

MOUNT OLIVET
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
2024

Got

QUESTIONS?

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Got

QUESTIONS!

The 2024 Lent sermon series is entitled, “Got Questions?” – focusing on questions about our faith. In this devotional, our pastors are diving a bit deeper into each question the week following the sermon. They will look at Scripture and more to see how these questions are both asked and answered (or not!).

Ash Wednesday, February 14 –Saturday, February 17: *Intro – Is it okay to ask questions?*

Week of February 18: *Why do we baptize babies?*

Week of February 25: *Do we have to believe everything in the Bible?*

Week of March 3: *Does everything happen for a reason?*

Week of March 10: *What comes next?*

Week of March 17: *What is so amazing about grace?*

Week of March 24 (Holy Week): *Why did Jesus die?*

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ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024

IS IT OKAY TO ASK QUESTIONS?

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

LUKE 24:27

In the earliest centuries of Christianity, Lent was a time when those who wished to become Christians – most often they were adult converts – would immerse themselves in the teachings of the Church so that when they made their first confession of faith at Easter, they would understand what they were confessing.

This Lent, we are following in that tradition by asking – and trying to answer – a series of basic faith questions. Why do we baptize babies? Why did Jesus die? And so forth. On Sundays, the appointed preacher will address one of these questions from the pulpit and, in our Lenten devotions, we'll go a little further, sharing other Scripture passages that bear on those same questions so that we can understand our shared faith more deeply.

The verse cited above comes from one of the resurrection stories in Luke's Gospel. Two disciples are on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They have heard reports of Jesus' resurrection but do not understand what they mean or even if the reports are accurate. Jesus comes alongside them, but they don't recognize them. He proceeds to open up the Scriptures in order so that they might not simply accept the story of his resurrection, but understand it. Strikingly, ahead of Jesus' teaching comes a series of questions:

“And Jesus said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’” (24:17-19a).

This give and take leads to the disciples sharing their disappointment and confusion over the events surrounding Jesus' death and the recently reported sightings of him. All of which sets the stage for Jesus to meet them where they are and open up the faith to them in a way that makes them want to get up, go out, and tell others about the good news of God's love. Who knows? Perhaps our questions will lead to a similar dynamic and life changing encounter!

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, thank you for disciples, then and now, who want to both believe and understand the faith. Amen.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2024

IS IT OKAY TO ASK QUESTIONS?

Jesus was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

MARK 9:31-32

Some churches think of faith as unquestioning adherence to religious doctrine. Asking questions, from this perspective, is an expression of doubt—a challenge to authority. The Lutheran tradition sees things differently. In fact, Martin Luther began each part of his “Small Catechism” with a simple but profound question: “What does this mean?” Luther wanted the faithful not just to believe blindly, but also to understand fully.

I think one of the saddest moments in the Gospels is when the disciples are afraid to ask Jesus questions. He has just been speaking about his impending death and resurrection. They don’t understand, and that’s understandable. When people imagined God’s promised messiah, most thought of a conquering war hero like King David. No one expected God’s messiah to come and die. What is less understandable is why the disciples were afraid to voice their confusion or ask their questions. As we’ll see, at other points the disciples ask Jesus questions and openly confess their confusion and even their doubt about what he is saying. So why not this time?

Perhaps they thought they should already know. This isn’t the first time Jesus has spoken of his death. Or maybe they believe that asking a question about something so fundamental, so clearly important to Jesus, is unfaithful and reflects poorly on them. When I think of it this way, I’m more sympathetic. There are times when I think I should already know something and don’t want to betray my ignorance. And there are other times when the subject seems so important that I feel foolish voicing a question. Perhaps you’ve felt this way, too. If so, this is the perfect opportunity to reclaim questions as a gift, to see them not as evidence of a lack of faith, but rather of a faithfully curious person, someone who wants to go deeper, to understand, and then to share that understanding with others.

Just imagine what the disciples might have learned if they’d asked their questions. Just imagine what we might!

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, make us brave enough to ask our deepest questions. Amen.



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2024

IS IT OKAY TO ASK QUESTIONS?

“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 14:4-6b

Thomas is my favorite disciple. We think of him as “the doubter,” but I think of him as “the realist.” Back in chapter 11 of John’s Gospel, when Jesus talks about going to Jerusalem, Thomas the realist foresees the danger of Jesus’ course of action and says to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with him.” Yes, Thomas was a realist, and a brave one at that!

In this scene, it is Thursday of Holy Week and Jesus is preparing his disciples for his imminent crucifixion. He knows that they are afraid and so he reassures his friends by telling them he is going to his father’s home, a place with many rooms, and that he will come back in time to take them there also. He then seeks to reassure them further by saying that they know the way to the place he’s going.

But Thomas is having none of it. “We don’t even know where you’re going, Jesus, so how can we know the way?” I love Thomas’ bluntness, his willingness to confront his teacher and friend, make him explain what he’s talking about. I’m guessing that took some courage, as Jesus is fairly focused on sharing some final and important words with his disciples when Thomas interrupts him with his blunt question.

Once again, however, asking a hard question leads to growth and discovery. In this case, Jesus helps Thomas reimagine that what he needs is not more knowledge (the exact location of where Jesus is going or a map to help him follow), but rather a deeper relationship with Jesus: “Trust me, Thomas, I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Perhaps that’s true with our questions as well. It’s not simply knowledge we’re after, but a relationship that invites us to trust Jesus, first with our deepest questions, and over time with our deepest selves, entrusting our fortunes and fate to the one who died and was raised again for us.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, help us to come to know and trust you through our questions. Amen.



SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2024

IS IT OKAY TO ASK QUESTIONS?

The man said, "From childhood, this demon has often cast my son into the fire and into the water, to destroy him. If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

MARK 9:21-24

One more thing about questions before jumping in. Sometimes we are hesitant to ask questions because we fear they betray not just our confusion, but also our doubt. And doubt, we assume, is the opposite of faith.

But is it?

I love this story of a man desperate to do something – anything! – for his demon-possessed son. He has already asked Jesus' disciples to heal him, and they have failed. Now he is hopeful that Jesus might succeed where they fell short. And not just hopeful, but also afraid, because Jesus is his last hope. And so, when Jesus assures him that anything is possible for those who believe, he immediately asserts his faith – "I believe!" – as well as his doubt – "but I also don't believe, so help me!"

I love this passage because it reminds us that faith and doubt aren't opposites. In fact, they are intimately linked together. If we had no doubts, we would need no faith. Faith, that is, is precisely trust when we don't know for sure. Faith is hanging in there when everything is not certain. Which means that questions aren't the mark of insufficient faith, but rather of courageous faith; faith that doesn't shy away from hard issues, faith that refuses to give up just because things aren't transparent or easy.

So across this Lenten season, both on Sundays and throughout the week, I invite you to bring your faithful questions and courageous queries. Together, we are fashioning a faith that is always seeking deeper understanding. But be warned: across the years, Lutherans have not only valued honest questions, but have also been willing to venture surprising answers. So don't be surprised if the questions we ask (and the responses we try to offer) challenge and stretch you as well as inform you. Because that's what good questions do!

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, we believe, but also struggle to believe, so help us! Amen.

First Sunday in Lent

FEBRUARY 18, 2024

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 15:13-16a

“WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES?”



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2024

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES?

As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

ACTS 8:36

Today's verse comes from a bizarre story, even by biblical standards. Quick recap: Philip, who has been commissioned by the disciples, is sent by God into the wilderness to sit by the side of the road. Then, an Ethiopian eunuch, someone who has been castrated to prevent him from being a threat to the royal family, happens by on his way home from Jerusalem. Philip jogs alongside the chariot, probably getting sweaty, and asks the man if he understands what he's reading. The Eunuch invites him into the chariot, they chat for a while, and then the man asks, maybe demands, to be baptized. Philips obliges and then is whisked away by the Holy Spirit. Strange, yes?

If you were to read this story in your Bible, you might notice it's missing a verse. In most modern bibles the eighth chapter moves right from verse 36 to verse 38. Verse 37 isn't there. This is because it wasn't there to begin with. At some point, before verse numbers were included, some faithful monk was reading along in the book of Acts and noticed "a problem."

In verse 36, the Ethiopian eunuch says to Philip, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Then in verse 38, he commands the chariot to stop, and Philip and the eunuch go down into the water, and Philip baptizes him.

Somewhere along the way somebody noticed that the Eunuch never has a conversion experience. So somebody put it in. Because, for many people, you must do something or say something to be ready to be baptized.

The problem is, that's not what the story is about.

It is about a God who makes water appear in the desert, so that his grace and mercy can be poured out on an outsider, someone who is known not by his name, but by the damage that has been done to him. It's a story about what God can and will do for all of us, no matter who we are.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

God, we thank you that you always make new ways forward for all people. Help us to extend that same grace and mercy to others, in Jesus' name. Amen.



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2024

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES?

If we are children [of God], then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

ROMANS 8:14

You can surmise a lot about the state of Christianity in America by the common approach to this question. It's almost always, "Why does your church baptize babies," instead of, "why doesn't your church baptize babies?" That so many Christians think it is common sense to withhold baptism until adulthood (or an "age of reason") tells us what most people think baptism is and does. Most people think it is something the individual does. It is their declaration of their commitment to God and the Christian life. It is their public profession of faith.

At its best, the Lutheran theological tradition understands that baptism is all about what God does, what God declares, what God promises. That is a much more powerful and meaningful thing. It's the difference between someone bursting into a boardroom during the reading of a will and exclaiming, "I'm his long-lost son and entitled to his fortune!" and the deceased actually identifying and claiming someone in the will. Only in the latter case is the person guaranteed to receive the inheritance.

Why do we baptize babies? Because in baptism, we are named God's children and granted all the rights and privileges (and responsibilities) that relationship promises. No loving parents would pointlessly wait to claim their children or give them the family name. No parent would wait to see what kind of teenager or adult their baby would grow to be before including them in their will or making them beneficiaries of insurance policies. Why would we expect this of God?

— PASTOR DIXON

God, we thank you for the generosity you show us. We thank you for the boldness you show in claiming us as your children even when we don't act like it and seem not to value that relationship. Help us to grow into the identity you have given us from our birth. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES?

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

MATTHEW 28:16-20

The conclusion to Matthew's gospel is often referred to as The Great Commission. After his Resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples on a mountain, his disciples worship and doubt (I love that combination), and then Jesus offers them some parting instructions and a big promise. Christians have long seen these instructions as something of a job description. Make disciples. Baptize them. Teach them. I don't think Jesus is commending a particular sequence of activities here, but rather he's inviting his followers to continue in God's work of calling people into relationship with the triune God. Disciples are those who are close to Jesus, those whom Jesus has called into relationship, those whom Jesus has taught and loved. The church's work is to continue helping people hear Christ's call and claim on their lives.

In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther wrote, "For my faith does not make baptism; rather, it receives baptism. Baptism does not become invalid if it is not properly received or used, as I have said, for it is not bound to our faith but to the Word."

God's word is the thing which makes baptism effective and God's promise to us in Jesus is that he is with us always, to the end of the age. That's a promise that comes to us and is for us no matter how old we are.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

We give you thanks, O God, for your presence in our lives. We give thanks for your promise to be with us always, no matter what happens to us. When we struggle to experience the fullness of that promise, send us people who help renew and strengthen our faith in you. Amen.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2024

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES?

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

MATTHEW 19:14

What is it about children? Why does the kingdom of heaven belong to them? Is it because they are younger and less corrupted by a lifetime of sin? Are children less enthralled by the idols of this world? Are they more obedient? (In my experience with my own children, this explanation seems unlikely.)

My best guess is that Jesus was not hinting at something that children do better than adults that makes them more righteous, more deserving of heaven. The wider context around this verse makes that clear. Immediately after making his statement about children, Jesus has an exchange with a man who wants to know what he must do to "get eternal life."

It's a frustrating conversation for the man. Jesus tells him to observe the commandments, and the man says he does. Then, Jesus ups the ante. "Sell all you own and give it to the poor." At this, the man walks away discouraged. And then Jesus delivers one of his most notorious teachings, "It is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle."

That idea has been so troubling to so many people over the centuries that it simply had to be softened. A story was concocted about a gate in the wall at Jerusalem that camels had to reluctantly stoop to pass through. The message became: it's very difficult to enter heaven, but if you try your hardest, it's possible!

What if Jesus' message here has nothing to do with our righteousness? What if he is not trying to coach us to live the best life possible, do all the right things, and somehow, at last earn our piece of the kingdom of heaven? I wonder if he lifts up children (and the childlike) not because children are more righteous, but because children are more...trusting. No one trusts like a child. Not one moment of my adulthood has been as deeply trusting as every moment I spent as an infant in my mother's and father's arms.

And so baptism, just like the kingdom of heaven, belongs not to those who earn it, but to those who trust.

– PASTOR DIXON

God, help us to forget our own virtue and, like children, trust in yours more and more every day. Amen.



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2024

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES?

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

MARK 1:9-11

In typical Markan fashion, Jesus' baptism is told without much detail. In fact, there is hardly any description of the baptism itself, and just a few words on the aftermath. But there's a lot that is packed in there. As Jesus emerges from the water, the heavens are ripped in two, the Spirit descends on Jesus and the voice of God rings out from the sky.

I love Mark's telling of Jesus' baptism for one big reason: Jesus doesn't really do anything. It's done to him. He doesn't say anything or promise anything. Jesus is a pretty passive participant in this whole exercise. Jesus simply emerges from the water, wet with promises and the Spirit's presence poured out upon him. He is given the promise that he is God's beloved, God's child, one in whom God takes great delight.

We might say, well of course God heaps this kind of extravagance on Jesus... it's Jesus after all. But I think that misses the point. Jesus is just given it. He doesn't ask for it. He doesn't demonstrate a readiness for it. It's just poured out, lavishly and graciously.

For me this is a sign, a promise, that God does this for each one of us in our baptisms too. We don't need to say anything, do anything, believe anything. We just get to show up and leave wet with God's promises and the Spirit's presence in our lives. It's a gift, whether we are 67 years old or eight weeks old.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

Dear God, thanks for choosing us, calling us, and claiming us as your beloved. Sometimes it's hard to trust the immensity of that promise, so we are grateful that you give it to us anyway. We pray as your beloved children. Amen.



SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2024

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES?

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 JOHN 4:10

Baptism is not our love letter to God; it is God's love letter to us. It is common for churches to get this backwards, and from that confusion springs so much pain, uncertainty and frustration. Baptism is a sacrament, which means it is supposed to provide comfort and peace. It is supposed to make your heart trust in God, the one who is making you a promise in and through the sacrament.

But if we continue to think of it as a love letter, it is easy to see how none of those benefits can come from a letter that we send. Think back to your school days. Did you ever send a note like this: "Dear so and so, I really like you. If you like me, too, check 'yes.' ___ Yes; ___ No."

Did you feel comfortable, peaceful, relaxed when that note made its way across the classroom? Of course not! You can probably still recall the gut-wrenching anxiety of that moment even if you can't remember the name of the note's recipient. It is a moment full of anticipation, expectation, and uncertainty. That is the opposite of faith.

Comfort and relief and joy only come when the note is returned and you fumble to get it open and—oh thank God—read, "X Yes."

Just so with baptism. If baptism is your note sent out into the cosmos, "I love you, God," what peace or reassurance can come from that? But if we understand that baptism is God's reply to you, then it has a tremendous effect. "Yes, I love you. Yes, you are mine." Oh, thank God!

Once we understand baptism in this way—a formal declaration that God loves the person being baptized—why wouldn't we baptize babies? "Well, they don't understand it," you might say. If we wait until they "understand" to tell them God loves them (or that we love them for that matter), we misunderstand the power and purpose of those words. Those words make themselves understood. Those words, delivered over and over in their infancy, mold and shape a child's developing heart. And the sooner we start, the better.

— PASTOR DIXON

God, we thank you for loving us from even before we drew breath or formed a word on our own lips. Continue to mold us into your people our whole life long. Amen.

Second Sunday in Lent

FEBRUARY 25, 2024

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JONAH 4:1-11

“DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE?”



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2024

DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE?

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

So many love to tout belief in the “complete inerrancy and infallibility” of the Bible. One can usually find it displayed in the “About Us” or “What We Believe” sections of their church websites. Those who do often use it as a proud boast and/or a kind of litmus test of true discipleship.

Sadly, the claim is so misleading. Case in point, we can be quite confident through scholarly evidence that some historical accounts in the Bible likely contain inaccuracies. Furthermore, scripture often includes stories told by multiple authors who contradict one another in certain ways. For example, while the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke include much of the same material about Jesus, they often tell it in slightly different ways or stress different order, chronology, or emphasis.

Those claiming “inerrancy and infallibility” often do zany and ridiculous theological, historical, logical, and even scientific backflips to make things fit into their claim. Meanwhile, for those who are open to scripture primarily as a confession of faith – rather than an idolized rulebook of dos, don’ts, and/or answers to all the world’s questions, scientific, historical, or otherwise – there is a deep, vast richness of literary content centered in the varied and messy experience of God with humanity, which can be prayerfully pondered, critiqued, and even scrutinized in discerning our own relationship to God’s activity in, to, and through us today.

This is where Martin Luther’s claim on scripture is so helpful. He’s known to have said, “the Bible is the manger which holds the Christ,” which is to say, some of it is mere straw. And even so, within that straw and the imperfect and fallible hands which penned its pages, there is a holy encounter with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier in the cross of Christ. Thanks be to God. Keep reading! There is grace amid the imperfections!

– PASTOR RUUD

Author of all life and love, help us to see in the pages of the faithful gone before us that which shows forth the peace which surpasses all understanding and the grace to carry it as food for faith, in Jesus’ name. Amen.



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2024

DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE?

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the seas, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

GENESIS 1:26

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man [Adam] should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he could call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

GENESIS 2:18-19

This fall my daughter received her first "grownup" Bible as part of Mount Oliver's Bible Presentation for all fourth graders. She eagerly began reading from the beginning. It didn't take long for her to exclaim, "That is so weird!" and "This is not what we learned in school!"

The opening chapters of Genesis contain two distinct creation stories, and if we try to read either of them through a modern historical or scientific lens, we will get in trouble quickly. To begin, these stories do not agree. What did God create first, light (Gen. 1:3) or the heavens and earth (Gen. 2:4)? Were humans created after the animals (Gen. 1:24) or were animals created after Adam and before Eve (Gen. 2:18-19)? Is stewardship (Gen. 1:26, 28) or partnership (Gen. 2:18ff.) the primary type of relationship between humans and other creatures? And, didn't it take billions of years (exponentially more than six days) for life to emerge on earth?

The Bible doesn't scientifically explain the origins of the universe, but it does tell us that God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all life. The Bible is not a modern historical book, even though parts of it can be verified historically. The Bible is not a rule book, yet it is chock full of wisdom for daily living. So what does it mean to believe the creation stories? It means to trust that God is the creator, that all of creation is good, and that God delights in and provides for us all.

— REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

God of truth and grace, awaken our faith in Jesus through the words of scripture that we, too, might become witnesses to his love for all creation. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2024

DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE?

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

JONAH 2:10

Is it a story of a whale or a whale of a story?

To this, I remember the words of one fine biblical teacher: “You’re not asking the right question!” You see, people wrote the Bible. And mostly, people wrote it in answer to specific questions of faith. Thus, when reading the scripture, regardless of historicity, imaginative flourish, or seeming impossibility, a better question often is: “What were they seeking to communicate?”

In the case of Jonah and the fish, first, let’s be candid. It’s super funny! Not to mention wild and entertaining! I mean, get this... if being swallowed by an oceanic creature wasn’t enough, Jonah sings in the fish’s belly – a song of praise, no less! God used the fish to save him after all, and so there, in perhaps one of the worst submarines one could imagine, Jonah displays great faith.

If that’s not delightfully inspiring enough, next Jonah is vomited up on the same shore from which he ran in the first place! To recap: Jonah first heard God say, “go to Nineveh,” but instead Jonah runs in the complete opposite direction, boards a boat with salty pagan sailors, endures a storm, and is thrown overboard and left for dead. Then he is gulped by a fish, carried in its gullet for three days, and now, as Jonah sits as fish puke on the beach, he receives another punchline to the story: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh.’” (Jonah 3:1)

...And so, Jonah went to Nineveh. ☺

Was there really a man in history named Jonah who was swallowed by a fish? Heck if I know! Better yet, how much does it matter?! Because you see, that’s not the point. There IS a man named Jonah in the story, and in the story, he IS swallowed by a fish. What fun!

Now, what does the story say about God and us?

Ah, now there’s a great question!

– PASTOR RUUD

God of wonder, continue to open us to faith and truth beyond our pithy reason and stubborn cynicism to encounter more fully your story of love and redemption. Amen.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2024

DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE?

For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young.

PROVERBS 1:2-4

The Bible includes many genres of literature; narratives, parables, prophecies, poetry, wise sayings, letters, and prayers, to name a few. That's part of what makes it fascinating and potentially daunting. One of my favorite sections is the wisdom literature; the Old Testament books of Ecclesiastes, Job, Proverbs, and some of the Psalms. These books aim to shape us into a people who hear, understand, and reflect God's wisdom for daily living. They are highly practical and reorient how we think about "believing" in the Bible.

If we take Proverbs as an example, we see quickly that "believing" every pithy saying is not the point. Some proverbs sound bizarre, if not completely absurd: "The one who lives alone is self-indulgent, showing contempt for all who have sound judgment" (18:11). Are we supposed to believe that living in a home without others is utterly foolish and self-absorbed? If not, what exactly does this mean? How, if at all, does it speak to us today?

Other proverbs are downright offensive, demeaning, and antithetical to how Jesus treated women and people relegated to the margins of society. Consider this one: "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense" (11:22). Yikes.

Sometimes the sayings are contradictory, like these two back-to-back verses: "Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly or they will be wise in their own eyes" (26:4,5). Which is it? Answer or don't answer? I suppose it depends on the context. And surely it takes wisdom to discern if, how, and when to ignore foolishness or take it on.

Simply put, proverbs are enigmatic. Any specific one may not apply to our life situation or our understanding of God's work in the world. But as a whole, these sayings encourage us to ponder big questions as we read scripture: How do I live faithfully and well in this particular situation, context, and relationship? What kind of a person does God call me to be?

– REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

*God of truth and grace, give us wisdom as we read the Bible that we may walk in your ways
and love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.*



FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2024

DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE?

“But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” – Jesus

MATTHEW 5:28-29

“**N**obody takes the Bible literally,” I heard a wonderful New Testament scholar stress recently. She continued, “If people did, there’d be a lot more Christians wearing eye patches!”

Ain’t it the truth? Even the strictest of self-proclaimed “Bible-believing” Christians seem to understand Jesus was being hyperbolic in the statements above in order to make a point. Why then, in other instances where the text could be read as poetic, metaphorical, sarcastic, snarky, purposefully obscure, outdated, or specific to a particular time and place do some insist it must be adhered to and obeyed with ruthless, cold rigidity? My insight and experience tell me it’s usually about desire for power and control.

I remember these verses being scary! What about you? Even if one forgoes the quip about bodily mutilation, who of you reading this devotional wouldn’t be labeled an adulterer based on Jesus’ definition? (Jesus calls out men, but I’m sure ladies aren’t off the hook either!) Jesus’ warning is meant to stir us. The thoughts of our hearts matter. We should certainly beware.

Sadly, at the same time, verses like this have been used to shame so many people, or to justify uncompassionate, unrealistic, and detrimentally unhealthy and incomplete understandings of human sexuality and gender.

While the Bible proclaims the great word of God’s love, hope, presence, and deep relationship with us and the world in the person of Jesus, we must confess the brokenness of humanity it contains and expounds, too. The Bible is holy insofar as it creates faith. That faith is one which always seeks love.

– PASTOR RUUD

Holy One, whose presence and power inspired the scriptures, give us wisdom, compassion, and discernment to lay aside our idolatry of the book in order to hear its witness of faith, in Jesus’ name. Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 2024

DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE?

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.
But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,
and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

JOHN 20:30-31

At the end of John's Gospel, we are told that it was written for a very specific purpose: that we may come to believe in Jesus and experience abundant life in him. This is a key verse for answering our question about believing everything in the Bible.

What (or, who) are we supposed to believe (according to the Gospel of John)? Jesus! Jesus is the Incarnate Word of God, God in the flesh. He is fully God and fully human. His life, death, and resurrection reveal who God is and what God intends for human beings. The Bible is the written word of God that witnesses to Jesus. It points us to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit and written, edited, and configured by many imperfect people over a long period of time. It is a very human book.

What does it mean to believe in Jesus?

1. To see, hear, and trust Jesus as depicted in the Bible.
2. To abide in Jesus, to rest in his love.
3. To depend upon God's grace and receive spiritual nourishment from Jesus through scripture and other means as well.

Believing is relational! To believe is to be attached to Jesus, which is something that God does for us. Believing can (and frequently does) include honest doubting and fierce questioning, because that's a part of all relationships, including our relationship with God.

The Bible, as God's written word, doesn't simply share information with us. It invites us into a shared life with Jesus, God's Word made flesh. So, the next time you are reading and studying the Bible, try reflecting on these types of questions: How does this passage, wise saying, or story invite us into relationship with Jesus? What does it teach us about who God is and who we are? How does it inspire us to become witnesses to God's love?

– REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

God of truth and grace, may we encounter your Son, Jesus, anew this day as we read the Bible and learn together. Amen.

Third Sunday in Lent

MARCH 3, 2024

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JEREMIAH 29:4-11

“DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?”



MONDAY, MARCH 4, 2024

DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

At that very time there were some present who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

LUKE 13:1-5

Many people love to say, “Everything happens for a reason.” I think they generally mean well. I also think we generally feel more comfortable thinking there is a reason for everything rather than accepting life and creation include a fair amount of chance, randomness, or chaos.

The above verses can be confusing, but in them Jesus gives insight. Jesus seems to say there is no particular reason the people in question died so brutally, tragically, and randomly. Were they worse sinners? Did they lack faith? Was God angry with them? To all of these, Jesus gives an emphatic, “No!”

Jesus doesn’t provide alternate answers either. He leaves the “why” hanging. His call to repentance, then, fortifies that life is fragile and the universe can be unpredictable. Evil exists. Random tragedy happens. Therefore, repent now. Live now in the hope and love of God with you in all things before this fleeting life is over. Why? Well, life is better in faith, and tragedy can strike any time.

It can be scary to think of the chance of life. While we don’t get easy answers to the “why,” in the story of God and Christ’s suffering, we receive a God who enters even into tragic chaos and ultimately shows it will not get the final say. It may provide just enough hope to keep living in faith now.

– PASTOR RUUD

God of all creation, help us to accept the things out of our control, to heal from tragedy, and to have faith through all which is unreasonable in life in order to endure in peace, hope, and love. Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 2024

DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

For everything there is a season, and time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-4

As part of my seminary education, I worked as a full-time hospital chaplain for a summer. I learned how to provide pastoral care for people with all types of chronic and acute illness. I remember one case vividly. A nineteen-year-old girl had a life-threatening stroke. Her life went from carefree to fragile in the blink of an eye. I visited her repeatedly. She and her mom boldly proclaimed that her stroke was part of God's plan, divinely orchestrated for a higher purpose. My inner theologian cringed because this seemed to make God the source of her suffering. My outer pastoral presence listened and allowed her space to process her shock and grief.

How can a good and powerful God allow so much suffering in the world? Why doesn't God prevent tragedies? Is there a reason or divine plan for all the heartbreak we endure?

If we are honest, most of us have asked these types of questions at some point in our lives, usually when experiencing tremendous loss of one kind or another. When life is topsy-turvy, we naturally want to make sense of things and re-establish our grounding in trust and hope.

So we cling to reasons like a life raft.

Many of us know the verses above from popular culture if not from the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes. Think of the 1960s song *Turn! Turn! Turn!* by the Byrds that has been remade by many musicians since then. The song quotes the King James Version of the Bible and sneaks in the word "purpose," suggesting that there's a purpose or reason for everything. But that's not actually what the text suggests. How, when, and why we experience sorrow and joy is a mystery. God's presence with us in the midst of every season, however, is sure.

– REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

God of truth and grace, may we know your unfailing presence and trust in your goodness whenever we struggle to understand our suffering. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2024

DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

ROMANS 8:28

Two of my good friends bear the terrible grief of having had their first-born child die of SIDS at three months. It was horrible, and nearly two decades later they, of course, still miss their little one. Any compassionate human can imagine how they will likely carry some sadness their whole lives.

Amid that grief, I've witnessed how their tears and understanding of such a loss have been a balm to others bearing similar grief. My pals have provided validation, accompaniment, comfort, hope, and healing to people in a unique way for which those who have not had the same experience cannot.

The Apostle Paul writes about God's work for good for those who love God. I see this proven true in the goodness my friends provide for others even through their grief. Living in love for God does not protect one from bad events or suffering. At the same time, the story of faith proclaims God can still work for goodness amid the worst this world can offer. This does not mean the grief is negated, nor does it make the tragedy better. The goodness comes in God taking it up into God's self where it can still prove to bring new life.

– PASTOR RUUD

Crucified Lord, you draw all who bear the weight of grief and suffering into you.

In all our trials, help us to both receive and share the goodness you continue to work now and forever. Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2024

DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you."

Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

GENESIS 50:15-21

Perhaps you've heard the story of Joseph's many-colored robe (or technicolor dream coat!), given to him by his father, Jacob, as a sign of his favored status. The gift did not go over well. Joseph boasted, and his ten older brothers seethed with jealousy and resentment. They stripped off his robe, threw him into a pit, and sold him into slavery. He was taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, a government official. Joseph prospered and became a leader in Potiphar's household . . . until Potiphar's wife wrongly accused him of sexual assault. Joseph was imprisoned for over a decade. Then one day, Pharaoh summoned him to interpret his dreams. His accuracy landed him a spot as Pharaoh's chief administrator. Joseph married, had children, and helped save the Egyptians (and his brothers and their families) from a life-threatening famine.

Joseph endured repeated injustice, betrayal, abuse, and trauma. Toward the end of his life, he declared that God intended his suffering for good. Joseph didn't gloss over his brothers' egregious actions. He certainly didn't say that God ordained the abuse or injustice. Instead, Joseph recognized God's presence and provision in the midst of horrific circumstances. God redeemed human failure, transformed lives, and preserved a family whose descendants would become Israel.

— REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

*God of truth and grace, you know our failures, sin, and suffering. Redeem it all by your grace for the sake of your name.
Amen.*



FRIDAY, MARCH 8, 2024

DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

JEREMIAH 29:11

I know the above verse better by its NIV translation which reads “plans to prosper you...” (emphasis added). It was a favorite verse of many American Evangelical peers in my younger days, while it always sounded a little strange to me. I got the sense that people would quote it as if it had been spoken to them individually, bordering on the idea that it was God’s wish and plan for them to be wealthy, prosperous, and a cut above. They also seemed to quote it as if God has a particular, specific, moment-by-moment plan for their lives. Something about that seemed a bit suspicious. Is that really what was being communicated?

A deeper reading of the text illuminates that the verse is a part of a prophetic letter in Jeremiah 29 written to Jewish exiles. It’s a word of hope amid being under control by an opposing power and forced to live in a foreign land. The main gist of the letter encourages the exiles to get on with life there. “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” (29:5-6)

Knowing this, the above verse is more an assurance that God hasn’t given up on the people. It also acknowledges that all of their hopes to go home and get back to the way things were may not pan out in the way the people want. Furthermore, it says, go ahead and live! Seek well-being in the place you’re currently in. God’s wish is for your welfare and safety, even when earthly powers threaten it. It’s not so much a promise of a moment-by-moment detailed itinerary for life, rather a promise of God’s faithfulness, even amid the chaos of unfulfilled hopes.

– PASTOR RUUD

Lord of life, you say you are the way. Help us to follow, living free in the promise that even amid all trials, your faithful heart desires our wellness and safety, in Jesus’ name. Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 2024

DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways, acknowledge God and he will make straight your paths.

PROVERBS 3:5-6

We all experience pain and perplexity in this life. When life throws a wrench into our plans, we want to wield it in order to create a new and better plan. We long for redemption, hope, meaning, and renewed purpose. We often struggle to understand. We seek answers to life's challenges, as if that will somehow make it all better. Sometimes we share well-intentioned but unhelpful platitudes to try and comfort each other: "You will be more compassionate toward others. This will make you stronger. God has a plan. There's a reason for all this."

Many biblical stories demonstrate God's presence and care for people in the midst of death and suffering. Some characters, like Job, lose everything (home, family, health) and then recover it all. Most do not. Amid our desperate search for answers, the Bible reorients us to trust in God, come what may.

Last year, my daughter and I lost someone dear to us. She was diagnosed with a very rare form of cancer, stage 4. Ten months later she was gone. She wrote eloquently about her ups and downs, and, as she fought to survive, she also reiterated a trust in God no matter the outcome. Her faith reminded me of the Apostle Paul and his response to his own suffering. At the end of life, imprisoned in Rome, awaiting his execution, he exuded trust in God. Writing to the church in Philippi, he declared that he had learned to be content in any and all circumstances (Phil. 4:12-13). Far better than having reasons, he had trust in the promises of God, faith in God's capacity to bring good out of evil, again and again.

Trust steadies us. It enables us to live with uncertainty and unanswered questions. It holds us fast in the storms of life and keeps us from fastening our grip on expectations for how life will turn out. So, the next time we frantically search for reasons, perhaps we can slow down, turn our gaze upon God, and share our presence with each other.

– REV. DR. THERESA LATINI

God of truth and grace, may we trust you and rest in you during life's uncertainties, disappointments, and losses. Amen.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

MARCH 10, 2024

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13

"WHAT COMES NEXT?"



MONDAY, MARCH 11, 2024

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.'"

LUKE 14:16-17

What comes next? The truth is, we have no idea. Not really. Scripture uses a ton of different images and metaphors to describe the unimpeded and eternal reign of God: a peaceable kingdom where the lion lays down with the lamb (Isaiah 11), a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21), a time when old relationships are renewed but no longer the same (Matthew 22), and more.

But did you know that the most frequent image used to describe that time when God's reign is fully realized and we live together in the light of God's love is feasting at a banquet? From Isaiah to Luke, and from Matthew to Revelation, biblical authors regularly describe our future life together with God in terms of a meal when we are gathered together in a state of fellowship, contentment, and abundance.

I love that image because it reminds me of some of the really special meals I've enjoyed over the years – at our summer cabin with my parents, siblings, and all our children; with a group of college friends who were all stranded over Thanksgiving and decided to celebrate together; with a close friend to celebrate a birthday by eating and laughing all afternoon. During these kinds of meals – as rare as they are special – time seems to stop, the usual worries of the day recede, and all that seems to matter is those gathered together and the joy you are sharing.

Does that answer all my questions about what comes next? No, not really, but it's enough to help me believe that heaven is less a place than a state of being; that our future life is meant to be lived together, with those we love and who love us; that what will characterize whatever comes next is not an extension of the present but instead the irresistible presence of sheer joy. Yes, that's enough... at least for now.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, let us trust that whatever the future brings, you hold it – and us! – in your hands. Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2024

WHAT COMES NEXT?

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the covering that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

ISAIAH 25:6-8

Some of the most beautiful and poetic imagery in all of scripture comes from prophets. (The prophets also contain some of the most difficult and sometimes horrifying images as well, but that's for another time.) This portion of Isaiah offers an incredible future promise that reminds people of the power of God's speech. Throughout scripture, God speaks and things happen. The world comes into being. Old folks have children. God's people are freed from bondage. God does what God says, so God's word is potent. So, what will the future look like for God's people? A feast... sound familiar? The pall of death that hangs over the world will be removed. Grief, disgrace, and death will be no more.

Isaiah doesn't say how or when this will happen. The details are sparse, but the essentials are here. I hear this described and this is something of which I want to be a part. I want the extravagance and the richness of what this world has to offer. I will be happy to see the difficulty and pain of this place disappear. That sounds good to me. And the fact that God is promising it, gives me faith enough to trust that it will be so. Because God has spoken.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

God, we give thanks for the richness of your promises. In due time you promise to relieve us from the burdens of this life and give to us the fullness of the world to come. Give us strength and courage to care and to tend to one another as we celebrate all you have already given us. In Jesus' name. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2024

WHAT COMES NEXT?

We do not want you to be ignorant and afraid, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-14

Optimism is not the same as hope. While optimism is the belief that things will inevitably get better, hope is the conviction that whether things get better or worse, there will still be a good end. The trouble with optimism is that it is remarkably fragile. Based on being able to predict good things ahead, when the future doesn't play out as planned, our optimistic plans and predictions crumble and dissolve like sandcastles swept away by the incoming tide.

Paul writes the early Christians living in the Greek city of Thessaloniki about what comes next, not to give them an optimistic blueprint of the future, but in order to give them hope. Paul does not offer a recipe to make sure they are "saved" or provide a timeline of events before Jesus comes again, but only says that, because we believe Jesus was raised from death, we believe that God will raise us as well.

Hope. It's exactly what the Thessalonians needed. They thought – as most of the early Christians did – not only that Jesus was coming again, but coming soon; indeed, in their lifetimes. And so, when some members of their congregation died, they didn't just grieve their lost friends, but wondered if they'd believed in vain. That caused them to lose hope, and life is incredibly difficult absent hope!

So beware the optimists – those that feel they can predict the future or are certain they can read the signs of Jesus' return. Because inevitably those predictions, like the first predictions about Jesus' return, will be proved wrong. Instead, remember Paul's promise: because God raised Jesus, we believe God will raise us also! And let that promise, even and especially amid uncertainty, give you hope, the confidence that even when things are at their darkest, the light and life of the God we know in Jesus will prevail.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, anchor us in the promise that you will hold onto us through all things, even death, to new life in you. Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2024

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-57

Through the fifteenth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, he is trying to help them look to the future with confidence. Paul fully expected Jesus to return in his lifetime, but some of the church members are dying and folks are wondering what it all means. Still others are asking, if Jesus will raise those who have died from the dead, what about those of us who are still living?

To both Paul says, look, God can work with whatever we have left. God can raise the dead and transform our finite flesh into something infinite. God can also transform those of us who are still alive into something that will last forever. Don’t worry about the mechanics of it all, the promise remains the same. Because of what God has done in and through Jesus, because Jesus has defeated death, we will too, and we will be with Christ forever.

How? Paul didn’t know. He drew on some of the best imagery he had at his disposal. The call of a trumpet heralded something big, new, and exciting. The promise of death being swallowed up—thanks Isaiah. Paul knew that there was nothing that God could not and would not overcome for us. So, whatever happens to our bodies, whether we live or whether we die, we are and always will be the Lord’s.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

Gracious God, when the stress and worry about what will happen to us and those we love becomes too great to bear, remind us that we are and forever will be yours. Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 2024

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

JOHN 14:8-9

Philip is having a moment. Jesus has just told his disciples that he will soon be going away, that they will not see him again. He also told them that they shouldn't lose heart because he will come back for them in time. All of this sounds well and good, but Philip isn't comforted. He would like some assurance, and so blurts out a request: “Can you just show us the Father? Then we'll be satisfied.” It's a question few faithful Jews would venture, as there is a long list of warnings in Scripture that mere mortals cannot behold the almighty and eternal God and live to tell about it. But Philip asks anyway, out of frustration, fear, and a deep yearning for comfort.

I've heard Philip's question a hundred times over my years as a pastor, usually near the graveside, because Philip's question is another way of asking, “What comes next?” There is something about death – and especially when it is unexpected or comes earlier than imagined – that shakes us to the core and creates in us a desire for comfort, assurance, even proof that there is something beyond this frail and fragile life that we lead.

Notice that Jesus doesn't scold Philip in response to his impertinent question. Of course, neither does he describe what God looks like in lofty and poetic terms or provide some kind of philosophical or theological proof of heaven. Instead, he says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” Rather than offer either philosophical proof or pie-in-the-sky assurances, Jesus offers himself. He offers a relationship. He reminds Philip that they have been together for a long time now, that Philip knows him, that Philip can trust him.

Perhaps that's the best answer to the question we can offer. We do not know with any certainty what comes next. We only know that Jesus will be there, both with us and for us. Jesus will hold onto us. Not a full answer, but perhaps enough to live this life with courage, compassion, and hope.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, remind us that in Jesus you are with us always. Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2024

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them and be their God;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

REVELATION 21:1-4

When I think about what's next, this is the passage that I come back to time and again. I love the way that these few verses invert so much of how we typically imagine life after death. Rather than depicting an escape from the world, John's Revelation imagines the fullness of God making his home here on earth. God's holy city descends from the heavenly realm as a gift for us. God promises to dwell with us. God will be with us, tenderly wiping away tears and defeating death once and for all (hello Isaiah, again). This is, of course, what God is doing in Jesus, coming to us, living with us, sharing life with us, and ultimately defeating death for us. So, it shouldn't be a big surprise that God might do that again at the end of time, but it is still a little shocking. God loves us and this world that much, that God would condescend to live here among us forever. I don't know about you, but I find that incredibly powerful and hopeful, not just for tomorrow, but for today too. It makes me want to take a little bit better care of this place until that day.

– PASTOR CIESLIK

God your all-consuming love for us and this world is quite overwhelming. Help us to see this world, your home, as worthy of being loved. Give us your eyes that we might see one another and this place as you do. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

MARCH 17, 2024

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 3:16-17

“WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?”



MONDAY, MARCH 18, 2024

WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

ROMANS 5:1-8

Some folks live under the delusion that just because we are Christians, we will never experience pain, sorrow, suffering, or heartache. I even heard someone say that if we just have enough faith, we will have abundance beyond our wildest dreams and we will never get sick. I do wonder what color the sky is in their world.

Just because we are Christians doesn't mean we will have a pain-free life. It means, thanks to God's grace, Christ Jesus is with us, as He says in His last words in Matthew, "always." Nothing will separate us from the love of God, which is ours in Christ Jesus. Nothing.

I don't know if we need to go so far as to adopt Nietzsche's statement, "that which does not kill me makes me stronger." I do know that our experiences can benefit others. Through the Holy Spirit, God frees us and empowers us to carry the message of God's amazing grace. God does indeed go to any length to share His love and grace through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

— PASTOR KALLAND

Help us please. Help us Lord to embrace Your love. Help us to continue to share Your love and grace through our experience, strength and hope with others. Help us to carry the message of Your amazing grace and love. And if we need to, let us use words. Thank You Lord...Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2024

WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

LUKE 15:18b-20

Think back, if you will, to a time when you'd done something really, really wrong. And you knew it. Your options were to hope you were never found out, to try and pass the blame onto someone else, to come up with some big, shiny, flowery story/excuse/lie, or to tell the truth. The stakes were so high that you came to the realization that the only way of receiving the forgiveness that you so desperately needed was to come clean, regardless of the consequences. Do you remember the dread that filled your gut? My guess is that you'll never forget it.

Now, what if, on your way to ask for forgiveness, the only person who could grant the forgiveness you so desperately needed came running toward you, wrapped their arms around you, and kissed you? And when you tried to say, "Wait! I have sinned against heaven and you! I am no longer worthy to be called your son/daughter/husband/wife/friend," they looked you in the eye, knowingly, and said, "It doesn't matter. You're home now. You were lost and now you are found."

Can you imagine the relief that would fill your heart and your soul? Jesus knew that we'd all need that kind of big, fat amazing grace at one point or another in our lives, which is why he gave us this parable. Grace this big isn't something that comes naturally to us in this world, we need to study Jesus's words to learn by example. And it seems to me the words, "It doesn't matter, you're home now," are as good a place to start as any.

– PASTOR HAMMERSTEN

Let us pray: Life is hard, Lord. We sin. We mess up. We disappoint ourselves and we disappoint others. Help us to say 'I'm sorry' more often, and to forgive more quickly. For Your sake. Knowing that it is You who runs to us, arms wide open, forgiving with your abundant grace. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2024

WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

ROMANS 3:22b-23

Many of you know that I am the daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of Lutheran pastors. To some, this might seem like nepotism. To others, it might seem like a badge of honor. To others, a curse. To most, it means nothing at all. Though not all of us are Lutheran pastors' kids, all of us have unique stories when it comes to our lives of faith.

Living lives of faith means learning to honor our different faith stories without making distinctions because of them. We live in a world that prides itself on the groups we're part of, the pedigree we're born into, the jobs we have, the income we've earned. Our world longs to make distinctions that will help us stand out. As Richard Rohr says, "the ego loves to compete and compare."

But the apostle Paul reminds us that Jesus came not to strengthen the ego, but to transform the heart. Though sorting and separating people based on abilities, demographics, belief systems, and the like has been the human way since the beginning of time, Romans 3 reminds us, "in Christ there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Jesus teaches us to love and forgive by becoming one with us. Just like Jesus, we learn to love and forgive by becoming one with one another – reconciling our differences and recognizing our similarities at the foot of the cross.

– PASTOR FREEMAN

Dear God, remind us that in you there is no distinction, but only love and grace. Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2024

WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13

Corinthians 13 has been called the great “Love Chapter” of the Bible. It’s often read or shared at weddings, especially the first seven verses (take a moment to read them). It gives us a glimpse of God’s greatest attribute, love. If you replace the word love in the reading with the word God, we get a glimpse of what God looks like and what love looks like. God is love.

Comfort comes to us in verse 12, “For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” One translation has it as, “we see in a mirror dimly.” I take that to mean that on this side of heaven, we won’t completely understand everything. Much remains a mystery, especially the “why” questions. (Why is all this happening to me? Why cancer? Why pain? Why sorrow? Why heartache? Just to name a few.)

In spite of all of this, one thing we know for sure: Jesus the Christ was given to die for u, and in His resurrection, we have the promise of new life today, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life for all our tomorrows. It’s all about God’s grace and love.

– PASTOR KALLAND

*Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Thanks for your great love for us.
Thank you for always being with us. Help us to love Thee more and more. Amen.*



FRIDAY, MARCH 22, 2024

WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

“My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weakness, so that the power of Christ can work through me.”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13

This piece of scripture, more than any other, has always struck me as one of the most important pieces of wisdom in the whole New Testament. The apostle Paul is recounting to the people of Corinth that as he fervently prayed to God to take away the pain in his life, the Lord responded with: “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” These words were an epiphany to Paul, for they made him realize that he didn’t need to live a perfect life, free of pain. Quite the contrary. Paul learned that God would use his weakness for good, so he decided to no longer hide his weakness, but rather, talk about it. “So now I am glad to boast about my weakness, so that the power of Christ can work through me.”

We learn that as we go through life, don’t we? That the more we’re willing to share our pain and our vulnerabilities, the more we’re able to help others? After all, have you ever really been comforted by someone claiming to never have stumbled? This sharing of grace gives life and hope when we need it most.

But then the Apostle Paul goes on to say, “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” Wow. Content with all that? Not so easy. In fact, for most of us, it is darn near impossible. That’s grace at a whole new level.

Now, imagine being dragged, beaten, humiliated, and left to die. And, yet, somehow, someway, you manage to pray these words: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they’ve done.” And you’ll catch the tiniest glimpse into just how amazing grace truly is.

– PASTOR HAMMERSTEN

Let us pray: Dear Lord, help us to be vulnerable with one another. To share our weaknesses knowing that you’ll use these moments to give others hope. Remind us that those who gossip, disrespect, and insult us, are often those most in need of love. Be present in these holy conversations, reminding us that Your grace is all we need, and that Your power works best in our weakness. Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2024

WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

1 JOHN 4:7-8

Dr. Claffin is known for saying, “We learn our faith because we sing it.”

One of the earliest church choir songs I learned is based on 1 John 4:7-8. It’s a song I can still sing today, and it’s the heart of our existence as children of God.

The writer of First John spends much of his letter reminding us that because God is love, we are to love one another.

This is the message of baptism. Love isn’t really what we do. Love is our deepest identity.

Love lives in abundance, not scarcity. Love trusts; it does not fear. Love sees the best; it doesn’t assume the worst. Love is God-given.

Of course, there will always be circumstances that challenge love – voices that tell us we’re not enough, hate and violence that seem to prevail, temptations that divert us from trusting God’s deeper voice of love.

In moments like this, I am heartened by Henri Nouwen’s book, *Life of the Beloved*, where he says just as Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it for the life of the world, Jesus takes us, blesses us, breaks us and gives us to one another in our vulnerabilities to share love with the world.

Ironically, God’s love most clearly shines when we feel we are least able to share love on our own. God’s love is stronger than our own abilities and efforts. God’s love carries us.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.

– PASTOR FREEMAN

Dear God, Thanks for loving us so that we can love others. Amen.

Palm Sunday

MARCH 24, 2024

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 19:29-40

“WHY DID JESUS DIE?”



MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2024

WHY DID JESUS DIE?

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

ROMANS 5:8

While backpacking a number of years ago, I struck up a conversation with another hiker. He was a Christian, a very-confident-eager-to-quote-the-Bible-and-ask-if-you-were-saved kind of Christian. While we were talking – okay, while he was talking – a snake slithered by and he said, “You know, that snake is like our sin. God hates our sin like we hate that snake. And so God crushes our sin by heaping it all on Jesus and crucifying him.”

Confused? Puzzled by the metaphor? So was I. Later, I would learn that his answer actually represents a popular answer to the question of why Jesus died: as punishment for our sin. The logic is as cold as it is simple. God is just and so, must punish sin. We have sinned and so, deserve punishment. But God is also loving. So rather than punish us, God punishes Jesus through the excruciating suffering of the cross. That makes it possible for God to forgive us.

That answer didn't sound right to me, didn't match the story of God I'd learned at church, but at the time I didn't have much of a response. Years later, I would wonder why God couldn't do something we could. We forgive each other regularly. Not perfectly, perhaps, but we certainly don't have to punish each other in order to forgive and love each other. (Imagine life with your family and friends if you had to track each infraction, each unkind word or action, to make sure someone got punished for it – it would be horrible!)

The Apostle Paul offers an alternative to my fellow backpacker's answer. He says that Jesus died on the cross not to make it possible for God to love us, but instead to show us that God already loves us. Jesus didn't die to satisfy God's righteous anger, but rather to express God's parental love. In another passage, Paul writes that Jesus died to reconcile us to God (2 Corinthians 5:18). God didn't need to be reconciled; we did! Jesus died, that is, to break our hearts open to God's love when we see just how far God will go to love us.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, help us to imagine you always as a loving parent. Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 26, 2024

WHY DID JESUS DIE?

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

A pastor friend of mine was caught in some significant turbulence while flying across the country. The person sitting next to him, seeing his black suit and clerical shirt, ventured a question: “Pastor, how do we know God is good?”

That question is harder than we think. Of course, we typically *assume* God is good... until an earthquake ravages a city, tragedy takes the life of a beloved, illness returns to threaten our future... or our cross-country airplane trip suddenly turns turbulent. At those moments, we may indeed wonder whether God is good.

It reminds me of this verse from near the beginning of John's Gospel, the first half in particular: “No one has seen God.” No kidding! At those moments when life suddenly seems more fragile than usual, at those times when our illusions about being in control are shattered, that affirmation is as alarming as it is obvious. But John doesn't stop here. He goes on. “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”

My friend had a similar, if less poetic, response to his fearful fellow traveler: “I don't know for sure that God is good. But I do know that Jesus is. Jesus healed and fed and helped people. He forgave their sins and told them God loves them. And then he died on the cross to show just how much God loves them, all of them, even those who sentenced him to die. Because I believe Jesus was sent to show us who God is, I believe that God is good.”

Martin Luther once wrote that Jesus reveals God's paternal heart. We may call God “King” and “Ruler” and ascribe all majesty and power and honor to God, and we would be right to do so. But at heart, God is a parent, a love-sick, even desperate parent who would do absolutely anything to show us how much God loves us. That's one reason Jesus died – to demonstrate on the cross just how far God will go to show us we are loved.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, when we see the cross, let us remember how much you love us... and everyone else. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2024

WHY DID JESUS DIE?

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff; they comfort me.*

PSALM 23:4

Sometimes we hear that Christ had to die, that there was no other way. That God's wrath was so great, and had to be directed at someone, and of course we—sinners that we are—were the just recipients, but Christ valiantly stepped in front of us to take the hit on the cross.

There is some scriptural justification for this idea (Romans 3, for example), but the dramatic emphasis Christians have put on this understanding of the cross has, on the whole, made people much less likely to trust and love God. It has therefore weakened rather than strengthened faith, I think.

Nevertheless, Christ did die. And voluntarily. And a good and unique purpose was served. Christ's death was not pointless. And none of us could have taken his place and achieved the same benefits. So, what were those? What was the point? Why did Christ die?

Perhaps it is surprising to look to this most familiar Psalm for answers to these questions, but in this fourth verse, I find them. In the Christmas nativity, God entered into our human experience. In the person of Jesus, God lived among us, felt hunger, thirst, joy, and sadness. He hugged, he cooked, he walked long distances, and reclined in the shade. But on Good Friday, in his crucifixion and death, he did something even more foreign to God. He died, as we all must.

But his death was not a "good death," so to speak. It was not quiet and peaceful, with generations of loved ones gathered round his bed. Christ's death was wrong, and tragic, and premature. Through this death, God went beyond our regular experience as mortals on this side of paradise. Through the cross, God entered the most painful dimension of what it means to be human. Into the supposedly godforsaken depths of human experience. Into the valley of the shadow of death.

And now we can trust that even in that supposedly godforsaken place, we are NOT forsaken. God is there, too. With us. For us. And even from that dark depth, God can and will guide us to the right paths, to the house of the Lord. Perhaps that is why He died.

— PASTOR DIXON

God, we thank you for finding and rescuing us even in the darkest corners of the human experience. Remind us always of your promise to bring us home. Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 28, 2024

WHY DID JESUS DIE?

So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

JOHN 11:53

Maybe instead of asking why Jesus died, we could ask today, why did we kill him? The answer is complicated, but this text is a good place to go if you want to meditate on the question.

What leads to the decisive moment in verse 53? What is the pivotal day after which the leaders in Jerusalem decided Jesus must die? It was the day many witnessed Jesus raise a man from the dead.

Jesus performs this, his most profound miracle, in Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus whom Jesus loves. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. He is well and truly dead. In fact, when Jesus asks for the stone to be rolled aside, Lazarus' sister Martha objects, saying her brother's body will have started to rot and produce a foul odor.

But the stone is rolled aside, and with no fanfare at all, Jesus simply calls, "Lazarus, come out!" That's all it takes for this well and truly dead man to be restored to life and walk out into the sunshine.

All this happens in a region in which Jesus has been met with serious hostility. So much that when Jesus decides to answer the call and return there, Thomas (yes, that Thomas) rallies the other disciples, "Let us go also, that we may die with him." Yet at the sight of Lazarus exiting the tomb, many people (who we must assume have been skeptical) begin to believe Jesus was in fact the Messiah. Was that his great offense? Winning over the unbelievers? Is this why he had to die? Or was it simply because he had moved on too far from parlor tricks with water jugs at wedding parties? Now that he was forgiving sins and meddling with life and death, he had infringed too much on Yahweh's sovereignty.

Whatever the reason, from this moment on, they (we) plotted to take his life. Jesus wasn't taken away in a chariot of fire. He didn't die in his sleep. He was killed. Crucified. Why did we do it?

– PASTOR DIXON

God, we you worked wonders while Jesus lived among us, and we give you thanks that the wonder of your love persisted even through his death. Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 29, 2024

WHY DID JESUS DIE?

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

MARK 16:5-6

I have a hunch that most of the hurtful things we do to each other, we do out of fear. Fear makes it hard to stay calm and think rationally. Fear prompts us to be defensive and reactive, to want to hurt others before we get hurt. From Adam and Eve suddenly fearing the presence of the Lord – something that formerly gave them delight – to those first witnesses of the resurrection, so much of our life is corroded by fear.

Little wonder that the angelic message to the women at the empty tomb – Do not be afraid! – is the most common command across Scripture. From Moses' words to the Israelites as they entered the promised land (Deuteronomy 31:6), to Gabriel's words to Mary (Luke 1:30), God banishes our fear with the promise that God is with us, loves us, and will never let us go.

Of all the fears we may face, perhaps the greatest is the fear of dying. And so when Jesus – God's only Son who reveals God's parental, loving heart – comes, he not only teaches and heals, feeds and forgives, he also dies... and then is raised again. Why? To show us that death does not have the last word. This is why the cross and resurrection are at the center of our faith, why Holy Week is so important. To remind us that Jesus dies, just like we do. And to proclaim that Jesus is raised from the dead, just as we one day will be.

If Jesus has defeated death, what is left to fear? Will there be hardships and struggle, loss and grief? Yes. (As well as joy and happiness and contentment and love!) But when we face hardship, we're reminded that the end of our story is a good one, because death is not the end. That promise grants us courage, and that courage allows us to look at others not with fear but with compassion. This, too, is why Jesus died and was raised again.

– PASTOR LOSE

Dear God, grant us resurrection courage so we can live with confidence and compassion. Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 2024

WHY DID JESUS DIE?

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

ROMANS 5:8

Some mornings—as I’m artfully distributing chocolate chips and walnuts and banana slices in the pancakes I’ve got on the griddle for my kids—I think to myself, “Do they deserve this?” And the answer that comes to me, as I hear the sounds of wrestling and the inevitable crash of yet another lamp in the next room is, of course, “No.” But they still get their banana/walnut/chocolate chip pancakes with butter and maple syrup because they are my wild animals – er, I mean children. Because I love them. And love is gracious, and generous. Perhaps foolishly so.

This scene is a pale, breakfast-y impression of God’s love for us through Christ. Why did Jesus die? It is easier for me to answer that when I remember *for whom* Jesus died. Of this I have no doubt. He died for you and for me. Because we deserved it? No. Why did Jesus die? Quite simply, because he loves us.

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Our sin made his death necessary. Why exactly? I do not know. But I know that if we had been capable of earning his sacrifice, we would not have needed it. And so out of great love, he did this for us. He gave us more than we deserved. In full knowledge that we would break all manner of lamps, all over the world, all throughout the ages, he served up his own life.

– PASTOR DIXON

God, help us to remember with humility that you have given us so much more than we deserve, and help us in turn to deal with each other more generously as fellow heirs of your abundant love. Amen.

Easter Sunday

MARCH 31, 2024

WORSHIP:

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

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

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 24:13-35

"THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD"



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