



FROM ASHES TO EASTER

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL FOR 2018

by

The Rev. Dr. David M. Wendel



<http://thenalc.org>

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Introduction



The Rev. Dr. David M. Wendel

We are preparing once again to enter into the holy season of Lent. It is variously a time of reflection, repentance, amendment of life, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some folks give up something for Lent, others take something on—a new discipline or spiritual practice. We will all benefit by additional time, however brief, spent reading God’s Word, meditating on it and responding to it. That is the aim of this Lenten devotional booklet—to stimulate regular, personal, daily time in the Scriptures in a simple, easy-to-use format that encourages faithfulness. We also hope that these brief readings and meditations will help those not used to daily Bible reading to begin doing so, at least during Lent! Who knows, it might become a habit that carries on long after Holy Week and Easter.

Together with our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod sisters and brothers, this year we introduced a three-year daily Bible reading plan entitled *Reading the Word of God*. If there is one thing missing from our Lutheran tradition today, it’s familiarity with the Holy Scriptures. We collaborated with our LCMS colleagues because we all recognize a lack of knowledge of the Bible in both churches.

You can find the daily Bible reading guide on the front page of the NALC website. There are readings listed for each day in the three-year cycle. If you complete the three years, you will have read through the entire Bible. Also posted are weekly readings from the book, *Luther on Scripture*, by Johann Michael Reu. Perhaps you will add those weekly readings to your daily devotional time during Lent. It is meaningful and insightful to learn how Martin Luther understood Holy Scripture.

You will notice that the daily Bible reading guide carries through in a continuous reading from each book. This means that the readings for almost half of Lent will come from later chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, while the remainder will be from Romans. We reserve the right to take liberties with the readings during Holy Week, intending to remain faithful to the flow of Palm/Passion Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

As with all personal Lenten devotional practices, approach these readings with grace. If you miss a day or two, catch up when you have time. Bible reading, meditation and prayer are gifts of God to be enjoyed in freedom, not guilt or compulsion! Yes, we wish to be faithful in our Lenten disciplines, but when we stumble, we get up, and by God’s grace, we begin again. There is no prize or award for keeping your Lenten routine pure and without blemish!

May our love for Holy Scripture and our knowledge of the Bible grow, in some small way, as we journey together through Lent and Holy Week using this devotional resource!

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-19

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants...Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, "Spare thy people, O LORD, and make not thy heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" —Joel 2:15-17

Church bells were once installed high on top of most every church building, ready to call people to prayer and worship. This was useful in city, town or village settings, as well as in rural areas where clusters of small family farms were close enough for the bells to be heard ringing out across the fertile countryside. Bells were often rung fifteen minutes before worship and then again at five minutes before worship, calling people and reminding them that “it is time for prayer, please come!” The bell was often rung again during the praying of the Lord’s Prayer, so that those still at their labors could at least join in with the prayer of the community.

Our reading from the prophet Joel is intended to call us to repentance, sanctification, and inward and outward cleansing—just as the Israelites were called to return to the Lord with their whole being. The passage begins with the LORD saying, “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” The disobedience of the people had become rampant and any show of religiosity was often just that—an external show, not heartfelt worship and devotion. The situation was so severe that “nations” and “peoples” would look at Israel and question whether there was a God of Israel! If so, why would this God not do something—to call the people back to Him, to save them from their sin and disobedience? The behavior of the people of God was a witness to the world.

On Ash Wednesday, what is our witness to the world? Do our worship, prayer and devotional life manifest commitment to a living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Do we gather with the assembled congregation, entering together into the season of Lent for repentance, renewal and restoration? Is our discipleship a response of heart and life or an outward show meant to impress?

If only we had a trumpeter or a bell-ringer to call us to worship, prayer and sanctification/holiness on this important day when we cross the threshold into Lent. If only God would send us an alert on our phone that would indicate a text from the Living God that says, **“Return to me with all your heart...for I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...”** Then again, maybe this is God’s “text message” to you today!

Lord, create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.

Lenten Response: Send the highlighted passage (bold text) above in a text or email to friends or family.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Matthew 21:1-17

And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. [Jesus] said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you make it a den of robbers.” And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. —Matthew 21:12-14

It would be tempting for us to read the account of Jesus cleansing the temple and give thanks that we are not like them! Although we receive offerings each week in worship, we are not buying and selling in the church, and we are certainly not making salvation available for purchase! And yet, is the church—our congregations—fulfilling God’s will for His people? Is the church a place of prayer and worship? Are the blind and lame being healed? Or do our congregations sometimes become something other than what God intends?

Sadly, congregations and church-bodies do lose their way. Pastors, lay leaders and members often forget that God’s house is to be a place of prayer, praise and thanksgiving, where people are set free, healed and restored by Jesus Christ, God incarnate, truly present in Word and Sacrament. What then becomes the focus, when we lose our focus on God dwelling with us full of grace and truth?

Too many congregations are still preoccupied with the church as an institution—focused mainly on paying the bills, maintaining the furnace and air conditioner, having monthly fellowship activities, making sure people keep the cozy, family feeling. These are not the main things in the Body of Christ. Neither is power, control, pushing your agenda or getting what you want! We may not be buying and selling salvation in our congregations, but all too often we spend too much time fussing and fighting over who’s in charge, who gets their way, who should be running the church! Congregations caught up in tension, conflict and fighting are almost always losing members and in decline—because that is not what God intends for the Body of Christ!

Lent is, above all, a time of honest, sincere, heartfelt reflection on our current reality, aimed at repentance and renewal as we prepare for our observance of Holy Week and Easter. This is important for us as individual Christians, as well as for congregations. Just as each follower of Jesus asks, “Am I fulfilling God’s will in my life?”, each congregation might be asking, “Are we fulfilling God’s will for us in our life together? Is the Word of God central in our congregation? Are we a place of healing and care, or are we a place of pain and conflict?” By God’s grace, Lent can be a time of reorientation and renewal!

Lord Jesus, help us be people of love, care and healing—and let our congregations be places of prayer, praise and thanksgiving! Amen.

Lenten Response: Pray for healing and encouragement for all in your congregation.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Matthew 21:18-27

And when [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" —Matthew 21:23

I remember all too well the day our daughter, Rebekah, said to me, "You're not the boss of me!" I'm guessing every parent has heard that from their children at some point. It grows out of our age-old rebellion against God and parents, as we convince ourselves that we can be like God—or at least, like our parents, making our own decisions and choices without someone (God or parent) telling us what to do. My opinion, for what it's worth, is that lack of respect for, or belief in, God has led to lack of respect for any authority and the breakdown of homes, families and society. When one believes in and respects the reality of God, one will necessarily respect parents, teachers, police officers and government.

Jesus has just been teaching the Jewish authorities, through deed and word, about God and His will. He cleansed the temple and then told them that they would be cursed because they were not bearing good fruit. Now they are questioning by what authority Jesus was saying and doing such things! Who made you the boss of us, they asked Jesus? They were being convicted by Jesus' criticism of them, but were not convinced. Rather than take his teaching to heart, they rejected what he was saying and questioned whether and by what right He should be speaking to them in such a way. And isn't that the way it is today?

As we are seeing a renewal in the Church by a recommitment to the Great Commission and Jesus' command for us to be disciples and make disciples, there are those who question this initiative and renewal. And yet, it is by Jesus' own authority that we have this commission. Before calling us to go and make disciples, Jesus says in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

Interestingly, you can find word usage frequency, over time, in the online Merriam-Webster dictionary. From 1800 to 2010, the latest year reported, there has been a significant decline in the use of the word, "authority." No wonder and no surprise, really. Adam and Eve rejected God's authority when they ate of the "forbidden fruit." The priests and scribes in the Temple chafed under Jesus' authority. People today would rather not have a "boss" of any kind telling them what to do. Still, the Christ-like life is all about yielding to God's will and authority. Being a disciple of Jesus is all about following Him, obeying Him, listening to His words of light and life. **Lent is a time of opening ourselves, once again, to the absolute authority of Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives and our church!**

Jesus, Lord of life, all authority in heaven and on earth is yours! Be Lord of my life! Amen.

Lenten Response: Take a few moments to look up the definition of "authority" in the dictionary.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Matthew 21:28-44

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one, it will crush him.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. —Matthew 21:42-45

Often, we hear Scripture verses, passages and parables and immediately think of ourselves—“Where am I in this text? What is God saying to me?” This is right and good, but that should come after we ask, **“What is this text saying about Jesus? What is this passage, verse, parable telling me about who Jesus is and why He came?”** The Bible is intended, first, to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ. Second, the Bible calls us to respond to the good news. This is helpful instruction as we read the Bible and hear readings and sermons in worship.

It is something of an understatement when Matthew tells us in verse 45 of our reading, “they perceived that he was speaking about them.” Yes, Jesus was speaking about them! He’s been speaking about them, and telling instructional parables about them, trying to break through to them with the good news that He is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, sent to call them, and all, to repent and return with hearts and lives to the Lord God Almighty! Jesus is confronting them with the truth that though they claimed to be religious leaders in Israel, their lives did not manifest obedience and faithful fruit-bearing. Rather than hear and heed Jesus’ words, they questioned his authority to say such things. They would have arrested him then, but they “feared the multitudes...”

The good news is that in Jesus, the kingdom of God has come to us. Jesus is the light of the world, born in Bethlehem, visited by wise men from the East, revealed as Son of God and Savior on the mountain top as he was transfigured before Peter, James and John. He is the Word made flesh to dwell among us. He is the way, the truth and the life. He died and was raised for us and for our salvation. He is with us always, even to the end of the age. He will return in power and glory. In the meantime, we are to give our lives to Him. In the meantime, we are to be baptized, be disciples, make disciples. In the meantime, we are to love God, love our neighbor, have faith, bear good fruit. As Jesus is speaking about the chief priests and elders, challenging their lack of faith and fruit, do we perceive that He is also speaking about us?

The very stone which “the builders” rejected, is now the chief cornerstone. Let us build our lives upon Jesus, Son of the Living God! Let us bear fruit that befits the kingdom!

Lord Jesus, I place my trust, my faith, my life in your hands. Use me for your purposes, that I may bear good fruit! Amen.

Lenten Response: Tomorrow in worship, ask first, what is this lesson saying about Jesus?

First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 21:45-22:14

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.’ But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. —Matthew 22:1-10

We misuse parables when we think we can “fit” them into our experience in every point and aspect. For example, this parable, as with all parables, is meant to communicate a particular message. It is not intended to suggest that God, like the king in the parable, “send his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” Those are details of the parable intended to make the story real to its hearers. It is not intended to say that is what God is like.

The message of the parable, however, is clear: **God extended an invitation to the Jewish people to come share in the marriage feast of His Son, Jesus. Many in Israel, especially many religious leaders, rejected the invitation and would not come. God also, then extended his invitation to all—both good and bad, Jews and Gentiles!** While not quoted above, the parable goes on to proclaim that guests enter the marriage feast by putting on a wedding garment—in other words, we enter only by being clothed in our baptismal garment—being clothed in Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

The parable does, however, present some details that are all too relevant to our human experience and real life today. Every week, we are called to come share in the marriage feast of the Son of God, as the Lord’s Supper is the foretaste of the feast to come. Every week, all sinners are invited, but many will not come. Many “make light of it” and go off, “one to his farm, another to his business.” We can blame our culture and the demands and temptations which are barriers to our regular participation in worship, but the gracious, loving invitation stands and it is for us to respond and come, as the Lord has made all things ready and is present to host the meal! Many consider Lent a heavy, dark, burdensome season. Perhaps we can give thanks and rejoice that Lent allows us to hear again the invitation and joyfully respond with our presence at the marriage feast!

Lord God, thank you for the invitation to the marriage feast—and for clothing us in the righteousness of Christ, our proper wedding garment! Amen.

Lenten Response: Make the Lord’s Supper a priority in your life each week!

Monday of the Week of Lent I

Matthew 22:15-33

Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk...But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. —Matthew 22:15, 29-33

Christians are familiar with skeptics who are always trying to “entangle” us in our talk about Jesus, the faith and the church. They want to poke holes in our beliefs, show how intelligent they are, not believing such foolish talk of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It all began with our Lord and how the Pharisees and religious leaders “took counsel how to entangle him in his talk.”

Our reading today includes the account of the Pharisees asking Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar and then the Sadducees challenging him to explain how resurrection would work, as their teachings required that brothers marry their brother’s widow, leading to a situation where several brothers might have been married to the same woman. Not believing in resurrection, they thought they had trapped Jesus in his assertion that there would be a resurrection after death. Jesus’ answers silence these religious leaders, while astonishing the crowds! The religious leaders have no response—while the people are amazed at the knowledge, authority and wisdom of Jesus!

Truly, Jesus’ words in verse 29 says it all: “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.” He then goes on to announce the reality of resurrection and what life after death will be like. It is an indictment of the religious leaders who, while knowledgeable about many things, are ignorant of the Scriptures, missing the power of God unto salvation! And are we better? Do we know the Scriptures? Can we proclaim the power of God and testify to the reality of resurrection in such a way that we are faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ?

On the one hand, we are not saved by our knowledge, either of Scripture or God himself. On the other, knowing Scripture prepares and enables us to be ready to share with others the good news that, in Jesus Christ, we have the hope and promise of eternal life then and abundant life now!

Lord Jesus, reveal to us the truth about you in all the Scriptures, and create in me a hunger and thirst for the Word of God, to which I turn every day. Amen.

Lenten Response: Email the “Reading the Word of God, 2018” daily reading calendar to friends and family. Find it on the NALC website, www.thenalc.org.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent I

Matthew 22:34-46

But when the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they came together.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." —Matthew 22:34-40

Lenten disciplines often revolve around taking on some special, unusual devotional activity aimed at deepening our hunger for God, our commitment to God, and our sacrifice for God. The traditional Lenten activities are almsgiving (money for the poor and needy), prayer and fasting. (See Matthew 6) Each of these are time-tested, valuable disciplines that focus our attention during the season of Lent. Another, related to these three, might be "love of God and neighbor."

Martin Luther writes, "After I have apprehended Christ by faith, have died to the Law, have been justified from sin and have been freed through Christ from death, devil, and hell, I do good works. I love God, thank Him, I practice love toward my neighbor. But this love or the works that flow from it neither form my faith nor grace it, but my faith forms and graces love. This is our theology." (*What Luther Says*, p. 822)

Because Christ has died and was raised that we might be justified, freed from sin, death and the devil, we do good works of love. We love God, thank Him, and next to that, we love our neighbor. Sometimes that's easier than other times. It's hard to love my neighbor when my neighbor is harsh, cruel, unkind. It's also hard to love God when we are struggling, in pain, grieving. Blessedly, Luther reminds us that love doesn't create faith, but love flows from faith—not in ourselves, but in God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, a gift of love, unmerited and undeserved. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17). It is God's love that creates faith in us, in Jesus, and it is that faith in God and His love that causes us to respond in love. How then can love of God and neighbor be a Lenten discipline?

Focus on God's love in Jesus during Lent! Read John 3 and I John 4 daily to hear again of God's great love for us! Consider not a wrathful, condemning God who judges sin, but meditate on the true God who, while hating sin, loves the sinner. And then, let us seek to love the sinner, too! Let's seek to love the "lovable," while also seeking to love the "unlovable"! Reach out with a phone call, card, kind gesture to the difficult family member, church member or next-door neighbor, expecting nothing in return, but only to share God's love in some small way!

Lord God, thank you for your love in the gift of Jesus, your Son. Help me, in faith, to love you and my neighbor more and more each day. Amen.

Lenten Response: Read John 3 and I John 4, and share God's love with someone today!

Wednesday of the Week of Lent I

Matthew 23:1-22

Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger...But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ.” —Matthew 23:1-4, 8-10

I remember well my father saying, “Do as I say, not as I do.” He would usually say that with a sly smile as he was going for a second piece of cake. Jesus is warning the crowds and his disciples to do the same, as he points to the fact that the scribes and Pharisees lord it over others, laying heavy burdens, ethical and religious, upon ordinary people, though they don’t keep them themselves. They were not practicing what they were preaching. Still, the religious leaders in Jesus’ time laid heavy burdens of guilt upon people who were struggling just to get through life. At the same time, the leaders loved to be called “rabbi,” “teacher,” “father,” as if everyone should look up to them for their piety and exemplary behavior. First, Jesus tells the people not to look to the arrogant, two-faced religious leaders. Second, Jesus says you have one Father who is in heaven and one master, who is the Christ. Third, Jesus says in verses 11-12, “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

The good news is that Jesus, the Christ, humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, taking our place on the cross to set us free from the heavy burdens and demands of the Law. Trying to save oneself by keeping the Law is crushing, leaving us so troubled by our inability to keep the Law that we are immobilized, stuck, unable to move forward or back. The death and resurrection of Jesus remove the heavy, crushing burden and free us for faith, for life, for love of God and neighbor! Because we cannot keep the Law and commandments of God perfectly, we cannot save ourselves. Thanks be to God that he sent his only begotten Son to be the Lamb of God, sacrificed for the sins of the world, that all people might be set free—to live, love and serve!

During Lent, as we have time to pray, ponder and meditate, let us keep our hearts and minds, not on the burden of the Law and our sins, but on the love, grace and mercy of God our Father and Jesus our Savior. Let us, then, be humble servants, helping to lift the burdens of those who are struggling, weighed down with the cares of the day.

God our Father, we give you thanks and praise for the freedom we have, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

Lenten Response: Think of one person you know who is carrying a burden in life, and decide how you can lighten their load—if only by an encouraging word or a simple phone call.

Thursday of the Week of Lent I

Matthew 23:23-36

[Jesus said,] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” —Matthew 23:23-28

Most people don’t realize that in our Lutheran tradition, everything in worship has meaning. The entire service with all the responses, come directly from Scripture. The robes of the pastor also have meaning, beyond a simple “cover-up.” The white alb still worn by most pastors is to resemble our baptismal garment, “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14). The old black cassock and white surplice made the message even more obvious, as the black undergarment proclaimed that pastors, like everyone else, are sinful people in need of forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ, as symbolized by the white surplice. However, peeking out from beneath the surplice was always the black cassock. It is a proclamation that we are at the same time “saint and sinner.”

In this very harsh chapter, Jesus is condemning the religious leaders of his time. Again and again, the Lord says, “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees...” They were very concerned to make an outward show of their religiosity, while inwardly soiled and sinful. They focused on the most minute details, while ignoring mercy, justice and faith. They took advantage of the poor and needy. They were full of “uncleanness.” In the verse we will read tomorrow, Jesus declares, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you... behold, your house is forsaken and desolate.”

If Lent serves any purpose, it is to convince us, again, that we are saints and sinners. Yes, we have been washed in the blood of Jesus and our sins have become white as snow (Isaiah 1:18). But we continue to sin and daily need to return to the hope and promise of our Baptism! We lie down in bed each night, aware of our disobedience, knowing we have fallen short of God’s will for us, needing the forgiveness that comes from Jesus. We awake each day, forgiven, freed, ready to begin anew! Lent provides us with the opportunity to be cleansed inside and out, daily, as we acknowledge our sin and turn again to our Savior!

Lord Jesus, we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Forgive me, this day also, and set me on the narrow way. Amen.

Lenten Response: Wear something black and white today to signify we are saints and sinners!

Friday of the Week of Lent I

Matthew 23:37-24:2

[Jesus said,] “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” —Matthew 23:37-24:2

After being asked, on the final day of the U.S. Constitutional Convention in 1787, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?”, Benjamin Franklin reportedly answered, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Those of us who live in the United States are naïve if we think that our republic and nation could not be lost one day. Governments of every kind have come and gone, often vanishing through their loss of ethical, moral and religious grounding. Dr. Franklin was right to caution citizens of the U.S. that it must be a daily responsibility to maintain and safeguard the republic, lest it be lost through neglect, ignorance or divisive special interests!

The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time, as well as his disciples, saw the many magnificent buildings in Jerusalem, including the massive temple with its elaborate rites, ceremonies and sacrifices, and trusted that the Lord God would protect and defend the holy city. As God’s chosen people, they assumed Jerusalem would never be lost and the temple would stand forever. Jesus knew better. Jesus had just condemned the current leadership, expressing “woes” to the scribes and Pharisees. **Now he declares their “house” desolate and forsaken. In the next verses, Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. To this day, there is no Jewish temple in Jerusalem—only a wall as a reminder and a remnant.**

Our brothers and sisters in the Anglican Church in North America often comment that it was a blessing to them that they were not able to keep their buildings when leaving their former denomination. Church buildings often become monuments—temples to founders and benefactors, museums exhibiting artifacts from the past—with little faith manifested in the present. Sometimes it is better to leave church buildings and institutional structures behind, rather than allowing them to become financial and organizational burdens that are the sole focus of the congregation. Church buildings and institutions come and go over time. The word of our God will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8)!

Lord God, help us cling, not to buildings and institutions, but to your Word! Amen.

Lenten Response: Look at the 2017 NALC newsletters on the NALC website, www.thenalc.org, to find photos of the different settings in which NALC congregations worship.

Saturday of the Week of Lent I

Matthew 24:3-14

[Jesus said,] “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. And then many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men’s love will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come. —Matthew 24:9-14

It is a challenge for the NALC to be truly “Mission Driven.” Lutherans were once fervent for the preaching of the gospel to all nations. The growth of Christianity and Lutheranism in Ethiopia and Tanzania is largely due to the Holy Spirit at work through the Word preached and taught by Lutheran missionaries from Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Lutheran churches planted on every small town and rural corner in North America were also due to the mission spirit of pastors and lay people alike, wanting to share the good news that we are saved by grace through faith in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

This missionary fervor is hard to find in Lutheranism today. Many no longer understand the challenge we face in our day, with many falling away, betraying, hating. Many are led astray by false prophets. The wickedness of the world has indeed caused love for the lost and the least to grow cold. It is time for the fire of love to be rekindled in us! It is time for Lutherans to again lead the way, planting churches, reaching those living in darkness, spreading the gospel to all nations, but also to the nations of North America!

The bishop of the Swedish Mission Province has told us their motto is, “Bringing the Gospel back to Sweden!” Of course, officials of the biblically and theologically liberal Church of Sweden don’t care much for that motto or the premise that the Gospel has been lost in Sweden. And yet, the same could be said for North America. Yes, the Gospel is still here in places, but it is largely unheard and unheeded. Many Christians are fearful of speaking the truth of God’s Word, afraid that it will cause a negative response. **Jesus suffered and died for the sake of God’s truth. We are warned that we will be persecuted for Jesus’ sake and the sake of the good news. Still, we are to share this gospel of the kingdom.**

While there are those called to preach the Gospel in distant lands, most of us are called to do what we can in our own corner of the world. We refer to this as life-to-life discipleship: One person caring enough for another to share the good news of Jesus, walking alongside that person in good times and bad, being Christ’s presence. This is how we can be mission driven in our own lives. And anyone can do it! It doesn’t require special training, education or skills, just a relationship with Jesus that you share with another!

Lord God, renew your church today, as we seek to share the good news. Amen.

Lenten Response: Tell someone—anyone—that God loves them!

The Second Sunday in Lent

Matthew 24:15-35

[Jesus said,] “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” —Matthew 24:29-31

For many Christians—and most Lutherans—today, these words of Jesus seem foreign and distant. The eventual return of Jesus, the Son of man, after tribulation, with power and great glory, is almost unimaginable. Certainly, the image presented here is one of cosmic proportions, as the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, stars will fall from heaven. Some believers think they have this all figured out, with a very specific timetable detailing how and when this will happen, down to the day. Many through the ages have publicized their predictions; so far, none have proven to be correct. Indeed, Jesus says “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32; Matthew 24:36.) So, what do the images and visions in this section of Matthew tell us?

The well-known Scottish New Testament scholar, William Barclay, in his Daily Study Bible commentary, points out that these pictures present three great truths. **First, they tell us that God has not abandoned the world. God’s purpose is still being worked out in the world, despite all its wickedness. Second, the images tell us that even a time of evil, a time of great tribulation, ought not discourage us or cause us to lose hope. Third, passages such as this remind us that both judgment and a new creation are certain! Jesus tells us that in God’s timing, he will return and draw the elect—the chosen—to himself from the four winds, from one boundary of heaven to the other!**

Although the usual human reactions to visions of increasing evil, tribulation, turmoil and the second coming are anxiety and fear, such images are shared by our Lord to uplift and encourage the elect! The book of Revelation is not intended to strike fear into our hearts, but to reassure us that God is in control, Jesus is risen and lives, and that, regardless of what transpires, the victory over sin, death and the devil is won! The whole message of Revelation is said to be contained in two words: “Worship God” (Revelation 22:9b). Do not give in to false teachers or false teaching. Do not worship false idols. Do not fall into unbelief. Despite persecution, evil and trial, “worship the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” That’s the message of every vision of the end time, Jesus’ return and the final judgment.

Lord Jesus, come and come quickly! Strengthen us so that no matter what comes, we will worship you and only you! Amen.

Lenten Response: Read Revelation 22.

Monday of the Week of Lent II

Matthew 24:36-25:13

“For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” —Matthew 24:38-44

This passage includes verses 40-41, in some circles referred to as “The Rapture.” This is not a biblical word, but it is used by many who describe Jesus’ return variously as a secret return, a return before or after seven years of tribulation, etc. You can find almost any meaning ascribed to these verses on the internet, most conflicting with other interpretations. While Lutherans have not commonly used this term, or tried to explain Jesus’ return in exact, detailed descriptions, what we agree with is the reality of Jesus’ return. Earlier in this chapter we heard the Lord speak of his coming with power and great glory! He gives the illustration of the one in the field taken and the other left. Then, the example of the two women grinding, and one is taken and the other remains. Jesus’ intention is to highlight the suddenness of his return—and the need for being ready and prepared, whenever he comes. That is the message of this passage, and why Jesus ends by saying, “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

To help us understand what it means to be ready, Jesus speaks of the faithful or the unfaithful servant and the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids. The message of the ten bridesmaids is clear—that we are to be watching for Jesus at all times, in all ways. We discussed this parable in our Advent devotions. The comparison of the faithful and wise servant and the wicked servant adds to this understanding. Jesus explains the servant will be blessed whom the master, when he returns, finds doing what he is supposed to do!

And this Lenten season, what is it that the Master expects us to be doing? Earlier, we touched on “almsgiving, prayer and fasting” (Matthew 6:1-18). We also are called to love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40). It would seem attending to these could occupy a lifetime and have us faithfully “busy” when our master returns! But, is the point to just “look busy”? Of course not. **The point is to be about the will and the work of God. The point is to be about love of God and neighbor. The point is to strengthen our faith and trust in God, as we patiently wait for the Lord’s return and the fulfillment of God’s plan. That is our aim during Lent and throughout our lives!**

Lord Jesus, help us to watch, wait and be ready when you come. Amen.

Lenten Response: Devote 15 minutes today to be prayerfully, watchfully waiting for Jesus!

Tuesday of the Week of Lent II

Matthew 25:14-30

“For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settle accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’” —Matthew 25:14-21

There is more to this parable, but please read the entire passage for yourself. Although the parable ends with the servant who buried his master’s money being cast into the outer darkness where men weep and gnash their teeth, this is not intended to exemplify God’s actions. However, it helps to communicate the message of the parable. Which is?

God gives his children gifts and intends for us to use them for God’s purposes and glory! God does not bless us with resources, talents, abilities that we are to keep hidden throughout our lives. God sets us free, in Jesus, to take risks, rise to challenges, give our all for the sake of God and neighbor. If our salvation were dependent upon returning to God at the end of our lives exactly what we have been given, then we would have reason to be cautious, careful and dedicated to holding on to that which has been entrusted to us. But that’s not how it is in God’s kingdom and household. Because we have received forgiveness and salvation as a gift, we can be daring with what God has given us! We can take chances, try something we’ve never tried before, risk it all for the sake of God’s kingdom, knowing our place in that kingdom is secure. And what does that look like, practically, in real life?

Volunteer to serve in some way that you have never served before. Offer to be a nominee for church council. Work with children or youth, even though you are 70 years old! Visit a nursing home, even though you have never been comfortable in that environment. Visit a prison, though it scares you to do so. Be an assisting minister in worship, chanting the Kyrie, even though your voice wavers from nerves. Make a special financial gift to your church, above and beyond what you would have imagined 20 years ago. The possibilities are endless, because our God is a God of new beginnings, new opportunities, fresh starts. As a pastor, it is always heartbreaking when someone says, “Pastor, I don’t know how I will serve, because I don’t have any gifts or abilities.” It’s heartbreaking because we know it’s not true! **God has blessed us all. Let us take the risk of discovering and using our blessings!**

Lord God, thank you for blessing me with gifts, talents and abilities. Help me use them freely and for your glory. Amen.

Lenten Response: Make a list of the gifts and blessings God has entrusted to you.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent II

Matthew 25:31-46

[Jesus said,] “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at this right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’” ...And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” —Matthew 25:31-36, 40

This is a meaningful vision of the nature of the kingdom of God. The Son of man, Jesus, will return in glory. Upon his return, there will be a separation—a judgment. The King will take those who belong to him to himself, while others will be separated from him. This is surely a promise that there will be judgment, there will be a division of “sheep from goats,” debunking the claim that all will be saved, no matter what. That is not the vision Jesus presents in this passage.

What is beautiful, however, is the love, care and compassion Jesus’ followers show toward the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. These are to be the actions of those who believe in Jesus and seek to be his disciples. We are to show care and compassion for anyone in need.

It’s unfortunate that those who may be biblically and theologically “conservative” are often accused of lacking compassion and love. For example, we uphold the biblical teachings about marriage between one man and one woman, purity and chastity outside of marriage, clarity about how God has created us male and female not because we are closed-minded or “old-fashioned,” but because we hold fast to the truth of God’s Word. Affirming the trustworthiness and reliability of God’s Word throughout time, without change under pressure from the prevailing cultural and societal attitudes and agendas, is actually a gift and blessing to culture and society. Helping children and youth to understand that God created them, intentionally, as male and female affirms them as they are, removes confusion and provides them with biblical boundaries and behavior that will lead them to healthy, godly lives. **Our firm stand on biblical teaching grows out of our great love and care for all people in our world.**

We are to love and care for those in need, for the sake of those in need—sometimes not realizing that we are, then, caring for Jesus as well—in the face and life of the stranger!

Lord Jesus, send me with love and compassion to anyone in need. Amen.

Lenten Response: Make a gift of time or treasure to a ministry helping the needy.

Thursday of the Week of Lent II

Matthew 26:1-16

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of man will be delivered up to be crucified.” Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and took counsel together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult among the people.” —Matthew 26:1-5

As we are reading through the Gospel of Matthew in the daily Bible reading guide, we are arriving at the Passion, death and resurrection accounts a bit early. Our passage today includes three short sections: Jesus’ instruction to his disciples about his impending arrest and crucifixion; Jesus being anointed by a woman in the house of Simon, understood as an anointing of Jesus’ body for burial; Judas agreeing to betray Jesus.

It may seem untimely to be reading this passage now, as we are still several weeks away from Holy Week, and yet, we want to keep the Passion of Jesus before us throughout Lent. It is all too easy to enter into Lent through the portal we call Ash Wednesday, all fired up for a holy and disciplined Lenten observance, but then, by the second week, life gets in the way, we become distracted, and we may not give much thought to Jesus’ gift of himself on the cross until Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Reading about the Passion in the midst of Lent can be a helpful reminder that, while Lent is not all about Jesus’ suffering and death, there would be no Lenten season if there were no Holy Week!

Our entire Lenten observance, whatever shape it takes, is to prepare our hearts and minds for hearing the good news of Jesus’ saving death and resurrection once again. Our Lenten discipline of prayer, giving and fasting, our Lenten mid-week worship and daily devotions are all to provide us with opportunity for reflection, repentance and renewal as we refocus and reorient our lives on Jesus and who he is and what he has done for us. Our readings today remind us of that and call us back to our intentions for a holy and meaningful Lent.

Interestingly, between Jesus’ announcement of his coming crucifixion and death and Judas’ plan for betrayal, we have the tender image of a woman pouring an expensive alabaster jar of ointment on Jesus’ head as an act of love and devotion. The disciples thought it wasteful, claiming it should be sold and the money given to the poor.

Our Lenten devotion, whether great or small, is like that ointment used to anoint Jesus. It is time, money and effort well-spent, not for what it does for us, but because it is in response to Jesus’ self-sacrifice and love. May we be renewed today, in our Lenten observance!

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for giving your life for me, for us. Keep me mindful, every day, of your saving death and resurrection. Amen.

Lenten Response: How is your Lenten observance going? Recommit yourself to your Lenten discipline. If you haven’t given up or taken on something for Lent, you are invited to do so now!

Friday of the Week of Lent II

Matthew 26:17-35

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." —Matthew 26:26-29

What a blessing it is that we have this Sacrament of the Altar—the Lord's Supper, instituted by Christ himself! The majority of the world's Christians (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran) all hold to the words of Christ. When Jesus says, "This is my body; this is my blood..." we take him at his word; we trust, believe and have faith that Jesus is present in the Sacrament. In the Sacrament, God is incarnate in Jesus, who is truly present in, with and under the earthly elements of bread and wine.

Sadly, during the Protestant Reformation, many reformed groups rejected this belief and adopted a "spiritualized" understanding of the Lord's Supper. They claimed, if Jesus is at the Father's right hand in glory, how could he be present on the altar in this church and every church around the world? How tragic that Christians would so limit the power and presence of God! Jesus promises to be where two or three are gathered in his name when he says, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Martin Luther affirms that Jesus is present in many times and places, but ties himself to Word and Sacrament so that we may know where he may be found! When people say, "I don't 'feel' Jesus with me," we can respond, "Here, here is Jesus in the Word and in the Lord's Supper—truly present, in a way that you can hear and touch and taste."

When troubled and experiencing trials in life, we receive great comfort that Christ gives himself to us; we need only eat and drink. Sometimes, we are so distracted by life that the preacher's words float over our heads and we comprehend nothing from the sermon. **In those times, however, Jesus comes to us in his Holy Supper, grace, forgiveness, mercy and love "embodied," incarnate. As we eat and drink, he comes to us, to become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh—truly one with us—to be our nourishment and strength!**

It is unfortunate that in some places the Lord's Supper is observed in such a way that there is little acknowledgment of Christ's presence. The singing of the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) after the Lord's Prayer has historically been a hymn of praise that Christ is now present! It is not just the first communion hymn, but may be set apart as we welcome the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Lord Jesus, create in me a hunger for your presence in the Lord's Supper. Amen.

Lenten Response: As you sing, "*Lamb of God*," consider that you are welcoming Christ!

Saturday of the Week of Lent II

Matthew 26:36-56

Then [Jesus] came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.” ... “But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then the disciples forsook him and fled. —Matthew 26:45-46, 56

The many calls in Scripture for us to “wake up,” remain awake and alert are especially pointed when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane praying, sorrowful unto death, while his friends, his disciples, are napping nearby! Wake up, you lazy disciples! After all Jesus has told you, having seen Jesus troubled and full of sorrow, how can you sleep and take your rest? Are you so unconcerned for your master that you couldn’t stay awake to share his burdens?

We would like to give Jesus’ disciples a piece of our minds! But we are no different, are we? The disciples in the New Testament do not demonstrate exemplary, saintly behavior. Instead, they reflect all our sinful humanity, our disobedience, our lack of understanding and compassion. They are us, truly. **We are the New Testament disciples. Sometimes we are Peter, sometimes we are the “sons of thunder” James and John, and yes, sometimes we are Judas—betraying our Lord by our unloving, unforgiving words and deeds.**

Regardless of the actions of the disciples, the drama continues. After praying, the betrayer comes. He kisses Jesus, calling him, “Master!” The crowd, along with the chief priests and elders, comes with swords and clubs and lays hands on Jesus. A disciple draws his sword and cuts off an ear. Jesus rebukes the disciple, as swords and violence have no place in these proceedings. And the disciples forsake Jesus and flee.

Jesus then says, “But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” All of this took place, as God had determined. Jesus becomes the Lamb for slaughter. Jesus is the Lamb of God who dies to take away the sins of the world, as we said yesterday. Though Jesus prayed, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup (of suffering) pass from me,” his final prayer is, “Thy will be done.” It is happening in accordance with the will of God, revealed through the prophets in Scripture.

As difficult as it is for us to walk with Jesus, hearing again the painful account of His passion and death, we remember these words: “all this has taken place that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled,” and, “Thy will be done.”

Lord Jesus, thank you for your passion, death and resurrection. Father, in all things, thy will be done! Amen.

Lenten Response: Do you have a cross somewhere in your home, bedroom, office or car? Perhaps move a cross into a more visible location—by a door, across from your bed, on your desk—to be an ever-present reminder during Lent that “thy will be done.”

The Third Sunday in Lent

Matthew 26:57-75

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a maid came up to him, and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the porch, another maid saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately, the cock crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. —Matthew 26:69-75

My grandparents' farm, near Mt. Auburn, Indiana, was just a short drive from our home, so we kids spent as much time as we could on the farm—many weekends and most of the summer. There's nothing better than summer days on a farm, with a rooster crowing as the first light of dawn peeks in through the window. I remember well the rooster crowing. I also remember being old enough to remember this passage from Scripture as I was lying in bed, wondering what Peter must have experienced as he heard the cock crow. Matthew tells us he went out and wept bitterly.

Matthew tells us about Peter's weeping. He doesn't tell us about Jesus at the cock's crow, having been denied three times by his closest disciple, friend and confidant. Have you been betrayed by a friend? Jesus was denied by Peter three times. All of his disciples abandoned him and fled after he was arrested in the garden. No one stood by him. No one took up his cause. One of his friends sold him out for a bag of silver coins. If nothing else, the account of Jesus in the garden, as well as before the High Priest and Pilate, makes it clear that Jesus suffered alone, fulfilling the Father's will without the least show of love, care or support from those closest to him. As we heard in verse 56 of this chapter, all this took place as the prophets had foretold, in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

We are in a unique time in history with Christians being "accused" for their faith, as radical terrorists in recent years challenging believers and threatening death if one confesses Christ. We thought those days were gone, that we live in a more civilized world. And yet, consider the many opportunities we have every day to confess Jesus Christ, to affirm that we are believers, to show that we are Christians by our love. We are blessed with many opportunities each day, in our own corner of the world, to share the Gospel, tell someone about Jesus, bring the light of Christ to someone living in darkness. **May God give us the courage and strength, not to deny, but to confess Jesus Christ as Lord!**

Lord God, let me be bold in my faith, sharing Jesus in my thoughts, words and deeds. Amen.

Lenten Response: On a computer or smartphone, listen to the sound of a rooster crowing.

Monday of the Week of Lent III

Matthew 27:1-14

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You have said so.” But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly. —Matthew 27:11-14

There is much about Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection that causes us, with Pilate, to wonder greatly. How could Jesus go, willingly, to the cross? How can one so faithfully pray, “Thy will be done?” How was it that Judas, a friend and disciple of Jesus, sold him out for thirty pieces of silver? And now, why doesn’t Jesus answer Pilate directly? Jesus never claimed to be “King of the Jews,” although prophecies suggested—and his own followers expected—that at some point he would assume the throne of David in Jerusalem. Perhaps things would have been different had Jesus defended himself. Yet, when the priests and elders accused him, Jesus made no answer, not even to a single charge.

We like things to be reasonable, rational and commonsensical. We want life to be fair, for the innocent to flourish and evil to be punished. This is not how life is, however. This is not how life was for Jesus, and that’s not how we experience real life today. Sometimes evil thrives and seems to win, while innocents suffer. We hear the account of Jesus’ suffering and death and cry out for justice! Somebody, save Jesus from the cruel religious leaders and Pilate! Somebody, turn the tables so that Jesus is released and allowed to go on his way!

It doesn’t end that way, does it? Regardless our protests and wishes, Jesus’ arrest and trial end with His death on the cross—a cruel, bloody, painful death. That’s how the arrest and trial end, but that’s not how the story ends, for God turns the tables.

Finally, Jesus is set free from death, raised again on the third day! It is still Lent, and we don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, but we know that Jesus’ life doesn’t end with Caiaphas or Pilate or the body in the sealed tomb. These are necessary means to a joyful, hopeful end! **There would be no resurrection for Jesus, or us, had there been no crucifixion and death.** While we are saddened to hear the tragic account of Jesus’ trial, torture and sacrifice, we have the good news! Every day, we rise anew, assured of resurrection, new life and new hope. For this, we live lives of praise and thanksgiving!

Lord God, we give you thanks and praise for Jesus, our Savior! In the midst of trial, suffering and death, give us hope and joy because Jesus is risen! Amen.

Lenten Response: Take some time today to give thanks for all those you love who have died in the Lord. Get out their photos, remembering them with joy, because Jesus was raised from death!

Tuesday of the Week of Lent III

Matthew 27:15-31

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up... Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified." And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified." —Matthew 27:15-18, 20-23

Before leaving the parish in Colorado Springs, I preached a few "country music sermons," making some slight reference to a current, popular song heard on country music radio. My wife didn't appreciate them, but I thought they allowed preaching to connect with culture. In that vein, a current country music song has the line, "I think most people are good." While I like the tune, it doesn't pass the biblical theology test. Most people are not good. While some people sometimes do good deeds, the bottom line is that we are sinful people. We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Even St. Paul writes that he knows the good that he wants to do, but does the opposite (Romans 7:19)!

This is why Jesus died for our sins. Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we are saved by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation (atonement, reparation, satisfaction) by his blood, to be received by faith (Romans 3:23-25). If all people were basically good, choosing good, doing good, there would be no need for a Savior!

The account of Pilate releasing Barabbas, instead of Jesus, is truly the story of our redemption. We deserve to die as judgment against our sin. If the world were fair, that's what would happen. Each and every one of us would die an eternal death, as "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). St. Paul continues, "But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." We don't know much about Barabbas, even though literature and film have fictionalized him as a character variously depicted as honorable, innocent, and misunderstood! Matthew makes it clear he was a "notorious prisoner." In Mark, Luke and John, he is described as a rebel in prison because he had committed murder in the insurrection. Regardless the details of Barabbas' life, Jesus dies in his place. Jesus is innocent, Barabbas is not. **That is the story of our lives, as we said. Jesus is innocent, we are not. Jesus dies in our place. Thanks be to God!**

Lord Jesus, as the wages of sin is death, thank you for the gift of eternal life, as you have died in my place and risen to give me eternal life. Amen.

Lenten Response: Pray a prayer of confession for sins, and read Romans 6 as assurance of our forgiveness and redemption.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent III

Matthew 27:32-56

And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. —Matthew 27:50-53

Modern, rational, scientific thinking minds will have a hard time believing the witness of Matthew above. How can such things happen, they will ask? The earth shaking and rocks splitting, tombs opened and saints being raised from their tombs? Is this believable?

Surely this is as believable as a man being raised from death after three days! The message is that the death and resurrection of Jesus were earth-shattering, earth-transforming! The curtain of the temple was torn in two—now there is no separation between God and humanity. There is no distance between the Creator and his creation. And how could it be otherwise? How could the Son of man and Son of God be crucified and resurrected and not have it rip the fabric of human existence in two? How could it happen and not have the earth shake, rocks split asunder and saints raised from death with Jesus? To impress upon the reader the truth of his witness, Matthew includes the comment, “coming out of the tombs after the resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.” It is similar to Paul’s testimony that after Jesus’ resurrection, he [Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred at one time (I Corinthians 15:6).

And how have his death and resurrection affected your life? **Is your life different because Jesus, crucified, is now raised from death?** Has the Gospel message caused a seismic shift in your life, an earthquake that has shattered your sense of reality, causing a new reality wherein death no longer has the final word and is not the end but the beginning of a new existence? A reality where heaven and earth are united in a cosmic oneness because God has made his home with us? The Word has become flesh to dwell among us. Now, God is with us! Now, Jesus lives! And how could this not shake and shatter our previous understanding of life, death and resurrection?

If, after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, we would go about the busyness of our lives as if nothing had changed, as if Jesus is not alive and risen, we would deserve to be pitied. We would be living not in the power of the resurrection, but still in bondage to sin, death and the devil. This is not what God intends. This is not what Matthew proclaims when he tells us of the earthshaking good news that Jesus, once dead, is risen!

*Lord Jesus, turn our lives upside down! Shake us up and make our lives different, because you live!
Amen.*

Lenten Response: Read I Corinthians 15, to hear Paul’s witness to the resurrection.

Thursday of the Week of Lent III

Matthew 27:57-66

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulcher. —Matthew 27:57-61

Without sounding too morbid and dark, I will share with you that, from my earliest memory, I have always touched the body of the deceased at a funeral. The first, I think, was my Grandpa Bud Wendel. He died when I was six years old. By that age, I had heard the story of Easter but found it hard to believe. I reached out my hand and touched my grandpa. He was cold and rigid, not at all like my Grandpa Bud. At that young age, I attended church every Sunday, so I had heard the good news of new life and resurrection, although I was ill prepared to understand and believe. Dead is dead. A six-year-old can see that.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary must have felt the same way as they saw Jesus taken down from the cross, laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea and the great stone rolled in front of the opening. Dead is dead. They sat opposite the sepulcher, not because they expected a resurrection, but because they never expected to see their beloved Lord and Master again. They sat, forlorn, opposite the tomb, because sealed in that tomb was their every hope and positive expectation for the future, buried with Jesus behind the great stone.

Had the tomb remained sealed, had Jesus not been raised, where would we be today? Lost in our sin? Without hope for the future? We would be facing death as the last word, with no light at the end of the tunnel, because the wages of sin is death, as we read recently.

Our passage today ends not with the hope and promise of resurrection, but with the sealing of the tomb and the setting of the guard. Easter Sunday is still some time off. But we do not live as people who have no hope. St. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, “But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” Because Jesus lives, we live every day with the hope that comes from having celebrated Easter. When we grieve, we grieve as those who know that Christ is risen, indeed! And because He is risen, we, too, will rise from death.

Observing a holy Lent does not mean we ignore the reality of Easter and act as if it never happened. We see Jesus laid in the tomb and the stone set in place, but we cling to the promise of Easter—even as we stand by the casket of our loved one.

Lord Jesus, give us the hope and promise of resurrection every day! Amen.

Lenten Response: Have you planned your funeral? It can be a joyful, hopeful experience!

Friday of the Week of Lent III

Matthew 28:1-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” —Matthew 28:16-20

With these words of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew comes to a close. We will meditate on Easter when we come to Holy Week. For the time being, we have the so-called “Great Commission,” in which Jesus sends his followers forth to be disciples and to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Holy Name of the Trinity, teaching them to observe all that he has commanded.

Two aspects are worth noting: Jesus has the authority to commission his followers in this way, and he doesn’t send us out alone. He promises to be with us as we go, to be with us always! What encouragement this gives, because we know Jesus speaks with the Father’s own power and authority and we know that Jesus walks alongside us.

We discuss the Great Commission in the NALC as “Life to Life.” Because Jesus is with us, we walk alongside others. We invest in others, life to life. Discipleship happens in no other way. It is all about relationships; it is personal; it is person to person. **Because God chooses to be “God with us,” we are called to be with others.** This is the proverbial “meaning of life,” to be a disciple and follower of Jesus and to make disciples—bearing good fruit for the Lord!

Without a doubt, this is a challenge for Christians used to a more institutional understanding of the church. Many of us were raised thinking our task was to get more members for the organizational church so that new members would help carry the financial load and help to maintain the church building. It requires a seismic shift in thinking to give up that notion and embrace the Great Commission and Jesus’ intention that we be disciple-makers! Could that seismic shift in thinking take place, in us, as we observe Jesus’ death and resurrection? Might that be the earth-shaking, earth-shattering transformation that he intends as we observe Lent, Holy Week and Easter again this year? We pray that it might be so!

Lord Jesus, make of me a disciple and a follower! And help me become a disciple-maker, teaching all that you have commanded! Amen.

Lenten Response: Learn more about the NALC’s Life to Life Discipleship initiative on the website, www.thenalc.org. Is there a way you can respond more fully to the Great Commission?

Saturday of the Week of Lent III

Romans 1:1-17

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine...For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." —Romans 1:8-12, 16-17

We have now concluded our reading from the Gospel of Matthew and turn to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. There is no more appropriate book for the season of Lent as we draw nearer to Holy Week and Easter, as our passage today includes that verse which set Martin Luther free: "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

Before God revealed to Luther the good news of salvation, Luther wrestled with the need to do good works to please God. He didn't understand the phrase, "the righteousness of God." He didn't know God as loving and righteous, but as cruel and harsh. If God demanded his children to be righteous (good, "lined up," in accordance with God's divine will) who could ever hope to be saved? The righteousness God expected was unattainable! When studying Romans 1:17, God finally revealed to Luther that the righteousness he [God] expected was now to be given to his children by faith, as a gift. It was not earned or deserved. Indeed, it could not be earned or deserved. He who has faith in Jesus is declared righteous! **This was miraculously freeing for Luther and, in his pastoral love, Luther wanted to share this good news with his congregation and with all Christians who lived burdened by the Law, thinking they needed to make themselves righteous through their own efforts and obedience.**

This is especially meaningful during Lent, when many continue to think their Lenten observance or discipline will increase their standing and find favor with God. Even Lutherans who should know better persist in a "works-righteousness," believing that in order to save yourself, you must prove yourself good, pure, worthy and righteous before God. We need the Reformation, still today, to set people free by faith in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. We need for the gospel to be proclaimed, as it is the power of God for salvation! We need to be passionate about sharing the good news that all people will come to know they are saved by grace through faith in Jesus!

Lord God, give us courage to proclaim the good news that the one who, through faith, is righteous, shall live! In Jesus, Amen.

Lenten Response: Write this verse on a notecard to give to others: "He who through faith is righteous shall live!" (Romans 1:17)

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Romans 1:18-32

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools... ” —Romans 1:18-22

Paul is speaking here about the corrupt, sinful, idolatrous behavior of Romans in the heyday of the empire, but he could be speaking of life in the 21st century in North America! We live in a wicked, evil time when even some Christians are trying to “suppress the truth.” Paul affirms that ever since the creation of the world, God’s nature, power and deity have been clear and easily perceived, yet people have not honored him, becoming foolish, their senseless minds darkened.

How else would we explain our world today? The Scriptures are clear, are they not? God’s will is easily understood. We are to have no other gods. We are to honor God’s name. We are to remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. We are to honor father and mother, not bear false witness, not steal, not murder, not covet. We are to live chastely and keep the marriage bed undefiled. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Yet, people will not honor God or obey him. We live in a time when there is disobedience, disorder and, yes, foolishness! What is the solution to the current madness?

Repentance and returning to God, the Creator and Redeemer of all. Humbling ourselves before God, confessing our sins before God, then asking him to renew his creation, his people and his world. There is no other hope for the world today. First, we repent and confess our sins before God. Next, we are to call the disobedient to repent as well!

Do we dare speak out boldly to Christians who have lost their way and departed from the truth? Do we dare speak out boldly to those in our culture and society who claim great, educated, sophisticated understanding, even though they believe contrary to God’s Word? Scripture tells us that many have exchanged “truth about God for a lie” (Romans 1:25). It is for us to call all to repent and return to God.

Lord God, we honor you and give you thanks for your created order. Make us bold to call for repentance and return. Amen.

Lenten Response: Confess your sins, today, with the gathering of believers in Sunday worship. Receive the hope and promise of forgiveness.

Monday of the Week of Lent IV

Romans 2:1-29

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? —Romans 2:1-4

The words of St. Paul in this passage bring to mind Jesus' own warning, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." This is what Paul is getting at. Jesus and Paul deal with this subject because we are judgmental people. We are all too ready to judge others and jump to criticism, without thinking or considering the harm we may cause or the log in our own eye. In other words, we may be judging another while doing the very same things. Such arrogance can bring God's wrath upon us, as we are called to forgive as we've been forgiven; we are to love as we have been loved; we are not to judge, lest we be judged.

Paul reminds us that because God deals with us with kindness, forbearance and patience, we are to deal similarly with others. This is always the way of God's kingdom. When we receive God's "riches" but do not share the same with others, we are presuming upon God's love and mercy. In the next verses, Paul says, "by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath..." He begins this section stating, "therefore, you have no excuse!"

The most powerful words in this passage, however, are these, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (verse 4b). **God's intention is not to frighten his children into repentance. God does not intend to "guilt" us into repentance. God does not threaten judgment as a motivating tool. Rather, God's kindness toward us, God's forbearance, God's patience with us is that which creates in us hearts and minds which humbly, honestly repent and return to him.** If God is angry and bitter toward his children, rarely will they want to come to him in confession and repentance. A merciful God, like a prodigal's father, is always ready to receive an errant son or daughter home. A graceful, forgiving God waits with loving arms open wide to welcome the disobedient child who returns.

This is how we are to relate to others—not with judgmental, arrogant attitudes and actions, but with mercy and grace. Christ commands, "love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). God expects nothing less.

Lord God, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.

Lenten Response: Have you had a judgmental attitude toward someone? Ask for their forgiveness.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent IV

Romans 3:1-20

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. —Romans 3:9-20

There are some enduringly endearing southern phrases. One is, "Bless your little heart." Another is, "Well, shut my mouth!"

Paul's intention in the above reading is to silence anyone and everyone who would claim to have a special place before God, especially those who might claim pride of place because of their Jewish heritage. The apostle asks, "What then? Are we Jews any better off?" The answer is no! But neither are Greeks (Gentiles) better off, just because they may be more cosmopolitan, urbane or civilized. Paul intends to remind us that, as it is written, "none is righteous, no, not one." He provides a series of quotes from Psalms and one from Isaiah that point to the sinfulness of humanity from Adam and Eve on. Throughout history, people have turned aside and gone wrong; people's mouths are full of curses and bitterness. They are prone to violence and don't know peace; there is no fear of God in their eyes. In short, all have sinned. There is no excuse, no one can justify themselves, no one is blameless before God. "Well, shut our mouths!" We might as well remain silent.

Before God, we might as well remain silent, if all we intend to do is try to explain away our bad behavior or justify ourselves. We are reminded of Psalm 46:10, where the Lord says, "Be still, and know that I am God." As Paul is making his case against us, he gives no room for arrogance, self-righteousness or denying one's own sinfulness. We are all guilty. However, Paul is setting the stage for his powerful proclamation of the Gospel. He does not lay guilt upon us to make us grovel or groan. He has no desire to beat us down. **Rather, the reality of sin is preached so that grace may abound! This is the function of the preaching of law, to show us our sin and our need for a gracious, loving Savior!**

Lord God, you are exalted among the nations. You are exalted in the earth! I will be still, and know that you are God. Amen.

Lenten Response: Spend ten minutes being still before the Lord. Calm your heart and mind and receive silence as a gift.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent IV

Romans 3:21-4:12

For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. —Romans 3:20-28

It's worth quoting the full eight verses above, because they are essential to the biblical proclamation and understanding of the Gospel. They are also key to grasping what Lutherans hold is the foundation of the entire Christian witness: that one is justified by God's grace as a gift, to be received by faith, apart from works of law. This is why I appreciate that we are reading through Paul's epistle to the Roman congregation during Lent. For if there is one message we ought to hear again and again during Lent, it is the good news that we cannot save ourselves by our good deeds or attempts to be righteous in God's sight!

Why is this such an important message, especially during Lent? It's because we are reflecting upon and confronting our sin during Lent—and at the root of all sin is our desire to be “like God,” thinking we can save ourselves, as if we need no other Savior. To kneel at the feet of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in humble confession and repentance, we need to hear again “since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” We can only be justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. **If Lent serves a useful purpose, it is to bring us to a recognition of our sin and disobedience and that we must cling to our only hope and salvation, Jesus Christ.**

Do you live burdened by sin, guilt and shame? Do you have the sense, day by day, that your sin is greater, more serious, more shameful than anyone else's? Do you believe that your sins are unforgiveable, that Jesus wouldn't forgive someone like you? If so, read today's passage and meditate upon it. Read it every day during the remainder of Lent and twice on Sunday! Take to heart the good news that all have sinned, no one is without sin, and all are equally in need of the gift of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, by His blood! Receive that good news today—and live it! Receive it and live it, not because of who you are, but because of who Jesus is: Savior and Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for forgiving me, a poor, troubled sinner. Amen.

Lenten Response: Read Romans 1-3, to hear again the fullness of the Gospel!

Thursday of the Week of Lent IV

Romans 4:13-25

[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness." But the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification. —Romans 4:19-25

What a blessing that Paul tells us Abraham's faith, reckoned to him as righteousness, was not for his sake only, but for ours as well! Some may find it hard to relate to Old Testament history and figures, and yet, Old Testament lives and struggles are not far removed from us and our experiences. We wrestle with the promises of God, as did Abraham and Sarah. We wonder whether God will do as he has promised. We sometimes question whether there is a God in heaven who sees and knows and will hear our prayers. **In times like these, the faith and example of Abraham reassure us. In times like these, faith is what it is intended to be—trust in God. And faith is strengthened and encouraged when we are tried and tested.**

Abraham and Sarah were not always faithful, however. When it seemed that God was delaying in giving Abraham a son, Sarah sent her handmaiden, Hagar, in to her husband; nine months later, Ishmael was born. But this was not the fulfillment of promise that God had intended. Through this painful experience, Abraham learned greater faith. This is also a learning lesson for us. God doesn't need us to help him along. God doesn't need us pushing him. God has his own timing and plan—which sometimes doesn't suit us. Still, we are to wait patiently, faithfully trusting in him.

I share with call committees and congregations that the wait for their next pastor can be difficult, tempting them to want to hurry things along to get their next pastor in accordance with their wants, desires and timeline. The same is true in our homes and families, as we would like God to attend to our every wish, NOW!

When we are "waiting for the Lord" (Psalm 27), we learn patience, grow strong in faith and give glory to God, trusting in his promises!

Lord God, your promises are certain and sure. Give me courage and strength to wait for the fulfillment of your will. Amen.

Lenten Response: List three things you believe God promised, and then fulfilled, in your life. Give thanks for promises fulfilled!

Friday of the Week of Lent IV

Romans 5:1-21

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice 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 which has been given to us. While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. —Romans 5:1-6

This is one of the most beloved passages in all of Scripture. It is most beloved because it is encouraging, strengthening and reassuring. When suffering, we question whether there is a reason. When suffering, we wonder why we are suffering. When suffering, it seems it will last forever and we wonder if we will survive this present difficulty.

Here, Paul explains how suffering serves a valuable purpose for the Christian, finally leading to growth in stamina, character and hope! And as hope abounds, God pours His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. All of this happens because Christ died for us and turns our world and our life experience upside down. Suffering leads to hope. Pain leads to joy. Death leads to life. All because Christ is victorious over sin, death and the devil! And we share in that victory!

How many Christians throughout the ages have heard this passage while suffering persecution, illness, grief and challenge? How many lives have been touched by St. Paul's words, spoken to the heart of those who are struggling? Familiar, favorite Bible passages become familiar and favorite when they stand the test of time and provide needed consolation and comfort.

Are you suffering in any way at this time in your life? Have you lost a loved one recently? Are you unemployed? Do you have a young person in your home or family who is wrestling with addiction? Do you lie down at night and wonder how you will make it through the next day? Do you understand what Jesus meant when he said, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" We all, each and every one of us, have times in life when we face uncertainty and are without hope, which is why Paul's words speak to us in those times. It is why Paul's words are speaking right now to some of you reading this devotion. **"We rejoice 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...while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."** When you are helpless, remember: **Christ died for you!**

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving your life for me. Thank you for making hope available, through suffering. Amen.

Lenten Response: Email Romans 5:1-6 to someone who is suffering and struggling.

Saturday of the Week of Lent IV

Romans 6:1-14

For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. —Romans 6:9-13

Paul is answering the question from verse 1: “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” He answers saying, “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” That gets at the heart of the matter, doesn’t it? We are sinners, saved by grace through faith. How can we now live the grace-full life? How can we live as the redeemed sinners we are? Should we simply continue in sin, knowing that this gives even greater cause for grace? The lives of those who have died to sin and are now alive to God in Christ Jesus are not to be lived that way. We are not to let sin “reign in our mortal bodies.” **We are to live differently.**

Paul makes it clear that we are sinful people, and in spite of our redemption we continue to sin. The apostle acknowledges his own sin, disobedience and inability to do that which he should do. He does what is contrary to God’s will, even though he knows better. What is Paul advising, then? Do not yield to sin, but yield yourself to God!

I find this notion of “yielding” interesting. The appropriate definition is “to give way,” to “relinquish.” Acknowledging that we cannot stop sinning, that we are sinful people from our birth, still, Paul doesn’t want us to give in or give way to our sin. It would be easy to say, “hey, our human reality is that we are sinners, so we’ll just accept that and not worry about our sin.” No, Paul says. Do not yield to sin, but yield to God! Do not give way or relinquish the fight against sin! Give in to God, his will and way! We are not to “continue in sin, that grace may abound.” Grace *will* abound, even as we struggle against sin, because we are children of God, redeemed by Christ.

Winston Churchill said in an address at Harrow School on Oct. 29, 1941, “...never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.” This is Paul’s message about not yielding to sin!

Lord God, give me strength and courage to yield only to you!

Lenten response: To what sin/temptation do you easily “yield.” Make this your Lenten challenge: not to yield.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Romans 6:15-23

Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves to sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification...But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life.” —Romans 6:15-19,22

Martin Luther is often considered a proponent of human free will. This is contrary to Luther’s actual understanding of “the bondage of the will.” Luther held tightly to Paul’s words in this passage. You will always be slaves to someone or something! Previously, you were slaves to sin and couldn’t free yourself. Freed by Christ, we are not free to live as we wish, do what we want, with no accountability or responsibility for our actions. Now, we are “slaves of God,” slaves of righteousness. Paul says directly, “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God...” And what is the outcome of our godly slavery? We “get,” Paul says, “sanctification and its end, eternal life!”

Our contemporary culture claims freedom of the will and encourages people to run with it! Biblical, moral and ethical teaching have been replaced by what is considered by many to be “freedom to do whatever you want, so long as you don’t hurt someone.” This misunderstands Paul and Luther, and misunderstands sin, because sin and disobedience of God always cause harm—to self, spouse, family, neighbor, community. God’s love and will, communicated through his Word, draw necessary boundaries and limits around human behavior, allowing God’s created children to live as he created us, with love, respect and consideration for all life, for his created order, for home, church and world.

Some will hear that we are “slaves of God” as negative, unwelcome, restrictive. Interestingly, the Christian understands our slavery, our yielding to God’s sovereign authority, as true freedom and liberation. Now we do not have to yield or give in to the pressures of secular society, liberal media or Hollywood. Now we are free to stand up for God’s Word and way, never giving in or giving up in our fight to live and restore godly, biblical behavior to our world. This is how God turns our lives upside down by the salvation won for us by Jesus’ death and miraculous resurrection. Our slavery to God is actually freedom, where slavery to sin is bondage to sin, death and the devil!

Lord God, thank you for the freedom that is truly freedom—yielding to your Lordship!

Lenten Response: Consider ways that you “yield” to God’s will in your life. Make a list of the ways you “yield” as a “slave of God.”

Monday of the Week of Lent V

Romans 7:1-6

Do you not know, brethren—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. ... Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. —Romans 7:1-2,4-6

While Paul is speaking of marriage in this life and how it relates to the death of a spouse, he is really discussing how the legal demand of obedience to the law is ended by Jesus' death and resurrection. We no longer need to save ourselves by the law, because we have been saved by the redemption we have in Jesus. Now we live in a new relationship, in the new life of the Spirit. When Paul says we no longer serve under the "old written code," perhaps he was speaking of the 613 Jewish laws pulled from the Old Testament. But even our relationship to the Ten Commandments changed after Jesus' death and resurrection. We keep the law not to save ourselves or make ourselves acceptable to God but because, in Jesus, we have been reconciled to God the Father by Jesus' death on the cross. Now we are free to live out God's laws and commandments. Now, as one of our pastors says, we don't "have to" keep the law, but we "get to" keep God's law! We are free to live new lives of the Spirit, as we are slaves of God, in bondage to righteousness.

This freedom is true freedom, as we live life hopefully and joyfully. Living under the law is a burden when we believe we must keep it perfectly in order to find favor with God and earn eternal life. This is demonstrably impossible, as we have seen from Adam and Eve onward. Being freed by Christ and "married" to him, we live in a new relationship that daily sends us on our way full of hope and joy. We are at peace with God, through Jesus Christ, able to live at peace with our neighbor. This is what God intends for us, and what he wants for us. This is why God sent his only begotten Son to die and be raised for us and our salvation. We have "died to the law through the body of Christ, so that [we] may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God."

This is the point—that we belong to Christ, in order to bear fruit for God!

Lord God, thank you for Jesus, who has freed us to live new life of the Spirit. Amen.

Lenten Response: See if you can list the Ten Commandments, in order. A fruitful Lenten activity is to consider and confess how we have transgressed against them today.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent V

Romans 7:7-25

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. —Romans 7:13-25

What would we do if we didn't have Paul and his writing in Romans?! He speaks to us in these verses about our shared human condition. Often, we know God's will and want to do it. Yet, we "yield" to temptation and do the opposite. We may even "delight" in the law of God, down deep inside, but we have an inward struggle between doing God's law and will and doing what, in our sinful humanity, we would like to do.

Does this speak to you? Does Paul describe you and your experience? No wonder Martin Luther experienced an inner conflict that shook him to his core. As a monk, he did everything a faithful monk was supposed to do to curb the flesh, remain pure in thought, word and deed, and attain God's favor. He was more passionate about disciplining himself than other monks, only causing himself greater grief as he continued to sin. No wonder Luther connected so powerfully with the writing and theology of Paul. They shared the same inward struggle. **Both speak deeply to our experience of frustration with our own sinfulness and the ever-present temptation to do what we want rather than what God desires.**

Some people reject Paul and his understanding of sin, hearing it as too negative, dark and depressing. It would be if we were left with our wretchedness, our body of death. But Paul continues, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He continues, saying in the next reading, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" But we are getting ahead of ourselves. The good news is that in spite of ourselves—our flesh, our carnal desires, temptations always with us and our tendency to sin—Christ Jesus saves us!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for saving me from this body of death and giving me life. Amen.

Lenten Response: In what law of God do you delight? Give thanks for one or two of God's laws.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent V

Romans 8:1-17

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you. —Romans 8:5-11

This second half of Lent, with readings from Romans, may be more theology than you've ever read in your life! It may be too much, too wordy, too "heavy" with theological thoughts, arguments and reasoning. I hope you're staying with it, because it is a most profitable endeavor as we approach Holy Week and Easter. **What is Paul talking about in this letter to the congregation in Rome but our sin, our inability to save ourselves and the meaning and message of Jesus' death and resurrection? By his death he saved us from death, and by his resurrection he gives new life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit, who dwells in us.**

Without Paul's deep meditation on sin and grace, the events of Holy Week can seem like just another story. Without Paul's theological reflection on God's saving acts through Jesus, his Son, we might hear the account of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection as only history. With these verses of Paul, we can approach Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday and Good Friday aware that this is *our* history, *our* life, *our* salvation, the path to our new life, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit who now dwell in us. If we walk with Jesus through Holy Week detached, disinterested and cold toward his suffering and death, we are surely not understanding that these events tell the story of our relationship with God and how that relationship is made new daily by Jesus' blood and righteousness.

We are now just a few days from entering the Great and Holy Week. If you haven't gone deeply into these readings from Paul, take time to go back and read them again, praying and meditating on Paul's valuable conversation with the Romans about the nature of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God's activity to redeem us from our sins, win our salvation and give us new lives of hope and peace.

Lord God, thank you for your servant, Paul, and his epistle to the Romans. Amen.

Lenten Response: As you have time, go back and read Romans 1:1-8:17.

Thursday of the Week of Lent V

Romans 8:18-39

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. —Romans 8:24-28

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” In my 35 years of pastoral ministry, I can’t remember the number of times I have been with troubled, grieving, suffering folks, as we would cling to Paul’s words that—even when we don’t know how to pray, when words won’t come—the Spirit helps us in our weakness, praying for us, not with thoughts or words, but with sighs too deep for words.

There are times in life when all we can do is sigh, when trying to put words together seems futile and foolish. I’m remembering my first funeral. I met Rolf at the hospital after his beloved Ruby was killed by a drunk driver. She was returning home after visiting her mother. It was just before Thanksgiving, 1981. Rolf and Ruby were in their 80s and had only been married a year. Rolf had been a confirmed bachelor until Ruby won his heart. They were the sweetest, most loving couple, cherishing every moment of married life, knowing they wouldn’t have many years together. Rolf was devastated, and I was, too. We sat stunned. Words would have been an intrusion, an offense. The Spirit prayed with us in our weakness, with cries too deep for words.

That was the first of many times when the Spirit helped me in my weakness—our weakness. Have you had such times? As we said yesterday, what a blessing that we have Paul’s words, but even more, what an immeasurable blessing that we have God’s Holy Spirit to help us, strengthen us and pray with us. People often speak of “prayer partners,” but how often do we consider that the Spirit is also our partner in prayer? **And it is that Spirit that reminds us, in the midst of struggle and difficulty, that regardless of what befalls us, God has a plan, and his plan is always for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.** We may not always see and know the good plan that God is working for us, but that’s what faith is—hope, and trust in things not seen. May the Holy Spirit remind us of the good our God is working out for us, even though we can’t see it right now!

Holy Spirit, come to me and pray with me! Remind me of God’s good will! Amen.

Lenten Response: Are you a prayer partner with and for someone? Commit yourself to praying for someone every day.

Friday of the Week of Lent V

Romans 9:1-26

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants... This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants. —Romans 9:1-7a,8

As Paul has so masterfully laid out the Gospel of Jesus Christ—that no one will be saved by the law, but only by the grace and mercy of God revealed in his Son, effected for us by his death and resurrection—the apostle now grieves the fact that many in Israel have not seen and confessed Jesus as Lord. Paul was himself a Jew. These were his people, his “race” he calls them. His love for his Jewish brothers and sisters is evident, as he is willing to be “cut off from Christ” for the sake of his brethren! And yet, many would not believe, and this is a cause of great sorrow for Paul.

And does this mean the Word of God which first came to the Jews has failed, Paul asks? If they first had the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises, and yet they would not confess the Christ, who was of their race, what was the problem? Why were there so many who would not come to believe in Jesus? Paul argues that being a child of God doesn’t come by birth, but by the promise. Being a child of God is not inherited by flesh and blood; it comes through Baptism and the Spirit.

There have always been those Lutherans who think they are faithful followers because they were born into a Lutheran church and had Lutheran parents and grandparents, even though they never lived the faith. Congregations regularly have folks who call asking for a wedding or funeral to be held in the church, based on the faith and involvement of their forebears. There are Lutheran congregations and church bodies who consider themselves Lutheran, even though they no longer hold to the truth and authority of God’s word and would never say, with Luther, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.” **It is for this reason that the Reformation never ends. But God’s Word is ever at work, reforming and renewing faith in the lives of Christians and in the Church at large.** We are always being called back to the promise of the Gospel, which makes us children of God and, yes, descendants of Abraham, who live by faith!

Lord God, save and redeem me, not because I am Lutheran, but because I cling to Jesus, who is my Savior! Amen.

Lenten Response: Find your baptismal or confirmation certificate, and renew your faith!

Saturday of the Week of Lent V

Romans 9:27-10:4

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling the law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." —Romans 9:30-33

The Jews who wouldn't believe in salvation by grace through faith in Jesus are not the only ones in history who have "stumbled over the stumbling stone." There have been many who pursued a righteousness based on their own achievement, accomplishments and activities. Prior to the Reformation, the Church offered salvation and standing before God based on how much you contributed to the treasury, how many prayers you said at the reliquary, how many pilgrimages you made to prove your worth before God. The entire religious system was based on merit, not grace and faith, which gave rise to Luther, the *95 Theses* and, finally, the reform of the Church.

Others have "stumbled over the stumbling stone." Mormons, while arguing that they are just like any other Christian church, continue to hold to the teaching that no one can die for another's sins, not even Jesus. So, he becomes a model, showing you how to save yourself by your good works. But ultimately, you have to be a Mormon in good standing to attain your own salvation, become your own god and have your own world to populate.

Interestingly, Islam is the same kind of religious system, based on good works and adhering to the teachings of Mohammed, even when it requires violence. The religion of Islam is not a religion of peace, nor is it a religion of mercy and grace in response to the love and forgiveness of God, for Jesus' sake.

Why in the world would people reject the Gospel of God's gift of grace, in Jesus? It makes no sense, except that holding to a religion that makes *us* the god of our own salvation perfectly suits our fallen human nature. If the original sin is "wanting to be like God," then the final goal of our idolatry is thinking that we can save ourselves: no other Savior needed or wanted. There is no place for Jesus, if I'm going to save myself.

Paul reminds us that those who want to live by the law will die by the law. It's as simple as that.

Those who believe in Jesus will not be put to shame!

Jesus, you are not a stumbling rock to me, but the solid foundation of my hope and my salvation. Thank you, Lord! Amen.

Lenten Response: Look up Luther's *95 Theses* on the web and skim through them to find the good news of Jesus proclaimed.

Palm/Passion Sunday

John 12:12-19

The next day a great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" And Jesus found a young ass and sat upon it; as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on an ass's colt!" His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead bore witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see that you can do nothing; look, the world has gone after him." —John 12:12-19

Finally, we have arrived at Holy Week! It may have seemed like a long Lenten season, but it has been filled with writings from the Gospel of Matthew and, of late, Paul's Epistle to the Romans. We have been enlightened by events in the life of Jesus, as told by Matthew, and pondered the deep meaning of Jesus and the Gospel of God's gift of grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now we are ready for the palm procession into Jerusalem and the events to come.

There is much in these seven verses. We hear that a great crowd came out to meet Jesus and welcome him to the holy city. The disciples only understood after Jesus was crucified, risen, and glorified that this was in fulfillment of the Scriptures. The crowds that went out to greet Jesus had been with him along the way, when he called Lazarus forth and restored life to his beloved friend. And we hear how the Pharisees begin to see that they are losing the battle against Jesus—they can do nothing; the world has gone after him!

Sadly, we know that while many have gone after Jesus, it's not everyone. Certainly, the whole world is not going after Jesus. We wish it were so. We wish all people, everywhere, would come to Jesus and know him and his life, death and resurrection. We wish the whole world would confess Jesus as Lord, that we would enter a new era of love, peace and hope in our day. This is not to be, however. We continue to be disciples and followers of Jesus and we continue to make disciples, baptizing and teaching them all that Jesus has commanded. And yes, we observe Holy Week as a public witness to the world, praying that some may notice and join us for worship on these special days.

We hope that your congregation is bold in getting the news out about services during Holy Week. There are those who are just waiting to be invited to Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter services by a friend, family member or neighbor. **We want to reach the whole world with the invitation to walk with Jesus to Golgotha and to visit the empty tomb!**

Father, bring the whole world to Jesus, and use me to share the good news. Amen.

Holy Week Response: Bring your palm branches home from church, to be a reminder all year long.

Monday of Holy Week

Romans 10:5-21

Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it. But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is not distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” —Romans 10:5-13

Paul now returns to his argument about righteousness based on saving yourself by the law, and righteousness based on faith in Jesus. Some may think they must ascend to the highest heavens or descend to the place of the dead to attain their own salvation. But that is not what Scripture proclaims.

The good news is as near to us as the Word of faith, the Word of God which we preach, so that it is on our lips and in our heart: the news that God raised Jesus from the dead. The news that all who believe and call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. To this Scripture testifies and this Scripture proclaims.

And this salvation is available to all—to the Jew and to the Greek, to the North American and to those living in Arabia, to the newborn child and to the octogenarian, to the top 1 percent and to those living in poverty. All are in need of justification, freely given, and all who believe in the heart and confess Jesus with the lips will be saved. Each and every one...

We are now at Monday of Holy Week. This day always leaves me feeling that we should just get on with it. However, we need this time; we need to *take* time. We need to not rush Holy Week and Easter any more than we should begin singing Christmas carols the first day of Advent or put up the Christmas tree just after Halloween. The church year provides us with a necessary rhythm. It is not legalistic, but rather a gift to slow us down, blessing us with space to pray, meditate, ponder and prepare.

If you haven't already, and you are physically able, plan to participate in each of the services offered by your local congregation this week; they provide a full experience of Jesus' passion.

Lord Jesus, I call upon your name for my salvation! I believe that you are the way, the truth and the life. Amen.

Holy Week Response: Invite someone to your church for Holy Week services.

Tuesday of Holy Week

Romans 11:1-10

So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day." And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a pitfall and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs for ever." —Romans 11:5-10

We rarely like to hear of God "hardening hearts," as if people's rejection of him is because God has willed it or desired it. As Paul ponders why some Jews have received God's grace in Jesus and others have not, he understands that some were hardened against it. How may we understand this "hardening?"

I have explained such hardening as God giving people what they want. If there are those who have rejected Christ and want no part of him, perhaps God gives them what they desire, hardening their hearts so that they cannot hear the gospel. There is no reaching some people, so there is a hardening, a closing of the mind and the ears. Paul remembers that the Scriptures say, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear." David said, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a pitfall and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs [give them a burden] for ever."

Of course, neither Paul nor David knew the mind and will of God. Neither knew clearly that God hardened the hearts of those in Israel who wouldn't receive Jesus and have faith in him. They did, however, wish to understand how it could be that God's own people could turn away from him and the fulfillment of his plan for salvation. It had to be, it was thought, that they turned away and, as a consequence, God hardened them against the good news. How else could one explain those who refuse to believe?

We might conclude the same in our day as we see family members, friends and acquaintances who reject God and his saving work in Jesus Christ. Some are so opposed to the good news of salvation that there is a "hardness" against Jesus. Perhaps David and Paul had it right.

Does this mean that God doesn't desire a softening in these persons? Does this mean that God gives them over to their lack of belief and faith? **We know that God desires that the world be saved, through Jesus. We know that God intends that all turn to Jesus and live. So, let us pray that the hardness in some will be softened and they come to faith!**

Lord God, soften the hearts of all who fail to believe, and bring them to Jesus. Amen.

Holy Week Response: Pray all week, fervently, for one or two persons who do not believe.

Wednesday of Holy Week

Romans 11:11-24

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. —Romans 11:17-22

Now that Paul has spoken of the hardness of heart and unbelief of some of the Jews, he is careful to remind the "Gentiles," the non-Jews who have come to faith in Jesus, not to boast. It would be a natural inclination for Gentiles to believe themselves special, as some of the Jews rejected Jesus and now the Gospel has come to those who are not Jews, the chosen people.

It is our human nature to appreciate our special place, thinking we have it better, thinking we *are* better than those who were before us. Paul's argument is intended to help the new Gentile Christians understand that it is through Israel that the Gospel has come to them. He wants them to understand that they have been grafted into the olive tree that was faithful Israel, and that without Israel, there would be no Son of David, no Son of God, no Jesus, Savior and Lord.

At the same time, Paul warns us all not to become weak, but to remain strong through faith! Do not become proud, but stand in awe of what God did through Israel. And remember, Paul says, God is always prepared to prune the branches to foster further fruit-bearing and the health and vitality of the tree.

The bidding prayers on Good Friday historically include prayers for the people Israel, that all would come to faith in Jesus. In recent years, in liberal Christian circles, it has been deemed politically incorrect to pray that Jews would become Christians. Therefore, these prayers are sometimes eliminated, other times adapted. It doesn't seem arrogant or prideful to pray for the conversion of Jews and, yes, Muslims. **It should be an act of love, care and compassion that we yearn for these brothers and sisters to enter into the joy of our Father God, through the Son, Jesus Christ.**

Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Hear the prayers of your Church that the people who you first made your own may arrive with us at the fullness of redemption. Enable all others in our world who do not acknowledge Christ to receive the truth of the Gospel; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Holy Week Response: Pray the bidding prayer above each day during the seven weeks of Easter, that we implore God to bring all his children into the Body of Christ.

Maundy Thursday

Mark 14:12-26

And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they had sacrificed the passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the passover?" And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the household, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the passover. And when it was evening he came with the twelve.

—Mark 14:12-17

We have already given some time during Lent to the institution of the Lord's Supper as found in Matthew's Gospel. If you are able to gather with the community of faith for Maundy Thursday service, you will hear from Mark or John at worship.

As a pastor, I appreciate every Sunday we meet at the table where the Lord is host, there to feed us with his presence in, with and under the forms of bread and wine. Each Sunday is particularly meaningful, as it is on the day of resurrection: The Lord's Day where we gather for Word and Sacrament. **Did you know that our Lutheran confessions state that we Lutherans celebrate "the mass," the Lord's Supper on every Lord's Day and on special occasions during the week, and with great devotion? Luther and Lutherans have always understood the Sunday service to be both the Word and the Lord's Supper, as we receive God incarnate in Jesus' real presence.**

Maundy Thursday is an exceptionally appropriate time for the Lord's Supper and is an out-of-the-ordinary experience. Is it the evening hour? Is it the waning evening light? Is it the entire Holy Week cycle of services? Is it the reading of the account of Jesus and the disciples gathered in the upper room? I can't explain it, but I know that there are few more meaningful services for me than the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.

Is it the same for you? I hope and pray this is the case. I hope and pray that you are physically able to gather around the altar of the Lord for Holy Communion this evening, to receive "the Body of Christ, given for you; the Blood of Christ, shed for you." If you are unable to attend worship, know that you are still connected with the fellowship of the saints, bound in a "holy-communion" that transcends space and time and earthly limitations.

Lord Jesus, let all mortal flesh keep silent this night, and with fear and trembling kneel in your incarnate presence in your Holy Supper. Amen.

Holy Week Response: Let every meal time be a time of welcoming Jesus to your table, receiving his presence with you, a reminder of his power and presence at the Lord's Supper.

Good Friday

John 19:17-30

So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote a title and put it on the cross; it read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. The chief priests of the Jews then said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts, one for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom; so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfil the scripture, "They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did this. But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), "I thirst." A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. —John 19:17-30

For this solemn and somber day, it seems appropriate to provide the entire Gospel reading for the day: John's account of Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial. It is moving, and we need to give due consideration of what it means that Jesus, the Son of God, was crucified for us. He was crucified with two others, one on his right and one on his left. Pilate's words, "Jesus, King of the Jews," are haunting; they troubled the Jewish leaders as this was not what they were expecting. The soldiers cast lots for Jesus' tunic, dividing his clothes among themselves, in fulfillment of Scripture. His mother and the other women stood by, witnessing his slow, agonizing death, until finally, "It is finished." And Jesus gave up his spirit.

Many will sing the beloved hymn, "Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?" today. We were not there, but through the testimony of John we, too, are witnesses of these things.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. By your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Amen.

Holy Week Response: Leave time today—even if only five minutes—for silent meditation on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Holy Saturday

Romans 11:25-36

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.

—Romans 11:33-36

Although most Lutherans, unfortunately, have not reclaimed the ancient service of the Vigil of Easter on Holy Saturday, it is a beautiful service full of meaning, light and transition. Within the service, worshipers move from the somber mood of Good Friday and Jesus in the tomb on Saturday, to the moment of Jesus’ resurrection from death, with bells, joyful singing and the sanctuary going from darkness to full light.

The prayer of thanksgiving begins with a blessing of the new Paschal candle, which will remind us throughout the seven weeks of Easter—and at baptisms and funerals—that Christ is the Light, risen and living. The prayer continues, speaking about that Holy Saturday night:

This is the night in which, in ancient times, you delivered our forebears, the children of Israel, from the land of Egypt; and led them dry-shod, through the Red Sea. This is the night in which all who believe in Christ are rescued from evil and the gloom of sin, are renewed in grace and holiness, by the rising brightness. This is the night in which, breaking the chain of death, Christ arises from hell in triumph. O night, truly blessed which alone was worthy to know the time and the hour wherein Christ arose again from hell! O night, truly blessed in which heaven and earth are joined—things human and things divine. (Lutheran Book of Worship)

Paul writes, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” **Who could have known, or imagined, or expected how God would send his Son to be the Word made flesh? Who, then, could have conceived that this Son would be crucified for the sins of the world? And then, the great reversal, his resurrection on the third day!**

We can only say, “Thanks be to God for his immeasurable gift in Jesus Christ!” In the Great Vigil of Easter, we call upon choirs of angels and the Church, saying,

Rejoice, now, all heavenly choirs of angels, and celebrate the divine mysteries with exaltation; and, for the victory of so great a King, sound the trumpet of salvation. Be glad also, O mother Church, clothed with the brightness of such a light, and let this house resound with the triumphant voices of the peoples. Wherefore, dearly beloved, who stand in the clarity of this bright and holy light, join with me, I ask you, in praising the loving kindness of almighty God; through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and rules with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Festival of the Resurrection/Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her." —John 20:11-18

We dare not criticize Mary for sitting at the tomb weeping, unable to recognize Jesus. She thought he was the gardener! And no wonder! No one rises from death! It is not expected, nor can we comprehend it. Even Lazarus was restored to life—not resurrected. Lazarus would die again, a natural, earthly death. Jesus, once raised, would live forever. It is still hard to believe!

Martin Luther wrote,

“This article (the resurrection) has suffered and still suffers the most opposition and is most difficult to believe... The reason for this is that no article so contradicts experience as this one does. For our eyes see that all the world is swept away by death and dies. Emperors and kings, high and low, young and old, and in a word, all the children of men, one after the other, are laid in the grave and buried... In a word, if you consult reason and judge according to external appearance and experience, faith fails, and man lets this article (resurrection) go... Therefore it is necessary for every Christian to have before him the testimony of Holy Scripture concerning the resurrection of the dead and then also the resurrection of the Lord Christ, proved and attested by certain revelation; that he must rest firmly on these and abandon outward appearance and the experience of reason.”

Thankfully, Mary abandoned outward appearance and the experience of reason, and when called by name, she knew Jesus. And not only knew him, but went to the others to share with them the good news that Jesus, who was dead, is alive!

It is now for us to abandon reason, believe the testimony of Holy Scripture, and to go, telling others the good news that Jesus Christ is risen; he is risen, indeed!

Blessings to you as we begin seven weeks of Easter! Thank you for the opportunity to walk with you this Lenten season, sharing deeply in the Word of God as we have prepared for the Paschal Feast! May God strengthen you and keep you in his grace and mercy! Amen.