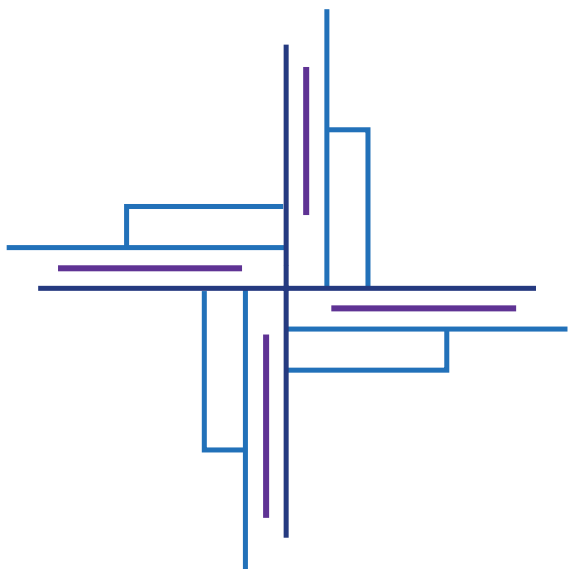




2024 LENTEN MEDITATIONS



Episcopal
Relief & Development
Working Together for Lasting Change



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Our Lenten Journey

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

—Psalm 51:11

In 2009, Episcopal Relief & Development published our first Lenten Meditations. Over these 14 years, we have been blessed by the opportunity to join readers on their spiritual journeys with thought-provoking meditations.

Our 2024 meditations follow the Revised Common Lectionary, a schedule of Scripture readings shared by many Christian denominations, including The Episcopal Church. During Lent, we pray, “Create and make in us new and contrite hearts.” The meditations focus on embracing this new heart, this new life in Christ, and looking deep within ourselves and acting in ways that seek and serve Christ in others.

Miguel Escobar authored this year’s meditations. Miguel is an Episcopal Relief & Development Board member and the Director of Strategy & Operations at the Episcopal Divinity School in New York City. Throughout his studies and professional life, he has helped many discern and strengthen their call to ministry. He is a thoughtful person who cares that the most vulnerable among us are treated justly. You will get a taste of Miguel’s life experiences and personal convictions in this year’s meditations.

We are grateful you have chosen to walk your Lenten journey with Episcopal Relief & Development. As you engage with the meditations, please also visit our website, episcopalrelief.org/Lent, to access additional Lenten resources.

We are praying for you, and we ask that you pray for Episcopal Relief & Development as well. Please pray for our board and staff, and our partners and program participants. Prayer is powerful, and when we pray for each other, we truly are working together for lasting change.

May you have a blessed and holy Lent.



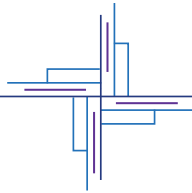
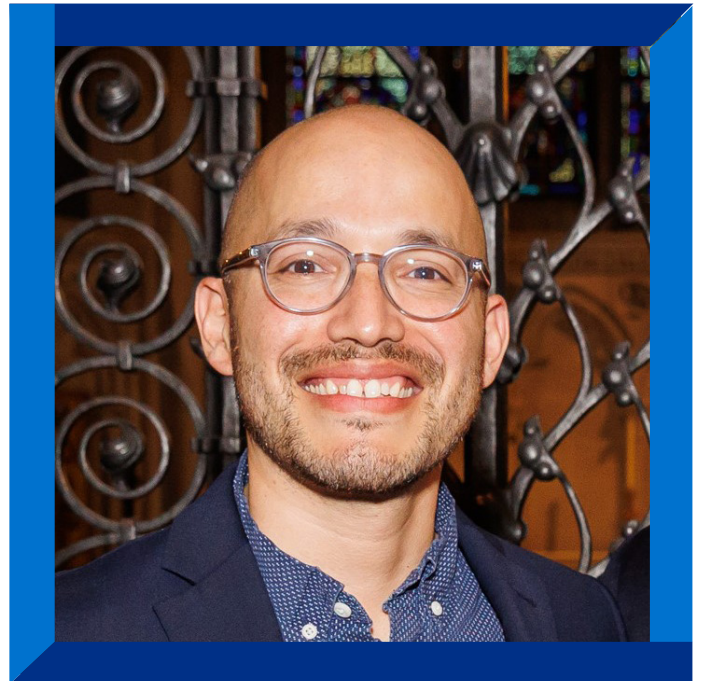
Sean McConnell
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About the Author

Miguel Escobar is Director of Strategy and Operations at Episcopal Divinity School. Previously, Escobar served as managing program director for leadership, communications and external affairs at the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF). He earned a master of divinity from Union Theological Seminary in 2007 and served as the communications assistant to then-Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori from 2007 to 2010.

Miguel serves as secretary of the board of directors of Episcopal Relief & Development and the former chair of the board of directors of Forward Movement. He grew up in the Texas Hill Country and attended Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas, where he studied the Roman Catholic social justice tradition and Latin American liberation theologies and minored in Spanish. He is the author of *The Unjust Steward: Wealth, Poverty, and the Church Today*.

Miguel divides his time between two partnered parishes in Brooklyn, New York: All Saints, Park Slope, and San Andres in Sunset Park. He lives with his husband, Ben, and dog, Duke, in Brooklyn and is spending this year working and studying in Barcelona, Spain.



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ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Isaiah 58:6



Each year, Christians have the opportunity to begin their Ash Wednesday with one of the most penetrating texts of the Bible: Isaiah 58. For me, this chapter of Isaiah is the literary equivalent of a powerful thunderstorm.

In this chapter, God probes the depth and authenticity of a people and a nation that consider themselves faithful and yet hardly care for the vulnerable in their midst. Such religious hypocrisy stinks to high heaven. From there, God bellows, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and you oppress all your workers” (Isaiah 58:3b).

Beginning the season of Lent with Isaiah 58 prepares us for wrestling with probing questions of depth and authenticity over the next forty days. We will explore what it means to be a faithful person in our day while knowing that the fast and sacrifice that God ultimately desires is to “loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” (Isaiah 58:6).

Today’s readings

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

How might the stirring message of Isaiah 58 serve as an invitation to a new way of experiencing the season of Lent?

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?

Luke 9:24–25



On this Thursday after Ash Wednesday, Scripture offers us rich and complicated fare about life and death. Beginning with Deuteronomy 30:15, God describes two paths: “I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” In Psalm 1:3–4, we hear that those who follow the Law will be like “trees planted by streams of water,” whereas those who walk in the counsel of the wicked are “chaff which the wind blows away.”

Such texts rely on strong contrasts. On one side is life and prosperity. On the other side, there is death and adversity. The starkness of the contrasts—their light and shadow—make the final reading even more remarkable

because Jesus’ message of the cross complicates this polarized vision of reality.

Jesus, after all, relishes a provocative paradox.

In Luke 9:24, Jesus states, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” Once again, Scripture presents life and death, but this time, gaining the whole world (power, prestige, etc.) is presented as the chaff that blows away, while the bewildering fact of a shameful crucifixion becomes the seed of new life.

Today’s readings

Psalm 1 | Deuteronomy 30:15–20 | Luke 9:18–25

It is easy, at times, to miss the strange and paradoxical message of the cross. What does it mean to lose one’s life for God’s sake today?

How might the way of the cross be a beginning rather than an end?

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

Matthew 9:13



In today's Gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples are admonished for hanging out with the wrong crowd. The religious authorities of Jesus' day criticize them for sitting with the much-loathed tax collectors and sinners. Jesus' response: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Matthew 9:13).

I see two components in Jesus' response. First, Jesus instructs us all to "go and learn." Go and learn what it means to follow God in a complex and confusing world. Go and learn what it means to have one's heart broken—and to know that you've broken others' hearts, too. Go and learn what it means to have tried your best and

yet completely failed. Go and learn the names and stories of people that you have judged to be sinners.

The second part occurs once one has "gone and learned." Once that has been done, we can begin to grasp the teaching that mercy—not sacrifice—is the hallmark of a truly faithful person. Jesus insists that a compassionate approach to life is more pleasing to God than righteous indignation and judgment.

Today's readings

Psalms 51:1–10 | Isaiah 58:1–9a

Matthew 9:10–17

Humans judge. At some point, we have all categorized people into good and bad, pure and impure. How might we entertain curiosity—rather than judgment—toward those we have dismissed?

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

Isaiah 58:9b–10



Today, we find ourselves back at Isaiah 58, which serves for me as a summary of the entirety of my faith. After probing the depth and authenticity of performative faith, the prophet Isaiah lays out what God considers true religion. God states, “If you offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday” (Isaiah 58:10).

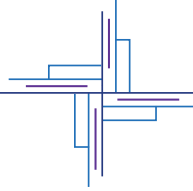
Over the centuries, scholars and theologians have made many efforts to spiritualize such simple and direct language. In the second and third centuries, some Christians reinterpreted “the hungry” to mean “the spiritually hungry.” Whereas Scripture speaks directly about the hardships of the poor, “to remove the yoke” became a metaphor for any form of relief.

As beautiful as this spiritualizing tradition can be, it is also vital to consider hunger, poverty and hardship in concrete terms. During Lent, let us ask ourselves these important questions: Am I adding to the burdens of the poor, or am I helping to remove the yoke? Am I sharing my food with the hungry, or are my meals kept to a closely knit circle of family and friends? What is the connection between my life and the needs of the afflicted? Through Isaiah, God urges us to make this connection and to become more generous and satisfy the needs of the afflicted so that our light will shine in the darkness and our gloom will be like the noonday.

Today's readings

Psalm 86:1–11 | Isaiah 58:9b–14 | Luke 5:27–32

Giving regularly to Episcopal Relief & Development is one of the ways in which my spouse and I strive to “remove the yoke” from people experiencing poverty. We especially enjoy supporting Moments That Matter®, a program partnership of Episcopal Relief & Development, which helps children up to the age of 3 reach their fullest potential. What is one concrete way you can help “remove the yoke” today?



FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, FEBRUARY 18

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 264

Today's readings

Psalms 25:1–9 | Genesis 9:8–17 | 1 Peter 3:18–22 | Mark 1:9–15



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Matthew 25:35–36



Growing up in a small Texas town in the 1980s and '90s, I was surrounded by versions of Christianity that placed great emphasis on God's coming judgment. To a surprising degree, my first encounters with Christians involved people who were trying to "save me" from the fires of hell and who were obsessed with the impending rapture. Needless to say, I found this experience both fascinating and strange.

It is comforting—indeed, healing—then to reflect on Matthew 25:31–46 decades later. In this passage, Jesus offers us a different image of God's coming judgment. Jesus describes a time when God separated the sheep from the goats. Critically, however, the criteria for judgment center on how we treated God's "least of

these" in our earthly life. This text on judgment specifically names the treatment of groups still incredibly vulnerable today: the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and the imprisoned.

Jesus is notably silent on so many of the issues that inflamed my schoolmates' imaginations, yet he spoke eloquently about serving the most vulnerable in our midst. "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

Today's readings

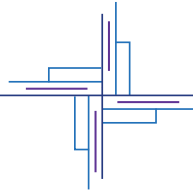
Psalm 19:7–14 | Leviticus 19:1–2, 11–18

Matthew 25:31–46

What does it mean to you that in a text on God's judgment, Jesus identifies with "the least of these"?

Pray then in this way.

Matthew 6:9a



A common theme in Lent is repentance and seeking forgiveness from God for our sins. Today's reading, however, turns the tables and asks us to consider the extent to which we forgive others.

In the Gospel lesson appointed for today (Matthew 6:7–15), Jesus instructs his followers on how to pray. He says we are not to pray “as the Gentiles do” by heaping word after word upon each other but to pray using the simple and direct formula that we’ve come to know as the Lord’s Prayer.

At the end of Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus circles back and re-emphasizes how forgiving others is closely related to being forgiven by God: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others,

neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” This is a problem. Or at least it is for anyone (like me) who tends to hold onto righteous anger. As a fairly creative thinker, I’m skilled at coming up with all sorts of reasons why I should not forgive someone. How can I forgive them when they’ve never acknowledged any wrongdoing? How can I forgive them when nothing about their behavior has changed?

Those are good questions, and yet Jesus is telling us something important about the power of forgiveness to be a saving grace for its own sake. For our own healing, then, Jesus asks us to forgive.

Today’s readings

Psalms 34:15–22 | Isaiah 55:6–11

Matthew 6:7–15

Even as we hold others accountable for their actions, how might we take Jesus’ emphasis on personal forgiveness to heart? What does taking a step toward such forgiveness look like today?

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Psalms 51:11



In today's passage from the Book of Jonah, Jonah proclaims to the inhabitants of Nineveh that God will destroy them. Shockingly, the king and inhabitants of the city listen and change their ways. This is not how things normally go. In most books of the Bible, we hear prophets proclaim God's message to hardened hearts. And yet, because Nineveh repented and changed its ways, God "changed his mind" (Jonah 3:10). God does not destroy the city, and everyone is left happy.

Well, almost everyone.

The one unhappy soul is Jonah himself. After all, God's merciful act has left Jonah hanging out there looking like a fool. God received

what God desired, and the city of Nineveh was saved, but Jonah's credibility and ego are sorely bruised.

Part of the reason why I love the book of Jonah, and this story in particular, is because it became part of a later tradition that reflected how following God will sometimes end up making you look like a fool. This resulted in a Christian Holy Fool tradition that drank deeply from the Book of Jonah, a spiritual path in which imitating Christ meant becoming a fool to respectable society, albeit a kind of holy fool ultimately grounded in God's love.

Today's readings

Psalms 51:11–18 | Jonah 3:1–10 | Luke 11:29–32

Let's be honest: choosing to follow Christ can occasionally feel like a strange and surprising choice. If it sometimes feels like foolishness, how can this be a way of identifying more deeply with figures like Jonah and Christ, whose journeys with God led them to the margins?

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 7:12



Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew contains Jesus' famous moral formula, his "Golden Rule," which appears across many religions and moral philosophies throughout the world: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

In the centuries since Jesus uttered these words, many Christian teachers have reflected deeply on this teaching and have offered their own variations on this theme. My personal favorite comes from the fourth-century theologian Lactantius, who, in his *Divine*

Institutes, considered how Jesus' teaching touched on public life and justice. Knowing how deeply Roman society valued family, he restated Jesus' Golden Rule for his culture: "The whole nature of justice lies in our providing for others through humanity what we provide for our own families and relatives through affection." He asked Romans to provide for vulnerable families what they so freely provided for their own.

Today's readings

Psalm 138 | Esther (Apocrypha) 14:1–6, 12–14
Matthew 7:7–12

In many cultures, it is traditional to draw strict boundaries around who we consider family, yet God asks us to consider whether children across the globe are also, somehow, our children. What does it mean to "provide through humanity" for an expanded sense of family?

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.

Matthew 5:25



In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus warns about anger, grudges and simmering feuds. The Jesus we meet here is a practical peacemaker. Rather than trying to resolve conflicts with acts of vengeance or through a shaky court system, he urges his followers to seek a peaceful resolution first, even if it literally means doing so on the way to court.

Biblical scholars frequently note that Jesus was speaking to a society obsessed with questions of honor and shame. While this is a sweeping generalization, it wasn't uncommon for insults to be "resolved" through acts of vengeance. More striking still is Jesus' portrayal of the

arbitrariness of a judge's decision and his sense that, whether a party is innocent or not, even the innocent may have to pay dearly. "Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny" (Matthew 5:26).

Jesus is seeking a culture change. He observes how his community keeps spiraling into violence and how a corrupt judicial system rarely achieves justice and instead urges peaceful ways forward. It is practical advice that still feels both radical and resonant today.

Today's readings

Psalms 130 | Ezekiel 18:21–28 | Matthew 5:20–26

Conflicts, large and small, happen all around us every day. How can we be peacemakers today?

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

John 15:7–8



Last summer, I was on a crowded train and had the opportunity (if that's the word) to overhear a young man in his 20s loudly and confidently decrying how lazy everyone had become. Speaking to his girlfriend, he even denounced people who took a week off work due to illness and declared that not only had he never done so but also his father hadn't done so either. He declared that top achievers, outperformers and successful people don't take time off.

At this point, I began desperately searching for my headphones, open windows, available exits—anything to get away from his bravado.

I mention all this because the idolization of productivity is all around us. Yet the Gospel

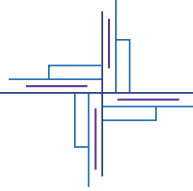
points us in a very different direction in defining fruitfulness. In today's readings, Jesus offers beautiful organic imagery. He describes himself as the "true vine" and God as "the vine grower," and he says that those who "abide" in God's love bear much fruit.

The active verb here is to "abide" in God. It isn't to achieve in God. It isn't to outperform or level up to God. Heck, it isn't even to succeed in God. All Jesus asks today is that we abide and be like trees planted by streams of water, trusting that we will yield fruit in due season.

Today's readings

Psalms 15 | Acts 1:15–26 | Philippians 3:13–21
John 15:1,6–16

Amidst so much talk about efficiency and productivity, what does it mean to abide and bear fruit in God's time?



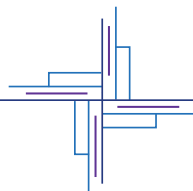
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, FEBRUARY 25

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 232

Today's readings

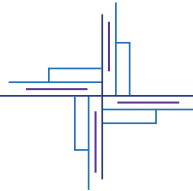
Psalms 22:22–30 | Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16 | Romans 4:13–25 | Mark 8:31–38



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Luke 6:35a



Nearly a year ago, my spouse and I visited the Eldridge Street Synagogue, a stunning place that was once a center of Jewish life on the Lower East Side of New York. After having fallen into disrepair, it was painstakingly restored, and today it is a museum rich in stories and artifacts from the community. Among the encased artifacts are two loan cards made to members of the synagogue in the 1920s. These cards record \$100 and \$25 loans issued and then repaid three weeks later at no interest. The word “paid” is scrawled in beautiful script over the first card.

Now, what on earth does this have to do with the Gospel reading today? This passage is one of my favorites because of a single line, an utterance so brief that it is rarely mentioned today. Quietly embedded within Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence and loving one’s enemy is what

some have called Jesus’ single most important economic teaching: “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.”

When I think about those loan cards from the Eldridge Street synagogue, I wonder about the people who needed those \$100- and \$25-dollar loans. Was an eviction imminent? Was it for relief in the wake of a fire? We don’t know much about the people who received those loans, but the fact that they were offered without interest tells us a lot about the compassion and care of the community that extended them. May we continue to use our financial resources to practice love and compassion in our communities.

Today’s readings

Psalm 79:1–9 | Daniel 9:3–10 | Luke 6:27–38

Why does Jesus talk about poverty so much? What does Jesus mean when he says that giving without interest is a way of loving others? What are the practical implications of this teaching?

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Matthew 23:12



Most leadership courses begin with the premise that a good, credible leader is someone who is clear about their values and models the way. If you want to encourage generosity, you must do so by publicly modeling generosity. If you want people to address conflict calmly and thoughtfully, you must model this for others. Leaders have the opportunity to set the tone and parameters for what constitutes appropriate behavior, and they often do so more effectively through their actions rather than their words.

In today's reading, Jesus critiques the wide gap that frequently exists between religious leaders' words and deeds. He notes that while the religious leaders of his day spoke of humility, their actions, titles, dress and performative righteousness modeled both self-importance

and the need to be at the center of all things. This behavior stands in stark contrast to the grounded humility Jesus hopes his followers will model: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted," (Matthew 23:12).

Jesus' critique is so piercing that it feels transcendentally applicable today. If Jesus is truly our leader, then we must learn to model simplicity, humility and a desire to learn rather than be lauded as an expert. Then, we can grow in awareness that God is the main character of this story, not us.

Today's readings

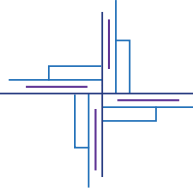
Psalms 50:7–15, 22–24 | Isaiah 1:2–4, 16–20
Matthew 23:1–12

If simplicity and humility are key values for Jesus, how might we model this in our daily life?

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be the first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Matthew 20:26–28



One of the most important, recurring themes in the Gospels is the large gap between Jesus' descriptions of God's kingdom and how his followers imagine it. In today's passage, the mother of the sons of Zebedee makes the same mistake generations of Christians have made by equating Jesus' coming kingdom with worldly wealth and power.

She wants in—or, more specifically, she wants her sons to benefit from high positions in Jesus' coming reign. Jesus' response is one of surprise and bafflement. He has just finished describing the way of the cross that awaits him. How could anyone mistake the shameful crucifixion he must endure with powerful thrones, golden crowns and worldly power?

Over the past year, I've visited many museums that focus on medieval religious art. Very often, Jesus is portrayed as a royal king, replete with golden crown, scepter and orb. While I understand that this imagery is intended to convey the glory and power of the resurrected Christ, ruling and judging from his universal throne, I can't help but wonder whether such imagery misses the point. For generations, Christians have kept trying to put a golden crown on one who wore a crown of thorns.

Today's readings

Psalm 31:9–16 | Jeremiah 18:1–11, 18–20

Matthew 20:17–28

How do we sometimes confuse the true essence of faith and discipleship with worldly success and recognition? What steps can we take to better align our understanding with the teachings of Jesus and his message of selflessness and humility?

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus.

Luke 16:19–20



To paraphrase the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, one of the most striking things about the Gospels is the way in which “the rich and the beautiful people” are largely sidelined, and the poor and marginalized people’s everyday encounters with God are in the forefront. He argues this is a rare—indeed, almost unique—aspect of these ancient texts.

This uniqueness is captured nicely in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. When reading the story closely, you may notice that almost unlike any other space in society, it is the rich man who goes nameless, and it is the beggar outside his door whose name we learn and whose experience of suffering and redemption we follow closely.

In learning to see the world through Gospel eyes, we need to pay attention to whose names we know. So many of us know not only the names but also intimate details about the lives of the rich and beautiful people of the world—celebrities, royalty, athletes—yet we may have a hard time calling to mind the names of the people we pass every day on the street or even the full names of cleaning staff we’ve worked beside for years. The people whose names we care to learn tell us who we consider to be at the center of God’s unfolding story, and the Gospels have a very particular perspective on this.

Today’s readings

Psalms 1 | Jeremiah 17:5–10 | Luke 16:19–31

Whose experiences and struggles do you pay attention to, and how might this perspective align or diverge from the Gospel’s focus on those often overlooked by society?

FRIDAY, MARCH 1

Here comes this dreamer.

Genesis 37:19b



The passage from Genesis describes how Israel favored one of his sons, Joseph, over the others—and how the hurt and resentment this engendered among Joseph’s brothers led them to conspire to get rid of him.

The brothers begin plotting when they see him in the distance: “Here comes this dreamer.” While the reading is about Joseph and his brothers, I believe what happens to Joseph gives us insight into our actions toward other “dreamers” around the globe—artists, prophets and truth-tellers whose vision of a more just, equal and peaceful world disturbs those who are beholden to the status quo. “Here comes this dreamer,” they say.

As someone who frequently listens to news out of Latin America, I think about the bravery of

journalists whose truth-telling and commitment to exposing corruption has led to their arrest or disappearance. They dream of a more transparent, less corrupt society, and they frequently pay heavily for this vision.

So much of what we hold dear is because of the sacrifice endured by everyday dreamers. Lent is an invitation to dream deeply with Jesus about a more peaceful, just and hopeful world. Yet we do so with a clear-eyed understanding of how the world treats its dreamers. May we be courageous and brave as we continue dreaming.

Today’s readings

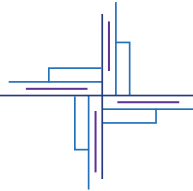
Psalms 105:16–22 | Genesis 37:3–4, 12–28
Matthew 21:33–43

What steps can we take to support and uplift the voices of modern-day truth-tellers and visionaries who work for positive change, despite the challenges they face?

SATURDAY, MARCH 2

Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

Luke 15:22b



Today's parable is one of Jesus' most famous: the Prodigal Son. There are many ways of reading this story, including as a story about what counts as waste and generosity. Through this lens, this is a story about a younger son who receives his full inheritance and who then wastes it on partying and prostitutes. When he is starving and penniless, he returns to his father who generously offers even more for having returned (a robe, ring, sandals for his feet) and wants to throw a big feast.

The older brother considers his father's generosity to be its own form of squandering. "But when this son of yours came back, who

has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

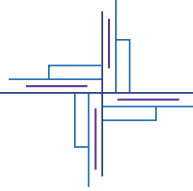
This brings me to a strange and troubling fact about Jesus: he is frequently the advocate for what some have called "promiscuous generosity," that is, generosity without a lot of terms. This is the type of generosity that upsets and scandalizes his disciples. It is a generosity, they contend, offered to too many people—and all the wrong sorts.

Today's readings

Psalms 103:1–4(5–8)9–12

Micah 7:14–15,18–20 | Luke 15:11–32

Are there times when we, like the older brother, find ourselves questioning acts of generosity toward those we deem unworthy? Do we struggle to give without conditions? How might this parable challenge us to expand our understanding of generosity and compassion in our lives?



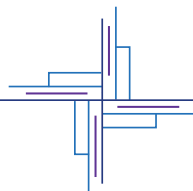
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 3

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 230

Today's readings

Psalms 19 | Exodus 20:1–17 | 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 | John 2:13–22



MONDAY, MARCH 4

Father, if the prophet had commended you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?

2 Kings 5:13b



In today's reading from 2 Kings, we meet Naaman, a foreign commander who suffered from leprosy. Through his wife's Israeli servant, Naaman learns of Elisha the prophet and seeks a cure for his lifelong disease. The cure Elisha eventually offers is disconcertingly simple: he instructs Naaman to wash in the Jordan seven times so as to be healed.

Rather than welcome this news, Naaman is enraged by the simplicity of Elisha's instructions. He was expecting a task as all-encompassing and consuming as his disease. His servants point out the irony in this, saying "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?" Naaman's healing comes about in part

because he sets aside his expectations and accepts the simplicity of Elisha's instructions.

I think this is just the message we need for this moment in Lent. For some, Lent is a time of profound sacrifice, fervent prayer and self-examination—and this is certainly appropriate. The way of the cross is serious work, and Lent is a time of living more deeply into that. And yet we are also following the One who said "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" and whose life and witness was marked by penitence but also feasting and joy. Sometimes healing can come through the simplest paths.

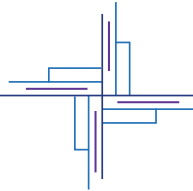
Today's readings

Psalms 42:1–7 | 2 Kings 5:1–15b | Luke 4:23–30

Do we sometimes make the journey more complicated than it needs to be? How might embracing simplicity and trusting in God's guidance lead us to healing and a deeper connection with the way of the cross?

TUESDAY, MARCH 5

Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?



In today's reading, we come across a particularly intense Jesus. He compares forgiveness to a king condemning slaves to torture until they forgive their debtors just as their own debts have been forgiven.

So much for gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

And yet, perhaps the reason why Jesus' imagery is so direct and startling is that this is one of his hardest teachings. Or it is for me, anyway. In my mind, I often see a spiritual ledger. On the left side are my debts—my mistakes, faults and sins—which have been met with compassion and grace. I think of friends, family and coworkers who have given me another

Matthew 18:33

chance and continued the conversation, even when I didn't really deserve it. And then, embarrassingly, on the other side of the ledger are the times when I've failed to extend that same measure of compassion and grace to others.

Although we've had our debts forgiven, we are lording over others what is owed to us. Jesus' message is stark and simple: forgive others' debts as yours have been forgiven.

Today's readings

Psalm 25:3–10 | Song of the Three Young Men (Apocrypha) 2–4, 11–20a | Matthew 18:21–35

Can we identify moments when we have received grace and compassion? When have we struggled to extend the same to others?

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.



I recently toured Barcelona's medieval synagogue in the city's Jewish quarter on El Call street. This synagogue likely stood on the same grounds as the one used by the Roman-era Jewish community. Archaeological excavations have uncovered Roman stones featuring Hebrew numerals for 18, a number symbolizing hope for protection from Roman authorities.

As a Christian, visiting such sites is a complex experience; historical danger often stemmed from Christians themselves. Our guide recounted medieval pogroms, the unjust blame Christians placed on the Jewish community for the Black Plague and the long history of Christian persecution against Jews, including the horrors of the Inquisition. This highlights the importance of today's reading: a reminder

Matthew 5:17

that Jesus himself was Jewish and of the importance of the continuity of our traditions. There isn't a separate God of the Old Testament and the New Testament; early Christianity held a nuanced view of the relationship between grace and law. Unfortunately, much of this continuity has become obscured over the centuries.

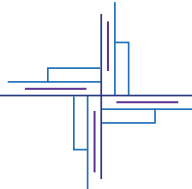
I believe we have a responsibility to learn more and repent for Christianity's historical rejection of Jesus' Jewish identity, and we must continue to recognize the deep connection between our faith communities.

Today's readings

Psalm 78:1–6 | Deuteronomy 4:1–2,5–9
Matthew 5:17–19

How can we actively promote and strengthen the understanding of the shared heritage between Christianity and Judaism in our communities and foster mutual respect and unity?

They walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward.



Jeremiah 7:24b

The Bible provides a fascinating perspective on the moral significance of memory. Time and again, God reminds the people of Israel of their deliverance from Egyptian enslavement, underscoring the ethical significance of this experience. The memory of liberation is meant to inspire Israel to act justly, drawing from their experience and lessons of their past suffering and redemption.

However, in today's passage from Jeremiah, God rebukes the people for fixating on their past and neglecting the potential of the future. They have become ensnared in the spiritual pitfall of nostalgia, as if they've forgotten to "remember the future," as my spiritual director aptly puts it.

Remembering the future recognizes that each new day brings fresh opportunities and that life's most significant moments are not confined to the past. It is a call to embrace the notion that new possibilities are ever-present, urging us to craft innovative paths for the days ahead. In essence, this perspective assigns moral weight to the future, affirming that God's vision of freedom and abundance awaits realization in the days ahead. In this way, the future carries as much moral responsibility as our past, urging us to actively shape it in alignment with a greater purpose.

Today's readings

Psalms 95:6–11 | Jeremiah 7:23–28

Luke 11:14–23

How can we both cherish the lessons of our past experiences while remembering to build a more just and hopeful future?

FRIDAY, MARCH 8

We will say no more, “Our God,” to the work of our hands.

Hosea 14:3b



Today's readings center on the theme of idolatry. Hosea condemns Israel for placing their faith in the Assyrians and worshipping the work of their own hands. Psalm 81 warns against having a “strange god among you,” and in Mark 12:28–34, Jesus emphasizes the priority of loving God with heart, soul and mind. In each case, Scripture underscores God's desire that we place our faith solely in the One who led us out of Egypt.

Discussing idolatry in the twenty-first century may seem unusual, but I invite us to consider it as a prompt to reflect on where our ultimate faith lies. When faced with challenges, who and what do we truly believe in? Where do we put our trust?

While modern idolatry may not involve carving and worshipping statues, many of us (myself

included) spend a significant part of our day with our heads bowed down to smartphones. Technology is often hailed as the solution to societal issues. Similarly, in almost every sector of society, people overvalue money's ability to solve all sorts of intractable problems. These texts remind us to question where we place our faith and to return to something deeper and more intrinsic.

Hosea beautifully describes God as a Cypress tree and God's mercy as dew, emphasizing the gap between the work of our hands and the steadfastness of the earth itself. What would it mean to reevaluate where we place our ultimate trust?

Today's readings

Psalm 81:8–14 | Hosea 14:1–9 | Mark 12:28–34

In a world where technology and wealth often take center stage, how can we ensure that our faith and trust remain firmly rooted in something deeper and more enduring, as emphasized in Scripture?

SATURDAY, MARCH 9

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.

Luke 18:14a



Every year on Ash Wednesday, Episcopal clergy engage in a somewhat peculiar debate. Some churches opt for “Ashes to Go,” offering quick prayers and ashes for people rushing off to work, while others view this on-the-go liturgy as unsettling and consumeristic, considering it an unnecessary concession to the busyness of people’s lives.

In my view, today’s passage from Luke provides guidance on the matter. In these verses, Jesus observes two individuals practicing penance. One follows all the religious protocols, offering lengthy prayers in a display of religious correctness and righteousness. The other is a tax collector who stands at a distance, uttering only a few words of penance. Jesus deliberately

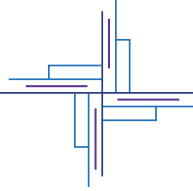
contrasts these two people, emphasizing that what truly matters is the humility and authenticity with which we approach God, rather than rigid adherence to external religious forms.

This serves as a reminder that God prioritizes sincerity and humility as we seek penance. As someone who embraces both traditional church practices and outreach on the sidewalks, I believe these qualities can be found in both settings. We need not position ourselves as judges of others’ prayers and penance; that task belongs to God alone.

Today’s readings

Psalms 51:15–20 | Hosea 6:1–6 | Luke 18:9–14

How can we observe traditional religious practices and also meet people where they are, recognizing that the authenticity and humility of our approach to God matter more than external expressions of faith?



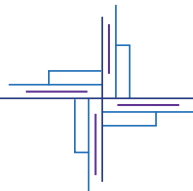
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 10

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 823

Today's readings

Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22 | Numbers 21:4–9 | Ephesians 2:1–10 | John 3:14–21



MONDAY, MARCH 11

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

Isaiah 65:21



In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet envisions God's renewal of the earth, offering transcendent images of abundance that resonate with humanity's deepest aspirations. These verses depict the end of infant mortality, the gift of long and peaceful lives, the ability to build and enjoy one's home, and a world where children are not born into calamity and are free from exploitative inequalities.

However, the reality we face today is far from this dream. According to the World Bank, many still live on less than \$5.50 per day, children are born into war, climate change displaces millions and poverty and inequality affect infant mortality and life expectancy. The dream of

Isaiah, where each person can build a home and live peacefully, seems distant. Despite these challenges, Isaiah's vision serves as a guiding North Star. While we may not be there yet, it shows us where we are heading. Through collective efforts, including the work of organizations like Episcopal Relief & Development, we can join with God in the ongoing renewal of the earth, working toward a future that reflects the prophetic dream of Isaiah.

Today's readings

Psalms 30:1–6, 11–13 | Isaiah 65:17–25

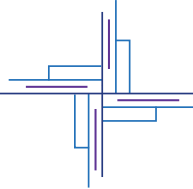
John 4:43–54

In a world where the dream of Isaiah seems far away, what actions can we take individually and collectively to move closer to that vision of abundance, equality and peace?

TUESDAY, MARCH 12

My Father is still working, and I also am working.

John 5:17



I recently noticed a linguistic quirk, or what might be considered a false cognate, between English and Spanish. In English, the word “fastidious” generally praises a person’s meticulous attention to detail. However, in Spanish, calling someone “fastidioso” describes them as overly fixated on minutiae to the point of being annoying.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus displays little patience for the religious *fastidiosos* of his day. He heals a man who has suffered for 38 years, and when religious authorities object because the healing takes place on the Sabbath, Jesus redirects their focus to the greater miracle of the healing itself. In response to their rule-based

objections, Jesus states, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”

As someone who values rules, order, policies and procedures, I often grapple with whether I am being “fastidious” or “fastidioso.” I believe that religion, perhaps especially Anglicanism, tends to attract and cultivate a certain fastidious personality, for better and worse. Jesus’ example reminds us to focus on the bigger picture. God continually invites us to recognize the transcendent miracles happening in our midst.

Today’s readings

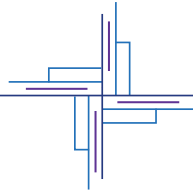
Psalm 46:1–8 | Ezekiel 47:1–9,12 | John 5:1–18

In your life, how do you balance between upholding rules and policies while also recognizing the importance of seeing the larger, transcendent miracles that unfold around you?

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13

Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the Voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

John 5:25



One of the most fascinating aspects of Jesus' message is the way he talks about both abundance and scarcity. For Jesus, there is materially enough for all. The feeding of the 5,000, his promiscuous generosity toward outcasts and his healing ministry bear witness to God's abundance amidst poverty and inequality.

And yet, the Gospels point to one resource that is scarce: time. "Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here..." Jesus says in today's passage. Jesus speaks of the shortness of time both in terms of his own life but also in a cosmic sense. He knows his time with the disciples is very brief—and that our own time on earth is, too.

Jesus' physical presence on earth was brief; his public ministry was just three years. The Gospels convey a sense of urgency to Jesus' ministry; he is constantly rushing from one place to another, always aware of the storm clouds gathering on the horizon.

In our own lives, I believe we are called to somehow embody this Jesus-like witness to both abundance and scarcity. There really is enough for all, but time is short, the situation is urgent and we must act quickly.

Today's readings

Psalm 145:8–19 | Isaiah 49:8–15 | John 5:19–29

How can we strike a balance between embracing abundance and embodying the sense of urgency Jesus displayed in his ministry?

THURSDAY, MARCH 14

Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.

Exodus 32:12b



Today's selection from the Book of Exodus is one of the most extraordinary moments recorded in Scripture: God and Moses engage in a debate and God's mind is changed as a result.

Moses is a reluctant liberator who helps free Israel from Egyptian slavery. His story doesn't follow the typical hero trajectory. There's the Moses who protects the Israelites from the dangers of the wilderness, standing in the breach (Psalm 106) between the dangers of the desert and even between his people and God's wrath. And there's Moses, who loses his cool, angrily striking a rock with his staff, and never actually entering the Promised Land.

The memory of Moses transcends his time, and he becomes the archetypal liberator for later generations. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is described as a new Moses, leading humanity out of the slavery of sin. More recently, Harriet Tubman was called "Moses" for guiding enslaved people as they escaped north to freedom. Reflecting on Moses reminds us of the fact that our faith is, at its core, about freedom. Freedom from slavery. Freedom from sin. Freedom from fear. May Moses's example continue to guide our way.

Today's readings

Psalm 106:6–7,19–23 | Exodus 32:7–14
John 5:30–47

As we reflect on the iconic figure of Moses and his role as a liberator, how does the concept of freedom resonate with your spiritual journey and understanding of faith?

FRIDAY, MARCH 15

He reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord.

Wisdom (Apocrypha) 2:12b–13



Today's lectionary passages include a striking passage from the Book of Wisdom. It is about a group of people lying in wait for a righteous man, "because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions." They complain: "He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange" (Wisdom 2:14–15). This passage names an important but often forgotten reality: the prophets and Jesus were often burdensome and strange.

Perhaps because we worship Jesus on Sunday, many of us believe we would have admired Christ while he was alive. Yet if you read the Gospels carefully, it is clear that he was frequently a confusing and exasperating presence even to his closest disciples.

But this is not only true of the prophets and Jesus. When one considers the moral geniuses of the twentieth century, very few were recognized as such in their lifetimes. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at the lowest point in his national popularity. Before her death, Dorothy Day was perceived by many in the Roman Catholic community as a holy terror. Thomas Merton's outspoken pacifism resulted in his being ostracized by his own religious community. Each was a burden, each a "reproof of our thoughts," and each was powerfully, faithfully strange.

Today's readings

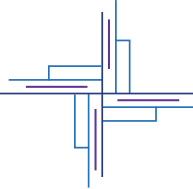
Psalm 34:15–22 | Wisdom (Apocrypha) 2:1a, 12–24 | John 7:1–2, 10, 25–30

How might Lent be an invitation to become more faithfully strange?

SATURDAY, MARCH 16

God is my shield and defense; he is the savior of the true in heart.

Psalm 7:11



Last fall, I visited a German-speaking Lutheran Church in Barcelona, Spain, where twentieth-century pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer had served for a short time. He eventually returned to Germany, took part in acts of resistance against the Nazis and was imprisoned and executed as a result. Bonhoeffer was a rare voice of resistance among German Christians, and so this small community of mostly elderly, German-speaking Spaniards cherish his writings and memory.

The sermon that Sunday was about a remarkable poem that Bonhoeffer wrote to his fiancé from prison shortly before his execution. This poem, which has since been made into a hymn, speaks directly to his fiancé with longing:

“I long to live these fleeting days beside you,” and it describes his heart as “crushed by the weight of bitter days.” And yet, he also describes his profound sense of being accompanied, harbored and surrounded by the presence of angels:

*And when the silence deep spreads all around us,
Then let us hear those swelling tunes begin
From world unseen which all about us widens
As all Your children raise their highest hymns.¹*

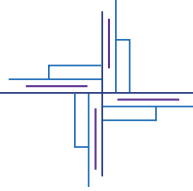
Today's readings

Psalm 7:6–11 | Jeremiah 11:18–20

John 7:37–52

How do you perceive and experience moments of spiritual guidance during times of adversity?

1. Translation by the Rev. Timothy M. Boerger



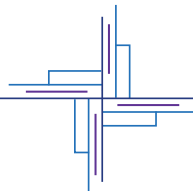
THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 17

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 832

Today's readings

Psalm 51:1–13 or 119:9–16 | Jeremiah 31:31–34 | Hebrews 5:5–10 | John 12:20–33



MONDAY, MARCH 18

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

John 8:7



This past September, I visited Rome and spent several days walking through the streets of this living, outdoor museum. The experience reminded me that being a Christian requires wrestling with 2,000 years of history, one with chapters both inspiring and grotesque.

One evening, my spouse and I visited Castel Sant’Angelo, a massive Roman tomb that was later converted into a prison for those condemned by the Roman Catholic Church. We attended an exhibit that told the stories of the heretics, scientists and women who were imprisoned there and later publicly executed in a nearby piazza. I saw the bright red robe and sword of the papal executioner encased in glass.

Against this searing memory, today’s passage comes as a cooling salve. In John 8:1–11,

religious leaders and an angry mob are preparing to condemn and execute a woman caught in an act of adultery. Jesus’ response is remarkable. He absolutely refuses to condemn the woman and saves her life by doing so. Further, he calls all who have gathered there to self-reflection about their own sinfulness, at which point the angry mob slowly turns away.

In light of Christianity’s long history of condemnation and judgment, this passage is an incredible gift. May the example of Jesus be our guide as Christians move from condemnation to compassion, and from judgment toward self-reflection.

Today’s readings

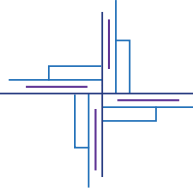
Psalm 23 | Susanna (Apocrypha) [1–9, 15–29, 34–40], 41–62 | John 8:1–11 or 8:12–20

What is the role of compassion and self-reflection in your own Christian journey, particularly in the face of a history marked by condemnation and judgment?

TUESDAY, MARCH 19

Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.

Luke 2:48b



I've always felt a bit protective of St. Joseph. Carefully referred to as the guardian of Jesus—categorically not his father—Joseph strikes me as the quintessential third wheel.

The Gospel of Luke describes this curious episode in Jesus' early life when he goes missing for three days. When found in the temple, Mary tells her son, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." The Gospel writer uses this exchange to clarify who Jesus' actual father is. Referring to the temple, Jesus tells his mother, "Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?" Jesus makes an important point, yet I imagine Joseph standing awkwardly by, feeling both relief and perhaps somewhat slighted by the exchange.

Here's what we know about Joseph's relationship to Jesus: We know Joseph wasn't absent. He was a loving and present guardian to Jesus. Further, we know Joseph didn't shrug off the fact that his son went missing for three days. He didn't return to work or go golfing with his buddies. Along with Mary, he was consumed with anxiety for the well-being of this child. In other words, he loved Jesus deeply. We also know Joseph helped to raise a moral and spiritual genius. Something about the space that Joseph and Mary created together helped Jesus grow, flourish and live into his true identity.

Today's readings

Psalms 89:1–29 or 89:1–4, 26–29

2 Samuel 7:4, 8–16 | Romans 4:13–18

Luke 2:41–52

Joseph wasn't Jesus' father, but he was Jesus' fatherly guardian. Give thanks for the parental guardians in your life who have helped you on your way.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.

Daniel 3:25



In the early church, when Christianity was illegal, it was dangerous for Christians to make or have images of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christians often used symbols and select scenes from the Old Testament stories to covertly signal their faith. Among the most famous of these covert symbols is Jonah and the Whale, as Jonah's three days in the belly of the beast was thought to be like Jesus' three days in the tomb. For this reason, Roman catacombs where early Christians are buried feature depictions of Jonah getting swallowed and spit up.

Another covert image comes from the famous story in our lectionary today about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three men who were thrown into the fire for refusing to bow to a king's image. It's worth reflecting on why this became a popular early Christian motif. First, it's a story of miraculous survival, one that brings

their persecutors to faith in God. Second, the three men may have served as reminders to early Christians of the Trinity. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the three Jewish men were persecuted for doing what Christians were refusing to do: namely, worship the image of a king (in this case, the Roman emperor).

These early Christian images—drawn from the deep well of Hebrew Scripture—emphasize struggle, miraculous survival and faithfulness to God amid persecution and adversity. They explore resurrection as miraculous survival amidst encircling flames and in the belly of the beast.

Today's readings

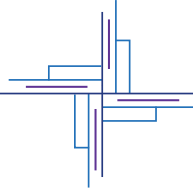
Canticle [2] or 13 | Daniel 3:14–20,24–28
John 8:31–42

What do these stories say about the themes of enduring faith and resilience in Christianity?

THURSDAY, MARCH 21

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Genesis 17:7



Today's Old Testament and New Testament readings center on the figure of Abraham. In Genesis 17, God bestows a new name, Abram, to Abraham, forging a covenant "between me and you." This covenant carries with it the promise that Abraham will be "the ancestor of a multitude of nations." The reading from John also focuses on Abraham. In mystical language, Jesus cryptically proclaims, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." In this rich tapestry of texts, I add my personal favorite New Testament portrayal of Abraham found in the Gospel of Luke within the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19–31).

The parable of Lazarus at the Rich Man's gate paints a stark portrait of excessive wealth and abject poverty coexisting side-by-side. Lazarus, a beggar afflicted with painful sores,

languishes in hunger at the gate of a wealthy man who indulges in lavish feasts every day. Upon Lazarus's death, he finds solace in the compassionate embrace of Abraham. In contrast, when the wealthy man meets his demise, Abraham becomes the herald of God's judgment. When the rich man implores Abraham for a miraculous sign to warn his wealthy brothers, Abraham tells him the sign he is hoping for is already present: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Today's readings

Psalms 105:4–11 | Genesis 17:1–8

John 8:51–59

In our daily lives, how can we become more aware of those who "dwell at the gates" of our existence? How can we be like Abraham in responding with both compassion and justice?

FRIDAY, MARCH 22

I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.

Jeremiah 20:7b



While living in Spain this past year, I saw a lot of medieval Christian art, perhaps more than I ever expected to in my life. One thing I've been struck by is how often the Christian figures in medieval scenes appear calm and serene, even when they are being shot by arrows or crucified upside down or holding their own severed heads. Even in the midst of great suffering, many are depicted as serenely unmoved.

As wonderful as these images are, the prophet Jeremiah is something of a relief because he is far more relatable. In the face of persecution and suffering, Jeremiah is vexed, passionate and conflicted. He doubts God; he wrestles with his people; he complains bitterly.

Biblical scholar Judy Fentress Williams puts it well in her book, *Holy Imagination: A Literary*

and Theological Introduction to the Whole Bible, when she writes, "Jeremiah exposes the inner life of the prophet who stands in the liminal space between God and God's people," and that "he is, for the most part, rejected by his people, and he has a tormented relationship with the God who called him."

I appreciate Jeremiah's witness and the opportunity to go beneath the still surface and witness the inner turmoil of a prophet. Our spirituality is enriched by a long line of prophets and thinkers who questioned and wrestled with God. Jeremiah's experience can be an inspiration for us today.

Today's readings

Psalms 18:1–7 | Jeremiah 20:7–13

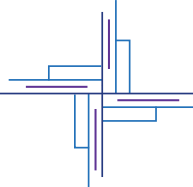
John 10:31–42

In what ways can the experiences and doubts of individuals like Jeremiah serve as valuable sources of inspiration and guidance in navigating your relationship with faith, calling and community?

SATURDAY, MARCH 23

So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

John 11: 47–48



I've been reading a book on the history of theological education. I promise this is more exciting than it might seem at first. As it turns out, the history of how Christians have formed and educated followers of Jesus cuts to the very heart of the faith itself. And this is especially so when in the season of Lent.

In the early church, one of the main vehicles for formation was a multi-year catechesis prior to baptism. Created at a time when Christianity was persecuted by Rome, this catechesis sought to prepare disciples to faithfully live out Christian values in a culture that opposed the faith at every turn. Rome, for instance, had little

tolerance for Jesus' many critiques of wealth and power, nor did Roman officials understand or value Christians' compassion for the poor.

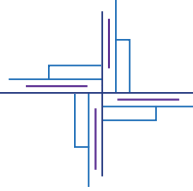
Interestingly, as the centuries passed, this multi-year catechesis was shortened until it became the 40-day period of Lent. This stretch we are walking together, then, is what's left of a very ancient road that many walked before us, training Christians to be an alternative and countercultural community throughout time.

Today's readings

Psalms 85:1–7 | Ezekiel 37:21–28

John 11:45–53

Do you approach the season of Lent as a time of learning? How can you be more intentional in embracing Lent as a period of catechesis and religious instruction?



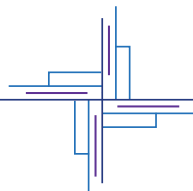
PALM SUNDAY, MARCH 24

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 833

Today's readings

Psalms 31:9–16 | Isaiah 50:4–9a | Philippians 2:5–11 | Mark 14:1–15:47 or 15:1–39,[40–47]



MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK, MARCH 25

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.

John 12:8



We begin Holy Week with one of Christianity's most provocative texts on wealth and poverty, when Jesus says, "you always have the poor with you." In the United States, this statement has become a rationale to dismiss Jesus' numerous teachings about compassion and care for the most vulnerable. Many point to those words from Jesus as a way to justify indifference to poverty.

But if we look more closely at the story, we see an entirely different message than indifference. In the passage, Judas voices a desire to gather money for the poor, but in reality, Scripture tells us he intends to divert these funds for his own gain. The Gospel of John reveals Judas has a

special role as keeper of the common purse and is embezzling from it. Jesus' uncharacteristic statement thwarts Judas from taking another opportunity to steal.

Tragically, Judas's corruption is not an isolated incident in the story of Christianity. The church is made up of imperfect people, and corruption and embezzlement happen. This underscores the need for strong safeguards and transparent standards to ensure that gifts directed to the most vulnerable are used as intended.

Today's readings

Psalms 36:5–11 | Isaiah 42:1–9

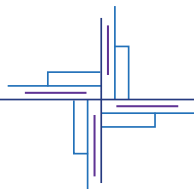
Hebrews 9:11–15 | John 12:1–11

It may seem unusual to broach the topic of financial transparency and safety measures at the beginning of Holy Week. But stewardship and care for the poor are intrinsically bound. It would be a disservice if I did not acknowledge that Episcopal Relief & Development has established such safeguards. As a regular donor to Episcopal Relief & Development, I contribute with complete confidence that my donations to "the least of these" are used as intended.

TUESDAY IN HOLY WEEK, MARCH 26

While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.

John 12:36a



As we approach Good Friday, Jesus begins to collect and sum up his most important teachings and messages with his followers. In today's passage from John, he reemphasizes the unique relationship Christians have with death: when a grain of wheat falls to the ground, what appears to be an end is, in fact, just the beginning. He then imparts a message that well applies to our long journey together this Lent: "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

This passage encapsulates Jesus' sense of urgency. Clearly, Jesus is referring to his own time on earth when he says, "The light is with you for a little while longer." However, I believe

his words are paradoxically timeless and universally applicable. In addition to urgency, he speaks of light as a symbol of hope, humanity, love and life—a primordial flame representing humanity's resilience over the forces of evil in the world.

Our time on earth is brief, and our moments with our loved ones are rare and precious. As Jesus faces his impending crucifixion, he also understands the formidable forces converging on his followers. While we are in the light, we must walk in it, taking steps forward in response to the Gospel's call, even as we acknowledge the day is growing shorter.

Today's readings

Psalms 71:1–14 | Isaiah 49:1–7

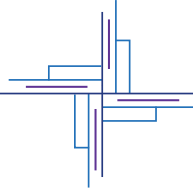
1 Corinthians 1:18–31 | John 12:20–36

When you feel like darkness is overcoming you, how can you return to the light? Think of a particular passage of Scripture, prayer or a hymn that draws you near to Jesus. Say—or sing—it today.

WEDNESDAY IN HOLY WEEK, MARCH 27

After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do."

John 13:27



Today's passage from John's Gospel portrays an intimate and dramatic scene of pain and betrayal. Jesus is eating supper with his close friends when he becomes troubled in spirit and announces to the group that one of them will betray him. He then signals with a piece of bread dipped in a dish who it will be, and knowing full well what is to come, Jesus tells Judas to carry out his betrayal quickly.

Sometimes when I reflect on the Last Supper, I picture the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci that depicts Jesus and his disciples all seated on one side of a very long table. John's portrayal, however, suggests something less formal and much more intimate.

In this small group of friends, Jesus is able to dip his piece of bread, hand it to Judas, and get his message across immediately. Not only is this group of friends physically close, Judas is portrayed as being even closer. John's Gospel makes a point of saying that Judas has been entrusted to make preparations for the celebrations and offer donations to the poor. The one who has been entrusted with great responsibility heads out into the night to carry out the ultimate betrayal.

Today's readings

Psalms 70 | Isaiah 50:4–9a

Hebrews 12:1–3 | John 13:21–32

What is John's Gospel trying to say to us here? What is the Gospel writer attempting to warn us about? How can it be that sometimes those who are seemingly closest to Christ betray all that he represents?

MAUNDY THURSDAY, MARCH 28

Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

John 13:16–17



On Maundy Thursday, we see Jesus using every part of his body to convey a single message: he and his followers have come to serve. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus states, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you as an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14–15).

Since Jesus mentions his role as a teacher, I want to reflect on his teaching methods. Jesus frequently conveys his messages at a slant. He teaches in parables, and Christians have been puzzling over their meanings for centuries. Jesus uses intentionally obscure gestures. For instance, when he faces a tough line of questioning, Jesus raises a coin and proclaims, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

In contrast, during the Last Supper, Jesus throws his full body weight to convey one clear message. He uses every tool at his disposal—dramatic, symbolic action and words—to emphasize his message that those who follow him are there to serve, not to be served. He desperately doesn't want his future followers to get this part wrong.

And yet we do. It is mildly funny to see how Peter immediately misunderstands what Jesus was trying to convey. Peter first refuses to have his feet washed and then he goes to the other extreme and asks Jesus to wash every part of him.

Today's readings

Psalms 116:1,10–17 | Exodus 12:1–4,(5–10), 11–14 | 1 Corinthians 11:23–26
John 13:1–17,31b–35

To what extent have we received Jesus' message about service? Do we really see our ministry as one of service or are we trapped in the role of waiting to be served?

GOOD FRIDAY, MARCH 29

*The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?”
He said, “I am not.”*

John 18:17



On this Good Friday, I invite us to reflect on the imperfections of Peter. This is the disciple who Jesus calls his rock, and who, in time, becomes “the rock” on which Jesus’ church is built. But John’s Gospel doesn’t present Peter in a particularly positive light. Some of Jesus’ last words to Peter are a chastisement: “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). Famously, Peter devotedly follows Jesus as he is bound and led away but also saves his own skin by denying three times that he ever knew Jesus. At the moment of Jesus’ arrest, “the rock” that Peter resembles isn’t granite—a rock that you can build on. Rather, he is more like porous pumice, rough around the edges and caving in all too easily.

Why does John’s Gospel include these embarrassing details about Peter, who becomes

perhaps the most important disciple? I see these details as a sign of hope.

Through Peter’s fallibility, the story involves all of us. Christianity is not only for the heroic, the unspeakably wise or the extremely brave. It is also a faith for people who overreact, who get it wrong quite often and who run away. On Good Friday, Jesus is arrested and led away to be crucified, and Peter utterly fails to live up to what he had previously promised to do. This is a source of embarrassment, yes, and yet it’s exactly this full and complicated humanity that Jesus redeems in the days to come.

Today’s readings

Psalm 22 | Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Hebrews 10:16–25 or 4:14–16; 5:7–9

John 18:1–19:42

Think of your life and spiritual journey. When have you, like Peter, failed to do what you promised? When have you, like Peter, been a rock for others?

HOLY SATURDAY, MARCH 30

So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.

Matthew 27:59–60



About a year ago, the United States Surgeon General warned of an epidemic of loneliness. He described acute isolation as significantly more widespread than previously imagined and as equally or more dangerous to Americans' health as smoking and obesity. I found myself thinking about this epidemic of loneliness while reading Matthew 27:57–66, which describes Joseph of Arimathea wrapping Jesus' body in cloth, laying the body in a tomb, rolling a stone to shut the tomb and walking away.

Jesus is isolated and shut away, separated by a wall of cold stone.

In Christian tradition, Holy Saturday commemorates the time when Jesus descended into the depths of hell. I recently saw a dramatic, medieval Christian painting portraying Jesus entering hell through the open

mouth of a crocodile-like demon. As a person in the twenty-first century, though, I imagine this scene somewhat less literally. Today, as Jesus is entombed, I imagine Jesus entering the hell of acute loneliness, descending to the depths of isolation and pain.

Tradition has it that Jesus enters hell in order to share in this experience—and to redeem and liberate us from its grip on our lives. Let us pray that this may be so. There is so much isolation and loneliness in our world today and so much hunger for genuine connection. Easter has much to do with the grace found in friendship and community.

Today's readings

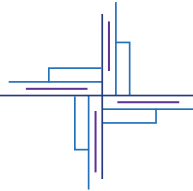
Psalms 31:1–4, 15–16 | Job 14:1–14 or
Lamentations 3:1–9, 19–24 | 1 Peter 4:1–8
Matthew 27:57–66 or John 19:38–42

Reflect on how the Good News of the Resurrection can take away the sting of loneliness. How can you be Christ's hands and feet in that work?

EASTER DAY, MARCH 31

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

John 20:18



This is the final reflection on this journey, and I want to end by saying what a privilege it has been to accompany you along the way during this season of Lent. Having walked through these forty days together, let us now share in Easter joy.

Each Gospel has a different account of the moment the disciples discover Jesus' empty tomb. In reading the four accounts this year, I was struck by the way angels appear in the texts. In John 20, two angels dressed in white sit where Jesus had been lying. In Mark 16, an angel appears as a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side of the interior of the tomb. In Matthew, the earth trembles as an angel descends from heaven to roll back the stone and sit on top of it. And in Luke 24, two angels assure the women who have come to Jesus' tomb that Jesus is alive.

Sometimes the angels bring words of reassurance. In other stories, they simply state

that Jesus has been raised. And in one instance, the angels are confused as to why Mary Magdalene is crying. Doesn't she know? Christ is alive and has been raised from the dead.

As we come to the end of this season, I am reassured by the physical placement of these angels. The Gospels tell us that these messengers are seated on top of, beside or just inside death's tomb. They have come to announce a new reality, and I wonder if we, as Christians, aren't called to join these angels in doing the same.

Fearfully, tremblingly, very imperfectly, we are called to sit in places of darkness and terror and proclaim that death has no victory here.

Today's readings

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24 | Acts 10:34–43 or
Isaiah 25:6–9 | 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 or
Acts 10:34–43 | John 20:1–18 or Mark 16:1–8

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Christ has risen indeed.

My Lenten Offering

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The world needs us now to share in acts of love for one another. Our vital programs are nurturing the potential of caregivers and young children, reducing violence against women and girls, strengthening communities' resilience to climate change and facilitating humanitarian response to disasters. Paul wrote in Galatians 6:9: "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up." Let us remain steadfast in working together for lasting change justly, compassionately and humbly in 2024 and beyond. Thank you again for your partnership.

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