

PEACE MENNONITE CHURCH

LENT 2021

DEVOTIONAL



***JESUS' JOURNEY TO THE CROSS
IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE***

WRITINGS BY JOANNA HARADER

Ash Wednesday, February 17: Luke 9:51-62; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Friends,

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Christian observance of Lent. Along with Jesus, we turn toward Jerusalem; we consider what it means to follow Jesus—even in seasons of difficulty and danger.

Traditionally, Lent is a time of sacrifice; a period to, as the prophet Joel says, “rend our hearts.” This year, though, it seems to me that we have already sacrificed quite a lot; that our hearts have been rent quite enough. I would suggest that during this Lenten season, rather than giving something up, we allow ourselves to open up to new spiritual practices, new ways of experiencing God’s presence and receiving God’s blessings. That rather than tearing our hearts in grief, we seek God’s healing for our already-broken hearts.

This devotional booklet will take us through Luke’s story of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the cross. I invite you to read along, to prayerfully consider what the scriptures and reflections may have to offer you for your own life in this season. You are also welcome to share your thoughts on our Facebook page and in our Wednesday night or Sunday morning discussions.

The reflections and prayers in this booklet are written by me, with the exception of the Palm Sunday monologue for March 23 that was written by Roger Martin. Most of these writings are adapted from pieces written years ago; some are newly written for this year.

I invite you to begin Lent with the prayer of releasing below. May God’s peace be with you.

~Joanna Harader

Holy, holy, holy God

I place myself in your presence; I rest in the promise of your grace.

My mind and my spirit are cluttered with many thoughts and feelings
that threaten to pull my attention away from you.

Let me unclench my fists and release these things:

I release all that I have done in these past weeks and months—whether for good or for ill.

I release all that I feel like I should have done, but did not do.

I release all that I think I should do tomorrow.

I release my fear. I release my anxiety. I release my impatience. I release my pride.

All of the thoughts, all of the feelings that pull me away from you, O God, I release.

[silence]

Fill me now with the joy and the peace of your deep, abiding presence.

I offer all of myself to you, my One God--Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

Amen

Thursday, February 18: Luke 11:1-28

The Simple Complexities of Prayer

One writer shares that her relationship with God began in earnest one morning during Sunday School when the Sunday School superintendent came into her class to pray with them. During the prayer, this little girl ventured to open her eyes just the slightest bit and peek up at the praying man. As she watched him pray, she was struck that he was speaking to God as if he really knew God—and as if God really knew him.

You may have heard someone pray like this. It's hard to describe what exactly it is about a person's voice or face or body language that gives you that sense that they are connected with the Divine. But there is *something* there. It must have been that *something* that the disciples saw in Jesus while he was "praying in a certain place." That *something* that caused them to say to Jesus, "Teach us to pray."

Jesus' response is simple, straight forward, concise: "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

It is a lovely, beautiful, profound prayer. If that were the totality of Jesus' teaching on prayer, we could all sit back and relax. But the parable about prayer Jesus shares next is far less clear—and far more uncomfortable.

It's the parable of the friend at midnight. The most obvious reading of this parable is that God gives us what we ask for only because we are really irritating—because we are, as the Greek most accurately translates, *shameless*. Surely, though, the *point* of this parable is not that God finds us annoying. The entirety of scripture contradicts this idea. So what *is* the point of the parable?

One point could be that God is our friend. One point might be that we are free to be shameless in our requests to God. We can go to God any time, with any request. We can pound and yell and demand. And God remains in relationship with us through it all.

And I wonder if this parable can work the other way around. What if we are not the friend who comes at midnight? What if we are the friend who is settled comfortably in bed . . . and *God* is the friend pounding on the door, demanding we share our bread?

Jesus' next teachings about prayer also pose challenges. Because we know that not everyone who asks receives. And we know that some fathers would, indeed, give their child a snake instead of a fish (so to speak). Jesus' seemingly simple answer quickly becomes complex.

I think, for all of its potential problems, the metaphor Jesus uses of God as Father highlights the relationship that is at the heart of all prayer. It is this *relationship* that Jesus is most concerned about—not all of the theological complexities in which we get tangled up.

A grown woman remembers a prayer she heard as a child in Sunday School. She does not remember the words that were spoken or the theology that was represented. She just remembers peeking over her folded hands and seeing someone who was really talking with God. Someone who had a deep and honest relationship with our Creator.

Friday, February 19: Luke 11:29-53

Just Sipping my Gnat-Free Beverage

I have some sympathy for the Pharisees in this passage. They remind me a bit of my English 101 student who was devastated by the “D” on his paper: “But I ran spell check AND grammar check!” he told me.

It's hard when you think you've done everything right only to realize that you have missed the point entirely. And it is certainly easier to follow a set of specific rules—be they grammatical or religious—than it is to understand and carry out deeper principles—like good writing or doing justice.

Our rules provide a sense of security. They let us know if we are doing things right or not, and that knowledge is a comfort to us. But God wants justice more than rule-following. Jesus says to carry out the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. Which makes this Christian life that we strive for pretty difficult. With rules, you generally know if you are following them—or not. With justice . . .

The biblical witness is honest about what can happen to those who carry out this call to do justice. It can get you in trouble the way that following rules rarely does. Jesus' contentious words with the scribes and Pharisees contributed to the forces—religious and political—that eventually conspired in his death.

You may recall that Martin Luther King, Jr. was scolded by religious leaders in Alabama for his “unwise and untimely” participation in nonviolent resistance. His response to these men of faith, the “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” is required reading for any Christian who seeks to follow God's call to justice. In it King writes: “the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” Maybe another term for “order” could be “rule-following.”

I doubt that anyone reading this is tempted to join the KKK. But the role of “white moderate” is awfully tempting. People don't throw white moderates in jail. Or write them nasty letters. Or accuse them of causing trouble. Being a white moderate is a pretty comfortable place to land.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” says Jesus. “For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”

The biblical call is a hard, impassioned, exasperated call to work for justice beyond—and sometimes even in spite of—the religious rules of our day. The temptation is to let the rule-following replace the justice-doing, because rule-following is easier. Straining out gnats might be a pain, but at least we know how to do it. And we know when we've done it. And once we've done it we can take a little break and sip our nice, gnat-free beverage.

But doing justice? There is rarely just one clear action to take. And there is never a time when justice is achieved and we can cross *that* off the list. Working for justice is on-going and complicated and messy. And it is also what Jesus calls us to do. Together.

Monday, February 22: Luke 12:1-21

To Fear or Not to Fear

The fear of God is an awkward concept. I don't like to be afraid—not of mice or riding in airplanes or COVID or God. There are many places in the Bible that talk about the fear of God in ways that are, if not pleasant, at least tolerable. The psalmists like to talk about this fear a lot:

“The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.” (19:9)

“The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him.” (25:14)

“The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him.” (34:7)

You get the idea. “Fear” of God seems to be connected to respect, admiration, worship. It's not really a bad—or even a scary—fear. Just healthy recognition that God is God.

But here in Luke the fear doesn't seem quaint or comforting; it is terrifying. “Fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.” My first instinct is to declare this a terrible verse, but I realize that it is merely a verse that has been used to terrorize. It has been used to shame people into conformity, to say that if you don't act the right way God will throw you into hell and so you should be scared. That's how some preachers use this verse.

But I don't think Jesus is using the words in this way. Because after he says, “Yes, I tell you, fear him!” he says, “Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” So are we supposed to be afraid or not be afraid?

Let's back up for a minute to the part right before Jesus tells us to fear God. He says, “do not fear those who kill the body.” This may feel like a pretty remote, hypothetical fear. But Jesus' audience was living under Roman rule, in an empire that maintained “peace” by crucifying and otherwise terrorizing people who opposed the powers that be. And Luke's audience was living through persecution of the early church.

Even today, there are people who legitimately fear those who kill the body. Every day. I'm thinking of people living under brutal regimes, people trapped in abusive relationships, black people who live under constant threat of police violence.

It's not that Jesus wants us to be afraid. It's that he absolutely does *not* want us to be afraid of the forces of evil in this world. These forces, says Jesus, are not worthy of our fear. The only One worthy of our fear is God, who *could* not only kill your body, but your soul as well.

God *could* do that, but God won't do that. Because God knows every hair on your head. Because God values you more than many sparrows, which, OK, might not seem like much. Except not one of them is forgotten. And neither are you.

Somehow, within the paradoxical reign of God, the way to not be afraid of this world's dangers is to fear only the One who poses no danger to us at all.

Tuesday, February 23: Luke 12:22-48

Holy God of Abundance,
As we sow and reap and gather into barns;
As we work and earn and calculate our net worth,
Let us consider the birds of the air;
Let us consider the lilies of the field.
Let us notice and look and give thanks
for the food that fills our pantries and refrigerators,
and the seeds and insects and berries that nourish the birds;
for the clothes that cover and warm us,
and the colors and textures that clothe the flowers and fields.

May we dwell in gratitude—
For the ravens and the lilies,
For each day that makes up the span of our lives,
For glimpses of your divine grace in the stuff of this world.

May we dwell in generosity—
Giving to those in need,
Recognizing our relationships as true treasure,
Trusting in your abundance.

Holy God, ease us away from worry
and point us on the path toward your peace.
Amen

Wednesday, February 24: Luke 12:49-13:5

“Jesus, Jesus. Did you hear?” asks a voice from the crowd. There were these people from Galilee, they were faithful, made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices at the temple. And then. And then. These men. Pilate’s men. They just killed them. Slaughtered them right there in the temple. The blood of the people mixed with the blood of the animals. An unholy, horrific sacrifice.

Did you hear? A protestor was shot, another trampled, a police officer killed at the Capitol on January 6. On January 9 a man went on a shooting spree, killing 5 people in the Chicago area. The next day, in Killeen, TX, Patrick Warren, a black man, was shot and killed by a police officer who had come to do a mental health check.

“Everyone knows,” writes Mary Oliver.

“Everyone knows the great energies running amok cast
terrible shadows, that each of the so-called
senseless acts has its thread looping
back through the world and into a human heart.”

“Do you think?” asks Jesus. “Do you think that because these people suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other people? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

This question from Jesus seems a bit harsh, given the context. He is speaking to a crowd that we assume to be made up of Jewish people—quite possibly some Galileans, potentially even family members and friends of the victims from the terrible massacre in the temple. Why would they have thought that people were sinners for offering sacrifices?

Do you think that because these people suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other people? Jesus, of course, says “no.” So apparently it was a rhetorical question. Which makes us feel better. For a half of a second until Jesus continues: “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

For Jesus and his audience, the command to “repent” wasn’t really about actions. New Testament professor Matthew Skinner explains, “The word translated as ‘repent’ is, at its root, about *thinking* and *perception*. It refers to a wholesale change in how a person understands something.”

The deaths at the Capitol, the mass shooting in Chicago, the murder of Patrick Warren--they are heartbreaking. And infuriating. Because these deadly combinations of racism, anger, entitlement, and violence have plagued our country for decades—centuries. And we don’t seem to be making much progress.

Jesus says, “If you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.” This is not a threat. It is a truth. We may not *all* die by violence, but people continue to die every single day. And if we do not repent, we will keep dying.

Maybe our necessary repentance has to do with *seeing* that looping thread Mary Oliver writes about; the thread of violence in the human heart of the rioters in D.C. and the shooter in Chicago and the police officer in Texas--the thread that loops back through the world.

It loops through the spreading of lies and inciting to violence, through unconscionable gun legislation and over-reliance on police; it loops through our failures to support struggling families, through underfunded schools and crowded jails and overwhelmed mental health care systems; it loops through our false ideas about being “male” and “female;” it loops through our racial prejudices and our xenophobia and our patriarchy and our sense of entitlement.

It is a long and winding thread.

Repentance is what we desperately need as a nation. A re-visioning, a re-imagining of what our communities can and should be.

We are called to echo the cry of Jesus: “Repent! Change the way you view the world, because this current vision of hierarchy and power and violence and scarcity and individualism is *killing you*. You think it is just killing *them*, but trust me, it is also killing *you*.”

Repent!

May God give us eyes to see the thread, ears to hear the cries, and a voice to proclaim the hard and holy message of Jesus.

Thursday, February 25: *Luke 13:6-21

Fig Trees among Grape Vines

In Jesus' parable in Luke 13, a fig tree is planted in a vineyard. Which sounds weird to begin with. The owner is unhappy because the tree is not bearing fruit. "Cut it down," he says. But the vintner says, "I'll dig around it, fertilize it. Let's give it one more year."

And the vast majority of the commentaries and reflections I've read about this story say something to the effect of, "See, God is willing to give us sinners one more chance. God is merciful . . . and yet God's mercy is not unlimited." But I just can't get on board with this reading, because it involves two major assumptions that I'm not willing to make.

First, this interpretation assumes that the vineyard owner represents God. *Why would we assume this?* Jesus doesn't say it. Jesus doesn't even imply it. Within the context of Jesus' teaching, God is *abba*, the loving father. The rich are, at best, blinded by their wealth; at worst, they are heartless oppressors. So why in the world would we just assume that Jesus wants us to equate God with the wealthy owner of a vineyard?

Second, this "God is merciful, but . . ." interpretation assumes that the vineyard owner says "yes" to the vintner's request. One commentator I read, as he was retelling the story, wrote about how the owner said, "O.K., but just one more year." Funny, I thought. That last part isn't in my Bible. The vintner makes the request and next thing we know the parable is done and Jesus is upsetting some religious leaders (again) by healing on the Sabbath.

So I can't go with the "God is merciful, but . . ." theory. I don't think the owner is God. I don't think the vintner is Jesus. I'm not convinced that Israel is (or we are) the fig tree, as many suggest. I really don't like to allegorize the parables at all. It's dangerous territory. But if we must allegorize, maybe we should think about the ways in which *some* of us are like the fig tree.

The owner seems to think that a fig tree is worthless if it's not producing figs. But that simply isn't true. The root system of the fig tree is vital for slowing down soil erosion. The branches of fig trees were often used as trellises for grape vines. There are lots of ways a fig tree can be useful besides producing figs.

So perhaps the fig tree is like those of us who are unproductive, those of us who are not worth much in the eyes of the world, those of us who do not act like others think we are supposed to act. Maybe the poor, the differently-abled, the mentally ill, the children, the misfits . . . maybe they are the fig tree.

Unappreciated. Vulnerable. Necessary.

And maybe those of us more appreciated, more accepted . . . maybe we are called to tend and fertilize the trees in hopes that fruit will emerge from the once-barren branches.

Or maybe we are called to convince the powerful, bottom-line-oriented people of the world to put away their axes. Because even barren fig trees are valuable resources—especially in a vineyard.

Friday, February 26: *Luke 13:22-35

Whom shall we fear?

At the end of today's scripture reading, there are two brief, distinct passages. In the first, Jesus is warned—by the Pharisees no less—that Herod is out to kill him. Jesus responds by calling Herod a “fox” and saying he will go to Jerusalem anyway.

In the second part, Jesus accuses Jerusalem of violence against the prophets. And yet, in a stunning metaphor, Jesus reveals his desire to gather and protect the people of Jerusalem “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” The obvious connection between these two sections is the animal imagery. If Herod is a fox and Jesus is a hen . . . well, you don't have to be a farmer to know how that story turns out.

Beyond the barnyard imagery, these stories work together to address a question posed centuries before by the psalmist: Whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid? The Pharisees figure Jesus should be afraid of Herod—the powerful man who, at least in their estimation, is trying to kill Jesus. This is the same Herod that had John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, beheaded a few years back. If Herod wants someone dead, chances are they will be dead. Soon.

But Jesus refuses to change his plans. He will not go into hiding. He stays the course and seems utterly unafraid of the threat posed by Herod's ill wishes. Of whom shall I be afraid? Through his actions, Jesus says, “Not Herod.”

Whom shall we fear? The answer comes, I think, in the second little part of our gospel reading. Jesus gives us the image of himself as the mother hen, spreading her wings over the chicks. And why would the chicks gather around their mother and hide under her wings? Maybe because they are afraid.

The people of Jerusalem are actually *not* running for cover. They are *not* afraid. But Jesus strongly implies that they should be. And why should they be afraid? Not because of Herod. Not because of some external oppressive, violent force. They should be afraid because they are the city that stones the prophets and kills those who are sent to it. They should be afraid *of themselves*. Of their own propensity toward rejecting the outsider. Of their own blindness to reality. Of their own ability to commit violence.

The U.S. federal government carried out ten executions last year (2020), and seven other people were executed by state governments. The death penalty exists because people are afraid of these other people who have allegedly done terrible things. But what we should be afraid of is what kind of humans we become when our government executes people. When our tax dollars pay for the materials and personnel to take the life of a human being.

The events of 9/11 were horrific. Everyone involved in perpetrating the suicide bombing plot enacted evil. The two planes that struck the towers killed about 3,000 people. And devastated the lives of tens—hundreds—of thousands of family members and friends of those who died. This event struck terror in our hearts. To realize that violence could come upon us in an instant.

And now, the low estimate of the civilian body count from the war in Iraq is over 185,000.

Of whom shall we be afraid?

We think the threat is external. Jesus says it is not. That the violence only really takes your life—your spirit, your soul—when it is the violence that *you* commit against another.

Whom shall we fear? Whom do we fear? Personally, I tend to fear the foxes—those threats of external, physical violence. I don't know what you are afraid of.

I do know what we *should* be afraid of. We should be afraid of killing the prophets. Of stoning those who are sent. We should be afraid that we will somehow treat another person as less than human and thereby reduce our own humanity. We should be afraid that we will fail to care for the least of these and thereby place ourselves at odds with the Kingdom of God.

We should be afraid. We should be so afraid that we go flocking to the mother hen, huddling under the heavy, soft wings; placing our trembling little bodies so close to her breast that we can feel her beating heart.

Monday. March 1: Luke 14:1-14

On Watching and Being Watched

Jesus must have been so tired of being watched all the time, of knowing that his critics were examining everything he did, just waiting for him to do something bad enough to justify them taking actions against him. In this particular story, Jesus tries to bring his critics along, to get them on his side. He asks what should be a simple question: “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?”

But none of them are willing to answer. If they say “no,” they open up a theological can of worms. If they say “yes,” they forfeit the right to criticize Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. So they just stand there silently looking back and forth between Jesus and the sick man who has come for healing.

You can sense Jesus' exasperation as he “took him and healed him, and sent him away.” It seems there is literally nothing Jesus can do that will not draw condemnation from this particular group of religious leaders. Of course he's exhausted.

It strikes me, though, that these religious leaders must also have been exhausted. They are constantly watching Jesus, questioning everything he does, trying to find fault in even the most kind gestures and the most faithful teachings. Jesus' critics are not interested in healthy accountability, but only in trying to prove themselves right and Jesus wrong. They don't dare engage in actual conversation with him or answer even the simplest-sounding questions for fear they will have to admit some virtue on Jesus' part or re-examine some of their own assumptions.

How terrible it must have been to live with so much vigilance and fear.

In the end, I think I would choose the exasperation of being scrutinized over the constant stress of watching and waiting for someone to mess up. There's a certain freedom in exasperation—when you know that whatever you do will be the wrong thing, you figure out that you might as well do what you want. But there is no freedom in the vigilance of these Pharisees, only fear and exhaustion.

Tuesday, March 2: Luke 14:15-24

Party Invitations

Most of us have been trained to read the parables as allegories. Someone has to *be* “the king”, and someone the “wicked people” and someone the “good people.” What do we do with parables in general if the power figure is not representative of God? What do we do with this parable in particular, if the host is not God? What message is Jesus trying to convey if this is just a story about a spiteful host and some lucky street people?

Maybe this one is a little too easy. Because I think Jesus tells people what he wants them to know before he tells the story: “When you have a nice meal (like the one we’re eating here together), be sure you don’t just invite people who can return the favor. You should invite the poor, the lame, the blind. Haven’t you ever heard the story of the host who only invited his rich friends? Well, once there was a man who gave a great banquet . . .”

If the host represents anyone, he represents those of us with the means to host a banquet. And Jesus is not telling us to set up soup kitchens or food banks. Those are good things, but not what this story is about. In this story, Jesus is telling us that the poor, the lame, the outcasts, should be our friends. We should eat with them, not just give them food. In the end, says Jesus, you’ll be eating with them anyway. You might as well start now.

The spiteful host is not God, but it might be us. And the first-invited guests—they also might be us. Those of us who can afford farms and oxen and weddings. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock points out that all of the excuses given in this story would have been considered legitimate reasons for canceling a dinner engagement. These are not “the dog ate my homework” kinds of excuses.

It was important for upper class people to acquire property, engage in commerce and solidify social ties through marriage. And it is precisely these obligations that prevented them from enjoying the meal their friend had prepared for them.

Probably the closest I’ve ever come to hosting a banquet is throwing birthday parties for my kids. And it was always a good feeling when the people we invited showed up to celebrate with us! It felt like we had friends, like we were loved. And we had a great time. There is a graciousness in giving the invitation, and there is also a graciousness in accepting the invitation.

In this passage, Jesus isn’t necessarily speaking metaphorically. He could actually be talking about what he’s talking about—giving invitations and accepting them, and how our attempts at respectability can get in the way of both. As the first-invited demonstrate, being socially respectable takes a significant amount of time and energy. Sometimes we are tempted to prioritize social and economic obligations over opportunities for true relationship.

Now, I’m not saying that *the* meaning of this parable is to watch out for social obligations. Or that you should never refuse a dinner invitation. But I think those messages are there as part of the story; they are there for those who need to hear them. The beauty of Jesus’ parables is that they meet us where we are. We might be the host. We might be the first-invited. We might be the poor off of the street. But wherever we find ourselves in the story, we can be sure of the good news: there is a party, and—one way or another—we’re all invited!

Wednesday, March 3: Luke 14:25-35 ~ *Explaining Discipleship*

Jesus' instructions on discipleship here seem a little disjointed. First it's "hate your father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters." Then it's "carry your cross"—which must have sounded odd to the crowd listening to Jesus; a Jesus who has not yet been crucified; a Jesus who is a rabbi, not a prisoner. They must be thinking, "What cross? Why do I have a cross? What are you talking about?"

Then Jesus tells these two odd little parables. The first is about a man building a tower, which hardly seems relevant for a crowd of Jewish peasants. They may have to calculate the cost of their next meal, but they are not planning home improvement projects. *Maybe* they get the "count the cost message." More likely they are thinking, "What an idiot, spending all that money on a tower."

Nevertheless, I like this tower-building analogy better than the war analogy. "What king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?" "Count the cost," says Jesus. As a pacifist, I would argue that the cost of war is always too high; that seeking peace is always the best option—whether you are the one with ten thousand troops or twenty thousand troops.

Many of the people in Jesus' original audience might have been thinking about the Maccabean Revolt that had occurred about 150 years earlier. The Jewish forces were drastically outnumbered, but still they prevailed against the oppressive Seleucid empire and gained religious freedom for the Jewish people. Their faith heroes did not count the cost, but boldly went forth, putting their trust in God. Isn't *that* the testimony of scripture—Moses against the Pharaoh, Joshua leading his raggedy band into the promised land, David vs. Goliath. Faith, they have been taught—we have been taught—is not about counting the cost, but about trusting in God.

Finally, after a rather disjointed attempt to explain the deep cost of discipleship to this crowd of baffled Jewish peasants, Jesus gives a big sigh. And he decides to just say it as clearly as he can. To present the most drastic sacrifice they can relate to: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

The relationship we have with our money and our stuff is that important. The right relationship with stuff—a relationship that holds stuff loosely—can allow us to follow Jesus faithfully. The wrong relationship—a relationship in which we cling to our possessions—will prevent us from being true disciples.

This disjointed passage reveals Jesus' struggles to explain what is required of those who would be his disciples. The people in this particular crowd have already left their homes; they think they've given up a lot. They think they understand the extent of the commitment required of them. But Jesus knows they don't. They have no idea. They can't imagine what lies ahead in Jerusalem. They don't understand the threat this movement of love and justice and truth poses to the powers of empire. They cannot foresee that their gentle teacher will be brutally executed. That they themselves may be targeted and persecuted.

If Jesus struggles to explain discipleship, it's no wonder that we struggle to live it. Even centuries later, knowing the entire story, we struggle to put God first, to risk discomfort, to commit to the cost of the cause, to hold loosely to our possessions. We struggle, but at least we struggle together. With each other today and with our ancestors in the faith, we struggle through the difficulties and embrace the joy of discipleship.

Thursday, March 4: *Luke 15:1-10

Bad at Math

This guy's a little crazy, don't you think?
This shepherd who told the whole town:
"I found my lost sheep"
Which is to say,
"I lost a sheep"
And to say,
"I left ninety-nine of my sheep to fend for themselves."
Which is to say:
Nobody is ever going to hire that guy
To watch their sheep again.

And that woman with the coins,
Poor thing.
Her house isn't that big
So I'm not sure how she managed
to lose a coin in the first place.
But in the second place,
She spent more than one silver coin
On that party she threw
To celebrate finding her one silver coin.

It doesn't add up.
One sheep,
One coin,
Equal parties and joy and angels.
It's an odd calculus
In the reign of God.
Hard to believe.
And harder to resist.

Friday, March 5: *Luke 15:11-31

There are two distinct groups listening to Jesus' parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. First, there are the tax collectors and sinners--people who have been shunned from polite society and the respectable religious institutions. And then there are the people from the respectable religious institutions: the Pharisees and the scribes. They have apparently shown up for the sole purpose of grumbling about the tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus tells both groups the same stories, but I imagine they hear very different things. What may be most notable to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes is that all three of these stories end with a party. Jesus is making a point about God, about the Kingdom, about the ways in which the judgment and the grumbliness of these scribes and Pharisees is counter to what God wants for God's people.

These religious leaders think that the tax collectors and sinners don't deserve the company of Jesus--who they have figured out has a special relationship with God. Maybe they are resentful, like the older son; they wish Jesus was eating and laughing and drinking with them. And here Jesus is saying, "You're invited to the party. But the party is not going to be just for you. And if you can't celebrate with everybody, including the tax collectors and the sinners, then I guess you won't be celebrating at all."

But the tax collectors and the sinners--they hear something very different in these stories. They hear about joy and forgiveness. They hear Good News.

In Jesus' culture, honor was the ultimate virtue and shame made you an outcast. The Pharisees and scribes are the ones with honor. The tax collectors and sinners experience shame in their community.

The younger son in Jesus' story brings shame to his otherwise honorable family by asking for his share of the inheritance. The worst part is that he loses the money to Gentiles—Roman prostitutes, pagan pig-owners. He takes his sacred inheritance and distributes it among those who do not even believe in, let alone honor, the God of his ancestors.

Barbara Brown Taylor explains that this activity was so shameful the Talmud describes a ceremony for precisely this situation. A *qetsatsah* ceremony would "punish a Jewish boy who loses the family inheritance to Gentiles."¹ If such a boy dares to show his face in the village again, the villagers fill a huge jug with burned nuts and corn and then break it in front of him. They yell his name and pronounce him cut off from his people.

Taylor suggests that when the father goes running out to meet his son, his running certainly is an expression of love. But it is also a means of protecting the son. The father wants to get to the son before the villagers have time to burn the nuts and corn and stuff them in a jar. The father risks his own honor to seek to restore his son to the family and the community before he is cut off forever. Once the people in the village come to the party honoring the returned son, the window of opportunity for rejecting him is past.

This story of the running father is powerful. The truth of Jesus' parable for the tax collectors and sinners is that God seeks to honor them, not to shame them. I guess that's also truth of the parable for the scribes and Pharisees as well: that God seeks to honor the tax collectors and sinners that they came to grumble about. It is the same message after all; but maybe it doesn't sound like good news to everyone.

¹ From a sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church (Chicago, IL) on March 18, 2007.
<https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/031807.html>

Monday, March 8: Luke 16:1-18

Systems of Wealth, Ancient and Modern

This parable is not just about the rich man, the shrewd manager, the lucky merchants. It is about the systems that all of these people are operating in. “You cannot serve God and wealth,” says Jesus. And it’s not just wealth in terms of money. It’s the social systems the wealth sets up. These systems where we have to lie and cheat each other to stay in the game. These systems that claim different rules and moral codes for different people. These systems where we have to classify people and maintain certain boundaries and establish certain relationships. The systems that pit *us* against *them*.

It might be helpful at this point to note that in this passage, Jesus’ audience seems to encompass a broad range of people. There are the disciples and the tax collectors and sinners who were coming to hear Jesus. Then Luke tells us that “the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all of this.” The tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and disciples listening to Jesus are just as much a part of a wealth-driven system as the rich man, manager, and merchants of the parable. They are enmeshed in money-driven systems. And so are we. Jesus says, “You can’t serve God and wealth,” but it’s not really a simple choice, is it? Because we are all tangled up in the *systems* of wealth.

We inhabit the spaces of our lives—our homes and schools and church buildings—because people many years ago—but not *that* many years ago—forced native peoples off of their land. The Kansa, Osage, and Delaware nations are the earliest inhabitants of our space. Their violent removal is part of the money-driven system in which we live. As is the economic legacy of slavery and the current reality of exploited workers and environmental devastation.

How do we live in a way that serves God and not wealth when we are so completely enmeshed in the systems of wealth? Hide our money under our mattresses? Give away our money? Give our property to an indigenous community? Refuse the low interest rate we’re offered—because the system offering it is unfair?

I’ve read commentators who think that none of the characters in Jesus’ story come off looking very good. They are all greedy and deceitful—the rich man who pretends not to charge interest but actually does; the manager that facilitates the deceit of his master and then is deceitful himself; the merchants who possibly start the vicious rumors that almost get the manager fired. Some writers judge them all pretty harshly.

But I just see how they, like we, are completely caught up in the wealth-systems of their day; they are constricted by the roles society gives them to play based on their socio-economic status. They, like us, may very well be doing the best that they can within the systems in which they have been placed. The systems of ancient Greece and the systems of modern America are all in service to wealth.

And Jesus says we *can’t* serve God and the systems of wealth. And, Jesus says, in this parable, that we are all running around serving wealth like crazy, because we *can’t help but* serve wealth. And it’s a pretty grim picture when we focus on this brief parable.

BUT, if we step back and look at the larger picture of scripture, we see the truth—and the hope. As Jesus reveals to us the Kingdom of God, he reveals that we *can*, in fact serve God instead of wealth. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see that the wealth systems of this world, though certainly strong, are not actually as powerful and inevitable as they appear.

Tuesday, March 9: *Luke 16:19-31 ~ Gaps and Gates

I've come to think of this as "the parable of the chasm." It's the only parable with a chasm. In fact, it's the only chasm in the whole of the New Testament. And what a chasm it is. The rich man is able to see to the other side, and even to talk with Abraham across the chasm. The one thing the rich man cannot do is cross over the chasm.

Of course, this chasm between heaven and Hades is a physical—and I would say imaginative—manifestation of the divide that existed on earth between Lazarus and the rich man. One dressed in (very expensive) purple and fine linen; the other covered with sores. One feasting with his friends, using scraps of bread as napkins and then tossing them under the table; the other stuck outside the gate, longing for some of those table scraps.

Certainly there are chasms today between the rich and the poor. The wealth gap, as you are probably aware, is obscene. I've also been thinking about experience gaps. And in particular the chasm that exists between the way I experience this society as a white person and the way people of color experience it.

Back in 2016, I was driving in town and I changed lanes without signaling. I immediately thought about Sandra Bland, a black woman who had been arrested in the course of a traffic stop—and later found dead in her jail cell. I remembered, as I casually switched lanes, that her traffic infraction had been failing to signal a lane change. Also in 2016, Terrance Crutcher and Kieth Scott, two black men, were killed by police in separate incidents. Crutcher's van was broken down in the middle of the road. Scott was sitting in his car in a parking lot.

I've never been pulled over for failing to signal a lane change. If my car broke down, I would be happy to see the police come. When Kieth Scott's wife, Rakeyia, saw the police officers approaching her husband's car, she immediately yelled, "Don't shoot him! Don't shoot him!". I have never—not once—yelled "don't shoot." That is a chasm—a wide gap in the way I am able to experience the world compared to how most people of color experience it. And of course, police interaction is only a small part of what creates such a wide racial chasm in our country.

"The parable of the chasm." It's a great parable to preach social justice—to point out the vast disparities in our society. But it's not such a great parable when you're looking for hope. Not so great when the huge inequalities, the deep divides, the chasms, are already painfully clear and what you want, what you need, is a word of grace and encouragement and hope that we might be able to go from here to there after all—that the unbridgeable chasm just might, by the grace of God, be bridgeable.

But in the parable, it's not. Abraham is pretty adamant that the rich man cannot come up to him, and Lazarus cannot cross over into Hades with a water jug. It's kind of a depressing parable.

Notice, though, that the chasm isn't the only physical division in this story. We also have the gate. Lazarus has been thrown at the rich man's *gate*. There is a great chasm, yes. But first there is a gate. And the thing about gates is--the beautiful, wonderful thing about gates is--that they can open.

The parable hints of a better way. The rich man begs for Lazarus to be sent to his brothers and warn them. He wants Lazarus to tell them to open the gate—open the gate and share with the people in need. Open the gate while there is a gate to open.

Wednesday, March 10: Luke 17:1-19

Healing and Wholeness

Ten lepers approached Jesus. All ten kept their distance as they cried out for mercy. All ten headed towards the priests at Jesus' instructions. And all ten were healed on the way. But only one returned to give thanks.

What about the other nine? The nine who apparently just kept going. We don't really know, of course, why those particular nine lepers didn't go back and thank Jesus. And We don't know why the tenth leper turned back.

We do, however, know *what* happened. All ten were healed. But the one who turned back; the one who praised God and fell at Jesus' feet--Jesus said to him, "Your faith has *made you well*."

All of the lepers are healed. The one who gives thanks is also *made well*. Which admittedly sounds kind of silly in English. But in the original Greek, there is a clear distinction between "healed" and "made well."

They are all healed. They no longer have leprosy. Their disease is gone. And that is no small thing. The one who goes back is *also* "made well." The Greek here is "sodzo," and the meaning is somewhat complex. It means well, whole, *saved*.

It seems there is something about gratitude, about the act of giving thanks, that contributes to our well-being, our wholeness. Plenty of research studies show that we tend to be happier, healthier, and have better relationships, when we show gratitude. When we say "thank you" to other people and to God; when we take note of the good and beautiful in this world.

Certainly there are all kinds of reasons to *not* give thanks. There are problems that need our attention. There are good and important things to do besides send thank you notes and write in our gratitude journals.

And the healing can come anyway. All ten lepers were healed. Even the ones who just kept going when they discovered they were clean. It's not like God makes some kind of bargain with us: "O.K. *if* you say thank you enough and fully appreciate what I'm giving you, *then* I'll let you keep it." God's healing grace does not depend upon our gratitude.

Yet somehow, when we offer thanks for the health and healing God gives in this world--the beauty and life and goodness that edges into our days--we become *participants* in the healing work of Christ, not merely *recipients*.

And through our participation, through our faith, God does the deeper work of making us well. Making us whole. Saving us.

Thursday, March 11: Luke 17:20-37

This is one of the reflections I had to write specifically for this Lent 2021 devotional. In fourteen years of preaching and eleven years of blogging, not once have I written on these verses in Luke—or the parallel passage in Matthew 24. I think it's rather impressive that I've managed to avoid them for so long—and not surprising that I would want to.

The first couple of verses I can appreciate: that the kingdom of God—God's ultimate reign of peace and justice—is not going to drop down from the sky. God's reign is already among us. We should not just stand around waiting for God to do something; WE are the ones who enact the love and justice of God in this world.

But all of this talk about the days of Noah and the sulfur that rained down on Sodom; warnings to not turn back; ominous revelations that “one will be taken and the other left.” I don't like to dwell on these thoughts of human misery—particularly when it is misery supposedly caused by God's holy (?) wrath.

Passages like this have been used by end-time preachers to scare people out of their money for ages. But the reality is that when it comes to these “end times,” the only thing the Bible is really clear about is that we will *not* know when it is coming. Jesus says this more than once.

Here in Luke 17, what Jesus specifically says is that when people try to tell you that it's over here or over there, don't run off to chase it. When it does come, says Jesus, you won't be able to miss it. It's not going to be some big secret that only people who are on the right discussion forums and know the secret code words will be able to figure out. When I come, says Jesus, you'll know. And until I come, you won't know when it's going to happen.

I suppose this message could cause anxiety, wondering every day, every minute, *when is Jesus coming?* Or it could cause a certain kind of peace, because why try to figure out what we can't know anyway? And why spend time and energy looking for something that promises to be absolutely obvious?

I can get to a point of appreciating what Jesus is saying here about *when* he will come. But then the disciples ask another question: “Where, Lord?” And Jesus says: “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

I don't know if Jesus' answer is sarcastic—because it's really a ridiculous question. Or if it's a sort of negative example of a positive concept: death attracts death so life will attract life. Or if Jesus makes this statement solely for the benefit of the Pharisees, who are no doubt eavesdropping on this conversation—implying that they are vultures gathering around his soon-to-be corpse.

Whatever the case, it's a disturbing answer to conclude an altogether uncomfortable conversation. My tendency has been to avoid these troublesome words over the years, but perhaps, as we move toward the cross, it is time to sit with them for a while.

Friday, March 12: Luke 18:1-8

Justice by Stubborn Persistence

In February of this year (2021), I had the opportunity to share about our work for alternatives to incarceration with over 200 clergy from across the country. It was a DART conference—for those who participate in local justice ministries like Justice Matters.

When I spoke at the same conference in 2019 (though we were in Orlando rather than on the computer), Douglas County leaders were still pushing hard for an expensive jail expansion. The biblical story I referenced in that first speech was the story of Siphra and Puah from the beginning of Exodus. These women were midwives, ordered by Pharaoh to kill all the baby boys born to Hebrew women. But Siphra and Puah let all the babies live. And when Pharaoh asked them about it they insisted that the Hebrew women delivered their babies so fast the midwives didn't even have time to get there before the babies were born. Pharaoh, clearly not wanting to discuss female reproduction any more than necessary, said, "fine, whatever."

These women are two of my great heroes. They are kind and fierce, brave and clever. They use Pharaoh's power and prestige and maleness against him and save the lives of many babies in the process. In 2019, I told all of those justice-seeking pastors that those of us fighting jail expansion in Douglas County were going to be like Siphra and Puah. We were going up against the powers of incarceration with our bravery and our cleverness and we were going to save lives—or at least improve them—by virtue of our skillful rhetoric and unflinching audacity.

This year I had the privilege to share that the Douglas County jail expansion has been defeated! And not only is the expansion off the table, but we have a new District Attorney, a new Sheriff, and two new county commissioners who all seem committed to working toward alternatives to incarceration. I had a great story to tell.

But I also had to admit that we did not, in fact, get where we are today by following in the footsteps of Siphra and Puah. The biblical story I talked about this year was the story Jesus tells of the persistent widow here in Luke 18. The judge refuses to give the widow justice, but she keeps coming back, demanding justice over and over and over. Finally, the judge says, "though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."

That's what these years of working against the jail expansion have felt like. Not that we were spectacularly brave or clever like the midwives, but that we were stubbornly persistent. We just kept showing up to meetings and community office hours; we kept speaking and writing about what was happening; we kept praying and getting petition signatures; we presented a moral case against increased incarceration and a legal case against the bond mechanism they planned to use. I think we might have stopped the jail expansion by sheer annoyingness.

This persistent widow is not a heroic figure. But she is a realistic one. Heroism is not within reach for us all. We can't always be brave or clever, risking our lives to outwit Pharaoh. But we can be persistent. We can remain focused on the justice God desires and insist that others pay attention to that justice as well.

Monday, March 15: Luke 18:9-17

In reading the story of Jesus blessing the children, I was reminded of the reflection below that I wrote back in 2011 about a particularly meaningful children's time at Peace:

When the children came forward for children's time, I handed each of them a glass "gem." We briefly discussed what a blessing is—something special and beautiful, like the gem. "This morning," I said, "you will each receive a blessing. And you can keep your gem as a reminder that you are blessed."

I was delighted, and a bit taken aback, that this was probably the largest group of children that had ever gathered with me at the front of the church. They ranged in age from 2 to 10. Some of those children I had been praying for since before they were born. One little girl I had met that morning.

There were a few quiet kids, some talkative kids, some rowdy kids. Thirteen beautiful, fidgety kids looking up at me as I explained, "This may take a little while. Just be patient and wait for your turn."

And I placed my hand on the first child's golden hair and looked into her eyes: "Sarah*, may God bless you—now and always. Know that God loves you very much."

I moved around the circle, placing my hand on each child, looking into their eyes, speaking their names.

About halfway around the circle I came to John, a kindergartner who is nearly always moving. He sat still, with his head down. I couldn't see his face. I thought he was bored, or maybe embarrassed. But then he lifted his head ever so slightly and looked at me with his magnificent brown eyes. He wasn't bored. He wasn't embarrassed. He was expectant. He was ready to receive his blessing.

"John, may God's blessing be with you. Know that you are deeply loved by God."

I continued to move around the circle, slowly and quietly speaking words of blessing to each child. I spoke these blessings into a holy silence, a silence I did not know was possible in the midst of over a dozen children. The energy these children so often use to make noise and move around was instead being used to wait for, receive, and absorb their blessings.

This sacred energy hovered with us as I blessed the last, the youngest, of the children. And as the children were dismissed, I looked out at the adults in the congregation. They, too, were in a state of holy calm that I'm not sure I have ever seen before. The love that they felt for those children was a tangible presence.

I just stood there for a while: watching the children, gazing at the adults, basking in the sacred moment.

—

*Names have been changed.

Tuesday, March 16: Luke 18: 18-30 ~ *How the Story Ends*

This rich man who comes to Jesus wants the famous rabbi to tell him the one thing he can do to acquire eternal life; he wants to add “spiritual fulfillment” to his many possessions. Jesus surely knew what the man was looking for. And so, after reminding the man of the basic commandments, Jesus gives him the kind of answer he wants--something straightforward, something concrete, something the guy could go off and do right away to get eternal life for himself: “Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor. Then come follow me.”

It was the *kind* of answer the man wanted. But it was not *the* answer the man wanted. Because selling all of his possessions is an action that will completely destroy the life he has so carefully built. It is not something he can do as an aside to his regularly scheduled activities. It requires full devotion to Jesus above everything else.

And so we read that, “When he heard this he became sad because he was very rich.” The Greek translated here as “sad” is really more intense. The man was “greatly grieved.” This man who came to Jesus was grieving because, with these few words from Jesus, he has lost the entire future life he imagined for himself. Thus far, he has held to his wealth and possessions *while* following the commandments. He had envisioned a future in which he possessed prosperity, power, prestige—and eternal life.

Jesus says that’s not how it works. If this guy wants to be *perfect*, he’s got to give up his possessions. And thus, if he keeps his possessions, he will have to give up his aspirations of perfection—his view of himself as a devoted, faithful person.

This man’s conversation with Jesus did not go quite as he had hoped. This thing Jesus told him to do was difficult—perhaps too difficult. So the young man went away grieving. He went back to his McMansion, snuggled down in his Lazy Boy, and flipped on the big screen TV, never to see Jesus again. That’s the story we’ve heard, right?

Except that’s not exactly how the Bible tells it. We only know that the man goes—which is actually what Jesus tells him to do. And we know that he is grieving. We assume he is grieving because he is not willing to sell his possessions, which means that he will not gain eternal life after all.

But it is also possible that he is grieving because he’s really going to miss that TV. He was so enjoying the new surround sound stereo system that he got for Christmas. None of the three versions of this story in the gospels say whether the man went and kept his possessions or went and sold his possessions. The text says only that he went away grieving.

It is interesting to me that there is such a broad belief that he rejects Jesus’ instructions. Some scholars even refer to this as a “failed call narrative.” We fill in the end of this story in our heads without even realizing we are doing it. Why? Why do we all fill in this story automatically? And why do we all imagine the same ending?

I wonder if . . . now I don’t want you to take this the wrong way . . . but it occurs to me . . . I think it’s possible that we assume the man keeps all of his stuff because . . . just maybe . . . that’s how our story would end.

Wednesday, March 17: *Luke 18:31-43

The Miracle of Seeing

They didn't see. The disciples. Jesus says, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem." But they don't see at all. Like they didn't see how Jesus could feed thousands of people, or why he would want to waste his time with children. Like Peter couldn't see how Jesus knew the woman had touched him or why it was such a bad idea to camp out with Moses and Elijah on the mountain for a few days.

They didn't see. They understood nothing. They couldn't grasp it. Jesus is trying to tell them the hardest and most real truth he knows—that he will suffer and die and rise again--and it is absolutely beyond them.

How lonely that must have felt for Jesus. How lonely it feels for us when there are people around who love us, who want to understand, who mean well . . . but who just don't get it. I've been there before and I imagine you have too. When you are struggling to parent through layers of trauma and mental illness or carrying the unspoken grief of not being a parent or when you have lost something or someone in your life that leaves a gaping hole or when your own body seems to be working against you.

Living a hard truth can be incredibly lonely. Especially when we know that the people smiling and nodding their heads and making sympathetic sounds and saying "I see, I see" actually see nothing at all.

For Jesus it must have been especially frustrating because *he can literally make blind people see*. He can—and does on multiple occasions—restore sight to those who have not seen for years. Yet somehow he cannot make the disciples see. One would think that bringing understanding would be less of a miracle than fixing broken eyes and optic nerves, but I guess not.

After that heart-breaking conversation with his disciples, I wonder if Jesus was relieved to hear the man's voice carrying out over the noise of the crowd: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus orders the man to be brought to him. Out of compassion for the man, yes. And I wonder if it is also from a desire to make *someone, somehow SEE*.

"Receive your sight," says Jesus. And the man does. The disciples may still be blind to the truth, but at least this desperate man from the side of the road can finally see.

Thursday, March 18: *Luke 19:1-10

Trees to Climb

When we are kids, we color pictures of a guy sitting up in the branches of a tree. But when we get older, we know that the really important part of the story comes at the end. When this very wealthy tax collector declares to Jesus, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much.”

Giving to the poor is an important part of following Jesus. And without diminishing this point about holding our worldly possessions lightly, I would like to re-visit the childhood fascination with the short little businessman perched in a tree. So back up with me, if you would, to verse three: “He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not.”

All those years of Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, all I ever got was that Zachhaeus wanted to see Jesus. Like the tourists want to see a movie star in Hollywood. Like my kids wanted to see Mickey Mouse at Disney World.

But the text doesn't say he wanted to *see* Jesus. It says he wanted to see *who Jesus was*. This wealthy tax collector has questions about Jesus. Who is this guy? What does he look like? What does he sound like? What is it about the way that he looks at people, touches them, that stirs up all of this energy, this excitement?

Zachhaeus knew that the crowd was in the way, obscuring his view. So he climbed up a tree. Zachhaeus doesn't care how ridiculous he looks or if he might rip his new toga. He wants to see who Jesus is. I am struck by this image of climbing the tree. Of putting ourselves in a place of perspective.

And I'm thinking about what our sycamore trees might be. Because I have to say that the crowds are pretty distracting right now. It would be nice to find a place of perspective, a place where it is possible to see who Jesus is in the midst of the chaos.

Worship is a sycamore tree for me. And morning prayer, when I manage it. And reading thoughtful, spiritual books. And listening to others. Those are all ways I can put myself in a better position to see who Jesus is. Those are some of the trees I need to climb.

What are yours? Where are the places of perspective to which you need to go?

I know there is more to following Jesus than climbing the tree. More than simply putting ourselves in a place of perspective. This following Jesus business is hard. And complicated. Still, I trust this story of Zacchaeus.

If we have the desire to see who Jesus is, if we have faith and courage and disregard for the crowds enough to climb the tree, Jesus will show up. He will look us in the eye. He will call our name. And our lives will never be the same again.

Friday, March 19: Luke 19:11-27

We get stuck in this story. We like the idea of growing things for God's kingdom—especially in Matthew's version where the monetary units are "talents" and we can pretend this is about singing solos in church. But then it gets pretty dark at the end and we aren't quite sure what to do.

The rural peasants that worked with Ernesto Calderon in Nicaragua did not have such struggles when they studied this parable. They immediately recognized this as a story of exploitation. This master is not God, he is a wealthy elite—therefore an oppressor—and the first two slaves are his henchmen.

If we take a step back from the hyper-capitalism of our culture, we can see that they are right. I mean really, how does one earn 100% interest? Betting? Drug or weapon trafficking? Slave labor? There is really no ethical way to make that kind of a profit. The peasants listening to Jesus knew how those first two servants made such impressive returns. They loaned money to subsistence farmers at exorbitant interest rates. This practice was the mechanism that made the rich richer and the poor poorer.

This type of economic exploitation assured that those who already had a lot would get more and those who had next to nothing would lose even what they had—to the point of having to sell themselves and their family members into slavery.

These first two slaves can only be seen in a positive light if we view the master as good—a stand-in for God. That is, of course, the conclusion we jump to, but all we really know about this master is that he reaps where he has not sown and gathers where he has not scattered seed. The third slave accuses him of this, and he doesn't deny it.

To a good capitalist, this description can be read as a commendation. He is efficient, industrious, a good businessman. But to rural peasants, he is just a thief. He is taking the crops that they have planted and tended. He is selling those crops to buy unnecessary luxury items for himself while the ones who grow the food live on the brink of starvation.

In reality, it is the third slave who is to be commended. We know this slave had been a trusted member of the master's household because the master gives him money to do business with on the master's behalf. But this time, for some reason, the slave decides not to participate in the oppressive economic system that had supported him all these years. This time, for whatever reason, he decides to follow Jewish teaching and bury the money. He chooses to stand up to the oppressive master—and he had to know there would be consequences.

It's no coincidence that, in Luke, Jesus tells this dark story just before he enters Jerusalem. It's a story of someone who chooses to side with the poor and marginalized against the rich and powerful and then suffers for that choice. And that's a story we will read again in the coming chapters.

Monday, March 22: *Luke 19:28-48

Palm Sunday Monologue: Peter Answers a Phone Call from John

Yeah. What's up, John. We're almost done at the market. Andrew's buying the lentils right now.

Something Jesus forgot? We've got the bread, the wine, . . . now we've got the lentils. What else could we need? Doesn't matter anyway. We're out of money. So see ya--

Jesus really wants us to pick up something else. Well, we'll have to steal it then, 'cause we've got no more money. Zero. Zippo. That Judas is so tight with the money. He barely gave us enough to get the basics. We had to buy the cheapest wine they had, though I guess it doesn't matter since Jesus can just--

What? No. I am listening. You're the one who's not listening. If Jesus wants anything else, we'll have to steal it.

Oh, Jesus says not to steal—just borrow. Nice moral teacher that guy. So what does he want us to *borrow*.

A what? A donkey? Not a donkey. Good. For a minute there I thought the guy was finally cracking up. . . . Oh. You said a colt? Like a donkey colt? So a donkey, then. And what, pray tell, does Jesus plan to do with this *borrowed* donkey?

He thinks he's going to ride it into Jerusalem! He can't come to Jerusalem. This place is a zoo. Passover time is always nuts. It's crawling with Romans, and their buddy, our (ha ha) high priest Ciaphas, is just waiting for someone to look at him the wrong way so he can show who's boss. No way Jesus is coming into Jerusalem. No donkey. Tell him no.

. . . Yeah, yeah. I know the book of Zechariah too. “Your king will come to you on a donkey.” Whatever. Listen. Is Jesus there? He's helping Martha make supper. Right. Well go into the kitchen and put me on speaker phone.

. . . Jesus. It's Peter. Andrew and I are headed back. We've got all of the supplies. And wouldn't you know, no donkeys in sight. Guess we just won't be able to come into Jerusalem during this particular Passover celebration. So, uh, see you soon. Jesus? Jesus? John. What's going on. Why did you take me off of speaker phone?

Oh, the “get behind me Satan” speech. No. I'd just as soon not hear that one again. I suppose he's determined to go into the city. But a donkey? If he comes riding through the streets on a donkey, I think people will notice. A few of the smart ones might even know Zechariah and put two and two together and come up with six and we're all dead meat. I mean, if we have to go into Jerusalem, can't we just walk. We walk everywhere else.

Jesus won't like my reasoning here. Tell him, . . . tell him that out of consideration for the well-being of the donkeys, I recommend—no, no, *Andrew* recommends that we *walk* into Jerusalem. Tell him!

. . . He wants a donkey. Wait. Listen. How about we *borrow* a horse. I mean, if he's going to attract attention anyway, he might as well show that he's got some power, some authority. All of the big wigs ride into town on horses. And we could *borrow* some armor and some swords and trumpets. That whole king on a donkey thing just doesn't even make sense. Zechariah must have been on something. My point is that the prophets are crazy. Everybody knows that kings ride on horses. Big horses. Surrounded by men. Big men with lots of weapons. Tell Jesus there's a horse nearby we can borrow. . . . Tell him, John. . . Well, you're the one who took me off speaker phone.

. . . He wants a donkey. A donkey to ride into Jerusalem. Fine. I give up. Any particular donkey? Color preference? . . . Oh, we'll find it tied up in the next village on our way back. So we just walk up and unite it? What do you mean you don't know? Go ask him!

Yes. We just walk up and untie it. And what should Andrew say when the owners of the donkey politely inquire as to why he is *borrowing* their animal? . . . Well, go ask him!

"The Lord needs them." Great. Got it Andrew. Your line is "the Lord needs them." That should work well. Yeah. OK. Well, tell Jesus that we will be home soon with the bread, wine, lentils, and his donkey. And if he thinks of anything else he needs, tell him to send Judas. Yeah. Bye.

Tuesday, March 23: Luke 20:1-19

[Today's reading doesn't directly address today's scripture, but rather continues reflection on the Palm Sunday/Holy Week story.]

Palm Sunday Monologue: Caiaphas Phones Pilate (by Roger Martin)

You really had to be there . . . yeah, palm branches. I don't know where they got them. They don't even grow around Jerusalem. And clothes - they spread their cloaks on the ground, for the love of Mike, as if he were . . . were . . . their king. And he played to the crowd! Coming in on a donkey's back, fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy about how the messiah would arrive! It was shameless.

Now I do have to say this, Ponty: He ain't got much. A few hundred followers - including women! And a very small inner circle of these so-called "disciples." All rabble. *Unarmed* rabble, I would add. They don't represent an immediate threat, but . . .

What?

Yes! Exactly! That's what I told my people at the temple: It's not a Jesus problem! It's a Passover problem! All kinds of riff-raff pour into town this time of year . . . and who knows . . . Jesus could be the spark for this miserable tinder. These people who want to believe in fairy tales. I for one don't want another riot. Haven't 32 riots in the last five years been enough?!

. . . That's right. 32. At this rate, everybody's going to believe in this Jesus . . . and Rome'll be all over us!"

What?

Right! Of course this guy is nothing special. I wasn't born yesterday. But true or false doesn't matter, Ponty - it's the perception that counts, right? Sometimes perception IS truth. So anyway, this Pharisee is going on about how the Romans are gonna come in and clean our clock if Jesus incites a riot during Passover. And this reminds us of that time - it's been a quarter century now but who can forget? - that Zaduk the Pharisee took on the Romans. He and his 2,000 men . . . it was ghastly.

Every one of them crucified. Every one.

And that's when I get the idea . . . the inspiration . . . I'd say "divine inspiration" . . . and I say to everybody in the room, "But you know, a whole nation doesn't have to perish, just because one citizen wants to bring it down. Better to eliminate the one and save many lives, right?"

Who could argue?

Of course we have to have a charge. I've given considerable thought to that, and so I must return to where I began - to this entry he made, to his messianic pretensions.

(Lowers his voice) Because he's not just acting as if he's a secular king. He's claiming more than that - that in some way he and God . . . well, that God is his father, and that whoever believes this will live forever.

I know, I know. THE worst kind of tommyrot.

And of course I'm torn here, because the man has no actual power, no weapons, no pretenses to want any. All he wants is belief. Belief in things beyond imagining. Belief in absurdities!

(Does a Jesus Imitation): Believe my absurdities and you will never die!

To which I say, He must die. To reveal the lie he lives and speaks over and over and over.

And this is where I see you coming in, Pontius. Out here, you stand for Rome. You ARE Rome. And here's the choice you've got: Either the buck stops with you or it lands on the desk of Tiberius. And considering your relationship with Tiberius . . . I mean it couldn't be THAT good if you wound up in this backwater, right?

. . . I know. I know. Middle-management is a nightmare. But that's why you make the big bucks. Jesus must die - to save the many. Jesus must die - and you're the go-to guy.

. . . I'm just asking you to think about it. Yes, yes, I agree: He's clearly a lunatic.

But he's a lunatic on a roll.

. . . Call coming in? Sure. Talk at you later.

Wednesday, March 24: Luke 20:20-40

Reflecting on Luke 20:20-40

A store clerk asked me once:
“If you could have any superpower, what would you choose?”
I should have known better
Than to go into a comic store,
But I was shopping for my son and so humored the clerk
With a response that I can no longer remember:
Flight or invisibility—probably that—or maybe super strength.

The question floats through my mind now
As I read the Gospel accounts of Jesus:
“If I could have any of the powers Jesus possessed, what would I choose?”

I think I should say
I want to feed the multitudes,
Or heal people’s bodies with a word or a touch;
To ease people’s minds and make the demons flee;
To calm storms
Or even
If I’d dare
To raise the dead.

But if I’m honest,
The power I really want
Is this ability to answer trick questions
With such cleverness,
such deep wisdom,
Such *absolute rightness*
That my opponents would simply stand in awe,
Unable to speak,
Not daring to ask any more questions.

Thursday, March 25: Luke 20:41-21:4

I imagine you have heard the common message drawn from the story of the widow's mite: "Friends, this poor widow gave everything she had to the temple treasury, so pull out your checkbooks and give a lot of money to this church."

When read out of context, it's easy to see how someone could read this message into it. But when we look at the full context of this scene, the meaning, I think, becomes less clear.

First, we should note that throughout the law and the prophets—scripture that Jesus knew intimately—the "widow and orphan" are held up as symbols of the most vulnerable people in society. The Israelites are repeatedly told to "defend the cause of the widow;" to provide for the widow; to protect the widow. This concern for the widow extends into Jesus' time when *the male heads of household* were required to pay a temple tax; thus the widows were released from that financial obligation. The religious establishment was required by their laws and scriptures to alleviate the oppression of widows.

Also, the temple is not your local neighborhood church. The temple treasury, where this poor widow puts her last two coins, was used to fund the considerable operations of the temple industry. This building was more than a place of worship—it was the economic lifeblood of Jerusalem. In a constant state of construction and renovation, and attracting pilgrims from around the world, the temple provided probably over half of the jobs in the city.

Finally, we have to back up and read what comes right before this scene. Jesus is in the temple courts and has attracted a large crowd. He says, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Did you hear that? Scribes, many of whom are beneficiaries of the money put into the temple treasury, "devour widows' houses."

That seems to put this sweet little story of a generous widow in a slightly different light, doesn't it? While Jesus seems to have great love for the widow, I'm not sure he is entirely pleased that she gave the corrupt temple system all she had to live on. The house of God should not be a place where the poor are exploited, but where they are cared for.

Friday, March 26: Luke 21:5-38

My best friend in elementary school, Katrina, and I loved to have sleepovers. One night, Katrina refused to lay on the floor by the bed. And she refused to lay on the floor by the closet. I found out that she had recently seen the movie *Poltergeist* in which, apparently, some scary somethings come from under the bed and out of the closet. And that was when I decided that if a scary movie could make someone too scared to sleep on the floor, I would just avoid scary movies.

My tendency has also been to ignore the "horror movie" parts of the Bible—these apocalyptic images that we find in this passage from Luke—among others. I avoid these passages because the images they present are frightening. And I avoid these passages because the theology that many people pull from them is even

more frightening. One end-times web site I found sums it up nicely: “If for any reason you ignore God’s message of love, you will deserve hell.”

The collapsing temple, false leaders, wars, famines, plagues, persecution--these, indeed, are images of horror. Pictures that, given a choice, we might choose to avoid. Click onto a different web site or change the channel on our TV.

But these images are hard to avoid. If you are connected to the broader world at all—through newspapers, radio, TV, the internet—you probably don’t go through a day without hearing of a leader who has betrayed the people, a war, a natural disaster, the current COVID crisis.

Jesus’ listeners, of course, did not have access to global media coverage. But they didn’t need it. They had all the horror they could take right there. Messianic pretenders were a dime a dozen. The Judeans grew up on stories of the armed conflict with the Romans. In fact, at the time the gospels were written the Judeans were either hearing rumors of wars, in the midst of a war, or dealing with the aftermath of war. The threat of starvation hung heavily over the Jewish peasants.

Jesus is not threatening humanity with a horrible future reality. Like all good prophets and poets, Jesus is simply naming the horrors that already exist. What Jesus describes is a horror movie--not one that Jesus creates, but one that he responds to. And when we let ourselves look at the images of horror, we can then look at the other image Jesus presents with joy and anticipation: “The Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory.”

I think that those of us who simply watch the horror on a screen have difficulty fully appreciating this image of the triumphant coming of the Son of Man. But the gospels were written most immediately for those *living* the horror—the earliest Christians who were being persecuted. For those living the horror, this passage provides hope. Jesus will come again and the suffering will end.

In general, this hope is a good thing. But we know that it is this “pie in the sky by and by” theology that oppressors have used to maintain their power for centuries: “Don’t worry about how bad life is for you and others because it will all be better when you die—or when Jesus comes back.”

Yet I don’t think that’s what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is giving hope, for sure. But there is something more. There is something Jesus is telling us to *do*: Be on your guard! Be alert! Pray!

This is not a call to sit back and scan the horizon for signs of a figure riding in on clouds of glory. Be alert! Be on your guard! Watch the images of horror. Be alert to the suffering of people around you. Be on your guard against the forces of oppression and injustice.

Yes, the 21st chapter of Luke is uncomfortable. It is unsettling. It presents images we would prefer not to see. But what Jesus says here should not be surprising to those of us following his journey from Bethlehem to the cross.

To those who are helpless and powerless, Jesus offers hope.

To those of us with the luxury of being able to turn the channel and avoid the horror, Jesus tells us to watch. To act. To enact the love and justice of Christ in this world until he comes again.

Monday, March 29: Luke 22:1-38 ~ *Awkward Family Dinners*

I once read about a family gathered around a table for their Thanksgiving meal. Things were going well until Uncle Larry said, “Hey, Steve, you need to pay me back that \$200 I loaned you last year.” And Steve said, “I don’t have the money to pay you back, Uncle Larry.” And Uncle Larry got so angry that he grabbed the sweet potatoes—Steve’s favorite food—and went into the bathroom. Everyone heard the toilet flush, then Uncle Larry reemerged with an empty sweet potato bowl.

Really, it shouldn’t be that hard to have a nice family meal. Just don’t bring up personal grievances and avoid hot topics like religion and politics. But Uncle Larry couldn’t seem to manage these basic rules—and neither could Jesus.

According to Luke, Jesus begins by talking about how he will suffer. And then he chimes in with the really weird stuff: “This is my body, eat it. This is my blood, drink it.” Eating flesh and drinking blood? Not kosher. And it’s not just any blood. It is the blood of the covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Religion talk. Granted, Jesus can’t really be expected to *not* talk religion at a Passover meal, but still, he’s making it awkward.

And then Jesus says, “Hey, by the way, one of you is going to betray me. Pass the salt please.” Suddenly the anxiety ratchets up even higher. “Who is it?” “It’s not me, is it Lord?” “I’d never do something like that.” And all that talk about who is the worst leads them into another argument about who is the best.

There is a tension here between the welcoming, prepared, comfortable space in the upper room and the air of foreboding and discomfort caused by Jesus’ words. It’s the tension of any space—like an upper room or a dining room or a worship space—where outsiders are invited in; the tension of any space that seeks to be a place of welcome and inclusion for diverse and flawed human beings.

The tension is not comfortable, but it is necessary. It is necessary for us to prepare the room, to set the table, to offer hospitality. AND it is necessary for us to speak the truth, to be true to Jesus’ teachings as best we understand them.

Sure, the family dinner is more comfortable if we don’t mention the betrayal, or if we offer quick forgiveness for harm done and move on. The family dinner is more comfortable if we just invite the people who think and look and act like us. The family dinner is less awkward if we just smile and nod politely.

Congregational dinners are more comfortable if we don’t talk about money and theological differences. Denominational dinners are more comfortable if we don’t bring up racism or LGBTQ oppression. And I suppose there are times for us to just enjoy a nice, comfortable dinner.

But that is not the kind of dinner we remember when we gather around the Lord’s table. This table is a place of prepared hospitality *and* a place of hard truth. We remember Jesus eating with his friends *and* his betrayer; Jesus sharing pleasant conversation *and* talking about his death. We remember the food that they ate *and* the arguments they had. When we gather around this table, we declare our longing to receive Christ’s comfort *and* our willingness to participate in Christ’s presence in the world, even when it’s uncomfortable.

Tuesday, March 30: Luke 22:39-62

This scene of Jesus' arrest is slightly different in each of the four Gospels. One aspect, though, remains consistent throughout every Gospel, and it strikes me as a very significant detail: the person whose ear is cut off is the *slave* of the high priest.

This detail speaks to an important reality of violent retribution: that the people in power, the people orchestrating the harm, are most often *not* the ones who get hurt.

The slave of the high priest was probably forced to be there, arresting Jesus. He likely had no personal antagonism toward Jesus, but if he didn't follow his master's orders he would suffer dire consequences. And yet, when the angry and frightened disciple swings his sword, it is the slave who is harmed, not the high priest who sent the slave.

People in power are good at shielding themselves from the consequences of their actions. The generals are not on the front lines of a war. The CEOs don't lose their jobs when the company has to lay off workers. The people profiting from factories that pollute don't live in the polluted neighborhoods. A president whose public statements and policies during a pandemic put millions of lives at risk has access to a level of health care unavailable to most.

And people who are frightened and/or suffering and/or traumatized tend to lash out at whoever is closest, not at the person most responsible for their fear and suffering and trauma—in big ways and small. Back in my college days I worked at a movie theater and people would yell at me because the popcorn and soda were too expensive—as if I had any control over the prices, or was pocketing all that profit myself. Teachers absorb anger from parents over policies they did not institute. People struggling to find good-paying jobs turn against immigrants instead of the people getting rich while paying low wages.

Everywhere you look, people are striking the *slave* of the high priest, while the high priest himself watches from a safe distance, both ears fully attached to his head.

Maybe this reality is one of the reasons Jesus responds so vehemently to the disciple who attacks the slave. "No more of this!" says Jesus. He reaches out in healing toward the slave and then turns his critical questions to those who are actually responsible for the violence against him.

May we, by the grace of God, be as wise and discerning in our own times of fear, suffering, and trauma.

Wednesday, March 31: Luke 22:63-23:25 ~ *A Tale of Two Crowds*

As we move from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, a lot of people wonder how the "Hosanna" of Palm Sunday gave way to the "Crucify him!" of Good Friday. How did the crowd go from praising Jesus to condemning him, all in a matter of days?

Well, it didn't. Because we are talking about two different crowds. Jesus' crowd, the one we read about on Palm Sunday, was made up of Jesus' disciples, other followers of his, some of the people he had recently healed, and other Jewish people in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. That's the Palm Sunday crowd.

We know the Good Friday crowd contained chief priests and elders—people unlikely to have been part of Jesus’ procession into the city on Palm Sunday. It’s not clear who else was in the Good Friday crowd, but it was likely people sympathetic to the interests of the religious elite; scholars have even suggested that some in the crowd had been paid—or otherwise coerced—to come offer false testimony and create a scene. I imagine that many in this Good Friday crowd had been cheering Pilate’s entry into Jerusalem the previous Sunday—not Jesus’ entry.

Jesus’ crowd and Pilate’s crowd were made up, for the most part, of different people. People with different motivations. Different hopes. Different understandings of the world. Different views of God. And it was, for the most part, Pilate’s crowd who had gathered on Friday and who took up the chant: “Crucify him!”. So where was Jesus’ crowd?

Perhaps skulking around the edges of the trial, trying not to get noticed. Perhaps telling their friends about the Messiah that they had welcomed into the city last weekend. Perhaps sleeping off an over-indulgent Passover meal or preparing the next meal or taking their kids to a soccer game . . .

To be fair, Jesus hadn’t exactly given them all a reason to stick around. A lot happened between the triumphal entry and Friday’s trial. Jesus turned over tables in the temple and cursed the fig tree. He got into multiple public arguments with religious leaders. Jesus told bizarre and violent parables, made dark predictions about the future, and, to top it all off, ruined a perfectly good meal by telling people to eat his body and drink his blood.

We can see why many of the people in Jesus’ crowd might have wandered away; how they might have found other things to do besides follow Jesus around the city all week waving their slowly drying branches, hoarsely croaking out “Hosannas.”

We can understand that following Jesus gets tiring, confusing, and more than a little uncomfortable. We can understand the inclination to just let things be. To play nice with the powerful. To . . . just . . . chill out for a little while.

Jesus, with his humility and obscurity, with his poverty and his annoying insistence on telling the truth—Jesus does not always draw a crowd. Sure, the hungry-feeding, demon-exorcising, leprosy-healing, joke-telling, miracle-working, Jesus draws a crowd. But this Holy Week “I’m on my way to the cross and the world is a terrible mess” Jesus? People suddenly have other things they need to do.

Here’s the thing, though. Pilate’s crowd is always there. Because people want to cozy up to power; because Pilate’s events are well-publicized; because Pilate is a master of telling people what they want to hear; because sometimes people are paid—outright or otherwise—to be there. Pilate will never lack a crowd.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus’ crowd, in a sense, balances out Pilate’s. Sure, Pilate still has his war horses and soldiers and pomp and circumstance. But Jesus has fun. And hope. And music. And the presence of God in Jesus’ crowd is a force to challenge the violence of empire that Pilate represents.

But on Good Friday? Jesus’ crowd is gone. And those who aren’t gone are scared. So Pilate’s crowd is the only crowd we hear. The “Hosannas” turn to “Crucify him”—not because the people in Jesus’ crowd changed their minds. But because the people in Jesus’ crowd got bored. Or scared. Because the people in Jesus’ crowd went silent.

Thursday, April 1: Luke 23:26-49

Some Were There

Some were there when Jesus, bloody and bruised, climbed the hill to the Place of the Skull. The women, wailing along with the infants in their arms; Simon of Cyrene, forced to carry the cross beam that Jesus could no longer bear; the chief priests and scribes and elders re-writing the narrative in their heads, making it make sense, putting themselves in the role of savior; the chosen apostles—eleven now—trying to blend in with the idly curious crowd, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, trying to hide their horror.

Some were there when Jesus staggered onto the hilltop; when Simon dropped the weighty beam onto the rocky ground; when the soldiers drove the nails and hoisted the body. The criminal on his right and on his left; the women who loved him; the disciple whom he loved; the abusive guards; the prophetic centurion.

These people knew why the darkness fell, why the earth shook, why the blood their hearts pumped felt like icy splinters spreading through their bodies.

But the man in Gerasene, clothed and in his right mind, had no idea. He only knew that, around three o'clock on a certain Friday afternoon, his clothes started to feel too tight and itchy. The deep wildness beyond the village beckoned. And he heard, ever so faintly, the squeal of distressed pigs.

So many people, far from Jerusalem that day, barely felt the earth shake, barely noticed the muted light, had no explanation for the emptiness enveloping them.

The man in his field near Bethsaida felt moisture on his eyelids, swore he saw the trees walking around. Peter's mother-in-law began to feel feverish as she served lunch to her guests. The centurion's servant had to take a sick day. Ten men, in a panic, peeled away diseased flakes of skin from their arms and tugged their sleeves quickly over the spots. Jarius' daughter didn't feel like eating, didn't even want to get out of bed that day. A man, carving a piece of wood, watched his knife drop to the floor as his fingers writhed with a painful cramp.

The woman, kneading leaven into her bread, did not know anything about the blood flowing from Jesus' wounds. But she was horrified to see the drop of blood on her ankle, to trace the scarlet trail all the way up her leg and past her tender thigh. She grabbed the hem of her dress and pulled it back down. She closed her eyes and heard his words, "Daughter, go in peace."

Friday, April 2: Luke 23:50-56

At the Foot of the Cross

The chapel sermon on our final night of Jr. High camp was always the same: a passionate re-telling of Jesus' violent death on the cross, with the assurance that, "Every time you sin, you pound the nails deeper and deeper into Jesus' flesh."

And there we sat, dozens of awkward barely-teenagers, with tears streaming down our cheeks because of that one time last year when we forged our mom's name on a test, or hid in the closet at 9:05 with the phone we weren't allowed to use after 9:00, or wrote "Mrs. Smith is a poopyhead" in the margins of our notes, or noticed how hot the shirtless guys looked out running the track; we cried because we were killing Jesus.

This, of course, is crazy talk. I had a feeling it was crazy talk a long, long time ago. And after two seminary degrees and almost a decade in ministry I can confirm it: when I got impatient and yelled at a telemarketer last week, that action, while unkind, did NOT, in fact, pound the nail deeper into Jesus' tortured flesh.

This camp theology is the kind that makes many thoughtful Christians want to distance themselves from the cross altogether. But while I have set aside that Jr. High camp version of the crucifixion, I still hold the cross as a central symbol and event of my Christian faith.

The foot of the cross is holy space because it speaks deep truth about humanity and deep truth about God. The cross is, in part, about sin. Not because our every minor misstep is responsible for killing Jesus, but because the cross reminds us that we, as humans, are capable of pettiness, of injustice, of violence. We sometimes grasp for power in ridiculous and dangerous ways. We can let fear control our actions and our interactions. And our individual sins can morph into systemic sin that oppresses and wounds many, many people.

The foot of the cross is holy space because it assures us that God desires intimacy with us so deeply that God became human. God did not just look human. God did not just hang out as a human for as long as it was convenient. God, in Jesus of Nazareth, became really, fully human—so human that he died on the cross.

And so it is at the foot of the cross that we can most clearly see our need for God. It is at the foot of the cross that we can gaze most intently upon God's love for us.

I leave you with this blessing for this holy day:

As you stand in the shadow of the cross, may the darkness guard your heart with love; may the chilled air fill you with holy breath; may you rest in the peaceful uncertainty of knowing that things are not as they seem. Amen.

Monday, April 5: Luke 24:1-12 ~ Overwhelming Nonsense

When Joanna and Mary and the other Mary tell the disciples what they saw at the tomb, the men regard the women's talk as "an idle tale." The Greek word is *leros*—really strong language. I've seen it translated as: folly, wild talk, hysterical nonsense, BS. It really does warrant a swear word.

The bottom line is that the women sound ridiculous. And it's no wonder. I mean who could expect this story to make sense? Sure, we think it makes sense to us because it's written in nice grammatical language and we read it every year. But it's a crazy story. How could it *not* have sounded like utter nonsense?

Do we make any more sense trying to talk about this resurrection event today? There is no way mere words can reflect the power and beauty of the event itself. The women couldn't adequately explain it on the first Easter Sunday, and we can't fully capture its meaning today. But we try.

"Resurrection"—that's what we call this event. That's what we say happened to Jesus. That's what we say caused the empty tomb. The Easter event is the basis, the grounding of our faith. "Resurrection" is the word we have to explain it.

But we hear the word "resurrection" in all kinds of contexts that have nothing to do with Jesus. For example, in sports. A few years ago Tiger Woods' golf career was *resurrected* when he won the Masters after a long dry spell. Or remember the fire at Notre Dame cathedral? People wrote about how the great building would be resurrected.

We use the word "resurrection" for these events just like we use it for what happens to Jesus on Easter morning. But this Jesus event--*the* resurrection--is not just that Jesus lost an ability—the ability to breathe, to be alive—and then got it back again like Tiger Woods. It's not just that the physical structure of Jesus' body was destroyed and rebuilt, like the cathedral. There's something else—something so much more—going on with Jesus' resurrection. But we don't have a better word.

What words can possibly capture the humanity and the divinity; the death and the life; the emptiness and the fullness of the Easter event? In Jesus' resurrection, all of these forces are working together even as they're contradicting each other, and it should be a mess but it's really, actually, astonishingly beautiful. And there's no reason for it to be. It just is.

And the women are there. And they're terrified. But they're there. And they have to go and tell—except there's no way. There's just no way. So it all comes out as nonsense. When really it is all that makes sense in the world.

I know the world is often overwhelming. I often feel the heaviness. The grief. The injustice. The death. . . . Maybe you feel it, too.

If so, I hope you also feel this other kind of being overwhelmed. Yes, Good Friday is a lot. But Easter—Easter is too much: the resurrection of Jesus holds together our humanity with God's divinity, eternal life with the reality of death, the empty tomb of grief with the full heart of joy, in ways we cannot possibly understand or articulate.

That is the overwhelming good news of Easter.

Tuesday, April 6: Matthew 28:1-15 ~ *We Tell the Truth*

When we talk about witnesses to the resurrection, we almost always—and only—talk about the women. The ones who heard the angel message, saw the empty tomb, and went to tell people that Christ was risen. But, according to Matthew, there were guards who also heard the angel message, saw the empty tomb, and went to tell people that Christ was risen.

Of course, these two reports have different results. The Marys pass along Jesus' message for the disciples to meet him in Galilee, and six verses later "the disciples went to Galilee." The guards tell the chief priests "everything that had happened," and the religious leaders pay the guards to change their story. "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"

The women did as Jesus told them—they went forth and proclaimed the truth. The truth of love; the truth of peace; the truth of life—the truth about real power. That truth is in our world.

But the guards also did as the authorities told them—they went forth and proclaimed the lie. The lie of animosity; the lie of violence; the lie of death—the lie about real power. Those lies are also in our world.

The Resurrection is Good News. It is truth. And human lies cannot change the truth. Human lies cannot change the ultimate reality of God as manifest in the risen Christ. But human lies *can* change how the resurrection affects our lives and our world in this moment.

It *matters* if we take the money—or security, or comfort—from the powers that be and join the guards in their lies:

- That we must sacrifice the few for the many.
- That we should trust the power of the authorities.
- That violence keeps us safe.
- That death wins.

It *matters* if we worship Jesus and join the women in proclaiming the truth:

- That all are beloved and must be cared for.
- That we should trust in the power of God.
- That violence begets more violence.
- That divine life is more powerful than death.

The call of Easter is at once simple and difficult: **to tell the truth of the Resurrection in a world obsessed with death.** Even when authorities offer money or status or comfort or safety if we would only repeat their version of the story—we tell the truth.

Even when people look at us like we're crazy, and we start to feel a little crazy—we tell the truth.

Even when the lies are so loud they seem to drown out our tired voices—we tell the truth.

There we no sleeping guards. No sneaky disciples. There was an earthquake and an angel and a risen savior. There is the power of God in this world that has overcome, is overcoming, will overcome all the forces of death.

We tell the truth: Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Wednesday, April 7: John 20:1-18

The Surprise of Easter

Awhile back, I was into a mystery series called “The Cat Who . . .”. These stories feature an amateur sleuth named Qwill and his two crime-solving Siamese cats. (Don’t judge.) One of the books opened with alarming news of Qwill’s death and then flashed back a little bit and moved the story slowly toward his fateful demise with ominous lines like: “He said he would call his friend that night. But that was a phone call he would never make.”

Of course, I wasn’t surprised when the burned up body in his car turned out to not be Qwill after all. I knew all along that he wasn’t going to die because I had read books that came later in the series.

Sometimes I feel like that’s the position we are all in when it comes to Easter. We’ve already read ahead in the story. And so we come to Easter with, I hope, a sense of joy; a sense of enjoyment at re-hearing and celebrating this wonderful story. But we are a long way from being surprised. We are a long way from the shock that Mary experienced on that first Easter morning.

The angels, the gardener-turned-Christ, the Holy One speaking our name. We love this story. We are fascinated. But we are not surprised. I’m afraid that we are so familiar with this story that we forget the shock of the empty tomb.

All of the people involved are surprised—they are astounded. This is the only time in the gospel of John that we see people running. They are running around like crazy people, finding surprise after surprise: the empty tomb; folded grave cloths; angels; Jesus—every piece of the story comes as an utter surprise to those experiencing it.

The surprise of life when we expect death—it’s a glorious surprise, but it’s not repeatable. We cannot will ourselves into ignorance. The story of that first Easter morning will never surprise us—not in the way it surprised Mary and Peter and the other disciple. But let me remind you, during this Easter season, that the time for surprises is not yet over. We know what God accomplished three days after the crucifixion, but we do not yet know what the power of God will accomplish in this community, in our churches, in our individual lives.

What would happen if we didn’t live our lives as if we already know the story? What if we were truly open to being surprised? Being surprised in our devotional times. Surprised when we sit down for a meal. Surprised when we spend time with our families. Surprised when we get on a Zoom meeting. Surprised when we do our volunteer work. Even surprised by what we might hear in worship.

Still, I think we shouldn’t feel disappointed that we do not experience the surprise and elation that Mary felt when Jesus called her name. Because we have the privilege of knowing more of the story. We’ve read ahead in the book. And we get to live our lives in the knowledge and joy of the resurrection.

Thursday, April 8: *Luke 24:13-35

Walking Together

We know where Cleopas and his companion—possibly his wife—are going, but not why. There are lots of possibilities: maybe Emmaus is home; maybe they just want to get out of Jerusalem because it doesn't feel safe; maybe there is a big church gathering at the Emmaus Convention Center that week. Or maybe they just need to walk. They have been through the traumatic event of Jesus' death, and now some of the women say the tomb is empty and they don't know what to make of it. So they walk.

They are walking together when a stranger joins them. Were they irritated by the intrusion? Or maybe they were happy for the distraction? They were clearly surprised that this stranger did not know about Jesus and the gruesome events of the previous Friday. And so they told him: “Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.” And they went through the story.

I imagine what we have in Luke is a summary. After all, they were walking seven miles. That's long enough for Cleopas and his companion to tell their story. To put into words the joy and the devastation and the confusion of following Jesus. It helps sometimes, to tell the story; to talk through the emotions.

So they walk and talk with this stranger. And after Jesus hears their story, he provides the biblical and theological commentary. Again, the dialog is much abridged. Luke is more interested in their walking together than the details of their—I'm sure insightful and profound—conversation.

Luke is also interested in what happens when the two travelers reach their destination--they invite the stranger to stay with them. They sit down together for a meal—and *that* is when they finally recognize Jesus. Clearly, for Luke, this is the climax of the story. He echoes here the language of the Last Supper: “He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them.”

Then, says Luke, *then* their eyes were opened and they recognized him. That is what it's all about, right? It's about the journey and the fellowship; about helping each other recognize Jesus. And about recognizing Jesus in each other.

It's easy for us to read this story and think how silly Cleopas and his companion were to not recognize Jesus as they walked along the road. Weren't their hearts burning? How did they miss that? They should have known. Those silly disciples.

Really though, we are the silly ones--to talk about when they *should* have known. They know when they know. They know when Jesus offers them the bread. They know when God finally opens their eyes. They know Jesus' presence when divine grace allows them to know it.

The knowing is out of their control. The revelation is up to God.

What Cleopas and his companion *should* have done is exactly what they did: welcome the stranger to journey with them; share their story; listen to his story; walk and walk and walk together for however long it takes; sit down together at the table.

The travelers did exactly what they should have done. And then God did exactly what God does: opens our eyes to the presence of Jesus in our midst.

Friday, April 9: Luke 24: 36-53

The Body of Christ

I've been listening to a podcast about the Heaven's Gate cult, thinking how very strange and warped the group members' beliefs were—they thought aliens from the Halle-Bop comet were going to pick them up.

Then I started looking at the story of the ascension: “While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” The Ascension isn't exactly UFOs, but it's not too far off. If we're honest, it's a weird story. I mean, sure, Jesus performs miracles throughout the Gospels, but they're mostly functional: some water into wine to keep the party going; multiplying loaves and fishes to feed the crowd; healing people's bodies and spirits. This miracle . . . well, this is just showing off.

There's a similar atmosphere of the absurd in the beliefs of Heaven's Gate and the story of the ascension—and a similar end goal in mind. But there is also a critical difference: the Heaven's Gate community members believed that they had to disable their human “vehicles;” they had to kill their human bodies in order to participate in the “Next Level.” Whereas, with Jesus' ascension, Jesus goes up in his entirety. His living human body is somehow part of this glorious, divine, raising up.

Not long before the ascension, Jesus shows his disciples his hands and feet—parts of his body that still bear the wounds from his crucifixion. This is not a perfect, perfected, unblemished body that is rising to heaven. This is Jesus in the flesh that has been broken and the blood that has been poured out. He has the nail wounds in his hands and his feet. His back bears the whip marks from his beating. And then he eats a piece of broiled fish. And *all* of that—the wounded hands, the marked back, the digesting fish—it all gets taken up to sit at the right hand of God.

Jesus does not abandon his “vehicle.” He takes it with him. Which is really, when you think of it, rather astounding. God is incarnate—is enfleshed—in the person of Jesus—and not just in a nominal, superficial way. God carries this embodiedness through to the very end. When Jesus shows his body—his hands, his feet, his wounds—it's somehow comforting to the distressed and confused disciples—that physicality.

That's how it is, sometimes. The things that comfort us aren't necessarily grand or even traditionally beautiful, but just the things that ground us back in this world. In our humanity. In our bodies. With each other. And some of these comforts are things we have sorely missed through these months of COVID.

Like singing together.

Like sharing meals.

Like being in the same physical space as people you love, as people who love you.

And yet even as we are physically distanced; even as we are eating at home and worshipping with our computers, we are still embodied. Still grounded in this world even as we are connected with God. We can still appreciate this comfort Jesus gives his disciples--this simple comfort of physicality, of presence.

Unlike the ascension story created by the Heaven's Gate members, Luke's Ascension story should not inspire us to leave this world, but to be more fully a part of it. It should not lead us into despair for worldly failures, but toward hope in the ways the Divine is part of our earthly existence. Jesus' Ascension story affirms us in our humanity while also affirming God's presence and power in the midst of it all.