



I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say

2019 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

"I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say"

ELW 332

1 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Come unto me and rest;
lay down, O weary one, lay down
your head upon my breast."
I came to Jesus as I was,
so weary, worn, and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
and he has made me glad.

2 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold, I freely give
the living water, thirsty one;
stoop down and drink and live."
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul
revived, and now I live in him.

3 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"I am this dark world's light;
look unto me, your morn shall rise,
and all your day be bright."
I looked to Jesus, and I found
in him my star, my sun;
and in that light of life I'll walk
till trav'ling days are done.

Text: Horatius Bonar, 1808–89 (Public Domain)

Ash Wednesday, March 6 Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Will you attend a service of worship today to begin Lent with prayer and ashes? Sociological studies and Scripture alike tell us that a vital, living faith thrives in community and withers in isolation. In today's increasingly fragmented and individualistic culture, coming together to confess our sins, to pray for God's mercy, and to commit ourselves again to the loving way of Jesus is a radically countercultural act.

As we enter Lent together, let's not forget, though: It's not going to church, or receiving ashes, or any of the faithful things that we do in public or in private that put us right with God, but God's gracious Spirit at work within us. It is the Spirit who leads us to pray and to seek God, the Spirit who calls us together into community and makes us the body of Christ, and the Spirit who is already at work among our neighbors, teaching us all how to love.

Sweet Lord, help me to let go of the ways in which I hope to impress others. Turn me only toward you, so that my whole life is filled with your goodness to overflowing. Amen.

Thursday, March 7 Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16

Whenever I enter the season of Lent, I feel a bit of hesitation in my body and spirit. Am I really up for this season of repentance and renewal? Wouldn't it be easier to just sit it out this year? When I open myself to God's call in this way, something painful always rises to the surface. Martin Luther was familiar with this pattern and reminds us that the devil is a tricky creature who can't stand our faithfulness to God. When we seek God and resist the lies of the world, we can expect those lies to fight back.

Today's psalm, with its reminders of God's faithfulness, is a comfort for me as we enter this season. Take heart, dear one! Neither the lies of the world nor the painful truths you uncover can hurt you when the Lord is your refuge. "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name."

Lord Jesus, come to my aid. Give me courage in the face of the tasks you've given me to do, and protect me against the forces or situations that would keep me from you. I trust you. Amen.

Friday, March 8 Luke 4:1–13

Have you decided to give up something for Lent? The tradition of fasting in this season is an ancient one, and today's reading reminds us that Jesus, too, fasted for 40 days. In the Bible, the number 40 often represents a time of transition between one era and another—like the 40 days of Noah's flood, or the 40 years of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land.

In the early church, the 40 days of Lent represented the transition between the old life and the new life in Christ through baptism. New Christians spent the season fasting and studying the Bible, and would be baptized at the Easter Vigil. Today, you might consider what new life God is calling you to prepare for. How is your fasting—or your feasting on God's word (after all, "one does not live by bread alone")—preparing you for the new life God has in store?

God, you called me out of death and into new life in my baptism, and you call me again in this season. Let me hear your call, and teach me how to respond. Amen.

Saturday, March 9 Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

Our theme hymn for this Lenten season, "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say," is an invitation. Jesus says to you today: "Come and rest your weary self. Come and find refreshment for your body and soul. Come, follow me." This invitation from our Lord is not just for the world—it is for *you*, exactly as you are. Jesus is inviting you, right now, to put down your burdens and to come and rest, to come and drink deeply of the good, fresh water of the Spirit, and to follow where his light would lead you, one brave step at a time.

Take a moment today to lean into this good news: You are not alone. Your struggles are not unseen. You (yes, you) are beloved of God, who shines the light of life onto your path. Be not afraid, beloved. Step forth in good courage!

Lord Jesus, I turn my ears, my eyes, my heart to you now. Let me recognize my own name spoken in your voice. Oh God, give me the rest, the refreshment, the light that I long for. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sunday, March 10

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

Lent is often understood as a season of repentance, of turning away from sin and death and returning to God. In fact, the Hebrew word most often translated "repent" also means "turn" or "return."

Turning around is hard work, though. It is much easier to defend our positions, to hide away, and to make excuses or blame others for what is wrong. This is certainly what we see many public figures doing, but we do it too.

The way of Christ is different. Our theme hymn reminds us what we can expect to find when we return to God: not the shaming and judgment we see in public life, but gentleness, nourishment, and help for the way forward. Practice turning toward this God today. Imagine what God will work in you if you turn around and hand over the fear, anger, or ugliness you're holding on to.

Jesus, I want to trust you and turn to you, but I keep getting in my own way. Help me today to turn and find you. Let your gentle love be the loudest voice in my life, so that the lies of the world fall away in your presence. Amen.

Monday, March 11

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18

All of our religious devotions are exercises in futility if God is not reliable. No part of this passage—Abram and Sarai's future, Abram's righteousness, or even God's reassurances—would be ground for any kind of confidence apart from one sure thing: "The LORD made a covenant." God puts God's entire character and reputation on the line, pledging God's own self to the fulfillment of the promises. The legacy of Abraham, Sarah, and their offspring does not depend on those people's own plans or cleverness; only God can make the promised future turn out right. Lent, with its focus on repentance and human finitude, asks us to examine the foundations of our spirituality. Without a faithful, promise-keeping God providing the bedrock of our faith, everything is flimsy.

Faithful God, deliver us from thinking that sturdy spirituality depends on our insights and doctrinal purity. Build in us a faith that moves us to surrender ourselves to your reliability as our trustworthy friend, deliverer, and sustainer. Amen.

Tuesday, March 12

Psalm 27

Most people find it easier to trust in God when life is going well; crises can snatch away our confidence. This psalm describes scary foes: opponents, liars, slanderers, and violent assailants. They threaten individuals' physical and social well-being. When they assume positions of significant power in governments and businesses, their treachery multiplies and they steal hope from communities and nations. The psalm's unshakeable trust in God's benevolence is appropriate for beleaguered believers who worry that they are no match for the endless stamina of bullies, haters, narcissists, and cruel manipulators of economic and political policies. Those who casually deny people their God-given dignity will, the psalmist believes, never be a match for "the goodness of the LORD." Let us expect to see that goodness here and now, in the communities where we live, even as we urge God to provide it through our efforts to make it known.

God of security and comfort, strengthen your people to stand against injustice by following your lead. Prompt us to repent of injuries we have caused to other people's health, reputation, and potential. Raise us again to stand in solidarity with those who wait for you to restore them. Amen

Wednesday, March 13

Philippians 3:17–4:1

When the apostle Paul speaks of believers' heavenly "citizenship," his words call attention to the loyalties that direct our daily living. He refers not to a future longing as much as to the social group and political organization to which we belong now. This new belonging and accountability that we enjoy are defined by Christ; they correspond to his glorified body—a body raised from the dead yet still marked by the violence dished out by a frightened and self-serving humanity. Christ's body was and remains a conduit of divine mercy and care. The rights we claim, the obligations that guide us, and the political leanings we profess must therefore never manifest themselves in isolation from Christ. They, like we, must be made subject to him and his body, which calls all people to come together in him, so we might turn from selfishness and learn to serve one another.

God of self-giving love, expose the lies and idolatry that make us pledge our loyalties to the values and rulers of this greedy world. As you did in Jesus Christ, show us today what it means to press on and discover that you claim our whole selves. Amen.

Thursday, March 14

Luke 13:31–35

Why does Herod Antipas want to kill Jesus? Because that's what venal and destructive people who wield power do to prophets who expose their abuses. The resistance to Jesus and the "kingdom" he inaugurates is a familiar story; Jesus appears unsurprised by it and equally unconcerned. His story will end another way, for Herod's power is ultimately no match for what God has in store.

This passage nevertheless reiterates that Jesus' gospel creates conflict, for it is about clashing values. No one wants to have their lies exposed, their selfishness thwarted, their power frustrated, and their privileges evaporated. This is especially true for tyrants and their enablers, but it extends to all of us who have conditioned ourselves to resist good news that promises grace without limits, as if such realities were too good to be true or too wild to manage.

God of infinite grace, you love us too much to leave us to ourselves, even though we do so much to protect ourselves from you and to find security apart from you. We know our resistance does not scare you off, and we rejoice that you will finish your work with us. Amen.

Friday, March 15

Luke 13:31–35

What does it feel like when grace goes unrecognized? Jesus' lament over Jerusalem reveals anguish. Most arresting is his comparison of himself to a protective hen, urging chicks to rest secure under her wings. The Savior approaches Jerusalem as a mother, intent on guaranteeing the safety of her children, whom she has known and devoted herself to since before they took their first breaths. What kind of people turn away mothers of vulnerable youngsters? What kind of people sneer at those who devote themselves to helping the powerless? What kind of people string up and mock a mother who has come to nourish and provide for those who need her? The Gospel of Luke and the witness of history answer: *We do*. God help us all. God had better be merciful. God had also better be fierce in commitment to pursue us and drag us under those healing wings.

Persistent and long-suffering God, forgive us. We are ignorant, violent, and resistant. We inflict harm on others, harming you. We suffer harm from others, making it difficult to receive your love. Pursue us. Overtake us. Remake us. Amen.

Saturday, March 16

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

The opening lines of this hymn recall one of the most comforting verses in all the Gospels: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Jesus characterizes discipleship as rest, for his yoke is easy and his burden light (Matthew 11:30). What an important thing to remember during Lent, when well-meaning acts of penitence and introspection can weigh down our spirits and make us feel unworthy. What an important promise to highlight in Matthew's Gospel, a book that also includes numerous reminders of God's judgment.

The rest inherent in Christian discipleship is not about passivity or apathy. It is about living in unburdened freedom, dwelling secure in Jesus' love and acceptance, and discovering in his embrace the joy that comes from surrendering to God and seeking the well-being of all God's children.

Welcoming God, give us comfort in the knowledge that you know and heal all the wrongs we have suffered. Give us forgiveness and freedom to make amends for the wrongs we commit. Give us courage to extend your grace into a broken world. Amen.

Sunday, March 17

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

Following Jesus means intimacy with him—intimacy with God. The hymn has Jesus say, "Lay down your head upon my breast," awakening memories of John 13:23, when one of Jesus' disciples reclines against his breast during his final meal before his arrest. That striking description of bodily contact recalls John 1:18, where we learn that Jesus himself, God's only Child, resides at the Father's breast (not "heart," as timid translators sometimes render the verse). The hymn evokes powerful images of interpersonal contact, not only to declare the comfort and solidarity that Jesus offers, but also to reiterate the promise that Jesus makes intimately known to us the God of the entire cosmos, and us to God. The promise is not about tranquil life in a far-off heaven; it is about experiencing that new, abundant life with God right now.

Nourishing and self-giving God, as our restless selves ponder the promise of sharing intimacy and abundant life with you, we rejoice. May that promise spur us to accept ourselves, to love the world with the fervor that you do, and to invite others to share the same. Amen.

Monday, March 18

Isaiah 55:1-9

Theologian Sarah Coakley, in "God, Sexuality, and the Self," says that God is found in *lack*—in the tugging, gnawing emptiness that is part of human experience. In emptiness we feel desire, and in desire we come to understand that to be human is to be related. Ultimately, this reflects the Being in whose image we are made: a God who desires relationship with us and all creation.

This aspect of our humanity is easily exploited. Our landfills overflow with the remnants of our excess; our web browsers hold incalculable stores of sexual fantasies on demand. But just as God desires us, our desire can only be fully satisfied in the One Who Is and Who Will Be.

Why do we spend our money for that which is not bread, and our labor for that which does not satisfy? May we drink from living waters. May we eat what is good. May we delight in the rich food of God's abundant justice and mercy.

Teach us to incline our ear and turn to you, O God; teach us to listen so that we may live. Amen.

Tuesday, March 19

Psalm 63:1–8

In his autobiography about his conversion, "Surprised by Joy," C.S. Lewis describes a lifelong search for what he called Joy—a fleeting sense of longing he could neither grasp nor control but that had captured his imagination from his youth. He pursued and yearned for this Joy as "that sharp, wonderful stab of Longing ... [that] dashes in with the agility of a hummingbird claiming its nectar from the flower, then zips away. It pricks, then vanishes, leaving a wake of mystery and longing behind it" (from "Shadowlands and Songs of Light").

The search for God begins with wonder, longing, not-knowing. Here, we marvel at reality. Here, the prick of desire draws us into the mystery of all that is. Here, we sing with the psalmist: "O God, you are my God, I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

God, show us your steadfast love that is better than life. Give us glimpses of Joy when we least expect them. Amen.

Wednesday, March 20

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

The ancient Jewish midrash, a commentary on the Old Testament, says that while the Israelites wandered in the desert, a stone rolled alongside them. Every night when they made camp, it gushed forth water to satisfy their thirst. The stone was complemented by manna, the miraculous food God replenished each morning. Both the water and the manna came daily and couldn't be stockpiled for the future. One was to accept today's gifts today, and trust that tomorrow's gifts would come tomorrow.

What if we believed it was true that when we were hungry, God would send bread; that when we were thirsty, God would send water; that we could take each day as it comes in faith that tomorrow would take care of itself? How would it change how we live, spend our energy, share our abundance?

I imagine it would look something like a porous rock rolling alongside us, or a heavenly meal replenished each morning, providing enough—more than enough—not only for us, but for everyone.

God, give us the courage to live in the abundance of your gracious provision. Where there is hunger and thirst, teach us to give generously, trusting that there is more than enough to go around. Amen.

Thursday, March 21

Luke 13:1–9

Here Jesus speaks of judgment. “Unless you repent, you will ... perish.” It sounds like a threat, but it’s also a fact of existence. The truth is, we are perishing—each day brings us closer to the grave. In a culture that barely acknowledges death, Jesus’ words are a stark reminder: No one leaves this world alive.

Our only hope is to repent, to turn around. I’ll be the first to admit, I don’t want to. It means changing my mind, admitting I was wrong, letting go of my strategies to keep suffering at bay. I want to continue to pretend I have the power to control the outcome. But the truth is we are dependent on God for food, for breath, for forgiveness. And judgment is coming. Like a barren fig tree that gets a second chance, we have the opportunity now to turn to God. Will we take it?

God of mercy, we confess we are powerless against the forces of death. We repent and turn to you. Save us, forgive us, heal us. Amen.

Friday, March 22

Luke 13:1–9

A computer programming idiom says, “Garbage in, garbage out.” Your input determines your output. For years I believed God was a Great Computer, and I had to get the code right. Whenever adversity struck, I assumed I was responsible. *Garbage in, garbage out; therefore I’m garbage.*

But Jesus makes a terrible computer programmer. He says sin is not the cause of all suffering; sometimes bad things just happen. And Jesus would know. His life was one of suffering. But his sorrow is our consolation—when he poured out his life on the cross and took it up again Resurrection Morning, he changed the calculation. Now we can repent, for God has already forgiven us. Now we can face suffering and death, for Jesus has passed through it. Now it’s garbage in, grace out. And grace replicates, re-creating us all as conduits of grace—grace upon grace upon grace upon grace upon grace.

Lord Jesus, when we see suffering, remind us to withhold judgment about its cause. Give us strength to face difficult things, knowing that you have passed through it and are with us there. Amen.

Saturday, March 23

Hymn: “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say” (ELW 332)

I grew up in a loving, devout Mormon home, which gave me gifts of community, hard work, and commitment. But one significant Mormon teaching is that we are saved by obedience; this made me hyper-aware of my flaws. From childhood, I felt sure I would never be acceptable to God.

I carried this anxiety through college until one day I heard a Christian theologian say, “I’m a Christian because I know enough of my deficiencies to be devastated. I don’t think I could live without forgiveness and the love of God.” I’d never heard anyone express their reliance on God’s grace so directly. I turned to Christ to see if he could forgive and love me, too. To my delight, he could—and the experience turned my despair into joy.

Luther said: “Christ our Lord, to whom we must flee, and of whom we must ask all, is an inexhaustible well of grace.” From this well I thirstily drink again and again.

Lord Jesus, remind us that you freely give living water. Teach us to drink in your grace. Amen.

Sunday, March 24

Hymn: “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say” (ELW 332)

I was baptized as an adult, and it felt like drinking from living waters. In a very real way, it is. Baptism proclaims the radical truth at the heart of the gospel—that God’s grace is a free gift, imparted to us not because of anything we’ve done or left undone, but because that is who God is. Baptism proclaims the radical truth that in baptism our sins are forgiven and we are claimed as God’s own. Baptism proclaims the radical truth that God has claimed us and will not abandon us, for God keeps God’s promises and will never ever let us go.

If we have been baptized, we have received the living water of Jesus’ love. We have entered into his death and been raised to new life in him. If we haven’t been baptized, the font always stands ready to revive our souls. Come and drink.

Gracious God, remind us of your faithfulness to the promises you made to us in baptism. Quench our thirst. Raise us to new life. Amen.

Monday, March 25

Joshua 5:9–12

Much is happening in and around these few verses. The Israelites are at the end of their 40 years of wilderness wandering. God dries up the Jordan River so they can cross and floods it again after they arrive on the other side. Now God commands that 12 stones be taken from the Jordan and erected as a monument to tell generations to come of Israel's journey and God's power. Joshua sets up those stones at Gilgal, the Israelites' first encampment in the promised land.

"Gilgal" is a play on the Hebrew verb that translates roughly as "roll." As the Israelites roll the 12 stones into formation, God rolls away the shame of their past. Their immediate observance of Passover is the most tangible way they can remember. Just as God was with the Israelites during their disobedience and the ensuing decades of roaming, God is with them in their flourishing. The Israelites literally wander into forgiveness.

God, thank you for all of the rolling that you do—in the desert, on new frontiers, and everywhere in between. Help me remember your love and forgiveness today, like you helped Joshua and the Israelites remember at Gilgal. Amen.

Tuesday, March 26

Psalm 32

This psalm harkens back to the Exodus story, recalling contrasts: sin and forgiveness, torment and joy, the wicked and the faithful, suffering and deliverance. The sharp images in these verses—the poet's groaning, the shrinking or wasting away of the human body, the temperament of livestock, the flooding and receding of waters, the heat of summer—evoke a sense of Israel wandering in the wilderness. The suggestion is that Israel's wandering is never static, but is a constant mystery, an active struggle. Every day in the desert brings the Israelites into the unknown and forces them to acknowledge how exposed and vulnerable they are.

We certainly experience moments of feeling exposed—seasons of vulnerability. So let us take inspiration from the poet's response and be honest about that. Let us call out to God, asking for our sins to be covered, for iniquity and deceit to leave us, and for a faithful path to be laid before us.

God, thank you for the essence of who you are—refuge, righteousness, liberation, steadfast love. Help me break my silence today, ask for your forgiveness, and shout for joy, rejoicing in you! Amen.

Wednesday, March 27

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

This portion of the apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians sums up the entire gospel story in a few short sentences. It establishes our foundational Christian confession that Christ's death and resurrection brought and continue to bring new life into the world. More than that, these words of confession define ministry, showing us how the relationship between God and Christ translates to the relationship uniting God, Christ, humanity, and all of creation.

What this passage doesn't say, however—what breathes between the lines—is that the Holy Spirit is the catalyst, carrier, and conduit of this relationship. The Holy Spirit animates us and empowers us to know the Son, who is a reflection of the heart of the Father. The Holy Spirit is integral in making all things new. When we read about God and Christ today, we need to remember that the Holy Spirit is there too.

God, thank you for newness, and for your Holy Spirit that calls me into your reconciling work. Help me to channel my creativity today—to embrace someone or something in my world afresh, and on behalf of you. Amen.

Thursday, March 28

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

Though beautiful, this parable is also frustrating, perhaps because we tend to read ourselves into it as the older brother. We think of times when the effort we put into something didn't match the reward we received, when our work went unacknowledged, when we wanted to be happy for somebody else, but just couldn't.

Today, let's read ourselves into this passage as the younger brother. Think of a time when you had a good idea that didn't pan out, when you lived beyond your means, when you realized you needed help and mustered the strength to grovel a little for it. But this story won't leave us there, dwelling on our sin and guilt; it isn't about those things. It's about wandering into forgiveness. If we imagine ourselves as the younger brother, we also imagine the people who will greet us and celebrate us with reckless abandon when we return from our seasons away.

God, thank you for staying with me no matter where I stray, what I do, or when I come back home. Help me to keep returning to those people in my life who take after your example and love me unconditionally. Amen.

Friday, March 29

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

Yesterday we thought about the concept of grace in this story by assuming the position of the "prodigal son." Today let's assume the position of his father—the one character who understands that God doesn't act based on fairness.

God's grace is freely given to all people, regardless of deserving. That doesn't make it unfair; it simply removes God's grace from the category of fairness altogether. That's what the father in this story is celebrating—that, in God's grace, the dead come back to life and the lost are found. Always.

While the father is the most challenging character to relate to, he is the one we most strive to learn from and emulate. He is the embodiment of forgiveness into which both of his sons can wander.

God, thank you for making fairness irrelevant, and for offering me your grace again and again and again. Help me show your radical love and hospitality to somebody today, just as you have shown it to me. Amen.

Saturday, March 30

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

Verse 2 of this hymn holds a beautiful reference to John 4, where Jesus encounters a woman drawing water from a well a good distance from the nearest town. He says to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (verses 13–14).

Not only does the woman ask Jesus for a drink; she also returns to her city, proclaiming the good news she has just heard! She is one of the first evangelists in all of Scripture, transformed solely by knowing Christ. She wanders into forgiveness and is forever changed.

The first-person voice of this hymn lets us put ourselves into the woman's shoes today: Our thirst is quenched, our souls revived, and now, we live in Christ.

God, thank you for baptizing me, reviving my soul, and sustaining me with the water of eternal life. Help me share this good news today, to give life to others that speaks to the life I know in you. Amen.

Sunday, March 31

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

Verse 3 of this hymn presents another beautiful reference to Scripture, this time to John 1:1–5: "In the beginning was the Word. ... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Christ has been with us since the beginning of time. When Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land, Christ was there. When psalmists sang their joys and laments, Christ was there. When it was time for Christ to come into our world and live among us, he did just that. And after his death and resurrection, when evangelists started spreading the gospel from nation to nation, Christ was there.

Anytime someone wanders into forgiveness, it is with and toward and because of Christ. I'm reminded of words from Holden Evening Prayer. I invite you to reflect on them as you walk in Christ's light.

Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world. ... Let your light scatter the darkness, and shine within your people here. Amen.

Monday, April 1

Isaiah 43:16–21

A quip traversing the internet recently says, "Don't look back; you're not going that way." God seems to say something similar to the Israelites in today's reading: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing." Why do we often gaze into life's rearview mirror, instead of out the windshield? Why is it hard to stop dwelling on past events—good or bad—to free ourselves for the new gifts God has for us in the present? What's worse, despite the familiar adage, hindsight is not always 20/20. Consider the recently liberated Hebrews pining for the food of Egypt, apparently forgetting they had bought it with their slave labor. "I'm about to do a new thing," says the Lord. "Do you not perceive it?" Not if we're looking backward instead of forward, we won't.

God, you have redeemed the sins and struggles of my past. Help me let go of them in order to focus on the new things you are doing in my life. Amen.

Tuesday, April 2

Psalm 126

Picture the people described in verse 6 of this psalm—their shoulders bent in despair, faces wet with tears, feet dragging with exhaustion. Yet forward they go, lugging not just worry and discouragement but bags of seed to plant! This is what it looks like to persevere in hope—even flimsy hope—instead of standing still or turning back in despair. This is like the apocryphal saying of Luther: "If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would plant a tree."

Because what if the world doesn't end? What if circumstances change—Saul the persecutor is converted to Paul the evangelist, against all odds the judge rules in your favor, the predicted storm doesn't materialize, the cancer goes into remission, new leaders step up? Then, if by God's power we've trudged forward, sowing seeds of hope even amid despair, we'll have sheaves to carry home, "our mouth ... filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy."

God of hope, encourage us to move forward, planting your love in the world even amid tears of despair. Help us trust that you will bring forth a harvest of peace and joy. Amen.

Wednesday, April 3

Philippians 3:4b–14

In high school and college, I didn't like the apostle Paul. I heard his words in arrogant tones: "If anyone else has reason to be confident ... , I have more." But a seminary professor helped me read more perceptively. Paul isn't boasting of his own achievements; he's saying that no matter how successful he was by human standards, it's all garbage (actually, he uses a less polite word) compared to the value of life in Christ. He determines to leave the past behind and move forward in the new life to which God has called him.

I wonder, too, if Paul had to learn to lay aside the guilt of past sins—above all, his zeal in persecuting Christ's church. Who hasn't had difficulty letting go of guilt and trusting God's and others' forgiveness—and maybe even our own?

"Forgetting what lies behind ... , I press on toward the goal ... of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." What if we let Paul's words be ours too?

Christ Jesus, please help me leave in the past anything for which I might boast, and guilt for sins you have already forgiven. I want to press forward to know you and the power of your resurrection more deeply every day. Amen.

Thursday, April 4

John 12:1–8

A woman from my first-call parish stated vehemently during a council meeting that she understood where Judas was coming from in this episode. Ever thrifty, she believed we should pare back our spending on worship-related items and use the money for our food pantry ministry. On one hand, her concerns—and Judas'—were sensible, indeed right in line with God's word through prophets like Amos: "I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ... Take away from me the noise of your songs. ... But let justice roll down like waters ..." (5:21–24). While John, writing well after Judas betrayed Jesus, paints Judas in a negative light, I'm confident the woman in my first congregation had every good intention as we looked ahead to the next year's budget.

But then there is Mary, anointing Jesus' feet and filling the house with the fragrance of her worship. And Jesus praises her forethought regarding his upcoming passion and burial. I don't mind admitting that this story still leaves me a bit puzzled.

God, thank you that I don't have to understand your Word perfectly in order to trust in you. Show me how best to practice both worship and social justice. Amen.

Friday, April 5

John 12:1–8

We've reflected this week on "not [remembering] the former things" but looking for the "new thing" God is doing (Isaiah 43:18–19). Occasionally, however, reflecting on God's goodness in the past is the best way to bolster our trust in God as we go forward. Though Mary's anointing of Jesus was extravagant—300 denarii equaled a year's wages for a laborer—we are keenly aware that only recently, Jesus had revived her dead brother. Can we say with any certainty how we might have treated Jesus at such a celebration dinner?

In my final sermon on internship, I told the congregation I'd come to love that I trusted God for my future because God had been so good to me through them. When we glance backward and recognize God's presence amid our ups and downs, we come to count on God for the future too. Surely this was part of Mary's experience.

God of goodness, remind us of how you've kept and cared for us in the past, that we might trust you wholeheartedly now and in the future. Amen.

Saturday, April 6

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

I've heard many people in recent months say they're exhausted. Worn out by the emotional toll of division. Tired of bad news online and on TV. Weary of hatred that feels stronger—and is certainly louder—than love. More than ever, we need to hear Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest."

Are you "weary, worn, and sad"? Jesus wants to be your—our—resting place. Not so we can hide forever from reality. But a place of refreshment where we can relax long enough to remember that all is not bad—there is gospel to share! All is not hatred—God's love is stronger. Resting in Jesus, we focus on God's goodness again. We recall kind people showing love to those in trouble, bold voices speaking up for justice, warm friendships brightening our days. Gladdened by rest, we rise anew. Jesus walks with us, as he always has. We can lean on him every step of the way.

Jesus, thank you for being my resting place. Remind me that I am not the world's savior, but through you who are, I gain new strength to live in love again. Amen.

Sunday, April 7

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

Verse 3 of our theme hymn reminds me of another hymn: "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus." As much as I love that one (and I do!), it calls to my mind a spotlight or flashlight shining so brilliantly in one's face that one can see nothing off to the side. Is Jesus' glory like that? Maybe sometimes. But as no one metaphor perfectly describes God, I also appreciate our Lenten hymn.

The words of verse 3 portray Jesus as a light shining from above, like the sun, illuminating our path forward, pushing away the shadows, and empowering us to see not only Jesus but the world around us—the world God loves so much that God gave Godself to and for it. Traveling with Jesus, we find our days brightened—not because we ignore the darkness, but because we walk with "the light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness [does] not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Jesus, thank you for being the light of this world, the light of our lives, the light that even brightens the tomb and illumines the way to everlasting life. Amen.

Monday, April 8

Luke 19:28–40

Nothing can stop the voice of Jesus, or stop those who hear his voice. Palm Sunday begins joyfully with a multitude following and praising Jesus, but the week will end with Jesus on the cross, surrounded by only a core of faithful women and men. The shouts of praise will be replaced by wails of lament as Jesus speaks his last words on the cross. But this is not the end.

For as Jesus foretells, though his followers become silent, like Peter disavowing him in his final hours, the stones cry out as an earthquake rattles the land at Jesus' death. Even this is not the end, for Jesus will rise from the grave and forever change reality. His followers will go on to praise God and spread the gospel of salvation throughout the world.

The stones will indeed cry out and speak boldly throughout history. Today, we are those living stones, the temple of the Lord's dwelling, who shout out in response to Christ, our risen Lord. What are we saying? To whom are we speaking the message?

Oh, holy God—Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit—guide my speech and guide my listening, so that I may hear you and speak of you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, April 9

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God has given us the ability to listen with our hearts, even when our ears may not hear so clearly. The voice of Jesus, speaking to our hearts through the indwelling Holy Spirit, is the voice of a teacher leading us on the path of humility and reassuring us as we prepare for Holy Week. Even as we know this path leads toward death, we can walk it without turning back and without hiding. Whatever God is calling us to do right now, God is here, empowering us to do it. Christ speaks to us with a word to sustain us in our weariness, to let us know that God is with us.

Oh God, great Three-in-One, morning by morning, waken the ears of my heart to hear you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, April 10

Psalms 31:9–16

Even as Christ continues to call us with the promise that his sheep will hear and know his voice, the voices of this world compete to crowd out the steady rhythm of our heart beating in time with God's. We hear the whispers and shouts of many who entice us to follow other gods, like money, our appetites, pride, and achievement. These voices clamor for us to give up on a God who would live in a weak human body and die for our sins. Judas heard these other voices as he decided before the Last Supper to betray Jesus. Holy Week challenges our views of what voice to listen to as we witness the suffering of God incarnate out of love for Creation. But, thankfully, we do not have to give in to the many whispers and shouts. We can say, "I trust in you, O LORD. ... You are my God. My times are in your hand; deliver me."

Trinitarian God, let your face shine upon me; save me in your steadfast love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday, April 11

Philippians 2:5–11

God's voice spoke the world into existence, sustains it, and continues to speak to us. God gives us the very Word of God, whose name is Jesus. There is power in that name, but not the power human culture expects.

We will see that power on Maundy Thursday, as Jesus washes his disciples' feet, hosts the Last Supper, and speaks new-covenant words. Through the name of Jesus, God's glory takes the forms of love, service, and humility.

Given how God's power works, we may wonder at how much Jesus' name comes up in casual speech: in everyday cursing or in excitement about something good. Why does this name seem so powerful, even for those who don't believe? Indeed, there is something special about the name of Jesus—a name in which we can pray at any moment. Listening to the still, small voice of God inside, we can respond with "the name that is above every name": Jesus.

God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—I confess the name of Jesus, that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.

Friday, April 12

Luke 23:1–49

Luke records Jesus as speaking sparingly during his passion, and sometimes not at all. Most of the voices around him shout, accuse, and mock. Yet, in a situation of riot and suffering, Jesus embodies the still, small voice of God, meeting his accusers with the silence of God that believers sometimes fear and the world still mocks.

Yet Jesus does not experience death in complete silence. The last words he speaks before his death are ones on which we can meditate today. As Jesus is crucified between two criminals and his mockers gamble for his clothing, he says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." As one thief joins the taunts, the other asks Jesus to remember him and hears Jesus' promise, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Finally, Jesus—God incarnate—dies with the final words, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And Jesus' voice is silent again.

Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit: Guide me to know you and experience your presence, even when you seem silent. Help me and refresh me in this silence, as I wait for you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, April 13

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

The silence of God that flowed out of Jesus' last breath on the cross will continue in the silence of the tomb on Holy Saturday. Yet even in this silence, God speaks to us, offering us the simple silence of waiting and rest. The hymn "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" beckons us to consider how to rest today, but it calls us to a rest that makes us uncomfortable and fearful: the rest of silence in the darkness of the tomb. For after all, Jesus lay completely dead in the earth; hope seemed lost.

Yet we can, with God's help, embrace the discomfort and come to Jesus for rest. We can be confident that when we come to Jesus full of the weariness of living, worn out and sad, still here at the tomb we will find in Jesus our resting place.

Jesus, help me in my discomfort, in the places of life that make me weary and sad. Give me your rest, Lord. Amen.

Palm Sunday, April 14

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

At the beginning of Holy Week we start the journey with Jesus to the cross. Yet we follow Jesus' passion, aware of the events that will culminate a week from today in the celebration of Easter. Jesus Christ is risen, today and every day. Already in the midst of the passion we can celebrate Jesus as our risen Lord. We live every moment in the Easter promise—redeemed sinners to whom God speaks and listens, and whom God loves deeply.

The risen Jesus speaks to us already in and through the days of his passion in a voice of power and compassion: "I freely give you living water. You need not search for a well; you don't have to dig your own. You live surrounded by this water, and springs of it flow from your heart. I rose from the dead for you; you live and move and have your being in me. The same power that raised me from the dead—the Holy Spirit—now dwells in you. Hear my voice, and live!"

Holy God, Maker of all that is seen and unseen: Lead me to live in the freedom of the risen Jesus, and empower me through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Monday, April 15

Exodus 12:1–4 [5–10], 11–14

Yesterday the hosannas ceased as Christ's passion began. We enter Holy Week, following in the way of Jesus, whose very body will be betrayed, beaten, and broken by us and for us. This is not the first time God has journeyed with God's people from death to life. The Passover in Exodus reminds us of this well-worn path. God passed over the people living-to-die in Egypt so they might experience dying-into-life in the promised land. On this "day of remembrance," God's people are re-membered to the divine promises of life—a re-memberment that takes place in our very bodies.

This Holy Week is a full-on body journey as we accompany Jesus, God's own embodiment, from life to death to life resurrected. Each day our bodily senses will be awoken and animated as we experience the passion that takes us to the cross and beyond. Along the way, we too are re-membered to the body of one who leads us out of death to life evermore.

Enliven our senses, O God, to your presence at work in our bodies. As we enter again into the story of your passionate love for us, hold us close, body to body. Amen.

Tuesday, April 16

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

Today the Holy Week journey is about the sense of hearing: our hearing, to be sure, but the psalmist is primarily concerned with God's ability to hear us. I don't know what the "inclined ear" of God looks like, but I know what it feels like. It is the feeling of hope—hope that our petitions are not uttered in vain. Whether we lift our prayers aloud in a public space or in the unsettled silence of our hearts, God's eager ears are an embodied metaphor for the abiding promise of the Divine, who receives our calls and cries.

If ever there was a week we needed to cling to the hope that God hears our prayers, this is it. When the powers within and around us seek to swallow up the message of the good news of Jesus, we require the keen hearing of the inclined ear of a God who holds fast to us in merciful love.

Hear us, O God, for your mercy is great. As momentum builds toward our inevitable betrayal of your Son, receive our hopeful prayers with forgiving ears. Amen.

Wednesday, April 17

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

As a foretaste of the Maundy Thursday to come, 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 activates the taste buds with Paul's recitation of Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper. Bread is broken and ground into mushy goodness by the teeth. Wine is poured and washes lusciously over the lips. Taste and savor that the Lord is good! For even in the shadow of betrayal, on the precipice of unfathomable anguish, God's goodness nourishes the body: your body, our bodies, the body of Christ. We cannot endure the stark reality of Holy Week without the sustenance of this holy meal. For it is true, as often as we bite into this bread-body and quaff the wine-blood, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. This death promises to re-member us to the eternal life of God. The invitation is given. Eat. Drink. For here in bread and wine we taste the extraordinary promise, and we do it all in remembrance of Christ Jesus.

You remember us, dearest Jesus, as you set forth the feast of the universe. Help us hear your extravagant invitation to gobble up your promise and gulp down your presence, for these gifts are our food and drink for the hard journey ahead. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 18 John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Towel. Basin. Water. So equipped, Jesus begins washing his disciples' feet. Turns out Maundy Thursday is about touch. Body hunched, the master-turned-servant takes his followers' dusty, crusty feet into his calloused hands, upending protocol and casting decorum aside. This is a bodily act of humility—and a holy act of hospitality. For with a touch and sacred washing, Jesus welcomes his disciples fully into the household of God to have "a share" with the Son. This is a divine love-act, done by the one who is God's own enactment of love unto the world—Jesus.

From this love-act we receive the command: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." We are charged to reach out and touch others with this same love. Now is the time for us to find a towel, grab a basin, gather water, and get going to extend God's hospitality to others.

Jesus of Good Friday: Before we follow you to Pilate's judgment hall, we take this Maundy Thursday to witness your love-act spilling out upon the world. Touch our hearts with your commandment so we may love as you love. This we pray even while tomorrow looms. Amen.

Good Friday, April 19 Psalm 22

Good Friday smells of death. For today is the day Jesus died, the day when humanity could not stand the embodied love of God any longer. Golgotha, the Place of the Skull—here is where we took Jesus to kill him with cross and nails. The words of Psalm 22 rang out that day on the death hill as Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When we read the whole psalm, the smells of death are even more pungent as the vicious animal imagery builds: "many bulls encircle me," "ravens and roaring lions," "dogs are all around me," "the horns of the wild oxen." It reeks of animals and excrement, blood and death. Verse 15 reads, "You lay me in the dust of death." So here we are, with Jesus, teary-eyed, death's odor clinging to our nostrils. But remember: "dominion belongs to the Lord." And Jesus' dominion extends all the way to death.

Christ of the crucifixion, we follow you to death's hilltop. We wait as the stink of it all invades our senses. In our waiting, we trust in your eternal dominion that will never die. May we, even now, catch a whiff of your Easter on the wind. Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 20

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

This Holy Saturday, with death in the air, we are compelled to keep vigil for Easter's dawn, for we have heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus spoke these words into the face of death, appealing to the sense of hearing of our ears or hearts or both. Our hymn text also reminds us of what we have heard from the lips of Jesus. But this particular Holy Saturday is about vision as we watch for the coming of resurrection. Like sentinels turned toward the east, we take to our post, intent on catching a glimpse of the sun's light.

Eyes squinting at the horizon, we hear the voice of Jesus say, "I am this dark world's light; look unto me. Your morn shall rise, and all your day be bright." The dark night will crack open, much like a rock-hewn tomb. Just you watch and see. Our bright day is coming. For this is the night when light is shed upon the whole of creation.

Be thou our vision, O Christ, as we look to your dawn. Anticipating your resurrection, we join the ancient words from the Vigil of Easter's proclamation: "Rejoice, O holy church! Exult in glory! The risen Savior shines upon you!" Amen. ("ELW Leaders Desk Edition," page 646).

Easter Sunday, April 21

Hymn: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (ELW 332)

Christ is risen!
A full-on bodily resurrection!
Today the tomb is empty; resurrection is now!

We have journeyed with our own bodies through Holy Week and Christ's passion, arriving at the mysterious truth of the resurrected body of our God. With vision and hearing, with smell, taste, and touch, we have experienced the grace and love of God that death cannot stop. This is the eternal promise of our embodied God, who traverses the way of death to bring us to life in all its bodily fullness. Indeed, we have seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched the truth of the crucified and risen Jesus, who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, re-members us to God forever.

As we stand at the empty tomb in wonder and joy, let us proclaim together, as the one body of Christ, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!"

What more is there to say, O Trinity of love, than to shout with our whole body: "Alleluia! Thanks be to God!" Amen.

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