Thursday)

**Read I Corinthians 11:23-25.**

**TEXT:** (Jesus said) “This is My body, which is for you....This cup is the new covenant in My blood....” (I Corinthians 11:24b-25a)

“I need a hug,” my son says to me when he’s having a bad day. “Can you hold my hand?” a child asks her mother, standing in line for an amusement park ride. “Stay with me, don’t leave me,” beg children everywhere as their parents plunk them down in chairs at the dentist.

We take comfort in the physical, don’t we? If I am alone and afraid, I want nothing more than someone I love to touch me, to hold me. That gives me comfort and courage. Millions of children waking up in the night would agree.

Jesus knows this about us. And for that reason (as well as so many more! See Luther’s Small Catechism for details), Jesus gave us a very special gift the night He was betrayed. He took humble, ordinary bread and wine, and He gave it to His disciples, saying, “Take, eat... All of you, drink of it... This is my body... this is my blood.” And in, with, and through the bread and wine, He gives us Himself—His own forgiving body and blood.

This is comfort. This is mercy, that Jesus should leave us something of Himself we can touch and taste and eat, a gift that comes to form the foundation of our own bodies and blood. He knows how we are made—He knows that at some point, we will all wish we had been there in the days when He walked the earth visibly, for anybody to see and hear and touch. And so He gives us this gift of forgiveness and life in visible, touchable form—a gift of love for all His people. Thanks be to God.

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Father, for the care You give to our physical bodies. Most of all, thank You for the gift of Your Son’s body and blood. Amen.

# ACCESS TO THE FATHER

Friday, March 30, 2018 (Good Friday)

**Read Luke 23:44-46.**

**TEXT:** And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. (Mark 15:37-38)

Imagine what it would feel like to be a priest going about your duties in the temple that Friday, getting ready for the Sabbath. You would be doing it nervously, in near-darkness—the sun's light had failed at noon. Nobody around you would know why.

A few hours pass. Then an earthquake strikes. A ripping sound—what could that be? You turn around, and there, to your shock and fear, you see the temple curtain, torn in two from top to bottom! God's Most Holy Place, the temple room which you have never seen, is now open to your eyes.

The priests must have been terrified. Everybody knew the curtain existed to protect them from God's holy presence. No sinful human being could stand in God's presence and live. But now the curtain—the huge, thick, heavily embroidered curtain, as hard to rip as a carpet—was torn in two. God's presence was open to all mankind.

The writer of Hebrews explains why God did this. It was an acted-out parable of what Jesus was even then doing, opening the way to God through His own body, through His own death. Hebrews 10:19b-20 says, "We have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh."

No longer do we need to be afraid of God. Jesus Himself has opened the way to us. Now, through Jesus, we can come to God the Father, not as terrified sinners, but as His own dear children. "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:22)

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Father, help us to come to You boldly, trusting in Your forgiveness through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

# ROCK OF AGES

Saturday, March 31, 2018 (Holy Saturday)

**Read Matthew 27:59-66.**

**TEXT:** And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. (Matthew 27:59-60)

We are used to thinking of rocks as things that do not change—or, if they do, only very, very slowly, over thousands of years. An old rock—what hasn't it seen? Surely of all earthly things, a rock should be able to say, "There is nothing new under the sun." And yet, this rock—the one sealing Jesus' tomb—had a surprise coming.

Joseph of Arimathea had ordered a family tomb built for himself—cut out of the limestone surrounding Jerusalem. There was nothing surprising about that. Plenty of people had done the same. This tomb was to be closed by a giant rounded stone, which would roll down a small slope to cover the entrance. It was made big and heavy on purpose, to discourage animals or grave robbers.

So Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped Jesus' body in a shroud, put spices around Him, and laid Him in the tomb. Then they rolled the stone down in front of the entrance and went away. Nothing would change (or so the men probably thought!) until the next member of Joseph's family died and needed to be buried. The stone would simply sit there, unchanging, heavy—doing its job.

But things did change. First came a squad of soldiers to seal the stone and keep watch, just in case Jesus' disciples got up the courage to try to steal His body. (The Jewish leaders obviously didn't know them very well.)

Then came the women, walking out to the tomb to finish the details of Jesus' burial. They too worried about the stone, which was too heavy for them to move.

But they didn't have to. There was an earthquake, and an angel of God came down. Casually, as if the stone weighed nothing, the angel rolled it away from the door. Then he sat on it!

The stone had no purpose anymore except as an angel's seat. There was nothing left inside the tomb to guard. Jesus had already risen and gone.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Lord, there are things in my life like the stone that guarded Your tomb—things that imprison me though not You. Come, please, roll away these stones and set me free to live trusting in You. Amen.

# A HOMELY BEGINNING

Sunday, April 1, 2018 (Easter Sunday)

**Read John 20:1-9.**

**TEXT:** Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. (John 20:6-7)

It seems so tidy, somehow. When the disciples look into the tomb, they see the linen cloths lying on the stone bed, with the face cloth folded up neatly a little distance away. There are no grand explosions, no linen left dramatically draped around the room.

Rather it suggests to my mind that when He rose from the dead, Jesus simply sat up, removed His wrappings, folded His things (no doubt as His mother taught Him!) and then stood up and went about His day.

Such a quiet, homely beginning for the day that changed the world. A beginning like any other—one that says “This is home; this is comfort; this is your life where you belong.” A beginning unlike any other—because this is the day that sees death undone, first for Jesus, and ultimately for every Christian who belongs to Him.

We fear death; for death is the enemy; death is a stranger and unknown to us. But Christ is no stranger. He is our Lord, our Savior, our brother and friend and refuge. And He is the One who has mastered death.

Now we do not need to be afraid. Jesus our Lord goes with us, through life and suffering and death and life again. He knows the way, and He holds us safe through all terrors. And just as it was for Him, so it will be for us some day: we will rise from our graves to enjoy the eternal life He gives—the life that is home, that is comfort, that is where we belong—forever—with Jesus.

**THE PRAYER:** Dear Lord, thank You with all my heart for rising again. Help me to trust in You as I face life and death, knowing that You will be with me and help me through every step of the way. Amen.

# NOW WHAT?

Monday, April 2, 2018 (Easter Monday)

**Read Luke 24:1-11.**

**TEXT:** When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so that they might go and anoint Him. (Mark 16:1)

Joseph and Nicodemus didn't have time to do a proper burial for Jesus that Friday evening. Though they did the best they could, the women who followed Jesus were not satisfied. They planned to come back early Sunday morning and do the job right.

So they went shopping (probably Saturday night, when the Sabbath was officially over). They bought spices and ointments, all the things they would need to wash and anoint Jesus' body. They packed them up to take out to the tomb the next day... at which point it became abundantly clear that no spices were needed. Jesus was alive, the funeral was cancelled, and ... now what should they do with all the spices?

Try to get a refund? Just imagine explaining the reason why to the shopkeeper. Save them for the next person to die? But death itself had been conquered, and who knew what would happen next! I imagine the women finally shoved them in a chest or closet and decided to figure it out later.

Jesus' resurrection must have led to any number of such ridiculous, joyful moments. And since Jesus will raise all of us who trust in Him, there will be more moments like this in the future. Think of what we won't need in the new heaven and new earth He is making—no cemeteries, no funeral homes, no dark clothes and solemn suits and handkerchiefs. No wills, no "I give, devise and bequeath," no inheritance tax. No hospice programs, no palliative care, no grief counseling. No grieving. No sorrow. No death.

Instead, there will be life. There will be love and happiness and laughter. There will be activity and creativity and fellowship. There will be friendship and joy as at last we get to know one another without sin ruining our relationships.

And best of all, there will be the Lord. There will be God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who made us and redeemed us and sanctified us for joyful life in God's kingdom forever. Thanks be to God!

**THE PRAYER:** Thank You, Lord, for the great joy we have to look forward to on the day when You return. Keep us strong in faith, and bring many more people to that same saving faith in You. Amen.



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# Silent Witnesses

LENTEN DEVOTIONS 2018

For Christians, the season of Lent is marked by deep reflection on the appearance of the Savior and, naturally, what His life, suffering, death, and resurrection mean for our lives now. God's human involvement in our world is a perfect example of His intimate love for us. He spared nothing to make Himself known to us—a fact that proclaims in no uncertain terms how “God so loved the world.” In *Silent Witnesses*, readers will note both the majestic—and mundane—aspects of the Gospel accounts: stories telling how God in His infinite power came down and “has spoken to us by His Son.”



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