

2026

# LENTEN MEDITATIONS



## Holy Habits



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# Lenten Meditations: Holy Habits

As a boy, I attended a Roman Catholic Franciscan boarding school. I sometimes felt on the margins as an Episcopalian: I couldn't receive Holy Communion or go to Confession, but I was very much a part of the school's life. I attended daily religion classes, sang in the church choir and prayed frequently. We prayed before meals, at the start of every class, at the end of evening study hall and just before lights out.

When I transitioned to public school, something felt off. The new school had many of the same outward structures—classrooms, sports, schedules—but something essential was missing. Eventually, I came to understand that I longed for the rhythm of prayer, which gave structure and meaning to everything else. It framed our days, our actions, even our relationships. That daily rhythm of prayer and work, school and recreation, was a blessing I carry with me to this day.

As an adult, I have tried to return to those early practices of daily prayer. Like many, I don't always succeed. My prayer life sometimes takes a back seat to work and other demands. But I know the difference it makes.

For Sister Monica Clare, the author of these Lenten Meditations, the journey was reversed. She began her adult life in a fast-paced career, surrounded by talented, ambitious and engaging people. By all accounts, she was thriving. But something vital was missing—something she later found in the Community of St. John Baptist, an Episcopal religious order of women. In that sacred community, she discovered the power and peace of the Divine Hours—those regular, intentional pauses throughout the day for prayer, reflection and Scripture. Through these quiet acts, Sister Monica found what so many of us long for: a life rooted in God, given shape, meaning and direction through the holy habit of prayer.

These meditations are an invitation for you to rediscover—or deepen—that same spiritual rhythm. Each day of Lent (excluding Sundays), you'll find a Gospel reading paired with a thoughtful reflection from Sister Monica Clare and a question for you to consider in response. You're encouraged to make space around each reading: through prayer, music, silence, or even shared conversation with others. You can journey through these meditations alone, or with fellow travelers in your community or congregation.

Wherever you are in your spiritual life, know that you are not alone. As you read and reflect, you are joining a global community of readers, all seeking to bring their lives into closer alignment with God through this sacred season.

May these meditations help you find the stillness, structure and spiritual depth that Lent so beautifully offers. And may you have a holy Lent.

Sean McConnell  
*Senior Director, Faith & Community Engagement*



## About the Author

Sister Monica Clare is an Episcopal nun, author and unlikely TikTok star whose journey from Hollywood to the Convent has inspired hundreds of thousands. Although she has more than 225,000 followers on her channel, @nunsenseforthepeople, Sister Monica Clare is less interested in being a traditional influencer than in helping others in their journey to become followers of Christ. In her videos and writing, she seeks to demystify religious life and encourage holy habits of prayer, Scripture engagement and care for others. As the Superior of the Community of St. John Baptist in Mendham, New Jersey, and soon to be an ordained priest, Sr. Monica brings both compassion and candor to her role as a spiritual counselor.

Before taking vows in 2012, Sister Monica's path looked very different: she worked as a photo editor in Los Angeles, performed in an acoustic rock duo and trained with the renowned Groundlings improv comedy group. In June 2021, she launched her TikTok presence not to seek fame, but to share joy, break stereotypes about religious life and offer hope in a world often marked by cynicism.

She is the author of the recently released book, *A Change of Habit*, a memoir that explores her unlikely vocation and, in her words, "reveals how much we can say yes to when we stop laboring to prove our worth to ourselves and others."

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## A Note from the Author

I live in an Augustinian religious community with eleven other sisters under the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Our community is both active and contemplative, meaning that we lead a life of prayer and contemplation alongside a life of active ministry to the world.

In our formation, we are taught that the life of prayer is our primary work, and that everything else comes from that life of prayer. Five times a day, we gather in the convent chapel to pray the Divine Office, also known as the Sanctification of the Hours. This ancient practice, which comes from traditions that predate Christianity, reminds us that time is not our own. It is a gift from God. We give thanks and praise to God by sanctifying the hours of the day through the chanting of Psalms, the reading of Scripture and the singing of hymns.

In the Anglican tradition, the Divine Office was considered so important that it was included in the Book of Common Prayer, even after the dissolution of the monasteries during the English Reformation. The monasteries were gone, but the Offices remained intact in Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline in the Prayer Book. At the Convent, we refer to Morning Prayer by its ancient name of Lauds and Evening Prayer by the equally ancient name of Vespers.

I have to admit that when I first entered the Convent, the Divine Office was the hardest thing for me to get used to. Chanting the Psalms and listening to Scripture readings at Lauds, Terce and Vespers every day bored me to tears. I didn't know if I'd ever get used to it. I tried hard to focus, but my restless mind would not be still. After a couple of years, I finally realized that I didn't need to try so hard. Our daily prayers had begun to change me just as regular exercise changes people at the gym. The words of Scripture, I realized, were not just words. They were a mystical experience that sank into my bones and became part of my DNA. The holy habit of daily prayer is not easy to get used to at first, but if you persevere, it changes you, and you start to feel that you can't live without it.

For these Lenten meditations, I am providing reflections on the Scripture readings for Vespers during Lent. In doing so, I hope to provide some added appreciation for the Sanctification of the Hours, allowing readers to become familiar with texts that are not typically heard in churches on Sundays, and to encourage holy habits of daily prayer and Scripture engagement. Each day, you'll see the listing for the full Gospel reading and an excerpt that guides the daily meditation.

Our religious community was founded in England in 1852, and generations of Sisters have faithfully continued the Sanctification of the Hours for 174 years.

"As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen."



ASH WEDNESDAY, February 18

*Luke 18:9-14*

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”  
— Luke 18:11-13

The season of Lent can be a time of giving up superficial vices, such as sugar or chocolate, but it can also be a time to take a deep dive into our own souls to determine what things are separating us from God. Modern minds often dislike the idea of grim Lenten penitence, but the practice can be compassionately reframed in our time as self-improvement. The Pharisee in today’s reading sees no need for self-improvement. He believes he is righteous because he fasts twice a week and tithes faithfully. The tax collector, on the other hand, is honest with himself and admits his faults. He is in despair over the things that separate him from God because he longs to be closer to his loving Creator.

Jesus tells this parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). He knew that they were being unrighteous by judging others while thinking they were above reproach. Twelve-step work refers to this type of approach as taking *someone else’s* inventory. Step Four instead requires a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves, a time for an honest and transformative examination of our own faults.

When I worked this step in Al-Anon, I was like the Pharisee, pointing out other people’s faults and congratulating myself on being so virtuous. I was soon dismayed to realize that my people-pleasing tendencies were actually dishonesty and fears that held me captive and were harming me and separating me from God. I still take inventory on a regular basis, and it humbles me when I realize how many defects of character I need to release.

*Reflect: In this prayerful season of letting go, can you offer up your fears and detrimental patterns to God and ask for release?*



THURSDAY, February 19

*John 17:1-8*

I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. — John 17:4-6

For many years, I practiced my faith on my own, thinking I'd be just fine without attending church. I was in my thirties when I realized my isolation was not working. I was in exactly the same place in my spiritual growth as I had been when I stopped attending church. I realized I needed community. When I began attending church regularly, my faith started growing by leaps and bounds. I grew even closer to God after joining a religious community where we all help each other along the road to our home with God.

In this passage from the Gospel of John, the disciples witness the Son praying to the Father, asking God to glorify him "with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." The prayer is part of the Farewell Discourse, and it occurs after the Last Supper, the night before the crucifixion.

In praying to God, Jesus shows us that he and the Father are one, but they are also part of a relationship between the coequal and coeternal persons of the Trinity. Jesus' human nature calls upon his divine nature and reveals a truth that is difficult for human minds to comprehend: One God and yet three distinct persons.

Jesus also shows us how we should pray. He is fully divine but also fully human, so he needs to ask God for strength just as we do. And he prays in community, just as we should.

*Reflect: How has your faith community helped deepen your connection with God?*



FRIDAY, February 20

*John 17:9-19*

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.  
— John 17:15-19

The reading for Evening Prayer today continues Jesus' prayer after the Last Supper. He is preparing his disciples for his death and resurrection, and he asks God to protect them after he returns to the Father. Their faith in Jesus is a dangerous thing. In their willingness to continue his ministry, they might face imprisonment, torture or death.

So why do they continue to follow Jesus?

Why did so many believers in the early church choose the road that often led to their own death? Why did they bring their friends, their family and even their children into a movement that risked retaliation from the murderous oppression of the Roman Empire?

Why do we continue to believe, after more than 2,000 years?

Why did I choose to follow God in a secular society where it's considered "ignorant" or "backward" to be religious? Why did I risk ridicule and humiliation by being a churchgoer while working in Hollywood and being surrounded by non-believers? Why didn't I choose the easy route of shunning religion in order to fit in with the "cool" people?

I believe we are called to continue Jesus' work for the same reason the early believers did: we have encountered Jesus, and we have seen the truth. We have experienced the vast, infinite love of God in our own lives, and we are willing to make sacrifices to live as God wills us to live.

*Reflect: What are some reasons that you follow Christ? What are some sacrifices you have made to be a follower of Christ? Are there sacrifices ahead?*





SATURDAY, February 21

*John 17:20-26*

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you. — John 17:20-21a

In this text, Jesus continues his prayer, the longest of all his prayers in the Gospels, and asks God for an intimate closeness between him and all believers “that they may all be one.” It is always fascinating to me that in that time and place, the Messiah did not come as a king or a great warrior. He didn’t speak of power and war and the conquering of enemies. He came to earth as a poor man who spoke about compassion and relationship, which are things modern minds find familiar, but ancient minds may have found confusing. If this Messiah has come to save us, they may have thought, then how does he expect to overthrow the Roman Empire with only talk of love and connection?

In 2001, the Community of St. John Baptist helped found an orphanage in Cameroon, West Africa, called the Good Shepherd Home. The motto of the home, which cares for more than a hundred children on a regular basis, is “May we all be one.” You can see that motto all around the home on plaques and painted on walls. A sign above the main door features these words with a painting of Jesus holding little children on his lap.

Jesus’ prayer shows us what God wants from us. His words and actions in the Gospels make it clear that God yearns for us to live in peace as one human family, loving one another as he loves us. Episcopal Relief & Development’s work is grounded in interfaith and intercultural collaboration. They work with core Episcopal and Anglican partners, in addition to other faith-based and secular partners, using an approach that is grounded in compassion and respectful of the dignity of all human beings. Transcending theological and political differences builds a stronger force of change than division and exclusion ever could.

*Reflect: Can you picture a world in which divisions have ceased and we consider every human to be our family member?*





MONDAY, February 23

*Mark 1:1-13*

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. — Mark 1:12-13

Today's Evening Prayer reading from the Gospel of Mark presents a brief description of John the Baptist, the Baptism of Jesus by John and Jesus being sent into the wilderness for forty days. This is the part of Jesus' story that the church remembers each year during the forty days of Lent.

We know from the other Gospels that John the Baptist lived in the desert and survived on a meager diet of locusts and wild honey. Mark says that John "appeared in the wilderness." We can surmise that both John and Jesus willingly submitted to this life of hardship in an extremely hostile environment to strengthen their relationship with God.

The forty days of Lent are a time of fasting and repentance when we practice our modern versions of this desert hardship by shedding tangible things or ideas that we hold dear. But why must we willingly submit to hardship to grow closer to God? In religious communities, we take vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. The vow of Poverty is often misconstrued by the public to mean deprivation and misery. Thankfully, that is not the case. We Sisters live out the vow of Poverty by removing anything that might distract us from God. We do not have our own bank accounts, we wear a habit every day and we regard everything in the Convent as "ours" and not "mine." We voluntarily give up marriage and children to spend more of our time with God, and for us, this act of sacrifice brings tremendous joy.

I once saw an addiction counselor on television who described sobriety as being "harder, but better." The Way of the Cross is harder, but it is far, far better than any other way.

*Reflect: What are the things that distract you from God? What spiritual practices and holy habits bring you closer?*



TUESDAY, February 24

*Mark 1:14-28*

Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. — Mark 1:25-28

In today's passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus begins his earthly ministry by calling Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him. They leave their families and their livelihood behind and go with Jesus to Capernaum, where he teaches in the synagogue and drives out an unclean spirit from a man.

I always wonder what it was that Simon, Andrew, James and John saw in Jesus that made them give up everything to follow him. In religious life, we also give up all we possess to devote our lives to Jesus, but our choice is made because we already know Jesus. We know of his divinity and miracles, and we know his teachings. We feel secure in following the one whom we know to be the Messiah. Those first apostles knew none of these things, and yet they chose to follow this gentle teacher whose very presence was powerful enough to draw them into his ministry.

The four fishermen may have thought that following Jesus would be a temporary thing, or they may have had a few doubts as they set out for Capernaum, but their doubts were probably dispelled as they heard the brilliance of his teaching in the synagogue. Their faith must surely have taken deep, permanent root when they witnessed Jesus casting out the unclean spirit. Maybe they were not at all sure until they heard the spirit proclaim, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"

*Reflect: What was it that made you realize Jesus is the Holy One of God? Was it something you were taught, or was it an experience?*



WEDNESDAY, February 25

*Mark 1:29-45*

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.  
— Mark 1:32-34

Jesus' ministry gains momentum as word of his miracles begins to spread. He visits the home of Simon and Andrew and heals Simon's mother-in-law. Then he heals many townspeople and casts out demons. He then sets out early the next morning and goes to a solitary place to pray.

Once again, we can see Jesus' time of prayer as a lesson to us. After a busy time of healing and teaching, he takes a break to pray. Any of us who serve the church, from volunteer to bishop, are aware that a pattern of busyness and rest is crucial to preserving our energy and avoiding burnout. In convents and monasteries, we balance our work time and our prayer time throughout the day, every day. If we are in the middle of a work project and the bell rings for chapel, we drop everything to go and pray. In secular work, you might put in your allotted hours and engage in prayer time outside your work hours. Monastics are taught that prayer is our work. Praying, in religious life, is our number one priority. This communal prayer time is sometimes referred to as the Daily Office, or daily work.

I am very much aware that if my work in the Convent were not punctuated by prayer at regular intervals, I would not have the strength to do my ministry. Prayer is a deep well from which I constantly draw nourishment and wisdom.

*Reflect: Do you pause for prayer during your workday? How can you create a holy habit of "touching base" with God on a daily basis?*



THURSDAY, February 26

*Mark 2:1-12*

At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” — he said to the paralytic — “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” — Mark 2:8-11

The story of the paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof by his four friends, then forgiven and healed by Jesus, is one of my favorite things to visualize in my prayer time. At this point in Mark, Jesus’ ministry has begun to attract large crowds, so the house where he is teaching is packed with people. The four friends who carry the paralyzed man to the house have so much faith in Jesus’ healing powers that they are not daunted by the crowd. They accomplish a near-impossible feat to get him into the presence of this man they have heard of—a man who performs miracles.

But Jesus doesn’t heal the paralyzed man right away. He first forgives the man’s sins. The teachers of the Law who see this think to themselves that this is blasphemy because only God can forgive sin. I am sure they were astonished when Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking. He explains his actions so that they “may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”

Then, Jesus heals the paralyzed man. All the people packed into the house see Jesus tell the man to get up, take his mat and walk. This is another wonderful moment to visualize in our prayer time. How would we feel if we were to witness such a thing take place? A man the townspeople know to be paralyzed suddenly stands and walks in full view of everyone. They cannot dismiss it as trickery. This is a miracle.

The suffering of the world is so immense that many turn away from it, thinking they do not have the power to help. Episcopal Relief & Development, along with other nonprofit organizations like it, is a witness to miracles. It may seem unrealistic to believe that enough donations can be gathered and enough programs launched to make a real difference in a world broken by injustice, but when we work together with Christ, we draw from an infinite well of miraculous healing.

*Reflect: A question to ask God in your prayer life: Why did Jesus forgive the man’s sins in addition to healing him?*



FRIDAY, February 27

*Mark 2:13-22*

When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” — Mark 2:17

One of my favorite bits of wisdom is: “The church is not a museum for saints. It is a hospital for sinners.” This aphorism reflects Jesus’ ministry on earth, in which he confounded all the religious leaders by spending his time with sinners and outcasts.

Tax collectors in Jesus’ time were deeply reviled by the Jewish people. They were Jews who had betrayed their own people to work for the oppressive Roman Empire. Their sin was compounded by extracting huge sums of money and taking an additional percentage to line their own pockets.

Jesus regularly dined with these traitors and with many others who were considered a threat to their way of life. Law, order and separateness were deeply ingrained values in the Jewish culture. Why would Jesus, who claimed to be God incarnate, want anything to do with them?

In ministering to both the righteous and the sinners, Jesus shows us something about the nature of God. The love of God is not something to be reserved only for those who walk the narrow way and follow all the rules. It is equally given to everyone, no matter what they have done.

I once visited a house in Bristol, England, where female sex workers could find refuge from their tumultuous world. The house provided a therapeutic environment, medical care and a daily meal for the women and staff. When my fellow Sister and I sat down to the meal, one of the women off the street said in her delightful accent, “Well, look at me sittin’ among the holy!” I turned to her and said, “You are holy, too. We are all holy, and God loves every one of us.” She looked stunned, then let out a laugh and pointed all around the table, saying, “Look at all of you! You’re all holy, too!”

God incarnate came to earth and dined with sinners and showed us very clearly that we are all loved, and that none of us is a lost cause. Jesus can redeem us all, even if we believe we are irredeemable.

*Reflect: Can you imagine God loving someone whom you consider to be evil or unredeemable? Can you imagine that God loves you and that person equally?*



SATURDAY, February 28

*Mark 2:23–3:6*

Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”  
— Mark 2:27

In religious life, we have a saying: “Charity overrules the Rule.” It means that sometimes we have to break our own strict Rule and Customary to follow the primary commandment of God to love our neighbor. If a visitor rings the doorbell when we’re in chapel, I can go down to greet that person. If I am visiting someone in the hospital or comforting someone in grief, I am automatically excused from chapel. I am a rule follower, but it’s nice to know that rules can be broken in the name of charity, our greatest grace.

In the Gospel text for today, the Pharisees disapprove of Jesus and his disciples for picking heads of grain on the sabbath, and in another incident, they watch him to see if he would heal a man on the sabbath. The Pharisees are committed to upholding the Law so that the Jewish people will be in a right relationship with God, who has commanded his chosen people to rest on the sabbath and refrain from doing any work.

Jesus, however, does not see feeding his disciples or healing a man as work. He sees these things as acts of mercy. He also becomes angry in the synagogue and asks, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). The Pharisees remain silent. In the grain fields, he tells them that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath, which in modern parlance basically means “Hey, I’m God, so I made that rule. I know exactly how to interpret it, and you don’t.”

These incidents also point to a much broader meaning beyond these confrontations. Jesus flips the script, emphasizing the inner motivations of the heart over an outward adherence to the Law.

*Reflect: What type of things get in the way of truly loving your neighbor?*



MONDAY, March 2

*Mark 3:7-19a*

He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. — Mark 3:9-10

“You need to learn to delegate!” is a refrain I hear all the time as the Sister Superior of the Community of St. John Baptist. My Sisters constantly remind me that I need to give parts of my workload to them, our staff members, our Associates or our Oblates. It is not easy for me to delegate because I always think I’m the only one who can do things “correctly.” My Sisters’ persistence reminds me that not only do I need to reduce my workload, but I also need to remember that I am not alone.

In this passage from the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus doing some delegating. Word of Jesus’ miraculous healing power has spread so quickly that he tells the disciples to arrange a boat “so that they would not crush him.” He then goes up a mountain, calls twelve of his disciples to him and appoints them as apostles to preach the Good News and cast out demons.

You may wonder: why would Jesus, the incarnation of God Almighty, need to delegate? As an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient being, God can do anything. Why would God need help?

Jesus shows us, in choosing his apostles, that God has no intention of operating alone. Jesus does not “need” us but instead wants us to be active participants in building the Kingdom of God. If we want things to change, we have to be agents of that change. God shows us the value and holiness of community and relationship through Jesus’ ministry on earth. Jesus was never a lone ruler dictating from above. He shows us that we must work as a community.

*Reflect: Where in your life could you benefit from working within a group instead of going it alone?*





TUESDAY, March 3

*Mark 3:19b-35*

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." — Mark 3:19b-22

These passages from the Gospel of Mark can be quite confusing. Jesus' followers are so numerous that he and the disciples can't even eat. His family members say that he has lost his mind. Then the teachers from Jerusalem accuse him of serving Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

This scenario brings to mind the chaotic lives of modern celebrities, who are hounded by so many people that they often hire bodyguards and live in seclusion.

Jesus' family and friends claiming, "he has gone out of his mind," doesn't seem very supportive, but is there a possibility they were trying to protect him from the authorities? They knew that Jesus' claim to be the Son of Man might get him arrested and executed. Is it possible they were trying to save him by claiming he knew not what he said?

Jesus doesn't flee to safety, though. He instead uses the situation to teach the radical, revolutionary idea that all of humankind is one family—God's family. To Jesus, there is no separation of family, tribe, race or nation.

I often wish that all the faiths could merge into one, and that we would all become one enormous, loving family. We would cease to oppress "them" to protect "us," and instead all work together in kindness and love. In my spiritual practice of the fearless and searching moral inventory, I am aware that I constantly need to examine any biases I may have toward others. I work hard to educate myself on how to be an effective advocate and ally, rather than assuming I am completely unbiased.

*Reflect: Do you ever look at another group of people as "them" and harbor feelings of fear or resentment toward them? How might you pray to respond with love and kindness?*



WEDNESDAY, March 4

*Mark 4:1-20*

He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." — Mark 4:2-8

As a child growing up in a Baptist church, I heard this story often. The Parable of the Sower was a favorite of our preacher, and it made such an impression on me that I still think of it quite often. Our preacher used this parable to guide the congregation in their efforts at evangelism. As good Baptists, we were all expected to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to everyone we encountered. Many of us, though, came to realize that not everyone is eager to hear the Good News. Our seatmate on a flight from New York to Atlanta might sigh and roll their eyes at the first utterance of the word "Jesus." Others might hastily put on their headphones to block out the noise of what they perceived as "Bible thumping."

Even when I worked at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in New York City, I made errors in our ministry to the unhoused people who slept on our pews every day. When I first started handing out toiletry bags to them, I came up with what I thought was a very holy and edifying booklet containing carefully chosen prayers and readings. Every day, I would find those booklets strewn under the pews or crumpled up in the side aisles. These people, I realized, didn't need words on paper. They needed me to show them the love of Christ by being compassionate toward them. Over the next few years, they taught me a great deal about evangelism.

The different areas Jesus describes in the parable represent the various kinds of responses to our proclamation of the Good News. Some people are like good soil, eager to learn and grow their faith abundantly, then germinate that faith in the world. Others are not as receptive, and they only receive the Good News temporarily before they are distracted away from it. Still others are closed off and unlikely to receive Christ's message at all. It takes a unique level of compassion to share the Gospel in a way that draws others in rather than drives them away.

*Reflect: How might you share the Gospel in ways that feel welcoming and meaningful?*



THURSDAY, March 5

*Mark 4:21-34*

For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. — Mark 4:25

Jesus presents three more parables to his disciples in this passage, which follows the Parable of the Sower in the Gospel of Mark. This verse from the first parable used to be very confusing to me. It seems to be in direct opposition to the ideals in the *Magnificat* and other Scriptures, where God promises to cast down the mighty from their thrones and satisfy the poor. I wondered why God would take from those who have little.

By the time I entered the Convent at age 46, I had spent an entire lifetime praying, worshiping and studying Scripture. I knew that I still had a lot to learn from a scholarly and theological perspective, but I thought my prayer life was full to the brim. God would soon show me that I was wrong.

My Novice Director, Sister Barbara Jean, told me that I had much to learn about prayer. "But how could that be?" I asked, "I have prayed in every possible way, and I am as close to God as I'll ever be." In spite of my smug pronouncements, she insisted that I take prayer classes with various Sisters. I thought it would be a waste of time.

My devotion was deep and had expanded steadily over nearly five decades, but the more I learned, the more I realized I still had light-years to travel in the realm of prayer. I had thought there was a list of standard ways to pray, but my Sisters taught me that there are infinite ways of praying. Listening to music, making art and even knitting can be prayer if they are approached intentionally. Anything that brings us closer to God is prayer. I never knew that.

I also learned that the closeness I felt with God was fairly superficial. The years I have spent in prayer at the Convent have deepened that closeness and taught me that there is no limit to the depths of a relationship with God. I could pray for a lifetime and still grow closer every day.

Jesus' words show us that the more we pray, worship and learn, the more we will be given. God's love is infinite, and we can journey into that love, closer and closer, for eternity.

*Reflect: What things bring you closer to God? Do you feel that you can go deeper into your prayer life?*



FRIDAY, March 6

*Mark 4:35-41*

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" — Mark 4:37-40

As a spiritual director, I find that most of my directees are either ordained clergy or are in the process of ordination. I always use this miracle of Jesus calming the storm to provide context for the work of ministry. The church, I tell them, is not a shiny, seaworthy vessel with perfect crew members guiding it. It is, instead, a leaky ship with a crew of all sorts, and it is truly a miracle that it still remains afloat. Church folks do not sign up for an easy journey. But we try our best to keep the church going through hard times with very human, fallible passengers and crew.

This story is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and it echoes Psalm 107, which recounts God's deliverance of the Israelites from their many struggles. Verses 28 and 29 of the Psalm say: "Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper and quieted the waves of the sea."

Jesus, as the incarnation of God, calms the waves of the sea.

Our boat, the church, is fragile and tiny against the powerful forces that rage against it. Our ministry is often shaken by forces beyond our control. The stress of trying to remain faithful to our discipleship can sometimes lead to disillusionment and burnout. Jesus, in this story, is sleeping peacefully on a cushion while the storm rages. He is baffled as to why the disciples are afraid.

When Jesus calms the raging waters, he is showing us that even in the midst of the storm, God is still in charge. God has power over every difficulty we face, and all we have to do is ask for God's help.

*Reflect: How has your own spiritual path been tossed about by the waves of the world?*



SATURDAY, March 7

*Mark 5:1-20*

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. — Mark 5:14-15

In today's passage from Mark, Jesus casts out demons from a man in the region of the Gerasenes. To our modern minds, this man would seem to be suffering from mental illness or some physical illness that caused him to live out a tortured existence. After Jesus orders, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!", the demons call out to Jesus, begging him to send them into a herd of swine.

Why does Jesus pause after commanding the demons to leave the man? Why does he ask the demon its name, which it says is Legion because "we are many?" Why does he listen to their request and grant it?

There are many theories as to why Jesus seems to grant mercy on the legion of demons. The one I identify with the most is that Jesus is showing his power over everything, including evil. We humans have no idea what "demons" really are, and we have no clear indication of God's relationship to these "demons" in the wider context of creation. Jesus shows us here that there are still many things we do not know. In that time and place, people who suffered from mental illness were said to be possessed by evil spirits. We now know that these things can be a manifestation of genetics or environment and often relate to brain chemistry and structure, but we still have no idea why these circumstances occur or why they are part of God's creation.

I have seen many friends and family members beset by their own demons of addiction and alcoholism. It is heartbreaking to watch good people in the throes of something that overtakes their true selves and seeks to destroy them. When I ask God to help these people, I don't ask God to treat their symptoms. Instead, I ask God to transform their souls so that they can return to themselves.

*Reflect: Can you take these questions into your prayer life? Can you ask God to help you understand why these "demons" are among us?*



MONDAY, March 9

*Mark 5:21-43*

He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease... He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). — Mark 5:34, 41-42a

I don't know about you, but God's timing is always much too slow for me. I am a quick-thinking, decisive person, and I need God ASAP. I worked in entertainment advertising for twenty years, and everything had to happen instantly. Our deadlines were tight and non-negotiable. While I was working for those twenty years, I was begging God, "Please let me be a nun. I know I am called to it. Why can't I do it NOW?" I had to be out of debt to enter a Convent, and it seemed like it was taking forever. I wasn't sure if God would ever answer my prayers. When I entered the Convent in 2012, I was 46 years old. In the years since I have been in community, I have realized that all the skills I learned in advertising were exactly the skills I needed to proclaim the Gospel to the world.

Today's Gospel passage gives us useful insight into God's timing. The two healing stories contain parallels. Jesus heals a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years, and he heals a young girl who is twelve years old. They are both daughters. The young girl is the daughter of a synagogue leader, and the woman is referred to by Jesus as "daughter."

Jesus shows no partiality to either the daughter of a prominent authority figure or an outcast "unclean" woman who violates protocol to obtain access to Jesus' miraculous powers. Both are equal in God's sight, so Jesus lingers to speak with the woman who touches his cloak and seems to be wasting valuable time as the synagogue official's child lies dying. Just as in the story of Lazarus from the Gospel of John, he is portrayed as waiting too long, allowing someone to die. And yet, in God's perfect timing, Jesus takes the hand of the girl and heals her.

God is all-powerful: no matter how dire the situation is, it is never too late. Healing and transformation can take place at any stage of the human journey. God can heal by restoring us to this life or by bringing us into eternal life, and God's timing is always perfectly aligned with God's plan.

*Reflect: Have you ever known a person who was healed or transformed after it seemed too late for them? Think about God's timing in your own life. Have there been situations when, in retrospect, God's timing turned out to be just what you needed?*



TUESDAY, March 10

*Mark 6:1-13*

Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief... “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” — Mark 6:4-6, 11

In the twenty years that I lived in Hollywood, I encountered many non-believers. Instead of waving a Bible in their face and telling them they were doomed to hell if they didn't repent and accept Jesus, I listened to their reasons for rejecting God and religion. Most of them made excellent points. They were shocked when I told them I agreed with their reasons, and I tried to gently let them know that not all religions are oppressive and exclusive, and not all faith traditions portray God as angry and judgmental. I gradually began to realize that most people are completely unaware that they have choices in their spiritual journey and that they, like many of us, are longing to know there is a safe and loving place for them.

As followers of Christ, we are called to spread the Good News to all creation, but in these two passages, Jesus reminds us that we will sometimes encounter rejection. Jesus himself is rejected by the people in his own hometown. He then tells the disciples what to do if they go into a town and their teaching is rejected.

I am always amazed when I see people attempting to pound Jesus' message angrily into non-believers. Any good teacher will tell you that this is not going to work. Jesus shows us here that if we try to share the Good News and encounter rejection, we simply move on. He gives us the example of a peaceful response to unbelief rather than an angry reaction.

*Reflect: How have you successfully or unsuccessfully modeled your faith to non-believers?*





WEDNESDAY, March 11

*Mark 6:13-29*

The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. — Mark 6:26-29

In the Gospel of Mark, the story of John the Baptist is told as a flashback to explain King Herod's extreme reaction to the ministry of Jesus. We see the conflict within Herod as he tries to appease his subjects and his family while fighting his desire to tolerate John because he "feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him." Herod caves in to the pressures around him, though, and orders John to be beheaded.

Our Community specifically chose John the Baptist as our patron because of his call to repent. The Community of St. John Baptist was formed in 1852 within an existing ministry that helped poor women transform their lives by gaining an education and acquiring valuable job skills.

When John called the people to repent, he was not asking them to cower and await punishment. Instead, this call for repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, which roughly translates into a change of thinking or a turning around to a different point of view. John, our founders believed, was calling the world to change its thinking and to care for the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed. I appreciate that Episcopal Relief & Development's approach focuses not on a top-down rescue but on strengthening the existing gifts and resources of local communities. In earlier times, both foreign and domestic missionary efforts sometimes imposed their own ideas rather than hearing the people's needs. Superficial top-down rescue cannot heal deeply, but collaborative empowerment sparks real transformation.

Herod silenced the voice of John the Baptist, but he did not silence the message. John pointed the way to Jesus Christ, who continued to call on the world to turn away from greed and violence and embrace compassion and justice.

*Reflect: Can you think of people who are carrying out John and Jesus' call to repentance in our modern age?*



THURSDAY, March 12

*Mark 6:30-46*

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.  
— Mark 6:41-44

As a child, I used to wonder, “If Jesus could perform miracles and God has power over everything, why would he just... feed people?” Why, I wondered, didn’t he overthrow the Roman Empire? Why wouldn’t he bless the ground so that there would be an abundance of food every day? When I delved deeper into the symbolism of this story, I began to understand the importance of this miraculous feeding of the five thousand. In the story, Jesus looks at the crowd and has compassion for them because he sees that they are like sheep without a shepherd. He wants the crowd to stay so he can teach them, but his disciples tell him they need to disperse the crowds and move on, because there is nothing to feed them. It would be better, they say, to allow all these people to go somewhere else and get food. Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” Then they begin asking questions about logistics. Jesus solves the problem by dividing the five loaves and two fish into enough for everyone.

The COVID pandemic closed down the world in March 2020, only three months after I had been elected Superior. We had to shut down our retreat house and our guest ministry, and the parishes where we worked were closed indefinitely. Without our guest ministry income and our outreach to the church, I was seized by a deep terror that our Convent would not survive or worse, that our Sisters vulnerable to respiratory illnesses might die. Nearly every day, I prayed to God, “Please help us.” The parish where I served stepped in and provided us with donated food from local grocery stores. Our friends and associates dug deep into their pockets and donated twice their usual amount. They also helped us learn how to do ministry online and reach more people than ever before. With God’s protection, we survived. None of our Sisters were lost to COVID, and we had a miraculously generous amount of food and support.

There are many meanings to this miracle, but my current understanding is that it means God always supplies enough for everyone. It is only through greed, war and injustice that people are made to starve. “You give them something to eat” is God’s message to us. There is always enough. We just need to devise a system in which everyone has all they need, and people step in to help.

*Reflect: Where have you seen examples of corrupt systems that cause poverty and hunger? How can you play a role in forming a more just system?*



FRIDAY, March 13

*Mark 6:47-56*

And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. — Mark 6:56

In today's reading, Jesus first walks on water, then, when the boat lands at Gennesaret, he begins healing the sick. He had gone up a mountain to pray, as his disciples went ahead to Bethsaida, but then nearly scared them to death by appearing to walk on water as the wind tossed their boat around.

My favorite part of this passage is "He intended to pass them by," which evokes a hilarious image of Jesus strolling casually past the boat when the disciples see him and think he is a ghost. This story is a bit difficult to understand, and it unfolds in a somewhat comical way because the disciples are so human in their confused reaction. They remind me of all of us. I think we'd all react in much the same way as we tried to wrap our primitive, human minds around the incarnation of the Divine.

When the whole confused band of disciples arrives at Gennesaret with Jesus, great crowds bring people to him for healing. These people, too, do not fully understand who this miracle worker actually is. The idea that any man could be God, come to earth in human form, is just beyond them. To them, he is simply a human who can heal.

*Reflect: When was a time in your life when you were truly surprised by God's presence?*



SATURDAY, March 14

*Mark 7:1-23*

And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."  
— Mark 7:20-23

I have always considered this passage a perfect message for Lent. The Pharisees see Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands, and Jesus replies to their rebukes by quoting Isaiah and telling them, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Jesus is not just bashing the Laws of the Jewish people here and being disobedient. He is talking about hypocrisy.

There are so many times in my daily life when I wish that people I encounter would "act better" or "do the right thing." Jesus reminds me that I have no control over other people's words and actions. I can only control my own words and actions by setting healthy boundaries and responding thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively. I sometimes fall back on my old pattern of "Well, he made me mad," or "She made me feel judged." But then I remember that no one can make me feel anything. My feelings are based on my own thoughts and perceptions of what enters my heart from the outside. Transforming my reactions into healthy responses is something that happens deep within.

Jesus reminds us to avoid the hypocrisy of following the Law in a superficial manner. He tells us instead to follow God's Law within our hearts and cleanse ourselves of inclinations toward destructive behaviors. The Pharisees' judgment of people who don't wash their hands is superficial compared to their uncharitable behavior. Many of Jesus' followers were probably poor or lacked access to ritual cleansing vessels and clean water. The Pharisees would have done far better to help the poor in front of them rather than condemning them for breaking the Law.

*Reflect: What are some ways that you have learned to transform destructive reactions into charitable responses?*



MONDAY, March 16

*Mark 7:24-37*

They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” — Mark 7:37

As part of my training for the ordination process, I worked as a chaplain intern in a large hospital for nine months. Over the course of those months, I often reflected on how a hospital is a place where people of all faiths, economic backgrounds and cultures live under one roof. As a Christian chaplain, I had to learn ways of relating to all the patients I visited, despite our superficial differences.

When I was called to the bedside of a man who was dying, I looked at the religious affiliation in his chart and saw that he was Muslim. I immediately thought, “Uh oh. This guy does not want a Christian chaplain to visit him.” When I arrived at the bedside, the man’s son, daughter-in-law and toddler grandson were there. Despite my fear of offending or upsetting them, they welcomed me. They even trusted me to babysit their adorable toddler while they called friends and family. In that place of healing, there were no walls between us.

Today’s reading from Mark contains two stories of healing. Jesus casts a demon out of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter, then heals a man who was deaf and mute.

The woman is not Jewish, so Jesus tells her that his miracles and teachings are not for “the dogs,” code for those who are not God’s chosen people. She persists in her pleas, though, and Jesus grants her request, saying, “For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter.” The deaf-mute man is part of the chosen people, but he is an outsider because he is perceived as defective and sinful because of his physical imperfections. Jesus does not refuse to heal either of these people. Instead, he shows us the real meaning of God’s Law.

*Reflect: How can you find common ground with those who are different from you or who may be considered “outsiders” in a social setting?*



TUESDAY, MARCH 17

*Mark 8:1-10*

Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled. — Mark 8:6-8a

I am not a foodie. When people start waxing rhapsodic about a recipe and rattling off all the ingredients to me, or they list every element of a wonderful meal they had, my mind goes to static. I couldn't possibly care less. I eat to stay alive. I enjoy eating, but I do not have any interest in cooking or pondering myriad ingredients and oven temperatures.

When I try to understand the importance of food in the ministry of Jesus, though, I sometimes need to put myself in the shoes of someone who is a foodie. I challenge myself to view it through the lens of someone who has a strong, profound connection to cooking and feeding. For people like that, food is far, far more than just something you wolf down to stay alive. Food, for them, contains a whole universe of taste and smell and symbolism. It is a holy ministry, in their perception, to feed people.

Jesus feels compassion for the people who have traveled far to see him. His soft heart knows that they must be hungry and tired, so he wants to feed them. The wisdom of God is the spiritual food that nourishes and strengthens us, and Jesus adds to that by providing tangible food that strengthens our physical selves. God always seeks to nourish us and tend to our needs.

*Reflect: What does food symbolize to you? How do the two feeding stories in Mark shape your understanding of the spiritual food of God?*



WEDNESDAY, March 18

*Mark 8:11-26*

Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod."

— Mark 8:14-15

Well, here we are talking about bread again.

One of the many gifts of the Divine Office is the consecutive reading of Scripture passages, which provides continuity and context as we follow Jesus on his way to the Cross. Yesterday, there were seven loaves of bread. Today, the poor, distracted disciples forget to bring enough bread, so they only have one loaf. We might expect Jesus to multiply this bread, too, but instead he uses it as a warning. He has just rebuffed the Pharisees who asked him for a sign, and he cautions his followers to watch out for the yeast, or teachings, of the Pharisees. Being fully human and fully divine, Jesus gets as exasperated with the disciples as he does with the Pharisees, asking, "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?"

Jesus and the disciples then go to Bethsaida, where there is indeed a man who has eyes and fails to see. The man is brought to Jesus for healing. Jesus spits on the man's eyes, and when he asks if the man can see anything, the man replies, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." This wonderfully vivid response is so clear that we can easily visualize the scene. He is beginning to see, but like the disciples, he is only about halfway there. When Jesus puts his hands on the man's eyes, he can see clearly.

I have been attending church since I was about a month old, and I have studied the Bible throughout my life. However, I am still only about halfway to understanding the nature of God and the full significance of the Incarnation of God in Jesus. I am like the blind man, about halfway there. I also relate to the disciples and the Pharisees who struggle to comprehend what Jesus says and does. His wisdom is so much greater than human understanding that I know I will still be only about halfway toward seeing it clearly at the end of my life.

The good news is Jesus never gives up on us. Just as he did with the blind man, he keeps trying to heal and transform us.

*Reflect: What are some of the teachings and actions of Jesus that you have trouble understanding? Can you bring those questions into your prayer life and ask God to give you eyes to see?*





THURSDAY, March 19

*Mark 8:27–9:1*

He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” — Mark 8:29a

The tone of Mark’s Gospel changes dramatically at this point from the exuberant joy of crowds and miracles to a sober warning of suffering and death. Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus then tells the disciples that he must face rejection, be killed and rise again.

After this shocking revelation, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. This story is also told in Matthew, where Peter says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22b). Jesus responds by rebuking Peter harshly: “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter is doing what any good friend would do, but Jesus reminds him that the concerns of God do not conform to the limits of human thought.

Whenever I ask for God’s help with a tough situation, I intentionally visualize what I want, I visualize five other possible outcomes and then I leave a space for the Holy Spirit. Over the years, I have realized that if I cling too tightly to my own version of the outcome, I am rigidly following my own will instead of submitting to the will of God. Whenever I remember to leave room for God’s plan, God always comes up with a much better solution than I ever could.

Peter loves his friend Jesus. He does not want him to suffer and die. He wants to do everything in his power to protect Jesus from this terrible fate. Even though Peter is acting out of love, Jesus admonishes him, reminding him that God’s will must be done. Peter’s own will, in this situation, is set against God’s plan just as Satan and the forces of destruction are set against it.

All of us want to prevent bad things from happening, but we often fail to recognize how everything we encounter, both good and bad, is part of God’s larger, eternal story.

*Reflect: Are there any situations in your life story where God’s solution was better than what you wanted to happen?*



FRIDAY, March 20

*Mark 9:2-13*

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them. — Mark 9:2

The Transfiguration is another one of those wonderfully visual stories where it is relatively easy to put ourselves into the scene and imagine it happening right in front of us. The Transfiguration is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—and it provides us with another glimpse into the unfathomable nature of God.

Jesus asks Peter, James and John up to a mountaintop, and there they see Jesus transformed into blinding white light. Moses, who also went onto a mountaintop and encountered God in the flaming light of a burning bush, appears along with the prophet Elijah. Jesus speaks to Moses and Elijah as Peter, James and John stand awestruck. Peter wants to make three tents to contain the three, just as the Israelites made a tent and then the temple for the presence of the Holy of Holies. Just then, though, God's voice declares that Jesus is his beloved son just as he did at Jesus' baptism.

In this story, as in yesterday's reading, Jesus is revealing who he truly is in stages. First, he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter recognizes him as the Messiah. Then he speaks of God's will for him in the cross and resurrection, and now he appears to them in full glory, which leaves them no doubt about the enormity of their situation.

Our own journey of faith also involves getting to know Jesus in stages. When I was a child, growing up in the Southern Baptist Church in the late 1960s, I thought of Jesus as a cool, laid-back hippie cousin of mine. Jesus was my buddy. I talked to him. We prayed to him at church, and everything was positive and easy. We did not observe Holy Week at our church—just Christmas and Easter with all the candy and celebration.

As I matured in my faith, however, I began to understand the deeper meaning of Jesus' identity. When I became an Episcopalian, I avoided going to Holy Week services because they were too upsetting to me. When I finally decided to face the uncomfortable feelings of Holy Week, my faith deepened significantly, and I began to comprehend the Good News of Jesus Christ: God has power over death.

*Reflect: Who was Jesus to you as you grew in faith? How has your concept of Jesus changed since you first began to believe?*



SATURDAY, March 21

*Mark 9:14-29*

Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me."

— Mark 9:17-19

Whenever I hear this passage read aloud in church, I have to stifle a chuckle when Jesus says, "How much longer must I put up with you?" Who among us hasn't either said that or thought it at some point when we are frustrated with the people around us? Jesus has tried to explain to the people who he is. He has performed many miracles, and the disciples have witnessed astonishing things, and yet, the people still do not fully believe that he is the Son of God.

When I began my studies as a hospital chaplain, one of my Sisters in the Convent told me about a prayer practice she had learned while working as a nurse, which involved thanking God for healing instead of asking God to heal. This approach can be used for others as well, so I began praying for people in the hospital by saying, "Thank you, God, for this healing miracle" instead of asking for one. I asked my Sister, "But what if I thank God for the miracle and then the patient dies?" She said, "That means that God has healed the person into the next life instead of healing them in this life. That, too, is a miracle." This prayer practice reinforces what Jesus does in his healing miracles. He makes it a participatory exercise instead of just putting his hands on someone and being done with it. Many times in the Gospels, he points out that the person's faith brought them healing. In today's story, the boy's father begs Jesus, "If you are able to do anything, help us!" and Jesus responds with, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." The boy's father then utters one of the most profound pleas in all of Scripture: "I believe; help my unbelief!"

When we appeal to God for healing and transformation, we are active participants in that healing through our faith. Later in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, "So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24). This kind of faith can be ours, especially if we ask of Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief."

*Reflect: How can you be an active participant in healing? What holy habits might help in this journey?*



MONDAY, March 23

*Mark 9:30-41*

He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." — Mark 9:35-37

Some of the best leaders, teachers and priests I have ever met are people who serve others, and the worst leaders I've ever met are people who want to control others with fear and intimidation. A good leader asks the people, "What gifts has God given you, and what would you like to accomplish with those gifts?" Leading in this way leans into an asset-based community development approach, a philosophy that guides Episcopal Relief & Development's work.

Today's Vespers reading contains three stories in which Christ educates the disciples and also us modern believers about how religion, government and all systems of the world should operate. He chose to be incarnate on earth at a time when the hierarchies of society were fixed and when humans had chosen to assign different values to different human beings. Slavery was an integral part of the ancient world, and slaves were considered to be of lowest value. Children had low value in society because they were dependent and not yet productive.

In his ministry, Jesus turns that entire system on its head and reminds his disciples that no one is greater than another. He rejects their question about who among them is the greatest by saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

*Reflect: Can you imagine a world in which all humankind is of service to each other? What would that look like?*



TUESDAY, March 24

*Mark 9:42-50*

And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

— Mark 9:47-48

When I was a kid in the Baptist church, we heard a lot about hell, and I can assure you that it kept me on the straight and narrow. Visiting preachers would deliver sermons on hell, and we learned all about the long list of things that might lead us into the lake of unquenchable fire. We even saw very low-budget scary films and slideshows about it, and I truly believed that they were scientifically accurate representations of a real flaming place with people wailing and gnashing their teeth just like in the movie.

Jesus talks a lot about hell in this passage, but what is he saying? He tells us that unless we rid ourselves of things that are destructive to us or others, we will “go to hell.”

The original Greek for the word hell in this passage, and at least seven other places in the Gospels, is Gehenna (γέεννα). Gehenna was an actual place outside Jerusalem, which has variously been described as a constantly burning garbage dump, a place of unclean burial for outcasts or a place of pagan child sacrifice. Was Jesus using Gehenna as an example of what hell is like, or was he using it as a metaphor for the hell we experience in our lives when we choose the path of harm and destruction?

What the actual, empirical truth is, we have no idea. Theologians and scholars have pondered the concept of hell over the centuries, and no one has ever figured it out. Nobody has ever been there to bring back a report. Jesus is speaking of something here that is beyond our comprehension. We do not know what this hell is, but we can comprehend the idea of ridding ourselves of destructive things. We know that following God will help us avoid hell, whether it's in our own lives or takes some other form.

*Reflect: What were you taught about hell? What is your belief about hell now?*



WEDNESDAY, March 25

*Mark 10:1-16*

But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”  
— Mark 10:6-9

In this passage in Scripture, Jesus seems to be condemning divorce. As you can imagine, his words here cause some discomfort for many people. I know some preachers who dread the Sunday when this Gospel is appointed for the sermon. I completely understand. It makes me uncomfortable, too, because I am also divorced, and so are some of my Sisters in the Convent. Many of my friends and family members have divorced and remarried. What is Jesus saying about all of us?

As is always the case with Scripture, there are many ways of interpreting Jesus’ words. Even in his own time, Jewish husbands were allowed to divorce their wives. Roman wives were also allowed to divorce their husbands. It was an accepted practice that was in keeping with the Law. Jesus says, “Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote this commandment for you.” Jesus acknowledges that divorce is in the Law according to Moses, but he also points out that Moses wrote the Law because of the people’s hardness of heart.

The interpretation of this passage that makes the most sense to me is that Jesus is holding up an ideal for the union of two people. They should love each other to the point of becoming one flesh. They should be kind to each other, and they should take care of each other. It is only through human weakness that spouses become abusers, drive their families into financial ruin, or commit any of the many other destructive acts that take root in the human heart. Jesus is saying, “This is how it should be. Love should be eternal. Love is from God. Why can’t you people figure out how to love each other?” It is in keeping with his commandment for all of us to love one another.

Jesus then shows his boundless love by blessing the little children after the disciples scolded them. This is one of the few instances in Scripture where he becomes angry. He has compassion for these innocents, and he was indignant that they were being mistreated. In all his actions, Jesus demonstrates the essence of true love.

*Reflect: How do you deal with challenging passages in scripture? Do you have a prayerful response that helps you with this encounter?*



THURSDAY, March 26

*Mark 10:17-31*

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” — Mark 10:21

When I was discerning the call to be a nun, this passage leapt into my mind. I was 46. I had a successful career as a photo editor in Hollywood, and I had dozens of friends. My job was stressful, yet I was always terrified of getting fired. I clung to the security of the paycheck even though it was costing me my health. I'd been like that since I was 7 years old, knocking on doors offering to rake leaves for the neighbors for a quarter. Not earning money, getting rid of all my belongings and moving away from all my friends was daunting to me. I had been earning money since I was a child. How would I survive without a paycheck?

I put off joining the Convent for many years as I hovered over the threshold to the unknown. Then I was told I needed to be out of debt to enter a community, so that added another ten years. I often despaired that I would never get out of debt and that I had let God down by waiting too long. Somehow, though, God found a way. My boss suddenly gave me a significant pay raise. Friends asked me to do freelance work, and someone at church anonymously gave me \$1,000. I started getting rid of my stuff and realized it all seemed like heavy weights to me. The idea of being free of all the clutter, knick-knacks and dishes I'd never used started to feel good.

When I was finally accepted into the Community of St. John Baptist, I quit my job and drove across the country with a friend. Any time I was seized with fear because I was jobless, I would repeat the words “God will take care of me” as a mantra. By the time we reached the East Coast, I had convinced myself that my mantra was the truth. I put my life into God's hands and trusted that God would take care of me.

God then showed me the abundance of a life lived in his service. I have no income and no bank account, yet I feel more cared for now than I ever have. We Sisters have all we need within our lives of Holy Poverty. We live simply, but we are blessed beyond measure by God's goodness.

*Reflect: What do you think of this passage? Monastics take it literally, but it can also be interpreted differently for modern minds.*





FRIDAY, March 27

*Mark 10:32-45*

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." — Mark 10:35-39a

At this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus and his disciples begin their journey to Jerusalem. On the way, Jesus tries once again to explain what is to come—his suffering, death and resurrection—but the disciples still don't get it. They do not want to believe that their teacher and friend will endure such suffering.

Their denial is such that James and John come to him and ask if they can be the equivalent of a chief minister and lord chamberlain by sitting at his right and left hand in glory. Instead of being impressed by their wish to serve, Jesus scolds them. Clearly, they are envisioning a future that is the opposite of God's plan.

Oh, how many times I've done that! When I joined the Convent, I prayed for God to use me in any capacity to build up the church and the religious life. I was grateful for the opportunity to live and serve in New York City in a ministry to the unhoused. Every day, I prayed fervently to do all I could for my Savior. At the end of every one of those prayers, I would always ask, "And please, God, whatever you do, please don't let me ever be elected Sister Superior."

And guess what God did? In 2018, the Superior told me I'd be coming back to the mother house from New York. I was heartbroken. I did not want to leave my ministry there, and I did not want to leave all my friends and colleagues. The community insisted, though, and I grudgingly came home. When I returned from New York that summer, various Sisters kept pulling me aside and whispering that they wanted to elect me Superior. That was why I had been told to return to Mendham.

I prayed, "OK, God, we talked about this. Remember? That is the one thing I cannot do. I am woefully unqualified! Surely these nuns will come to their senses if you intervene! Please Lord, take this cup from me."

In spite of my pleas and my fervent attempts to keep my story on my track, I was elected Superior less than a year after I made my life profession to become a nun.



My prayer after the election was, “All right, God, if you’re going to force me to face my fears, you’ll have to run this community through me. I cannot do it, but I can be the instrument of your will for us.” This past December, I was re-elected to a second five-year term.

The disciples were focused on their own vision of Jesus reigning supreme on an earthly throne with a firm hierarchy of disciples in place. God’s plan was, as always, much better.

*Reflect: When has God made you face your fears? How did you feel about God’s plan as opposed to your own?*



SATURDAY, March 28

*Mark 10:46-52*

Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. — Mark 10:51-52

Jesus heals the blind in all four Gospels, and each story is deeply moving. Earlier in Mark, he heals a blind man by spitting and making mud. Here, Jesus simply says, “Your faith has made you well.” Mark’s telling of this story is so vivid that it is easy to put ourselves into the scene and hear the blind beggar calling out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” We can see the man spring up, throw off his cloak and rush to Jesus to be healed.

How strong this beggar’s faith must have been, that it brought about his healing. Jesus tells him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” What great faith he must have had to recognize who Jesus truly was, even without being able to see him. In the darkness of his blindness, the beggar could still see the light.

The healing of the blind, of course, also has a symbolic meaning. Jesus is trying to make the world see the truth, and even his disciples are blind to it. Sadly, humans in the past—and even today—are still blind to the full reality of God’s glory. The world is still choosing not to follow Jesus’ command to serve one another in love and to make the least of us the greatest.

This is one of the Gospel passages that inspired the Jesus Prayer, which is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It is meant to be repeated over and over, and it was first used by the Desert Mothers and Fathers in Egypt in the fourth century. When done consistently over time, it is a deep and powerful way to invite God’s mercy into our blindness. I highly recommend it.

*Reflect: When have your eyes been opened on your spiritual journey?*



## MONDAY of Holy Week, March 30

*Mark 11:12-25*

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. — Mark 11:12-14

After the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus and the twelve go out to Bethany. On their way back to Jerusalem the next day, Jesus becomes hungry and looks for figs on a tree but finds none. He tells the fig tree it will never bear fruit again, and the group journeys on.

When they reach the temple, Jesus becomes angry and drives out the people who were buying and selling there. This scene is particularly striking to me because it's the only one, to my knowledge, where Jesus becomes truly angry. He has been frustrated in some instances, but this is the only time when he is so furious that his anger becomes physical. He overturns the tables of the moneychangers and the animal vendors and says: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

Whenever I try to determine if something is worthy of my righteous anger, I look to the person of Jesus. What angered him? What frustrated him? Of all the things that happen to him—the nails, the scourging, the mocking and the ridicule—the only thing that truly brings his wrath is when people are ripping off the poor. Jesus, as the incarnation of God, wants his house to be a place of holiness and prayer. He wants the poor to be lifted up and treated with compassion. Instead, the people in their human blindness have figured out how to turn the temple into the ancient world's version of a tourist attraction.

Jesus is teaching us what is worthy of our anger and how we can use that anger to break down systems of injustice that take advantage of the poor. Because Mary and Joseph were poor, they had to exchange their limited funds with a moneychanger for temple currency to buy two small sacrificial doves to present their son at the temple. The usual sacrifice in these circumstances was a lamb, but the poor were permitted to purchase doves. Mary and Joseph were some of the poor people being exploited every day in God's house.

After Jesus and his disciples leave the temple, they once again pass by the fig tree. The disciples are amazed that it has died and withered. The cursing of the fig tree



symbolizes Jesus' anger at his own people for practicing piety and collecting huge sums of money from believers and yet bearing none of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. When religion becomes an empty moneymaking machine, it contributes to its own death.

*Reflect: As we move into Holy Week, what are some issues that your faith calls you to engage? How can you bear the fruits of compassion in those situations?*



## TUESDAY of Holy Week, March 31

*Mark 11:27-33*

Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me." They argued with one another, "What should we say? If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'Of human origin?'"—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet.

— Mark 11:29-32

I don't know about you, but if I got angry and demolished the whole system of sacrifices and money-changing at the temple, I would not go back there ever again. But Jesus goes right back the next day. The elders challenge him, asking by what authority he was doing such things. Instead of saying "OK, guys, I'm really sorry. I lost my temper. I'll pay for the things I destroyed," he asks them a question that completely confounds them: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" In their fear of further antagonizing the crowd, which regarded John as a prophet, the elders simply reply that they do not know. Jesus says, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

This is an extraordinary moment in which Jesus could have saved his own life by cooperating with the authorities. Instead, he continues on the path to suffering and death by further incriminating himself. As a good Jew, he knows full well that the punishment for claiming to be God is death. Most of us would let our self-preservation instincts kick in and do everything possible to stay alive, but Jesus knows that his death and resurrection will change the world.

Sometimes in my work, I visit with people who are terminally ill. We often pray together, and patients and their visitors ask me the hard questions. Why can't God save my loved one? Why is this part of God's plan? The only thing I can answer is "because death doesn't mean the same thing to God that it means to us," and this is true. In our earthly life, we try to stave off aging and death because both are too frightening for some of us to face. And yet we all age, and we all die. To God, death is a transition into another life.

My favorite part of the funeral liturgy is the preface, "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens" (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 382). In Jesus' resurrection, we see that God has power over death. He faces our greatest fear and overcomes it.

*Reflect: What were you taught about death when you were growing up? How have your beliefs around death changed?*



## WEDNESDAY of Holy Week, April 1

*Mark 12:1-11*

What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?” — Mark 12:9-11

If you read this parable of the vineyard through the lens of human psychology, it seems irrational. Why would a vineyard owner keep sending slaves to collect his profits after even one of them was killed? Why would he send his only son after so many slaves had been beaten and killed? Why did the vineyard owner not bring a band of soldiers and kill the wicked tenants?

The parable is not about human logic; rather, it reveals something about the nature of God. Jesus recounts how God’s chosen people repeatedly rejected a long line of prophets and ultimately even the Son of Man. A human vineyard owner would have acted swiftly after the first servant was killed, but God did not punish Israel after the first prophet was rejected. Instead, God sent many more prophets—including John the Baptist—and finally his only beloved Son. God’s perseverance in sending one prophet after another shows his patience with the Israelites. God knows all too well the stubbornness of humankind and keeps hoping they will finally understand. But Jesus, in the parable, explains that killing the son of the vineyard owner is the final rejection of his word. After he himself is killed, Jesus says, God will destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. In the ancient world, abandonment by God often doomed a people to being conquered by another nation. Taking Jesus’ message to the Gentiles would leave Israel vulnerable to its enemies. Less than 40 years later, during the First Jewish-Roman War, the temple would burn to the ground. Many Jewish people would be killed, captured to be enslaved or forced into exile. The war would rage on until the Romans triumphed at the Siege of Masada and eliminated the last of the Jewish rebellion.

This outcome brings up several difficult questions. How could a loving God exact such violent punishment on his chosen people? Why wouldn’t an all-knowing God find a method that was certain to enlighten the Israelites? Why would God allow this violent trajectory of history to play out? Believe it or not, we are all welcome to bring difficult questions like these to God in our prayer life. “God, help me understand” is always a welcome prayer. We may not receive definitive answers, but we often find helpful flashes of insight.

*Reflect: Can you think of other difficult questions that this parable raises?*



## MAUNDY THURSDAY, April 2

*Mark 14:12-25*

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." — Mark 14:22-25

Many churches these days observe Maundy Thursday as a penitential event, but at our Convent, we observe it as a festal, joyful celebration of the institution of the Eucharist. White or gold vestments are worn, the *Gloria in excelsis* is sung after being omitted throughout Lent, and the music is exuberant. We usually have several guests staying with us for Holy Week, and some newcomers are a little taken aback by this. They are used to seeing a somber Maundy Thursday service with no *Gloria*, simple music and red vestments.

A few years ago, we were urged by clergy friends to change our "old-fashioned Anglo Catholic" relic of a service to the more contemporary penitential one. We politely declined. For us, the festive spirit of Maundy Thursday interrupts the austerity of Lent and places us in the Upper Room, where Jesus and his friends joyfully celebrate the Passover while still hoping that his predictions of death will not come true. It provides a stark comparison with the moment after we have all shared the feast, when the body and blood of Christ leave the chapel and go into the Altar of Repose. At this point, our festal celebration suddenly transitions to darkness as Jesus goes to pray at Gethsemane. We know he will be arrested there and sent to his death. Watching the altar being stripped of its festal trappings, we feel a sense of bewilderment and desolation. The candles are extinguished. Our brief moment of joy in the depths of Lent is gone. Gold vestments are replaced with red. We depart in silence.

The first time I experienced this service, I plunged into grief. I went back to my room and cried the same tears I have cried many times at funerals. Our liturgy had moved me to the point where I was truly feeling loss and desolation.

If clergy approach us in the future and suggest that we change our liturgy, we will once again politely decline.

*Reflect: What parts of Holy Week are the most moving for you? What emotions do you experience?*





## GOOD FRIDAY, April 3

*John 19:38-42*

They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

— John 19:40-42

In our Community, we do not eat meat on Fridays or Wednesdays because Jesus was betrayed by Judas on a Wednesday, then was crucified on Friday. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are even stricter days of fasting in which we only eat plain bread, plain yogurt, some fruit and cheese. We also begin a deep silence, or Greater Silence, after the Maundy Thursday service until Easter morning. On Good Friday, we walk the outdoor Stations of the Cross with visitors, and we spend the entire day either worshipping in the chapel or in private meditation.

This combination of fasting and silence adds a profound depth to our experience of Jesus' crucifixion. We usually have several guests staying with us during Holy Week, and even though we are in silence, our connections are strengthened. We all suffer together through the long, solemn hours of the day as we pray Lauds, Terce, the Good Friday Liturgy, Vespers and Compline together. At 3 p.m. on Good Friday, the house bell tolls 33 times for each year of Jesus' life.

I often marvel at the fact that I used to avoid the services of Holy Week. Now, I embrace them. When I was younger, I couldn't bear to think of Jesus' suffering and death, but I have learned that walking through grief increases my gratitude for life and redemption.

Our eldest Sister is 89 years old, and she observes every fast and custom on Good Friday along with the rest of us. Whenever I get hungry and tired, I tell myself that if she can do it, so can I. It is all for Jesus.

*Reflect: Which parts of the Holy Week observances deepen your experience? Are there any you would rather avoid?*



## HOLY SATURDAY, April 4

*Romans 8:1-11*

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. — Romans 8:1-4

When I was a Novice, I was talking to one of the Sisters in the hallway outside our chapel, asking a question about the schedule. It was Holy Saturday, and we were supposed to be in the Great Silence, but I thought that by whispering softly, I would not be breaking the silence. Just then, a senior Sister came whipping around the corner, her black habit flapping in the whirlwind of her indignant momentum, and stage-whispered with great intensity, "He is IN the TOMB!!!!"

Well, that shut us up. I was so mortified that I must have turned purple from head to toe. The other Sister put her finger to her lips, and I did not utter a peep for the rest of that day. As embarrassing as that was, it taught me a lesson about the Great Silence on Holy Saturday. He is in the tomb. We must bear that truth in mind all day.

Jesus' flesh lies in the sealed darkness of the tomb, in silence. We keep silent with him. Paul's letter to the Romans describes to us the importance of Jesus' sacrifice and reminds us that when the flesh fails, we are sustained by the Spirit.

As Jesus lies in the tomb, his disciples start to lose heart. They have suffered the agony of watching him suffer and die, and even though he told them death would not be the end, they still wonder if his words are true. The hours of Holy Saturday tick away slowly as they are plunged further and further into despair. Is this the end?

*Reflect: What is your usual observance of Holy Saturday? Is silence a part of it?*



## EASTER DAY, April 5

*John 20:19-23*

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

— John 20:19

In our Community, we hold the Easter Vigil on Sunday morning instead of the evening before. All of us Sisters and our houseguests wake up long before dawn, shuffle sleepily into the Convent library and wait in darkness and complete silence as the chapel Sister lights the holy fire in the cast-iron stove in the fireplace. We listen to the words of the Service of Light, watch the lighting of the Paschal Candle and light our small candles from its flame. Then we process silently into the dark chapel, still barely awake.

As we take our seats, a Sister sings the Exsultet. We awaken slowly as we listen to the long, meditative readings of the Liturgy of the Word. We solemnly renew our baptismal vows, listen to the collect at the conclusion of the Renewal of Vows and then, somehow, every year, the sun rises right on cue as the celebrant says "Alleluia, Christ is risen," and we shout, "The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!"

As the lights are flipped on, the organ music swells and the many candles are lit, I always love to look around the chapel at the radiance on every face. Exhausted countenances transform into smiles as bright as the sun, and we all experience a collective surge of jubilation. Even though we do this every year, the joy of Christ's resurrection always feels brand new in this moment. Yesterday, we were in darkness and despair. Today, the sun has risen, and we are full of life and hope.

The world around us might seem to be full of chaos and fear, just as it did in the disciples' time, but I always remember that we Christians are a people of hope. We know from Christ's example that even in death, there is still hope because life is eternal. Even when all seems lost, it is never the end. The Lord has risen indeed. Alleluia. Alleluia.

*Reflect: Where do you encounter the risen Lord in your life? What moments give you hope?*



## MY LENTEN RESPONSE

We are truly grateful for your ongoing partnership and faith in our mission. With your help, we work alongside locally led organizations worldwide to create lasting change in communities affected by injustice, poverty, disaster and climate change.

The world needs us now more than ever to engage in acts of love for one another. Our essential programs nurture the potential of caregivers and young children, reduce violence against women and girls, strengthen communities' resilience to climate change and facilitate humanitarian responses to disasters.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:8-9, "The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose...For we are God's servants, working together." During this season of spiritual reflection and giving, let us come together as we strive for lasting change in our communities and our world.

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