



ST. MICHAEL'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

2026 Lenten Guide  
and Reflections



Lent from the  
**INSIDE** OUT

A GUIDE TO PRAYER AND REFLECTION IN THE SEASON OF LENT



# Lent: From the Inside Out

***Lent has a way of slowing us down.***

In a world that constantly pulls our attention outward toward busyness, productivity, and appearances, Lent invites us to turn inward. Not in a self-absorbed way, but in a holy one.

Lent is a season of honest self-examination, of listening beneath the noise, of noticing what is stirring in our hearts and naming what we often keep hidden.

**The Book of James reminds us: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”** The invitation of Lent is not to become someone else, but to draw near to God more fully to who God already knows us to be.

**“From the Inside Out”** is a reminder that real transformation rarely begins with what we do, but with who we are becoming. It begins in the interior places of our lives—our desires, fears, wounds, longings, gratitude, and hope. These are the places where God already dwells and where grace quietly does its deepest work.

The daily reflections in this booklet arise from those interior places. They are offered by members of St. Michael’s, each one sharing honestly from their lived experience of faith, doubt, struggle, healing, and trust. These reflections are not meant to provide quick answers or spiritual shortcuts, but to create space—space for prayer, for truth-telling, and for God to meet us as we are.

**As you journey through these days of Lent, may these reflections encourage you to listen more deeply, to be gentle with yourself, and to trust that God is at work—slowly, faithfully, and lovingly—from the inside out.**

May this season be a grace-filled companion on your journey toward renewal, hope, and new life in Christ.

In Christ’s love,

## Lent at St. Michaels

### **Shrove Sunday Worship and Brunch**

Sunday, February 15

### **Ash Wednesday Services**

Wednesday, February 18 at 12 pm & 6:30 pm

### **Lent Morning Prayer**

Mondays - Thursdays during Lent in the Chapel, 7 am

Fridays in the Chapel, 8 am

### **Friday Morning Eucharist**

March 6 in the Chapel, 8 am

### **Every Wednesday**

Noonday Prayer and Compline on Zoom, 12 pm & 8 pm

### **Stations of the Cross**

A Walk-Through Experience - daily during Lent in Fordham Hall

## Holy Week

### **Maundy Thursday Service**

Thursday, April 2, 6:30 pm

### **Maundy Thursday Prayer Watch**

Thursday, April 2, until 12 pm on Good Friday

### **Good Friday Service**

Friday, April 3 at 12 pm

### **Touching Jesus' Feet**

April 3 at Orlando Union Rescue Mission, 10 am - 1 pm

### **Easter Day**

Sunday, April 5, 7:45 am | 9 am | 10:15 am

### **Easter Day Children's Ministry Egg Hunt**

Immediately following the 10:15 am service

*Childcare and Church School will be provided on Easter Day.*



ST. MICHAEL'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH



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## LENT *from the* INSIDE OUT

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**SUNDAYS DURING LENT**  
*February 22nd - March 29th*

**AT 9 AM IN THE PARLOR**  
*During 'Faith Formation'*

**BEGINNING ON**  
**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22ND**  
*Join us for a deeper exploration  
in the Lenten season*

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# Lenten Bible Challenge

## A 40-Day Journey through Matthew



You're invited to rediscover Christ anew by reading through the Gospel of Matthew in 40 days. You'll cover approximately 30 verses each day for six days a week and then take Sunday as a day of rest. This requires intentionality and may require fasting 10 minutes a day from Facebook, X, the news, or ESPN to reflect on God's "love letter" to you.

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### HERE ARE THE DAILY READINGS BEGINNING ON ASH WEDNESDAY

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#### FEBRUARY 18-21

WED 1:1-25  
 THURS 2:1-23  
 FRI 3:1-17  
 SAT 4:1-25

#### FEBRUARY 22-28

SUN Rest  
 MON 5:1-19  
 TUES 5:20-48  
 WED 6:1-34  
 THURS 7:1-29  
 FRI 8:1-34  
 SAT 9:1-37

#### MARCH 1-7

SUN Rest  
 MON 10:1-25  
 TUES 10:26-42  
 WED 11:1-30  
 THURS 12:1-21  
 FRI 12:22-50  
 SAT 13:1-23

#### MARCH 8-14

SUN Rest  
 MON 13:24-58  
 TUES 14:1-36  
 WED 15:1-20  
 THURS 15:21-39  
 FRI 16:1-28  
 SAT 17:1-27

#### MARCH 15-21

SUN Rest  
 MON 18:1-35  
 TUES 19:1-30  
 WED 20:1-34  
 THURS 21:1-22  
 FRI 21:23-46  
 SAT 22:1-22

#### MARCH 22 - MARCH 28

SUN Rest  
 MON 22:23-46  
 TUES 23:1-39  
 WED 24:1-25  
 THURS 24:26-51  
 FRI 25:1-30  
 SAT 25:31-46

#### MARCH 29 - APRIL 4

**HOLY WEEK** MON 26:1-25    WED 26:47-75    FRI 27:39-66  
 SUN Rest    TUES 26:26-46    THURS 27:1-38    SAT 28:1-20

#### APRIL 5

**EASTER SUNDAY  
 CELEBRATE!**

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# Listening with the Heart: A Lenten Journey of Emotion and Intuition

**Format:** 6-week Lenten series on Zoom

**Practices:** Lectio, Audio, & Visio Divina

**Dates:** Thursdays in Lent  
(February 19 - March 26)

**Time:** 6:30-7:30 pm

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## Holding Hope: Reimagined

This series is for anyone searching for a gentler, deeper way to pray during Lent—one that listens not only for God's word, but for God's movement within.



Scan the QR code to join the meeting or click on the link in the E-messenger.



Contact Heather at [heather@stmichaelschurch.com](mailto:heather@stmichaelschurch.com) with any questions.

# Touching the Feet of Jesus

Foot Washing and Fellowship  
with Orlando Rescue Mission



Last year, we felt the presence of Jesus at the Orlando Union Rescue Mission's Easter Banquet & Foot Washing. Jesus plans to show up again this year. Follow him for a beautiful opportunity to deepen your faith and connect with your St. Michael's family.

**FOR ANY QUESTIONS, CONTACT**

Freddy Clayton at 407-928-6375 or  
fred.clayton@ourm.org.

**SCAN THE QR CODE** to sign up.



JOIN US FOR A DAY OF  
LOVE, SERVICE & COMMUNITY  
ON GOOD FRIDAY

**APRIL 3**  
10am - 1pm





2026  
LENTEN  
REFLECTIONS

# I Love You From The Inside Out

***“I love you from the inside out,”***

says my grandmother, Mama June. A lot. Like all the time. Even though she went home to heaven (at age 104 in 2023), I hear that phrase in my heart still. A lot. Like all the time. Sometimes I feel like remembering her is all I’ve got, and for me, it is all I need to remember not only her love and that I belonged to her like no other, but it leads me to remembering I belong to Jesus!

I love you from the inside out. You can imagine my surprise, when & delight when I found out “From the Inside Out” was to be our theme for the Days of Lent in 2026. And you can understand that joy was in remembering my grandmother AND the fact that in this edition of Lenten Reflections, we had long ago asked two children, siblings ages 8 and 10, to write together for one of the days with their grandparents! Grandchildren and grandparents sitting with one another, sharing the faith, teaching each other, spending precious time, making the most of the time, as St. Paul says, and talking about important, life-giving things.

We are blessed with many grandparents at St Michael’s Church! I watch with awe at the relationships between these generations, I laugh with them, sometimes weep with them, and mostly am simply thankful that they have each other in this life of ours. Blessings flow.

And I am thankful for the relationships we have with one another in our church. Blessings flow! One does not have to be a grandparent or have grandchildren to know how important relationships & connections are, in church and in life. I give thanks as well for those who contributed to the life of our congregation through the gift of their writing for these 40 days and Holy Week. The time our writers took is appreciated deeply, and will remind the reader how precious our days are. God willing, we will feel loved and love in return from the inside out.

*Lionel*

The Reverend Lionel Smith-McGehee





## Lent: Prayer of Beginning

**The Lenten season begins.** It is a time to be with you, Lord, in a special way, a time to pray, to fast, and thus to follow you on your way to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, and to the final victory over death.

**I am still so divided.** I truly want to follow you, but I also want to follow my own desires and lend an ear to the voices that speak about prestige, success, pleasure, power, and influence. Help me to become deaf to these voices and more attentive to your voice, which calls me to choose the narrow road to life.



**I know that Lent is going to be a very hard time for me.** The choice for your way has to be made every moment of my life. I have to choose thoughts that are your thoughts, words that are your words, and actions that are your actions. There are not times or places without choices. And I know how deeply I resist choosing you.

Please, Lord, be with me at every moment and in every place. Give me the strength and the courage to live this season faithfully, so that, when Easter comes, I will be able to taste with joy the new life that you have prepared for me.

*Amen. – Henri Nouwen*

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## As Far As The East Is From The West

What would it be like to live without the weight of guilt or the fear of being rejected because of your mistakes and failures? Psalm 103, particularly vv. 12-14, invites us to imagine that kind of freedom and assures us it is already ours in God.

Verse 12 says, **“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.”** East and west never converge; they stretch endlessly in opposite directions. In the same way, God’s forgiveness is complete and final. He does not keep our sins within reach to hold them against us. When God forgives, it is finished. This truth reminds us that God does not define us by our worst moments.

**The psalm then shifts from the vastness of forgiveness to the closeness of relationship.** “As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him.” God’s mercy is not distant or abstract. It is personal, attentive, tender, and near. Like a loving parent, God comes to us with patience and compassion. We are invited to open ourselves to be fathered by God and grow in our trust that he is kind, trustworthy, and gentle.

**Verse 14 grounds this compassion in God’s deep understanding of human weakness.** “For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.” God is never surprised by our limitations or inability to live into who he created us to be. He knows our frailty, fears, and tendency to fall short. Rather than turning away from our weakness, God meets us where we are. Our humanity is not an obstacle to God’s love; it is the very reason for it.

**Psalm 103:12-14 offers profound reassurance.** We are not held captive by our past, nor dismissed because of our weakness, and not loved conditionally. We are forgiven completely, cared for tenderly, and known fully by a God whose mercy is as vast as the heavens and as gentle as a parent’s embrace.

**Readings:** Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12 | 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 | Psalm 103 or 103:8-14

## Steady, Nourished and Fruitful

**Our lives are filled with everyday decisions – Should I go to the gym? What show should we watch? Pinot or Cabernet?**

*These in-the-moment decisions typically have little impact on the direction of our lives until they become so frequent and distracting that our primary choice each day is an afterthought. Today's Lenten readings draw us back to the most impactful decision in our lives—what path will we walk?*

Moses in Deuteronomy sets life and death side by side, urging us to walk in His ways and not be led astray by bowing to other gods and distractions. **"I set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life."** This is the way to be genuine and to live with meaning and purpose. The psalmist echoes this with the contrast between the flourishing tree by streams of water versus the wicked: **"like chaff which the wind blows away."** These are two lives shaped by two different directions of the heart. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus calls us to follow Him on the path of self-giving love and the way of the cross. **"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."**

We celebrate and laugh at the wit and wisdom of the great Yankee philosopher Yogi Berra who said, **"When you come to a fork in the road, take it."** We ponder the poetry of Robert Frost and may choose the road less traveled, "And that has made all the difference." Scripture makes the choice clear. During this Lenten period and beyond, we are given the opportunity to refocus on God's path that will make us rooted like a tree, feeling steady, nourished, and fruitful.

It is a path that requires the courage and discipline to lay down whatever keeps us from following Jesus with our whole heart. Help us, God, on our Lenten journey, to turn away from the constant noise and endless options of our world and paths that lead to false promises and emptiness. **"What does it profit a person to gain the whole world, yet lose or forfeit themselves?"** (Luke 9:25)



**Readings:** Deuteronomy 30:15-20 | Luke 9:18-25 | Psalm 1



## About Those Old Wineskins

*Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” Matthew 9:17*

In this passage from today’s Gospel reading, Jesus explains to His disciples that His radical teachings about grace and forgiveness are incompatible with the rigid teachings, traditions, and mindset of the Old Law. **He likens His Gospel message to new wine, which is simply too much for old wineskins to handle.**

Many Biblical scholars believe that the so-called new wineskins were actually used ones that had been **carefully refurbished**. Those ancient wineskins were first thoroughly washed to remove caked-on detritus. The old brittle skins were then soaked in oil, massaged, and gradually stretched to restore their flexibility. Over time, with more oil, massages, and rest, the skins became like new and could be filled once again with wine.

Might we then be able to take the metaphorical dry and brittle wineskins of our minds and hearts, encrusted with years of hurt, grief, anger, and all seven deadly sins, and render them capable and worthy of receiving the joyful news of the Resurrection?

**Lent seems like a good time to try.**

The apostle Paul instructed his followers to “take every thought captive and make it obey the Messiah.” (2 Cor. 10:5) In Phil 4:8, he explained what that might look like: “Finally, brothers, (and sisters) whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely . . . think about these things.”

**Two thousand years after Paul wrote those words, the scientific community began to embrace the concept of neuroplasticity** – the human brain’s ability to rewire itself. Neurologist Dr. Caroline Leaf, in her book, *Switch on Your Brain*, suggests that by repeatedly grabbing hold of negative thoughts the instant they occur and replacing them with positive ones, we can train our brains, in a matter of weeks, to escape the entrenched toxic patterns that relentlessly steal our peace and our joy.

I pray that a Lenten commitment to this discipline might refresh our spirits in a way that allows us to fully embrace the joy of Easter.



## Act Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly With Your God In all things... In all ways

For so many seasons of Lent, I have dutifully participated in the “sacrificing” / “giving up” ritual in the observance of the 40 days before Easter, in order to reflect on those sacrifices Jesus made in the wilderness, as well as prepare for the miracle that awaits us on Easter morning. But let’s be honest, giving up the sweets, or the bread, or the wine was often more of a way to drop the last pounds from the holidays, and/or a self-righteous “look what I am doing” move. What if, instead, **I stepped out of my comfort zone** (I mean, who REALLY knows if I am sneaking a Reese’s?), and aimed for a spiritual renewal by cultivating virtues and serving others? Be the true “hands and feet” of God.

The readings for this reflection all seem to emphasize the verse in the Old Testament book of Micah which summarizes beautifully God’s core requirements for humanity: **“To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”** Micah 6:8

True worship involves practical justice, and NOT just religious rituals. Indeed, the passage contrasts empty religious practices with a transformed life of social responsibility . . . that is a genuine love for all our neighbors. God promises abundant blessings to those who live out their faith practically.

### Isaiah 58:9b-10

If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

**Jesus desires from us mercy, emphasizing compassion and saving the lost over rigid religious observance.** The Gospel reading demonstrates Jesus’ compassion for social outcasts (tax collectors back then) while also showing His love and mission for the broken and marginalized. And let’s be real here . . . we are ALL broken.

So back to that “serving others” piece of the Lenten season . . . I am challenging myself, and YOU, to EMBRACE Jesus’ mission to reach those in our own lives and communities . . . the lost and the marginalized and those “neighbors” who might be different from us. Donate clothes and blankets, read to students at Lake Silver, visit the residents in our local senior living facilities, take brownies to the neighbor down the street who seems lonely . . . the list goes on and on. Let’s actually step out of what is comfortable so that we can step into the life Jesus so desires for us as His children . . . actively participating in what is true worship.

**Readings:** Isaiah 58:9b-14 | Luke 5:27-32 | Psalm 86:1-11



## Trials of Faith: Formation in Desert Times

*I have always loved taking tests. To me, they represent a holy striving—a tangible way to learn and grow. In my student days, I saw every exam as an opportunity to give my best. This is mirrored in our readings: from the Garden of Eden to Jesus' time in the wilderness, Scripture shows us that the spiritual life is often refined through trial.*

In the Episcopal tradition, we understand these “tests” not as traps set by a distant judge, **but as part of our ongoing formation.** They are moments that reveal our reliance on God's unfailing love and grace. Of course, the struggle is real. Adam and Eve faltered when they allowed pride to overshadow their relationship with the Creator. Honestly, despite my love for challenges, I likely would have failed that test too. My own desire for knowledge can easily turn into the pride of “self-sufficiency,” which is where the enemy often strikes.

**Scripture is a tapestry of people facing trials.** Some stand firm, while others fall, but every trial serves to bring us closer to the heart of God. We must remember that the enemy often seeks us out in our “desert” moments—times of hunger, exhaustion, or grief—just as he did with Jesus. Yet Jesus overcame the Tempter not through human willpower, but by the power of the Word and a perfect alignment with the Father's will.

The trials we face today—illness, injustice, or loss—are far more complex than a classroom exam. **Yet, we are not alone.** Through faith, the study of Scripture, and the strength found in the Sacraments, we resist the shadows of pride and despair. Most importantly, we live in the assurance that God's love is a gift of grace, not a reward for a high score. We are loved simply because we are His. I am willing to walk through these trials to rest in that perfect love. **Will you walk with me?**



**Readings:** Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 | Romans 5:12-19 | Matthew 4:1-11 | Psalm 32

## With Faith Like A Child

We were invited to write this Lenten devotional with 2 of our grandchildren ages 8 and 10. What a blessing! We explored the Gospel of Matthew 25:31-46.

Our discussion with our grandchildren centered around those who did the work of the Father (gave food, drink, shelter, clothing and a welcoming spirit) vs those who gave away nothing. The kids had a hard time figuring out the analogy of the “Sheep and the Goats” and **wondered why anyone in the world would deny God!** When we suggested that perhaps there were people who didn’t realize that everyone was a child of God, the kids said that in that case, **everyone should give to everyone!**

They questioned that since we (our little family) cannot give to everyone in the world, what can we do to demonstrate our love for God and therefore His children? Our grandchildren said that we can give to those in our own neighborhood and town and came up with the following ways:

1. Pack bags of food and give to schools
2. Give water to places after hurricanes
3. Share toys that you don’t play with any more
4. Give people medicine when they are sick
5. Get blankets and socks to those who are cold
6. Care for them by visiting with them and saying hello
7. Share about God



**As it says in Psalm 8:2, “Out of the mouths of babes”.**

How quickly they perfected innocence and praise!

As grandparents, we were reminded of the importance of receiving God’s word like children rather than adults with our many worldly distractions. Jesus could not have made it any clearer than He did in Matthew 18:2-5 - “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”.

**Lord, help us to enter Your presence like children**  
with humility, trust, and complete dependence on You.

**Readings:** Leviticus 19:1-2,11-18 | Matthew 25:31-46 | Psalm 19:7-14



## The Enemy Of Hurry Cultivating Deep Communion

*Each of us has been called by God to live our lives in deep communion with him. Oftentimes, however, the noise and pull from the outside world fills our capacity so completely that we simply lack the time to follow the call (if we can hear it at all). The readings for this reflection all stress that we must make room to abide in God's presence to hear His calling.*

In Philippians, Paul exhorts the reader to “forget what lies behind” and to “strain” forward to what lies ahead . . . the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” **But how do we hear that heavenly call and know what is asked of us?** The passage from John provides the necessary guidance: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” The Psalm likewise refers to those who “dwell” in the Lord’s tabernacle.

**But what does it mean to abide and dwell with God?** It means that we put in time to develop a relationship with him that permeates all aspects of our lives, such that we journey together. If God is someone we visit once a week and think of no more, our relationship is confined to that space. He is an acquaintance. We know that he is there, and we have made ourselves known to Him, but there is no relationship. The building of a relationship requires that we clear daily space in our hurried lives to abide in his presence. The author John Mark Comer wrote, “Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life.” If we hurry past Him in our schedule, no relationship can form.

**During this Lenten season, we should count the things that fill our lives and ask what portion we have set aside for our relationship with God.** We should measure whether the portion given to God makes a true and lasting relationship with God possible and seek to find new ways to abide in his presence so that the relationship can form. Scripture tells us the rewards for abiding in a relationship with God are great. They include complete joy, eternal citizenship in heaven, and insurmountable strength in the face of the challenges we face. The gospel of John tells us that, if we bear His fruit, “the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.” May we all abide and dwell with Christ this Lent and receive these rewards.



## What Do We Sacrifice For Lent?

As the Lenten season approaches each year, a popular question in our household is “what is everyone giving up?”

We always seem to straddle the line of something not too difficult that we would really miss for forty (40) days, but something difficult enough so that God would give us a nod and know that we are sacrificing something that, in our minds, is relatively important. The passages from today’s reflection, I think, define what God expects and wants from us as a sacrifice apart from the common seasonal refrains of Starbucks, chocolate, etc.

**God’s expectations were not always clear.** When Jonah was delivering God’s warning to the Ninevites and their king, in one sentence, “Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!”, resulted in the Ninevites committing to a forty-day fast hoping to receive God’s mercy. Were they certain they would receive it? Likely not, given the phrases “who knows?” and “God may relent.” There is no evidence the Ninevites even knew the warning Jonah was delivering came from God, but even in the face of uncertainty, they gave up food, water and clothing for forty days, turned from their evil ways, and ultimately received God’s mercy.

The Psalm then offers direction of what God is looking for from us when it comes to sacrifice. Not **“burnt-offerings”** or empty promises to be a better Christian, but a **“broken and contrite heart”**, and willingness to accept His mercy as did the Ninevites.



In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells the crowd, surrounding him, like generations before them, it is an **“evil generation”** searching for a sign of salvation that, in fact, was standing right in front of them in His presence. He cites the Ninevites repentance at the warning of Jonah and the queen of the South’s (believed to be Queen Sheba) seeking wisdom from Solomon as examples of what the Psalm is asking of them. In these two examples, were there elements of uncertainty, doubt, non-belief? Possibly. **But it was overcome by faith, belief, and what God was asking for in the Psalm – a clean and contrite heart, and willingness to accept His salvation.**

Jesus tells the people in the crowd before him that the sign they seek to their salvation is He, “something greater than Jonah” and “something greater than Solomon.” **As we approach Easter and think about what sacrifice means during Lent, there is comfort in the certainty we will receive God’s salvation that exists within ourselves, with God’s help.**

**Readings:** Jonah 3:1-10 | Luke 11:29-32 | Psalm 51:11-18



## Trust in Times of Trouble

*“Queen Esther, seized with deathly anxiety fled to the Lord”.*

The coldness and quietness of the room does nothing for my anxiety. I am aware of how quiet this room is and lonely. It gives rise to the worst possible scenarios I’ve played out in my head during my sleepless night. I’ve been here before, not necessarily in this particular room, but rooms like it. A doctor’s office waiting for test results. And while I have a great deal of experience being in this situation, it doesn’t get any easier. At times like this, I often think about Esther preparing herself to address the king on behalf of her people.

In Esther, we are given a description of her anxiety. Esther 14:1 describes it as “deadly anxiety”. Despite her status as Queen, she was afraid. Not just for her people, but for herself. Her actions could mean death for her, not just her people. We are also given a description of her preparation and trust in God.

Esther 14:1-2 “she fled to the Lord. She took off all her splendid apparel and put on the garments of the distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfume she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair.”

By dressing as she did, Esther humbled herself. She acknowledged she could not do this alone. She could not face the king alone. She could not save her people alone. Esther 14:3 “Oh my Lord, you only are our king, help me, who am alone, and have no help but you”. This was not Esther alone; it was God working through Esther.

Esther did not know how she would be received or if she would be successful in saving her people or herself. But she trusted in the Lord and in His will, whatever the outcome would be.

In spite of my extreme attention to taking medications and following doctors orders, it isn’t always enough. I can’t control my test results. It’s done and already written. **We can’t always control the situations we are thrust in.** But we can control how we respond and who we put our trust in. Each reading for today reinforces how we should respond and who to put our trust in. May the season of Lent strengthen your trust in God and His plan for you.

## The Parable of the Kingdom of Lightness

Once upon a time, there was a Kingdom that divided all of its inhabitants based on the comparative lightness of their eyes. Indeed, with the aid of technology, the ultimate hue of even infants' eyes could be determined, and at birth, the government measured each resident's eyes against a lightness scale and processed them into their designated societal role, without regard to family unit or any other form of relationship.

As those with the lightest eyes were fewer in number, they were placed at the top of the scale, in the belief that their scarcity meant they must be the elite. Accordingly, they assumed powers and took charge of the distribution of goods and services and land, receipt and ownership of which was denied to the vast majority with eyes of a darker hue. They grew to regard those below them on the scale as the other—suspicious and potentially dangerous, justifying an ever-increasing level of violence against them, especially those who questioned the lightness divide.



**After decades or more, some people with eyes of all hues started to question why they were separated based on the shade of their eyes.** They led an uprising in the land, and finally, with encouragement of other kingdoms that had no such laws, the people of the Kingdom banded together and elected new leaders who erased the eye-lightness laws.

**But there was great sorrow among all the people of the Kingdom,** especially those who had been assigned to the bottom of the scale, and those who felt they had been unjustly treated. Some of those who had led the protests and the uprising came up with a different idea.

They would form a hearing committee so that those who had been harmed during the years of the Division could testify, in public and in front of those who had injured them, about their experiences. And those who had caused injury could also share their testimony and seek forgiveness, instead of criminal punishment. The people of the Kingdom hoped that truth sharing and transparency would create reconciliation instead of revenge, and restoration in lieu of retribution.

**After the hearings, the committee placed transcripts of all the testimony into a Great Book available to all.** For ever after, the citizens of the Kingdom consulted it regularly to remember what life was like during the Division, and to remind them never again to separate brother from sister and mother from son because of the shade of their eyes.

This history of the Kingdom may read like a fairy tale. Yet isn't it the restorative justice that Ezekiel and Jesus, as reflected in the words of Matthew, ask us to strive for? Ezekiel notes that when the wicked recognize and turn away from their transgressions, **"they shall surely live."** And Jesus cautions, if your brother or sister has something against you, leave the altar where you are offering your gift, and first be reconciled.

**There is a philosophy called Ubuntu in certain African cultures** that posits "I am because we are." God calls us to exercise that humanity to each other, both those who are harmed and who have harmed, by acknowledgement, true repentance and forgiveness, and reconciliation.

**Readings:** Ezekiel 18:21-28 | Matthew 5:20-26 | Psalm 130



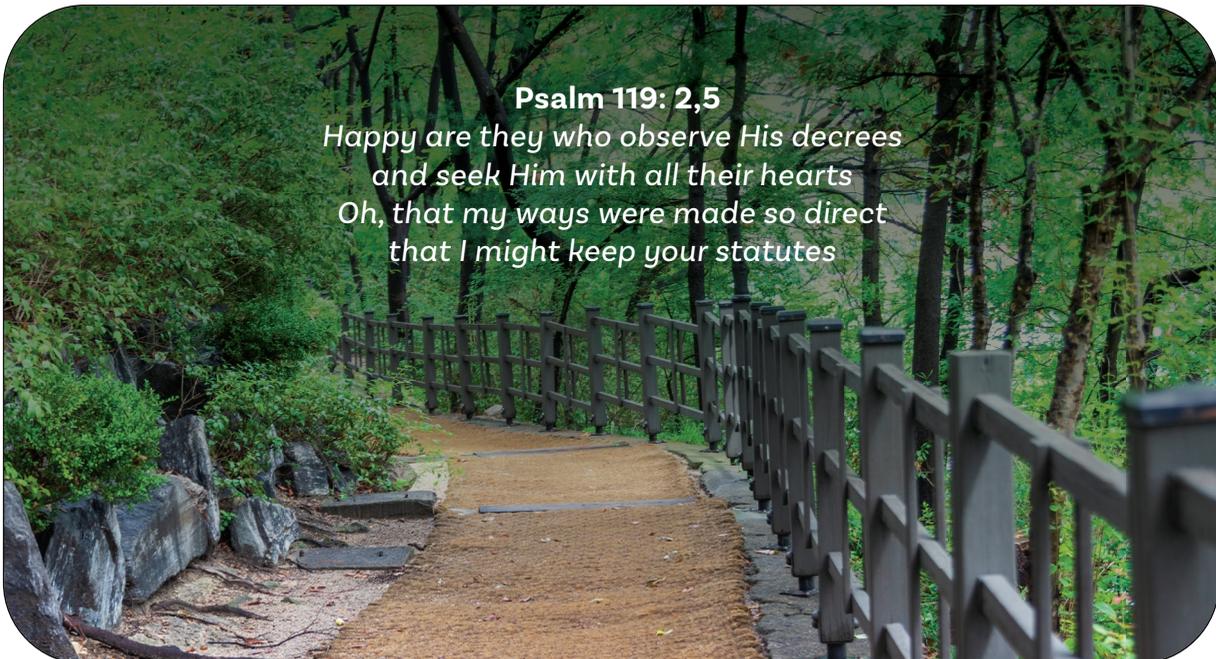
## Just A Closer Walk

As we proceed through Lent, it's important for us to recognize that the goal is a closer relationship with God. We see others not understanding the importance of Lent or not willing to make the effort. Some look at us like we are from another planet (we are). Others make a half hearted effort like giving up wine or dessert but not trying to be closer to our Master.

**All three of today's passages show that God has chosen us to live by different rules.**

We are special in His sight and are called to live by a higher standard.

It seems, as I mature in my walk with Christ, Lent lasts for far more than forty days. The prayers, readings and meditations have become part of every day life. The days have come down to repentance and faith.



**The gospel lesson in Matthew clearly calls us to be different.** Some people of the world, want an eye for an eye, while we are called to lay down our burdens and pray, and ask for blessings, redemption and release. In doing so, we are going further than just turning the other cheek. We are even being asked to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect. As humans, we stumble and fall short every day but what an awesome calling! The potential that God sees in us! It is incredibly humbling. May your Lent be special this year as you walk closer to God every day.

## When the Hills Seem High, Look Higher

**Psalm 121 has always been one of my favorite psalms – a passage I return to repeatedly. I first encountered it in an unexpected place: my all-time favorite movie, *The Sound of Music*. (Spoiler Alert – if you haven't seen the movie, skip to the fourth paragraph!)**

As the von Trapp family flees the music festival to seek refuge at the Abbey, escape seems impossible. Austria's borders have closed and the path ahead looks dangerous and uncertain. Yet Captain von Trapp outlines their daring route: **"Then we'll drive over those hills and go over those mountains on foot."**

Saying goodbye, the Reverend Mother offers Maria words of encouragement that have stayed with me: "You will not be alone. Remember, 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help.'" In that moment, the psalm becomes more than a verse; it is a promise. Even in the face of uncertainty, fear, or impossible odds, help comes from a source far greater than ourselves – we are never truly alone on our journey.

Psalm 121 begins with a simple but deeply personal question: **"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where is my help to come?"** It's a question I've found myself asking in different seasons of life – sometimes with urgency, sometimes with quiet desperation, and sometimes without even realizing how much I needed help.

**Some of us know exactly what it feels like to stand at the end of our own strength.** The bills, the diagnosis, the heartbreak, the decisions that feel too heavy. We know we need help, and we know we can't provide it for ourselves. Others go through life assuming we can handle everything alone – until life proves otherwise. But Psalm 121 invites all of us, the desperate and the self-reliant alike, to pause and ask honestly: Where does my help come from?

For the ancient pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, this wasn't a theoretical question. Their journey was dangerous – steep paths, scorching sun, unpredictable weather, and robbers hiding in the hills. They sang this psalm as a reminder that though the road was uncertain, they were not traveling alone.

**And neither are we.**

The psalm answers the question clearly: **"My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth."** The Creator of every star, every cell, every breath – is the One we're invited to call our helper. There is no problem too big, too complex, or too small for the One who designed the universe. When we feel small, He is not. When we feel inadequate, He is all-sufficient.

But the psalm doesn't stop there. It tells us that God is not only powerful – He is watchful. He does not sleep, He does not lose track of us, and He is never distracted. Day and night, in the bright heat or the shadows of uncertainty, His care is constant and personal.

And then comes the promise that steadies my heart the most: **God's help isn't temporary.** "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore." His care stretches into eternity. He is holding us now, and He will hold us then.

**Where does your help come from?** From Jesus – our Creator, our Keeper, our eternal Protector. Whatever mountain you're facing, whatever hill feels too steep, lift your eyes and fix them on Him. He is with you every step of the way, guiding, strengthening, and holding you steady. No matter how impossible the path may seem, you are not alone – **and He will never, ever, let you go.**

**Readings:** Genesis 12:1-4a | Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 | John 3:1-17 | Psalm 121



## Be Like Daniel

In Daniel 9:3-10, the words that spoke to me were, “Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you.” God is telling me that shame falls on us because we have sinned.

**This passage calls me toward a deeper idea of what sin is.** I have sinned and so has everyone else alive today. This scripture also inspires me to be a better example to new believers, because I want to sin less.

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*Holy and gracious Father, we thank you for being merciful to us. We pray that you bring to light any impurities still hiding in the darkness within us.*

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In Luke 6:27-38, these words spoke to me, “and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt”, and “For even sinners love those who love them.” God is saying to me “Love people who don’t love you”, and “You should be good to people, expecting nothing in return.”

**The action I want to embark on is to be kind and loving even to those who are not kind to me.** I will be forgiving and generous to people even if they hurt me.

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*O God, let us be loving and kind to people who hate us. Let us be good even to those who are not kind to us. Let us be gracious towards people, even the ones who are not gracious to us. Let us all turn the other cheek when someone hits us. In your gracious and holy name we pray, Amen.*



## Hear, Listen, Learn, Act: One Person's Reflection

*Our world is loud, at times it is even deafening. Phones, tablets, smart watches, televisions, radios, megaphones, advertisements, and an ever-expanding social media ecosystem, are all vying for our time and attention. It can be challenging to get one's bearings and decipher what is true, or accurate.*

The season of Lent invites us to tune out this noise and these distractions so that we may listen to the true word of God. While reading the lectionary for today's reflection, one word stood out to me, "**HEAR**". This command is the first word of both the Old Testament reading (Isaiah 1:2-4,16-20) and the Psalm (50:7-15,22-24).

We are instructed to **HEAR** the word of the Lord and to do right by Him. In Isaiah, we are rebuked for rebelling against God, however we are told how to **repent and rejoin his fold**.

Today's Psalm describes a vision where God summons the earth to a judgement disapproving of mere ritual in place of true worship. A questioning of empty actions as opposed to true discipleship.

In the Gospel reading (Matthew 23:1-12) Jesus calls out the scribes and the Pharisees who speak the word of God but do not truly practice it. **Jesus warns against those who put on a good show**, but do not practice what they preach, who seek attention and praise of others, who crave power and titles rather than love and charity.

Christ reminds his followers that they (we) have **one true Father, one true teacher and one true Messiah**. Our Lord states, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."



### Can you HEAR the message? Will you heed it?

It is demanded that we cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. We are given clear and actionable steps to serve God. Following Christ cannot be passive, you are called to action.

**It is time to HEAR, LISTEN, LEARN and ACT.**



## Golden Scars: The Kintsugi of Lent

*There is a Japanese art called kintsugi, which is a beautiful practice of repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with gold.*

The lacquer creates striking gold streaks that transform something broken into an entirely new creation. Instead of hiding the cracks, the artist highlights them. What was once shattered is made whole again—not by covering the break as though it never happened, but by honoring it and bringing it forward. The vessel becomes more beautiful because of where it was broken.



**Lent invites us into a similar kind of honesty.**

This season asks us to slow down and take stock of our lives—not only the polished parts we like to present, but also the fractures we would rather conceal: the impatience, the regrets, the grief, the habits that have worn thin places in our hearts. Lent does not demand that we be flawless. It asks that we be willing to listen to God’s Word and enter into it with our whole hearts.

**In kintsugi, the gold does not erase the break—it fills it.** The vessel is no longer what it once was, but something new, something transformed. In the same way, Christ does not promise to rewind our lives or undo every wound. Instead, He enters into them. Through repentance, prayer, and mercy, He fills what is broken with His own life.

**In Jeremiah 18, the Lord commands the prophet to go to the potter’s house.** There, Jeremiah watches as a vessel is spoiled in the potter’s hands, and the potter reshapes it into another vessel, as it seems good to him. The Lord then says, “Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? ... Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand.” In the Psalms, David cries out, **“I am as useless as a broken pot,”** yet he also proclaims his trust: **“I have trusted in you, O Lord... My times are in your hand.”**

So often, we try to hide our brokenness—from God, from others, even from ourselves. We smooth over the cracks and hope no one notices. But the Gospel tells a different story. Again and again, God meets His people not in their strength, but in their weakness. The places we consider failures are often the very places where grace takes hold.

Let this Lent be a time to turn our attention toward the cracks and the breaks, and to allow God to fill them rather than closing them off. A season of not hiding our flaws but bringing them forward as a place where God’s healing and perfect love can take hold. Let it be a season of renewal and restoration, as we journey toward the promise of Easter.

**Readings:** Jeremiah 18:1-11,18-20 | Matthew 20:17-28 | Psalm 31:9-16

## The View from the Gate

### From Lifestyles of the Rich to the Life of the Spirit

*Do you remember Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous? Or maybe MTV Cribs was more your style. How about the fancy cars on Top Gear? For thousands of years, humans on the outside have looked in wonder at those who seem to “have it all.”*

Our Gospel story today from Luke 16:19-31 shows us a man that Robin Leach would have loved to interview. (Apologies to those of you who just had to Google “Robin Leach”). This man is not named, but if you lived in his town, you’d probably know him in an instant. The text says he dressed in purple (the most expensive color at the time), fine linen, and ate sumptuously every day. Outside his gate was a poor man covered in sores. **His name was Lazarus.**

We are told that Lazarus longed to eat even the crumbs from the rich man’s table. Note that we aren’t told that that ever actually happened. **He just sat there. Day after day.** To be clear, the issue did not appear to be that the man was wealthy; it seems that the trouble was what he did with what he was given. Repeatedly stepping around, over, or even ON Lazarus each time he entered his house, and allowing this suffering man to languish right outside his door. God literally put someone in his way to give him the opportunity to help.

#### **Death came for both Lazarus and the rich man, as it will for us all.**

We are told that while the rich man was consigned to Hades and torture, angels came and whisked Lazarus to the side of Abraham. While the rich man begged for a drop of water for his lips, only to be told, in essence, you’ve had your fun. At this point, it is too late.

Time and time again, the Bible (especially in the readings for today) talks about the fate of those who trust in the things of this world. In Jeremiah 17: 5-10, it says that those who would rely on wealth, power, or the strength of the flesh will wither and die like a shrub in the desert. Both Jeremiah and Psalm 1 tell us that those who trust in the Lord, on the other hand, are like a tree planted by a stream. It shall not fear when the heat comes, and its leaves will stay green.

**So what are we to do?** First, notice that Jesus does not name the rich man; he identifies Lazarus by name. That is no accident. Jesus identifies with you, knows you, and whatever situation you are in. Second, take an honest look at what you have. Third, consider who God may be putting in your path. Who might be right outside your door, in desperate hope for the very crumbs from your table? For you, it’s not too late. Pray about how you can play a part in the work that is to be done, living into God’s kingdom here on earth, and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Do all the good you can, By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can, In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can, To all the people you can,  
**As long as ever you can.**

*John Wesley*

**Readings:** Jeremiah 17:5-10 | Luke 16:19-31 | Psalm 1



## Pulling Weeds, Planting Grace

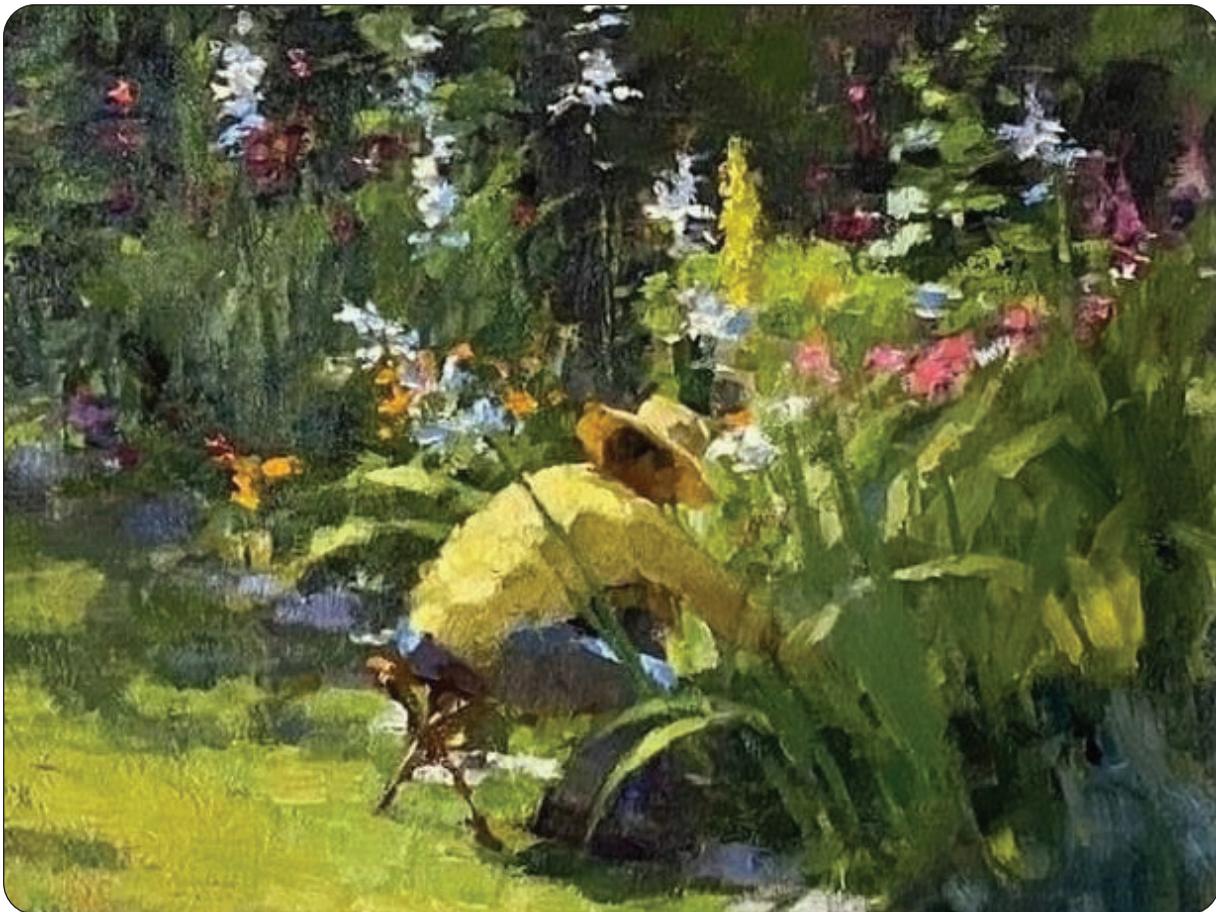
*Joseph persevered through the many hardships in life, receiving the rewards of his dedication by doing the best job he could in whatever situation was presented to him. By following God's commandments to honor God and one another, he had a tremendous beneficial impact on many people.*

He lived in a civil kingdom, but more importantly, he lived in the **Kingdom of God** here on earth as it is in heaven. How easy it is to bemoan our situation and say, **"It's not my fault"**. It may not be our fault, but that doesn't mean that we just quit. How much better to accept that which we cannot change and **make the best of it**.

It may mean a change in our life's direction, just as Joseph had a change in his life's direction. We remember it is God's will that **WILL** be done. The work we put into doing a job is reflected in the results.

**If weeds take over the garden, then we pull them out to give the plants a chance to survive.**

Cursing the weeds doesn't make them go away. If we do nothing to help the desired garden plants, then nothing is what we will get. We need to examine ourselves, repent of our sins, and blossom into the fullness of God's grace.



**Readings:** Genesis 37:3-4,12-28 | Matthew 21:33-43 | Psalm 105:16-22

## Welcome Home: The Heart of the Father

**The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a mirror.** At different points in our lives, we have all stood in each position: the rebellious wanderer, the resentful elder brother, or the hopeful father. Yet the central theme of Luke 15 remains constant: **Welcome Home.**

Micah 7 reminds us that God is a Shepherd who “delights in showing clemency.” He does not retain His anger but treads our iniquities underfoot. This is the “Shepherd-King” who pardons transgression and keeps the covenant of loyalty made to our ancestors. The Psalmist echoes this, noting that the Lord “heals all your infirmities” and “redeems your life from the grave.” **He does not deal with us according to our sins but crowns us with mercy and loving-kindness.**

Whether you are the one who has stumbled or the loyal soul struggling with jealousy, the call is the same: **Welcome.** We are to mirror the Father who ran to his son while he was still “far off.”

As you reflect on who needs that grace today, consider this:

I'm lost and have nowhere else to turn to —**welcome them home**  
 I'm begging for food —**welcome them home**  
 I've got nothing good to say to you or about you —**welcome them home**  
 I betrayed your trust —**welcome them home**  
 He keeps getting everything he wants —**welcome them home**  
 I look different than everyone else here —**welcome them home**  
 But he didn't give love to everyone he met —**welcome them home**  
 But he took something of value from me —**welcome them home**  
 But he hurt me —**welcome them home**  
 I've always been good and faithful they have not —**welcome them home**  
 For he was lost and now returned —**welcome them home**  
 He thinks differently than me —**welcome them home**  
 He acts differently than me —**welcome them home**  
 I have nothing else, but a Hallelujah —**welcome them home**

**How are you welcoming someone home today?**



**Readings:** Micah 7:14-15,18-20 | Luke 15:11-32 | Psalm 103:1-4(5-8)9-12



## Meaning In The Shadows

In the Old Testament lesson from Exodus, the Israelites are a few months into their journey after leaving Egypt. They are starting to complain about the less-than-ideal conditions, like a lack of water, a roof over their heads, and food. Moses is not doing well with all the complaining and asks God what to do. God answers by making water flow out of a rock, which seems like a pretty impressive solution. Manna appeared for nourishment, and to once again show that God was listening, answering, and loving them.

During World War II, there was another exodus of Jews. It wasn't always safe, but there was always the call for God to keep them safe and alive. I recently read the book, 'The Forest of Vanishing Stars' by Kristen Harmel. This is a historical novel about Polish Jews who escaped to the forest from the Ghettos that Nazis established before sending them to concentration camps. These people had been lawyers, tailors, and other business people, but certainly not used to living in a forest. They were willing to learn and found someone to lead them and give them hope that they could survive. They lived in lean-tos, often had to move if the Nazis seemed close, and had to be very careful about having enough food, especially for the long, cold winters. Celebrating holy days gave them a bit of normalcy and reinforced their faith. In the Epilogue of the book, the author said that at the end of the war, 36,000 Jews came out of the forest between Poland and Germany.

**A week or so ago, a story came up on Facebook about an Austrian Jew, named Viktor Frankl, who was a neurologist and psychiatrist. He wrote a manuscript about having meaning in life, but it was found and burned by the Nazis.** He continued his research, gathering stories from fellow prisoners on what motivated them to keep fighting to live, and those who felt they had nothing left to live for. He discovered that the people who had reason to live strived to survive. It could be as simple as knowing God was there or hoping to see a loved one when they were freed. After the war, he rewrote the manuscript and added his new information into the book 'Man's Search for Meaning'. One of his quotes is: "Life never ceases to have meaning; even suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning".



With my 21st century eyes, I can see that there are people around the globe who have no choice but to leave their homes. Where will their Exodus take them? Will they know God is listening, answering, and loving them, and will give more than they believe possible? Will they find new meaning and nourishment in their lives to help them survive and thrive?

**Readings:** Exodus 17:1-7 | Romans 5:1-11 | John 4:5-42 | Psalm 95

## Obedience Over Ego

**For me, many of the scriptures take much reflection and thought to understand their meaning. But the story of Naaman is different.** The Southern novelist and historian Shelby Foote once said, "God is the greatest dramatist – just tell the story." This is the story of the great general Naaman, a Syrian, making his way to Elisha and being cured of his leprosy.

**The story could be the plot of a modern-day movie, full of warriors, victory, kidnapping, bribery, treachery, deceit, anger, rage, narcissism, desperation, miracles, and then awe and wonder...a happy ending.**

You see, Naaman was a great warrior, but desperate because of his leprosy, who, in a narcissistic way, thought he could bribe his way to a cure. He was enraged when Elisha would not meet with him and only gave him a very simple task. Naaman felt it was beneath him to bathe in the Jordan and couldn't understand that he should be obedient to God's command through Elisha. But he was eventually humbled by his servant's advice and did what Elisha prescribed. Being cured, he was filled with awe and proclaimed that "there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." Here was a great warrior who listened to the advice of his lowly servants, resulting in a miraculous healing through his obedience to God's word. He was not afraid to open his mind and trust in others. No matter how wise and in control we think we may be, a bit of humble pie sometimes achieves big results.

**Over 800 years later, in the early days of Jesus' ministry, we find him speaking to the people in Nazareth, where he grew up.** Jesus was a local boy, and the people had heard of the things he had done in Capernaum. But they couldn't believe he had any special powers: **they wanted proof!** They wanted to see if "charity truly begins at home." Jesus would have none of it but instead told them of two past events: one of which was the ages-old story of Naaman the Syrian being cured on the advice of Elisha, despite the similar plight of many Israelites, the non-believers. How could Jesus even mention ignoring the Israelites and favoring the Gentiles? The locals were so filled with skepticism, doubt, and rage that they rejected Jesus' words and prepared to throw him out of the city and cast him down the mountain. But it was not his time, and Jesus somehow escaped.

**Are we so filled with skepticism sometimes that we fail to heed the words of the Lord and just be obedient?** Maybe we have doubts about our own faith and just need to trust in the Lord in good times and times of trouble! May it be so!



## An Unclouded Heart

### A Journey Through Memory and Mercy

*Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times. Matthew 18:21-35*

#### Types of Sin:

##### From the heart:

Evil thoughts, deceit, envy, sexual immorality, foolishness, arrogance

##### Social:

Hatred, discord, dissensions, gossip, judgmentalism

##### Omission:

Failing to do what is commanded, being ungrateful, or failing to pray

Do your sins **keep you in the past?**  
Do your sins **take up your thoughts?**  
Do your sins **cloud your heart?**

During this Lent, my promise is to give at least one sin a day to God and ask for forgiveness and to be released from this bond; it's been 7 months since I've known you were gone. I struggle with memories and thoughts of our love, friendship, and marriage. They cloud my mind, and my heart breaks. You were alone and broken, and I wish I could have done more. Please forgive me for failing you.

In Psalm 25:7, it says,

**"Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways according to your love, remember me for you, Lord, are good."**

I find it comforting that in John's Gospel (3:19-21), many people don't want their lives exposed to God's light because they are afraid of what will be revealed. They don't want to be changed. Don't be surprised when these same people are threatened by your desire to obey God and do what is right, because they are afraid that the light in you may expose some of the darkness in their lives. Rather than giving in to discouragement, keep praying that they will come to see how much better it is to live in light than in darkness. Let us ask God to give us the strength to be a light in this world.

**Readings:** Song of the Three Young Men 2-4, 11-20a (from the book of Daniel)  
Matthew 18:21-35 | Psalm 25:3-10

## The Shepherd's Voice

Reflecting on this passage has realigned my focus toward the importance of becoming more like Christ. I am reminded that true righteousness—the kind only found in Him—is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven. I am so deeply loved by God that He allowed His only Son to become a curse for me, redeeming me from the curse of the Law.



**While the Law focuses on self-examination, the New Covenant of God's amazing grace is focused entirely on seeing and experiencing Jesus.** The Pharisees committed vast portions of the Word to memory, yet they failed to recognize the Word made flesh standing right in front of them.

**I have seen God's love and grace carry me every day.** We should not be interested in merely accumulating biblical knowledge; instead, we should open the Scriptures to see more of Jesus. Some believe that knowing Hebrew or Greek is the key to understanding the Bible, but the Pharisees knew Hebrew, and it did not save them. What we truly need is for the Holy Spirit to reveal the "hidden gems" of Jesus and His finished work. When Jesus and His grace are not our focus, we often find ourselves wandering in the "desert of legalism," becoming discouraged and disillusioned. I am profoundly grateful that we are no longer under the Law, but under Grace!

As we prepare for the season of Lent, it is vital to position ourselves away from the noise to hear God's voice. Being intentional involves practices that allow us to be immersed in His presence, being open not only to listen but to act.

**Hearing God's voice should not be an extraordinary, rare event; it should be a normal part of the Christian life.** Imagine the peace of having divine wisdom for our decisions, clarity for our future, and confidence in following His lead every day. When we are in the "fast lane" of life, it is easy to overlook God's faithfulness. By slowing down, we can align our decisions with His perfect will and discern His voice amidst the clamor.

### To hear clearly, we must "exit the noise"

—the noise of anxiety, loneliness, and the pain of our past and present. Just as sheep are attuned to the voice of their shepherd, we are called to be attuned to Jesus. As John 10:27 reassures us:  
**"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."**

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 5-9 | Matthew 5:17-19 | Psalm 78:1-6



## No Neutral Ground

Isn't it miraculous how ancient texts speak so precisely to our current circumstances? Today's readings eliminate any possibility of neutrality in our relationship with God.

**Jesus draws a stark line: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."** There is no middle ground. We aren't permitted to be undecided or to observe from a safe distance. If we aren't with Him, we are against Him. If we aren't gathering what He is gathering, we are scattering it.

There is no fence to sit on, no middle ground to occupy, and no "still figuring it out" category that leaves us uncommitted yet acceptable. We are either with Jesus or against Him; we are either listening to God's voice or we have turned away. Every day, we must choose.

**Here is the uncomfortable truth: to not choose is to choose.** To delay commitment is to commit to delay. To withhold full obedience is disobedience. The person who witnesses God's power and explains it away as coincidence, psychology, or natural causes—anything but the "finger of God"—has made their choice. They are scattering, not gathering.

Jeremiah reveals what happens when people think they can maintain a neutral position. Israel didn't abandon God overnight; they simply stopped listening while keeping up religious appearances. They thought they were standing still, preserving their options. But God's diagnosis was clear: "They went backward, not forward." There is no "standing still" in the spiritual life. We are either moving toward God or drifting away.

**How often do we make the same mistake?** We have our Bible apps and worship playlists, our small groups and service projects, all while truth quietly vanishes from our lips. We go through the motions of faith while following "the stubbornness of our evil hearts." We mistake religious activity for actually being with God.

**The connection between these passages is profound: refusing to recognize God's power and refusing to listen to His voice are two sides of the same coin.** Both stem from hearts that have become hard and from wills that resist change. Both place us firmly on the wrong side of the line Jesus has drawn.

When we witness answered prayers and transformed lives but rationalize them away, we aren't being intellectually honest—we are choosing against God. When we hear His Word calling us to forgive, surrender, give, or trust, but file it away as an "interesting spiritual concept" rather than obeying, we aren't being thoughtful—we are scattering.

The question isn't whether we will take a position; we already have, whether we realize it or not. The real question is: **Which side are we on?**

**Are we with Jesus or against Him?  
Are we gathering or scattering?  
Are we listening, or have we turned away?**

Today demands an answer. Not tomorrow. Not when it's more convenient. Today. Because the Kingdom of God is advancing right now, and we are either advancing with it or standing in its way.

**Readings:** Jeremiah 7:23-28 | Psalm 95:6-11 | Luke 11:14-23

## Kindness: The Real Flex

**I have a lot of commitments, and I bet you do too.** Between scouts, church, school (so much work!), piano, swim, and friends and family, I feel like I'm always running from one thing to the next. Part of me likes that because it means I'm never bored and always having fun. At least, that's what I thought. But as middle school went on, I started feeling more stressed and burnt out. Even though all these things were good, it was easy to lose sight of God in the middle of it all.

**After my Soul in the City volunteer week, I decided to start praying every night, and I noticed that my life improved.** Still, I found myself drifting away from God during my busy days. In Mark 12:28-34, it says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

**It sounds simple: follow God always, and don't worship idols. But most of the time when we lose sight of God, it's not on purpose, we just get distracted and let other things take over.** Sometimes we even spend more time hating than loving, without even realizing it. It's easy to want revenge on people who have hurt us. But if you're holding on to hate, you're definitely not loving yourself. And maybe that's one of the hardest parts of being Christian: forgiving people even when they don't deserve it. Sometimes you have to choose to be the bigger person. When you start to love those who have wronged you, you can finally love yourself. Loving your enemies is difficult, but with God's help, it's possible.

And to stay close to God, you don't have to go around preaching to everyone or telling your friends how great God is.

**Just be kind. That's it.**

People will notice—even if they never say anything—that you're someone who treats others well. It's not about being popular or turning in every assignment perfectly. It's about kindness. And if you can do that, you are already devoting yourself to God.



**Readings:** Hosea 14:1-9 | Mark 12:28-34 | Psalm 81:8-14



## Bringing My Broken Heart To God

*Have you ever had one of those moments where you stop trying so hard to do the right thing, and finally just be with God? That is where these scriptures take me.*

In Hosea, God isn't looking for us to jump through hoops or put on a show of piety. He's asking for a real relationship—"steadfast love, not sacrifice." It reminds me that God isn't impressed by my busy spiritual resume; He just wants my heart.

And oh, the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke! It feels so raw, doesn't it? The Pharisee is talking to himself, impressed by how good he is. But the tax collector? He hits rock bottom and just says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." In that moment of total honesty, he finds Jesus. That is the invitation of Lent: to stop pretending we have it all together and to find freedom in our own weakness.

*It brings me right to the words of Psalm 51. When I feel overwhelmed by my mistakes or am just plain tired, I hold onto this truth:*

***"The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart,  
O God, you will not despise."***

This Lent, I'm not focusing on giving up coffee or doing more good works. **I'm focusing on letting my heart be broken open by God's love.** It is only when I bring my brokenness to Him that I feel truly healed. **It is not about head knowledge; it is about heart connection.**

## In The Light

Samuel and the blind men both trusted in the Lord. Reading the story of Samuel, is easy to see that Samuel had a direct line and clear connection to God. When God told him to face his fear of Saul and seek the next king born of Jesse, he listened. He filled his lamp and set forth. The blind man - born into a world that condemned him and his family as sinners - listened to Jesus. He went to the pool to wash his eyes with faith that he would see again.

In reality, their world was chaotic and noisy, just like ours. There was no parting cloud, and there was no booming voice from God commanding Samuel to fill his lamp or the blind man to wash his eyes. Rather, their ears and their eyes were turned to God, and they were awaiting His commands that they may act in His will.

**In a busy world, am I listening for God's commands?  
Am I waiting for God's will?**

This soothing and familiar Psalm reminds us that ours is a generous God. It gives us confidence in our Lord that He cares for us with mercy and tender compassion.

The Epistle urges us to go further - beyond listening and waiting on God's will to be revealed - to living it day in and day out. As children of God, Paul is encouraging us to turn away from darkness and live according to what is "good and right and true". We are reminded in the Old Testament passage that our compassionate and mighty God sees our "heart", and not the "outward appearance" as does humanity.

***In a world that values outward more than inward,  
am I striving each day to be more in the Light?  
To reflect what is "Good and right and true"?***

**Readings:** 1 Samuel 16:1-13 | Ephesians 5:8-14 | John 9:1-41 | Psalm 23



## Testimonial

*When I reflect on my life, I see a journey marked by deep loss, enduring love, hard lessons, and a God who has never let go of me—even when I struggled to trust Him.*

Early in my marriage, my wife and I lost a child at just two and a half months old. There are no words for that kind of pain. It changed me forever. At the time, I did not understand how grief could coexist with faith.

Psalm 30 later gave language to my experience:

**“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”  
I learned that faith does not remove sorrow—but it gives us a place  
to take it.**

For 40 years, I loved my wife through the storms of bipolar disorder. She endured five severe manic episodes, and together we lived with uncertainty, exhaustion, and constant prayer. Then, at age 59, she was diagnosed with lung cancer. For six long years, we endured surgeries, setbacks, and hope that rose and fell, again and again. When she finally succumbed to the disease, my heart was shattered. I cried out to God, often without words. Psalm 30 became my lifeline: “O Lord my God, I cried to You for help.” God did not spare me the loss, but He sustained me through it.

Grief clouded my judgment, and in my brokenness, I entered into a marriage that was completely wrong. It lasted only 18 months. That failure humbled me deeply and forced me to confront my own need for God’s wisdom and mercy. Yet even in that season, Isaiah 65 began to speak hope into my life: **“I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.”** I learned that God is not finished with us because of our mistakes. He is a God of new beginnings.

Over the past few years, God has gently shifted my focus to gratitude. I have come to deeply appreciate my son—a loyal, faithful man—and the gift of my three beautiful granddaughters. They bring joy, laughter, and meaning into my life. In them, I see glimpses of Isaiah’s promise of joy restored, of life not defined by past pain but by God’s ongoing goodness.

In the last two years, God has also brought into my life a beautiful, godly woman who truly loves me. Our bond has grown slowly and thoughtfully, grounded in faith and mutual care. Like the royal official in John 4, I am learning to trust Jesus not just for immediate solutions, but for life itself. The official believed Jesus’ word before he saw the healing—and that kind of faith continues to challenge me.

**I want to be honest: my faith is still being tested today.** I am currently trying to sell my house in a very challenging market, and I struggle daily to trust God with the outcome. I want answers and certainty, but God continues to ask me for trust—trust in His timing, His provision, and His way. This season reminds me that faith is not something we graduate from; **it is something we live into, again and again.**

Psalm 30 ends with praise: **“You have turned my mourning into dancing.”** My life is not free from difficulty, but it is filled with evidence of God’s faithfulness. I am still learning, still trusting, still surrendering. I stand as a testimony, not of a perfect faith, but of a faithful God—one who walks with us through loss, restores what is broken, and invites us to trust Him even when the future is uncertain.

**Readings:** Isaiah 65:17-25 | John 4:43-54 | Psalm 30:1-6,11-13

## Living Waters

What a gift my Lenten journey was in 2025! Lent is 40 days long and a season during our church calendar that most Christians, including me, don't jump into with wholehearted enthusiasm. Having grown up in a Protestant household, the season of Lent was "something our Catholic neighbors did." It requires fasting, self-examination, and restraint. However, when I can show more patience and reflection, particularly on the daily readings, I have found tremendous faith and understanding. Last year, I came away with one word that was helpful in all aspects of my life...

**Humility.**

**We are never alone.**

Our Lord and Savior leads us and loves us every day.

*Today's Lessons are filled with Holy Leadership and Grace  
using the substance, flow, and healing power of Water.*

**Ezekiel 47: 1-12**

...Whenever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these rivers reach there...because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their lives for healing.

**Psalm 46:1-8**

...through its rage and foam, and though the mountains tremble at it's tumult,  
The Lord of Hosts is with us...

**The Gospel John 5:1-18**

"Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep's Gate there is a pool..."  
Jesus notices an invalid man who has been at the pool a "long time".  
Jesus says to this man ...

"Stand up, take your mat, and walk. All at once, the man was made well and began to walk.

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This brings to mind the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Water is poured 3 times during this sacred rite in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

The healing, soothing quality that water represents is always an important source to seek for rejuvenation, calm, and Joy and is also a divine reminder of God's foundational promise to love and care for us always.

As I went down in the river to pray  
Studying about that good ol' way  
And who shall wear the starry crown?  
Good Lord show me the way

**Readings:** Ezekiel 47:1-9,12 | John 5:1-18 | Psalm 46:1-8



## Too Tired for Lent

### Receiving the Lord's Compassion When You Are Bowed Down

In Lent, we are called to a time of holy preparation. I don't know about you, but in recent years I haven't been as excited about Lent as in the past. Life happened. Suffering layered on. I built a wall around my sad heart. I became weary and crumbled. In the Psalmist's words, I became bowed down. I was too tired for Lent.

The readings, Isaiah 49:8-15, Psalm 145:8-19, and the Gospel of John 5:19-29, step into our overwhelmed lives and draw attention to the loving comfort and compassion of the Lord for all needs. There is a way out of human weariness where protective walls aren't needed to survive.

#### Psalm 145:8-9

The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness. The Lord is loving to everyone and his compassion is over all his works.

#### The Lord's compassion is threefold.

1. The Lord is so very mindful of our specific needs. He never forsakes.
2. The Lord lovingly understands the needs of humanity at large.
3. The Lord responds by heaping on kindness, favoring us with his help.

It is kind compassion, the favoring of us as humans, that brings comfort. The generous provision of the Lord keeps all. The Lord's compassion lifts up. It leads the way to salvation and even to resurrection.

We often let suffering get the best of us, distracting from seeing the Lord's loving acts. It is easy to miss the provisions of the Lord when we focus on struggles. Feeling fear, and with a hurting heart, we tumble into numbness, even forsakenness.

*The readings today bring us home to the Lord's comfort and compassion.*

**Psalm 145:19** The Lord is near to those who call upon him, to all who call upon him faithfully.

**Isaiah 49:14** Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

What a relief to shift focus from self to the Lord's provisions and belief. We don't have to become too tired or bowed down. It's possible to shape a new response to human suffering, one that receives the Lord's work, instead of being hijacked by our suffering.

We are offered powerful ways to respond through the twists and turns of life.

May I notice and be in awe at all the Lord's astonishing provisions.  
May I believe and faithfully call on the Lord because he cares for me.  
May I allow the Lord to comfort me.

This Lent, we are invited to return to the bedrock and safety of the Lord's provisions, back to the impetus for bursting into song and praise with joy. We are never forsaken, always lovingly cared for. Settling into the Lord's compassion, we prepare our hearts for exulting joy and resurrection of life.

**Readings:** Isaiah 49:8-15 | John 5:19-29 | Psalm 145:8-19

## Father's Day

*No, I did not lose my calendar. I realize that in America, we usually celebrate Father's Day on the third Sunday in June. However, today is the Feast of Saint Joseph, and our readings focus on three prominent Biblical father figures—Joseph, David, and Abraham.*

In the collect, we remember that God **“raised up Joseph to be the guardian of [His] incarnate Son,”** and we ask for God's help so that we can “imitate” Joseph's examples of “uprightness of life” and “obedience.” This prayer makes us think about how every person is a child of God and that God calls each of us to be guardians of His children.

In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, **Henri Nouwen writes about how Rembrandt's painting of the well-known parable inspired his spiritual growth.** Nouwen says that “For you who will make this spiritual journey with me, I hope and pray that you too will discover within yourselves not only the lost children of God, but also the compassionate mother and father that is God.”

### How can we step into this parental role?

Nouwen states that “If we are not only to be received by God, but also to receive as God, we must become like the heavenly Father and see the world through His eyes.”

Similarly in Amy Grant's song from 1979, she sings about the desire to have her **“Father's Eyes.”** She describes them as “eyes that find the good in things when good is not around,” “eyes that find the source of help when help just can't be found,” and “eyes full of compassion, seeing every pain, knowing what you're going through and feeling it the same.”

**This Lent, may we think about how we can become better guardians of God's children all around us.** May we look to the three father figures in today's passages and follow their examples of faithfulness. Along our spiritual journey, may we also reflect on the insights of Nouwen and the prayer of Amy Grant to find goodness in all situations, locate resources to help others in need, and receive all of God's children with compassion. When people look into our lives, may they recognize our Father's Eyes.



**Readings:** 2 Samuel 7:4,8-16 | Romans 4:13-18 | Luke 2:41-52 | Psalm 89:1-29 or 89:1-4, 26-29



## Beyond What We Think We Know

### A Lesson from Bailey

*How many of us have owned dogs?  
Maybe you have a dog right now, and maybe  
your Fido is a really smart one.*

Bailey (my Frenchie) knows 40 words that I can think of off the top of my head, plus a few phrases. But no matter how smart she is, we can't discuss the weather or mathematics with her. She is limited by the scope of her understanding as a canine. To her credit, no matter how many buzzwords she knows, she keeps trying to learn new ones.



### ***As humans, we are also limited in our focus and understanding of God.***

In John 7:25-30, Jesus is teaching at the temple during the Festival of Booths. People were amazed by what he said, and they wondered whether Jesus could truly be the Messiah. But he couldn't be the Messiah, right? The people were confused because they knew where Jesus came from, Nazareth. However, they were taught that no one would know where the Messiah comes from. Their human nature limited their comprehension. Jesus was right before their eyes, yet their focus and understanding of certain words kept them from truly seeing who Jesus was.

God has highlighted some personal words that I pay extra attention to when I hear them - **words like love, peace, grace, and mercy**. Maybe other words go over my head in favor of the buzzwords I recognize and the thought patterns I am comfortable with. I wonder if there may be more to the words I already think I know? I wonder what other message I might be missing. What else is right before my eyes that my restricted focus is prohibiting me from seeing?

Although I will always have limited comprehension, I aspire to be like Bailey. I hope to always listen to the best of my ability, continue learning, and, with God's help, increase my understanding without getting bogged down in what I already think I know.

## The God Who Sees, Judges, and Sustains

There are moments in life when we feel misunderstood, opposed, or even quietly resisted for simply trying to do what is right. Jeremiah knew this feeling. He wasn't looking for a fight - he was simply speaking God's truth - and yet a hidden plot formed against him. In his innocence, he compared himself to **"a gentle lamb led to the slaughter."** But in that fearful moment, God did something transformative: He revealed what Jeremiah could not see on his own.

When we are overwhelmed, when motives around us feel murky, when we sense resistance we can't quite name, one of the greatest comforts is knowing that God already sees. Nothing is hidden from Him - not threats, not wounds, not quiet acts of faithfulness.

**Psalm 7 carries the same confidence.** The psalmist cries out for God to rise up and act, not because he wants personal revenge, but because he knows God judges with righteousness. God doesn't just see outward actions; He searches hearts and minds. He knows the truth in ways we never fully can. And because of that, we can release our need to control outcomes. We can entrust our cause to Him.

And then we come to Jesus in John 7, standing up in a crowded feast and crying out, **"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink."** It's striking: this invitation does not come when everything around Him is peaceful. It comes amid argument, suspicion, division, and misunderstanding. Even in the midst of opposition, Jesus offers living water - the Spirit who fills, comforts and sustains us.

**Taken together, these passages remind us of a simple but powerful truth:** God sees what threatens us, God judges what confuses us, and God supplies what sustains us.

Jeremiah shows us that God is aware of our hidden burdens. The psalmist shows us that God is just in His timing and His judgement. Jesus shows us that God meets our need with His own presence.

So today, whatever weighs on your spirit - misunderstanding, anxiety, unseen pressures, relational strain - bring it to the One who invites the thirsty to come.

**He is the God who sees you.  
He is the God who defends you.  
He is the God who fills you.**

And He is enough.



**Readings:** Jeremiah 11:18-20 | John 7:37-52 | Psalm 7:6-11



## Breath in the Valley

Across these readings, God reveals Himself as the One who brings life into places that feel hopeless or sealed shut. In Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, God leads the prophet into a valley filled with everything long dead and forgotten. When God asks, **"Can these bones live?"** the honest answer seems like no. Yet God tells Ezekiel to speak His Word, and as he obeys, breath enters the bones, and life rises where death once ruled.

Paul echoes this promise in Romans 8. He reminds us that the Spirit of God doesn't merely encourage us—He dwells within us. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is actively at work in our hearts, turning fear into peace, despair into hope, and spiritual dryness into new life.



And then in John 11, we see the power of God's life-giving love on full display. Jesus arrives at Lazarus's tomb after all human hope is gone. Mary and Martha believe it is too late, yet Jesus shows that His timing is perfect and His authority greater than death itself. At His command, Lazarus steps out of the darkness and into life.

Psalm 130 adds the voice of the waiting heart. **"Out of the depths I cry to You, Lord."** This psalm gives language to the places in us that feel like deep waters, where answers are delayed and our souls feel suspended between longing and uncertainty. Yet the psalmist testifies that God's mercy is abundant, His forgiveness complete, and His redemption certain. We wait—not in despair, but in confidence that God will come.

**When these passages rest together, a clear theme rises:** God breathes life into what seems beyond repair. He meets us in valleys, tombs, deep waters, and speaks resurrection into them. His Spirit works within us even when we cannot see it.

This Lent, God may be inviting us to place our "depths" before Him—the weary places, delayed hopes, or silent prayers—and trust that He is already breathing life into them.

**Wait with hope—God is already working in life where you cannot yet see it.**

### A Prayer:

Lord, out of my depths I call to You. Breathe Your Spirit into every dry or discouraged place within me. Teach me to wait with hope and trust Your timing. Call forth life where I have accepted defeat and let Your resurrection power renew my heart. Amen.

**Readings:** Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Romans 8:6-11 | John 11:1-45 | Psalm 130

## God Loves a Comeback

The passage from Susanna reminds me of a song lyric:

**“Beauty comes to those who have been waiting for something that is bigger than themselves.”**

Every now and again, we may hear of a billionaire who has purchased a deserted island without considering what it takes to tend to the wildlife and the native plants. Soon after, everything gets chopped down, and mansions or hotels are put in their place, driving out the wildlife and bringing certain species of plant life into extinction.



**The passionate and patient heart of a devoted gardener**, who works for months on end to tend a seed into a beautiful rose, may feel a different kind of ache when someone comes along and plucks it when no one is looking, only to smell it once and let it wilt on the ground. These men who lusted for Susanna were of the truly vulgar “plucker-variety.” They felt entitled to take what was not theirs, and when they failed to succeed, they packed their egos into their igloo coolers—their icy hearts—and led one heck of a tailgate of a smear campaign, which they hoped would cost her life. It is safe to say they ate revenge for breakfast. But then, something incredible happened... as it often does in the hands of the One who knows us best...

**The plot twist!** The hot dog of hatred was ripped from their hands when God’s faithful servant, Daniel, spoke up in her defense. Like the team that hadn’t won the Super Bowl in 50 years, God threw a touchdown—the kind people speak about for years to come—bringing them back stronger than ever, much to the chagrin of the cruel rivals who were so used to winning that they forgot who is really in charge.

**Like the whisper of a desert wind that brings about heavy rains and lush, life-giving greenery, all is revealed.** Those who delight in the darkness never see it coming: the rebellion that is the truth, the way, and the life. This light burns cruel intentions to a crisp and raises the underdog into a flying phoenix. It is liquid gold to the soul and the ultimate healing balm. I am convinced that our God, our ultimate defender, loves a good comeback. (See the account of Our resurrected Christ for reference.)

**As this verse also illustrates, He literally cuts in two the plans of the wicked who have set traps for His children.** There is nothing that He cannot do to polish us off and set us on the path He has intended for us. Nothing. Because God, who created all good things, also has the final say, as He does for everything in between. Being the ultimate Artist, He wastes nothing to create the ultimate display of His love, not even the darkest parts. For even those, He can turn into golden fire to burn the way brightly for generations to come. Praise be to God.

**Readings:** Susanna 1-9, 15-29, 34-40, 41-62 | John 8:1-11 or John 8:12-20 | Psalm 23



## Looking to Christ

As the songwriter F.E. Belden penned, “Look upon Jesus, sinless is He; Father, impute His life unto me. My life of scarlet, my sin and woe, cover with His life, whiter than snow.”

**Heavenly Father**, we call on your most holy name as we face these times in history where your children stand in need of you. Our world is facing perilous times and great suffering, and we look to you as the author and finisher of our faith. As we read in Psalm 102, You look down from your holy place on high, listen to our cry, and set free those who are condemned to die so that we can declare your name and give you praise.

**Right now, the world as we know it is in dire need of your saving grace.** We see wars and natural disasters, and we are experiencing all these things, but the one thing that stands out is that we need you. No man has the ability or power to fix what is going wrong around us. We look to you, Lord, for strength and deliverance from the sickness and diseases that are spreading quickly throughout the world.

In Numbers 21:4-9, we see evidence of your goodness in providing deliverance for your children, even though it was due to our own sinfulness and disobedience. You showed mercy and provided the means of healing when we looked to You. We have a bad habit of taking on things out of our control, and you take time to remind us that you are always there, ready for us to place our cares and burdens at your feet. Lord, thank you for hearing and answering our prayers. Amen.

**One such experience comes to mind of how Christ stepped in for us and saved our mother’s life when she experienced a stroke.** Jesus allowed us to notice the signs as we immediately rushed her to the emergency room in less than an hour. The hospital staff were amazed at our quick response, which essentially saved her life, and how God allowed her to recover after just one week with minimal therapy.

**In all the chaos** surrounding us in our daily lives, and the constant upheavals that we experience, at work, school, and even in church, the one thing that we neglect to do is to **look to Christ**. We constantly try to solve issues on our own when the Lord has promised to be with us and keep us as long as we stay focused on Him. **So, let’s put that into practice and look to Christ.**

## Mary's Yes Is Our Yes

Admit it, most of us Episcopalians put away our thoughts of Mary when we carefully wrap up the figures from the family creche and put them away until next Advent. But Mary deserves closer focus during Lent because she was given an extraordinary mission from God Himself. And it was handed to her in a spectacular way. The angel Gabriel appeared to her, a peasant teenager. She must have been stunned by what she heard. As a young Jewish woman in first century Palestine, she was considered property and lacked status or power. She lived in a restrictive, male-dominated culture.

Mary was engaged to the carpenter Joseph, and, although they were legally married, their marriage had not been formalized in a customary wedding. **Yet the angel told of Mary's pregnancy with a divine child to be called Jesus.** This was unimaginable! Think of the scandal! What would people say? She and her family would be shunned. How could she ever walk the streets of her village again and feel normal? And how could she explain this to Joseph?

According to Jewish law, Joseph could divorce Mary, but that would subject her and the unborn Jesus to public humiliation, shame, and poverty. It might ruin Joseph's reputation and affect his livelihood. When Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid, she needed calm and comfort because his message was terrifying. She needed all the faith and courage she could summon to take that leap of faith and say yes. **Mary had the courage and faith to do it.** Faith in God, faith in herself and what she had been taught, in others, and in Joseph who stood by her.

**Despite fear, Mary exemplified strength and determination to face what all of us must face someday:** the prospect of pain, rejection, loneliness, and grief. Mary takes it all on. She says yes. Mary is not just the pallid figure in blue with whom we are familiar. She endured childbirth in a dirty stable. She and her newborn fled Herod into Egypt on a donkey. As a mother, she scolded Jesus as a boy for running off without telling her, and goaded Him as the Chosen into performing his first miracle at Cana before He was ready. Sadly, this godly wife, mother, and follower bore the horror of Jesus' torture and crucifixion. She stood beneath that cross. She saw. Then Mary, the desolate and bereaved, carried on her discipleship for years following His death.



**Sometimes the scariest thing we can do is to remain open when God is doing something we simply can't understand.** Mary leaves us a legacy of wisdom, faith, fortitude, and bravery. She was the channel through which our Lord Jesus was brought into the world. It is still possible for us to be a channel through which His message of love, kindness, forgiveness, and hope is brought into the world.

***Might we all remember Mary and say yes, as well.***

**Readings:** Isaiah 7:10-14 | Psalm 45 or Psalm 40:5-10 or Canticle 15 (or 3)  
Hebrews 10:4-10 | Luke 1:26-38



## An Invitation Into Experiencing Lent Through Jesus's Human Experience

*"Jesus came to show us the truest, best way to be human—not by denying His humanity but by embracing it." ~ Aundi Kolber*

**When I read John 8:51-59, one verse immediately caught my attention:** "Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." At first, these words made me panic. What does Jesus mean? I make mistakes. I'm messy—sometimes deeply messy. I'm human.

**Would I still belong to Him?**

As I sat with the passage, I found clarity. Because I trust God, my mistakes are held within His forgiveness. Physical death becomes a transition, not an ending—a doorway into God's presence. I believe God to be compassionate and understanding, aware of the ways I fall short, and yet never withholding grace. For me, **"keeping God's word"** means allowing God's word to shape me, mind, body, and spirit. This passage also describes Jesus hiding Himself because His hour had not yet come. I'm struck by how different that is from the times I hide. Jesus withdrew with purpose. We often hide because of shame, guilt, fear, or the belief that we must fix ourselves before we can be seen.

**So I ask myself:** When have I hidden from God? What drove that hiding—shame, guilt, fear, confusion, loss of control? What did I believe about myself, or about God, in those moments?

These questions invite me to lean into curiosity rather than judgment. This helps to foster the head, heart, and body connection with God. Psalm 105:4-11 speaks of Abraham being chosen by God, which makes me wonder how I am chosen. I believe God chose me before I was born—woven into His story with purpose. What is God calling me toward as He journeys with me?

I invite those reflecting to imagine this journey with God. Picture it in your mind or draw it on paper. Notice where you are on the path right now. What does the landscape of your spiritual life look like? And where do you long to go next with God?

To deepen this awareness, I turn to a practice from **The Courage to Feel by Andrew Seubert.** modified

### Begin simply:

**Notice** your breathing.

**Shift awareness** to your body—any heaviness, tension, warmth, joy?

**Notice your thoughts:** Reflect upon when you have hidden from God? What drove you to hide? What do you believe about yourself and God in these moments?

**Pay attention** to the emotions that come up as you are reading through today's reflection. Then become still. Invite God into that stillness.

**Ask:** What might God be inviting me to today as a response to the reflection?  
What stirs in my innermost being?

**I'd like to close with Aundi Kolber's gentle reminder:** "God, give me eyes to see the ways You're already here. God, You're with me. You're with us." May your curiosity about how you are woven into God's story guide you as you close your Lenten booklet for the day.

**Readings:** Genesis 17:1-8 | Psalm 105:4-11 | John 8:51-59

## Living In A Way That Points To God

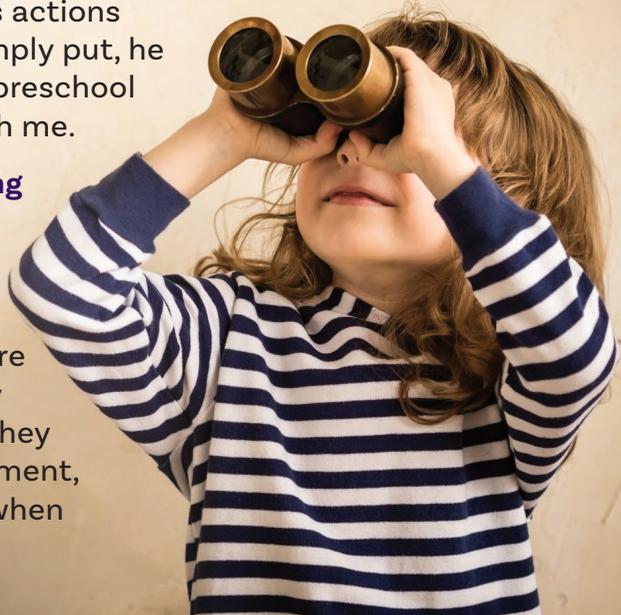
This passage from John's Gospel captures the tension we often feel during Lent. Jesus has been teaching and healing, showing people what God's love looks like, yet instead of gratitude, he is met with anger and rejection. Stones are raised, and he is accused of blasphemy, not because he has done wrong, but because the truth he speaks is unsettling. His deep connection to God challenges those who want their faith to feel safe, familiar, and clearly defined.

### What most stands out to me is how Jesus responds.

He does not argue loudly or try to force belief. Instead, he points to his works. If his words are difficult to accept, he invites people to pay attention to what he has done. His actions reveal healing, mercy, and love. Simply put, he says, "Look at what you see." As a preschool director, this resonates deeply with me.

### Anyone who has worked with young children knows that words only go so far.

You can talk about kindness all day long, but children learn far more from what they see modeled. They notice who comforts them when they are upset, who helps without judgment, and who responds with patience when things fall apart. **Actions matter.**



**Lent invites us to consider where we might be missing God at work because we are too focused on our expectations.** In the preschool, I am reminded daily that growth is often slow, messy, and rarely linear. A child who struggled yesterday may suddenly surprise you today. Faith can be like that, too. We may want dramatic signs or clear answers, but God often works quietly, through consistency, presence, and love lived out in ordinary moments.

When Jesus withdraws across the Jordan, many come to believe, not because of miracles, but because his life aligns with the truth spoken about him. There is something deeply Lenten in that simplicity. Belief grows when words and actions match. As we move through this season, we are invited to trust God's word even when it challenges us, and to let our own lives bear witness in small, faithful ways.

**Perhaps Lent is not about having all the right words, but about living in a way that points others to God.** Like Jesus, and like the children who watch us so closely, may our actions speak loudly of love, patience, and grace.

**Readings:** Jeremiah 20:7-13 | John 10:31-42 | Psalm 18:1-7



## A Sanctuary Forever God's Dwelling Place Among Us

In our Old Testament reading for today, according to Ezekiel 37:21-28, God said he would bring all the Israelites back to their homeland and...

***“then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall have one shepherd .... I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”***

**I believe the Prophet Ezekiel is sharing God's plan to unify his people and restore Israel to one nation, with David as king and with one shepherd, a prophecy of the coming Messiah, Jesus.**

This passage also alludes to God's love for his people in his promise to be with them and be their sanctuary, their refuge, forever.

In the Gospel according to John 11:25-53, Jesus told Martha that her brother Lazarus would rise from the dead because He said **“I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believes in me, though he be dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”** Martha, Mary, and others witnessed Jesus perform the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus and believed in Jesus and what he said. Many other witnesses told the Pharisees of the miracles Jesus had performed and of his increasing influence and increasing number of followers.

The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat and feared the Romans would destroy their nation because of him. The high priest, Caiaphas, “prophesied” that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. John's passage leads us up to the events of Holy Week.

**God's love is reflected in both scripture lessons today.** I believe Ezekiel's prophecy came true as God gathered his people out of love for them and established a nation into which he brought his son Jesus. Jesus was revered, and many became believers in him and his teachings. In John's passage, he prophesies that evil intentions are used for good because God so loved his people, he made the decision that Jesus, his son, would die for all the sins of humankind so that we may have eternal life with God.

## I Will Be There. I Will Be With You.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, after the land had been dark for three long hours, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

**These words echo through every generation.** I have heard them—spoken aloud or whispered in the heart—by people who have known deep suffering. Why has God forsaken me? It is the great human question. And there is something profoundly comforting in knowing that even Jesus gives voice to it. Even the Son of God knows what it is to feel abandoned, to stand in the darkness and cry out why.

Paul writes in Philippians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not cling to equality with God. Instead, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and fully entering human life. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross". This is not a distant God, but one who goes all the way down with us.

**In the garden, we see that humility lived out.** Three times Jesus prays, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want." **Herein lies the heart of faith.** As long as we cling to our own understanding—our will, our plans, our desired outcomes—we risk disappointment and anger. But surrendering to the will of the Lord is not defeat. It is freedom—the release from needing to control what we cannot.

I know this truth not only as a matter of faith, but as lived experience. When I was thirty years old, I prayed with everything in me for my young husband not to die. I have never prayed so fervently. And when my prayer was not answered in the way I longed for, I did not turn away from God in anger. I did not walk away—because, like Jesus, my prayer was held within a deeper trust: **not my will, but thy will be done.** Of course, I wanted my prayer answered. With all my heart and soul, I wanted that. But trusting God means surrendering to the unknown. That is why it is called faith. As I sit with this Gospel, I notice how often the number three weaves its way through the Passion story.

### Jesus prays three times.

He proclaims that the temple—his body—will be destroyed and raised in **three days**. He is denied **three times** by Peter. He is betrayed for **thirty pieces of silver**. He suffers on one of **three crosses**. His world is covered in Darkness which covers the land for **three hours**. He suffers death. **At three o'clock**, he releases his spirit.

Research reveals the number 3 symbolizes divine perfection, completeness, and fulfillment, often representing the Trinity.

**Each moment echoes the same truth:** God is present in every step, even when the way forward feels like loss. Even as we walk through sorrow, we are invited to hold the whole story. "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." God chooses not as the world chooses. God builds not on power, but on humility and grace.

### God is Three in One—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And I wonder if, throughout this Gospel, God is quietly repeating a promise meant for us all:

When you pray, I will be there. I will be with you.

When you are denied or abandoned, I will be there. I will be with you.

When you are betrayed by the people or promises of this world, I will be there. I will be with you.

When you suffer and walk through the dark night of the soul, dawn will come—and I will shed my light upon you. I will be there. I will be with you.

When you die to yourself, when you pick up your cross and follow me, I will be there, I will be with you.

God has redeemed my life in more ways than I can count. And I hold fast to the hope that my beloved, who has passed on, is now making music with the angels—resting, rejoicing, and floating in the glow of God's love.

**Readings:** Matthew 21:1-11 | Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 | Isaiah 50:4-9a | Philippians 2:5-11  
Matthew 26:14 - 27:66 or Matthew 27:11-54 | Psalm 31:9-16



## The Gentle Power of Justice

On this Holy Monday, Isaiah's portrait of God's chosen servant reveals a central truth: divine power works not through force, but through persistent, gentle faithfulness. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. Instead, he faithfully brings forth justice with tenderness toward all that is vulnerable and damaged.

**I have come to know this truth through water.** Standing at the edge of the Atlantic at New Smyrna Beach or paddling through crystal-clear, quiet morning waters on Juniper Springs, I find myself centered and stabilized in ways that nothing else quite achieves. The coastline reminds me of my proper place in the world. My anxieties and problems, which loom so large in the small space of my mind, mean very little to the vast life force and majesty of the ocean. The tides turn without consulting me. Pelicans glide low over the waves, intent on their own purpose. The rhythm continues, indifferent to my worries, and somehow this is deeply comforting.

God's love reaches to the heavens, his faithfulness to the clouds. His love runs deep like the ocean itself, fathomless. These are not comforting abstractions but lived realities here in Florida, where water and sky meet in endless conversation, where afternoon storms roll in with such regularity they become liturgy, where the natural world persists in its ancient patterns regardless of human turmoil.

*When I am on the water or walking the shoreline, I feel the sheltering arms of God's love. The God who saves me is greater than my fretting, my planning, my anxieties. There is freedom in recognizing my smallness against such vastness and such majesty.*



**This is the Christ who walks through Holy Monday with patient purpose.** He moves toward Friday's sacrifice with the steady faithfulness of sunrise over the water and tides that will not be hurried..

On this Holy Monday, the coastline teaches me to release my grip. To remember that the God who stretched out the heavens and spread forth the earth carries every bruised and flickering life with the same faithful attention he gives to the turning of tides. My worries may feel overwhelming, but they are held within something infinitely larger and more sure. The sun will rise tomorrow over the water. The waves will continue their ancient work. And God's gentle, persistent power never fails.

**Readings:** Isaiah 42:1-9 | Hebrews 9:11-15 | John 12:1-11 | Psalm 36:5-11

## Light in the Darkness

*“What did you do this weekend?” is a simple enough question, but often I struggle to answer.*

**At times, there is so much going on that life becomes a blur and time seems to slip away.** Life can get overwhelming with a constantly looming to-do list and a growing collection of things we have failed to do. It is easy to get swept along by the events of the day or run from one urgent demand to the next without being thoughtful as to what we are doing, why we are doing it, and who is being impacted.

Reading Isaiah 49 provided a jolt of clarity. In verse 6, the prophet writes that it is **“too light a thing”** for the tribes of Jacob and Israel to be saved alone. Salvation must go to the **“ends of the earth.”** It is a statement about purpose and perspective that resonated with me because the busyness and routine of life can cause me to lose sight of my purpose as a follower of Jesus. The passage reminded me that I am part of a larger plan and my actions can have more impact than I think.

**Small actions can have big impacts because we participate in the redeeming work of the Lord.** As we pour the love of God into our children, teaching them to pray and sing songs of worship, resolve conflict, and consider the needs of others, we empower them with a strong foundation of faith, equip them with tools for strength in times of trial, and indirectly touch the lives of people they interact with as they go about their day. As we engage with our neighbors: lending a helping hand, patronizing their businesses, being hospitable and breaking bread together, we strengthen their connection to community, can lighten some unseen burden, reassure them they are cared for and appreciated, present an example of love and grace that they can look to in a time of need, and indirectly touch the lives of people they interact with as they go about their day.

**We can change our perspective to see the grand purpose in the everyday things we do.** There is value even in the small actions. There is divine power in our actions because we are ambassadors for Christ in this world, representing the love of God to our children, families, friends, church, and broader community. As you go about your day, reflect on how your efforts, even in the routine of life, are building blocks of value contributing to the larger purpose. Seeing God in our everyday interactions allows us to feel His presence and realize He is with us in the big and the small aspects of our lives.



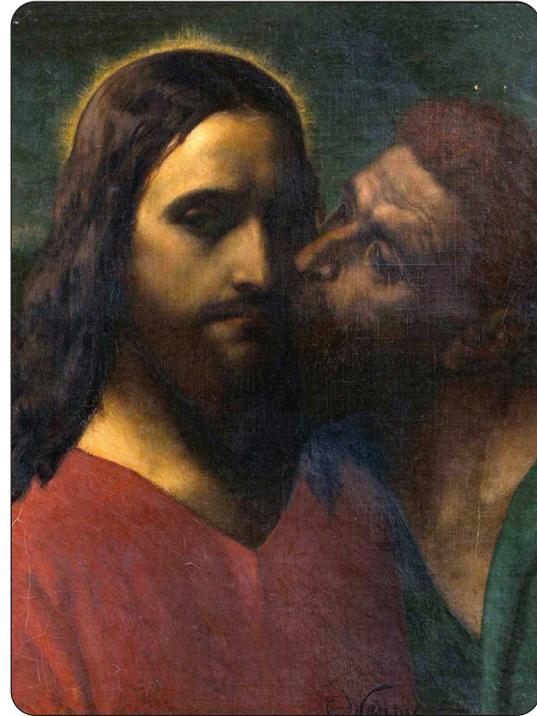
**Readings:** Isaiah 49:1-7 | 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 | John 12:20-36 | Psalm 71:1-14



## The Betrayal

Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, **“Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me”** (John 13:21). Jesus told the disciples that he would reveal the betrayer by serving him dipped bread. As Judas took the bread, **“Satan entered him.”** Jesus discerned this and told Judas to do what he must. Judas left, but his fellow apostles—unable to see him as a traitor—assumed he was simply leaving on an errand. Judas had deceived his brothers, and he would soon betray the Son of God with a kiss.

**How could this have happened?** Judas was one of the chosen. For three years, he walked with Jesus, shared His food, and lived alongside Him. He witnessed healings, the casting out of demons, and Jesus walking on water. He likely saw Lazarus raised from the dead. Jesus taught Judas about God’s love and His plan to redeem mankind. He was his teacher, his leader, and his friend. Jesus loved him. Yet, Judas committed the most universally reviled and shameful act in history.



**Why?** Was it the thirty pieces of silver (roughly \$500 today)? Was he disgusted that Jesus was not leading a physical rebellion? Was he jealous of the love Jesus showed to the other apostles? We will never know for sure, but it remains a colossal tragedy. Too late, he suffered bitter remorse. Too late, he went to the high priest to take it back. Filled with guilt and despair, Judas hanged himself, having never reconciled with God. His story is a powerful message to all who follow Jesus.

**Betrayal takes many forms.** In Hebrews 6:6, Paul wrote of certain converts who had fallen away from the faith: “...they are crucifying the Son of God all over again.” They had once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, and tasted the goodness of the Word of God—yet they turned away. Paul minced no words, stating that the actions of these fallen followers were a betrayal of Jesus.

If Judas and those early converts could fall away, what about us? Fortunately, we can guard against such a fate. The Bible offers a clear message on how to stay the course: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8).

We draw near when our priorities testify to our love for God, His Word, and our neighbors. We draw near when our actions outside the church walls are guided by our faith—when we show compassion for the needy, the rejected, and those different from ourselves, and when we dedicate time to study and prayer.

### Remember, Jesus loves us.

He loved us enough to come to earth, to be one of us, and to die a horrific death to bring eternal salvation to every person. If we waver, He will welcome us back with open arms—if we but ask Him.

**Readings:** Isaiah 50:4-9a | Hebrews 12:1-3 | John 13:21-32 | Psalm 70

## Two Sonnets

**This is the Night!** So much is happening the disciples might think that they are a ping pong ball being batted about. Jesus is fully aware of the immensity of the hour. Following the Passover meal, the washing of the feet by Jesus, Judas' betrayal and the gift (institution) of the Eucharist, Jesus begins a Final Discourse which is like a love letter to comfort His disciples (John chapters 14-17) ending with the High Priestly Prayer of John 17: 1-26, I pray you might be able to read these chapters today or listen to them on a phone app. You, too, will be comforted by His love and care for His own. This includes us! This includes Jesus's command (maundy) for us to love one another. Next they go to Gethsemane to watch while Jesus prays. **This is the Night!**

It seems as though Jesus is saying,

**“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.**

*I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.”*

Yet those words were written years later by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Throughout these four chapters, Jesus is saying:

**I love you with the love of the Lord,**

*I love you enough to die for you and to prepare a place for you  
So that you can be with Me for all eternity.*

**I love you enough to go away**

*In order that the Advocate might come, the giver of peace.*

**I will abide with you if you will abide in Me**

*For with Me you can bear fruit and experience joy  
Without Me, you can produce nothing.*

**Ask anything in My name, anything according to My will.**

*Whatever you ask in this way, I will do.*

**I want you to know that I have chosen you**

*That you are no longer servants but My friends.*

**The world may hate you; remember, it hated Me**

*But fear not, I am praying for your protection  
And that you may be of one heart and one mind.*

*“I've loved you the way My Father has loved Me.*

*Make yourselves at home in My love.*

*If you keep My commands,*

***You'll remain intimately at home in My love.”***

Quote from *The Message*

**Readings:** Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14 | 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 | John 13:1-17, 31b-35 | Psalm 116:1, 10-17

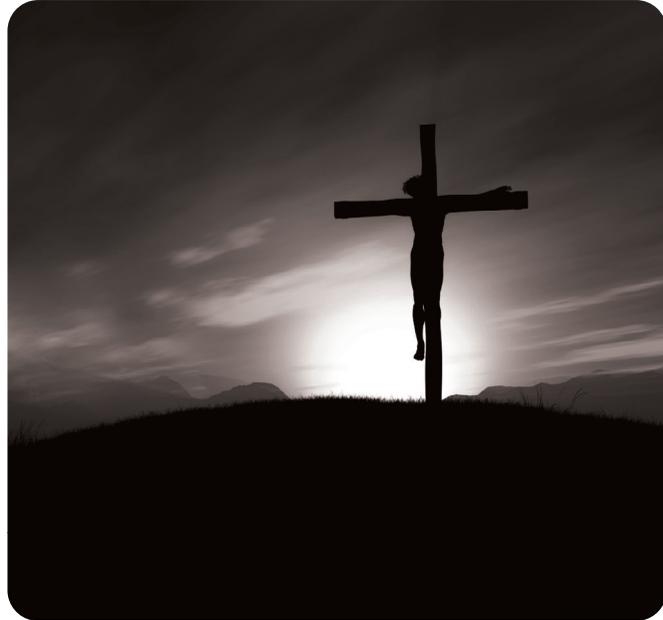


## Grace To Help In Time Of Need

Weekly, I meet with a group of contemplative women who practice the Examen Prayer as taught by St. Ignatius. We close each of our individual reflections with the question: **“What Grace might you need?”** Attuning to this authentic ask, we frequently find days and/or weeks later that the particular grace we named has arrived in our life, or the grace of a spiritual shift within ourselves has occurred, which helps us navigate the scenarios where we have needs.

Similar to the Examen Prayer, throughout Lent we are invited to contemplate what our lives and souls ultimately need in order to fully embrace Good Friday, whilst we simultaneously know the Good News of Easter comes soon. We also reflect on the many needs Christ faced as he gave his all for our redemption and freedom.

**In Christ’s humanity**, he agonizingly needed help as he faced the angry crowds and horror of the cross and crucifixion. Several people bravely stepped forward and helped Him in His time of need. From one who helped carry the cross, to others who prayerfully stayed through his final breath, and finally via the benevolence of Joseph of Arimathea, providing a safe tomb for Jesus, we see grace powerfully present to Christ on Good Friday.



**A number of times in my journey, I, too, have known great need and longed for relief or support.** To my amazement, the Holy has met me through the care and presence of others. Sometimes I see needs being met with grace in the moment itself. Other times, it takes hindsight to see the hand of God more clearly. Regardless, as time passes, time teaches me, and affirms that Jesus, the strength of my heart, carries me forward, offering mercy forever and is there for me in my time of need. Hebrews 4:16 is undoubtedly true: **“Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”**

**What is it within the mystery of our Good Friday faith that brings forth this phenomenal grace of help?** The answer lies within Hebrews 4, where we are reminded that our high priest, Jesus, sympathizes with us. We are invited to trust in that great love, stay faithful, and obey as we walk in the way of The Way.

In our humanity, we so often cry **“why?”** just as the Psalmist did in Psalm 22, saying **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**—which Jesus also cried from the cross. Despite any angst we hold, we are still beloved, and Providence shows up through friends, strangers, acquaintances, and angels.

Above all, the grace response we need is for eternal assurance, and thanks be to God, we receive that through the outpouring of Christ’s offering on Good Friday: grace to help in time of need... grace to assure us we are citizens of Heaven.

**Readings:** Isaiah 52:13-53:12 | Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 | John 18:1-19:42 | Psalm 22

## The Holy Silence: Waiting In The Dark

Jesus was dead. His body lay in the tomb. On this day, His disciples are waiting with little hope, hidden in despair in the upper room. Even the Gospels make no mention of any activity. Only silence follows Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

### **It is this silence and the pause that give ground to our lamenting.**

Theologian and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, in her reflection "Learning to Wait in the Dark," says: "That is what Holy Saturday has taught me about being Christian. Between the great dramas of life, there is almost always a time of empty waiting—with nothing to do and no church service to help—a time when it is necessary to come up with your own words and see how they sound with no other sounds to cover them up. If you are willing to rest in this Sabbath, where you cannot see your hand in front of your face and none of your self-protective labors can do you one bit of good, then you may come as close to the Christ as you will ever get—there in that quiet cave where you wait to see how the Maker of All Life will choose to come to you in the dark."

Today's lesson in Lamentations 3:19-24 brings hope into the silence: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him." Knowing Jesus prayed the Psalms, the hope of Psalm 139 says, "If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. Even darkness is not dark to you." Jesus descended to the dead and filled that darkness with light.

### **How do we live out God's mercies, sharing the silence of lament in our own lives?**

By offering our presence and light, we transcend our earthly life and focus heavenward. Our Epistle lesson, 1 Peter 4:8, instructs us: "**Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins, so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.**"

**Today, spend an hour feeling the reality of death before hope returns.** Resist fretting, anger, or fear by praying today's Psalm 31:15-16: "**My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me. Make your face to shine upon your servant, and in your loving-kindness save me.**" Praying this, we dare to hope, to work for peace and justice.

Hard redemptive work in the face of the world's injustice can follow Jesus past Good Friday, into Holy Saturday, and toward the hope of Easter Sunday.

***The end is not  
death and despair,  
because the tomb  
is empty.***

**Readings:** Job 14:1-14 or Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24 | 1 Peter 4:1-8  
Matthew 27:57-66 or John 19:38-42 | Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

## But It's 2026, Not 33 AD...

**Luke 24, vs.5:** (Arriving at the empty tomb and seeing the two angels) The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.

**From Matthew 28:** Suddenly, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

**From John 20:** Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

**From one of the Easter Collects:** ".....Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection..."

### On this Easter Day, 2026:

In the presence of things you cannot explain, **are you TERRIFIED?** ... this man died horribly - **how is he now living?** ...I might see Angels. ...this is just too much to believe! .... **But what if it IS all true?**

Are you so overwhelmed today that you **bow down and worship?** ...Jesus, God...

Will you go home and tell your family, **"I HAVE SEEN THE LORD!"**

Is there **JOY, pure JOY in your heart?**

How, how on earth can we possibly capture in 2026 the experience of the disciples and closest friends of Jesus who **SAW** and **HEARD** him, **ATE** and **TALKED** with him, **TOUCHED** him - **AFTER** he was killed, and rose again. So many tragedies in 2026, the media flock to them - ask any: **"... how do you feel about this?"** But for those disciples and friends in AD33, oh that we could go back with cameras and microphones - record their responses, because it **WAS** an earth-shattering, life-changing, "blowing their minds" event that was **FELT** - deeply, shockingly, reality-altering, powerful, and visceral. Utterly changed their lives.

Oh, that we could, like Thomas, put our hands in his side, touch, be touched, and talk with Jesus. But as Jesus said to Thomas: **"...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

In Mendelssohn's Oratorio "Elijah", Jeremiah 29:13 is paraphrased: **"If with all your heart ye truly seek me, ye shall ever surely find me."** By our own grit, determination, and doing the "right" religious discipline, we cannot conjure up God. HE will reveal himself to US.

**This is The Way:** seeking God, Jesus, with the Holy Spirit "guiding you into all truth" (John 16:13), the gates of your heart, mind, spirit flung wide open - prepared for anything, 24/7/365:

**OPEN your eyes** that you may see HIM

**OPEN your ears** that you may hear HIM

**OPEN your mouth** that you may speak HIS words

**OPEN your hands** that you may touch, heal, comfort

**OPEN your mind** that you may know HIM

**OPEN your heart** that Jesus may take up residence there, guide you, your life, your love

Then, you may FEEL, you will KNOW, that you HAVE BEEN/ARE in the presence of God, felt JOY often overwhelming, that bowing down and worshiping is the only response, and you can say:

**"I HAVE SEEN THE LORD! ALLELUIA! HE IS RISEN!"**

**Readings:** Romans 6:3-11 | Matthew 28:1-10 | Psalm 114 | Acts 10:34-43 or Jeremiah 31:1-6  
Colossians 3:1-4 or Acts 10:34-43 | John 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10 | Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24  
Isaiah 25:6-9 | 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8 | Luke 24:13-49 | Psalm 11



Our heartfelt thanks and deep gratitude to the wonderful contributors of the

# 2026 Lenten Guide and Reflections

**Althea and Shelley Dawkins**, sisters in bond and Christ. Educators and singing ministers for Christ.

**Andrew Walker** was born in a farmhouse in 1955; the first sound he heard was a cow “lowing” ever since. When asked, “How do you do all that music stuff?” - he replied, “I have absolutely no idea.”

**Arielle Bokkean**: is a retired mountain woman living in WNC with my husband and my French Bulldog. One has a driver’s license, and one wishes she had one. :-)

**Ashley Bedell** is a practicing empty nester, missing her boys, but finding therapy one step at a time around College Park.

**Ashley Bennett** is married to Parks, who is the proud mom of Maisie and David. She currently serves on the Vestry, enjoys traveling, learning to play mahjong, and trying (with limited success) to be on time for her family’s many activities.

**Becca Entinger** – a coffee-loving teacher and kids pastor who survives on naps, Netflix, and good food. I share my home (and most of my couch space) with my three dogs, three cats, and a wonderful husband, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

**Becky Dreisbach** is a cradle Episcopalian - and a lifelong member at St. Michael’s. St. Michael’s is home for my heart- so many memories with my extended family. And it will be my final resting place. Hopefully not any time soon.

**Beth Knight**, spiritual director and pastoral counselor, serves ecumenically in Central Florida and online. She cherishes being a nana to three grandchildren, is an avid non-fiction reader, and loves Coldstone Ice-cream.

**Betsy Culpepper** is a 35 -year member of St. Michael’s and the Community Engagement Director at Grace Medical Home. A lifelong Floridian, she enjoys home life with her three furry supervisors: Summer, Lenzie, and Polkadot.

**Bryan Hardy**, an educator and aspiring Jack of All Trades, enjoys his time with his family and friends. Bryan feels close to God through music, nature, and creative outlets.

**Charlie and Roberta Lang** enjoy the colors of nature they have observed in their travels: flowers, rocks, rainbows, and the efforts of amazingly talented people over thousands of years.

**Chas and Kim Bailes** delight in their relationship with their grandchildren (especially Coco and JB) and love celebrating life with the generations of their family.

**Christian Leger** is an attorney here in Orlando. He attends St. Michael’s with his wife, Kirsten, and two sons, Ford and Foster.

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**Darvin Boothe** is a husband, a father, a grandfather, a Florida native, and a retired high school principal. He and Chris have worshiped at St. Michael’s for 4 years, and he facilitates the Adult Faith Formation class on Sunday mornings. They are thankful to be part of the St. Michael’s family.

**Elaine Morgan** attends the 9 AM Gospel service, and I’m a beach-n-sun girl, always in search of a good wood-fired pizza.

**Eleanor Ackermann** was born and raised in Austin, Texas. She didn’t quite believe the stories about cowboys and oil wells until she went to school in West Texas and saw them come to life.



**Frank Leogrande** is a retired Real Estate Appraiser. He has been blessed with 3 beautiful granddaughters, ages 8 through 13. The last 2 years have been spent with Julie Topping, the love of his life. He credits God for leading him to Julie and for Julie leading him to St. Michael's, a church he now calls home.

**The Rev. Greg Favazza:** God's kid, husband, father, priest, former DJ, and video game enthusiast.

**The Rev. Happy Gafford** met her husband, George, at a bridge table. She says she was no match in cards, but in the game of love and marriage, she truly scored.

**Heather Niemas** is journeying toward becoming a spiritual director and facilitates Holding Hope. A mother to Lucas (18) and Cole (15) and a former teacher, she finds life-giving joy in creativity and writing. She holds a deep belief that being human is messy and tender, and that kindness is essential on her journey

**Jack Berry** has gone from a child obeying his parents to a grandfather obeying his grandchildren. C'est la vie.

**Jackson Chrisman** is an 8th grader, Star Scout, musician, and self-proclaimed nerd. He loves God, his family and friends, his dog, video games, pizza, and hexagons (in no particular order).

**Joan Myers** is a native of the island of Jamaica, the sixth of nine children. She currently serves as the Financial Controller for St. Michael's Episcopal Church, leads worship at the 9 am Gospel family service, and believes that God has not called her to a "hall of fame", but as a strong woman, to make Him famous amongst the feeble."

**Jovaun and Mahalia Boyd**, the loving parents of Amara and Caleb Boyd, spend their days thwarting chaos wrought by their children. In their spare time, they work, travel, and have family dance parties in the living room and sing-alongs in the car.

**Kathy Berlinsky** loves Jesus, her family and friends, music, books, and spreadsheets.

**Kathy Cox** is a longtime member of St. Michael's Church. She is in love with her Maine Coon cats and all things Italian.

**Kathy Shearer** found her home at St. Michael's Episcopal Church twenty-six years ago...that was after being baptized in a Lutheran Church, confirmed in an Evangelical and Reformed Church, and married in a Presbyterian Church.

**Katie Singhofen**, God's daughter, married to my best friend, co-gardener, pal to stray pets, corny-puns appreciator, published author-illustrator.

**Katrena Luoni** is a committed Duolingo Italian lesson aficionado. She enjoys cooking with love and always looks forward to her and Rick's Sunday night tradition of cards and pizza.

**Kris Robinson** is a nerd and not shy about it. While known to sit on the sidelines during parties, she does like engaging in spirited conversations about the Bible, books, and cats.

**LeighAnn Blackmore** is a loyal Gator and cradle Episcopalian who finds God's presence through worship, music, and quiet reflection.

**Marion Arnheim** celebrates 30 years at St. Michael's and 45 years married to Toby this year. She looks forward to celebrating with her children, grandchildren, and friends.

**Mark Cole** is the ultimate professional starving artist, the reigning king of chaos at St. Michael's! His antics are the stuff of legends, keeping the youth thoroughly entertained while they soak up the good word about Jesus. And when he's not busy being a lovable goofball, you can find him whipping up culinary masterpieces in the kitchen! Love that Gumbo y'all.

**Mary Helen O'Connor** finds God's glory and wonder in seashells, dogs and donkeys, the Florida springs, beaches, and books.

**Mary Ruth Houston** spends much of her time now traveling to visit her children (and grandson) in California and Massachusetts, and to see her parents and the old farmhouse she and husband John are renovating in North Carolina, but when she's not on the road or in the air, she treasures the time she spends at St. Michael's.

**Melanie Olivier** is the Director of the Preschool here at St. Michael's, a cradle Episcopalian who delights in watching children grow in curiosity and faith. She has been married for 27 years and has three children, all of whom attended the SMC preschool. Melanie believes God is present in both the quiet, holy moments and the everyday joys of life, from prayers to snack time.

**Mike Robertson** is the Director of Outreach at St. Michael's. His wife Sara, daughter Kjerstin, and son Collin continually show him what love, compassion, and service look like.

**Randy and Joanie Fiebrandt** are either confused or well-traveled Episcopalians, having been members of 10 different churches in our 47 years together, from our Coast Guard days and after. This includes a very interesting 2-year break at the only English-speaking church in Malmo, Sweden, the local Pentecostal church.

**Sara Ivy** and her husband Chris have two preschool boys, Allen (5) and William (3), and live in College Park. They moved to Orlando six years ago and have found a church home and preschool at St. Michael's. Sara works in Brand Marketing.

**Sarah Ser** is a Beatles historian, cat lover, and data scientist.

**Sean Kelly** is the really tall guy who sits with the Bailes, along with his lovely wife, Ashley, and two kids, who you "can't believe how big they're getting." I know!

**Therese Gentile** is a native Orlandoian and Disney brat. My passion is raising two young adult daughters, putting jigsaw puzzles together, and traveling, just not necessarily in that order. We've been a part of the St. Michael's family for 18 years.

**Victor Dickinson** is a sophomore in High School who likes the video games Baldi's Basics + and the Roblox game Grace. He is a part of a speech & debate club, an archery club, and the St. Michael's choir.

**Yvonne Traylor** became part of the St. Michael's Parish Family in 1961 when she arrived as a new bride, new resident, and new member; she has loved, been loved, and enjoyed this family ever since, and you might recognize her as the short lady under the hat who likes to sit up front.

## Care to Join Us?

If you would like to be a part of the Lenten Reflection Collective for 2027, please email The Rev. Lionel Smith - McGehee at [lsmithmcgehee@gmail.com](mailto:lsmithmcgehee@gmail.com).

**We would love for you to join us and join in!**

