

**LENT  
2022**



**MERCY COMMUNITY CHURCH**

# Welcome!

Welcome, beloved community, to your 2022 Lenten devotional! This year you'll find art, daily reflections on scripture, and prayers lovingly crafted by our pastors, staff, and members of our community.

In our Mercy worship services we often employ a form of lectio divina to study scripture together. We read through a passage once listening for words and phrases that stand out to us before we read the scripture a second time. Then we share the microphone to talk together, ask questions, and share insights about what the passage might mean. In our community we could talk about anything from difficult theological questions and historical context to how a particular word or phrase is speaking to our community and context on any given day. Our devotionals reflect this community practice. Each day you'll notice a word or phrase from the passage to reflect on, a devotion written by someone in the community, and a prayer that you can carry with you throughout the day.

We hope these devotionals deepen your Lenten season and remind you of your connection to our community!



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## **Ash Wednesday**

### Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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## Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

### **Reflection: v. 2, 'So whenever you do mercy...'**

Hoping to turn our hearts and lives toward God in new ways this Lent, we are called to reengage with three vital practices: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (or doing mercy). Compared to prayer and fasting, doing mercy is little talked about and less understood. Our text begins with Jesus saying we should show some intentionality about how we as individuals and communities practice justice, simply reminding us of what should be obvious—justice-making is integral to following God faithfully. Sadly, the NRSV and many other translations simply miss the mark here. It says something of where we find ourselves as churches that we have substituted 'acts of piety' for 'practices of justice.' That most of us never notice the inadequacy of a translation we read every Ash Wednesday only underscores how far we are from understanding that practicing justice ought to be an everyday witness to our faith. Similarly, the English word alms or almsgiving is commonly understood as giving money to poor people as a kind of religious duty or obligation. But the Greek word, just like the word 'justice' earlier, isn't alms as we commonly think of it. Instead, the word is related to mercy. Unlike simply giving money or goods away, mercy is more. It isn't something we can easily fit into a check-list of right-standing with God, a duty we can perform. Like justice, mercy is relational—concerned for the well-being of others, pulling us deeper into hospitable, caring, and mutual engagement with our sisters and brothers. On my wall, there's the gift my co-worker gave us this Christmas. It's a print of the traditional works of mercy laid out in wood-cut images: sharing food, clothing, shelter, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, burying the dead. I am graced to see this mercy in our little community everyday. Lent extends the same grace to all our communities so that we might be more intentional about our practice of justice, especially mercy. After all, couldn't we use a little more mercy in our troubled world? I believe we can become the kinds of communities our world needs, that all of us are looking for. So let us open our doors and our pantries, set our banqueting tables for a feast, and welcome all who are hungry and weary and shivering from the cold—not only during Lent or even every Sunday but every day.

**Prayer** God, by your own mercy towards us, lead us to practice more mercy in relationship with our sisters and brothers every single day.

## Isaiah 58:1-12

### **Reflection: v. 6-7, 'Isn't this the fast I choose... to share your bread with the hungry?'**

Why is it when we fast as communities of faith that our fasting looks more like what Isaiah says God doesn't want rather than what he tells us God wants? Humbling ourselves, bowing down, and ashes—even if we do forego the sackcloth—we have aplenty. But where is sharing our food with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into our homes, working to break apart unjust systems and casting aside our violent, finger-pointing ways? Fasting is so much more than giving up something. Fasting is a form of protest. When we fast, we call on God to break into our weary world with saving justice. Yes, when we fast, we deny ourselves some aspect of our basic needs for a time—but not because we are unworthy of having our needs met. We fast as a protest that proclaims every human being has a right to the same things we all need to live and thrive. To deny ourselves in such a purposefully symbolic way is an act of solidarity with all who are suffering. When we fast, we sign with our bodies that we are both complicit in the shape of the world as it is and that we are willing to collaborate in its wholesale liberation. Fasting becomes an act of turning our hearts toward justice. But as Isaiah reminds us, it is not enough to deny ourselves only for a time. In fact, it is less about calling ourselves to account by what we give up than it is by what we do in relationship with others. This Lent let's do more. Let's fast by denying ourselves some food or comfort for a season in solidarity with those who cannot escape hunger or affliction. But let's also share our table with the hungry and find ways to comfort our sisters and brothers who are suffering. Let us break the yokes of systems that oppress others and lift heavy burdens together instead of expecting others to carry them. Let's stop all of our angry and self-righteous finger-pointing that scapegoats and demonizes other human beings created in the holy image of God. Let's stop threatening violence and using it against our sisters and brothers. Let's put an end to exploiting others, especially laborers, and make sure everyone can enjoy the dignity of work. Repairing the world, as Isaiah calls us to do, is hard work. But this Lent, let's make a start of it together.

**Prayer** Saving God, we long to give you the fast you desire—our justice.

## Psalm 51:1-17

### **Reflection: v. 17 'a broken and contrite heart...you will not despise'**

As I sat down this year to contemplate our Lenten texts, I felt a sinking and creeping reminder that this will be our third Lenten season of the pandemic. It was this time of the year in 2020 when everything shut down, and our collective lives changed irreversibly. How foolish we were, thinking our sacrifices would be short-lived and borne together. That realization somewhat zapped my creative energy; what new thing could I even have to say for Lent this year? Forgive me for my morose musing and remembering. I know it is much easier to pretend this arduous season is behind us, to pretend that death doesn't surround us still, and to try to envision yet another new way forward. But for many of us, things do not feel over. I try to cope by giving myself small promises of hope: 'You'll feel less anxious when Emi [my daughter] can be vaccinated, too.' Or 'It will get easier when you can welcome your community inside again and when the freeze-shelter can reopen.' Or 'When the number of deaths each day go down, you'll feel less worried about the vulnerable people in your life.' Like a too-long Lenten season, I sit here today in my pain, worry, grief, and even my penitence. And I yet wait for hope to dawn, even as it still feels far off and unrealized. And that's okay. It's okay to not be okay right now—God is with us when things are not okay, too. We do not have to put some beautifully worded theological spin on our hurting hearts to be acceptable to God. No, beloved, our broken hearts, God does not despise. So as we embark on yet another Lenten season together, and I find myself still hurting, still waiting, and still worrying, I am thankful that my broken heart is enough today.

**Prayer** Accept my broken heart, O God, hold it tenderly and care for me.

## 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

### **Reflection: v. 10, 'as having nothing, and yet possessing everything'**

In Paul's letters to the early Christian churches, he is often writing to remind these budding communities of the life they have signed on for with Christ. For Paul, this new life in Christ is no small thing, and has involved many changes and sacrifices. To follow Christ, there is much to give up and a lot you must walk away from. Paul describes in this letter feeling unknown and misunderstood—speaking the truth and yet being treated as an imposter of ill-repute. Paul also notes being treated as having nothing, despite possessing everything. Ever since I was a child, I have loved the traditional practice of 'giving something up' for Lent as a form of fasting. While I believe that God wants us to have good things and to enjoy life and abundance fully, there is also wisdom sometimes in giving things up. Sometimes it is okay to set something aside for a while, to take a little less, or to stop and take stock of what feels most important. While I certainly would not have articulated it this way as a child, I think giving something up was a small and subversive way that I combatted our consumerist culture that tells us that more is always better. 'I want it all, and I want now.' Don't tell me our society is not set up for the constant and instant gratification (of some). But does that always serve us? Do those of us with more, more, more ever really feel like we have enough? Or do we yearn for what Paul describes—seemingly having nothing, but possessing *everything*. Perhaps there is some wisdom in some of our old traditions if they can help us to actively resist the urges for things that do not satisfy. Perhaps this Lent, you might take some time in this slow season to take a reckoning of all that we consume—maybe there are things to give up, maybe there are things to consume less of, maybe there are things to share. And maybe in the slowing down, that brief pause we take to pull back our grasping hands for just a moment, we'll find what Paul has found instead: *everything*.

**Prayer** Instead of grasping for more things we don't need, help us to seek you, O Lord.



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## **First Week of Lent**

### Lectionary Readings

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Luke 4:1-13

## **Reflection: v. 1, 'Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness'**

There's no sense in talking about Jesus being tempted unless we talk about Jesus being baptized first. It is the Spirit that came upon him in those muddy waters, after all, that leads him and is with him in the wilderness. So let's recap: Jesus came out of the water, the heavens opened, the Spirit came down, and a voice from heaven spoke over him. 'You are my beloved Son; in you I find my delight,' the voice says. That's who Jesus is. That's his identity. And whether we believe it or not, that's ours, too. No, of course, neither you nor I are likely to be confused with the second person of the Trinity. Happily for the universe, I can say with confidence we are not god. But all the same, you are a beloved child of God. And just as God was pleased with Jesus, God delights in you.

Trust me, I know that's maybe one of the hardest truths for us to accept, acquainted as we are with our own brokenness and so often consumed with all the ways that we fail to measure up to our own ideals—let alone the expectations of others. But this inviolable belovedness is the essential truth of our existence. Being a child of God, like every other human being made in God's image, isn't a decision that you or I or anyone else gets to make about ourselves or others. That's God's choice, my friend, and it has already been made about us, long before you or I came to be. We belong to God, we are claimed by God, and we will never be forsaken by God. Period. End of story. Whatever else you may know about yourself or claim to be true, that is the truth that will not change. That is your identity. That is who you are.

**Prayer** Oh, voice from heaven, you call us at every moment your child, at every instant, beloved. By your Spirit, help us to trust in your unending love for us.

Luke 4:1-13

**Reflection: v. 3, 'The devil said to him, If you are...'**

We have nothing to prove in order to be loved. We have nothing to prove in order to have worth. And yet. And yet we so often feel we do, we must. Because, let's be honest, it seems the whole wide world around us tells us we do—perhaps not always directly but certainly indirectly. Our basic identity as beloved children of God is challenged everyday in countless ways. It's challenged by racism, genderism, and poverty. The thing that is most true about ourselves, that should be the most intuitive, seems to us to be absolutely counterintuitive. We allow our worth and value to be determined by what we wear, what we look like, what we do, who we are with, who recognizes us. If you think Jesus doesn't understand those struggles, trust me, he does. The temptation in the wilderness is nothing more than the devil throwing God's love in his face and saying, 'Prove it; prove you are really God's Son, beloved and the source of God's delight. Prove you are who God says you are.' And Jesus shows us the way to stand in our belovedness as a child of God when the devil comes at us with the same kinds of demands. Jesus says, in effect, 'No, I have nothing to prove; I know who I am.' And that's the grace we can hold onto, the grace to claim our identity and to not give it up—no matter what forces or voices or narratives—within our own head or without—make us feel as if we must prove it again and again. You have nothing to prove. You are beloved, child of God.

**Prayer** Spirit of Jesus, stay with us in our wilderness—stay when the devil and the world and our own thoughts demand that we prove what we cannot but never need to: that we are your beloved children.



Luke 4:1-13

**Reflection: v. 2, 'he was tempted by the devil'**

It seemed to me that the Bible Belt I grew up in was hell-bent on convincing me I was hell-bound. My mom would browse Christian bookstores when I was a kid, and I would inevitably find my way to the comics section. Christian comics in the 70's? Y'all have no idea. As a teen, I discovered Al Green, and among his gospel numbers was one entitled, *Yield Not to Temptation (For Yielding Is Sin)*, that I thought was pretty catchy. So naturally enough, even though we didn't go to church, topics I presumed to be essential to a good Christian life were made up of words that felt pretty scary to me back then—like sin and temptation and how to be holy. To be honest, I haven't really thought about these themes using those terms in a very long time. But reading about Jesus facing temptation in the wilderness gives us an opportunity to re-think traditional ways we have understood theological categories like temptation. One way of talking about temptation is anything that pulls us away from our hearts staying centered in our true identity as beloved children of God. Temptation is anything that makes us feel the need to prove our worth—to ourselves or to anyone else. The core of the temptations that Jesus faced is found in all the 'ifs' that call into question his identity: 'If you are God's beloved child, prove it by this...' We face temptation when we are lured away from the truth of our belovedness and try to prove our worth, by defining ourselves through wealth or power or privilege or status—and the list could go on as long as there are enough materials laying around by which we can piece together a DIY sense of self. Yet being tempted doesn't call into question our faithfulness. We will always find ourselves tempted to measure our worth by some other standard. Growing deeper into our hearts, into the truth of our belovedness as children of God, even as we struggle against our own broken and destructive patterns, is a life long process. It doesn't end. It didn't end after forty days in the wilderness for Jesus. As they say, the struggle is real. But more real by far is the truth of God's love for us. Temptation is nothing more than when we are pulled away from that truth.

**Prayer** Jesus, you stayed true to who you knew yourself to be, a beloved child of God, even when you were tempted to prove yourself. Help us to overcome every temptation to become anything other than who we are, beloved just like you.

# Wednesday, March 9

Isaiah Lewis

Luke 4:1-11

**Reflection: v. 13, 'After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity'**

HALT: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired. Some recovery communities use the acronym HALT to describe when we're most susceptible to the temptations to give in to destructive impulses and addictions. The scripture today presents Jesus as dealing with at least three of these vulnerabilities: he's hungry, tired, and alone. Perhaps predictably, that is exactly where the devil shows up. And the temptations Jesus is offered have everything to do with power. Again and again, the devil tries to needle Jesus into proving himself.

Sometimes when I'm hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, I can be convinced that I have something to prove, too. I feel vulnerable and that scares me, so I cling to false promises of power. But Jesus doesn't fall for the devil's trap. He isn't afraid of his own human vulnerabilities, so he doesn't have anything to prove. He has just been baptized and told by the Holy Spirit how much God loves him, and he holds onto that love to keep him stable in the midst of temptation. I don't have much in common with Jesus, but if I can remember my baptism when I'm feeling the need to flex, I can get a little curious about what that not-enoughness is hiding. When my identity is grounded in God's love, I'm better equipped to fight the temptations of power and privilege.

**Prayer** God, help us ground our beings in you. Be with us in our vulnerability and keep the devil and his temptations far from us.



## Psalm 91

### **Reflection: v. 2, 'my God, in whom I trust'**

These words of this psalm—the promise of God's protection that we can trust in—remind me of my own journey with recovery. For a long time, I wanted to give up on the process of recovery. Especially when you're out there drinking and using like I was, I thought I would never get to where I am at right now. I thought the opportunity was never going to come my way—that one of those doors was never going to be open to me. It was my faith that kept me steadfast. I believed that the process could work because I had witnessed it work for others before me. I knew that if you stick with it, results will come to pass. Many times, I wrote down prayers for things that I needed. I wrote them on a board, and sometimes they would come to pass, and that would give me encouragement to stick with the process. I have seen the recovery process change a lot of people's lives. There are some people I have known who have been in recovery for eight or nine years. Pastor Lattimore is an example. I have known him a long time, since he was at Peachtree and Pine, and he has a long history of clean time now. You need that kind of vision, to see someone move forward, to help keep you moving forward, too. That's part of why I come to Mercy every day. I'm hoping to help someone who wants help through their own process of recovery. I want to be there for others the way people have been there for me. It doesn't matter where you're at, so long as you start somewhere. For me, I had to start somewhere. Now, I'm just more grateful than anything. At this point I've come too far, and I just have to keep moving forward and trusting that God is with me.

**Prayer** Help us to remember, O Lord, that sometimes we just have to trust in the process and trust in you.

## Psalm 91

### **Reflection: v. 16, 'with long life I shall satisfy them and show them my salvation'**

I had to grow up a lot out here on these streets. I'm 59 years old—I've got to make my time valuable. I have to value life now because I'm getting older. I process things differently now. Especially when I see people downtown struggling, it hurts me, because I know I was once there, too. I have so much compassion for the homeless and people who are down and out, because I was there. I was standing in pain, just trying to get a break—trying to get in a doorway. Sometimes we have opportunities, and we mess up. We blow them. At times, we have to keep it moving forward and take responsibility. A lot of times when I've messed up, I realized I needed to take responsibility for some of my actions. I have had to look back and say, 'I messed that up. I could have handled that situation better.' I've grown a lot through this realization, through that process, and even through messing up. I look back at things now, and I stay encouraged. It's a good feeling to be able to do the things you know you need to do to take care of yourself. You're supposed to be able to have the things you need to take care of yourself and to feel good about yourself. God wants the best for you. God wants you to live the best life you can. I'm 59 years old, and I want to live the remainder of my life as the best life that I can. That's why I give it my best every day I wake up. I walk in that bathroom, look in the mirror, and say, 'This is what I've got to do. This is what I've got to do to stay sober, to stay blessed, and to stay in the place where I am.' I'm enjoying the place where I'm staying now, and I'm just trying to keep it moving one day at a time. I trust that things are going to happen as I'm working toward my next apartment. It's a tedious and slow process, but you can't give up. You've got to just keep on moving forward.

**Prayer** Walk with us, God, as we keep it moving forward one day at a time.

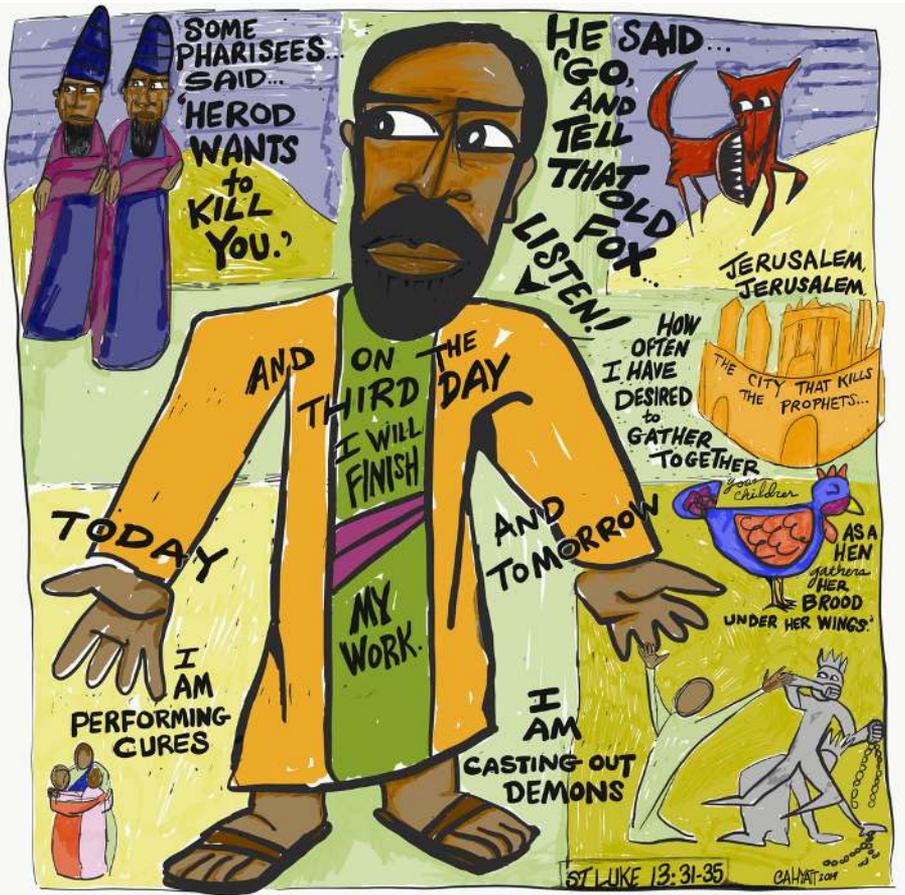
## Deuteronomy 26:1-11

**Reflection: v. 10, 'so now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me. You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God.'**

Reading this passage, I think of Mass, where Roman Catholics bring the 'gifts,' the bread and wine, to the priest for a blessing and the offering is taken up in a basket, prayed over, and set at the foot of the altar where the bread will be broken. At Mercy Community Church, instead of an offering basket, two black milk crates sit below our altar: one full of chimes, bells, maracas, and drums, the other piled high with Bibles. During our service, worship is shared with a congregational percussion section, and then the Word is exchanged as all are invited to speak. Here in Deuteronomy, ancient Israelites are encouraged to offer the first fruits of the prosperity God has given them. The Lord heard them in their pain of exile, brought them home, and now they return gifts in thanksgiving to God.

As we meditate on the scripture during Lent, I'm struck by the way that such an offering is not out of a need for penance but an honoring of the Giver. What if this Lent we understood 'giving-up' as just that—giving, which is a reflexive response of gratitude? What does this gratitude prepare our hearts for? Not for individual salvation or personal holiness, but communal remembrance and celebration in the presence of the One who guides us with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. I remember the boy who gave fish and loaves, the widow with her two coins, Mary with her only child Jesus. All gave in gratitude for what was given, and, in the sharing, communities were created and sustained. So let us give, and offer up, and in this way enter our community prepared to one day ring out praise and thanks to the Lord. Come worship with us on Sunday. I'll hand you a bell from the milk crate.

**Prayer** Lord, we give you thanks for your abundant love. Teach us to give in love.



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## Second Week of Lent

### Lectionary Readings

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalms 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

## Psalm 27

### **Reflection: v. 1, 'Yahweh, you're my light and my salvation'**

A few years and what feels like a lifetime ago, my coworker, Pastor Chad, wrote a community worship song based on this psalm. As music so often has the power to do, it comforted me in some unspeakable way. I loved how the lyrics, pulled straight from the words of the psalm, asked the simple question, 'Whom shall I fear?' and then transitioned to another bold declaration, 'I can see the goodness of the Lord.' Perhaps unsurprisingly, I have found this song most comforting when I have struggled to believe its words—when there is much to be fearful of and the goodness of the Lord seems scarce. When my appendix almost burst during the pandemic, and I was stuck in the hospital alone for several days, tired, disoriented, and scared. When I lost sleep over sending my unvaccinated daughter back to school, knowing her safety depended on the care and prudence of others whose decisions I couldn't control. When every day after working in the bitter cold, I would come home to another email or complaint conveying that our community gatherings are a nuisance to the privileged, and the pain of caring became partnered with the sting of being misunderstood. In these moments, I would find myself defiantly humming and mumbling, 'Whom shall I fear?' I would find myself singing, 'I can see the goodness of the Lord' long before I saw hope for some resolution to my problem. On some level, saying these words like a prayer helped me to believe them. They reminded me of God's presence to me, of God's goodness, when it was hard to perceive. I have to wonder if the psalmist may have felt that way, too. Did they write these powerful words because they were feeling completely assured of God's saving grace or because they so desperately yearned for that assurance? Beloved, I pray that when you too are struggling, you may receive the reminder you need that God is with you: God is our light and our salvation.

**Prayer:** Yahweh, you're my light and my salvation. You are my strong tower, whom shall I fear?

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

**Reflection: v. 11, 'when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away'**

Imagine it with me: there's Abram—tired, frustrated, and trying to be faithful as he beats away a bunch of vultures vying for his offering. Do you think he cursed them out? I would have. 'This meat is for God, you ungrateful buzzards! Buzz off!' At this point, Abram has completely uprooted his life and dragged his family to who-knows-where on the uncertain promise that God will bless him with innumerable descendants... *someday*. 'Look at the stars,' God promises, as Abram yearns for a legacy. But in the present moment what Abram is doing is shooing hungry birds away from dead animal carcasses. Now there are a lot of interesting pieces that we could ponder together in this passage, but for me this year, it was the image of a sweaty, frustrated Abram protecting his offering that stood out to me. Why, you ask? Because this very non-glamorous, hands-on image of faithfulness seemed relatable to me in this long and arduous season of serving our Lord. In some ways, it feels as if the people of God at Mercy Church have had a tough couple of years. Yes, we have much to be grateful for, but I would be lying if I said it has been easy showing up day in and day out. We are doing everything we can to be faithful to one another in these uncertain and difficult times, and yet sometimes it seems we can't catch a break. And so, like our friend Abram here, we pray to hold on, we pray to remain faithful and good to one another even when it is hard, and even when there is only the promise that things will get easier. And for the time being? Well, we'll keep shooing the pesky birds away, trusting that God shows up to fulfill God's promises.

**Prayer** God be with us, even when it feels like things are for the birds.

## Philippians 3:17-4:1

### **Reflection: v. 17, 'join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us'**

There are several people at Mercy who we affectionately refer to as our community's prophets. They have earned this title because of the truth-filled wisdom they impart in sharing their stories and insight in our discussion-based Bible studies. None of them have been to seminary or been ordained. But their honest leadership and the way they share their stories of everything from homelessness and hardship to their journeys through recovery and wellness inspire. The stories of their experiences and insight make you want to imitate their kind of faithfulness. They set an example for all of us who strive to be well and who work to be better at loving ourselves and our neighbors. Living a good and faithful life is not about always getting it right or always *being* right. It isn't about success. It isn't about having good credentials. It isn't about burying our shortcomings and hiding our addictions. Let us be more honest with ourselves. Let us be more honest *about* ourselves. Join me in imitating these honest prophets of our community who bravely show us a way to seek truth and wellness together.

**Prayer** Guide us in the wise ways of your prophets, O Lord, from the days of old and from now.



# Wednesday, March 16

Maurice Lattimore

Philippians 3:17-4:1

## Reflection: v. 19, 'their end is destruction'

This passage reminds me of a time in my life when I was an enemy of the cross and my life was on the road to destruction. My 'gods' were greed, selfishness, lust, control, and the most powerful of them all, my thirst for self-medication. At the end of the day, it was all about me and what I thought were my worldly pleasures. But God has a way of getting your attention by letting you go according to your own way—by allowing all kinds of stumbling blocks to come your way to keep you from your own destruction. At this point, I had been dragged through the gutter and was imprisoned—and facing many years. It was at this time that I turned my life over to Christ with a true heart of repentance and a willingness to honestly try. This was when Paul's message in Philippians started to resonate with my life. These biblical examples of how we ought to live continue to keep me standing firm in hope today.

**Prayer** By the manifesting spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, glory and praise be to God Almighty! Hallelujah!! Amen!!



## Philippians 3:17-4:1

### **Reflection: v. 19, 'their god is the belly'**

I love breakfast at Mercy. I don't usually eat breakfast at all, but I always look forward to the eggs and hash browns when I come to Mercy on Mondays. In Germany, we don't put cheese in scrambled eggs. This was new to me. What a revelation!

And now Paul says I must not enjoy my food? Can't we also enjoy earthly things? With tears, he calls those whose belly is god and who only focus on earthly things enemies of the cross of Christ. That's a serious expression. How do we deal with that?

Let's take a close look at the wording: 'Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.' It isn't those who enjoy good food or other earthly things who are the enemies of the cross. Those who place their bellies above all else and who strive *only* for earthly things are called enemies. We can and should enjoy our food and everything else, but it shouldn't be all we strive for. In the Gospel, according to Matthew, Jesus once said, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' There is so much beauty in the world to be happy about. But food and other earthly things are not everything.

We live in the certainty that God loves us. Our citizenship is in heaven. Jesus transforms us according to his example. Jesus joins us into his body. In this way, the glory of God is visible in the world. We hold firm that we belong to the Lord.

We are God's beloved children. We can rejoice and trust that God will help us and that we have our place with him in heaven. At the same time, we can be just as happy and enjoy the world with everything it offers, including scrambled eggs with cheese.

**Prayer** God, let your grace be one of the things that fills us up.

# Friday, March 18

Elizabeth Rogan

Luke 13: 31-35

## Reflection: v. 34, 'as a hen gathers her brood'

Jesus spent his adult life in a community much like the one we have at Mercy Community Church. He surrounded himself with the people who were outcast and shunned, and made it his mission to make his community seen and cared for. The passage from Luke 13: 31-35 describes how Jesus was warned that Herod would kill him, and he responded, essentially, 'Come at me; I will not back down until I have finished the work that is left for me to do.' He likened his role to a hen protecting her brood, standing defiant as those in Jerusalem threatened him, and his people, with harm. For me, this metaphor calls to mind our beloved Mercy pastors, who fearlessly provide community, shelter, comfort, and above all safety to those whom the rest of society casts aside. In this season of Lent, it is also interesting to read that Jesus said that he needed three days to accomplish his work, and that his undoing would happen by those in Jerusalem. Perhaps this was a foreshadowing of the three days from his execution to his resurrection, in that same Jerusalem. Jesus did not shy away from the danger of his mission—he embraced it, and by fearlessly forging ahead in the face of death, he made the power of his message more enduring than anyone could have imagined. We live that message every day at Mercy Community Church, standing tall in the face of opposition and scorn from society, and protecting each other like a hen with her chicks.

**Prayer** Help us to protect the ones you care about, O God, just as you so lovingly protect us.



## Psalm 27

### **Reflection: v. 13, 'I shall see the goodness of the Lord'**

St Mother Teresa once wrote, 'I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength, I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now know that prayer changes us and we change things.'

While at Columbia Seminary, my daughter, Brittany, served as an intern at Mercy Church, and I believe that both of our lives changed because of it. The first time I visited Mercy, I knew that one day it would be my church. Soon after graduation, Brittany became a pastor there. My visits from Arkansas became more frequent after Emi, my granddaughter, was born. I think after every visit I would learn something at Mercy and then take a new challenge back to my church in Arkansas. And every time they would step up and take it on. I moved to Atlanta a little over two years ago and have been able to see how resilient Mercy really is—this community doesn't understand the word 'can't.' Since the start of Covid restrictions, Mercy has continued to do whatever we could to serve. We moved outdoors, provided masks, arranged for Covid testing and vaccinations, and continued to provide food and clothing. But the thing that is so enlightening is the sharing of the word of God. Hearing stories and thoughts about the daily scripture and the interaction between everyone in the community is such an eye-opener. Mercy isn't just for food and clothing, it is the church of the community. Every day I see the goodness of the Lord right here at Mercy.

**Prayer** Help me to see your goodness, O Lord, and help me to be a part of it.



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## **3rd Week of Lent**

### Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

# Sunday, March 20

Holly Reimer

Isaiah 55:1-9

## Reflection: v.1, 'Whoever has no money, come'

This is a wildly counter-cultural statement for us to receive. We exist in a world that lives an opposite truth: that money buys entrance and gives value. Here we are, with a God who continues to defy the lies that we've been perpetuating, that what we have is more valuable than people and relationships. God has set a table that is big enough for everyone. God creates space for all of us. But it's not just a space to sit and be, it's also a space that we are to create for one another. Now, this all sounds fine and good until it requires something of us, which it does. It means that we do, in fact, live in a world where there is enough for everyone to have what we need. It means that no one should have to sleep outside in the cold. No one's feet should be so badly bruised and blistered from inadequate shoes and wet socks that they can barely walk. It means that those who are struggling with mental health should not be treated as dangerous and violent. It means that people of different races or ethnicities should not be scapegoated for violence. It means that corporate executives should not make billions of dollars while hourly employees work multiple jobs struggling to care for their families. So as we come to the table that God has set before us, let's dismantle our fences so we too can create space where there is 'enough' peace, justice, and resources for everyone.

**Prayer** Lord, may we be challenged to create space for everyone. Amen.



# Monday, March 21

Holly Reimer

Psalm 63:1-8

## Reflection: v. 1, 'my body desires you in a tired and dry land'

I don't know about you, but I'm in desperate need of peace and a stronger sense of life. This pandemic has revealed a lot about our broken systems and selfish thoughts. I'm tired of bearing witness to gender, cultural, racial, and economic profiling. I'm tired of seeing power and privilege used to create abuse and disparity. I'm tired and my whole being desires something that this world has not been able to provide--peace. I'm craving God's presence, a sense of 'with-ness' with God that allows us to sit and bear witness to one another. I'm craving space where we don't have to fight for love and justice. So I join the psalmist in this prayer, craving more of God's Spirit, because it is God who provides that which the world cannot. Maybe you are craving something similar. Maybe, you have also been in a space where something has been 'missing' or felt 'off.' We are making our way toward the cross and resurrection, toward death but also new life. Maybe it is time for us to be agents in the change we desire, tapping into the one who demonstrated all that we are craving.

**Prayer** Lord, we crave you. We crave spaces of peace and justice. May we find that peace in you.



Luke 13:1-9

## Reflection: v.5, 'Unless you change your hearts and lives'

We read books, listen to podcasts, watch shows and movies. We sit in the crowd of protests and marches, and wonder why nothing changes. We get frustrated by the ways of the world, but nothing is transformed. Insanity has often been called 'doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result.' Well, the crowds in this story don't seem to understand what Jesus is offering—this same truth—that our mere presence in the crowd, simply listening to Jesus is not enough. Lives must change, action must take place. The same is true for the land owner who is appalled by the fig tree that has borne no fruit. How dare this tree be barren! Yet what has he done to till the land or prune the branches? What action has he taken to change the result? We may find ourselves frustrated by injustices, but it is no longer enough to read books, listen to podcasts, and watch movies that depict real-life strife. It cannot end there, we have been called to change. If I want something to change in the world, something has to change in my life. If I want something to change in my life, then I have to change something in my behavior. If I want to be closer to Christ, then I need to draw closer to those Christ drew closer to.

**Prayer** God, may we no longer talk about change, but be changed. Amen.



# Wednesday, March 23

Ruth Ann North

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Isaiah 55: 1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

## **Reflection: v. 2, 'that which does not satisfy'**

Why is the allure so strong to try and satisfy ourselves with cheap alternatives when God is offering us the best?

I think it's similar to why we often give in to cheap, fast, physical food. It's easier. It is often more convenient to show off in neat little packages. It immediately but briefly satisfies a craving, while at the same time makes us crave it more and more.

Somehow in God's story we can come, buy, and eat the best food, even if we don't have any money! How is that possible?

I think what Isaiah is trying to tell us is that it's possible because God is the source. God doesn't need anything in return. God also provides what we need to endure any temptation to settle for less! God will send a cloud, part the sea, whatever it takes to help us not turn back to the cheap substitutes.

When I come to the table with my brothers and sisters at Mercy, I see a picture of this kind of radical welcome, nourishment, and abundance. There is life for our souls here. God's love is steadfast and sure.

When we come together for communion, we reflect this truth to one another: all it takes is to come and receive it. It's not about what we have to offer but what is already there for us to receive and share.

We practice it on Sunday so we can do it in each moment of our journey.

**Prayer** God of abundance, help us to practice radical hospitality every day.

# Thursday, March 24

Jerome Johnson

Isaiah 55:1-9

## Reflection v. 3, 'I will make with you an everlasting covenant'

When it says that God is going to make an everlasting covenant with me that means God is going to forever help take care of me. That makes me feel good knowing that I can eat at God's table—that I'm always welcome there. That's kind of like Mercy's table here, too. Everyone is welcome. This scripture says, 'You who have no money, come and eat.' That makes me think of coming here to Mercy's table at times when I have had no money and yet there is plenty to eat and drink. We give away free food—we don't charge anybody for it. It's like the Lord's table, and you don't have to spend any money for it. This is the only church I know of that doesn't even take up an offering in service—I've never been to a church that doesn't take up an offering. Even the big churches around town do, but we don't do that here. Reading this scripture reminds me of our days at Mercy. It reminds me of this place here because you don't need anything to be welcome. God's covenant with us is like that too—God welcomes us to a big table. It's free and there's more than enough to share.

**Prayer** Thanks for making a promise to us, God. Thanks for inviting us to your big table.



## Psalm 63:1-8

### **Reflection: v. 4, 'I will lift up my hands and call on your name!'**

You can get in a room full of very smart people and they might not be able to come to an agreement on much of anything. You can also take some less educated people, who know what they believe in (but aren't armed with as much ammunition that they can use to make their arguments), and they can say something profoundly true if it comes out of love. If what you say and do comes out of love, you don't have to be all that smart. When you do things out of love, you're smart anyway. In the same way, when you look at life through the eyes that God wants you to see through, then the scary stuff, isn't always so scary. It's easy to find condemnation out there in the world. There are definitely enough people who are throwing it our way. So sometimes I think we need to quit catching it so much and listen for God's voice instead. I can think of so many instances that I think I might not have survived if it had not been for God. I can't think of how many times that, due to my own self-damage, I thought I was going to die. There were times I couldn't see my way out, and there were times I just didn't really care anymore. That's a dangerous and scary thing. If it hadn't been for that little mustard seed of faith that I had, then I think I'd have been gone. If you listen to God, you will hear God. You may not hear some audible voice, but you're going to hear it in your heart. Because once God puts that in your heart, it's like a tattoo that cannot be taken away. I'm not going to sit here and say that I pray prolifically, but I do have a compartment inside of me that is where God lives. I find myself throughout the day honoring God in ways that I don't always even think about. One of them is that every time I get home and I stick my key in the door I say, 'thank you, Jesus!' I don't even say the 'sus.' I don't even say 'Jesus,' it's JE-SUH. 'Thank you, JESUH! Amen! Halleluiah!' It's just something simple that I do every day to keep God on my heart. At the end of the day, keeping God on our hearts, listening for God, is what gives us hope. You don't have to have all the answers, and you don't have to always get it right, to listen for God, to act in love, and to look for hope.

**Prayer** Thank you, Jesus, for all the ways you speak to us.

Isaiah 55:1-9

## Reflection: v. 1, 'Come, buy and eat'

In this passage from Isaiah, God is speaking to a group of discouraged, hungry people. God is not giving up on them and is calling them towards him instead. These people have been struggling with hunger and thirst, just like many people still struggle with, but God's love does not give up on them. I often have trouble reading and understanding scripture. This is a passage I read quite a few times to understand and really get the message. In this passage, it is clear that God wants us, as God calls out to everyone and says, 'Come to the waters...come, buy and eat...come, buy wine and milk...seek the Lord.' God is calling us to both physical and spiritual blessings. God desires us, no matter who we are, where we sleep at night, or what we do during the day. God desires good things for all people and God desires us to seek him. Despite everything going on in this world, this message gives me hope and reassurance because of how clear it is that God didn't give up on his people then and he's not going to give up on his people now. No matter what we do or who we are, God loves and desires us. It is also our job to seek God out. And the amazing thing is that we can seek God out just as we are. We don't have to change who we are or put on a show or face, because God desires us just as we are.

**Prayer** God, thank you for loving us just as we are and for calling us to good things.







'The lavish hospitality that sees caring for human beings bodily, even our weary feet, as truly holy is the only real way for us to love one another as Jesus has loved us.'

CHAD HYATT



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## **4th Week of Lent**

### Lectionary Readings

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

## Psalm 32

### **Reflection: v. 1, 'Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered'**

Let's talk about sin. Lent is known as a season of penitence, a season that we Christians intentionally set aside to think about the ways we have been sinful—and you know, repent. Unfortunately, the church has a long and painful history of thinking and teaching about sin in harmful and unhelpful ways. We pile on shame and make one another feel guilty about the entirely wrong things, while blatantly ignoring the things we *should* be addressing (you know, like all the ways we hurt, deny, and leave one another out), all the while, never working toward an honest and healing changing of our ways. It is natural to want to put theologies of sin on the back-burner when so many of them do nothing but harm, but if we don't talk about sin and repentance in healthier ways, how can we ever hope to change? So instead of banishing the concept of sin altogether and saying 'we don't talk about sin (no, no, no)', can we instead envision an honest repentance that liberates us all—a truthful desire to change our ways for the better of everyone? The psalmist says, 'Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,' not happy are those who are perfect, not happy are those who can ignore injustice. I believe that when we are honest with ourselves about what we need to work on, about the ways we hurt and fail one another, about the ways we judge and discriminate, about the ways we hold privilege, and about the ways we participate in brokenness, only then can we work toward something better. The freeing part? You do not have to beat yourself up. God doesn't actually want that either. Repentance is not about beating yourself down for every little thing, it is about changing our world for the better. Doesn't sound so bad does it? So, let's talk about it.

**Prayer** Take away my sin and guilt, O God, that I may be part of change for the better.

# Monday, March 28

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**Reflection: v. 31, 'Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours'**

This parable has always been one of my favorite hard lessons for anyone who has ever been bitter about others getting what they need. What is it about humans that even when we have more than enough, we become jealous when we believe someone is getting 'more than they've earned' or more than we believe they deserve? That is not how grace works, and thanks be to God, Jesus reminds us that we have a God of grace. The father in this story cares about the faithful son who has been there all along (and lest we forget, has his father's resources still). But he also cares about the son who has made a few mistakes along the way. Like this loving parent, God's ways are of grace. As a frequent mistake-maker myself, I'm glad God operates with grace instead of giving us our just desserts. As followers of this God, what if we too decided to proceed in the world, with one another, with grace. Instead of constantly analyzing whether or not someone has 'earned' healthcare or benefits or a day off or a second chance (while often ignoring all the ways we have been given legs-up and may not even be aware), why not proceed with grace first? Why not offer the benefit of the doubt? Why not just decide that everyone should have enough of what they need? Why not decide that someone getting something they need does not negatively impact those of us with more than enough? Grace is free, abundant, and beautifully unearned—thanks be to God. What if this Lenten season we started acting like we follow a God of grace?

**Prayer** God of grace, help us to operate out of grace too.

## 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

### **Reflection: v. 20, 'So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us'**

Lately I have been thinking a lot about what it means to be the church. As a humble little church that has always rented and borrowed space, I believe Mercy has a unique perspective. We are never able to confuse our 'church' with our building—we don't have one! Because we gather throughout the week prioritizing the sharing of resources alongside practices like praying, singing, and preaching, we are also less tempted to conflate 'church' with our 'Sunday worship service' alone. Our church is all the ways we show up for one another, and particularly the most vulnerable among us, day in and day out. Our church practices are sharing, eating, fellowshiping, lamenting, listening, and yes, worshipping too. As I read Paul's reminder of our vocation to be ambassadors for Christ, I recalled a recent conversation with one of our community members. He described why it was important to him to give back to his community at Mercy. He saw his Christian ambassadorship as all the ways he was present to his fellow community members—in the ways he shared wisdom, in the ways he showed kindness, in the ways he was present to others who were struggling, but also in simple ways like how he helped make and serve coffee. We are called to live a life through which God makes God's appeal through our actions. As Christians, we worship Christ, yes, but we also *follow his ways*. We also live a life wherein Christ's appeal shines through the ways we treat one another. As I continue to contemplate what it means to be church, I pray that this church might be a place full of such ambassadors.

**Prayer** Speak through our actions and witness, O Lord. Help us to be your ambassadors, your church.

# Wednesday, March 30

Bill Smith

## 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

### Reflection: v. 18, 'the ministry of reconciliation'

This has always been one of my favorite passages. I love that Paul dispels the notion that you have to *be somebody* particularly special before you are converted. All the things that we think are really important for getting ahead in this world—who our parents are, what school we went to, how much money we have—aren't what really matter. Paul dispels that notion. Anyone can come to God and be enough. Paul's words dispel the notion that you have to be all that and a bag of chips before you are reconciled to God. Then Paul slams on the breaks and changes directions, and goes on to say that since you've been reconciled, now your job is to create reconciliation with others. There are some in the church who tend to think that only clergy can convert folk, that only clergy do the work of bringing people to God. And here's the problem with that: Christ calls clergy and church leaders to be shepherds. Shepherds do not *make* sheep—sheep make more sheep! I believe that we are *all* called to make sheep. We are *all* called to convert. We are *all* called to bring others to the kingdom—to be ministers of reconciliation. That's what Paul encourages us to be. He puts it back on us to work at reconciliation with one another. Whether its social justice, racial justice, or seeking justice for those experiencing poverty—whatever the form of justice looks like in your locale, that's the work that we are called to as ministers of reconciliation.

**Prayer** God, who calls each and every one of us, guide us to be ministers of reconciliation and to seek justice in this world.



## 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

### Reflection: v. 18, 'given us the ministry of reconciliation'

Reconciliation. Now there's a word you don't hear every day. What is 'reconciliation?' What does it mean to be reconciled? Simply put, reconciliation is putting back together what once was broken. It is the act of coming together after pressure, stress, tensions, and actions have torn something apart. How wonderful it is that we have a God who reconciles the world to Godself! What was once a strained and broken relationship, God has restored through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. What good news for the whole of creation!

This reconciliation does, however, come with a call. Paul reminds us that God 'has given us the ministry of reconciliation.' We are called to participate in the work of reconciliation that God has already begun in the world. So where are the broken places? What stresses and tensions do you see around you? What is in need of being put back together after being fractured? If we take a little time to slow down and pay attention, we'll begin to see these places and relationships around us in dire need of reconciliation. The message of reconciliation has been entrusted to us. Let us go out into the world and, with God's help and guidance, work towards putting back together what once was broken.

**Prayer** Guide us, reconciling God, to the work of reconciliation.



## 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

### **Reflection: v. 20, 'we are ambassadors for Christ'**

This letter to the Corinthians is a work of art. I love the letters to the Corinthians because these words are what started my own religious search. They broke down everything for me. This passage talks about the ministry of reconciliation. To me, that describes the heart of things. Every person on earth can be reconciled, rejoined together, and made whole and made new. This passage says that from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view, though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, he goes on to say, if anyone is in Christ, we are experiencing a new creation.

When I read these words, first of all, it broke things down for me. It lets me know how my Christian walk should be, since I have been redeemed. If I have been redeemed and reconciled unto God, that's a blessing to me. So every day that I get up, I must make that day notable. I must be thankful to God that God has redeemed and reconciled me. It is a blessing to know that I am an ambassador for Christ. Somebody might ask, 'Well, how do I consider myself an ambassador?' I can consider myself an ambassador for Christ because anyone can be someone who speaks on behalf of Christ. I feel like I do that everyday that I get up and I serve my community or someone in my community. I'm actually being an ambassador in doing what God wants me to do.

**Prayer** Make me your ambassador, O Christ, in the ways I serve my community.

## Psalm 32

### **Reflection: v. 2, 'happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity'**

The writer of this psalm is happy because his sins and iniquities have been forgiven—which has probably been a waste of his life. Feeling guilty is a heavy burden one must carry on one's back. God doesn't want us to feel bad all the time. We're God's children. It's who we are. We're God's creation first, and God's children second. Jesus came and paid the total price of all our iniquities on the cross—which is a heck of a way to die. But it saved us all. To live as a Christian in community sometimes means understanding that those who are at fault aren't at fault totally—every once in a while we just have a bad day. All of us have had a bad day at some point. But God does not hold that against us. When asked, God does not deny you forgiveness.

**Prayer** Thank you, God, for never denying us forgiveness.





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## Fifth Week of Lent

### Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalms 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

Isaiah 43:16-21

## Reflection: v. 18, 'Don't remember prior things.'

When I think about this text, it reminds me of our 'new,' old space. For over a year and a half our community met on the lawn of our partner church, St. John's Lutheran. Shortly after the first of the year, we moved back to our established basement space at Druid Hills Presbyterian Church. It can be easy to think about all of the ways we used to do things, and the experiences we had in that space prior to COVID. It can (and has been) easy to get stuck in the past, feeling trapped by what used to be. And yet God is doing a new thing. Coming back to an old space in a new way has allowed us to create hospitality by warming up inside, using flushing toilets, washing up in a sink with running water, while also being mindful of the need to keep one another safe from the COVID virus. But if we had been stuck on the old ways we had always used the space before, we would not have been able to reimagine ways to create hospitality while keeping one another safe. If we get too stuck in the past, we cannot see God working in the present. God, who is beyond our full comprehension, will make new paths in the wilderness and create a way in the desert—in ways we never dreamed possible. As we think about things in our lives, and the ways of the past, let us not put God in such a box that we lose sight of what God can do now.

**Prayer** Lord, let us not get stuck in the past. Amen.



## Philippians 3:4b-14

### Reflection: v. 12, 'but I pursue it'

Paul is in pursuit of something greater, something everlasting that gives life. But it's not just life in the moment, it is life everlasting. Something that will not fade away. It is so easy to engage in things that will bring us a temporary reprieve from the things that weigh us down. And it usually isn't until we get stuck with the empty bottle, the hefty credit card bill, or wake up exhausted because we have numbed our minds binging TV that we realize that relief isn't permanent. The everlasting life is something that allows us to feel healthy and happy for the long-term, to find new practices and ways of engaging that bring fulfillment, rather than emptiness. Paul tells his readers about all he has given up (good things, too) in pursuit of this gain. He realizes that although he was doing nothing wrong by the measure of the law, he was not truly living as one living in Christ. Paul is losing old ways and habits, and this is a message we should also take to heart. Our world is broken, as are the ways we engage one another. It is time to lose old ways in an effort to find something better, and not just better for me, but for everyone! Pursuit requires persistence and energy. There are even times when pursuing something new and different can feel isolating. It requires that we alter our thinking, become more mindful about our relationships, and create new patterns.

**Prayer** God, give us the the strength and endurance to pursue the kind of faithfulness that can only be found in you. Amen.



John 12:1-8

**Reflection: v. 3, 'she anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair'**

Mary is holding a posture of humility. Have you ever knelt before someone? Whether they are sitting or standing, allowing yourself to become lower than they are? In kneeling before Jesus, Mary communicates silently that she is yielding control to him, that he is of great importance to her in that very moment. It also allows her to communicate her focus on Jesus alone in this moment. When we kneel before one another, we take away threats of power or authority and allow ourselves to simply be present. Although the scripture doesn't say this, I imagine she takes her time, massaging the oil into Jesus' feet, taking care with every inch. Feet can be seen as one of the dirtiest parts of the body, and are often overlooked. Our feet get us from place to place, appointments, meetings, etc. Here is Mary, taking care of Jesus' feet as she prepares them for his death, not worrying or listening to the critique of her use of such expensive oil. And then when she is finished, she uses what she has, her hair, to wipe Jesus' feet dry. She takes what she has, bowing her head even lower. Mary takes this position to allow herself to submit to someone else, acknowledging the value and worth of Jesus, the person before her, and she cares for him. She cares for the one who is in front of her. Friends, I challenge us all to take such humble care of the ones who are before us. May we submit ourselves to the meek, the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten. May we allow ourselves to become a little lower, more humble, and more kind.

**Prayer** Make us more humble, Lord, that we may be more attentive to those in need.

## Psalm 126

### **Reflection: v. 5, 'may those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy'**

In my last months of drinking, sobriety looked like the finish line. I dreamed of the peace of healthy guts, the clean feeling of a good night's sleep, the presence of mind to read and write in the evenings.

When I got to the other side of detox, I realized that all kinds of problems were waiting for me there. I had to get honest about my lack of faith, face destructive relationships, and figure out what to do with my anxiety and despair.

In Psalm 126, God's people had arrived in God's city. They exploded in celebrations and songs, wrote the story of crossing over, then found out there was more story ahead.

They made new mistakes, got into new fights with their neighbors, faced new oppression from new empires. Here they are looking back at God's work in the past and wondering why they're still dealing with all the same things so many years later.

Sometimes, eternal life seems like a terrifying idea. I'd like to know what I'm aiming at, get there, and be done. But wherever we think we're going, there's always more after.

The good news is that today's pain is part of a new cycle of grace. We walk along weeping now, but the seeds we plant in this season will bloom in the next. That's how God's world works.

**Prayer** Journey with us through the cycles of life, O God. Help us to feel your presence when weeping and rejoicing.

Isaiah 43:16-21

## Reflection: v. 18, 'do not remember the former things'

Memory is a tricky thing. Things we think of as 'unforgettable' may stay with us for a long time, but the details can get fuzzy: the time of day, the season, what we were wearing. Psychologists have shown human memory will lose traction, slip up, make mistakes. Like an old tape, the fidelity of our memory can wear out, get grainy, colors blur and fade. Our relationships are built on memories, trust or lack thereof is forged on what happened before. For many of us, that's a tough ask to have only your past speak for you, especially an imprecise past. We make mistakes and gain perspective, and sometimes that can come too late for many people. Even if we don't remember all the facts, the feeling of hurt remains. While Isaiah makes a case to remember the past, this passage goes a step further. God says, 'Even though I was there for you before, okay, forget the past. You don't need every detail. I'm making a pledge on the future. You can let go of the past. You are released from that! The new offer I make will be better than the old one you were getting. I want good and better things for you. I give you hope for the future!' That is good news indeed! Our memories and feelings may not stay sharp, but God is not done working. There is more to hope for and good memories to be made on the horizon.

**Prayer** God, give us faith to trust in the bright future you want for us.



## Isaiah 43:16-21

### **Reflection: v.19, 'I will make a way in the wilderness, and waters in the desert'**

It was the end of the day. The end of a long day that began at 4:20 a.m. As I drove to pick up my daughter, I wondered what to make her for dinner. She got in the car and almost as if she read my mind she said, 'Can we have Waffle House for dinner?' In my exhaustion I was delighted at her suggestion because I knew I still needed to study and do some laundry in addition to making dinner happen. When I arrived at the Waffle House, I was greeted by a warm and lovely waitress. As I was placing our order to-go she politely paused for a moment and reached for her phone.

She said, 'This is my song!' while she turned up the volume on the speaker she brought from home and began singing along with Al Green, 'For the Good Times.' She continued to sing and sway to the music all while she rang up my order and dried the silverware. As I waited for the food, the cook, the waitress and I swayed gently and sang quietly with Al Green. In that unsuspecting, unexpected moment at the Waffle House, refreshment was offered and shared in the midst of the everyday-ness and the feeling of exhaustion.

In this scripture, Isaiah is addressing the Israelites who have been held captive and separated from their community at the hands of the Babylonians. He is attempting to offer them hope in the promises of God amid their suffering—which can often feel like a lonely wilderness or a dry desert. We can read Isaiah and know intellectually that God is where we find hope, but often it's difficult to translate that to our everyday lives. I know I certainly struggle sometimes to see and understand what God's hope looks like when things seem hard, especially when circumstances seem to remain unchanged. But it's amid those circumstances when we pause, pay attention, and sway to the music of the unexpected rivers that appear before us in our deserts, that we will catch a glimpse of the hope in God that Isaiah perceives.

**Prayer** God, who provides waffles in the wilderness, care for our needs and give us rest and refreshment.

## Phillipians 3:4b-14

### **Reflection: v. 7, 'whatever gains I had, I have come to regard as loss'**

This passage talks about how Paul once considered his many titles and status from society to be high praise and worthy of note. He was proud of these accomplishments and had achieved what most folks would call success. However, he had now come to consider all of these status markers and accomplishments to be wasted effort. This is because he found his faith in Christ and realized that his faith in Christ was more important than all the titles and positions he could have gotten elsewhere in the world. This is an important lesson for us to learn and apply in our lives as well. We should all feel empowered to take our faith in Christ and find what matters to us in our life. As Paul notes, he still has a way to go on his journey and just because he found fulfillment in his faith, that does not mean that his life became measurably easier. When we find what matters to us, we will also have to put in work to keep and expand what is important to us, just as Paul had taken up the work to expand and guide the early Christian communities. I know from personal experience that working toward something that is important to me makes me feel happier and more productive working on it, even if the work is harder or more complicated. As we move forward let's try to learn from Paul's experience. Let us try to find what gives meaning and fulfillment in our lives. Let us then take those things and treasure and work to expand them.

**Prayer** Guide and empower us, God, to find fulfillment in our journeys with you.





LOOK  
YOUR  
KING  
WILL  
COME  
TO YOU  
AND  
SPEAK  
PEACE

LUKE 19:36 ZECHARIAH 9:9-10



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## **Palm Sunday + Holy Week**

### Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Luke 19:28-40, 45-48

John 12:1-11

John 13:1-35

John 18:1-19:42

# Palm Sunday

Chad Hyatt

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Luke 19:28-40, 45-48

There's something about the table-upending Jesus, the one who refuses to let us go about business as normal. Table-tossing Jesus is the one we human beings shout both 'hosanna' for and 'crucify' against. Imagine my surprise when I realized our Palm Sunday liturgy at Mercy has always included Jesus marching into the temple and toppling tables, sending coins and birds alike flying—but the lectionary doesn't. In fact, only once in the three year cycle of readings for worship does it make an appearance: the Third Week of Lent, Year B. I don't think there is a lectionary conspiracy afoot or anything nefarious like that. But I do think our choice to always keep these texts together and its general omission is telling. Our reading has always seen the liturgy of the palms as a street action, a protest march from the overlooked outskirts to the very center of power. It is worship, but it is a very radical and subversive kind of worship. There's a reason the powers that be wanted to nail Jesus to a cross, after all. Flipping tables in the temple, calling out the institutional exploitation of the poor and reminding us what true worship of the liberating God ought to be, is a natural extension, even an intensifier, of the palm-waving celebration that ushered Jesus into Jerusalem. Our community Palm Sunday practice has often included marching together in the streets toward our worship space, palms moving like flags and home-made protest signs raised together, as we sing civil rights anthems and shout throaty hosannas. As we study the scriptures together and unpack their meaning for us, we inevitably see ourselves as part of the movement Jesus was leading. Isn't that what church really is, after all—a movement for freedom that Jesus is still leading? I remember a member of our community remarking in bible study: 'It seems to me like Jesus knew his conflict with the authorities was unavoidable, and so he's turning himself in. I've had to do that before.' Our own holy table isn't excluded from Jesus' indictment of the way all of our communities can turn inward upon themselves and forsake God's call of liberation and radical welcome. Yes, we have actually overturned our own communion table as an act of worship. Because it's important to remind ourselves that even we are not excluded from Jesus' TFE (Table Flipping Energy). Maybe it would do all of us good to include some table-tossing in our liturgies and worship and especially in the lives of the communities we are called to lead with one another toward liberation.

**Prayer** Jesus, overturn our tables until we make a prayerful home for all.

## John 12:1-11

Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, washed the feet of Jesus before he washed the feet of his disciples. With John's narrative framing, it's worth pondering whether Jesus draws inspiration for his own act of foot washing from Mary's lavish and radical hospitality. And wouldn't you know it, of course she is judged and publicly shamed. Authentic hospitality is always lavish and gratuitous. It's not quality-controlled or studied for efficiency. It's simply an extravagant overflowing of love for another, particularly the stranger and the far from home. It seems to me it is especially at this point that it offends those who don't want to partake fully of this kind of open table themselves. There is a hint of the cross here, not just in Jesus' sense that she is in a way preparing him for burial, but also in the way that those with power in the little group deem her free act of love and hospitality as inappropriate and wasteful. And it is perhaps one of the things I love most about Jesus that he defends Mary against Judas' resentment and greed. He took her side before he took her place as one who washes feet. In Jesus' own action later at the last supper, he is clearly trying to help his community imagine a different, more subversive way of being human together than perhaps their—or our—culture would allow. (By the way, 'the poor you will have with you always' is an invitation to do mercy and act justly—not an excuse not to.) And so Mary discerns a way—a way that all those who hold power or status around her fail to see, even among the disciples—a way that enters into the heart of Jesus, into the heart of love. The lavish hospitality that sees caring for human beings bodily, even our weary feet, as truly holy is the only real way for us to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

**Prayer** Jesus, whose feet were anointed and cleansed by Mary, who washes disciples' feet too, help us to see like you and Mary so that we may love the suffering bodies of our sisters and brothers as you did.



Isaiah 50:4-9a

**Reflection: v. 7, 'I have not been disgraced'**

All the things that Isaiah says, he says with the confidence of knowing that God is with him. Truth be told, unlike Isaiah, there have been times I have turned away from God and others too. It took me a long time just to not want to hide my face from society. Being homeless, being poor, being not only Black, but dark-skinned Black, there was a lot of mocking and bigotry that I experienced. My pride would not always allow me to step down. In other words, if somebody challenged me when I was living on the streets, then they were going to get challenged back. There were times that I disgraced myself. Even when I was trying to hide my face because I was ashamed of my situation, I always knew that there was only one way out: and that was deliverance from God. I also knew that the only way that I was going to be delivered was to do what God says. It was really hard for me to do what God says out there on those streets, because I really didn't have any way of maintaining a communicative relationship with God. I had to get around a church—not even knowing that's what I needed to do. Then, as the word was put forth, and after many, many years of half-way listening and trying to pay a little attention, some of it started soaking in. My church became my training ground for how to go out there in life. When I know in my heart that I'm doing what God wants me to do, then I know I will not be put to shame. I will not be disgraced. Now I know that God has put me in a position to where I can help others in some kind of way. When you know that you can help in some kind of way, and you know you're doing God's will, and you know that you're making just a little bit of difference, then it takes away a little bit of that shame. Then you feel a little bit of that vindication. I don't have to hide my face—like Isaiah, I can be confident that God is with me.

**Prayer** Give me confidence, O God, that you are with me. Do not let me be put to shame.

## John 13:21-32

There is a short distance for Jesus between trouble and glory, maybe even no distance at all. Eating for the last time with his community, Jesus is keenly aware of what lies ahead. It is no surprise to read that he is 'troubled in spirit.' Yet what strikes at his heart most deeply isn't just grief at a goodbye his friends could scarcely understand. It isn't simply all the horrors that would befall him in the hours to come. No, what troubles him lies closer to home. 'One of you will betray me,' he solemnly announces. Though he knows it's Judas, he doesn't shout it out. He does not shame him before all the others. It seems things had already been set in motion that neither Jesus nor Judas could turn back from. No, Jesus identifies his betrayer quietly, discreetly, even kindly—a tacit recognition, a resigned grace. He offers him bread. And his betrayer does not refuse. Once Judas had disappeared into the night to quickly do what he had made up his mind to do, Jesus turns once more to the confused faces gathered around the table. He says, with no elaboration and no real explanation: 'Now has the Human One been glorified. And God has been glorified in him.' Strange words these. It seems to me that for Jesus, trouble and glory do not displace one another, that both are held in the same heart, in the same body—that they are part of a whole. The betrayal of his friend that brings trouble deep into the heart of Jesus is held there. It is a dark road that Jesus knows he cannot dissuade his friend from following. But this trouble isn't mysteriously turned to something else. It will not simply go away. Jesus sees things as they are and accepts them, as anyone in recovery will tell you we must learn to do if we are to become whole. Jesus knows he cannot change it, and he does not try. And yet, it is precisely here that glory will also to be found. Not our kind of glory, mind you, so drunk with victories and honors and the praise of others. No, this is the glory of God's love for us all. It is a genuine glory, a true essence truly seen. The heart of Jesus can hold both: the trouble of a betrayal he cannot control and the glory of a love that he freely chooses—despite his own pain and all that it will cost him. It is in this moment, where trouble and love choose to live in the same heart, that the glory of God is revealed without measure in Jesus. This is the heart that will beat its last on the cross. And it is the heart that will greet a resurrection morn. Jesus' love cannot stop Judas—or me or you, for that matter—but such a compassionate heart does not have to in order save us.

**Prayer** Help us, Jesus, to hold trouble and glory in our hearts.

# Maundy Thursday

Chad Hyatt

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## John 13:1-17, 31b-35

I don't think I had ever seen our community hurry toward the exits as quickly as they did the first year that we announced we would offer foot washing after Bible study. Common in the world of Jesus, it is uncommon to us—maybe even a little scary. Certainly, it is an unusually vulnerable and very embodied experience to share in with your community, especially if you don't have access to ways to care for your feet, clean socks, or shoes that keep out the rain. It is easy to become self-conscious and even ashamed when offered this act of ancient hospitality and care. While the numbers of folks who want to take part have never been huge, our community has come to embrace foot washing as part of our worship practice over time. And I am glad that we did. For one thing, it subverts all the roles we think we play in the most wonderful way possible. I have sat on the water-puddled floor at the feet of community members, gently washing their feet and drying them, looking them in the eyes and trying to make a potentially awkward encounter something holy and safe and affirming. And I have had members of the community take the towel and basin from me and invite me to sit in the seat in which they had just sat, removing my shoes and socks and washing my feet. The time it takes to wash someone's feet is also the time it takes to communicate our appreciation and love for the human being seated in front of us—a time uniquely set aside for us to remind one another that we are beloved, and that we are and always will be children of God.

I think this is what Jesus, as he finishes the meal with his disciples and with the cross in view, has in mind for us. This image has guided my reflections for Lent. In a simple, if ancient, act of hospitality, the intertwined mysteries of cross and resurrection are embodied and lived out for us in daily community. But foot washing itself is just one example. It might look like hosting the clothing closet and holding the space lovingly and graciously, seeing each of us who comes through the line in our belovedness and brokenness, a child of God worthy of grace and dignity. It could be lugging an urn of hot coffee on a frosty morning to an early-rising community—and taking the time to sip a cup yourself as we all wipe sleep from the corners of our bleary eyes. Or it could be painting new art for everyone to delight in. Or listening to a child's story and paying attention to how they tell it in their own words. Whatever the act of hospitality we offer one another, it is the space where all of us in our crucified bodies are raised to new life. Maundy Thursday is how we live Good Friday and Easter Sunday everyday. And it is how our old world is made new again.

# Good Friday

Holly Reimer

John 18:1-19:42

## Reflection: v. 42, 'they laid Jesus there'

How do we parse it all out? What we think about Good Friday is in the context of what we know about Easter. It can be so easy to skip over the abuse, trauma, and sadness. Jesus' mother, the disciples, and Jesus' followers left the cross alone. Things felt forever changed and not in a good way. Someone they loved, was brutally murdered. I imagine their grief left them paralyzed. They couldn't think about anything else but their loss. They couldn't even remember Jesus' promise to return. Grief and sadness takes over our bodies and can leave us feeling like our hearts literally hurt, and it makes it hard to breathe. Grief can leave us feeling guilty, angry, ashamed, and lost. When we lose someone or something so central to our lives, we may not even know what we are supposed to do next. How do we move forward? Lament, grief, sadness are all around us in our broken relationships, insecurities, financial struggles, and missed opportunities. There are things we *should* lament: housing and financial insecurities, racial injustice, violence, and abuse of power. Let's not be so quick to move from this place that the things we should lament become trivial and ideologized.

**Prayer** God of love and cross and life, help us to stand with you and all who suffer, to lament and to cry out, so that we might find ourselves and our world raised to new life.



# Holy Saturday

Ivan Cooley

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Isaiah 50:4-9a

**Reflection: v. 4, 'the Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word'**

I know what it feels like to be weary. I've been blessed by the Lord in recent history. To a certain extent, a lot of the harder things I have had to deal with in life, as far as day-to-day survival goes, have been alleviated for me. But the thing is, I still feel a little weary, because until we are all off the streets, then I don't think that I will feel full, complete peace. When I walk out on the streets, and I see my brothers and my sisters suffering, I feel weary. Having been in the same experience myself for so long, sometimes it is hard to separate myself from them and I just feel like I haven't gone anywhere. I'm suffering all over again. I realize that a part of me never had time to grieve for all the time that I lost while living on the streets. I went from the streets to a place—a place of blessing and a place of safety. But at the same time, it was really hard for me to get used to that blessing, because I hadn't had time to grieve for all the years that I'd spent on the streets, to grieve for all the stuff I see as normal accomplishments in society that I never achieved. Sometimes it feels like the majority of society took a certain path through life and I took another path. When I read this passage from Isaiah, to be quite honest, the first thing that came to my mind is how unlike Isaiah I am. Isaiah seems to be very dedicated to the Lord in a way I haven't always felt. But some of the things he says I can relate to. I think in a way the Lord has blessed me to speak to those who are weary like me. Not so much because my tongue is so well-instructed, but because I know what weariness and loss feel like. I'm going to use this well-instructed tongue to win others over to the way of love and compassion.

**Prayer** Be with me, Lord, when I feel weary, and help me to use my gifts to lift the burdens and weariness of others.



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## **Easter Sunday**

### Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Luke 24:1-12

# Easter Sunday

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

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Luke 24:1-12

**Reflection: v. 5, 'why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here.'**

Recently, I was having a conversation with a friend, and we were musing whether or not we church-going Christians actually expect God to show up. As we sit in our pews or sign on to Zoom and listen to the prayers and sermon, do we actually anticipate and look for God to show up alive and active and busy in our lives? As I read the Easter story this year, I thought back to our conversation and wondered if we, like the apostles, sometimes find ourselves looking for the living God in dead and dry places. And, if that is the case, are we really even looking for God or are we just caught in our routines? Are we expecting God to be alive in such a way that could actually stir our hearts, change our minds, reconcile our relationships, heal the world, call us to account, and bring us to new life? Do we continue to show up at the tomb because it is where we saw God last, or do we actually believe in the power of resurrection? And no, I'm not trying to get us pondering what we believe about the bodily resurrection (at least not today, anyway). I'm asking us, on this Easter Sunday, if we are seeking the living God? I'm asking us if we are looking for God among the living, where life and new hope blossom still, or if we find ourselves stuck in the same changeless patterns? It is okay to be stuck sometimes, I have been there over and over again too. But sometimes it can be as simple as putting ourselves where we believe the living God may be found—we need to look for God among the living. On this Easter Sunday, Jesus isn't to be found in the cold stagnant tomb. Jesus is out in the world where people are hurting. He's where people are hungry and tired. He's where people are sick and ailing. He's where people are joyful and sharing hope with one another still. He's where justice is sought and where there is still much work to be done. He's where resources are redistributed, human dignity is valued, and life is abundantly shared. Jesus is out there—busy, alive, and calling us to action. Let's go find him.

**Prayer** Expel us from the tomb, living God, that we may seek you, that we may seek life.

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## Illustrations

*Ivan Cooley - p. 34, p. 47*

*Chad Hyatt - Cover, p. 16, p. 50, p. 62*



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## A Home Of Our Own

## A HOME of OUR OWN

No, the church isn't a building, but when you have no home, a building sure is nice. Shelter keeps us cool in the heat, warm in the cold, dry in the rain. Buildings aren't luxuries or the privileges of some—though we too often act that way. Housing is a right. We believe now is the time for our little church to have a home to call our own. Pray for us as we continue to seek a home for our growing and thriving community!



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