

2021 MOUNT OLIVET LENTEN DEVOTIONS

The Passion According to St. Matthew



MOUNT OLIVET LUTHERAN CHURCH

LENT 2021

Discipleship 101

Dear Mount Olivet family member,

Of the four Gospels, Matthew is the one most interested in how the stories he collected and shared about Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection applied to the actual and concrete lives of his followers. He is the one most interested, that is, in discipleship.

That interest runs like a unifying thread throughout the whole of Matthew's Gospel. We see it in his account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, so keenly interested in how we treat others. We see it in the parables of Jesus Matthew shares, focused regularly on our obligation to care for "the least of these." And we see it in Matthew's depiction of Jesus' many acts of care and compassion and the implicit invitation to "go and do likewise."

But nowhere do we discover a blueprint for the Christian life more poignantly – and at times painfully – than in Matthew's account of the Passion, the final days and hours of our Lord's earthly life. Through Jesus' refusal of violence when the authorities seize hold of him to his steadfast commitment to his friends (even though they deny and desert him!), we behold a model of compassion, service, and forgiveness that is the hallmark of Christian discipleship.

It is my hope that as you read Matthew's account of Jesus' death, you will be struck anew by the tremendous and costly lengths to which God goes in order to let us know just how much we are valued and loved. It's also my hope that you will find in Jesus not just an example of how to love others – though that is surely present – but also inspiration to do so, a willingness to sacrifice for the wellbeing of others rooted in a deep confidence that God's will, in the end, will prevail.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pastor Lose". The script is fluid and cursive, with the word "Pastor" written in a larger, more prominent hand than "Lose".

David J. Lose, Senior Pastor



ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2021

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

MATTHEW 26:1-2

The “all these things” that Matthew references is the set of parables and teaching Jesus offered his disciples while they were gathered together on the Mount of Olives. After Jesus said that the time would soon come when the Temple would be destroyed, the disciples asked him when these things would happen. In response, he looks forward to a time of tribulation and challenge and urges his followers to keep watch, ready for his return and caring for the vulnerable in the meantime.

And now that he has described the coming challenges, he is ready to enter into them. Moreover, now that he has taught his followers all about the “ethics of the kingdom” – a discussion that started all the way back in the Sermon on the Mount and culminates in his parable about taking care of “the least of these” – Jesus now demonstrates just what that looks like. For now it is time to inaugurate God’s kingdom, though in a way none of his disciples had expected.

Make no mistake: Jesus is not taken by surprise by what happens to him at Jerusalem. He has seen his fate a long way off and marched steadily and steadfastly toward it. He has told his disciples on several occasions earlier just what awaits him. And now he tells them again, asserting that they “know” this, but also recognizing that they cannot imagine it will really take place.

But he knows. No doubt there were countless opportunities for him to turn aside, to choose another path, to take an easier route. But he does not. Instead, he merely tells his disciples one more time what is about to happen, and then walks the path before him. Why? Simple: so that we do not have to.

Dear God, fasten our eyes on the journey your Son takes that we may see the depth of your love for us and all the world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE ASH WEDNESDAY WORSHIP VIDEO IS AVAILABLE AT [MTOLIVET.ORG](https://www.mtolivet.org). IT INCLUDES OUR MOUNT OLIVET PASTORS, BEAUTIFUL MUSIC, AND REFLECTIONS OF FAITH MADE BY OUR MOUNT OLIVET YOUTH.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2021

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

MATTHEW 26:3-5

This is a difficult element of Matthew’s Gospel, and so it’s important to take it head on: Matthew, more than any of the other Evangelists, paints a fairly harsh portrait of Jesus’ Jewish adversaries.

This is probably because Matthew writes for a congregation of Jewish Christians who have had to defend their beliefs to other Jews who do not believe Jesus was the Messiah. So he not only interprets Jesus ministry in light of the Old Testament, he also argues against those – most likely contemporary Pharisees – who asserted that Jesus was not the Jewish Messiah. Matthew wrote his Gospel, that is, in the heat of controversy and division. And for this reason he at points paints a harsher picture of Jesus’ Jewish religious opponents even as he offers a “softer” view of Jesus’ political opponents from Rome.

At the time Matthew wrote, Christianity was the minority religion and likely experienced rejection and perhaps persecution. A few centuries later, however, Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Romans. And, over time, the passages Matthew once wrote to bolster the faith of his community are too often used to justify prejudice against Jews, never more tragically than during the Second World War in Nazi Germany.

There is little doubt that Jesus had opponents among the religious authorities of his day given that he criticized Temple practices. And it’s likely that Jesus enjoyed a measure of popularity among the general masses that would make any move against him both challenging and complex. Beyond that, we need to take care with how we read this and similar passages, as far too many of God’s Jewish children have suffered and died at the hands of God’s Christian children who based their actions on these accounts.

Dear God, forgive us when we do not regard all others – no matter what religion or race – as your beloved children, and help us to read Matthew’s story of Jesus in a way that points us to your great love for all people. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2021

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor."

MATTHEW 26:6-9

The disciples are at dinner. They're visiting a friend named Simon, someone Jesus had healed, who lives in a suburb just outside Jerusalem. It's likely a quiet meal, as the last couple of days have been pretty intense. Jesus has been teaching about, well, things like the destruction of the Temple and the end of the world and other minor stuff! And his teaching really riled folks up. In fact, there were moments where the disciples were afraid they were just going to haul Jesus off to prison.

Finally, they get a nice break and can relax over a quiet meal. Until, that is, this woman comes into Simon's dining room with this really fancy jar and begins pouring its contents over Jesus' head. Immediately they realize this is really, really expensive stuff. And Jesus just leans back, totally undisturbed, almost enjoying it.

My guess is that the disciples had absolutely no idea what was going on. They obviously weren't too happy about it. Maybe they're upset because it's expensive ointment being lavishly, even wastefully, dished out. And maybe it's that they don't really understand what's happening. And maybe it's that it's a woman doing this to Jesus. And maybe they're just really tired and still a little afraid of what's going to happen to Jesus when they get to Jerusalem. Whatever the reason, the disciples get not just indignant or upset, but downright angry.

And I can't help but wonder what might have happened if, instead of getting mad, they'd gotten curious...

Dear God, keep us from the sin of anger when we are confused, tired, or afraid. Instead, enliven our hearts with a sense of curiosity about what confuses us and with a courageous trust that you are always with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2021

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

MATTHEW 26:10-13

Each of the two scenes at the outset of Matthew’s passion set up much of what is to come by naming a significant theme.

The first deals with Jesus’ opponents. It’s clear from the opening scene that Jesus faces significant opposition from the political and religious leadership in Jerusalem, but he will not be deterred from his mission and destiny.

The second deals with Jesus’ friends who, while they may be aware of the danger Jesus is facing, do not understand what is about to happen. Jesus has told his disciples on three different occasions that he will die in Jerusalem and be raised to life again. Yet they cannot perceive in the actions of the woman in this scene anything other than a wasteful act rather than see it as an anointing in preparation for Jesus’ death.

As it turns out, neither his opponents nor his friends understand what is to happen. They may have ideas or expectations, but both will be surprised. For what God has planned simply goes beyond all expectation.

In addition to these two, there is a third important theme here as well. For Jesus doesn’t simply rebuke his disciples, he also acknowledges this woman. He sees her, recognizes the valor and beauty of her gesture, and promises that the world will remember her.

You may have noticed that she is not named in Matthew’s account. Some have thought that this indicates the patriarchal bias of the first century, while others have suggested that Matthew simply didn’t know her name. Both are possible. But I wonder if Matthew’s omission was intentional so that this woman can stand for all who seem of little significance to the world and yet are seen and remembered by Jesus. So as we remember her, let us also give thanks for the countless other women and men who have graced this world with quiet acts of valor and beauty, and borne witness to the love and mercy expressed in Jesus’ cross and the hope and redemption expressed in his resurrection.

*Dear God, let us remember this woman’s act of devotion and be inspired to do likewise. In Jesus’ name,
Amen.*



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2021

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

THE FAITHFUL CENTURION: TRUST

Matthew 8:5-13

PASTOR LOSE PREACHING

THE LENTEN PRAYER

God of Grace,

Your mercy is steadfast and your love never fails. Grant us trust like the centurion, that our lives would bear witness to your redeeming love. Revive our faith and guide our lives, so that your healing grace would be known throughout the earth. Amen.



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2021

*Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said,
“What will you give me if I betray him to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver.
And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.*

MATTHEW 26:14-16

Here is the heartbreak. To be betrayed by a friend. To be sold out by a discipline. To be so utterly disappointed and let down by someone with whom you’ve shared bread and conversation and toil and hope.

But it’s not just heartbreaking for Jesus. It’s also heartbreaking for Judas. That he could be so utterly disappointed and disillusioned that he will sell out the one he thought would be the Messiah. He was zealous for his faith, for his people, for the vision of the future he imagined and desired, and so he passionately embraced the promise of God’s coming kingdom that Jesus heralded. But somewhere along the way, he realized that Jesus’ kingdom and the one of which he dreamt were not the same.

Except he didn’t see them, I imagine, as different visions of the kingdom. More likely, he saw his as a vision of the kingdom and Jesus’ as a lame excuse, perhaps even a lie. And so heartbroken and despondent, and driven only by the remaining embers of a hollow passion, he betrays his teacher and friend for thirty pieces of silver.

That’s the challenge of passion. It’s essential to do anything of worth in this world. That is, it’s crucial for us to embrace the people and causes we love with passion. Yet of those two, I suspect it’s people we must finally side with. When we put aside our passion for people and lodge it instead solely in our causes, we lose something essential and risk being misled into thinking that any cause is more important than the people that cause was meant to serve.

God comes in Jesus for a cause, yes, but even more for people, the people God loves so much that God will risk everything. Let us do likewise.

Dear God, grant us a holy passion for your people, those persons you place all around us, and let all of our words and deeds be governed by your love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2021

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?” He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.’” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

MATTHEW 26:17-19

Lest we have doubts, these few verses reminds us that Jesus knew what he was getting into. Nor are we talking only about the foresight that prompts him to tell his disciples on several occasions that he will meet his death in Jerusalem. Rather, we are at the level of something far more mundane: making arrangements to celebrate the Passover meal with his disciples in Jerusalem, the hotbed of the controversy surrounding him and stronghold of his opponents.

Some, I imagine, may read this passage as indicating Jesus’ predictive ability – that he was prophesying that his disciples would meet a certain man who had a room available for them. But I think this was, as I said, far more mundane. Anticipating his desire to spend the Passover – and, indeed, the last moments of his earthly life – with his disciples, Jesus had made plans ahead of time and now directed his disciples to execute those plans.

Mundane. But also courageous. It’s one thing to respond to difficult or dangerous events that come upon us unexpectedly with a burst of sudden courage. It’s another to see the difficulty and danger a great distance off and walk steadfastly toward it, facing the mounting fear and anxiety that such a fate occasions.

This is what these verses reveal: the mundane details of a courageous man who embraced his destiny in faith and confidence....

...For all for us.

Dear God, encourage us through the example of Jesus’ courage, strengthen our faith as we witness his, and increase our love as we recognize his love for us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2021

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, “Surely not I, Lord?” He answered, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.” Judas, who betrayed him, said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” He replied, “You have said so.”

MATTHEW 26:20-25

This wasn't a pleasant beginning to their Passover meal. They'd obviously been eager to celebrate together this festival, yet the first words out of Jesus' mouth are filled with omens of treachery.

“Greatly distressed” barely describes the disciples' reaction. Each protests. Likely not just his innocence, but that it could even happen. And Judas protests along with the rest, even though he has already accepted the blood money.

What they don't understand is that even as they sit down to celebrate God's great deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt, God is about to deliver again, but this time not a single nation but all of humanity. This deliverance, like the last one, will be born of tears and struggle and death.

Jesus goes to the cross to demonstrate God's profound love so that we may be delivered from our illusions that we are all alone, or that we must rescue ourselves, or that we are doomed to determine our fate on our own. Jesus goes to the cross so that we may be delivered from our sins, from our fears, and even from the specter of death itself.

As the disciples sit to celebrate God's work to redeem Israel, they have no idea of what is to come. And because they do not yet know what they are capable of – betrayal, desertion, denial – or what God is capable of – mercy, forgiveness, redemption – they will miss much of what is about to happen.

In this regard, we are different. We know this story and what to look for. At times, however, our very familiarity with the story of God's greatest act of redemption dulls us to its significance. Let us, therefore, give our attention to the details of this narrative that we might be struck anew by God's profound and unending love for each and all of us.

Dear God, fasten our eyes to the form of your Son as he endures the cross that we might know we need never fear again. In Jesus' name, Amen.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2021

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from 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 will never again drink 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 does it mean when Jesus says, “This is my body,” after giving his disciples bread? This has been the subject of endless theological debate over the centuries.

Roman Catholics, borrowing the philosophical categories of “substance” (the essential thing itself) and “accidents” (the concrete appearance of something in its particularity), confess that the bread Jesus offered – and that is used in Holy Communion today – is “transubstantiated” (that is, has its essential substance changed, even though its particular accidents remain the same).

Reformed theologians have argued more simply that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, that he did not mean to imply that he was actually giving his body to the disciples to eat but that the bread merely represented his body.

Lutherans have opted for not so much a middle ground as a whole other way of looking at matters by saying that the whole of creation is imbued with the presence of God. Therefore, the presence of Jesus, God’s word made flesh, is already and inherently part of the bread he gives his disciples and, indeed, all bread, but in this meal, Jesus promises to be revealed there in love and mercy for us.

Each of these distinct confessions have their proponents and one or the other may appeal to you. But I wonder if there is also a more basic answer.

I think that when Jesus says that the bread he offers is his own body and the wine they drink is his blood of the covenant he is telling us that he is giving himself completely and fully, not sparing any part of himself (which also means God is not sparing any part of God’s own self). More, he is saying that he is offering all of himself to us in order that we may perceive how much God loves us and be drawn into a new relationship with God defined and determined by that love.

Dear God, each time we share in the Lord’s Supper, remind us that we are receiving your gift of yourself to us, really and truly, that we may live in and through your love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2021

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

MATTHEW 26:30

There's something about this solitary verse that I find quite touching.

It's a bit of an orphan, serving as a transitional verse from the tension and drama of Jesus' prediction of his betrayal while sharing his Last Supper with his disciples to the tension and drama of his prediction of Peter's denial and prayer at Gethsemane.

But in addition to serving as a transition, it also feels strangely normal. Because this is what you did at the end of a Passover meal. You sang a hymn. Not just a hymn, actually, but the hymn. At the close of the Passover meal, you see, it was traditional to sing Psalm 118, which includes the verse "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." And many of us may have sung those words (even if we didn't know they came from Ps. 118!). So at the close of their meal, Jesus and his disciples sing a hymn.

Which reminds us that whatever else may happen on this evening, this company of disciples was also a group of friends and devout Jews who gathered together to celebrate the Passover, just like thousands of other friends that evening and millions of Jews across the centuries. They gathered for a meal, for reading and recitation of the story of God's deliverance, and for prayer. And at the end of it all they sang the hymn that brought their observance to a close.

It's easy for us to forget that there was something very normal about Jesus and his disciples gathering to share this meal, even as there was something quite extraordinary about the larger story and night of which it is a part. We tend to focus on the extraordinary, of course, because this is the night that begins our Lord's great passion, and within the next twenty-four hours he will be betrayed, denied, accused, tried, found guilty, and crucified. All, we confess, for us.

But for just a moment, I'd invite us to remember that this meal, this company, their bond of faith and friendship, were terribly ordinary, even mundane. And it is through just such ordinary events that God quite often does extraordinary things.

Dear God, open our eyes to see your presence in the ordinary moments of our lives this day and always. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2021

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”

MATTHEW 26:31-32

As will often be the case on this night, there is mixed together anguish and hope.

After they leave their Passover meal together, Jesus and his disciples go to the Mount of Olives. And on that familiar hill he tells them news that must have saddened them to the core. Earlier, keep in mind, he had announced that one of their company would betray them.

Now Jesus’ prediction moves from the solitary to the corporate, and all of them are indicted: “You will all become deserters....” There is no escape, no looking the other way, no assuming it’s one of the others.

This is the way it must go. Perhaps that is, as Matthew suggests, because this desertion fulfills scriptural prophecy. And perhaps it’s simply because God’s plan for redemption is so utterly surprising and turns our expectations so completely upside down that Jesus’ disciples not only could not anticipate it but couldn’t even accept it. And so they desert him, every one of them, and he tells them this upfront.

Yet amid this difficult word of anticipated desertion is Jesus’ promise: he will be raised again, and after he is raised he will go ahead to meet his disciples in Galilee.

I don’t know if the disciples could hear this word of hope amid their shock at Jesus’ accusation. I don’t know, that is, if they noticed that Jesus didn’t stop with the announcement of their desertion but continued on with a promise of his faithfulness, but it will become a core part of the message with which the angel greets the women at the empty tomb. He will send these women to bear the news that despite all their failings – the betrayal, denial, and desertion – yet Jesus has kept his word and promise.

Which is, of course, our source of hope. We are commanded to be faithful and try to be so. Yet when we fail we have God’s promise to draw us back, forgive and renew us, and send us forth once again as ambassadors of God’s grace and love. Because God, from the beginning of Scripture to the end, always keeps God’s promises.

Dear God, encourage us to strive to be the people you have called us to be, and when we fall short remind us that even when we falter you are faithful. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2021

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

THE CALLING OF MATTHEW: REPENTANCE

Matthew 9:9-13

PASTOR MACLEAN PREACHING

THE LENTEN PRAYER

Almighty God,

Like your disciple Matthew, you call us to repentance and transform us when we least expect it. Turn us to you as we learn to trust that your ways bring wholeness and life. Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 1, 2021

Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you."

Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

MATTHEW 26:33-35

It's tempting to chide Peter at this moment for being too overconfident. His statement is so bold, so cocksure, all of which makes his later actions so disappointing.

Or is it that his later actions – or really, that we already know what he will do – that make his words now seem so bold and foolish? To be honest, in that moment I can't imagine saying anything different. Peter had been one of the first to follow Jesus and clearly was close to him. And so he cannot imagine deserting him. Moreover, he probably heard Jesus' words less as prediction and more as discouragement, and so sought to comfort and encourage his friend.

Whatever the reason, Peter isn't simply being impetuous or overly bold or cock sure, he's just being genuine, genuinely believing he will stay with his friend. And so when Jesus repeats his assertion, this time with greater specificity about the details of Peter's desertion and denial, Peter protests that he will never deny his Lord, not even if it costs him his life. But then he doesn't follow through. He fails to keep his promise.

Again, it's tempting to be hard on Peter. But, really, are we all that different? How many times, I wonder, have I resolved to stay near what I know to be the will and pleasure of God and yet, in the moment of duress and trial, abandoned that resolve and went my own way? Maybe what's remarkable isn't that Peter, not yet knowing his limitations, protests his devotion, but that I, having learned of my shortcomings far too often, still do the same.

Yet, as will be a theme throughout Matthew's story, even when we are faithless, Jesus is faithful. To the very end.

Dear God, we all fall short of your will and good intentions. Forgive us, renew us, and restore us by the faith of your Son. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 2, 2021

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

MATTHEW 26:36-39

Whenever folks read the Gethsemane scene in Matthew, they are almost always struck by Jesus' level of distress. If asked to name what strikes them, they invariably use the word "human" when speaking of Jesus. As in, "he seems so very human in this scene."

I think that reaction reveals two really interesting things. First, deep down we know that suffering is part and parcel of what it means to be human. It's not the only thing, of course – joy, happiness, and contentment also color our lives. But suffering is most definitely a part of our experience.

Second, I also think it's interesting that we regularly seem surprised that Jesus suffers as we do. In fact, that's the other thing people often say when reading this part of the story: "he seems so much like us." No matter how often we may affirm the Nicene Creed's affirmation that Jesus is "fully human and fully divine," in our heart of hearts we think of Jesus more regularly in terms of divinity. And for many of us, divinity means dispassionate.

And so I wonder: might it be that part of Jesus' mission is to reveal to us the heart of God as passionate and vulnerable? Passionately in love with the whole creation and vulnerably willing to expose God's own self to the suffering of that beloved creation out of love?

As we approach Jerusalem and the end of the story of Jesus' earthly life, it occurs to me that we also come full circle, returning to the promise that Jesus is Emmanuel, the God who is with us. More than that, Jesus is the God who is with us by being one of us. And to this God we can offer any prayer, lodge any concern, confide any hope, for this God knows what it is like to be human.

Dear God, remind us today and always that in Jesus you took on our lot and our life that we might never be alone and live amid our suffering with hope, courage, and joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3, 2021

And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.

MATTHEW 26:39-43

The contrast between passionate obedience and dispassionate, or at least oblivious, ignorance is stunning. Jesus knows what is going to happen and, as we noted yesterday, his reaction to these events is both passionate and poignant. He would, at this moment, give almost anything to avoid the fate he anticipates. And so he prays that the bitter cup may pass from him.

Which is striking. Jesus doesn't just accept his fate stoically. He protests, mourns, and asks that it may not happen. Which means we can, too. When we have been disappointed, hurt, or upset, there is absolutely nothing wrong with pouring all of that into our prayers. Jesus did.

And then, through this heartfelt prayer, he comes to a level of acceptance and obedience. This invites us to think differently about the nature of prayer. Prayer is not something we do simply because we should. And prayer isn't something we do hoping to manipulate events. Prayer, rather, is inherently relational, a vehicle for sharing our deepest and truest thoughts, feelings, concerns, and desires with God. And through sharing, we are changed, moved, empowered and strengthened to cope with the present and future as we realize we are accompanied through whatever the present and future may bring.

This prayer at Gethsemane, I believe, is where we see Jesus as deeply connected to God as anywhere in the Gospels, as he is willing to share all that he is and be changed in and through that sharing.

The disciples, by contrast, are oblivious, ignorant of his struggle, for they do not – perhaps cannot – pay attention either to Jesus' struggle or God's presence. Sometimes I wonder if that's the greater sorrow. Not that at times we are angry at God, but rather that at times we are apathetic and don't care enough even to pay attention.

Dear God, save us from dispassion and ignorance, that we may know and revel in your great love for us and all people. In Jesus' name, Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 4, 2021

So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

MATTHEW 26:44-46

Three times Jesus prays. Three times his disciples cannot stay awake. It is a snapshot of disappointment and failure at a time when Jesus most needed and asked for the support of his friends.

But it is also a portrait of courage and resolve. Jesus has prayed three times, each time asking that this cup be taken away, each time yielding to the destiny he sees in front of him. And now that the hour is at hand, he is ready. Alone, perhaps, as his disciples have failed to accompany him in this hour, but nevertheless ready.

Yesterday we observed that prayer is a time to be honest and to share our deepest feelings without reserve with God. And that sometimes such sharing can change us, providing us with the resolve and courage we need.

But today, just before the main act of the drama is about to commence, we might also note that prayer invites not just candor but also persistence. Prayer, that is, isn't easy. It takes time. Like our other relationships, our relationship with God requires effort and persistence as well as open communication.

Jesus is many things for us, as we will see throughout our time with Matthew's story of the passion. One of them is an example, an example of what genuine relationship with God looks like, including praying three times deeply and desperately for a future he dreads but comes to accept.

With that example in mind, let us also get up and get going, for the hour is at hand.

Dear God, encourage us to persevere steadfastly in our relationship with you, just as you persevere and keep faith steadfastly with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 2021

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.

MATTHEW 26:47-50

The "Judas kiss." Over the millennium it has come to represent the most intimate of betrayals. For Judas was with Jesus from the beginning. His betrayal of his teacher is all the more wretched because he not only shared bread and fellowship with Jesus but also shared his dreams, hopes, and mission.

Or did he? That becomes a key question. He clearly thought he shared Jesus' vision, but over time grew disillusioned and disappointed, even to the point of being willing to sell his teacher to his opponents for a few pieces of silver.

I hesitate to make the jump from Judas' betrayal of Jesus to our own missteps and sins so as to not underestimate the sheer disappointment Jesus must have felt when one he calls "friend" betrays him. At the same time, I think the root causes of my sins are not so different from Judas'. For Judas thought he knew how the kingdom should play out. He was sure he understood Jesus' mission, perhaps better than Jesus himself. And when Jesus didn't live up to Judas' expectations, then he gave up on him, going his own way, even to the point of betraying him.

Judas, in other words, wanted to be in control. And here is where the lines of my failings and Judas' intersect. I also regularly think I know what is best for me and how life and the world should unfold. And when things don't go according to plan – my plan – I am easily frustrated, disappointed, angry, and tempted to despair. Is this not, perhaps, one of the central causes of all sin? That we are confident we know better – even than God – and will to have our own way in matters? Rather than yield to God's vision and mission, we set our own course and, as the word "sin" literally means, miss the mark.

Yet here is a word of hope: if Jesus can not only call Judas "friend," but also endure that betrayal and ultimately use it to demonstrate the power of God's love, then there is nothing we can do that can banish or void God's love for us. God can and will forgive all, redeem all, even work through and use all for the sake of the world and people God loves so much.

Dear God, forgive us when, confident of our own opinions and eager to satisfy our own desires, we go astray and miss the mark, and draw us back into your redemptive love. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 2021

Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?"

MATTHEW 26:51-54

When someone grabs hold of Jesus, the disciples finally realize what is happening, accept that all Jesus said will come to pass, and recognize that their friend and teacher is in danger. In response to this late realization, they are first afraid and then resort to violence.

That isn't an unusual pattern of response. Many of us grow afraid when we feel out of control. Nor is it unusual that fear turns to violence. Fear, I think, is often the essential ingredient to violence, as it's by violence that we seek to take back control, shift and shape events to our benefit, and protect ourselves from those we fear.

But while Jesus understands their fear, he rebukes their turn to violence, naming the destructive spiral that the turn to violence initiates: "all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

But Jesus doesn't only rebuke this penchant to turn to violence to calm our fears, he also offers an alternative. In response to the fear that is part of our life, Jesus invites trust and courage. First, Jesus trusted that God would see him through. Rather than appeal to a legion of angels, he instead trusts God.

From trust, courage is born. Courage, we should remember, is not the absence of fear but the ability to keep faith, do what is necessary, and be true to one's self even and especially when you are afraid. Jesus' trust in God allows him to face a fearful future with courage.

Dear God, when we are afraid, grant us the courage to refuse the easy and destructive path of violence and instead trust that you are with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2021

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

THE CANAANITE WOMAN'S FAITH: DETERMINATION

Matthew 15:21-28

PASTOR FREEMAN PREACHING

THE LENTEN PRAYER

God of All,

Give us faith like the Canaanite woman – full of determination and courage. Help us to trust that nothing is too small for your care. May our lives bear witness to Jesus' love that knows no divisions or bounds. Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2021

*At that hour, Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled."
Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.*

MATTHEW 26:55-56

There are two movements to this brief scene, the pivot point between Jesus' prayers at Gethsemane and his capture by his opponents.

The first is Jesus' steadfast faith. Having come through his time of trial and the dread agony of anticipation, he has now not only accepted his fate but embraced it. And so he addresses the crowds, challenging their seizure of him as if he were a bandit. From the opening verses of Matthew's account of Jesus' passion, we gather that his opponents are afraid of Jesus' popularity with the general populace and so dared not take him by force. For this reason, they have come at night, hoping to accomplish in darkness what they feared to do in broad daylight. What they don't know, he implies, is that there are bigger forces at work. For while they think they are prevailing by strategy and stealth, they fail to realize that their actions are part of a larger drama, the drama of God keeping God's promises to Israel.

The contrast to Jesus' faith, of course, is the faithlessness of his disciples, the second part of this scene, as they flee the moment their teacher has been seized. But even this serves to fulfill the Scriptures and Jesus' earlier words and prediction.

These two things – the faith of Jesus and faithlessness of his disciples and, indeed, of all humanity – are what structure not only this scene but also, when you think of it, the passion, the gospel and, indeed, all Scripture. For these two forces – God's desire to love and bless and ours to control and flee – have contended with each other throughout human history. The bedrock good news of our faith is that, in the end, it is God's good intention, will, faithfulness, and love that prevail.

Dear God, as we watch your Son journey to the cross, remind us again and again of your unfailing and victorious love for us and all people. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2021

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end.

MATTHEW 26:57-58

I find the last line of this transitional vignette fascinating. Jesus has been arrested, and those who have arrested him are bringing him to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest. This, apparently, is where the leadership of the religious authorities had already gathered. Which means that much of this evening has been scripted ahead of time and so far things are going according to plan. That's not unusual, and reflects the normal working out of a well-conceived plot.

What I find most interesting is Peter. He fled, like the rest of the disciples, when Jesus was arrested. He fled, despite all his protests and despite his long friendship and period of discipleship with Jesus. Except now he is again following. But at a distance. Matthew doesn't add this modifier, but we might: he followed at a safe distance, until he had come to the courtyard of the high priest's house, just outside of where all the action is. And, then, in a moment of bravado strangely lacking earlier this evening, he walks into the house with the guards. You know, like he belongs there, cool, calm, and collected.

Why this sudden tolerance for risk? This is the part that fascinates me. Because Matthew tells us that it's simply Peter's curiosity. He follows at a distance and then enters the high priest's home with the guards "in order to see how this would end."

Peter, it would seem, is caught by his own curiosity of how things will turn out. Perhaps he now believes that all Jesus spoke must come to pass, or perhaps he is still hoping that Jesus might survive this ordeal, or maybe he simply can't let go of this man and, though fearful, is driven by his need to follow his story to the end.

Whatever the reason, Peter will soon find out that while you can follow Jesus at a distance, you can't be a follower of Jesus at a distance. Because being Jesus' follower – the word is still disciple – means that you're all in. And when Peter finally realizes that – perhaps only as he sees God's salvation offered in a way no one expected – then absolutely everything will change. For him... and, indeed, all the world.

Dear God, keep our eyes fastened on your Son that we may believe afresh that you came to love us and to change us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 2021

Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'" The high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But Jesus was silent.

MATTHEW 26:59-63A

Sometimes silence is the best answer.

The story Matthew tells is growing darker and more tense. Jesus has been arrested and is now on trial. Except that there are no true witnesses to what he has done wrong. Or, as Matthew undoubtedly is implying, because Jesus has done no wrong his opponents can find no true witnesses. And so they bring false ones.

I suppose Jesus could have countered the accusations or protested his innocence. But instead he remains silent. Perhaps this is simply because he has resigned himself to his fate or knows that all things are out of his hands. Perhaps.

But I think it more likely that Jesus refuses to answer because he refuses to be pulled into the drama others are creating around him. He has his own drama – his own passion – to play, and it does not involve plots and schemes and false accusations but rather is dominated by trust and courage and obedience.

Jesus is silent, I think, because to speak now would be to dignify his accusers with an answer, to participate in the mock trial they have staged. And so Jesus remains silent, content in his trust in God that this – even this – will work for the good of all in the hands of a loving God.

There are times to not remain silent – to protest injustice and lift our voices in despair or defense. But this is not one of them. For Jesus is not some tragic figure caught up merely in an unjust trial. He is God's Son, the one who embraces death to show us that death does not have the last word. And in his willing silence he identified with all those who have had to suffer silently, offering them the dignity he was denied.

There are times to speak and to cry and to sing... and there are times to be silent. And this is one of them.

Dear God, let us see in the silent courage and suffering of your Son your love poured out for all people, especially those who have little voice in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 2021

Then the high priest said to him, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?" They answered, "He deserves death."

MATTHEW 26:63B-66

And then comes the question that demands a response. It is no longer false accusations or bogus charges, but a question about identity. Jesus' identity: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" And so Jesus breaks his silence to speak.

And he doesn't merely speak, but actually makes Caiaphas a promise: he, the high priest who accuses Jesus, will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and come on the clouds of heaven.

To understand what Jesus is saying, it helps to know that the phrase "seated at the right hand of Power" likely does not designate some place up in heaven, just to the right of wherever God happens to be. Rather, to sit at someone's right hand was to enjoy their favor and to exercise their authority. So Jesus is saying that he will act on God's behalf, exercising God's authority for the sake of God's beloved children.

Indeed, he already has done that. Each time Jesus has forgiven sins he granted the pardon that belongs to God. At times, his accusers noted this, protesting that, "Only God can forgive sin." And for making the promise and claiming the authority to forgive and restore and heal whenever there is need, Jesus is sentenced to die. Those who surround him are not prepared to concede him that authority and find his promise of forgiveness (which of course implies the need for forgiveness) too threatening to allow him to live.

And in his dying the second part of his promise comes to expression. For Caiaphas and all those gathered will see him come on the clouds of heaven – that is, come in all of God's glory. But it is the unexpected glory of sacrificial love, as Jesus will go to the cross to make manifest just how far God will go to communicate God's love for each and all of us.

Dear God, you have given all authority over to your Son and he, in turn, has used it to forgive, love, and restore us to right relationship with you and each other. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 2021

Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?"

MATTHEW 26:67

It's the abuse that I find most difficult. Much of the Passion, when you read as carefully as we are, is hard to endure. From the agony of the garden to the betrayal by friends to the crucifixion itself, it is a harrowing story. And yet for some reason I find the abuse and belittlement of this scene among the most difficult passages to read.

Perhaps it's that Jesus' treatment bespeaks such an absolute loss of respect for another person's basic humanity. It's not enough that they punish him, if that's what they think they are doing, or even put him to death. When you witness the spitting, slapping, and petty insults, you realize they are out not just to torture his body but to demean and demoralize his spirit.

Some may argue that such treatment is an integral part of Jesus' suffering for us, that it demonstrates that he suffered more than anyone else and therefore that his "payment" makes full satisfaction for our sins. I don't buy it. First, I don't think God required payment. God is God, fully capable of forgiving us just as we forgive loved ones without exacting payment ourselves. (What an impoverished view of God, when you think of it, that God is so protective of justice that God cannot do something each of us has done easily throughout our lives!)

Second, I don't think you can even begin to make the case that Jesus suffered more than anyone else. Certainly he suffered – tremendously – but others have suffered by disease, despair, or torture for years. I don't think the point of Matthew's story is that Jesus suffered more, just that he suffered like – like us, like others, like all those who have been wrongly accused or had their spirit diminished by belittlement or neglect or injustice. Jesus, we confess, entered into our existence, taking on our flesh and living a life like ours so that we would know a) God understands our circumstances and b) God loves us wholly and completely.

I don't like this scene, and I wish Jesus had never gone through this. But I am grateful that all those who have suffered such humiliation – and all of us whenever we have felt hurt, lost, or insulted – know we have a God who identifies with us, understands us, loves us, and promises to redeem us and all things.

Dear God, as we read of the suffering of your Son, remind us that whatever we may experience, you understand... and care. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 13, 2021

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, "You also werewith Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before all of them, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 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 curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

MATTHEW 26:69-75

The irony is that even as Jesus' opponents are demanding he prophesy who struck him, his prediction of Peter's denial is coming true.

Many of us have likely wondered how Peter could deny his Lord after all he had shared with him. But I think the answer is not surprising: Peter is afraid. And fear narrows our vision, reducing, if not eliminating, possibility. All we can imagine is what frightens us. There is no past; there is no future; there is only the terrifying present.

And so Peter, afraid, denies. More than denies, protests. More even than protests, he swears an oath that he does not know this man Jesus. And then, when the cock crows, he remembers his Lord's words, sees what fear has reduced him to, and learns something terrible and difficult about himself and, indeed, all of us. For we, too, are so very susceptible to fear. It colors our vision, corrodes our life, and dramatically restricts our ability to keep faith or enjoy abundant life.

There is no way to banish fear forever from our lives, yet we do not need to allow it to dominate us. The response to fear is courage. Courage, contrary to popular belief, is not the absence of fear, but rather the ability to keep faith, to do what we need to do, in spite of fear. And courage is born of faith. Faith that we are not alone, that there is Someone greater than us on our side, that all will come, in time, to a good end.

Dear God, grant us the courage to face our fears, to reach out to those around us, and to walk together into an unknown future, trusting that you are always with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

PETER'S CONFESSION... AND REBUKE: HUMILITY

Matthew 16:13-28

PASTOR LOSE PREACHING

THE LENTEN PRAYER

Almighty God,

The way of the cross calls us to lives of humility. When we are tempted to set our minds on human things rather than your divine strength, remind us that it is the cross and resurrection of Jesus that bring true power and life. Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2021

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

MATTHEW 27:1-2

It's been, to say the least, a very long night. What began with an intimate meal with his disciples led first to prayer and betrayal in Gethsemane and then accusations and trial before the High Priest. And now Jesus is being handed over to Pilate, the brutal Roman governor – that is, oppressor – of the region of Judea. In this role, it was Pilate's job to keep the Pax Romana, the “Roman peace,” which pretty much meant putting down any unrest or rebellion that threatened Rome's rule.

We don't know a lot about Pilate from sources beyond the four gospels. His rule in Judea spanned a decade and was marked by controversy as he harshly suppressed several groups he found objectionable. Information about where he came from, however, or what he did after his time in Judea is mostly speculation.

What we do know is that this transfer of venue doesn't bode well for Jesus. Up to this point, the conflict Jesus has been having with the religious authorities about the Temple and its practices has been largely contained to matters of theology and justice. But now the point of contention has escalated from matters religious to matters political. Being brought before the Roman Prefect was no minor incident. Rome's emissary probably cared not one whit about religious squabbles, but if Jesus was being accused of sedition or treason, then that was different.

As we will see, the scenes with Pilate, particularly in Matthew's account, are some of the most difficult to deal with historically and have had serious consequences through the ages. But for now, it is perhaps enough to note that Matthew draws us into not just another scene of his story but another level of conflict, tension, and intrigue. He wants us, in other words, to pay attention, for what will transpire over the next few hours that he narrates will have grave implications not just for Israel and Rome but, indeed, for all the world.

Dear God, let us receive the story of your Son and his passion with open hearts that we may recognize your great love for us and all the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 2021

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

MATTHEW 27:3-10

I find these verses among the most tragic in Scripture. Judas repents and, seeking to make amends, he seeks to return the money he received but is rejected. In despair, he dies by suicide.

For much of its history, the Church has described suicide not just as sinful, but as something that excludes forgiveness. I think that has been a grave mistake. Of course suicide runs contrary to God's will – how could any parent want such an end for a child? That's not the point. What really runs contrary to God's will is that any of God's children should be in so much psychic, emotional, social, and existential pain. Rather than condemn the outcome of such pain, we should instead stand with those who are suffering and their families by working to remove the stigma from the mental illness that would drive one to contemplate or attempt suicide. We should encourage outreach to those suffering by supporting counseling and suicide prevention services. And we should offer those suffering and their families the consolation of empathy and companionship as they walk a difficult road.

Interestingly, the field the elders buy becomes a place of burial for "foreigners," those who would not normally be included in the burial rites of the time. Might this remind us that God always makes room for those normally excluded? Might we renew our efforts to extend the love of God to those who are suffering mental anguish? And might we do all of this in the name of the one Judas followed?

Dear God, use us to comfort those who suffer, to reach out to those who despair, and to accompany those who feel they walk alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 2021

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

MATTHEW 27:11-14

After the narrative detour regarding Judas’ tragic end, we are back to the primary story of Jesus’ journey to the cross. He now stands trial before Pilate, arguably the most powerful man in all of Palestine.

Pilate begins with what may seem a straightforward question, but one that has far reaching implications: “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus’ answer will help Pilate discern whether this is primarily a religious squabble or one that has more political overtones. But Jesus refuses to satisfy Pilate’s curiosity, employing the same strategy he had earlier by saying simply, “You say so.” At this non-answer, his accusers jump into the fray, but as before Jesus refuses to answer any of them. Pilate, then, prods him further, inviting him to address the charges spoken against him. And Jesus remains silent.

All of this may not seem that surprising, as Jesus has retained his rather stoic sense of self and mission ever since his anguish and resolve in Gethsemane. What strikes me, though, is that Pilate is “greatly amazed.” Why?

Perhaps because most of those who have been brought before him came as terrified and beaten opponents of the empire, yet this man is unafraid. Or perhaps those Pilate usually speaks to are out for their own political gain, always seeking an advantage, and yet this one seems to desire no favor. Or maybe it’s that the normal human reaction when accused of something is to defend oneself vigorously and level counter-charges at one’s opponents, and yet this rabbi speaks not a word either in his defense or against his accusers.

Pilate, based on his experience with power and influence and violence, has a whole set of expectations about how Jesus should respond. Yet Jesus, acquainted instead with grace, faith, and trust, defies those expectations, remains silent in the face of his accusers, and entrusts himself to the mercy of God.

Yes, Pilate is amazed. For Jesus abides by the rules of another kingdom altogether, one Pilate cannot imagine but only wonder at.

Dear God, remind us daily that while we live and work in this world, we are also citizens of your eternal kingdom. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 18, 2021

Now at the festival, the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time, they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

MATTHEW 27:15-18

Which Jesus will it be?

That’s the great irony of Pilate’s dilemma. He has before him two prisoners, each named Jesus. One, Matthew reports, is a notorious criminal; the other, a religious figure accused of being the Messiah. Which one will Pilate choose?

Before moving too quickly through this scene, it’s worth noting that Matthew is the only evangelist of the four who refers to Barabbas as “Jesus Barabbas.” Typically, when a difference like this exists in the Gospels, I take it as an invitation to pay special attention. Not in order to figure out which one was right but rather to perceive more clearly what the evangelist was trying to confess. So what is Matthew trying to tell us, we might wonder, given that “Jesus” is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua which means “God saves.”

Perhaps he is describing the choice between two paths to salvation, to bringing in God’s kingdom. The other gospel accounts describe Barabbas as a zealot, one who wanted to overthrow Roman rule. So this they have in common: both Jesus Barabbas and Jesus called the Messiah anticipate “regime change.” But whereas Barabbas has chosen to do so by violence – hence Matthew’s designation of him as “a notorious criminal” – Jesus seeks to inaugurate the kingdom of God through forgiveness, mercy, and healing.

So which Jesus will Pilate choose? Which will the crowds prefer? These are the questions Matthew prepares to answer. But perhaps he would also ask us, which one will we choose? Will we, in other words, yield to God’s guidance and timing rather than take matters into our own hands? Will we forgive those who offend and hurt us rather than demand punishment and call it justice? Will we follow the way of service when all around us bids us to choose power?

Which Jesus will Pilate and the crowds choose? We’ll know in a minute. Which Jesus will we follow? That question will take a lifetime to answer.

Dear God, draw us away from the path of power and violence and teach us to walk the road of service, love, and peace as we endeavor to follow Jesus who is called the Messiah. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2021

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.”

MATTHEW 27:19

This is a detail unique to Matthew. No other gospel says anything about Pilate’s wife. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, there is no historical record or description of Mrs. Pilate either.

Not only that, but it’s such an odd detail. In the middle of his time with Jesus, as he weighs the fate of two men on the scales of Roman justice, Pilate receives word from his wife that she didn’t sleep well. (He probably knew that, of course. Or perhaps he’s the kind of guy that sleeps so deeply he hardly notices if his wife is troubled.) Not only that, but she has been burdened all day by the memory of that dream.

In any event, burdened by her dream, Pilate’s wife notifies her husband – really, warns him – to have nothing to do with Jesus. Except she doesn’t just call him Jesus, but rather “that man.” And not just “that man,” but “that innocent man.”

So there it is: Pilate now has two reasons to use the power entrusted to him to release Jesus. He himself suspects that the religious authorities brought Jesus before him out of jealousy, and how his wife shares her troubling dream and also perceives and names him as innocent.

It’s an odd detail, but it does rather stack the deck in Jesus’ favor – or at least it should – in Pilate’s eyes. So what, Matthew wants us to wonder, will Pilate do?

Dear God, when we see the right thing to do, grant us the courage to do it. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 20, 2021

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 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 should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

MATTHEW 27:20-23

It's vital to keep in mind that Matthew writes to make his case, over and against the Jewish religious leaders of his own day, that Jesus is indeed the Jewish messiah. Moreover, the church for whom Matthew writes lives in an increasingly Gentile world.

Scholars believe that Matthew wrote his Gospel in the early 80s, about fifty years after the events it narrates and ten years after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. After losing its Temple, Judaism defined its identity more narrowly, which probably contributed to some of the conflicts it had with those Jews who believed in Jesus. In response, Matthew consistently connects the actions and events of Jesus' life to Scripture and portrays the forebears of his opponents – the Pharisees of Jesus' day – in a poor light. Moreover, in the wake of the Roman destruction of the Temple, Matthew is careful to portray the Roman characters in this story – including Pilate – in a better light.

In this scene, we have the Pharisees described as scheming against Jesus and persuading the crowd to release Barabbas, while Matthew describes Pilate as trying to find some reason to release Jesus. While that is historically unlikely, it functions as an effective narrative device by which to heighten the drama and tension of the scene and shift much of the responsibility for Jesus' death from the Romans to the Jews.

Matthew isn't alone in making these moves, but on the whole, and as we'll soon see, he offers a rather harsher take on the religious authorities than the other three Evangelists. While that might be understandable when Christianity was a fledgling religion and struggling for its existence, the consequences these decisions have had through the centuries have, at times, been devastating. And so we must read this part of the story with both great care and great faith.

Dear God, remind us that you chose to offer your Word to us through the human words of faithful but fallible people. Encourage us, therefore, to read the Bible with care and faith, holding all that we read to the standard of love and mercy set by the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

TRANSFIGURATION: RESILIENCE

Matthew 17:1-13

PASTOR RUUD PREACHING

THE LENTEN PRAYER

Glorious God,

*Enlighten and guide us through the mountains and valleys of life to be disciples of resilience and grace.
May we, like Peter, James and John, learn to see life in new ways and be changed by Your Living Word.*

In Jesus' name, Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 22, 2021

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

MATTHEW 27:24-26

Earlier, we tried to understand the situation of Matthew and his community and put into historical context his tendency to skew the narrative to favor Pilate and place the responsibility for Jesus' death on the Jewish people. In these verses, we reach the low point of this endeavor.

Not only does Matthew portray Pilate as declaring Jesus' innocence, he then portrays the crowd as shouting, "His blood be on us and our children!" That line doesn't appear in any of the other Gospels, and we don't know what impact it made on his original audience. We do know, however, that it has been used through the centuries to justify anti-Semitism and to cover a multitude of horrific acts. These are harsh, even awful words that, I believe, make God cringe, yet they come in the middle of a story that tells of God's unconditional love.

But perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. Faith and faithlessness. Beauty and ugliness. Grace and sin. These are all part and parcel of the human condition. And so while God rejoices in what is good and right in our lives and the world, God also grieves over what is wrong and how we hurt each other, at times unwittingly.

And that is most likely the case here. Matthew seeks to witness to the significance of Jesus' death, a death he believes reveals God's love and forgiveness for all the world. And I firmly believe he never intended his characterization to do such harm.

So we should give thanks for his witness and repent the damage part of it has done. Actually, we can do more than that. We can stand with any who are persecuted for their beliefs, whether they agree with ours or not. We can defend the weak and vulnerable even and especially when it puts us at risk. And we can offer our care and protection for all who are oppressed for whatever reason. Because these people – the persecuted, the weak, the vulnerable, and the oppressed – are precisely those for whom Jesus came to live, die, and rise again.

Dear God, forgive us when we have hurt or neglected others because they are different from us, and use us to care for all those in need. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 23, 2021

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

MATTHEW 27:27-31

The great irony of this scene is that the soldiers, in seeking to mock Jesus, only repeat the action he has already taken. First, they dress him in a robe as if he were a king, twist thorns into a crown to place on his head, and laud him with sarcastic cheers as "king of the Jews." Then, after spitting on him and striking him in order to humiliate him, they strip him of his raiment and put ordinary clothes back on. Now consider: is this not precisely the dramatic movement of Jesus' whole life?

At the beginning of his Gospel, St. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1) Yet this eternal Word, "became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14), putting off his kingly and eternal attire to take on our flesh. The Apostle Paul agrees, writing: "though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).

The physical humiliation that Jesus suffers at the hand of these soldiers is immense. At the same time, it only mirrors his decision to forsake his divinity to experience our lives: the hopes and hurts, the dreams and disappointments, the ups and downs of what it means to be human.

The soldiers, of course, know nothing of this. They seek only to taunt, hurt, and humiliate. But Matthew from the beginning has described Jesus as Emmanuel, "God with us." And in Jesus' embrace of the cross we see just how far God will go to show us that this God is, indeed, with us always, everywhere, and to the very end.

Dear God, as we contemplate the cross, remind us that you took on our lot and our life that we might know and share your profound love. In Jesus' name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2021

*As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read,
“This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”*

MATTHEW 27:32-37

We know next to nothing about Simon of Cyrene, only that on that fateful Friday nearly two thousand years ago he bore another man's burden and cross even as that man would bear the burden of the world and hang on the cross for the sake of all people.

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. The victim, first impaled upon the wood and then hung up as a spectacle, most often died not of the wounds themselves but often from asphyxiation or dehydration, possibly several days later. Horrible... by design. This was Rome's way, you see, of making a statement, of warning all who might journey near the condemned of the fate of those who oppose the Empire.

Yet amid this humiliating and horrible death, a moment of truth. The sign put over him reads that his man, Jesus, is king of the Jews. Except it's not just a sign, it's an accusation, the warrant and rationale for his execution. Jesus is executed as an enemy of the state. The claims made – whether by his followers or opponents or both – that he is king, lord, and messiah – have brought upon him the vengeance of an empire that will brook no defiance and countenance no counter claims of authority.

But in that accusation, a second truth. This man – humiliated, beaten, scourged, crucified – nevertheless is not defeated. Or rather, in his defeat we see God's victory revealed. And it is the victory not of brute might but rather sacrificial love. In the face of Rome's violence, God offers forgiveness. In the face of brutality, God offers mercy. In the face of injustice, God offers God's own Son who, dying, grants the possibility of life, life both more abundant and eternal than his crucifiers could ever imagine.

Dear God, when we witness these two men – one bearing the other's cross; the other bearing both the sin and hope of the world – grant us the capacity to see your profound love... for everyone. In Jesus' name, Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2021

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

MATTHEW 27:38-44

Matthew paints a picture of absolute abandonment, isolation, and rejection. People who once may have beseeched him for healing or listened to him preach now deride him. His opponents scoff at him. Even the bandits crucified alongside him taunt him. He is utterly and completely alone.

Consider, though, the taunt hurled at him by his accusers: “Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.” At face value, it actually makes a certain amount of sense. When these religious leaders think about God, they think about power. Truth be told, most of us do. Why not, then, expect someone from God to wield that kind of power and to look to God for divine intervention?

I suspect we’ve often prayed similar sentiments. Perhaps not “come down from the cross,” but what about, “save my child...,” or “heal my disease...,” or “fix my relationship...,” or “help me find a job... and I’ll believe.” This is what gods do, right? They wield their extraordinary power to change things, fix things, order things according to their design and desire.

But not this God. For had Jesus come down from the cross he would have rejected, not just his suffering, but also his incarnational mission to take on our lot and our life completely and fully. For we, too, feel at times utterly alone and abandoned. We, too, suffer greatly and unjustly. We, too, know disappointment and betrayal. And so the God we know in Jesus is not out simply to fix things, let alone order them to God’s desire, but to redeem them.

And so Jesus does not come down. He stays there, so that we might know the depth of God’s love, mercy, and understanding.

Dear God, when we come to you in prayer, let us come confident that you know us truly and deeply and love us completely. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 2021

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

MATTHEW 27:45-46

The verses up to now have depicted Jesus' increasing isolation. First his disciples betray, deny, and flee him; then the crowds turn on him, the authorities condemn and crucify him, and his opponents taunt him. Jesus has been stripped of all the normal human supports and encouragement even as his clothes were stripped and divided between his executioners.

In recognition of this – or perhaps expressing the last element of his utter isolation – Jesus cries aloud in agony, voicing his despair that even God has turned away. And as if nature adds its assent to Jesus' assessment, the sky itself turns dark.

Over the years, Christians have tried at times to explain away this cry of despair. Noting that it is part of a Psalm, some have seen it as a sign of faith. He is praying a Psalm, after all, a Psalm that after voicing discouragement turns to hope. But I believe that is a huge, unnecessary, and ultimately unhelpful interpretative leap to make.

It seems far more likely that Jesus, steeped in Scripture, finds in it words to express his sense of utter isolation. Further, who says that despair is absent from the life of faith? The last thing one needs when sinking into despair, quite frankly, is guilt. So rather than hold on to Jesus as a model of unyielding faith, why not instead see in Jesus one who understands and accepts our moments of despair because he himself has experienced them?

I think we resist Jesus' cry – the only thing Matthew reports him as saying from the cross – because it challenges our ideas not only about faith – faith should not despair – but also about God – God is a God of strength. If Jesus is God, we may wonder, how could he despair?

But that overlooks the humanity of Jesus and the commitment of God to take on our lot and our life fully, even to the point of death and despair. And so in this moment we see Jesus at the extreme end of human experience, and thereby know that there is nothing we ourselves can feel that God will not understand, indeed, already understands because Jesus experienced it.

Dear God, whatever we may experience, you have also experienced. Whatever we may feel, you have felt. Remind us that you understand us fully and love us completely, that we may reach out in understanding and love to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 27, 2021

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

MATTHEW 27:47-49

Tragedy has become spectacle. If there earlier had been any expressions of sympathy or even horror from passers-by, those are gone, having been replaced by exclamations of perverse curiosity. Jesus' cry of despair to God is misunderstood by some nearby to be an address to Elijah, and that pricks their curiosity. Will Elijah come? Might Jesus of Nazareth be the Chosen One of God after all?

Hoping to see something worthy to tell others about later, they dampen a sponge with wine and extend it to him so he can parch his thirst. They do this, of course, not from a desire to ease his suffering but in the hope that he will endure a little longer and they can see if Elijah will come.

I'd love to say that we have matured beyond such unholy fascination. But crowds still gather to watch the misery of others and news programs today graphically display our tragedies, often accompanied by background music, to increase ratings. In many and various ways, the old adage of the newspaper business still holds true: if it bleeds, it leads.

The Germans, who have a word for almost everything, also have a word for this: Schadenfreude, literally "harm-joy," describing the pleasure derived from watching the misfortune of others. But why? Why, that is, do we take comfort from the pain others endure.

Is it simply that extreme misery is extraordinary and so we watch because we are always drawn to spectacle? Is it our own fear of suffering that draws us irresistibly to the pain of others, strangely eager to have our fears confirmed? Or does seeing another person suffer give us a sense of comfort, that somehow no matter what our lot may be, at least we are not as unfortunate as those we watch?

Whatever the reason, it describes the depth of the cup of human feeling, emotion, limitation, and suffering that Jesus did not want to drink, but nevertheless did accept for the sake of the world. His tragedy has become a public spectacle, and that spectacle, in time, will become the sure sign of God's great love for us and all the world.

Dear God, when we look at the cross, remind us of your love, and when we see others suffering, propel us to help and comfort them. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2021

PALM SUNDAY

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

Matthew 21:1-11

PASTOR HAMMERSTEN PREACHING

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road as Jesus entered the city, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"—Matthew 21:8-9

THE LENTEN PRAYER

Dear God,

Remind us that the same crowds who cheered your Son as he entered Jerusalem would, just days later, call for his death. Give us the strength to honor Jesus not only with our words, but also with lives marked by love, courage, and compassion. In Jesus' name, Amen.



MONDAY, MARCH 29, 2021

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

MATTHEW 27:50-51

No doubt the onlookers waiting to see if Elijah would come to rescue Jesus were disappointed. For shortly after they offer Jesus sour wine he cries out one more time and then dies. It is such a terse description of the ending of Jesus' life that it takes us by surprise. Shouldn't there be more fanfare for the death of the rabbi who has been teaching and healing and preaching, the one who challenged civil and religious authorities and declared the coming kingdom of God, the one who some believed was God's promised Messiah?

But whatever the expectations of the crowds watching then (or now), Jesus only cries aloud one more time and dies. That's it.

Except that's not it. Immediately, the ramifications of Jesus' life and death are felt. There is an earthquake, splitting rocks wide open, testifying that nature itself bears witness to the significance of Jesus' death. And the curtain in the Temple is torn in two, representing the new way in which God would be active in the world.

The Jewish faith, you see, offered an interesting and complex picture of Israel's relationship to God. It was, on many levels, quite intimate. God, after all, had chosen Israel from among the nations and promised not only to save Israel but to save and bless all the world through Israel. At the same time, faithful Israelites knew that God is beyond us, that no one can see God and live.

The veil separating the "holy of holies" – the innermost part of the Temple believed to bear God's presence most fully – captured both of these dimensions. Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter to represent the nation before God and to renew and restore the intimate relationship God had with God's people. Yet precisely because God's presence was so totally Other, the rest of the year no one entered this sacred place, and even on Yom Kippur it was only the high priest.

So the tearing of the curtain signals that there is no more separation between God and humanity and that of the two dimensions of our relationship with God – divine intimacy and holy awe – intimacy wins out. God is now active in and accessible to the world in a new way, available to all... anytime... anywhere.

Dear God, you want nothing more than for us to know and share your love. Thank you for showing us that clearly in the death of Jesus. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 30, 2021

At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection, they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

MATTHEW 27:51-53

The consequences of Jesus' death are portrayed in Matthew's story as more immediate and more dramatic than in any of the other gospels. I have suggested that the tearing the Temple curtain represents the unleashing of God's presence into all the world and our complete access to God's mercy through Christ. But the rending of the curtain may also be a visible sign of the anguish that accompanies the death of this innocent. Precisely because he is the Son of Man and bearer of the Kingdom, when he is put to death by the Romans the sky goes dark, the earth convulses in grief and outrage, and the Temple itself is wrought by anguish.

Jesus' death is an offense against creation, Matthew suggests. It runs against the natural order. And in response, the natural order itself is disrupted, as some of the saints who had been laid to rest awoken and are called out of their tombs and raised to new life. It is as if even the normal rules of life and death no longer hold once the Son of God is not welcomed by humanity but instead put to death.

But what is experienced only as disruption on Friday afternoon becomes the birth pangs for a new creation, a new way of relating to God and each other. Come Easter, there is a new order, a new world altogether, one governed by love and grace and forgiveness. And so the saints that were raised on Friday suspending the natural order now bear witness to the fact that death is no match for the life-giving power of God's grace and love.

No one expected this. Friday was meant to be the end of the story, and so the whole earth grieves Jesus' tragic demise. But God takes what we believe is dead and offers new life, transforming the ending Jesus' opponents had devised into a transition, a birthing of a new world where the dead live, the lame walk, the tired receive rest, the blind see, and all the people live in the hope of life with God.

Dear God, grant us faith to believe that with you all things are possible. In Jesus' name, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31, 2021

Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

MATTHEW 27:54

This is perhaps the most extraordinary moment in the Passion narrative. Consider: the Roman soldiers – paid killers responsible for enforcing Roman rule wherever they might be sent – have just executed Jesus and, at the moment of his dying, suddenly confess him as God’s own Son.

Why this change of heart, perspective, and life? We cannot know. Perhaps it was witnessing the humility of his dying. Perhaps it was watching the extremes to which Jesus would go in order to confess God’s coming kingdom. Perhaps they are convinced by the outburst and disorder of the natural world? Perhaps it was that in this moment of absolute dejection and desolation they perceive the God who is “with us” in every trial. Perhaps....

We do not know.

What we do know is that Jesus’ death made an impression, caused an effect, and changed lives even where one would least expect it.

And it still does.

Though sometimes we forget it, the word of the Gospel regularly mends relationships, draws people from addiction, turns around lives, and creates hope. We cannot control it or predict it, but we can count on being surprised by just where God’s light shines to change hearts and lives. Even at the executioner’s ground, as hardened warriors see in their deadly craft the revelation of God’s unexpected and unmerited mercy and grace. And even in our lives, in those moments when we were all but convinced God had forgotten about us. Jesus’ death and resurrection make a difference. Then... and still today.

Dear God, open our eyes to see your grace at work, even and especially where we least expect it. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

MATTHEW 27:55-56

Matthew is quite tactful. He writes only that, “Many women were also there.” “There,” of course, is the site of Jesus’ crucifixion. “There” is within earshot of Jesus’ cries of desperation and agony mingled with the taunts of passersby. “There” is right in the middle of the rock-splitting earthquake and darkness. And “there” is among the executioners who just put Jesus to death and now wondered if he might be the Son of God.

Many women were there, among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, as well as the unnamed mother of the sons of Zebedee. These faithful women had followed Jesus; listened to him teach; given over, in at least two cases, their sons to Jesus’ mission; and more. And now they were “there,” at the crucifixion, with Jesus to the end.

And it wasn’t just these three. They are only three representatives that Matthew identifies as part of a larger company of “many” women. Jesus is surrounded in his last moments by these many faithful women.

But no men. They had fled. One betrayed, another denied, and all deserted.

On this day of death and despair, Jesus is not alone. He is surrounded by these many faithful women. At the moment when Jesus believes himself to be abandoned even by God, he is not alone, as he is surrounded by these many faithful women. These women stayed by Jesus to the end and, as we’ll see, become the first witnesses to the resurrection. They are, beyond any doubt, Jesus’ most faithful disciples, and that deserves our attention.

Dear God, thank you for these faithful women who did not shy away from the horror of the crucifixion but kept Jesus company to the end and then were the first to bear witness to the resurrection. And thank you for all the many faithful women who have proclaimed the good news ever since. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 2021

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

MATTHEW 27:57-61

The next two scenes would appear to close the tragic story of Jesus. After the great drama of his trial, the chilling spectacle of his crucifixion, and the brutal climax of his cry of desolation and death very little is left except to bury him.

Matthew's story, however, breaks literary tradition with a second climax that is to come. Except that it's not as much a climax as it is a reversal, an upending of the outcome of the natural climax and the opening up of a whole other story. But we get ahead of ourselves. Before Matthew leads us to this reversal, he first yields an important clue about the shape of Jesus' ministry and mission both up to this point in the story and in the new chapter that is to come.

Joseph of Arimathea appears in all four Gospel stories, yet we know very little about him. I've wondered if Matthew, by including him in the story, wants to remind us that while we often focus on "the twelve" disciples of Jesus, there were many, many more. Like the women. Like Joseph. And like countless others.

If so, then it may be helpful to remember that it is these other disciples who stay with Jesus to the end, boldly approach Pilate for Jesus' body, bury him, and care for his crucified body. The twelve, ironically, are nowhere to be found in these last scenes; rather, it is all the other disciples who see Jesus through to the end of his earthly journey in small ways and large.

Might we see ourselves in these other faithful disciples? For fidelity, it seems to me, is expressed most often not in grand or glorious gestures but in the small things, the minor acts of kindness and courage that can occupy any ordinary life every single day and slowly but surely usher in and witness to the coming Kingdom of God.

Dear God, keep us faithful in the little things, knowing that when done in faith, there are no little things. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, APRIL 3, 2021

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead,’ and the last deception would be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.” So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

MATTHEW 27:62-66

The request for guards to be posted at Jesus’ tomb is another detail unique to Matthew. It seems likely that one of the rumors that plagued Matthew’s community was, in fact, the charge that Jesus’ disciples had stolen his body in order to claim resurrection. And so Matthew deals with that via his narrative by sharing the account of the guard detail.

Once again, the Romans come off in a slightly better light than do the Jewish religious authorities, as it is the Pharisees who request the guard at the tomb and Pilate who, rather than send his own soldiers, tells them to see to the matter themselves.

But this brief scene serves another purpose, too, as it sets up the climatic reversal to come. For Pilate commands them to make the tomb “as secure as you can.” And they do. But, as readers of the gospel both then and now know, no human effort can prevail against God’s intention to resurrect Christ and renew humanity and, indeed, the cosmos, by defeating death once and for all.

The Pharisees in this story are neither the first nor last to attempt to take matters into their own hands, to secure their fate and future by their own means, and to order the world as they desire. We see such attempts everywhere, not least in our own lives and homes and events of the day. But now as then, such efforts finally are futile, for whether noble or self-serving they are all bounded by the mortality that is ours as children of Adam and Eve. For this reason, God enters into our story not to fix us or change us or even improve us, but to redeem and resurrect us. Jesus, as the Apostle Paul says, is the first fruits of this redemption, the sign and promise of all that is to come.

Dear God, we give you thanks that your will to love and redeem all will not be thwarted...even by our best efforts. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 2021

EASTER SUNDAY

THE RESURRECTION

Matthew 28:1-10

PASTOR LOSE PREACHING

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised!"—Matthew 28:5-6

THE LENTEN PRAYER

Dear God,

At the resurrection of your Son, the heavens opened and the earth shook with awe. Let us similarly give witness to the power of your love and grace to defeat all things, even death, with lives of mercy and compassion. In Jesus' name, Amen.

