



WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

2023 Lenten
Meditations

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

According to The Book of Common Prayer, Lent provides us with the opportunity for self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial; and to read and meditate on God's holy Word (BCP, p 265).

This Lenten Season, Episcopal Relief & Development invites you to join us as we meditate on the commandment to love our neighbor and consider the meaning of this fundamental instruction in our daily lives.

The Rev. Robin Denney, a parish priest and former missionary focused on agricultural development in Liberia and South Sudan, wrote this year's meditations. Robin's reflections are poignant and personal and challenge the reader to consider the question, "Who is my neighbor?".

We look forward to walking with you on your spiritual journey this Lent. If you would like to share your personal reflections on these meditations, please send them to engagement@episcopalrelief.org. We will share reflections of two or three sentences at episcopalrelief.org/lent and on our social media channels @episcopalrelief.

May God guide you into love and mercy this Lenten season.



The 2023 edition of *Lenten Meditations* was authored by the Rev. Robin Denney. Robin is the rector of St. Mary's in Napa, California, and has been ordained five years. Before that she had a career in agriculture development in tropical post-war contexts, as a missionary of The Episcopal Church. In the course of this work, Robin lived in Liberia and South Sudan, where she worked with partners of Episcopal Relief & Development. She also served as a lay church-planter, starting a bilingual ministry in the Salinas Valley. Robin grew up on a farm and ranch in northern Salinas Valley, and has a degree in Viticulture and Enology from UC Davis. She has a master's in divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary, where she helped start the student-led sustainability and gardening initiative, Cultivate VTS. Robin is the author of a handbook on tropical agriculture titled "Where There is no Farm Advisor."

A note about the Sunday Reflections in this book

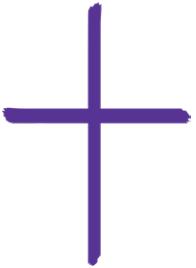
As you may know, Sundays are not counted as days of Lent. During the Lenten season, however, we worship and reflect on scripture each Sunday, and this collection of Lenten Meditations will offer the same opportunity. As with our previous publications of Lenten Meditations, the following meditations cover every day of the week except Sunday. New this year, each Sunday, we will list the lectionary readings for the day and share a reflection on a prominent theme raised in each one. We invite you to use these reflections as a prompt for journaling, prayer or deeper learning. We will also share a link to a video of Episcopal Relief & Development's work that resonates with the theme. You can use the video and reflection on your own, with friends, or in a church group for deeper study.

Suggested format for a group study

- ◊ Open with prayer
- ◊ Read one of the passages of scripture from Sunday's lectionary
 - Use the *Lectio Divina* style of bible study: Read the passage aloud a first time. Following the reading, each person shares a word or phrase that resonated for them. Then read the passage aloud a second time. Following the second reading, each person describes how that word or phrase is speaking to the ear of their heart.
 - OR use another bible study method
- ◊ Play the video for the week
- ◊ Break into small groups to discuss the questions listed on the Sunday page
- ◊ Come back as a larger group to ask:
 - What were the highlights from your group discussion?
 - What parallels do you see between the video and discussion and the scripture we read?
- ◊ Close with prayer

We want to share your short reflections on the weekly theme with our friends online and on social media each week. If you have a short reflection of two to three sentences to share, please email it to engagement@episcopalrelief.org. Please put "Lenten Reflection" in the subject line.

We hope this resource gives you an opportunity for spiritual growth and brings new depth to your Lenten practice. May God bless you along your Lenten journey.



Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Luke 10:36-37

A lawyer comes to Jesus and wants to know what he has to do to get into heaven. Instead of answering, Jesus asks the lawyer what he thinks the answer is. The lawyer is ready with his textbook answer, a quote from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

There you have it. Jesus agrees. Question answered. Done. But no, instead of being pleased and walking away, the lawyer seems annoyed that Jesus didn't answer, so he asks a follow-up: Who is my neighbor?

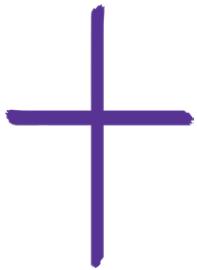
Again, Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. Jesus could have said, "Your neighbor is your enemy. Your neighbor is the one whom you have overlooked. Your neighbor is the one you call unclean. Your neighbor is that man begging over there, that woman visiting the well alone at high noon, that child with two loaves to share, that hemorrhaging woman, that leper, that瘫痪的, that blind man, that prostitute, that tax collector..."

Jesus could answer directly, but he does not. Instead, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan and asks the lawyer which one acted as a neighbor to the man who was robbed. The answer is obvious, though uncomfortable on the lips of the lawyer. He cannot admit that the good guy in the story is a hated Samaritan, so he names him by his actions: The one who showed him mercy.

"Go," Jesus says, "and do likewise."

Who is my neighbor? There is no list we can memorize, no litmus test we can apply, no loopholes that we can use to leave folks out whom we find particularly difficult. Jesus does not tell us who our neighbor is; he shows us and invites us simply to "Go!" and to find the answer on the road.

Do you dare to take that road this Lent? It is winding and steep. There are surprises around every turn. You are bound to learn things about yourself and about God. You may find that you are carrying too many burdens or have not left enough time for the journey. You may find amazing gifts all around you that you didn't see before. You may find that the next right step you need to take has been illuminated for you in the darkness. But one thing is for sure; if you seek Jesus while you look for your neighbor, you will find them and yourself transformed.



I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

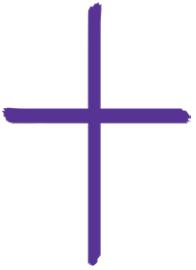
Book of Common Prayer, pg. 265

You likely heard these words if you began Lent yesterday with a service in person or online. It can seem like a tall order, one we will fail at along the way. I don't think I usually even get to the end of the Ash Wednesday service before realizing how unattainable my Lenten goals are. But then the service comes to the part where we kneel, and the sign of the cross is made on our foreheads in ash.

As a priest, the most difficult words I am asked to say, as I look into the faces of God's beloved children, are these: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But when I take my turn, and the ashes are put on my forehead, I am reminded what good news this really is. In all my striving, yearning and failing, I am brought up short by the good news of my mortality. It is not up to me to save the world. God calls us to follow, to love and to serve, but never to forget by whose grace we live and move and have our being. Not only is the outcome of all our efforts in God's hands, but the very life within us is not ours but a gift from God.

If we know this deeply, that we are creatures of dust and at the same time beloved of God, it changes everything. True humility does not tear us down, it sets us free and brings us joy. True humility opens our eyes to see God in our neighbor and to see the miracles that God is working in us and through us every day. Humility unlocks a fountain of gratitude in our souls.

Did you receive ashes yesterday? What was the experience in your heart? Trace the cross on your forehead that was placed there at your baptism, and remind yourself of the words, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Write a letter to God, or take some time in prayer to respond.



Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:19-21

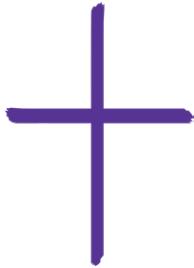
Almost exactly fourteen years ago today, I was reading the sixth chapter of Matthew for my morning devotion, sitting next to a hut built of mud and thatch. I lived in what would become South Sudan, and I was the agricultural consultant for the Episcopal Church of Sudan. I patted myself on the back smugly as I read these words from Matthew. Look at me, I thought. I'm a missionary, living day to day with the support and hospitality of others, volunteering my time. Surely, I'm serving God instead of wealth. I'm storing up treasures in heaven.

Thankfully God has a good sense of humor and a desire to teach us humility. As I was congratulating myself, a thought interrupted me. I had spent the whole previous day furious with God. I was on a trip to visit people who had been displaced by the terrorist group "the Lord's Resistance Army." The people had fled for their lives, and all I could see was what they didn't have, and what I couldn't do. I was focused on their pain and my lack of resources. I was focused on the treasures of earth after all. I was serving wealth instead of God by what I chose to focus my heart on. My smugness quickly vanished in the face of a new and uncomfortable humility.

That day, I was repeatedly reminded of my own shortcomings to look for what God was doing. It turned out beautiful miracles were happening all around me that I missed by focusing on what was lacking. In the small town of Maridi, ten thousand displaced people had been received, not into a camp, but welcomed to set up shelters between community members' homes. The bishop there took me to meet people and hear their stories. One family we stopped to pray with was preparing dinner from peanuts that a neighbor had given them and greens they had found in the forest. Thousands of wild mango trees in the forest were just about ripe.

Humility can be uncomfortable; it requires us to let go of something. But letting go also sets us free. Humility helps us to stay in our lane and let God be God. Humility is a path to hope and joy despite the circumstances surrounding us.

When in your life has a realization brought you up short and helped you find humility? Where have you found abundance when at first you saw only scarcity?" Look for where God is at work today in your life and the world. What small miracles are all around you?



Humility is the mother of all virtues; purity, charity and obedience. It is in being humble that our love becomes real, devoted and ardent. If you are humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you are blamed you will not be discouraged. If they call you a saint you will not put yourself on a pedestal.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Mother Teresa has become known, not only for her remarkable work among the poor and dying, her founding of the Sisters of Charity and her Nobel Peace prize, but also for her time of spiritual drought, her “dark night of the soul”, which lasted most of her life. In a book of her letters and notes published six years after her death, Mother Teresa expresses her loneliness and pain in not experiencing Jesus’ presence. It seems that the more she succeeded in serving the poor, the more acclaim came her way, the more distant from God she felt.

Spiritual drought is a common experience, part of the spiritual journey. In Mother Teresa’s spiritual darkness, even though consumed by the pain of it, she continued to follow Jesus. She was beset by doubts and carried a pain in her heart that no one could see. She was constantly aware that her faith and abilities were not enough for the work Jesus called her to. But she was also convicted that it was through her weakness that Christ intended to work. Perhaps her spiritual sense of abandonment helped her to understand the suffering of those whom the world had cast aside.

Mother Teresa embodied humility in the face of all she achieved and all she suffered. It was in humility that she found the strength to continue.

Have you experienced a time of spiritual drought? Have you experienced a time when you felt God’s presence? What has God been drawing you toward in your life? What is it that your heart yearns for most deeply?

Welcome to the first week of Lent! Each Sunday, we will share a link to a video and reflection questions that you can use as a resource for journaling or deeper learning during the week. You can also use the video and notes from this reflection with friends or a church group to reflect on this week's themes from the daily meditations and the Sunday lectionary readings.

Today's themes: In our Sunday lectionary readings this week, and in the daily reflections, we will be considering the themes Responsibility and Temptation, as well as Care of Creation.

Today's Lectionary Readings

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



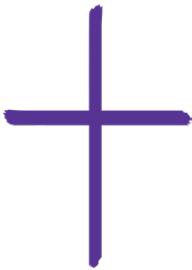
Video Story

Expanding a Culture of Resilience in Nicaragua
vimeo.com/episcopalrelief/nicaragua

This video tells the story of rural farmers in Nicaragua who have learned new ways to help alleviate hunger and end poverty within their communities. The people in this video are experiencing more chaotic and unpredictable weather, impacting their ability to survive as small-scale farmers. One farmer said, "We are seeing turmoil in the plants themselves." They are building resilience not only from new farming techniques but also through their faith. The farmers talked about God's call to care for the earth and how scripture and trusting in God are also essential tools in farming.

Reflection Questions:

- ◊ What stood out for you from the video? Why?
- ◊ How does the video answer the question "Who is my neighbor"?
- ◊ In the face of difficulty, there can be a temptation to give up.
 - What sources of strength do the farmers draw on to build resilience? What resources do the farmers have access to?
 - Try to find at least 10 strengths or resources!
- ◊ The farmers talked about their responsibility toward creation.
 - What do you see as your responsibility toward creation?
 - What is an action you can do today to be a good steward of the earth?
- ◊ Farmers are keenly aware of seasons. There is a time for tilling, planting, weeding, waiting and harvesting. Participating in the work of creation, spending time farming, gardening or in nature helps make us aware of God's timing.
 - What is the season of Lent a time for in your life?
 - Have you taken on any Lenten practices?



Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

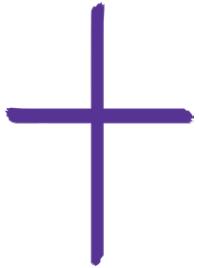
Matthew 4:1-4

In the Lord's prayer, we ask, "Lead us not into temptation," but that is precisely where the Holy Spirit leads Jesus after his baptism. After a mystical experience of God's favor, being called the beloved of God, Jesus finds himself famished in the wilderness. This reminds me of Mother Teresa's story, which we reflected on last week. An uncomfortable truth emerges: We are at the same time beloved of God, called by God, and also hungry, tempted and in pain.

It can't be an accident that Jesus' ministry was forged in the wilderness. Jesus was hungry, famished, not only for food but also for freedom and justice for his people and a renewal of faith through love and mercy. Overcome by hunger, Jesus is offered a way out. Acknowledge that this world is the most important thing: having our desires met, having the power to set people free, to keep people safe. Admit that, and you can have the pain of this deep yearning end. In the face of temptation, Jesus holds fast to God, placing love of God at the center of his being.

Being beloved of God is an invitation to leave behind our worldly identities—our jobs, successes, or relationships—and instead to plant our identity in God's mercy and grace. Jesus' ministry began in the wilderness, with his identity planted firmly in God. Temptation failed to draw him away, but rather burned away the illusion that anything else could be more important, and he was ready to go out and proclaim, "Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near!"

What temptations draw you away from God? What identities do you hold most dearly? Is the Holy Spirit inviting you into the wilderness, or are you already there? What is God calling you to let go of, or hold more loosely (beliefs, possessions, identities, regrets, relationships, vocations), so that God can be at your center?



The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

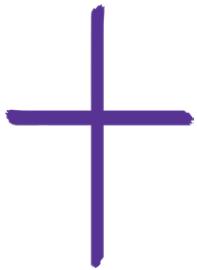
Genesis 2:15

The temptation of Adam and Eve starts here, not with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God gave them a purpose, a responsibility, and it is simple: “to till and to keep.” In Hebrew, the word “till” is also to serve or be a servant, and “keep” is also to protect, safeguard, and steward. Adam and Eve forgot their purpose as caretakers of creation. They turn their back on responsibility in favor of selfishness, greed and envy. It is a story we know all too well in our own lives and our contemporary world.

We are constantly tempted to see creation as a resource to be exploited for our comfort and wealth. We have chosen by our actions and inactions personally and collectively to benefit in the short-term while mortgaging the lives of future generations and the planet itself. It is a terrible and pressing truth. We see mass casualty events, displacements, conflicts, disasters, and an increasingly uncertain future due to a changing climate. To live each day under the weight of this untenable truth, we compartmentalize it. We absolve ourselves of the responsibility to act because we are tempted to think the problem is just too big. But God is the champion of hopeless causes!

New technology is being invented. A new generation inspires us by their witness and action, and organizations like Episcopal Relief & Development are helping those most impacted by the changing climate to make a full and sustained recovery. But even if it were an utterly hopeless cause, we would still be called by God to be servants and stewards of creation because it is in our very souls, the first call of humanity.

Does hopelessness tempt you to inaction? When do you feel most hopeful for our world? Have you had an experience of serving others or caring for creation that filled you up? How can you act today as a servant and steward of the earth?



***Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.***

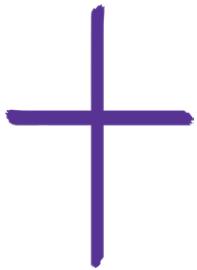
A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis

Francis is one of the best-known saints. Born in a wealthy merchant family, Francis walked away from it all to embrace a life of poverty and service. He lived day in and day out as the Good Samaritan, binding up the wounds of the ill and dying, and feeding the hungry. He even crossed the front line during a crusade to try to convert a Muslim ruler and, in so doing, developed a respect for Islam. Francis' compassion and mercy caused him to see those who suffer and those of other faiths—and indeed all of God's creatures—as his neighbors.

As we consider the weightiness of our responsibilities and temptations this week, it is important to remember what we have already learned about humility. As Francis reminds us in his prayer, humility is a way to consolation, understanding, love, blessing, forgiveness and eternal life. What Jesus calls us to is impossible, yet it is through God that all we are called to be is in fact possible.

Francis found that along the way, as he sought to bless others, it was that very act that blessed him in return. Each action in following Christ's way of love leads us deeper into God's mercy and grace. There is something about loving our neighbor that transforms us.

When have you sought first to listen and understand someone else instead of speaking your mind? When have you reached out in love or compassion and expected nothing in return? What helps you to let go of bitterness or selfishness? When are you your best self?



For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

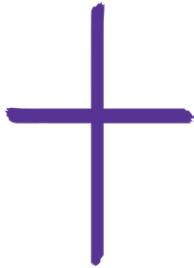
Romans 8:19-21

Paul talks a lot about what it means to be a neighbor, about how the divisions of culture, gender, nationality, wealth and slavery fall away in the face of the unity we find as beloved children of God. In this passage, the family of God is thrown wide to include not just humans but all of creation.

God's love is in all and through all. Every living thing is connected by that same source of life and love and, therefore that same hope in Christ. From decay and destruction everywhere in the universe comes new life and new hope. From the rotting leaf to the exploding star springs raw material for new life. From rich compost to stardust, the stuff of creation is ready to nurture the tiniest baby organism or the newborn solar system.

I have never grown out of my childhood fascination with rescuing insects. We lovers of small squirming creatures tend to find one another. A Muslim scholar and friend taught me to care for ants because the Quran tells us that the ants once cared for Abraham. One time in seminary, a retired bishop joined me in rescuing worms from a rain-soaked sidewalk. That bishop taught me a nursery rhyme about worms as we transported them one by one to safety. We were both late to chapel that day. When I see that moment again in my mind, laughter wells up deep in my soul. I have committed many years of my life to teaching creation care and improved agriculture techniques, and yet it is still the single wriggling worm returned to good soil that fills my heart with joy.

What if every living thing you encounter today is your neighbor? What if God gives you eyes to see creation that way? Would it be overwhelming, joyful, terrifying, hopeful, heartbreaking, silly? And perhaps so much more!



But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among these does not know what the hand of the LORD has done? In his hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of every human being.

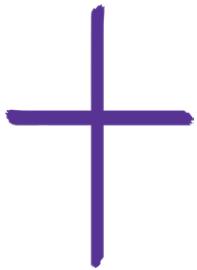
Job 12:7-10

The heart of my workshops with small-scale farmers over the years has been this passage and Tuesday's verse from Genesis. Many small-scale farmers, especially in post-conflict zones, have a hard time seeing their work as valuable. Many of them did not set out to be farmers. It was what was left to them when other endeavors failed, or conflict uprooted their lives and dreams. In some of the countries where I worked, more than 90 percent of people are farming, and most people experience a hunger gap between when their stored food runs out and the next harvest. It was even worse in conflict zones, where displacement meant leaving behind crops and food, and constant displacement disrupted the handing down of agricultural knowledge between generations.

Farmers who gather together in bible study, examining these passages for themselves, time and again determine that the work they do as farmers is honorable before God, the first call of humanity. They see God as the great farmer and look at what lessons they can learn from their own microclimates and ecosystems to help their crops flourish. I have seen farmers double their yields with simple techniques that are also good for the environment (like mulching instead of burning). Climate resiliency and closing the hunger gap are possible without expensive inputs or supply chains.

When I am tempted to think that nothing can stop the world from becoming more dangerous and desperate with each passing year, I remember the small-scale farmers I have met: those who, by their faith and courage, and despite literal hunger and trauma, found the hope to try again, to pray, to listen and to learn from the world around them.

Who inspires you to find hope? What has helped you see your work as valuable and honorable before God? When you want to give up, what helps you to continue? Have you ever learned from creation? What can you learn from your neighbor today?



Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:18-19

Temptation is ever before us and, as Paul laments, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:19) And yet it is from this seemingly hopeless place that we find redemption. Our job is not to redeem ourselves, to make right choices by our own strength, or to somehow right the wrongs of Adam and Eve, but rather to humbly rejoice in the freedom and salvation we find in Jesus.

With our identity rooted in God's love and what Jesus has done for us, it is easier to find our way to humility, and from a humble heart to see the ways we have fallen short and find the yearning to live our lives closer to God's dream for us and all creation.

We are not set free so we can ignore the responsibility God has given us toward our neighbor and all creation. We are set free from an identity of relying on our own strength so that we might rejoice in the grace of God at work in us. That humility helps us to turn from temptation and empowers us to works of love and mercy.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

If you are able, spend some time today observing creation. Whether by gazing at the world through a window, or going for a walk, a ride, a hike, a swim, a row, a bike... Take some time to observe the tiniest thing and the biggest thing, and everything in between. Are you able to stop and pray? Ask God, from the midst of creation, to help you see what you need to let go of, lament or repent of, and what you need to celebrate, receive and rejoice in.

Today's themes: In our Sunday lectionary readings this week, and in the daily reflections, we will consider the themes of living faith and relational love.

Video Story
ONE THOUSAND DAYS OF LOVE, Zambia
vimeo.com/episcopalrelief/zambia

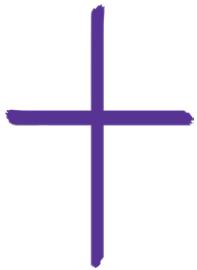


Today's Lectionary Readings

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

Reflection Questions:

- ◊ What stood out for you from the video? Why?
- ◊ How does the video answer the question, "Who is my neighbor"?
- ◊ In the face of overwhelming need and difficulty, Catherine says, "I love what I do."
 - How is Catherine living her faith?
 - How does relationship play a role in her work?
 - What resources and strengths does Catherine have to draw on?
- ◊ Catherine's prayer for the caregivers is that, "they will have spirit and determination" and that they will share that spirit as well as love and patience with the children.
 - When have you found spirit and determination when you needed it?
 - How has receiving patience and love from others helped shape your life?
 - How might you share a spirit of determination, love and patience with the children in your community?
- ◊ The video reminds us that caring for others requires us to practice patience and self-giving love. In caregiving, there is both difficulty and joy.
 - In reflecting on this story, is there any yearning that God is planting in your heart?
 - Are you feeling drawn to any further reflection or action on caregiving or relational love?



And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

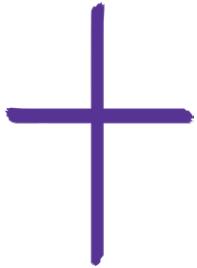
John 3:16-17

Jesus invokes the story of Moses and the bronze serpent when describing his ministry. The people of Israel complaining in the wilderness broke their relationship with God, and the suffering of the plague of serpents reminded them to turn back to God. All who shifted their gaze from the snakes biting them to the symbol of God's deliverance that Moses had lifted up were saved.

Jesus sees his ministry as one of deliverance and mercy. He explains that he has not come to condemn but to save. The salvation that he offers is not a political, religious, or military victory in this world. He warns his followers that the way will not be easy; it will include suffering. The salvation Jesus offers is something so much more. The eternal life we find in Jesus is not something that starts when we die; it is a shifting of our gaze that transforms the way we live now.

Like the people of Israel in the midst of poisonous serpents, we find ourselves in the midst of dangerous and frightening times. We are beset around the world by increasing natural disasters, the threat of a changing climate, conflicts, rising hatred, nationalism, and division. Jesus offers us himself so that we might shift our gaze to him and see God's unending and overwhelming love for us. Jesus calls his followers not just to believe but to allow that belief to transform us and send us out to be agents of that very love that empowers us. We are called into these dangerous and frightening times to find that all are our neighbors and that we are a part of God's movement of love.

What is an act of love you can do today? Take some time to pray that God would give you eyes to see the opportunities that God places before you today. Take time to dwell on God's love for you so that restored and nourished, you are ready to serve.



The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you... and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

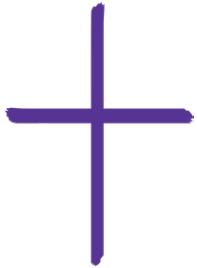
Genesis 12:1-2a, 3b

As a child, I remember being perplexed at why God praised Abraham for his faith. It sounded like a pretty sweet deal that God was offering him: go on a trip and become the father of all nations. Who wouldn't say yes to that? Wasn't that a pretty low bar for faith? Now, as an adult, I see Abraham, asked to leave everything and everyone he has ever known to go out into a dangerous desert and follow a God who is new to him. The cost of saying yes to God is steep, and I wonder how he did it.

Children see things differently. Their lives are full of change. Their brains are wired to try new things, to ask questions and to wonder. As adults, we are ready to count the cost, and the cost of change can feel insurmountable. We often dismiss the perspective of children as silly. But Jesus tells us that we can't enter the kingdom of heaven unless we become like children. If we could learn from children, remember how to play, value adventure and observe with wonder the creation around us. Would it be easier for us to follow Jesus?

At times Abraham loses his faith. All through the difficult journey of his life, he only ever gets to see the glimmer of hope that God's promise will come to pass. Today more than half of all humanity are followers of the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Islam, Judaism). We are called to faith and trust in God, not a blind faith, but a playful and adventurous faith. We are in a relationship with God whose love and faithfulness toward us are more than we can even imagine.

What opportunities is God giving you today, to wonder, to play, to seek adventure? How might you engage the children and youth in your life in conversation that you might learn from them? Talk with your inner child about your life today and what God might be calling you to do.



***Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle.
To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is,
right here and now.***

Fred Rogers

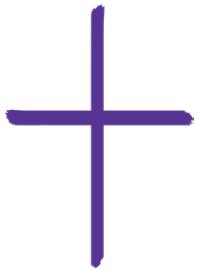
The word neighbor and Mr. Rogers are inextricably linked for those of us who grew up as his television neighbors. A presbyterian pastor in Pittsburgh, he devoted his career to teaching children how to be good neighbors. Without talking about God directly, Mr. Rogers shaped two generations of children with the idea that they are loved, they matter, they can manage their emotions, and they can reach out in love and understanding to others.

Fred Rogers reminds us that love is not a destination or state of being that we arrive at but something we work at if we choose. Of the different words for love in ancient Greek, the word agape means the kind of love God has for us and that we are called to have for one another. Agape is unique from other types of love (like romantic love or love of family) because it is chosen and it is selfless and unconditional.

Jesus, through his teaching, his parables, his actions and his very life, shows us what this agape love is. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see that God calls us to see all people, especially those in need, as our neighbor, and that the kind of love we should share with our neighbor is agape love.

I hope that you'll remember, even when you're feeling blue, that it's you I like, it's you yourself, it's you.
(Fred Roger, lyrics)

Is there someone in your life whom you struggle to love and accept as they are? Are you able to love and accept yourself? Spend some time in prayer and ask God to help you see and love yourself and others as God does.



Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit...The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

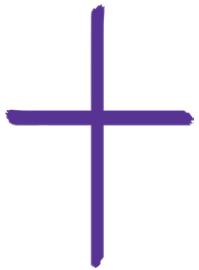
John 3:5-8

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dead of night. He is drawn to Jesus but struggles to understand, taking all of Jesus' words literally. He tries to figure out how you can literally be born a second time and responds to this further explanation from Jesus with "How can these things be?"

One of Jesus' criticisms of the religious elite, to which Nicodemus belongs, is that they are following the letter of God's law but ignoring the meaning. Religious practice, ritual or tradition had become more important to those in power than works of mercy, love and justice. Jesus' criticism of the religious establishment rings through the ages.

But Jesus doesn't give up on Nicodemus. He keeps trying to help him understand. We are called to be more than our human nature would have us be. We are called to be children of the very Spirit of God. What then? What if our identities were truly shaped by and grounded in the Spirit of God? What more would be possible? Could we risk and not lose faith? Could we serve and not grow weary? Could we hold onto adventure and wonder? Could we see the world and our neighbor as God sees them? Could we find true humility?

Spend some time today in silence or listening to sacred music. Listen for the movement of the Holy Spirit. Respond to your experience of the Spirit by making art, playing music, singing, writing or through your work today.



***I lift up my eyes to the hills; * from where is my help to come?
My help comes from the Lord, * the maker of heaven and earth.***

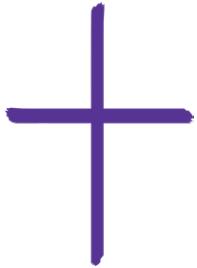
Psalm 121:1-2

Mr. Rogers often shared the advice in times of disaster to “look for the helpers.” In seeing God at work in those around us in the midst of suffering, we are further empowered to find that same strength, inspiration, hope, and love in our own hearts.

When I lived in South Sudan, I met so many remarkable helpers. One helper inspired me particularly. She was deeply moved by the plight of the girls who lived on the street and were often abused, and she opened her home to support the children by teaching them the skills (like basic hygiene) they needed before they could be enrolled in school. She loved the children and helped them find safety, health, and education. It was not an easy road. For many of the girls, she was the only adult in their lives who truly loved and protected them, and that also meant she was the only one they could get angry with in safety. I filled in for her for just one day when she had to go out of town, and I was so utterly unprepared to handle the situation; I had to give myself a time-out. I laughed with her and some of the girls about it later.

I learned that we are called to act in love even when we are utterly unprepared for the tasks at hand. She showed me that in the face of massive, seemingly intractable situations of suffering, there is always something that can be done. From where is our help to come? God helps us as we seek to be the helpers.

Who are the helpers who have inspired you? When have you been a helper to someone else? When has God helped you with the hope or strength you needed in a difficult time?



Dice San Pablo: el que cumple con el amor cumple toda la ley, porque no robarás, no matarás, no harás mal a otro; todo eso está comprendido en una sola palabra: "Amarás a tu prójimo"... Si hubiera amor al prójimo, no existirían terrorismos, ni represión, ni egoísmos, ni desigualdades tan crueles en la sociedad, ni secuestros, ni crímenes.

Saint Paul says, 'Whoever fulfills the duty of love fulfills the whole law. You shall not steal, you shall not kill, you shall do no wrong to another' – all this is contained in one phrase: 'you shall love your neighbor.'... If there were love of neighbor there would be no terrorism, no repression, no selfishness, none of such cruel inequalities in society, no abductions, no crimes.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, December 10, 1978

We think of martyrs as existing primarily in the times of the early church, but in the 20th century, there were more Christian martyrs than in all the previous centuries combined. One such martyr is Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was shot by a sniper while celebrating the eucharist on March 24, 1980. Romero's ministry as Archbishop of El Salvador was only three years long. Still, in those three years he profoundly inspired his people, and people around the world, with his determination to speak out against the oppression and violence being done to his people by their government, and to walk with the poor and those who were suffering most profoundly.

Love empowered Romero to a different kind of life than he had lived before. In grief and love, he found his courage and his voice. Romero had a clear vision of what it means to be a neighbor, and in the circumstances surrounding his ministry, he understood that living into this vision of loving neighbor would cost him his life. If we, too, were to love our neighbor truly, Romero tells us, the world would be a different place.

What stops you from speaking difficult truths? What stops you from getting to know someone who holds a different ideology or comes from a different culture than you? What stops you from serving those in need? Pray that God would inspire you to see these barriers as mere speedbumps on your way and give you all that you need to continue on the Way of Love.

Today's theme: In our Sunday lectionary readings this week, and in the daily reflections, we will consider the theme of restoration.

Today's Lectionary Readings

- ◊ Exodus 17:1-7
- ◊ Romans 5:1-11
- ◊ John 4:5-42
- ◊ Psalm 95

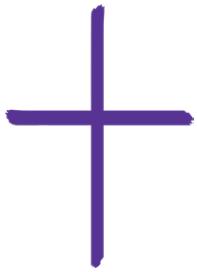
WE BELIEVE

Video Story
We Believe
vimeo.com/episcopalrelief/webelieve

In this video, Episcopal Relief & Development staff read the organization's Credo, the text of which can be found on their website. After watching the video, take some time to read the text of the Credo at the following link.
episcopalrelief.org/who-we-are/mission-and-mandate/we-believe

Reflection Questions:

- ◊ Which line or phrase from the Credo speaks to you most? Why?
- ◊ How does the video or Credo answer the question, "Who is my neighbor"?
- ◊ How does God move through our lives and actions to bring restoration to us and those who are suffering?
- ◊ Consider the first line of the Credo, and the following questions:
 - WE BELIEVE our life-giving, loving, liberating God gives all, gathers all and draws all towards shared wholeness with one another and the concerns of those struggling with poverty, disaster and disease.
 - What does the wholeness that God draws us toward look like?
 - When has God drawn you toward the concerns of those struggling with poverty, disaster or disease?
 - How has that concern changed you, your priorities, or your actions?



But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, ... "Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

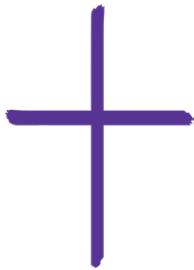
Exodus 17:3-7

Thank goodness the Israelites were cranky in the wilderness and lost faith. Just imagine if God saved them from slavery, brought them to the promised land, and they never once doubted or betrayed God. Where could we find ourselves in that story?

I went to a workshop once by the staff of Episcopal Relief & Development about the emotional lifecycle of disasters. The initial phase is traumatic, followed by inspiring heroic effort as people come together to help each other. Time moves on, and disillusionment happens as people experience the reality of their loss and their community's inability to maintain long-term disaster-level cohesion. The energy of individuals and the community depletes as exhaustion in body, mind and soul begins to grow. The work of recovery then shifts to working through grief and building a new sense of community. It is slow work that happens in the midst of crankiness, doubt and division. But it is also good and real work that can lead to resilience and deeper relationships.

The good news is that God meets us in the wilderness, the very place where it is easy for us to forget all that God has done for us. When we are hot, thirsty, cranky and exhausted by loss, God is there ready to gush living water from the very stones of our grumbling and doubt. The hard truth is that even then, we may not feel refreshed. There is no shortcut to recovery, but God walks with us, a fountain of life in the valley of the shadow of death. God is there, ready to give us what we need to continue the road that leads to restoration.

Does any part of this emotional lifecycle of a disaster sound familiar as you consider your community's experience over the last three years of the global pandemic? How do you find the patience, hope, inspiration and strength you need on difficult and cranky days in your own life? As you look back at your life, can you see God's restoration at work in you?



Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

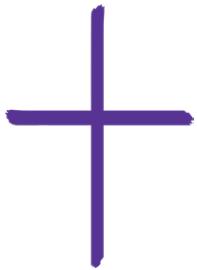
John 4:27-30

I love how this passage makes it sound like Jesus frequently made the disciples feel awkward and uncomfortable. Jesus' inner circle was a group of outcasts and misfits themselves, but there were some social rules even they couldn't overlook. This woman had several strikes against her. First and foremost, she was a woman. There are many other stories of Jesus speaking to, touching, sparing, healing or teaching women in John's gospel. We forget how truly shocking this behavior was: shocking enough to strike the disciples speechless. She is also a hated Samaritan, an ethnic and religious division Jesus should not have dared to cross. She appears to be an outcast in her community as well: married five times, alone at the well at midday.

Despite all this, she is witty and engaging, asks pointed questions, and does not back down. Jesus does not judge her and instead offers her eternal life. Despite her status as an outcast, she finds her voice and that power working through her surprises the community. They believe her, and they come to see for themselves.

Jesus chooses the broken, rejected, and outcasts to be his messengers. Throughout the gospel, they find themselves restored, not just in body and mind, but in their relationships. He sends them to give witness or thanksgiving for their healing, forcing the community to see them differently, to understand that God is at work doing something new. The restoration of these individuals changes the community, challenged to see that it was wrong in rejecting them in the first place.

Who do you identify with in this story? In what ways might Jesus be calling you to let go of social norms in favor of crossing barriers for love? In what ways might Jesus be calling you to find your voice?



We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

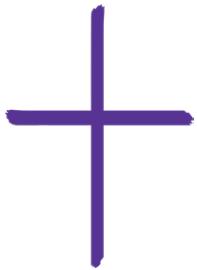
Romans 5:3-5

There are many unhelpful things that people say to those who are suffering. It sounds like Paul is using a popular one here, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Our streets, prisons and hospitals are full of people who can bear witness to the falsehood of this trope. Suffering, Paul claims, can lead to endurance, character and hope. But how?

I live in a community and region plagued by wildfires in recent years. Everyone has friends who have lost their homes. Almost everyone has had to evacuate, some of us in the middle of the night. In 2020 two wildfires claimed five lives and 40 percent of the land area of our county. We know the difference between haze caused by dust versus smoke and are familiar with the particular sound of propane tanks exploding as homes burn. But we have learned other things, too, in the past few years. As a community, we are better at evacuating now and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. We are better at sharing information and resources, and working together. We know the giddy joy of the first rain that ends fire season and the unparalleled beauty and hope of new green growth breaking through the blackened landscape.

I do not believe God sends suffering to test, grow or punish us. Rather, God uses everything, even our suffering, to communicate God’s steadfast presence and love. In the presence of suffering, God is reaching out, helping us with every breath to develop endurance, character, and hope.

If you think back on a time in your life when you experienced suffering, was there also, perhaps later, a time that you noticed a strength, hope or resilience you didn’t know you had? What makes your community strong or resilient? What restores your hope when you are feeling down?



Soon we will come to see that money devoid of love is like salt devoid of savor; it is good for nothing but to be trodden under the foot of men. It may buy material bread, but the bread that it buys will soon decay. True neighborliness requires personal concern. The Samaritan not only used his physical hands to bind up the wounds of the robbed man's body, but he released an overflowing love to bind up the wounds of his broken spirit.

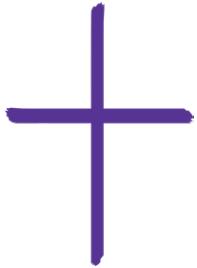
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Today, I read a sermon written by a previous rector of my church, Tom, from the third Sunday of Lent 1965. He had just returned from Selma, from marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and had been arrested and detained overnight. He was one of two thousand clergy and religious leaders who came to join Dr. King that week. The way that people supported one another and remained non-violent in the face of terrible evil inspired Tom. His common refrain was that words and letters of support are not enough, that Christ compels us to show up physically.

Dr. King inspired so many people to find in themselves a strength they did not know they had. That strength didn't just enable acts of courage but also knit together the bonds of a new kind of community. Tom wrote about the crowds of volunteers that met every bus and train coming into Selma to shepherd the incoming volunteers to safety, the local folks who opened their homes and tables to strangers from everywhere. These people, who after living through bloody Sunday on the bridge kept showing up to march again and again. And the volunteers didn't just march; they staffed phone banks and helped with community projects.

True neighborliness, Dr. King says, binds not only the physical wounds but the wounds of a broken spirit with love. He saw in Christ, and in this new community, he was helping to inspire, a kind of love that restores the body and soul.

When have you been inspired to act in love? When have you been a part of a community that exemplified true neighborliness? How did these experiences make you feel in your body and soul?



***Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
I will with God's help.***

***Will you strive for justice and peace on the earth, and respect the dignity of every
human being?
I will with God's help.***

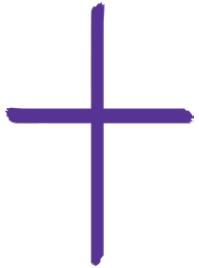
Book of Common Prayer, Baptismal Covenant

In The Episcopal Church, we take the opportunity at every baptism to renew our promises to God. These are promises about what it looks like to follow Jesus. The Baptismal Covenant was new with the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The covenant and different trial liturgies were piloted and tested in the 1960s. At first, there were four promises: the first about tradition, the second about turning from sin, the third about sharing the Good News, and the fourth about loving your neighbor. In early trials, these four promises seemed to be a sufficient summary of faith in practice.

Anecdotal evidence (partially corroborated by timing) suggests that following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, many who were using the trial covenant felt that more needed to be said. Perhaps they felt that ending with the fourth promise of the Baptismal Covenant left the church asking, "Who is my neighbor?"

The fifth promise in our Baptismal Covenant seems to echo Jesus' response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Go, we say, and do likewise. Love on the grand scale and the individual scale. Strive for justice and peace on the earth and respect the dignity of every human being.

Where today is God calling you to see the path of justice and peace? Who have you overlooked or treated as less than a fully autonomous adult, equal to you and to all in worth and dignity? Where are you called today to give up being right in favor of doing what is right?



***I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.***

Amos 9:14

God promises a traumatized, violated, and scattered people that they will experience a restoration that is hard to imagine. From a place of broken relationship, destruction, division, and hopelessness, how can we trust that God is indeed a God of restoration? How can peace, safety, and abundance come to pass?

There are precious few mountaintop experiences of God's deliverance on the spiritual journey. The journey is a daily struggle to hold onto God's love. It is the daily grind of trying to choose patience when you are tired and cranky, hope when all you see is things gone wrong, or gratitude when it seems you don't have enough of what you need.

Restoration is something that doesn't come all at once. The Spirit is at work in us so that our day-by-day struggle is the very soil in which our restoration grows. We learn to find God in the wilderness. We learn to trust that God is there even in the spiritual drought. And occasionally, our eyes are opened to see the gushing fountain of eternal life in the valley of the shadow of death. God calls us to build a new and beloved community where true neighborliness reigns, but we do not build alone.

As you look back on the times in your life when you experienced disaster, displacement, or despair, did you also experience a restoration that grew slowly over time? What has restoration looked like in your life (restoration of body, mind, soul, relationships, vocation, livelihood)?

Today's theme: In our Sunday lectionary readings this week, and in the daily reflections, we will consider the theme To See as God Sees.

Today's Lectionary Readings

- ◊ 1 Samuel 16:1-13
- ◊ Ephesians 5:8-14
- ◊ John 9:1-41
- ◊ Psalm 23



Reflection Questions:

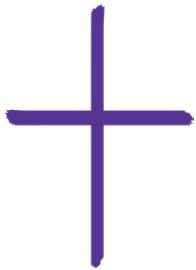
- ◊ What stood out for you from the video? Why?
- ◊ How does the video answer the question, "Who is my neighbor"?
- ◊ The center asserts that every child is talented and that they want to help children develop their abilities in a positive environment.
 - What strengths and resources do you see among the children and volunteers in this video?
 - What do you think God sees in their stories?
- ◊ The staff and volunteers of the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf founded their satellite center in Za'atari camp as a response to the need they saw there. They saw the refugees not as unwelcome strangers, but as neighbors.
 - Has God ever helped you to see a person or group of people who others consider a "problem" or a "stranger" as a neighbor instead?
 - Is there someone in your life now that is difficult to love, who God might be inviting you to see with different eyes? (Do not feel compelled to answer this question in a group unless you would like to).
 - What might help you to begin to see more as God sees?

Video Story

A center for hope in Za'atari Camp

vimeo.com/episcopalrelief/zaatari

Za'atari refugee camp opened eleven years ago in Jordan for people fleeing the war in Syria. Originally established to be a temporary place to stay, it is still home to over 80,000 inhabitants, making it one of the largest "cities" in Jordan. The Holy Land Institute for the Deaf, a ministry of the Diocese of Jerusalem, located in Salt, Jordan, opened a center for children with disabilities in the camp 10 years ago. They serve over 75 children daily at the center with their professional staff and volunteers. The video invites us to consider what it is like for disabled child refugees and the transformative power of the assistance they receive at the center.



The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

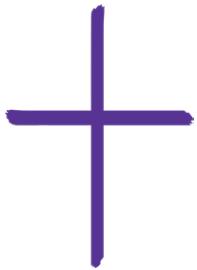
John 9:30-33

Jesus' encounter with the man born blind is one of the longest healing stories in the gospel. We get to see not just the healing but the impact on the man, how he finds his voice, how he risks everything, and how Jesus comes to him again after he is rejected and kicked out of the synagogue. The sight that the man receives is clearly so much more than the function of his eyes.

Can you imagine how much it would impact a person's identity for their whole life to be told they were nothing but a sinner, unworthy, not allowed to do anything but beg for what they needed to survive? The man receives his sight, but immediately no one believes it is him. He keeps saying, "I am the man." Again and again, they don't believe his testimony; they call his parents, who don't stick up for him. Yet the more he is rejected, the more passionately and eloquently he speaks, finally making this compelling and confident argument under interrogation by the religious elite.

This man, who has experienced nothing but rejection in life, is able to see in a way that the most celebrated religious leaders cannot. He sees that God is at work in Jesus. He understands that his healing is so much deeper than sight. He finds courage not in his ability or ego, but in the beauty of God's power, love and restoration at work in him. He not only sees, but he also proclaims the truth. God is doing something new!

Think of a person who you made assumptions about, only to have that person break all your expectations. What did you learn from them? Have you ever been underestimated, or overlooked or have you experienced discrimination? What helped you to hold onto your sense of worth and dignity?



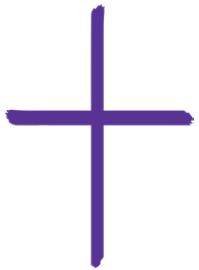
The Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7

Samuel himself was only a child when God called him to be a prophet. But perhaps by this point in his life, he has forgotten that God sees and calls people so much more than they thought was possible. Here among Jesse's sons, God has sent him to anoint a new king. But not the handsome, tall and strong sons; it is the child again whom God calls. David the ruddy youth, who will act with love, mercy and courage, who will love God with wild abandon, and who will also commit adultery and murder. Yet God never gives up on David, seeing his heart, his potential, calling him back when he strays.

It seems like God has a soft spot for underdogs and hopeless cases. Lost sheep, sinners, tax collectors, outcasts, the broken and rejected; these are whom God draws close, and sends out to share the Good News. It is in the broken places of our own hearts that we are reminded how much we need God after all. God is not waiting for some future theoretical time when we get ourselves sorted out, make all the right decisions, have conquered all our negative tendencies, are strong and healthy in body, mind and soul. If we are tempted to think that, we need to look no further than David, or really any number of bible characters. God takes us as we are, today. Not when we are ready or perfect, but just as we are.

Are you ready to say yes to God when the opportunity presents itself? Are you willing to pray that God puts opportunities in front of you today, to love and to serve, to make a difference in the lives of others? Are you ready to pray for eyes to see the opportunities that are already there?



We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito.

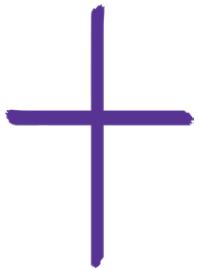
C.S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer

My first experience of spiritual drought came when I was a mission volunteer for The Episcopal Church, serving in Liberia just three years after their civil war. I was twenty-five, and I had pretty high expectations for how God would show up in my life, now that I had said “yes.” I was sure that I would feel a warm glow of God’s presence every day—that I would know what it was God wanted me to do. I knew exactly how God ought to behave.

Instead, a hard silence grew between God and me as I shook my fist to the heavens. I heard horrific stories from former child soldiers. I saw just a glimpse of the incredible burden of hunger, illness, poverty and violence borne by a people recovering from the ravages of war. An Episcopal Relief & Development staff member visited me about this time. She had done this work for years and had a steady and peaceful wisdom. I don’t remember what advice she gave me, but I remember the hope I felt that there was a different way of being than the path I had chosen, blaming God for everything. Slowly, something new began to dawn in my heart, until a few months later I was ready to change my refrain from “Why God!?” to “Where is God?”

God was in my student studying agriculture to help his village out of poverty to make amends for what he had done in the war. God was in the laughter, birthday parties, church choir... all in the face of difficulty. God was in the hope, courage and compassion that people all around me still had even after all they had been through. My eyes were opened to God in a way that I had not known God before.

Where do you see God in your life and the world? If the answers are slow to come, pray that God would open your eyes to see God at work. Make a list today of all the times you notice the presence of God.



Hay muchas cosas que sólo pueden ser vistas a través de ojos que han llorado.

There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.

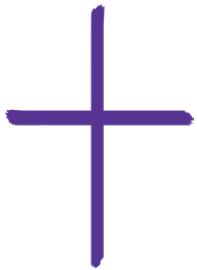
Archbishop Oscar Romero

How often are we tempted to jump past lament and tears to problem-solving? When someone is grieving, how often do they hear, "Don't cry, it will be alright." We buy into the lie that there is a shortcut to grief, that we will feel better if we ignore the pain.

Oscar Romero reminds us that grief, perhaps especially when it comes from compassion for our neighbor, changes how we see. He bore witness to the suffering of his people in a deeply painful way. He met with mothers of young men and women who were disappeared by the government. He prayed at the sites of atrocities. He visited displaced and impoverished people in their cardboard shacks. He blessed the mangled bodies of torture victims. He presided over the funerals of murdered priests and lay people.

The more he walked in solidarity and with love for the suffering, the more it changed him. He found courage, conviction and clarity. He became a voice for the silenced. In walking in solidarity with the suffering, Romero not only found grief, he also found great strength and hope.

Where in your life is God calling you to listen deeply to a neighbor's story of pain? Who can you walk with without judging or trying to fix their situation? What lament is bubbling up in your own heart? What can you see because you have cried tears of love?



***The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.
He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for
you are with me your rod and your staff, they comfort me.***

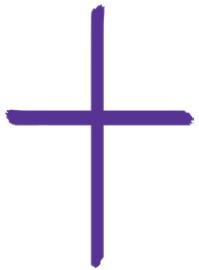
Psalm 23:1-4

Gathered for Sunday worship in 2005 in an open-sided tent surrounded by rubble, facing the ruin of an Episcopal Church, I heard this scripture. The sun was out, and the water of the Gulf was still, calm and clear, but everything in view showed the unparalleled violence that can be done by water and wind. I had been volunteering for a week, overwhelmed by the enormity of the trauma Hurricane Katrina had inflicted on the people, the walls of rubble, the stench of death and how little I could do to help. But here was a group of people gathered to pray even though they had lost everything. Jesus' presence with them gave them eyes to see beyond the destruction. It did not take away their loss, but I think it helped them find gratitude in the face of grief.

They lifted a weight from my shoulders that day that I could not name. My hopelessness crumbled in the face of their faith. Living in the valley of the shadow of death, they found in God the daily courage they needed to notice that they were not alone. Their Good Shepherd was already there.

We see destruction and disaster in the news, but we don't often get to see the simple and remarkable acts of people choosing courage, hope and love in impossible situations.

For what are you the most deeply grateful? Have you ever been moved to tears by gratitude? Make a list, a doodle, a prayer, or create something that expresses your true treasures.



Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

Ephesians 5:8-10

How can we live as children of the light? How can we transform the way that we see so that we can see more as God sees? This passage makes it seem pretty simple. Just try. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord and do that. It's that simple.

There is no way to wait for some future time when we are healed and strong in body, mind and spirit. When all our grudges and petty thoughts have been conquered, when we can see God's presence in our lives and the world around us. We can't wait because it is by following that we are transformed. It is by the daily work of trying to find out what is pleasing to the Lord and doing it, that we are transformed.

Who inspires you to action? Perhaps stories of the saints, or well-known folks who have sacrificed for others, or caregivers and essential workers, or a good movie or a story in the news? Maybe it is encountering a person who is suffering that inspires you, or hearing stories of perseverance in the face of hopeless situations.

Take some time today to read from the Gospels and listen for what pleases God. Spend time in prayer to consider your life and what God is calling you to do. Look for opportunities throughout the day, in ordinary moments to show love, kindness and hospitality, or to nurture joy, forgiveness and peace.

Today's theme: In our Sunday lectionary readings this week, and in the daily reflections, we will consider the theme The Return of Hope.

Today's Lectionary Readings

- ◊ Ezekiel 37:1-14
- ◊ Romans 8:6-11
- ◊ John 11:1-45
- ◊ Psalm 130



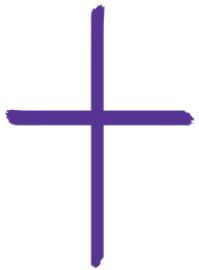
Reflection Questions:

- ◊ What stood out for you from the video? Why?
- ◊ How does the video answer the question, "Who is my neighbor"?
- ◊ Vilma talks about how she wanted to study as a girl, but her mother said there was no money for studying. She is inspired by the dreams of her own daughters, who want to be a doctor and a chef. She says, "I will fight to make those dreams come true."
 - What are the strengths and resources that Vilma has found in herself and in this program?
 - Where do you think Vilma's hope comes from?
- ◊ One of the trainers talked about how they help participants to believe in themselves and to see how they can transform themselves and the environment around them.
 - When has believing in yourself, and encouragement from others, helped you to transform?
 - Have you ever noticed that when you have experienced transformation it had a rip-ple effect on those around you?
- ◊ Bishop Guerra says in the video that it is through the sum of small efforts that big enter-prises are achieved.
 - What transformation do you long for?
 - Are you taking small steps toward that transformation each day?

Video Story

Empowering Women with Micro-finance
vimeo.com/episcopalrelief/guatemala

In this video, we hear from Vilma about her involvement in the business training program run by the Episcopal Diocese of Guatemala. Trainers describe the importance of the program and some of the skills that participants learn. Vilma reflects on the hope she has for her daughters.



Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb [of Lazarus]. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone."

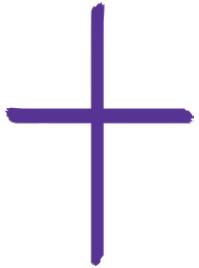
John 11:38-39a

Jesus' encounter with his friends in Bethany moved him profoundly. The story makes clear that Jesus knows he will raise Lazarus from the dead, and yet it mentions multiple times how deeply grieved he is.

It is important that we see Jesus' grief. As humans, we know how fragile our lives are and how little is in our control. In the face of our mortality, it is easy to believe in a god who is all-powerful, but a powerful god could easily be a cruel god. Jesus shows us the heart of God. In Jesus' tears, we see the God of Love, who holds the restoration of all things, and at the same time, weeps with us in our present moment. There is no pain of grief we hold that Jesus does not also hold with us.

Yet even in his grief and theirs, Jesus calls the people to roll away the stone. In the midst of grief, we are called to hope. Hope does not erase our pain but comes alongside it. God is always there, weeping with us and ready to do something new in us.

Where are the “stones” in your heart or life that need to be rolled away? Is there something in you or your life that you believe is beyond God’s redeeming love? Take some time today to wonder and to invite God in.



The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Ezekiel 37:1-3

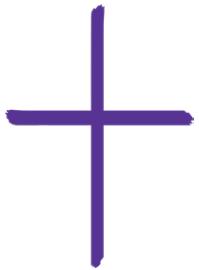
Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones has resonated with oppressed people throughout the centuries. Ezekiel lived through the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and was part of the great exile of the people of Israel to Babylon. The cry of the people that God quotes to Ezekiel in this passage, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost," must also have been the cry of Ezekiel's heart. He is weighed down by grief and trauma, utterly cut off from his place of worship and homeland, from the very promise of God.

"Can these bones live?" God has the audacity to ask this man who, along with his people, has known such profound suffering.

"O Lord God, you know." Hope in God is still in Ezekiel's heart if even just a whisp of a breath of hope.

And from that whisp of a breath of hope springs a vision of incredible redemption. The veil between what we see and what God sees is drawn back, and we glimpse a different reality. God will always take the ashes of our devastation, grief and loss, and breathe new life, love and hope into our being.

Try using the refrain "Can these bones live?" "O Lord God, you know" in prayer, doodling, art or journaling. What comes up for you? What new sight, new hope does God have for you?



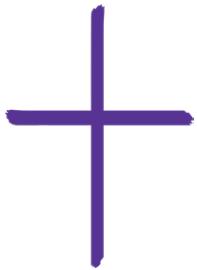
You have given all to me, to you, Lord, I return it. All is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola

For more than a year after Hurricane Katrina, a gymnasium in Long Beach, Mississippi, served as a dormitory for Episcopalian and Lutheran volunteers from across the country who were coming to help. The demolition and clean-up work was both heartbreakng and hopeful. I remember one volunteer, covered in mud and slime, saying, "You couldn't pay me enough to do this work, but I will gladly do it for free."

At one house, the homeowner hadn't been able to bring herself to enter. The storm surge had gone right up to the roofline. She stood outside, her arms tightly crossed, and said, "Just throw it all away." The crew took turns standing with her, chatting, and I remember thinking, "This is slowing us down." Someone brought her a mug they found; she held it for a long time and smiled. We brought her other things that were salvageable, and by the end of the day, she was talking animatedly, standing by several boxes of her things and the bones of a home cleaned to the studs. I had been so focused on the task of clearing the house I almost missed the true miracle of God's grace. What mattered the most was the hope she had reclaimed, which had nothing to do with the boxes of things or the home ready for rebuilding.

When have you seen the miracle of God's grace at work in the lives of others? What might God be asking you to let go of, to return to God, or to hold more loosely today, so that you might have more space in your heart for God's grace and love?



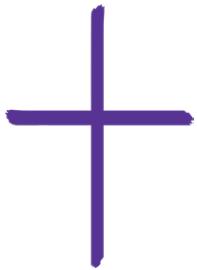
***If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe,
I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown:
that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love.***

Saint Julian of Norwich
"Revelations of Divine Love" The Sixteenth Revelation, Chapter 82

Why God allows suffering has been an enduring question throughout the generations. Julian of Norwich, who lived in the Middle Ages, addressed this question in the midst of suffering and found the question itself lacking. She lived through an armed conflict and a plague that claimed the lives of half of the population of her town. Julian herself became gravely ill and received last rites. As she lay close to death, she had visions of Jesus. She recovered and wrote about her visions and their theological significance.

Amid all the pain she experienced and saw in her community, the power of God's peace and love was so much greater. The peace she found and wrote about was a peace that came not from a sense of protection or security, but a deep and abiding assurance that God held her, all people, and all things in an eternity of love. Whether experiencing devastation or consolation, we are all of us constantly held in love. The hope that animates our perseverance is not based on circumstances but on this deeper truth.

Take a few minutes to contemplate God's embrace of love, which always holds you. How might you hold onto this image of God's embrace today? How might you draw strength from it?



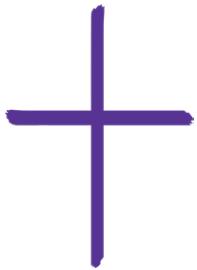
***Take up your cross, the Savior said, If you would my disciple be;
Deny yourself, the world forsake, And humbly follow after me...
Take up your cross, which gives you strength,
Which makes your trembling spirit brave;
'Twill guide you to a better home, And lead to vict'ry o'er the grave.***

Hymn Text by Charles W. Everest (1833)

Jesus told his disciples that they would have to take up their cross if they wanted to follow him. What shocking words to hear in a society terrorized by mass executions by crucifixion. It is easy to forget the weight of transformation the symbol of the cross represents. A sign of torture and abject fear has become a symbol of hope.

In the Jonglei region of South Sudan, devout Christian women carry crosses. In church services, they lift the crosses high as they worship. But many also carry their crosses throughout the day as they garden, gather firewood or carry water. This is not a piece of jewelry or a small token, but a wooden cross, long and thin, more than a foot in length. After being presented with the honor of one of these crosses for my own, despite how precious it was to me, I misplaced it within a few hours of receiving it. Grieved, I retraced my steps but never found it. I was struck by how much intention it takes to carry such an item everywhere you go. I marveled at how truly carrying the cross all day might shape a person's life and their awareness of God's presence with them. But I wonder if it wasn't something more. That in carrying the cross, their suffering was knit together with his suffering, and likewise their hope and power from his resurrection.

What is a simple prayer that you could use throughout the day today? Perhaps a deep breath, a phrase of scripture, a hymn, a poem, or a question in your heart? Is there something today you could do or carry to remind you to pray? A reminder on your phone, a stone, a cross, a rosary?



***I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him; * in his word is my hope.
My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning, *
more than watchmen for the morning.***

Psalm 130:4-5

The psalmist connects waiting for God with hope. In Spanish, the word is the same, esperar, esperanza. Hope requires waiting, it seems.

In this information age, with the internet and a globalized economy, we are less practiced at waiting for certain things. I wonder if we are also less able to wait with longing for deeper truths. Do our souls ache in longing and waiting for justice, unity, and peace? Can we sustain the focus, prayer and action that are a part of that longing, waiting, and hope?

Are we able to esperar with esperanza? Are we able to wait with hope? What does it look like for our souls to wait for God, even more than a night watchman waits for the dawn? What if the very hope we seek comes to us only as we wait for God?

Spend some time in silence today, listen to music, take a walk, pray. What is the experience of waiting for God? How does it feel? Where does your hope come from?

Today's theme: In our Sunday lectionary readings this week, and in the daily reflections, we will consider the theme of Salvation: God With Us.

Today's Lectionary Readings

- ◊ Matthew 21:1-11
- ◊ Isaiah 50:4-9a
- ◊ Philippians 2:5-11
- ◊ Matthew 26:14- 27:66
- ◊ Psalm 31:9-16

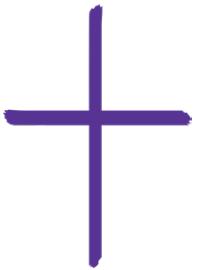


Video Story
Disaster Preparedness & Response
vimeo.com/episcopalrelief/manoruban

Fr. Manoruban, in the Diocese of Colombo, Sri Lanka, is a humble man who looks to the gifts God has given his community as tools for transformation, even in the context of preparing for disaster and recovery from conflict and disaster.

Reflection Questions:

- ◊ What stood out for you from the video? Why?
- ◊ How does the video answer the question, "Who is my neighbor"?
- ◊ At the end of the video, Fr. Manoruban says, "Living in Sri Lanka is a great gift from God."
 - What gifts, strengths, and resources do Fr. Manoruban and his community possess?
 - How has focusing on those strengths shaped his ministry?
- ◊ Fr. Manoruban expresses his determination to continue to serve and to trust that God is working with him.
 - When have you experienced God walking with you, strengthening you in difficulty?
 - What is the source of your determination to carry on in love and service in difficult times?
- ◊ The toolkit that Fr. Manoruban helped develop can be used by other pastors to encourage their communities in disaster preparedness and recovery.
 - How might God be working through your recovery from difficulty or transformation to bless others?



Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

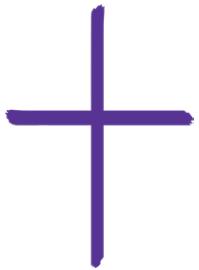
John 12:1-3

Our journey through Holy Week begins with a dinner like so many that Jesus has participated in throughout the gospels. He is back in the home of his dear friends, in the presence of the one he raised from the dead, with Mary at his feet and Martha serving. Mary anoints his feet with expensive perfume and wipes his feet with her hair in an incredible display of intimacy, love and generosity. Jesus explains to those who are scandalized that this is for his burial.

From this place, this intimate dinner among those who love him, the journey will be one of incredible suffering, betrayal, abandonment and violence designed to deny him dignity, humanity and his very life. Yet, at this moment, the foreshadowing of his death is surrounded by the overwhelming scent of the perfume filling the room, a year's worth of wages poured out, an offering of love.

Mary of Bethany is an exemplary disciple. She gets it right more than the twelve do. She is ready to break social conventions, to show her love for Jesus, to give him all her attention, to learn and to give without counting the cost. Holy Week starts here with Mary's love and generosity. She reminds us that even in the face of vast movements of tragedy, oppression and violence, our small acts of love make a difference.

Take some time in prayer today to consider your love for Jesus. Put yourself in Mary's place at Jesus' feet. If you have scented oil, incense, or perfume, smell it as you pray. What are you ready to give to Jesus today as an offering of love?



Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

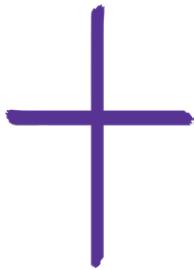
John 12:24-25

Seeds respiration ever so slightly if they are alive. A dead seed cannot germinate and grow. Jesus knew this. He farmed like everyone else in his community. Jesus was also a master of metaphor and parables, so the idea that sticks out to us as odd is often the doorway into deeper understanding.

What is it about a seed that dies for it to bear fruit? A seed is living potential. To bear fruit, the seed must cease to be a seed. It must spend the energy reserves it has been saving, give up all its protective coatings, and become an incredibly vulnerable sprout. Seeds are designed for security. Their respiration is so slow that they are able to protect life in incredibly adverse conditions, sometimes for years. Many seeds never germinate because the life within can't overcome the protective coating.

If we love being a seed, if our lives are about comfort and security and protecting what has been given to us, then we will miss the opportunity to germinate. What God plans to do in us and through us is so much more than our goals and dreams. Be willing. Jesus challenges us to give it all, to use the gifts of ourselves, our time, our resources, our very life.

Spend time in prayer today, asking God to open your eyes to see the gifts you have been given. Make a list of all that you are grateful for. Pray that God shows you opportunities to use your gifts in love and service.



If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

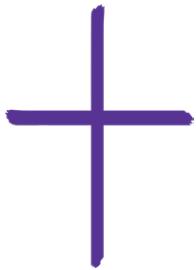
**Lila Watson and the Aboriginal Activists Group
Queensland, Australia, 1970s**

Tomorrow, we begin the Triduum, the holy days when we remember the whole story of Jesus' last supper, betrayal, suffering, death, burial and resurrection. The liturgies invite us not just to observe these stories, but to enter into them, to truly experience Jesus in our hearts. We are far from celebrating a baby in a manger, and yet the incarnation, God becoming flesh, is at the center of this Holy Week. We follow a God who loves us so much that God could not remain separate from us but had to enter into our experience of humanity, to reveal God to us, to show us a better way, and to enter into the experience of our suffering.

We, too, are incarnational beings, a piece of God's eternity embodied in mortal life. And, as followers of Jesus, we are called to his incarnational ministry, a ministry of presence and relationship instead of charity. We reach out in love and service, not to help or fix others but because, as Lila Watson's quote reminds us, our liberation is bound up with the liberation of the suffering and oppressed. A ministry of "relief and development" is incarnational as people encounter in one another the presence of God, sacred story, dignity, healing, resilience and hope.

An incarnational ministry of following Jesus is not doing to someone or doing for someone, but rather walking with someone and encountering the living God along that Way of Love.

Think about times in your life when you have walked with someone who was suffering (i.e., sitting with a friend in grief, talking with a homeless person about their life, visiting people in a nursing home). What did you feel? Ask God to help you find opportunities today to walk with others with Jesus as your guide.



And during supper, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

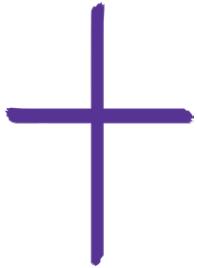
John 13:3-5

I was sitting under a tree next to St. Andrew's Cathedral in Bor, South Sudan, hot and grimy after a long and dusty journey, talking with some church leaders about agriculture. Two women approached the group with basins and pitchers of warm water and began quietly to wash the feet of those of us who had just arrived. I was embarrassed at first by my dirty feet and by feeling unworthy of this kind of attention, but as they washed my feet, I felt like a sacred gift was being offered to me. "Wash one another's feet," Jesus said. Be willing to be humble, intimate, and self-giving in your relationships and ministry. Be more like these women, Jesus was saying in my heart.

Jesus conducted this humble service for his disciples while holding in mind his ultimate power, identity, and mission. This action of choosing to empty his authority before them gives them a visceral feeling of the ministry he calls them to. Then, after he washes their feet, he tells them to go out and love one another.

Today you may have the opportunity at your church to experience foot washing, but even if you do not, as you take in the service, the prayers, the eucharist, the stripping of the altar, hold in your heart the image of Jesus, knelt at your feet, washing them. He looks up into your eyes and says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

If you are able, go to Maundy Thursday services, or watch them online. Take time in silence to let the experience wash over you in prayer. How is Jesus calling you to love and serve today?



From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ... Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

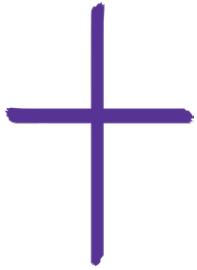
Matthew 27:45-46, 50

I was living in the United States when civil war returned to South Sudan in December of 2013, and I heard only scattered reports of the violence and displacement. More than a thousand people were killed on the streets of Bor in just a couple of days in January of 2014. The most impacted were the elderly and vulnerable who couldn't flee. A number of people, mostly older women who were church workers and clergy took refuge in St. Andrew's Cathedral, and more than twenty were murdered there. A mass grave was dug for them next to the church.

What possible answer does God have for such horror? For lives lived in love and service, cut short by unimaginable evil? There is no answer that could satisfy our pain. God does not explain but rather enters into the depth of our suffering. God willingly walks the way of the cross and is betrayed, beaten, humiliated, tortured and killed. God experiences what it feels like to feel utterly forsaken by God, to call out in despair with one's final breath. Our crucified God meets us in the very depth of our pain so that we may finally see the power of God's love, and know that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

The Archbishop of Canterbury visited Bor only weeks after the atrocities and consecrated the mass grave of the church workers. The martyrs of St. Andrew's, like so many saints who have gone before, lived their lives in love and hope. The impact of their lives rings far beyond their deaths, in lives transformed by love and service.

Take some time in silence today to sit with the Crucified God. Hold in prayer all the crucified people of the world, victims of oppression and violence wherever they may be. Entrust them, yourself, and all who are in need into the loving arms of God.



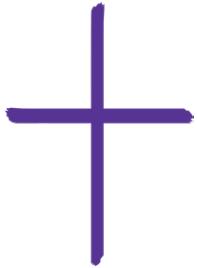
Joseph of Arimathea... asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus... also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen 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 19:38-42

There is a stone in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem known as the anointing stone. It was erected in the Middle Ages, part way between the stone of Golgotha and the stone of the empty tomb, both inside the church. The anointing stone memorializes the anointing of Jesus' body for burial and is a place of great devotion. People bring their own burial shrouds or those for loved ones and anoint them there. The stone is covered in fragrant oil and always surrounded by people in fervent prayer.

I visited Jerusalem after I had spent a summer as a chaplain intern at a trauma hospital. I had difficulty letting go of the patients in my care. I was drawn to the anointing stone and to the prayers of the people who surrounded it. As I took my turn to kneel there, I made the sign of the cross at the head of the stone, just as I had done for so many of my patients as they died. I tried to remember their names as I lifted them with a troubled heart to God. Suddenly, I was aware that in my peripheral vision to my right was Golgotha, and to my left was the Empty Tomb. It felt as though God was encouraging me to see that I encountered these folks at the hardest moment of their lives at Golgotha. I was holding them there in my mind when in reality, they had been set free. They had already experienced the Empty Tomb.

Today is a day of silent expectation, of letting go. Take time with Jesus and think about the anointing stone. Who or what have you been carrying that Jesus might be calling you to set down in his care?



But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet and worshiped him.

Matthew 28:5-9

Alleluia, Christ is risen!! Death could not hold the author of life. The light of the world could not be extinguished. In him, we see the hope of eternity.

The resurrection is not something that happened just once, long ago. God is constantly bringing new life from death, hope from despair, love from fear. The empty tomb is all around us. God redeems us again and again.

In this journey of Lent, we have considered our lives and our walk with Jesus deeply. We have sought humility, responsibility, forgiveness, relationship and hope. We have prayed for eyes to see as God sees, and we have looked for ways to act in love. The joy we feel this Easter is a profound joy that does not disregard or cover over the pain and suffering in this world, but rather surrounds and transforms it.

The ash of wildfires becomes fertilizer for new plants. Death and decay everywhere in the universe become the building blocks of new life. Matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed but change form again and again. We and all that is around us are made not just of dust, but of stardust, and animated by the very love of God.

MY LENTEN RESPONSE

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