

WHO IS JESUS?



MOUNT OLIVET LUTHERAN CHURCH
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2023



INTRODUCTION

This Lent at Mount Olivet, we are trying to understand Jesus better. That may sound a little basic, as Jesus is the foundation of our faith. But perhaps for that very reason, we often don't give much thought to how we think about him. Or, more to the point, we may not give a lot of thought to how our understanding of Jesus shapes our sense of our faith, of God, of church, even of ourselves. For instance, we may speak of being "disciples of Jesus," but what does that mean to us on a daily basis? Or, perhaps when we think of Jesus, doctrinal titles come to mind: Son of God, Messiah, or Savior. But what do those titles mean? Or, again trying to get to where the rubber hits the road, what do those kinds of titles tell us about Jesus that might make a difference in our day to day life.

And so this Lent, we're asking the question, "who is Jesus?" hoping to renew our faith in, and commitment to follow the one we confess as Savior and Lord. On Sundays, we are looking at stories from the Gospel of John where Jesus talks about himself with metaphors like "good shepherd" and "light of the world." On Wednesdays, we have chosen various artistic representations of Jesus to help us imagine him more fully and diversely. And in our Lenten devotions, we are exploring the various names given to Jesus across the Scriptures to deepen our understanding of his relevance to our lives today. Some of these names are ascribed to Jesus by his followers. For instance, Matthew, author of one of our four Gospels, records an angel naming Jesus as "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." And some of those names were used by the prophets of the Old Testament. Isaiah, for instance, describes the coming Messiah as the "Prince of Peace" and "Wonderful Counselor." "What might these names tell us about Jesus, about how believers across the centuries have understood him and, most importantly, what he might mean to us today?" I hope you enjoy this exploration as much as your pastors have enjoyed writing it. Together, we can come to know Jesus again, anew, and afresh!

— PASTOR LOSE



ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2023

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'

JOHN 8:12

Last year during Holy Week, I received a beautiful gift in the mail. Four years earlier at Easter-time, my dad died. When a loved one dies, you think about all of the things you'll miss about the person - the funny habits, the personality traits, the lessons he taught. One of the universal memories shared about my dad was his absolute love of light. He strung Christmas lights throughout his office, our home, and yard. He placed solar lights along our walkways and had a flashlight for any occasion. He absolutely loved light.

Well, as I mentioned, last year at Easter time, I received a package at Mount Olivet from one of my dad's high school friends – four years after his death. It was filled with an Easter card, a One-Year Bible and some strings of colorful LED lights. In the Easter card, this man told me that during a tough time in his life, my dad gave him a One-Year Bible, and encouraged him to read it a bit each day. This friend wanted me to know that this encounter changed his life. He also included the packages of lights because he knew that it represented more than just my dad's love of light; it was a reminder that Jesus, the true light of the world, conquered death, and that my dad was right there with Jesus, too.

Jesus proclaims, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Jesus doesn't promise that the road of life will be easy, but he does promise that in good times and in bad, we can and should turn to him, for he is the light that no darkness can overcome. This is good news today and always.

*Dear God, thank you for being the light of life, the light no darkness can overcome.
Amen.*

– PASTOR FREEMAN



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2023

THE GATE

So again, Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you. I am the gate for the sheep.'

JOHN 10:7

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most comforting in all of scripture. We picture Him with a shepherd's hook in hand, leading his flock to feed in the pasture, and then bringing them safely home again at night. Guiding, protecting, and keeping a watchful eye on the horizon. "I am the gate," Jesus says, "whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

You know that feeling when you've had a really long day, a day that didn't go at all as you'd hoped, and you finally pull into your driveway and walk through the door? There is something about closing the door on your day, turning the lock, and then walking into the warmth and comfort of home, that brings such a sense of peace and calm. Now picture Jesus, the Good Shepherd, opening that gate/door, arms outstretched, welcoming you home.

Or how about the feeling when a big door closes? When the person you thought was "the one" decides to leave. Or you're getting the feeling that your boss has a different, much earlier, date in mind for your retirement than you do. Or when you feel a long-held dream slipping right through your fingers. That, my friends, is when you'll find Jesus, standing at the gate, wildly waving His arms, "Over here! Over here! Look! Come through this door! That other path wasn't my plan for you at all! I've got a future in store for you that is so much better than you ever could have imagined! I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope!" And that's the best surprise of all.

Let us pray: Thank you, Lord, for being our Shepherd. For standing at the gate, guiding, protecting, welcoming. You know exactly what we need, so much more than we do. You who sees the big picture. Comfort us and help us to remember to listen for your still, small, voice, trusting that, if we but listen, your voice will lead us home. Amen.

—PASTOR HAMMERSTEN



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2023

GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

HEBREWS 4:14

In first-century Israel, the great high priest was the lone figure permitted to enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, and only on one day out of the year (the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur), and only after making special preparations for more than a week prior in order to be ritually clean and piously focused. On that most holy of days in that most holy of places, the great high priest was tasked with the great responsibility of presenting sacrifices before the Ark of the Covenant. This, the people hoped, would wash away all their sins and compel the LORD to write their names in the Book of Life.

So what does it mean for Christians that the author of Hebrews would describe Jesus as our “great high priest”? To me, the significance of this name or title is found in the other descriptors paired with it. Who is our great high priest? He is the one who passed through the heavens to join us in our earthly journey. He is the very Son of God! The one who intercedes for us before the throne of the Lord is the same one who sits on the throne. And so, the author continues, “let us hold fast to our confession.” Of course! How could we not? Our great high priest is so deserving of our trust. We have no reason to fear; we are in good hands.

God, remind us every day that Jesus has washed away the stain of sin once and for all. Teach us to trust in your son and encourage us to confess our faith in him with great joy. Amen.

— PASTOR DIXON



SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2023

THE LIVING STONE

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,' and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

1 PETER 2:4-8

A living stone. It's kind of a weird metaphor, if you ask me. For instance, it's one thing to say Jesus is the cornerstone. I can wrap my head around that. I imagine the immense, strong, stone which serves as the support for an entire building; thus, Christ as the foundation of faith and life.

But the writer of 1st Peter takes it further – a living stone! Peter even says we, too, become like living stones! What does that mean?

Pondering it recalled a memory from years ago of visiting Sugarloaf Cove on the North Shore of Lake Superior during a particularly blustery day in November. The waves were immense, powerful to see, and also to hear. There were the sounds of wind and waves, but also a curious thundering, and not from the clouds. Upon closer inspection, I found the source. The waves were so strong they were stirring up huge rocks on the lake bottom – some easily more than a foot in diameter and surely weighing 20-50lbs each! They tumbled and rolled over each other under the water as the waves broke. Those stones looked alive, swarming and tumbling and continuing to shape the shore.

Peter certainly means that Jesus is the rock of faith, the sure foundation of God's presence and power. But I think he also means that this rock is not stagnant or rigid. It's alive. God's love is flowing, dynamic, and active. Jesus moves and lives along with us. So, too, Jesus lives in us, so that we can even become "like living stones," flowing boulders of God's powerful love for others. Amen to that, and rock and roll on, you living stones!

Living stone, shatter our rigidness of heart and mind to make us flowing and active in the present gift of your dynamic love, in Jesus' name. Amen.

–PASTOR RUUD



First Sunday in Lent

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

STREAMING: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 6:25-35

"I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE"



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2023

WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

ISAIAH 9:6

This past fall, I rushed into my daughter's elementary school to pick her up and stopped dead in my tracks. On the wall prominently displayed behind glass were a dozen creative drawings from third-grade students. Each began with the phrase, "I dream of becoming . . .," and ended with things like "an artist, a math teacher, an ice skater, a therapist." The latter depicted a comfy room with a couch and chair, books, toys, flowers, and a feelings chart. I smiled because it conveyed in vivid colors the support, intimacy, and care people experience in therapeutic contexts.

The prophet Isaiah depicts the Messiah, whom we believe is Jesus, as a Wonderful Counselor. As such, Jesus is first and foremost a comforting presence. He is completely with us whether or not we feel his presence or hear his voice. Unlike human counselors, Jesus is present with us at all times and all places through the Holy Spirit. We are never alone or left to our own devices.

Secondly, Jesus is a compassionate listener. Because Jesus is the Word of God, it's easy to focus on the power of his words and forget that he listens deeply to all creation. He hears our hopes and joys and our perplexity and pain. As a result, he is moved in the depths of his being to act on our behalf: Saving us. Healing us. Encouraging us. Strengthening us. Reminding us that we belong to God and to one another. Jesus even hears that which we cannot utter, those unspoken cries of our hearts and the longings too deep for words.

As our Wonderful Counselor, Jesus also is our wise guide. When we read scripture, worship, and pray together, Jesus gives us insight for living well, for making decisions big and small, and navigating challenging times. In other words, Jesus is the counselor we need every day.

Dear God, comfort us, hear us, and guide us today through your Son Jesus whose counsel we are eager to receive. Amen.

—REV. DR. THERESA LATINI



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2023

LAMB OF GOD

The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

JOHN 1:29

At various points in his Gospel, St. John seems to be retelling one of the central stories of Israel: that of the Passover when God delivers Israel from their slavery in Egypt. After sending multiple plagues upon the Egyptians to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave, God sends a final and terrible plague: the Angel of Death, sent to kill the firstborn children of all the homes in Egypt. Before this terrible occurrence, Moses instructs the Israelites to slaughter a lamb and prepare a meal to signify their departure. The blood of the lamb is used to mark their doorposts, and when the Angel of Death approaches it “passes over” – hence the name – the homes of the Israelites. This is likely the story referenced when John the Baptist greets Jesus with the words, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

But how does Jesus take away our sin? One popular conception is that, because God is holy, God must punish sin, and so Jesus substitutes himself for us and receives the punishment we deserve. But this doesn't line up with the story John is re-telling. The Passover lamb wasn't slaughtered to appease an angry God, but rather was used to mark the door of God's chosen people. The Israelites were not perfect, nor had they done anything to merit God rescuing them. Rather, God rescued and redeemed the Israelites out of love. So also, we are “marked” as Jesus' disciples in baptism and so God rescues and redeems us in love also. This is the work of the lamb of God, to show us just how much God loves us – enough to die on a cross – and to remind us of God's intent and work to rescue, redeem, and forgive us always.

Dear God, thank you for taking our sin seriously and also taking it away, giving us a new chance to live in grace. Amen.

– PASTOR LOSE



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 2023

ALPHA AND OMEGA

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

REVELATION 1:8, 22:13

I've been thinking a lot lately about beginnings and endings as I have been giving thanks to God for the lives of some of our members and commending them to God's care and keeping. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. "I am the Alpha and the Omega" is a way of saying that God was at the beginning, is now, and God will be at the end of all things. God's promise is that even now, in the midst of suffering, persecution, and distress, God is with God's people, comforting them, and giving them renewed strength and hope. For me the good news of the Christian faith is offered in this majestic vision in Revelation: God is present and at work among us, "wiping the tears from our eyes, making all things new, until the day finally comes when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, the new Jerusalem. Death will be no more; mourning, crying, and pain will be no more, for the former things have passed away." Living our lives with this kind of faith and hope can make all the difference in who we are, and how we deal with life.

Gracious God, our beginning and our end, though we are separated from those gone before us, we are still drawn and held near to them, by precious memories and the never-ending, ever-binding nature of love. Be with us in our pain and sorrow, wiping away our tears, and giving us hope in your victory over death through the cross of Jesus. Amen.

- PASTOR MACLEAN



THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2023

SUFFERING SERVANT

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

ISAIAH 53:1-4

I love this name of Jesus. I also love the passage from whence it comes. It points to the inescapable truth about what God has done in Jesus, and it doesn't make sense. At the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, many saw Jesus as a failed messiah. He didn't meet folks' expectations of what he was supposed to do and be. More than two thousand years later, it's still hard to believe what we hear about Jesus. Why would God choose to come, suffer and die for us, for you? It's unbelievable. But it's true.

Jesus suffers all of the insults and indignities of our humanity, he shares all of it with us, so that we might have the name that rightly belongs to him, sons and daughters of God.

Dearest Lord Jesus, for the life you lived that gives us life, we give you thanks. Amen.

—PASTOR CIESLIK



FRIDAY, MARCH 3, 2023

THE TRUE VINE

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.

JOHN 15:1

Years ago, I learned something very life-giving vines and branches. My husband and I were newly married living in our first house. We thought it would be fun to plant lots of fruits and vegetables, so that's what we did. We even planted grape vines on the side of our garage, which was very close to the fence dividing our neighbor's yard from ours. Our next-door neighbor was a meticulous lawn keeper. My husband and I were a bit more on the "let-it-grow" side of things. Well, as the grapevines grew, they became a bit more unruly by the day. And I became more self-conscious of their unruliness, as well. So, one day, when I was particularly ashamed of our wild vines, I decided to cut them down and untangle the parts of the vine that wrapped themselves in the fence and extended into our neighbor's yard. The clean cut made me feel quite good until I realized my pruning efforts simply accelerated the growth and developed even more abundant fruit.

It taught me quite a bit about our lives of faith, especially this verse about the true vine and our Father being the vine-grower. How often do we, as humans, try to cut back on the things that we think make us ugly or unlovable? How often do we try to impress others with our abilities and efforts?

The truth of our lives is that God is the vine-grower, and despite our efforts to get rid of the parts we deem ugly, there is nothing that will separate us from the vine. When we try to control the things that we find weak or unlovable, we quickly learn that God finds them beautiful, and multiplies the fruit. God's kingdom is grown and most clearly revealed in places of vulnerability. Jesus died on a cross, and as we know, the fruitfulness of Jesus' life is beyond human measure.

Dear God, you are the vine and we are the branches. Help us to see the fruits of your love in the places we least expect. Amen.

—PASTOR FREEMAN



SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 2023

THE WAY

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'

JOHN 14:6A

Are there any more comforting words? More families choose these words while planning a funeral than any other in the Bible. And with good reason: these were the final words Jesus spoke to his disciples before he died. His final, parting words.

Can you even imagine? You know your death is just around the corner, you're about to leave your children, your friends, those who you love most in all the world! You've got just a minute or two to sum up everything that's on your heart. So what does Jesus do when he finds himself in that situation? He doesn't lament that he's going to die, or question why. He doesn't say he's scared or try to bargain his way out of what lies ahead of him. Jesus simply says: Don't worry! It's going to be OK. I'll come back for you! We'll be together again. I promise.

And when his friend Thomas wants, craves, and needs more information and asks "How can we know the way, Lord?" Jesus simply responds "I am the way." No lengthy to-do list, no prerequisites, no do-this-or-else demands. Just pure love and grace. Don't worry, I'll be back for you. Have faith! Believe.

*Dear Lord, over and over again you remind us to not be afraid, that you are with us now and always. When our brains start to spin, and we can't seem to find a way around our problems, help us to remember that YOU are always the way and the truth and the life.
Amen.*

—PASTOR HAMMERSTEN



Second Sunday in Lent

SUNDAY, MARCH 5, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

STREAMING: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 8:12-20

"I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"



MONDAY, MARCH 6, 2023

MEDIATOR

*For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human.*

1 TIMOTHY 2:5

When it comes right down to it, it's you and Jesus. That's what this verse says to me. If you were to stand before the proverbial pearly gates, it's Jesus who will guide you through and bring you home. It's not your favorite Christian author. It's not the pope. It's not even Pastor Kalland. Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and us.

And aren't we lucky?! Because Jesus, in this role-unlike so many who wish they had it--only seeks to bring us closer to God, never drive us away. In Martin Luther's day, he was afraid that the Popes and priests were placing themselves between God and the people and using that assumed position to dangle and withhold grace. "If you don't follow our rules and do as we say, we won't let you take the Lord's Supper and thus you're excluded from the grace of God."

Many still think like this five centuries after Luther's time. Humans often confuse our fellowship with God's grace. "If you're not with me, God's not with you!" This verse is a good reminder for me that people, churches, and theological traditions with whom I might disagree are blessedly not dependent on me to vouch for them in God's presence. They have just as much right to Jesus' mercy as I do (none), and Jesus' death did just as much for them as it did for me (everything).

*God, we thank you for the gift of your son. Remind us that no one can take his place, and
no one else can take us home. Amen.*

—PASTOR DIXON



TUESDAY, MARCH 7, 2023

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

JOHN 6:35

I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament twenty years ago in a small church in upstate New York. I remember the sermon preached by one of my seminary professors, and I remember the celebration afterward. Mostly I remember tearing pieces of bread and handing them to friends, family, and colleagues for the first time. As I repeated the words, "This is Jesus' body broken for you," tears began to roll down my face. My voice started to crack. Each person present at that worship was not only precious to me but also lavishly loved by God. Each was being fed by God with the Bread of Life.

Every day we need physical sustenance and spiritual sustenance alike. We need health and purpose and community and rest. We need peace and joy. We need faith in God's love for us. We need hope that God will comfort and guide us. We need love bigger than all that assails us and our loved ones. As the Bread of Life, Jesus feeds us with all this, and more.

Jesus sustains us with his own life. Every time we partake of communion, we are reminded that we are nourished, body and soul, with the very life of Christ. Often, when I serve the Lord's Supper, I hand people a big piece of bread. Because Jesus isn't stingy. He doesn't throw us a few crumbs and then walk away. Instead, he sets before us an abundant and delicious feast.

All are welcome at God's feast. There are enough seats at the table for us all. Just as Jesus miraculously fed five-thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread, so he feeds the whole world. He is the Bread of Life who gives us all that we need daily and then inspires us to tear off a piece of God's goodness and pass it around.

Dear God, nourish us with the life of your Son Jesus Christ in whom all our needs are satisfied daily. Amen.

—REV. DR. THERESA LATINI



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8, 2023

PRINCE OF PEACE

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

ISAIAH 9:6

There's a mural I remember seeing upon the beginning of the Russian invasion into Ukraine last year. It depicted armored tanks in a line advancing to war, yet they were being thwarted by an unexpected foe. Marching on top of them like stepping stones and leaving them behind in a crumpled heap was a little girl, perhaps no older than three or four years old. She had no traditional weapon, only flowers and blue and yellow ribbons in her hair which flowed seamlessly behind her into the colors of the Ukrainian flag she held in her hands. It was powerful. I've thought of that mural often this past year upon hearing the atrocities of civilian apartments or hospitals being targeted and the horrifying reality that little ones like her have died as a result of our worldly evil and our human lust and greed for power.

This girl comes to mind thinking of how Jesus is characterized as the "Prince of Peace," because similarly to that girl in the mural, God's ultimate peace is born not of weapons or worldly might. It is a peace born in suffering all our sufferings, taking upon God's self all our atrocities. It is a peace that outlasts the war of our hearts. It is a peace which weeps with those who weep, and as the old prophet says, a peace which will finally wipe all tears from all the faces and beat our swords into ploughshares, not unlike a little girl's innocence and joy crushing all the hate of this old world. What wars are we still waging in ourselves and across the world today? The Prince of Peace marches on.

As we await the day when our weapons will be made into implements of cultivation and creation, bombard us with the peace which is only found in you, the holy Prince of Peace.

Amen.

—PASTOR RUUD



THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 2023

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

JOHN 8:12

I am a marathon driver. As my family knows all too well, if I am given the choice, I will get a drive done in a straight shot. Whether twelve hours or twenty – my record is thirty-four hours of straight driving – I prefer to avoid the cost and downtime of motels and get to my destination as quickly as possible (This is a confession, by the way, not a recommendation!)

All of which means that I've seen my fair share of sunrises while driving. And there is almost nothing quite like it. Whether you're heading east to west and the sun rises behind you, or west to east and it creeps above the horizon to which your heading, and whether it's near the beginning of your drive or the end, there is something so encouraging, so life-giving, about the sunrise. However tired you may be, the increasing sunlight dispels your weariness in the same way it dispels the darkness you've been traveling through.

This is the image that comes to mind when I hear Jesus describe himself as "the light of the world." It's not simply physical light making it easier to see things, but more of an emotional or spiritual light that creates in you a sense of hopefulness and possibility that stokes your belief that, with God's help, you can do anything. That's what God's promise of love and acceptance does – it creates energy and gives life so that you can face anything, not just enduring challenges and setbacks, but flourishing amid them.

In the Gospel of John – where this verse and our other Sunday readings this Lent are found – Jesus' main task is to reveal God's love, to make it plain, to show forth God's compassion and grace in word and deed. That's why Jesus has come, so that we may know and believe just how much God loves us and, through the power of the Son of God and Light of the World, take on anything.

Dear God, let your light and love shine in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

– PASTOR LOSE



FRIDAY, MARCH 10, 2023

GOOD SHEPHERD

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

JOHN 10:14-16

It seems to me that many Christians like to talk about who's in and who's out of the fold. And who gets to decide that. I think in John 10:16 Jesus is saying that his sheep may not always recognize one another. Don't you think we sometimes have trouble recognizing one another today? Even though Jesus recognizes us all? Some denominations won't recognize one another's baptisms. And some Christians don't recognize one another at the communion table. If you don't believe as I do, then you aren't a sheep that belongs in the fold. But the sheep need to realize that they aren't in charge of the fold. They never were. Jesus is.

I found this poem years ago and I love the poet's take on this reality:

"I was shocked, confused and bewildered as I entered heaven's door – not by the beauty of it all nor the lights or its décor. But it was the folks in heaven who made me sputter and gasp – the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics, and the trash. There stood the kid from 7th grade who swiped my lunch money twice. Next to him was my neighbor who never said anything nice. Herb, who I had certainly thought was rotting away in hell was sitting pretty on Cloud Nine and looking incredibly well. I nudged Jesus – "Hey, what's the deal? I'd love to hear your take. How'd all these sinners get in here? God must have made a mistake. And why's everyone so quiet, so somber? Give me a clue." "Hush, child," he said, "they're still in shock. No one thought they'd be seeing you!"

Lord, make us one flock and guide us as we follow your lead. May we be welcoming to others and dedicated to ministering to our community and world. We pray today in the name of Jesus Christ, our good shepherd. Amen.

– PASTOR MACLEAN



SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2023

SECOND ADAM

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

ROMANS 5:18-19

In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul flexes some of his theological muscle. And it's pretty fun to read. In the fifth chapter of Romans, Paul is making the case that just as one person, Adam, showed the human predilection and predisposition to choose life apart from God; so too one person, Jesus, shows God's commitment to restore all people to the right relationship with God. I love the idea of Jesus as the Second Adam, because Jesus is God's way of making second, third, and fourth chances available to each one of us.

We give you thanks O God for your victory over death and the grave. We give you thanks that the lamb who was slain has begun his reign in our hearts and our lives, Alleluia, Amen.

—PASTOR CIESLIK



The Third Sunday in Lent

SUNDAY, MARCH 12, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

STREAMING: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 10:11-18

"I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD"



MONDAY, MARCH 13, 2023

EMMANUEL

*‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’,
which means, ‘God is with us.’*

MATTHEW 1:23

Every week at confirmation, we remind the students that if they take nothing else from their years of faith formation, this statement will be enough: “Remember that you are a child of God; remember that you are loved; remember that you are not alone.”

We make the sign of the cross on our foreheads, we give ourselves a hug, and we reach out to another person in the room to remind ourselves of the constant presence of Jesus in our lives – individually and collectively.

It’s a promise Jesus brought when he was born – that God would be with us ALWAYS.

And yet loneliness is one of the signature feelings of what it means to be human.

Each one of us is unique, and what causes each of us to feel alone will be different. But God comes in the form of Jesus to assure us that we will never be alone. Emmanuel, God with us, is the promise received at Jesus’ birth.

Our lives are filled with all sorts of loneliness – singleness, grief, sorrow, guilt, shame. St. Augustine says it best when he says, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord.”

The promise of Emmanuel, God with us, invites us to return to the assurance that when we feel most alone, God is always at our side, our constant companion. Our hearts will be restless until we trust in this grace.

“Remember that you are a child of God; remember that you are loved; remember that you are not alone.” If you remember only one thing about your life of faith, that is enough. May you trust it and live the life God hopes for you, grounded in the companionship of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Dear God, You are Emmanuel, God with us. May we know and trust this promise as we live into the joy of your companionship. Amen.

– PASTOR FREEMAN



TUESDAY, MARCH 14, 2023

ONLY BEGOTTEN SON

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

JOHN 1:18

The first of our Gustavus group of girlfriends is about to have a grandbaby! To say we're all excited is an understatement! We're all following my goddaughter's pregnancy on a shared app and each day we receive an update on the baby's size. She went from being the size of a poppy seed to a blueberry, a strawberry to an orange, and today as I write this she's the size of a coconut! We celebrated recently as the mom-to-be opened packages filled with adorable little outfits, cozy pink blankets, and a basket filled with our favorite baby books. The miracle of a new baby girl joining our circle of faithful women fills us all with joy!

The first verses of the gospel of John share a similar story of anticipation. We read the poetic, hypnotizing introduction to the Son whose life will change the very nature of our own lives today! Jesus is described in these first verses as "The Word Became Flesh as the Word, the Light that shines in the darkness, and God the only Son."

As powerful and omniscient as these words sound to us today, knowing Jesus's story, imagine how they must have sounded to those hearing them for the first time! Jesus, the only begotten Son.

A few short weeks from now, we will all gather around the baptismal font. All of us who love this new little life will promise to nurture her in faith and in prayer so that she may learn to trust God. It gives me goosebumps to think of that holy moment being inextricably linked to the life and death of Jesus. The birth of two babes, the life of One sent by God to save the life of the other.

*Dear Lord, Your gift of life and salvation are greater than our human minds can even begin to grasp. You taught us that God is agape love, for those who came before us, and all those tiny little beings to follow. Thank you for the gifts of hope, baptism, and new life.
Amen.*

—PASTOR HAMMERSTEN



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 2023

FIRST FRUITS

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:20

For my money, this is the best reading for Easter morning worship in the whole Bible, better even than the actual stories of Easter morning found in the Gospels! A couple verses before this, the apostle Paul writes, “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain and your faith is in vain.” Quite apart from Christ, the stakes are certainly raised! If death has the last say, what business do we have talking about life, not to mention life everlasting? This is the context for the title Paul gives Jesus in this reading: “first fruit.”

Jesus is the first fruit of the resurrection, but he’s not the last. The “first fruit” metaphor carries within itself the promise of a greater harvest, a bumper crop. The grace of God extends Christ’s victory over death to all of us.

But Jesus is not just the first. That implies that there was a second, who might simply have become the first if not for Jesus. No, Jesus is also the only fruit who could have blossomed out of the barren soil of the grave. If not for him there would have been no second, nor third, nor any other fruit at all.

O God, you great and faithful farmer, we give you thanks for the mystery of Christ’s resurrection. How did you coax out life from the lifeless tomb? Why do you extend that miracle to each of us? Help us to appreciate your power and mercy more with every springtime.

– PASTOR DIXON



THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2023

THE ADVOCATE

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 JOHN 2:1

Jesus named as our “advocate” may be one of the most heartening descriptions and best hopes for my life of faith. Think of it, Jesus advocates for us, for you, even amid all we have done and all that we carry which has been less than loving, less than godly, less than faithful. I recall the prayer Jesus prays in the Gospel of Luke when he is suffocating and dying on the cross. He prays, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.” Imagine the fortitude it takes for Jesus to acknowledge the deathly ignorance present in us and then advocate for forgiveness. It’s astounding.

A favorite preacher of mine said that Jesus’ prayer is not merely for that time and place. Rather, it is an eternally valid statement. In faith I cling to that hope, because I know there are plenty of things I’ve done or thought which were plain hurtful, and I knew it at the time. But perhaps even more sobering is to think of all the pain which occurs in the world for which I and we had no idea we were doing. Jesus advocates for us even in all of that. God’s own son, God in flesh, God crucified, still pleads on our behalf. He won’t give up on you. What wondrous love is this!

Jesus, thank you for sticking by our side, being our advocate, and thus restoring us to the fullness of who we are created to be. Amen.

– PASTOR RUUD



FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 2023

MAN OF SORROWS

*He was despised and rejected by others; a man of sorrows and acquainted with suffering;
and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised,
and we held him of no account.*

ISAIAH 53:3

I don't want a sanguine God who glosses over or denies human sin and suffering, or a God who puts creation into motion, steps back, and watches to see how it all goes. I don't want a God that encourages us to smile and pretend like all is right with the world (and our own lives) when it isn't. Thankfully, that's not the God revealed to us in the life of Jesus. Scripture teaches us that Jesus was a man of sorrows, that he suffered tremendously, and therefore understands, from the inside out, the anguish of all creation.

Jesus experienced all the vicissitudes of human life. He underwent the fragility and miracle of gestation, the nearly suffocating passage of birth, the exquisite first breath, and the joys of growth and discovery that often come through failure. Jesus was vulnerable to the beauty of friendship as well as the agony of betrayal. He felt profound sadness along with soaring joy. He was (and is) brokenhearted by the sin and suffering that threaten to undo us. Yet he has remained lovingly attached to us... even when beaten, ridiculed, naked, bleeding, and dying on a cross.

One of my favorite books is *Lament for a Son*, written by theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff after the tragic death of his son. It's a series of his personal journal entries penned during Lent. Struggling to understand God in the midst of immense grief, he wrote these words: "The wounds of Christ are his identity. They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came up with him—visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds." In other words, Jesus has been marked by heartbreak and pain, both his and ours. Forever he is the man of sorrows.

*Dear God, thank you for sending your Son as our fellow sufferer and wounded healer.
May we be comforted by the fact that he sees and understands us fully. Amen.*

—REV. DR. THERESA LATINI



SATURDAY, MARCH 18, 2023

THE FAITHFUL WITNESS

*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come...
Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead,
and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

REVELATION 1:4-5

What is God really like? Most people of faith have wondered this from time to time. When we see a beautiful sunset or rejoice in the birth of a healthy child, we are likely to conclude that God is gracious and good. But when we witness the destruction of an earthquake or watch as someone we love suffers from a dreaded disease, we may wonder how much we really know about God. St. John names the inherent uncertainty in our life of faith when he states boldly: “No one has seen God” (John 1:18). Each of us has likely felt the aching truth of that statement when life’s challenges or tragedies threaten to overwhelm us. But John goes on to write, “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

Similarly, the author of the Book of Revelation describes Jesus as the “faithful witness.” That’s a powerful image, one drawn from the court systems. Witnesses are called to tell what they saw. Witnesses are expected to tell the truth. Witnesses are crucial in understanding what really happened. In all these ways, Jesus is a witness. He is the one who points to God, who shows us what God is like, and who “tells us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about who God is for us and what we can expect from God.

That is, through his teaching, his compassion, his grace, and his willingness to die on a cross, Jesus shows us that God is love, that God will do anything to redeem us, and that God will never, ever give up on us. In this sense, Jesus is a witness. Even more, Jesus is the witness, the faithful witness, the one who makes the unknowable God known.

*Dear God, when we have questions about you or wonder what you are up to, draw our attention once again to Jesus, the one who witnesses your love and mercy.
In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

– PASTOR LOSE



The Fourth Sunday in Lent

SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

STREAMING: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 11:17-27

"I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE"



MONDAY, MARCH 20, 2023

REDEEMER

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;

JOB 19:25

I know this verse well because I reflect on it every time I hear one of my favorite arias from Handel's *Messiah*. It always reminds me of hope rising out of despair. In the Old Testament, a redeemer generally is one who "buys back" property that has been sold in order to keep it in the family. This verse seems to be Job's great cry of faith that even if in this life he suffers, at least after his death he will be raised up to see God. However, the identity of the redeemer in this passage is unclear. Job uses the theme of a court of law, insisting that he is innocent and that God will come as his defending counsel to prove it. We Christians have often understood these words to be alluding to Jesus' Resurrection.

God, as we sort through our own trials and difficulties, we find it difficult to respond to all that is broken in our world. So many things that cause us to worry. But you create anew and your healing love can restore us. And through you hope can rise out of despair. Amen.

— PASTOR MACLEAN



TUESDAY, MARCH 21, 2023

THE LION

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

REVELATION 5:1-5

If you've ever been brave enough to crack open the book of Revelation, you know that it is filled with rich, but maybe a little confusing, imagery. In chapter five we find ourselves in the heavenly throne room and the author is dismayed because there appears to be no one on heaven or earth able to open a special scroll, which likely holds within some sort of divine decree. In verse five the author is comforted, by a heavenly elder who says.

'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

Judah is one of the twelve tribes of Israel, named after the twelve sons of Jacob. Judah's symbol was a lion, a royal sign of strength, representing the monarchy and the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. So to see Jesus as the Lion of Judah, is to recognize the power that he commands as the long-expected Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people.

God you are faithful to your word, and accomplish your purposes in due time. Give us patience. Give us clear eyes to see the ways you are working in our midst to bring life, hope and healing. Amen.

– PASTOR CIESLIK



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 2023

CORNERSTONE

This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'

ACTS 4:11

At the first church I served, I helped preside at the funeral for the man who laid the cornerstone of our church building. I felt such gratitude, for he lay the very stone that set the direction for that entire community of faith, the community of faith that taught me how to be a pastor.

Similarly, this verse from Acts illustrates the trajectory of the church community built on the cornerstone of Christ.

As a child, my parents' friends and their kids would join us on the back deck of our home for hootenannies. One song I remember singing with great fervor was "Building Block" by Paul Stookey. Because the tune is so catchy, I did not realize how poignant the words are. They elaborate on what it means to live as the community of Jesus Christ. When overcome by rejection or betrayal, Jesus is our rock, the cornerstone, as he promises the gift of a whole new world.

It's a promise we need to hear. Jesus walks with us in times of great joy, but is most certainly known to us in times of deep sorrow. For Jesus Christ, the stone that was rejected, is our solid cornerstone and hope.

And just for fun, here are the lyrics to Paul Stookey's famous song. May you find a recording with which you can sing along, but even more importantly, may you be assured of the promise that Jesus surely brings: *"The building block that was rejected. Became the cornerstone of a whole new world. When I am down and unsuspected. With a burden that does not show. I think what time has resurrected. And how the sun can make the water flow. There is a man who has collected all the sorrow in our eyes. He gives us love as God directed but is seldom recognized. When all your dreams have been connected. And your vision has been returned. Remember, love, you are protected. By the truth your heart has learned."*

Dear God, You promise new life in places of betrayal and pain, for Christ's rejection became the cornerstone that transformed the world. Amen.

—PASTOR FREEMAN



THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2023

THE WORD OF GOD

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

JOHN 1:1, 14

A letter arrived at church the other day addressed to me from someone I didn't know. It contained an old, yellowed, greeting card. When I opened it up, I gasped at the handwriting. It was that of my beloved Grandma Goldie who died 28 years ago. She had written a condolence letter to this woman upon the premature death of her husband. In it my gram had written, "When my husband died of polio when our children were six months and three years old, it helped me to remember that God is always with me in Jesus."

To see her beautiful handwriting, and to hear her faith shine through in her words to another grieving young widow, was a pure gift. It felt like a visit with this woman whose loss I still feel nearly three decades later.

We all understand God and relate to God in different ways. I had a seminary professor who used to say that she loved God with all her mind. For her, getting close to God and understanding God meant diving into the Word, the Bible. For my grandma, losing her husband at the age of 29, God showed up in the comforting presence of Jesus.

Have you ever heard of Jesus being referred to as the Word? Messiah, Savior, Redeemer, Son of God? Yes! But Jesus the Word? Not so much. But if you think of it, it makes perfect sense. Words convey feeling, emotion, and intention. They're how we communicate with one another. Jesus is God's love letter to us all!

Somedays, if I take the time to stop and look, to truly pause and look around, the handwriting is unmistakable. Jesus is so active in our lives it makes me gasp.

Dear Lord, remind me to pay attention to all the blessings in my life. To focus on the beauty rather than the bumps. Because when I do, I see You, God's love letter to us all, everywhere I look. Amen.

– PASTOR HAMMERSTEN



FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2023

AMEN

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write, These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation...

REVELATION 3:14

Don't head into Revelation without a roadmap. Light reading it is not. Your devotional Bible study will be aided by a cursory knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, the political history of imperial Rome, ancient near eastern geography, and of course the broader literary tradition of the first-and second-century Mediterranean world to begin with. But in this case, just a little time in the Old Testament book of Isaiah is all you really need.

The author of Revelation knew the old scriptures it turns out, and this seemingly odd title for Christ (what kind of name is Amen anyways?!) hearkens back to Isaiah's similar use of language to describe God. Isaiah instructs people to swear their oaths and share their blessings using the name of "the God of Amen."

So it's traditional, but what does it mean? In the simplest terms, it means that God (or Jesus in this case) is faithful. Jesus is so faithful that we can call him "the Amen," the true, the yes, the "so be it and so shall it be." If you've ever wondered if you can put your trust in Jesus, this verse says that his very name is not just a prayer, but a prayer ended and answered. Or to put it another way:

Q: "Who is Jesus?"

A: "Nuff said."

God, we give you thanks for your Son, Jesus. He is a sign of your faithfulness; he is faithfulness itself. If all we ever uttered in our quiet talks with you was his name, it would be enough. And so we say, "Amen."

—PASTOR DIXON



SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 2023

THE SHOOT OF JESSE

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

ISAIAH 11:1

Whenever I hear this verse— almost always in the season of Advent when we anticipate the birth of Jesus— I think of an old stump, the remnant of what once was a great family tree with strong branches and leaves galore, now chopped down, dry, dead, and decomposing in a barren field with seemingly no chance for any regeneration. Yet there's a shred of hope — sometimes a shred is all that's needed — upon a small, bright, green shoot impossibly peeking out of one of those old hardened cracks. It may not look like much. Most folks walking by wouldn't even notice it unless they stop to look closely or someone else points it out, but it's there.

The prophet says God embodies that little green shoot. That when all looks deserted and forsaken, God is still at work. And there is hope even in the driest, most desolate circumstances. There's even hope in death, and beyond, for newness to take root and blossom and grow. We see this in the creation all the time of course, but perhaps it's more difficult to believe for ourselves in the face of so many challenges and the harsh end death seems to accomplish.

Christians proclaim Jesus is that little shoot. A hope in new life which may begin right here and now and continue into eternity. That little shoot waves to you and me in the breeze as we walk along. As green blades rise this spring out of what was our frozen northern tundra, you may see it as Christ waving to you. If you're blessed to notice it, go ahead and point it out to someone else who might have missed it on the way by. It's easy to miss, but even the smallest shoot may bring life and light.

God of new life, when all seems hopeless, remind us of your promise to make all things new. Fill our hearts with hope enough to exclaim, "Holy shoot!" Amen.

—PASTOR RUUD



The Fifth Sunday in Lent

SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

STREAMING: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 14:1-6

"I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE"



MONDAY, MARCH 27, 2023

HEAD OF THE CHURCH

*And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things
for the church.*

EPHESIANS 1:22

The New Testament depicts the church as a body with a head. The members of the church are like the many parts of a body. Each part (that is, each one of us) is essential and needed for the whole to function and to flourish. God has given each one of us gifts and abilities so that together (not alone) we can share God's love with the whole world.

Jesus is the Head of this body, the Church. We cannot exist without him any more than a physical body could live without its head. Just the thought of it seems absurd! During the pandemic, we didn't worship together for over a year. It looked (and perhaps felt) like we were cut-off from each other, and maybe even from God. But we weren't, because Jesus is joined to us as closely as the heads on our own bodies. And we are joined as closely to one another as our arms and hands, feet and ankles, legs and torsos.

If Jesus is the Head of the Church, then he's in charge. We listen to him and follow him. We pray for his will to be done in us and through us. As he lives and loves, so do we. By the power of the Spirit, we throw open the church doors and welcome all, especially those who have been forgotten, shunned, neglected, and abused. Of course, if we are honest, we often miss the mark and fail to welcome and love others as Jesus does. We say and do things that bring harm intentionally or unintentionally. So, we acknowledge our sin, seek to make amends, and forgive one another . . . every day. As a pastor, mother, and friend, this is the best news of all. We don't need to live in guilt or shame but rather humbly stand together, hand-in-hand receiving God's mercy for us all.

*Dear God, thank you for uniting us to Jesus, the Head of the Church, by whose authority
we proclaim the forgiveness of sins and by whose grace we love and accept one another.
Amen.*

—REV. DR. THERESA LATINI



TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2023

MESSIAH

*Andrew went and found his brother Peter and said to him,
“We have found the Messiah.”*

JOHN 1:41

The word “Messiah” comes from the Hebrew and means, most literally, the “anointed one.” To anoint someone was to mark that person with oil. For this reason, the ancient Israelites would signify their belief that their kings were called and chosen by God to take care of the people by anointing them; that is, by literally pouring oil over their heads.

But while all of Israel’s kings were considered anointed, they looked forward to the coming of one who was greater than all the previous kings, one who would not simply care for the people but redeem them once and for all. This was the one they called “Messiah” and savior.

All four of the Gospels confess that Jesus is God’s Chosen, God’s Anointed, God’s Messiah. John makes this claim in the very first chapter, as Andrew, one of Jesus’ first disciples, runs in excited to tell his brother Peter that they have found God’s anointed one. John also makes this claim again near the end of his Gospel as well, when he shares why he wrote his Gospel in the first place: “Jesus did many other things in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ” – the Greek translation of “Messiah” – “and believing have life in his name.”

When we call Jesus the “Messiah,” we are joining in the confession Christians have been making for two thousand years – all the way back to the Andrew – that Jesus is the one who God sent to love, bless, and save us. Always.

Dear God, remind us that you sent Jesus into the world for one reason – to tell us of your love that we might believe you will always save and redeem us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

– PASTOR LOSE



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2023

EVERLASTING FATHER

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

ISAIAH 9:6

We're living in Minnesota and during this winter season, we can go many days without seeing the sun. And if darkness also means a sense of uncertainty, of being lost, vulnerable, afraid; if darkness means conflict between people, races, nations, then we are people who sit in darkness. "If we are people who pray," Frederick Buechner says, "darkness is apt to be a lot of what our prayers are about."

In seemingly dark times, how do I affirm God's goodness, God's love, and God's presence in this kind of world? Well, first of all, I serve others. It gives me peace. In Isaiah 9:2 we are told, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-on them a light has shined." This light in the darkness breaking through is the announcement of a new king in the line of David. The titles "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" were all given to the king at his coronation. Although we do not generate the light, we are called to do something. We're called to let God's light shine in our lives, so that others will be drawn to the light.

A pastor friend said to me that when he hears or reads something he disagrees with, he whispers a silent prayer to the author and then moves on. I thought, "What a novel idea!" Would that help all of us to see more clearly all who are pronounced blessed and loved by God? Help us to see light in the darkness? Because, darkness doesn't have the last word. It never will. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Everlasting Father, In times that darkness may seem to prevail in our world or even in our own lives, help us to trust that no darkness can prevail against the light; no loss, no failure is beyond redemption, and through your help, no exile from our real home is eternal. We must simply wait faithfully, work diligently, and trust in you. Amen.

- PASTOR MACLEAN



THURSDAY, MARCH 30, 2023

AND THE LAMB

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. They sing a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.'

REVELATION 5:6,9-10

The author of Revelation expects to see a lion, he instead sees a lamb who appears to have been slain. It's the central, confounding claim of Christ. Where we would expect God to show his power through acts of force and might, in Jesus, God gives himself away, gives his life away so that we might live. Jesus, the lamb who was slain, is a name that continues to surprise us because it's never what we expect, but it's precisely what we need.

*We give you thanks, O God, for your victory over death and the grave. We give you thanks that the lamb who was slain has begun his reign in our hearts and our lives,
Alleluia, Amen.*

—PASTOR CIESLIK



FRIDAY, MARCH 31, 2023

BELOVED SON

*And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased."*

MATTHEW 3:17

When Jesus was baptized, he heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). These words reveal Jesus' deepest identity as beloved child of God. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are a clear message that all of his thoughts, words, and deeds were and are done from that deepest identity of love.

The words spoken to Jesus at his baptism are the same words spoken to us at our baptism. The world will try very hard to get in the way of us believing and trusting our deepest identity, as God's beloved. Our own thoughts of not being enough are often the message that derails us in life.

But once we receive these life-giving words of love in their fullness, our baptismal identity becomes real every single day. We daily die and rise to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that sets us free to be the people God created us to be.

Being the people God created us to be frees us from having to prove our worth and gives us permission to trust our God-given worth— that being God's beloved is enough. In fact, it's more than enough. It changes the world.

My childhood church choir director just died. She taught us a choir song that I've never heard since, and yet captures the essence of our baptismal identity – that nothing separates us from God's love, not even death, and when we trust and live into that love, even more love is found. Her daughters sang it at her funeral. I'll share the lyrics here, as well:

*Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away. Love is something
if you give it away, you'll end up having more. It's just like a magic penny.*

*Hold on tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many.
They'll roll all over the floor, for...*

Love is something if you give it away... you'll end up having more...

You are God's beloved. With you, God is well-pleased. Live in love and transform the world!

*Dear God, Thank you for making us your beloved, united with Jesus, in baptism. Help
us to trust in and share that love with the world. Amen.*

– PASTOR FREEMAN



SATURDAY, APRIL 1, 2023

THE STONE THE BUILDERS REJECTED

Jesus said, "Have you not read this scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?'"

MARK 12:10-11

My dad, like many in our family tree, suffered from alcoholism. He went through treatment when I was in 5th grade, and with the help of his faith and the many brave men and women that he met through his countless AA meetings, maintained his sobriety up until the day he died.

I still remember the hushed whispers by the other parents in our neighborhood. The stigma of that nasty disease followed him all the days of his life like a bad shadow. My brothers and I learned to recognize the looks as we heard the mumbled, "You know he's an alcoholic don't you?" 40 years did nothing to erase people's judgement. He accepted it all humbly, saying only, "I'm so grateful to have lived to be a grandpa."

On the day of his funeral, we stood at the big wooden doors, jaws dropped at the sight of a sanctuary packed to the gills, while the church ladies ran downstairs to make more sandwiches. Hundreds of folks we had never before met came up to give us hugs and tell us what our dad had meant to them. We were still receiving cards in the mail the following year from people he had sponsored in AA. Rather than hide his disease, dad had the guts and heart to share his experience, strength, and hope with anyone who needed a helping hand.

Jesus was rejected, whispered about, judged. And then some. He accepted it all humbly. I imagine if He stood at the big wooden doors this Easter Sunday morning, some 2,000 years after His death, and saw the sanctuary packed to the gills, even Jesus might be surprised.

Dear Lord, help us to always remember to welcome the outsider, the person who has suffered. Remind us that good never comes from whispering behind someone's back. You taught us "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The person we reject may very well end up being the cornerstone of our community, or in Jesus' case, the world. Amen.

— PASTOR HAMMERSTEN



Palm Sunday

SUNDAY, APRIL 2, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

STREAMING: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 12:12-19

"THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY"



MONDAY, APRIL 3, 2023

I AM

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”

JOHN 8:58

There’s a famous video of a professional bowler who, upon clinching a victory, turns to the crowd and screams defiantly, “WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? I AM!” If you haven’t seen it, check in with any young man in your life, aged 18-35. I’m sure they have. Grammatically, it makes no sense. And yet, it makes all the sense in the world. Whoever you thought you were (victor, champion, The Man), this guy is.

Jesus’ statement here in John 8 is just as grammatically jarring. “Before Abraham was born, I am!” Uh, what? We would accept: “Before Abraham was born, I was [born],” or “Before Abraham was born, I existed.” But that’s not what Jesus said in John’s Gospel. And we must assume he meant what he said. Unlike the impassioned bowler, I don’t believe Jesus’ mouth got ahead of his brain. So, what are we to make of this peculiar use of tenses?

What I see here is a beautiful, poetic, concise use of language, with all its rules and limits, to convey something absolutely unlimited: the eternal and mysterious personhood of Jesus, the Word who was with God, the Word who was God, the Word through whom all things have their being. How can our clumsy words and grammar impart something like that? (How can bread and wine contain the infinitude of Christ’s body, blood, and grace, for that matter?) Who is Jesus? Yes. Jesus is the one who is. Before you and me, before the mountains and the seas, Jesus is.

O God, you are so shrouded in mystery. We give you thanks that you somehow pierced that veil in the person of your son, Jesus. You gave him to us to know and understand and love in this life, and yet he retains his connection to the vast and unknowable You. Help us to trust and accept what you have revealed to us in faith. Amen.

– PASTOR DIXON



TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2023

SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

“See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

MALACHI 4:2

My goodness, winter in Minnesota can sure seem to drag on forever! Reflecting upon the “sun of righteousness” which Malachi assures will rise for those who honor and respect the God of all creation, I hearken back to a day in late January this year. It felt like it had been more than a week since we had even spotted the sun. Then one Thursday morning it broke forth. Getting set for some writing and prep at home I got my coffee and entered the living room to see our mutt, Diggs, sprawled and stretched out like a warm, wet noodle in the south-facing bay window, eyes closed, and absolutely soaking in every blessed ray from nose to tail! He knew. It’s instinctual for him. Sun can heal. It was as if I could literally see that light working healing and health in the warm circulation of his blood and breath and all his limbs.

Christians receive the “sun of righteousness” in the person of Jesus. He shines his holiness and righteousness on you, on us. It’s a pure gift. I took a cue from Diggs and set up shop in the light next to him on the couch.

And the joy it can inspire? Like calves leaping from the stall, Malachi says. Do yourself a favor and watch what calves do when released from the birthing barn for the first time! YouTube it! Go ahead and frolic a bit, you little calves, especially after a long winter. It’s a holy response.

Sun of righteousness, heal us. Warm us with hope. Inspire in us the joy of your salvation. Unleash us to frolic in your love for us and all. Amen.

—PASTOR RUUD



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5, 2023

AUTHOR OF LIFE

... and you killed the Author of Life, whom God raised from the dead.

To this we are witnesses

ACTS 3:15

Every summer, I love walking the prairie trail at Mount Olivet Conference & Retreat Center. This trail circles and then cuts through the heart of our twenty-five acres of tall grasses and flowers. Prairies are diverse ecosystems and home to a multitude of plants, fungi, and insects. Whenever I roam these “seas of grass,” I feel a mixture of wonder, openness, and possibility. The wild beauty of the prairie reminds me that Jesus is the Author of Life.

Scripture teaches us that Jesus was with God in the beginning, creating life in all its forms—plants, animals, humans, planets, stars, and galaxies. Many scientists estimate that, on earth alone, there are 8.7 million different species; 2.2 million of these species live in the ocean; and, we have named and classified only a small portion of them. The Author of Life has created an abundance of life, so vast we can barely comprehend it.

The Author of Life creates this incomprehensible diversity of living things because he longs to be in relationship with it all. He takes pleasure and delights in creation. He upholds and sustains all living creatures (including you and me). He provides for us daily. When it seems as though God is absent, when our prayers go unanswered, our hopes are dashed, or disaster strikes: we can look to the trees and the mountains, to the lakes and the prairies, to the stars and planets to remember that we are not alone. We belong with all creation. Just as the Author of Life cares for the birds and flowers, soil and sky, so he promises to care for us.

In Lent, we also remember that the Author, Creator, and Sustainer of Life took death into his own being and overcame it so that he could be with us in and through death and raise us all to new life with him.

Dear God, we marvel at your creation and thank you for giving us life. May we rest in your providential care and trust in your presence with us even in death.

—REV. DR. THERESA LATINI



MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 6, 2023

OUR PASSOVER

Our Passover lamb, Jesus Christ, has been sacrificed for us.

1 CORINTHIANS 5:7

In an earlier devotion, I suggested that when John the Baptist calls Jesus “the lamb of God,” he is referencing the story of the Passover, God’s deliverance of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. John isn’t the only one to make use of this imagery, however. The Apostle Paul does as well.

But Paul doesn’t just reference the Passover lamb, but instead says Jesus is our Passover lamb. What does he mean? I think the key is to remember that the Passover is a Jewish story – the account of God’s deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery – and that most of Paul’s ministry was to Gentiles; that is, people who were not Jewish and so did not claim the story of the escape from Egypt as their own. But Paul invites them into the larger account of God’s redemption of the whole world by saying that Jesus is our Passover, a new Passover, a Passover that is available to all of us – Jew and Gentile alike – because in Jesus God promises to “pass over” all of our faults, all of our shortcomings, all of our sins, in order to bless, redeem, and forgive us.

One central time to remember this is when we share the Lord’s Supper, which we do at Mount Olivet on Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and on Good Friday. The meal Jesus celebrates with his disciples when he institutes the Lord’s Supper is a Passover celebration. When we share Holy Communion, we are entering into that story now expanded to include everyone. Jesus invites his disciples to remember in the eating of bread and drinking of wine that he gave his own body and blood so that we would know of God’s love and count on God passing over all our faults, mistakes, and shortcomings in order to redeem us in love.

Dear God, thank you for the gift of Holy Communion to remind us of just how much you love us and all people. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

– PASTOR LOSE



GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 2023

KING OF KINGS & LORD OF LORDS

...which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

1 TIMOTHY 6:15

Throughout the Gospels it doesn't seem that the disciples really understand who Jesus is. There is a disconnect between the disciples' talk of greatness and Jesus' talk of dying. Jesus had just said to them, "If you want to be my followers, you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and give your life to serving others." But the disciples just don't get it. What Jesus is saying fits none of their hopes and expectations about a Messiah. In their view, Messiah would be a great conquering hero. Messiah would defeat Israel's enemies and establish a powerful kingdom. Since the disciples were his closest followers, they would have power and rank in that kingdom. Jesus, on the other hand, is not talking about triumph and victory, but about defeat and death. What kind of Messiah is that?

Jesus seems to be shattering our human ideas and expectations about God and what a King of Kings and Lord of Lords looks like. At the heart of the Gospel is a crucified God. God's suffering love for us, the Apostle Paul says, is "God's foolishness" that is wiser than human wisdom, and "God's weakness" that is stronger than human strength. It is the logic and the way of God's love.

We give thanks, dear God, for the blessings we enjoy and may not always recognize – the beauty of our world, having food enough to eat, having the love and companionship of family and friends, having the comfort of belonging to this faith community, having the hope of our faith in you. We pray that we always be mindful of these treasures we have amassed and enjoy every day, that give our lives their context, their meaning, and their character. Amen.

– PASTOR MACLEAN



HOLY SATURDAY, APRIL 8, 2023

MORNING STAR

'It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.'

REVELATION 22:16

The morning star signals that the new day is close at hand. At the close of the book of Revelation, Jesus claims that name for himself. Jesus ushers in a new day, a new life, a new world in which all is set right. Jesus announces a day in which all of God's children, the whole of creation is renewed and restored to the fullness of what God intends. We don't know when that day will dawn, but we do know that Jesus will light the way.

*Jesus you are the bright morning star, which prepares the way for the dawn of a new day.
Amen.*

— PASTOR CIESLIK



Easter Sunday

SUNDAY, APRIL 9, 2023

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 7, 8, 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 8, 9, 10 & 11AM

STREAMING: 7, 8, 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 20:1-18

"THE FIRST EASTER"

HOLY WEEK WORSHIP

The Seven Last Words of Christ Concert

Wednesday, April 5

7pm, Mpls Campus, and livestreaming at mtolivet.org.

Maundy Thursday - The Living Lord's Supper

Thursday, April 6

7pm, Mpls and West Campuses, and livestreaming at mtolivet.org.

Good Friday

Friday, April 7

Mpls Campus: 8am, 12noon, 5pm and *7pm

West Campus: 5pm and *7pm

The 12noon service at the Mpls Campus will be
livestreaming at mtolivet.org.

**Tenebrae service*



MOUNT OLIVET LUTHERAN CHURCH

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