

MOUNT OLIVET  
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL  
2026

ENCOUNTERING  
JESUS





## INTRODUCTION

For nearly all of Christian history, the 40 days of Lent have been set apart to focus on the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the dark events that transpire there. All four Gospels are unanimous in their testimony that Jesus goes to the capital city and center of Judaism knowing full well that when he arrives, he will be arrested, tried, condemned, and crucified. But he goes anyway, as the climax and conclusion of his ministry to announce that God's love cannot be contained to any one group, whether ethnic or religious, but is for all.

John's Gospel is, without a doubt, the most distinct of the four in his witness to what happened when Jesus goes to Jerusalem and, more importantly, what those events mean. John writes to a group of Christians who are struggling with uncertainty, chaos, and division in their community and look for reassurance. John, that is, writes to people not all that different from us.

This Lent, you are invited to read through John's account of Jesus' passion not simply as a bystander, but as a witness, someone deeply invested in the events that transpire. As you read, think about what John's story means to you, what difference it makes, and how Jesus' sacrificial death impacts you. For we, like John's original audience, need to hear the promise that Jesus is for us.

Two additional notes:

1. As you enter these devotions, it's important to remember that John is not trying to write as a historian or journalist in our modern sense, committed to getting every element of the story as accurate as possible. Rather, John writes as a witness, seeking to weave the events of Jesus' life, elements of the Jewish tradition, and his convictions about the cosmic significance of Jesus' death together into a story that rooted early Christians in their faith. And we continue to read, and be strengthened by, his testimony today.
2. The 40 devotions here cover the 18th and 19th chapters of John's Gospel. If you can find even five to seven minutes, you might enjoy reading those chapters as a whole before delving into the more focused devotions. Either way, however, I hope you will be encouraged by John's witness that in and through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God makes manifest his love for the world!

– PASTOR LOSE

*Daily devotions written by Pastor Lose.*

*Family Focus for Lent (pages 2 & 3) written by Katy Michaelitz, Director of Children & Family Ministry.*

## FAMILY FOCUS FOR LENT

What is Lent? Lent is a season of the church during the six weeks before Easter Sunday, beginning on Ash Wednesday and running for 40 days (minus the Sundays). Lent represents the time Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights fasting in the desert. It's a time at Mount Olivet when we prepare for Easter and contemplate the sacrifice that Jesus makes for each and every one of us in his death and resurrection.

### LET'S TALK

Some people choose to give something up during Lent as a way of being mindful of the season. It might be a favorite food or treat, it might be a habit or hobby they enjoy (shopping, social media). The goal of the activity is to reset and re-place our trust in God.

- Do you know anyone that gives something up for Lent? Have you ever asked them about it and what it means to them?
- If you were going to give something up, what would it be? Why would giving it up feel like a challenge to you?

Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the desert without food or drink or shelter.

- What would that look like?
- What might that feel like?
- What do you think Jesus prayed for when he was in the desert?

## **ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS**

Some families choose to be more intentional with their time or energy during the season of Lent and take on a new challenge or activity. Listed below are a few ideas your family might like to try during Lent:

- **40 bags in 40 days:** You pick the size of the bag, and, as a family – purge your household! Get the whole family involved in finding items to give away, donate, repurpose, or recycle!
- **40 Acts of Kindness:** There are many ways to be kind to a friend, classmate, neighbor, stranger, or co-worker. Get creative and feel good about making someone's day better for them.
- **40 Days of Connection:** Think of one way you can connect with family or friends per day. Maybe this is sharing a meal, using FaceTime to check in, meeting for a walk, sending a note or text, or sharing highs and lows in the car. Think of all the fun you could have catching up with people near and dear to your family!
- **Attend a Worship Service** during Lent that you have never been to at Mount Olivet, perhaps The Living Lord's Supper on Thursday, April 2. All Holy Week offerings are listed on page 45.
- **Serve Others:** Volunteer as a family on Saturday, March 28, at either campus to support Easter for All. Opportunities include unloading and sorting food donations, assisting in assembling baskets, and delivering baskets to families. More information and registration available at [mtolivet.org](http://mtolivet.org)!
- **Focus on Prayer:** Learn a new prayer, try a new way or time of day to pray. You could pray together before meals, pray the Sending Prayer from church together before heading out in the morning, or pray the Lord's Prayer before bed.

*After Jesus had spoken these words...*

JOHN 18:1a

**W**hat words?

There is a long-standing debate among careful readers of the Bible about whether the passion narratives in each of the Gospels should start before or after the Last Supper. Is the time Jesus spends with his disciples in fellowship and predicts his impending tragedy part of the passion narrative proper, or should it be viewed as its own discreet scene?

John is the Evangelist who probably most complicates how you answer this question. Because most of the second half of John's Gospel is actually given over to an extended overview of Jesus' last meal with his disciples and the passion. The last supper – note, although there is certainly a last supper, there is no institution of the “Lord's Supper” in John – consumes chapters 13-17, and the passion narrative then begins with this verse in chapter 18 and runs through the end of 19.

“These words,” therefore, may mean the close of the prayer Jesus just offered to his heavenly Father that takes up all of chapter 17, or it may be the whole of what is called “the farewell discourses” from chapters 14-17 where Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure. My guess is that John uses “these words” more expansively to take in all of the conversations he has had with his disciples that dark Thursday evening.

The heart of that conversation is about love, obedience, and God's promise of comfort after Jesus departs. Jesus tells the disciples that the new commandment he gives is that they should love one another. Indeed, if they love him, they will obey his words and love one another (15:10-13). He tells them that God will not leave them orphaned but will send the Advocate, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth to them to remind them of Jesus' words and to empower them to be faithful (16:4-15). And he prays to God to hold onto them during the turbulence that will come (17).

This conversation is one offered in hushed tones, describing difficult moments to come, but also promising help and strength. And it's just after “these words,” that the drama of our Lord's passion begins.

*Dear God, fasten our eyes on the story of your Son's great love, that we may learn to love one another in word and deed. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2026

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*After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.*

JOHN 18:1

In John, there is a clear transition, as we noted, between Jesus' last meal with his disciples and the commencement of events leading to his crucifixion. The drama that the Church has called "the Passion" begins with Jesus' journey to this place, a garden across the Kidron valley. Interestingly, John is the only one to describe this place as a garden. While we are used to naming this spot "the garden of Gethsemane," that's actually a conflation of designations found in the gospels. Mark and Matthew call the place simply Gethsemane – no mention of a garden – while Luke names it as the "Mount of Olives" – no mention of a garden or Gethsemane.

Why does this matter? Not, I should be clear, because of any worries about inconsistencies among the evangelists. I've said on many occasions that we are far better off regarding the gospels as first-century confessions of faith rather than as twenty-first century histories. For this reason, when there are differences between accounts, the question of "who got it right?" doesn't serve us nearly as well as asking instead, "what is this evangelist confessing?" And in this case, I think John's description of this place as a garden is telling.

John, it should be noted, shares with us no temptation scene. Mark, Matthew, and Luke all report that, after Jesus' baptism and before his public ministry commences, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness for forty days. Not so, John. Rather, that temptation – or at least the hour of Jesus' trial – comes now, in a garden that is likely intended to remind us of the Garden of Eden. Keep in mind that John, through his gospel, is in many ways re-telling the history of Israel. Hence, he begins his story with the first words of Genesis, "In the beginning..." and at various points makes strong allusions to the Exodus account.

So also, I believe, he is at this point in the story calling to mind that other garden, Eden, where the story of the tragedy of human disobedience, sin, and suffering begins. So John, as author and artist, wants us to know just how high the stakes of this story are. For when we watch events unfold, we are watching a replay of history, a second chance, as Jesus intercedes – and changes! – the history of humanity's interactions with God and, as a result, our very destiny.

*Dear God, you sent Jesus to be a second Adam, the one who stands with and for all humanity, and we can only give thanks that he does so in grace and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2026

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*Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples.*

JOHN 18:2

**O**ne final introductory note setting the stage not just for this scene but for the whole of the passion narrative: *What happens next is not an accident.*

Notice that Jesus goes to a place he knows, a place his disciples know, a place Judas knows. We might go further and say that Jesus goes to a place he knows Judas knows. That is, if Jesus were looking to hide or had hoped to escape this fate, he would not have crossed the Kidron valley to stay in this garden that he knew Judas also knew.

But he does. He goes there knowing full well what may happen.

There are, I believe, two kinds of courage: the kind that reacts suddenly and bravely to a situation of danger and distress, and the kind that sees danger looming long off and does not change course. Jesus, in this scene, exhibits this second kind of courage. He sees the cross ahead of him and does not swerve, though the opportunities to do so were countless.

Which means, among other things, that all that is to happen in the coming hours is no tragic accident, but rather an intentional act of courage and love. That matters because, in John's Gospel, Jesus plays a particular and significant role: to reveal to all the world who God is. For this reason, John ends his introduction (1:1-18) with these words: "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."

That is Jesus' mission: to make the invisible God known, and he does that through his teaching, healing, feeding, and preaching. But he does that most fully through his passion, death, and resurrection. And none of this is accidental, but rather display the intentions of a God who will stop at nothing to love us into new life.

*Dear God, just as Jesus refused to turn away from his destiny and instead embraced the challenges ahead in courage and love for our sake, let us see those around us in need and bear their challenges also in courage and love.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2026

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*After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "For whom are you looking?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "For whom are you looking?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth."*

JOHN 18:1-7

**E**vents move quite quickly. Judas comes out to meet Jesus with, John says, "a cohort of soldiers." It's easy to miss the significance of the word "cohort," as it was a standard military unit in the Roman army composed of 600 soldiers. Yes, you read that right. In John's dramatic retelling of Jesus' story, Judas comes to meet Jesus with 600 soldiers.

And what happens next, though also easy to miss, is rather stunning. In particular, notice what Jesus says when this group tells him they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth: "I am he," Jesus replies simply. But it was actually even more succinct. In the original Greek John used, it's really just two words: "I am." And that terse statement would remind faithful Jews of another question and answer scene in the Bible, way back in Exodus when Moses meets God at the burning bush and asks for God's name. God answered Moses with the same terse phrase: "I AM," a name that represents absolute freedom.

Which is essentially what Jesus is claiming here, answering with the Divine Name, the name so holy that faithful Jews do not utter it aloud. And did you notice what happens when Jesus claims his kinship with God? All 600 soldiers fall to the ground, literally bowled over by Jesus' pronouncement.

This is, once again, John the supreme artist, retelling the story of Israel in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and making sense of Jesus' life and death in light of Israel's story. Why? Because, as a faithful Jew, Israel's story is John's story. It is the only story that really matters. Yet, as a follower of Jesus, John believes it has a better ending than he could ever have imagined. And he wants us to know that.

*Dear God, let us discover in the story of Jesus our story, the story of our life caught up in your love and purpose.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# First Sunday in Lent

FEBRUARY 22, 2026

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

*TRUE DISCIPLES*

JOHN 8:12, 31-36

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2026

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*Again he asked them, "For whom are you looking?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me."*

JOHN 18:7-9

**W**e've already noticed some of the differences between John's account of the passion and that of the other three evangelists. Actually, each Gospel is quite distinct, differing from the others at numerous points both small and large. As we've said throughout our devotional reading, these differences give us clues as to the particular interest and theological aim of the evangelist.

And one of the particular concerns of John, as we've seen, is to demonstrate to his readers – those in the first century as well as those in the twenty-first – how Jesus is God's messiah, fulfilling the promises God made to Israel and revealing God's paternal heart. And nowhere is this concern more evident than in John's presentation of the last events of Jesus' life.

Hence, John will consistently point out where various elements of what happens to Jesus fulfill previous prophecies. At the same time, John's telling of the story is shaped by his own memory of Jewish Scripture. In this case, for instance, Jesus' exchange with those who have come to arrest him corresponds, in John's treatment, to a portion of Scripture from Israel's past. At the same time, John's love of Scripture shapes how he tells the story, influencing some of the distinct details, small or large, he offers. And so his order to his captors – and it's striking that even when soldiers come to arrest him Jesus is still clearly in charge – reverberates with the past promises of God.

Throughout this narrative, John's concern – shared by all the evangelists – is the same: that we might see in Jesus' words and deeds God's grace poured out for us and all the world.

*Dear God, let us attend to the story of your Son so that, hearing of your love, we are equipped to live in hope and confidence and treat others as you have treated us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2026

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*Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"*

JOHN 18:10-11

**H**aving spoken yesterday about how differences between the Gospels give us clues to their intent, it's important for us to recognize in these verses one of the most distinct differences between John's Gospel and the other three. In each of the other three narratives, the Evangelists describe Jesus' moments before his arrest as a time of moral and existential trial. More than that, each shares Jesus' agonizing prayer that "this cup would pass from me" and his obedient acceptance of his fate, "not my will but your will be done." (See Mark 14:36, Matthew 26:39, and Luke 22:42.) This is the account with which most of us are familiar.

Yet in John's story of Jesus, things couldn't be more difficult. There is no time of existential anguish, no petition for his disciples to pray with him, no invitation to stay awake to wait and watch, and certainly no prayer that he be spared this hour. Indeed, this hour is the one that John's whole Gospel has pointed to, as his crucifixion is the very vehicle for him to be "raised up" in a peculiar yet powerful form of "glory."

John's Jesus is, quite frankly, a powerful Jesus, not susceptible to anguish or temptation, and eagerly embracing his destiny of fulfilling Scripture and in this way redeeming the world God loves so much. And so far from praying that this cup would be removed, in this scene Jesus asks a stunned Peter, who had just done violence in order to protect his Lord, "Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?"

Everything he has done thus far has led to this moment, and so Jesus is not about to have Peter muck it up by a misguided attempt to spare him. Jesus' mission, according to John, is not just a mission but a quest, a confrontation with evil, a battle to the death with death itself that he might wrest victory and life from the "prince of this world."

"Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?" Or, in other words, "Game on!"

*Dear God, in our moments of weakness and doubt, let us remember Jesus' strength and victory and find confidence and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2026

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*The slave's name was Malchus.*

JOHN 18:10b

**W**ho was Malchus?

That's an easy question to overlook amid the drama of Jesus' encounter with those who have come out to arrest him.

But I think it's also an important question. Because while we don't know with any certainty who exactly Malchus was – we have no records within or outside of the Bible other than John's testimony – we nevertheless know he was a person, a person who had a name and, likely, a family and friends and community.

Actually, we might imagine that he was somehow known, and perhaps even connected, to John's community. Why else, one might wonder, mention him?

Might Malchus, whom John reports was the servant to the high priest, have become a disciple of Jesus after these events? Might he have been a leader in the community for whom John eventually writes? Might his testimony and faith have shaped John's presentation of the Gospel?

Truth be told, we can't answer any of these questions with confidence. But we can remember that John wrote about actual people and that he wrote to actual people. And that helps us remember that the Gospels – and most especially this narrative about the passion of our Lord – was not written as a dispassionate or objective account of “just the facts.” Nor was it written in a vacuum. It was written as a personal confession of faith about not just what happened, but about why what happened still matters. Why it mattered to someone like Malchus...and why it matters to someone like you.

*Dear God, as we read Scripture let us remember that it was written by real people and for real people so that we might hear your living Word addressed this very day to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2026

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*So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.*

JOHN 18:12-14

**O**f the four evangelists, John is the one with the strongest sense of narrative. His use of symbolism, metaphor, and plot development make his account often read like a novel. Which is part of what explains this scene on two levels.

First, these few verses serve as a transition from the high drama of the arrest to the more tempered but also more ominous trial scenes. But within this transition, John also identifies some of the key players, almost as an aside but with an eye to reminding his audience of who's who in the larger story of Jesus' passion. In this case, John identifies Annas and further links him to the high priest Caiaphas.

Second, John uses these verses to remind his readers of a critical moment of foreshadowing that had happened earlier in the story. Immediately after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, his opponents debated how to respond to the threat that Jesus represented. Amid this discussion, Caiaphas interrupts and tells them that it is better "to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (John 11:50).

Caiaphas, of course, believes he is advancing political strategy. But John sees things differently, and comments as the narrator, "He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (John 11:51-52).

And so now, as we transition from the arrest to the trial, John the master story-teller reminds us of these words so that they may serve as a preface of all that is to come, so that all who believe will see that, indeed, it was better for one man to die than for a nation to be destroyed. Thanks be to God.

*Dear God, when we read the story of your Son's passion, let us be reminded again of your love for us and the whole world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2026

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*Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in.*

JOHN 18:15-16

**T**his is not the first time we hear about “another disciple.” But it is the first time we hear about him in the Passion. John introduces us to this unnamed – and, apart from John’s Gospel, unknown – disciple when Jesus shares a last meal with his followers. John describes him in that scene also as “one of the disciples,” but adds that he is “the one Jesus loved.” He sits beside Jesus at the last supper in a place of honor (John 13:23).

Who is this other disciple? Truth be told, we don’t know. But we might guess that it is the disciple who founded this community of believers for whom and to whom John writes. I have wondered if it was his preaching of Jesus’ words and stories, in fact, that formed the heart of John’s own testimony. We don’t know for sure, as he goes unnamed, but it’s safe to assume that John and his community not only knew him well but also loved him deeply.

Which is probably why he occupies such an interesting place in the company of disciples, and especially in relation to Peter. In this Gospel as in the others, Peter plays a pivotal role. But so does this other disciple, the one Jesus loved. And so here in this scene, Peter has access to the courtyard where he will fulfill Jesus’ dark prediction about him only because he is in the company of this other, unnamed but clearly important, disciple.

It is John’s way, I think, of inviting his readers – and, indeed, all those who have read his Gospel ever since – to remember and give thanks for this other disciple, one perhaps not as famous as Peter but nevertheless important to this community and instrumental to the story at hand.

*Dear Lord, across the centuries your kingdom has advanced chiefly by those whose names are no longer remembered. Let us give thanks for them, even if we do not know their names, for we believe in part because of their faithfulness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2026

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*The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.*

JOHN 18:17-18

**T**he charcoal fire will come back later in John's story and remind us of this moment. For now, though, it serves only as a place of relative warmth and comfort on a chilly evening. So the servants of the high priest and some of the police are warming themselves by it. And with them is Peter.

Which is curious, when you think about it. Presumably Peter followed Jesus in order to know what would happen to his Lord, perhaps even to try to protect him. But here he remains, warming himself by the fire. Perhaps he could not go inside. Perhaps he assumed Jesus would be brought out again. Perhaps he is just really, really cold.

Or perhaps he is already regretting his hasty decision to follow Jesus to this dangerous place. Perhaps he is wondering what in the world he was thinking. For if Jesus has been arrested and taken away to trial, might not any of his disciples similarly be arrested?

That seems, at least, to be his thought when a woman asks him if he was one of Jesus' disciples. In response, Peter, who earlier had told his Lord that he would lay his life down for him, now denies that he even knows him. It's hard to blame Peter. His life was unmistakably in danger and he was undoubtedly – and understandably – afraid.

Fear is a debilitating thing. It can make you forgo previous commitments, break promises, take the easy way forward, choose what you know is wrong in order to avoid ridicule or danger, and threaten to overwhelm you so that you forget even who you are. And sometimes, it can urge you to choose the comfort of a warm fire and convenience of a small lie rather than stand for the truth you confessed.

*Dear God, grant us courage in the face of fear that we may hold onto our confession of faith in word and deed.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Second Sunday in Lent

MARCH 1, 2026

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

*HEALING A MAN BORN BLIND*

JOHN 9, SELECTED VERSES

MONDAY, MARCH 2, 2026

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*Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said."*

JOHN 18:19-21

**J**ohn's story of the last hours of Jesus' life, as we have noticed at several points already, is strikingly different than that of the other evangelists. Jesus' attitude and actions during his trials – plural, as there will be several – is one of those distinct elements.

The other evangelists regularly portray Jesus as nearly silent in his encounters with his accusers. But not John. Here, Jesus answers forthrightly, even daringly, turning the tables on his questioner and directing them to find their own answers.

John's Jesus, in short, is rather authoritative, even feisty. You'd never be able to tell from the tenor and tone of his response that he was the one on trial. Rather, it feels far more like he is in control of the whole situation. And that is a key dimension of John's portrayal of Jesus. He is in charge. From start to finish, there is little question of whether or not this is some tragedy spinning out of control. Rather, Jesus is the primary actor throughout, moving steadfastly toward his destiny with no hesitation whatsoever.

Why this emphasis on a strong Jesus? Perhaps because John's community was feeling rather weak at that moment. Scholars have suggested that John's was an orphan community, a group of Jews who had become followers of Jesus but continued for some time in the Synagogue and were eventually thrown out to fend for themselves. And amid the self-doubt and lack of confidence this created, John wants to offer them the promise that the Jesus who did not falter will see them through their trials as well.

And, apparently, that helped, as we have today the legacy of John's writing and Jesus' promises to this early community of believers, a word that still brings hope and courage to us today.

*Dear God, inspire us with John's witness as you have inspired countless generations of disciples that we may hold fast to our confession in word and deed. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2026

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*When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.*

JOHN 18:22-24

**A**nd then comes the repercussions for those audacious words.

John's Jesus, unlike the portrayals offered in the other three Gospels, does not stay silent during his interrogation, but instead answers with a boldness that reminds readers – and probably those in attendance – who is really in charge of this situation.

In response, one of the police strikes Jesus, reprimanding him for not addressing the chief priest with sufficient respect. But notice that Jesus is undeterred by this excessive use of force. Rather, he challenges the police officer with pretty much the same message he offered the high priest, defending the truth of his testimony and challenging them to meet him at the level of truth rather than accusation, irritation, or hearsay.

This has been a theme in John's Gospel from the beginning: that Jesus has come to bear witness to the truth. The truth of God's grace, the truth of God's love, the truth of God's availability to all who seek God, the truth that God will not be contained to the Temple or even to one faith tradition, the truth that in Jesus God has come to save the world.

And Jesus, as the preeminent witness to – but also embodiment of – this truth, can do nothing else but continue to speak it, no matter what the cost. This commitment to bear witness to the truth is what got him in trouble in the first place, of course. And this is what will lead him to death...and us to life.

*Dear God, we give thanks for Jesus' commitment to the truth and ask that you grant us courage to bear similar witness and to stand with those who are oppressed for telling the truth of their experience. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 2026

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*Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.*

JOHN 18:24-27

**P**eter, still warming himself by the charcoal fire outside the high priest's quarters, is asked a second time whether he is one of Jesus' disciples, and again he denies it. Then another person stands up to question him, who was actually at the garden and related to the man whose ear was cut off by, we should note, Peter. And so, it would look like the jig is up, but Peter sticks to his story and denies the accusation once more. Except he's not just denying an accusation; he's denying his Lord. And when he hears the cock crow, he realizes he has just fulfilled the one prophecy he couldn't imagine coming true.

Think about that for a moment: as a follower of Jesus, Peter has believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of so many of Israel's prophecies about the coming Messiah. But when Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him, he cannot believe it. In fact, he has already promised Jesus that he would follow him to the end by laying down his life for him.

This is one of those stories in Jesus' passion that all four evangelists share. Which means that it really, really mattered to the early church that this story of Peter's failure be told. Peter the one on whom, Jesus said, he would build his church. Peter, who was the chief disciple and close associate of Jesus. Peter, the leader, who had enough courage to follow Jesus to his trial but failed when the test came.

Why was this story so important to share? Because, I think, it reassures all of us who would follow Jesus that heroic faith is not a requirement to be a disciple. Peter failed. We will fail. Yet the one on trial, even as Peter denies him, will yet save us all.

*Dear God, grant us courage in our times of trial. And when we falter and fail, assure us of your grace.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2026

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*Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.*

JOHN 18:28

It's interesting that John points out that the religious leaders won't go into Pilate's headquarters because they did not wish to defile themselves. Perhaps it seems odd, too. So maybe a note of explanation may help.

Part of the Jewish legal code was a set of rules related to what was ritually clean and what was not. We sometimes have a hard time understanding the importance and function of such rules and so they seem odd to us. But it might help to think of them as similar to some of our favorite or important traditions. Many of our families have traditions, especially about holidays. What is served for Thanksgiving or Christmas. When we open the presents. Who sits where at the holiday dinner table, and so on. These traditions are important because they remind us of who we are and what family we're a part of.

While not exactly the same, rules about Passover and other festivals and celebrations are somewhat similar. That is, Jews didn't believe so much that keeping these rules made them righteous before God, as Christians sometimes misunderstand. Rather, keeping these rules was a part of their identity, it marked them as God's people, and reminded them that they had been set apart by God to be blessed in order to be a blessing to the world. The cluster of rules relating to purity and cleanliness, particularly in relation to religious festivals, helped to orient them to their primary identity in a confusing time in their history.

To enter the home of a Gentile after they had already prepared themselves for Passover undid those preparations and made them ritually unclean. And so they stayed on the outside. That's the point of what John is telling us.

At least it's part of the point. The rest will come as we read through this wonderfully complex scene.

*Dear God, help us remember and reclaim our identity as those you have also blessed to be a blessing.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2026

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*Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)*

JOHN 18:28-32

**B**ecause the religious authorities will not go into the headquarters of a Gentile just before Passover, Pilate comes out to them, curious about the affair unfolding before him and eager to learn exactly what is going on and what is expected of him. For this reason, he requests to know what accusation Jesus' accusers have leveled. Their answer is intriguing. Or, rather, their non-answer is quite revealing. They offer no specific accusation, but simply assure Pilate that Jesus is guilty. But guilty of what?

This exchange highlights one of the themes of John's story: Jesus has done nothing wrong. Except that, by his revelations about God's mercy and accessibility, he has called the religious status quo entirely into question. Jesus has, according to John, come as a witness to the truth, and only those who are afraid of the truth have need to fear Jesus. And, apparently, there are a lot of folks afraid of the truth that God is available not just to the powerful or religiously pious, but to all.

At the close of this exchange, we discover the real intent of the meeting as, when Pilate suggests they take Jesus and the judge and punish him according to their law, they reply that they are not permitted to put anyone to death. They want Pilate, that is, to play the role of executioner.

But again, why? Because Jesus bears witness to a God who wants to be accessible and available to all of us. If you think you've cornered the market on God – whether through religious rituals and hierarchies in the first century or by demanding that we “invite Jesus into our heart” or be “born again” in the twenty-first century – the news that God loves us all, unconditionally, can be incredibly unsettling.

*Dear God, when we see the light of Jesus, let us not be afraid, but both confess our short-coming and receive your grace, mercy, and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

SATURDAY, MARCH 7, 2026

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*Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."*

JOHN 18:33-36

**J**ohn's depiction of Jesus before Pilate is, quite frankly, theologically dense, so it will help to slow down and unpack this scene a bit.

Unsatisfied, perhaps, by the answers offered by Jesus' accusers, Pilate demands an account from Jesus himself and asks him quite specifically whether he is "the King of the Jews." But Jesus is having none of it, pushing the question back in Pilate's face, asking him, essentially, why he wants to know. His response reminds Jesus that it's his own people who have sent him here for death.

At this point, Jesus answers Pilate's original question, saying that he is indeed a king, but not of this world. And this, I think, is where things can get confusing. If Jesus is not king of this world, what world is he king of? Heaven? Our hearts? What?

I think our confusion may stem from equating "kingdom" with a place. Do you know what I mean? This world. Heaven. Our hearts. We think of a kingdom as a location. But perhaps it is more about God's authority and rule. That is, Jesus' kingdom is wherever God's authority rules and God's will is being done. And Jesus' followers are those who live according to the rules and logic of God's kingdom wherever they are.

Which means, among other things, that you can participate in God's kingdom right now, wherever you are sitting, riding, walking, working. Look around. Ask yourself what God sees, what God would have you do, how God might use you to love and bless the people all around you. And when you do, you will sense Jesus joined to you, connected to you, with you, at work through you, inviting others into God's kingdom.

*Dear God, let us sense your voice leading us and your hand guiding us to love those around us as you have loved us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Third Sunday in Lent

MARCH 8, 2026

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

*THE GOOD SHEPHERD*

JOHN 10, SELECTED VERSES

MONDAY, MARCH 9, 2026

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*Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."*

JOHN 18:36

**O**ne more thought on Jesus' declaration that his kingdom is not of this world. I have often read Jesus' statement that, "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over..." as a statement disavowing his connection to this kingdom and world. That is, if this conflict were happening in his kingdom, then indeed his followers would fight, but since it was happening in this other kingdom, a kingdom that cannot keep hold of him, his followers do not get involved.

But a colleague suggested another way to look at this passage, suggesting that Jesus' declaration testifies to his rejection of violence as part of God's kingdom. That is, Jesus is saying that were he of this world – the world of tyrants and emperors and might-makes-right – then he would have followers willing to fight for him. In this world, the ends justify the means, even violent means. But perhaps Jesus is rejecting that philosophy altogether, testifying that God's kingdom simply cannot be brought about by violence.

And we saw an example of that just a few verses earlier. Peter is ready to fight, ready to kill, to protect Jesus. And Jesus just won't let him. Jesus' kingdom is different from the kingdom of the world. Why? Recall the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. And hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." Similarly, King described nonviolence as "a powerful and just weapon that cuts without wounding and ennoble the one who wields it." King's logic, you see, is the logic of the kingdom Jesus proclaims.

Pontius Pilate, of course, would have been utterly dumbfounded by such reasoning. All he knows is a world of power through violence. But Jesus invites another way to think of power, and that is the road of power through vulnerability, power through love. It was utterly foreign to Pilate and is often quite foreign to us as well. Which is why Jesus ultimately doesn't just invite this way of thinking, but rather lives it; or more accurately, dies modeling it so that we may see God's vindication of him and the way of love in the resurrection.

*Dear God, having shown us the power of love in the death and resurrection of your Son, teach us how to love others that we may walk the way of peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 2026

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*Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"*

JOHN 18:37-38a

**J**esus continues to call into question everything Pilate thought he knew.

Given this talk of kingdoms, perhaps it's natural that Pilate will ask Jesus again whether he is a king. Pilate seems to be pressing his attack. Now that he has gotten Jesus to admit that he has a kingdom, he can come back to the question of whether he is the king of the Jews.

Or maybe it's just that Pilate can't think in any other way. Perhaps he is so dominated by his sense of power and military might as the only way by which to exercise authority that he can't really engage Jesus along any other lines.

But just as Jesus redefined the nature of kingdom – not simply a place, but wherever the will of God is exercised; and not achieved by violence but by sacrificial love – Jesus now redefines what it means to exercise authority: it is to tell the truth, to bear faithful witness to the One who sent you. Authority, keep in mind, has at its root the word "author." We exercise authority when we are faithful to, and bear witness to, the intentions of the author, the one who sent us on behalf of the world.

Jesus comes to bear witness to the truth, the singular truth that God loves this world and wants all of God's beloved children to flourish. That's it. Jesus comes as the Revealer, the one who makes God most fully known to us, so that we might know God's love and in turn love one another.

Love, vulnerability, sacrifice? These are not words or concepts with which Pilate is familiar. And this talk of truth makes him perhaps the most uncomfortable of all. So rather than ask Jesus more, either pressing his attack once again or seeking to learn something new, he instead backpedals, straying into the territory of convenient ambiguity, and employs one of the great dodges of all time, asking "what is truth?"

You know the truth, Pilate. And so do we. The question is not what is truth, but whether we will hear and follow.

*Dear God, let us hear your word of truth and follow it by receiving your love and sharing it with all those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2026

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*After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.*

JOHN 18:38b-40

**A**fter his exchange with Jesus, Pilate returns to the patio outside his headquarters where the religious authorities await his decision. His reply is frank, even blunt. Not guilty. Pilate can find no meaningful charge against Jesus.

Which, of course, doesn't solve anything. The religious authorities brought Jesus to Pilate claiming he was a criminal and asking Pilate to punish him. But Pilate has found no cause. Which means he either punishes an innocent man or risks being accused of not enforcing the law. He was, after all, governor, and tasked with enforcing the law against all criminals, whether brought by his Roman legionnaires or the local authorities. So, Pilate is in a bind.

A shrewd politician as well as a brutal soldier, Pilate seeks a loophole, a way out. There was apparently a custom by which the governor could release one Jewish criminal at the time of Passover. Perhaps he could use this device to both recognize the charges the religious authorities brought against Jesus by conceding he was a criminal, but also avoid punishing a man he found blameless.

The religious authorities, however, are not interested in branding Jesus a criminal, they want him dead. And so rather than simply reject Pilate's offer – surely a dangerous thing to do – they suggest an alternative: release Barabbas, a bandit.

And so Jesus' fate is set. He falls victim to a combination of religious malice, political expediency, and moral cowardice. He told Pilate that he came to bear witness to the truth. And right now, the light of truth that his life shines on this scene is reminiscent of his earlier words to Nicodemus: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

*Dear God, Jesus came to bear witness to the truth, both the truth of our failings and the even greater truth of your grace and mercy. Let us not hide from the former or fail to embrace the latter. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

*Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him."*

JOHN 19:1-4

**T**his is a longer devotion than most. And it needs to be. I think you'll understand as you read.

Pilate isn't finished yet. He will try one more time to set Jesus free. He flogs him first, hoping that will count as sufficient punishment. And then allows his soldiers to mock and torment him. And then brings him back, saying once again that he has found no case against him.

At least that's how John tells it.

Look, I hate to interrupt the narrative flow of John's dramatic scene. And of course I'll want to jump back into it soon enough to continue with the story. But just here, just now, I feel obliged to slow down a moment, to stand apart from this multi-layered drama, and observe the simple fact that it is highly unlikely that Pilate would have cared much whether this rebel Jewish rabbi lived or died.

John – and, indeed, all the evangelists to one degree or another – are at pains to give Pilate a pass and make sure the burden for Jesus' death rests squarely on the shoulders of the Jewish religious authorities.

Why? Because this is with whom they are contending.

After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70AD, you see, Judaism went through a massive crisis. The Temple that was the center of their religion and worship was gone, wiped from the face of the earth. And with the loss of the Temple they also lost much of their identity. In the wake of the physical, emotional, and existential damage wrought by the loss of the Temple, two variant forms of Judaism arose that sought to interpret these events and move into a new, if unexpected, future.

One of those branches from the tree of first-century Judaism focused on the Synagogue, the practice of the faith in local contexts absent the focal point of the Jerusalem Temple. It was the version championed by those in the Gospels called Pharisees. The other branch might be most accurately described as those Jews who were followers of Jesus. They saw in Jesus God's plan for Israel and, indeed, the world, unveiled before them. They likely didn't think of themselves as "Christians" at this point, but rather as good Jews, perhaps the "true" Jews because they received Jesus as God's messiah.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these two groups were rivals. Like members of a congregation or family that has split, everyone felt pushed to take a side. And part of the consequence of this rivalry were four gospels written for communities made up of the followers of Jesus who had nothing to gain from further antagonizing Rome and everything to gain by putting the whole of the blame for Jesus' death on the ancestors of their current opponents.

Was Jesus in conflict with Jewish religious authorities? No question. But did he die at the hands of a reluctant Pilate who would have done almost anything to set him free? Not likely. Pilate was a ruthless commander, entirely comfortable with putting whole hosts of people to death. And Jesus was, as we'll soon see, perceived not only as a religious threat but as a political one. And so Pilate put Jesus to death as an enemy of Rome.

Why does all this matter? Because it's one thing for a minority group of early Christian followers to tell their story in a way that casts their opponents in an unfavorable light. The Gospels were originally written, after all, to bolster the faith and confidence of communities struggling to hold onto their faith in rather challenging, and sometimes desperate, circumstances. But it's a whole other matter to continue to read this story as history when, for the better part of two thousand years, the majority religion in the Western world has labeled Jews "Christ killers" and used these scenes to show Rome's innocence and Jerusalem's culpability.

It is, I think, the responsibility of those who follow Jesus – the One who embodied God's love for all – to stand up whenever we want to justify our hatred of others, even and especially when we use the Bible to do it.

*Dear God, you made promises to your people Israel that we believe we were kept in Jesus. Let us look upon those who continue to worship you as faithful Jews as fellow children of the promise, deserving only and always of our love and respect. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2026

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*So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God." Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.*

JOHN 19:5-8

**N**oting John's literary intent to bolster the faith of his community and to portray Pilate in a more sympathetic light and the Jewish religious authorities in a much harsher light, I still find fascinating the issue on which this whole matter finally turns: the assertion that Jesus has claimed to be the Son of God. This claim of divinity is finally and fully the charge which leads Jesus to his death.

For the religious authorities, it is blasphemy. There is one God and Jesus is not it. For Pilate, the matter is not blasphemy, but treason. There is one God, and that God is Caesar. There can be no other. And so both parties – religious and political – have now turned against him. For they receive his purported claim as a demand on their allegiance.

And in that perception, I would argue, they are right.

When we confess Jesus as Lord, we give him authority over all other allegiances: political, familiar, economic, relational. But do we take that seriously? Do we, that is, contemplate the implications of what our confession of Jesus as Lord and, indeed, as Son of God, means for us? For how we spend our time, energy, and money? For how we conceive of and live out our relationships? For how we treat others, especially those who look or believe differently than we? For how we vote and make decisions more generally? Do we really, that is, imagine that our faith in Christ makes demands on all these things, or is our profession of faith simply one (perhaps even minor) element of who we are and what we do?

Because here's the thing – whatever else they get wrong, Pilate and the religious authorities get this part right: Jesus makes a claim on all of us.

*Dear God, let us hear your call to obedience and answer it...in every part of our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

SATURDAY, MARCH 14, 2026

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*Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."*

JOHN 19:8-12

**T**he religious authorities know just how to play Pilate. In John's construction of this scene, Pilate is at pains to set Jesus free. He has thus far been frustrated in these attempts, and upon hearing that Jesus claims to be the Son of God, he grows worried, even afraid. It will not be easy, he realizes, to dissuade the religious authorities to overlook such a serious charge.

So he retreats to the inner sanctum of his headquarters to question Jesus, hoping, perhaps, either to figure him out or to discover some new angle by which to make his case. But Jesus is not a piece to be moved around Pilate's board and so remains silent. When questioned by Pilate...actually, it's more like when threatened by Pilate...Jesus asserts his own independence. Pilate, Jesus contends, is caught up in forces larger than he can imagine.

Oddly, Pilate seems to take this seriously. Or at least he takes Jesus' confidence seriously and tries all the more earnestly to set Jesus free. But this is where he is again outplayed, not simply by Jesus but by the religious authorities. For while Pilate may or may not care whether Jesus claims divine relationship, he will surely care – and must act – when the religious authorities remind him that some (including Pilate!) have called him a King, as there can be no king other than Emperor.

Each of us, I suspect, has something – some fear, some worry, some concern – that is so deeply at the core of us that we are easily, and perhaps always, motivated by it. For Pilate, at this moment, it's his career, his relationship to the Emperor, his job security. He simply cannot be known as "no friend of the Emperor." And so he betrays his belief that Jesus is innocent and fails his duty as arbitrator and judge.

Naming Pilate's pressure point, of course, is easy. Naming our own – and surrendering even that fear to God – is much harder.

*Dear God, help us to give over to you our deepest hopes and fears that we may live by faith and trust.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Fourth Sunday in Lent

MARCH 15, 2026

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

*THE RAISING OF LAZARUS*

JOHN 11, SELECTED VERSES

MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026

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*Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.*

JOHN 19:10-11a

I'd like to tarry for just a moment longer on Jesus' reply to Pilate. In response to Pilate's implied threat that Jesus had better cooperate because he, Pilate, holds the power to release or crucify him, Jesus answers by saying, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."

It's an interesting, even audacious, and certainly courageous affirmation. For, indeed, Pilate holds the power of life and death in this situation. And Jesus doesn't challenge that. Rather, he asserts that even Pilate's power over life and death came not from himself, but from a higher authority; indeed, that it came from God.

Can we imagine that for a moment? That all authority for the various roles of government – and, for that matter, the various roles in business and education and the family and all the other elements of human society – come from God? What would it be like, for instance, if those who hold positions of authority believed that they were placed in these positions by God in order to care for God's people and world? How would that shape their decisions, actions, and choices? What would the world look like if they took seriously the responsibility to exercise the duties of their office not for personal gain or sense of accomplishment but rather because they believed God was using them for a purpose?

Perhaps this will always be a hypothetical question. Because if those holding office believed their authority came from God, they would also and immediately believe they were accountable to God. But it's still worth asking.

As is another question. What if you believed the same? What if you believed that the place you are at, the position you hold – whether paid or volunteer, whether at home or in an office, whether as friend, parent, teacher, or more – was God-ordained for a purpose: to make this world a better, safer, more trust-worthy place? How would that shape how you see yourself and your role? How would it influence how you spend your time and resources? What, in short, would the world be like if you claimed the authority and responsibility that comes from being an agent and partner with God?

I think it would be awesome.

*Dear God, let us exercise with fidelity and compassion the authority you have given us wherever we may be.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 2026

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*When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.*

JOHN 19:13

Imagine turning this tightly woven scene into a play. First, we divide the stage in two. One side would represent the inner sanctum of Pilate's headquarters, while the other would represent the patio just outside his headquarters. Second, we note Pilate's movement between these two places:

1. Pilate first comes out of his headquarters to greet the religious authorities (18:19).
2. Pilate then goes back inside and summons Jesus to him (18:33).
3. After Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" he goes outside once more (18:38).
4. And after failing to find a way to release Jesus, Pilate returns inside and has Jesus flogged (19:1).
5. Pilate then returns to the religious authorities and presents Jesus to them (19:4).
6. When the religious authorities again reject Pilate's attempt to release Jesus, he goes inside his headquarters with Jesus to question him once again (19:8).
7. Finally, we arrive at these verses and the close of this scene, where Pilate brings Jesus outside once more, renders his judgment, and turns Jesus over to be crucified.

Seven times Pilate moves back and forth, inside and out, between the religious authorities and their unyielding demand and Pilate's own confrontation with the truth that Jesus is innocent. Now, imagine we not only set this scene on the stage, but filmed it. And then sped up the replay. What would you see? We'd see Pilate, the most powerful man in Palestine, wavering back and forth, wanting earnestly, even desperately, to sit this one out, to remain on the fence, but ultimately being forced to decide between justice and political expediency. Pilate wants off the hook, but he must finally decide, and he chooses the easier, but both tragic and cruel, option. Perhaps that's John's point all along. That when encountered by Jesus, there is no possibility of sitting on the fence. You are either for him or against him. There is no neutrality.

We might extend that, of course, and suggest that each time we are confronted with a choice between doing what's right and doing what's easy, we can neither evade nor avoid making a decision. In the end, it comes down to much the same thing: Will we choose truth, even when it is difficult?

*Dear God, strengthen our resolve so that we will see the difference between right and wrong and choose what is right and good. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18, 2026

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*Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon.*

JOHN 19:14a

**W**e have noticed time and again that John is a master artist, carefully crafting scenes to witness to the truth of Jesus. For this reason, we've grown accustomed to hugging the details of John's narrative, trusting that they are clues to understanding his confession. And this is one of those details worth our complete attention.

At first blush, it's an odd one. For John reports that this day on which Jesus is judged by Pilate and condemned to death is "the day of Preparation for the Passover." That is, it is the day before Passover, the day when everyone is getting ready for the Passover celebration. But in the other three Gospels the day on which Jesus is crucified is Passover itself. So what is going on?

All accounts record that Jesus died on a Friday, the day before the Sabbath. But they differ on whether that Friday was Passover (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) or the day before Passover, the Day of Preparation (John). This confusion is entirely understandable because Passover is not fixed to a particular day of the week. In this way, it is like Christmas, which can fall any day of the week, rather than Easter, which is always a Sunday.

But I don't think John is confused. Keep in mind the words with which John the Baptist greeted Jesus in the beginning of this story: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). All of which brought us back to the Day of Preparation, the day on which the Passover lamb is prepared. In fact, Jesus' death on the cross occurs at exactly the time the Passover lambs are slaughtered for the celebration. This is no accident.

John, you see, isn't particularly interested in chronology, in factual accuracy, or in getting everything "right." Rather, he's interested in testifying to the truth. In this case, the truth is that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the one who removes our sin and makes God available and accessible to us at any time and any place. There simply isn't anything left that we have to do. Jesus – God's Son, Word, and Passover Lamb – has done it all.

Pretty cool.

*Dear God, let us see in Jesus your promise to bless and forgive always. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

THURSDAY, MARCH 19, 2026

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*He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.*

JOHN 19:14b-16a

**W**e have touched before on the matter of John's literary aim of encouraging his community of Jewish Christians in the face of conflict with their local synagogue, so we need not say too much more at this point except to acknowledge again John's favor of Pilate over the religious leaders in his depictions.

That is to say that while history shows Pilate to be a merciless, even cruel governor who likely would not have thought twice about executing a rebellious rabbi like Jesus, John takes great pains to demonstrate Pilate's interest in releasing Jesus in order to put the full weight of responsibility for Jesus' death on the religious authorities. This culminates with what would have been a blasphemous and, quite frankly, nearly unimaginable declaration from the Jewish religious authorities, "We have no king but the Emperor."

But rather than asking whether it is likely that the Jewish religious authorities would have made such a statement, we might ask instead how often we say pretty much the same thing. Oh, we don't claim Caesar as our emperor and king. But I wonder...how often we say, if by our actions rather than our words, "Money is our king." Or, "A robust retirement account is our king." Or perhaps, "Our children and our wish for them to have every opportunity is our king."

How often do we pledge the allegiance of our time, energy, and finances to some perhaps worthy goal that, whether intentionally or not, functions not as one among many priorities but as the center of gravity of our being. Martin Luther liked to say that we humans are very good idol makers. He defined a "god," you see, as whatever it is that we look to for all of our good.

We might say very much the same about emperors and kings. While we may not swear allegiance to any human potentate with our lips, how often do our actions make kings and gods of things that, while perhaps good in and of themselves, can simply not bear the weight we need and do not deserve our ultimate allegiance?

Jesus believed we deserve better. Do we believe the same?

*Dear God, call us back to trust you in all things that we may look to you for our every need. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2026

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*So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.*

JOHN 19:16b-17

**T**his is another detail unique to John...and easy to miss because it is placed beside other more dramatic details like the gruesome name of the Romans' execution site. I'm talking about John's mention that Jesus carried the cross by himself.

In each of the other three accounts, Roman centurions press Simon of Cyrene into service to help Jesus carry his cross. That's pretty understandable. Jesus earlier had been flogged – that is whipped 51 times with a whip that had bits of metal woven into the ends of the lash. That kind of scourging was brutal, enough to incapacitate even the strongest. And that was after being arrested the previous evening and tried, accused, and harassed all night long. No wonder he needed help.

But not according to John. John's Jesus is, quite frankly, a very strong Jesus. Jesus, in John, is a man on a mission, a spiritual warrior and muscular savior undeterred by hardship and unfazed by physical distress. John's depiction of Jesus seemed so extreme, so nearly beyond human, in fact, that the early Church wasn't entirely convinced it should be included in the New Testament canon. John's emphasis on an almost super-hero-like Jesus was especially glaring when compared with the other Evangelists' far more "human" descriptions of Jesus.

So why does John characterize Jesus in this way? Keep in mind the distress most scholars believe his community experienced as Jewish followers of Jesus who had been rejected by, and likely expelled from, their local synagogue. In the face of such pain and brokenness, John wants to remind them that their Savior is strong, strong enough to weather the torment of his abuse and crucifixion, strong enough to turn the defeat of the cross into victory, and strong enough to save them.

There are times that we feel low and need to know that God understands. At those times, it helps to know that God in Jesus identified with us. At these times...read Mark! But there are other times when we are low and we need to hear that God will lift us up. That nothing is too much for the God we know in Jesus. That's the time for John.

*Dear God, thank you for the witness of John to remind us that you will see us through even the darkest times of life and bring us to the other side victorious. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 2026

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*There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.*

JOHN 19:18

It's remarkable, when you think about it, how few words it takes to describe the loss of an innocent life. One sentence, four dreadful words: "There they crucified him."

This is no peculiar tragedy, of course. Unmarked, innocent deaths occur all too regularly. And perhaps because of their very frequency, we have grown rather numb to them. One death, said the tyrant Joseph Stalin, is a tragedy; one million deaths is a statistic.

Nor is Jesus' death solitary. He is crucified with two others. Whether they are criminals or not seems hardly to matter, as surely no one deserves to die in such a horrific manner. Crucifixion was an intensely cruel way to die. Those nailed to the wood beams often lingered for several agonizing days, eventually succumbing to blood loss, asphyxiation, or a combination of the two.

And that is how our Lord dies. Or, we might say, this is where our God chooses to come to us: among the innocent, among the forgotten, among those cruelly treated by the world, among those whose deaths go unmarked and unattended. And in dying this way, God identifies with all those who have lived and died similarly, all those who are lost, all those, finally, who need a compassionate and attentive God.

Jesus, we confess, becomes like us in the Incarnation that we celebrate at Christmastime. But Jesus ultimately experiences everything we do – including even the pangs of loneliness and the desperation of a painful death – on Good Friday. It's hard to imagine, but then that's what God does to save us: the unimaginable.

*Dear God, keep us mindful of those the world regularly ignores, for you still come to us among the forgotten and despised. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Fifth Sunday in Lent

MARCH 22, 2026

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

*JESUS ANNOINTED FOR HIS DEATH*

JOHN 12:1-11

MONDAY, MARCH 23, 2026

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*Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."*

JOHN 19:19-22

**J**ohn has a distinct sense of irony. In this case, the man who gives the order for execution – Pontius Pilate – is the one who acknowledges Jesus as king. In doing so, he both condemns himself and elevates Jesus. Irony, indeed.

Nor is this the first time one of Jesus' opponents has spoken a truth with greater significance than the speaker realized. Earlier, the high priest Caiaphas had justified the plot against Jesus by saying that it was better for one person to die than a nation, with no idea that, indeed, Jesus would die to save all the nations (11:49-50). And now Pilate, whether mocking Jesus or antagonizing the Jewish religious authorities, proclaims him King in the three languages of the day so that all the world may witness Jesus' coronation upon the throne of the cross.

In the end, of course, it hardly matters to us whether Pilate concedes Jesus is a king or Caiaphas perceives the significance of his sacrifice. What matters – and the whole point of John's writing, as we'll see – is what we say about Jesus. Many have encountered him along the route of this story – Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, Pilate – and each has had something to say. But what will we say? With our words? With our lives?

*Dear God, help us not only to confess faith in Jesus with our lips but also through our actions.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 24, 2026

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*When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots." And that is what the soldiers did.*

JOHN 19:23-25a

**W**e've seen before John's interest is connecting the details of Jesus' life and, particularly, his death to the witness of the Old Testament, in this case by linking the soldiers' division of Jesus' clothes to the twenty-second Psalm. When reading these allusions, it's helpful to remember that John is bolstering the confidence of a beleaguered community of Jewish Christians who are likely being told again and again that they've bet on the wrong horse, that their Messiah is an imposter, and that they have betrayed their heritage and faith. And so John seeks to demonstrate to his flock as often as possible the continuity between Jesus' story and Israel's.

And there is no greater challenge to this affirmation of continuity than Jesus' death on a cross. After all – and it's vital for us to remember this – absolutely no one expected the cross. Indeed, the cross initially appeared to invalidate all of Jesus' teaching and ministry.

It's difficult for us to imagine what a profound change in attitude it demanded to see the one who was brutally executed by the Romans for treason as the agent of God's salvation. It would be like someone coming today to say that a person put to death on the electric chair was actually God's Messiah. Impossible.

Which means that the great challenge for the earliest Christians was to look again at everything they thought they knew about God and the story of Israel and read it in light of this startling confession: that God came to redeem the world through this outcast, one branded a criminal, and executed on the cross.

The cross, in short, demanded a complete rethinking of their lives, experience, practice, and tradition. And the thing is...it still demands the same today.

*Dear God, when we look at the cross, invite us to reconsider what we thought we knew about love and power and be drawn into the mystery of your salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 2026

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*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.*

JOHN 19:25b

**I**t's always the women.

Have you noticed that? In each of the four accounts, it is only the women who remain with Jesus to the end. Judas betrays, Peter denies, and the rest desert and flee Jesus in his time of need. Except the women, who remain with Jesus until the end.

John – naturally, after all this is *John* we're talking about – tells it a little differently. As we'll see in a moment, in John's account there is one male disciple who remains, and we'll get to that part in just a moment.

But for now, let's just notice that it's the women who remain, the women who don't run, the women who bear witness, both now at the foot of the cross and again at the empty tomb, as the women are the first heralds of the resurrection as well.

Which makes me wonder.... For while I have tremendous respect for the variety of Christian traditions in the Church, I also grieve that women too often are overlooked for positions of leadership, are not considered eligible for particular roles, and do not receive the level of responsibility that they not only can handle but at which they would excel.

Here – and indeed throughout the Gospels – it is the women who prove the most faithful of disciples. Perhaps this is something to which we should pay closer attention.

*Dear God, let us recognize and celebrate the gifts of the women of the Church of all times and places and advocate that they can exercise their gifts fully and freely for the sake of the Church and world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 2026

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*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

JOHN 19:26-27

**J**ohn introduces his readers to the “disciple Jesus loved” during the last meal Jesus shares with his disciples. He is never identified, and believers have wondered whether this might indeed be John, perhaps the disciple named John, for whom the Gospel is named (although it would seem odd to name John at some points in the story and call him “the disciple Jesus loved” at others). Others have wondered if this might be Lazarus, as he is the only character in the story identified as someone Jesus loves and he slips away from the story just as the “disciple Jesus loved” appears.

Mostly likely, he was a disciple of Jesus but not one of “the twelve.” Later, he became the founder of this particular Christian community, the original witness that brought his testimony to this synagogue and the leader who first fashioned them into a thriving community. It might even be this leader’s recollections, testimony, and sermons that are primary sources, along with materials likely shared by the other evangelists, that form the backbone of John’s Gospel. Who knows?

What we do know is that he – the beloved disciple – remains by Jesus’ side along with the women until the end.

We also know that, true to John’s picture of a victorious Christ, Jesus, far from languishing on the cross, is giving orders. He commands his mother to take this disciple as her son and for this disciple to take her as his mother. And of course they do. But far from merely portraying Jesus exercising his executive ability from the throne of his cross, John also paints a picture of the coming Christian community as being a family, a family joined not simply by blood but by shared faith in the crucified and risen Christ.

This was, I suspect, received as a tremendous comfort to those early Christians who had not only been expelled from their local synagogue but likely lost relationships with family members along the way. And it might still provide comfort in a world where more and more people feel simultaneously very connected yet remarkably lonely. When we gather at worship and in service with others who follow the way of Jesus, we are each and every time being received once again into the body of Christ and family of God.

*Dear God, remind us that those with whom we gather are our brothers and sisters in faith, that we might know ourselves to be part of your family. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2026

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*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.*

JOHN 19:28-29

**O**nce again in this scene, John reclaims and reinterprets the story of Exodus.

Earlier we noticed that John placed Jesus' death not on Passover itself – as do Matthew, Mark and Luke – but instead on the Day of Preparation just before Passover because it was on this day that the Passover lamb was to be sacrificed.

Now, in these verses, imagery from the Passover once again informs John's description. For the sponge of wine offered to Jesus comes on a branch of hyssop. Most of us don't think twice about that, assuming the branch is like one that might fall from the maple or oak trees we have in our neighborhoods.

But hyssop is a flowering herb, connected to the mint family of herbs, and no branch would have been able to support a sponge. It would be kind of like saying, "they put the sponge on a branch of parsley" – it just wouldn't hold up. Then why tell the story this way? Because hyssop played a key part in the very first Passover. On the night of their deliverance from Egypt, the captive Israelites used the leaf-strewn branches of hyssop like a paintbrush to mark their doors with the blood of the Passover lambs so that the angel of death would pass over their homes (Exodus 12:22).

So here, as Jesus' mission draws to its close, John reminds his readers of the Exodus in order to demonstrate that Israel's God was again coming to redeem them and, indeed, all the world.

*Dear God, enable our lives as the continuation of the story of your faithfulness to Israel and the early Church, that we may trust your promises and walk by faith alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

SATURDAY, MARCH 28, 2026

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*When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

JOHN 19:30

**A**fter Jesus received the wine offered to him on a hyssop branch, he says words that are translated, in my opinion, rather poorly. The Greek word that John uses – *telos* – can indeed be translated as “finished,” but it has much more the sense of something being accomplished, something being drawn to a fitting conclusion, of achieving its intended purpose.

In short, Jesus is saying that everything that he was sent to do on earth has now been completed. His mission, that is, has been accomplished. Which means that far from Jesus crying out in agony despair from the cross, he dies with a shout of victory on his lips.

So now that all has been accomplished, his life is torn from him. Rather, he gives over his spirit, calling to mind his earlier words when he described himself as the good shepherd: “I am the good shepherd...I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (John 10:17b-18).

Jesus does not surrender or give up or give in to despair. He embraces the cross as his divinely appointed mission, trusting that the One who commissioned him to give his life will also give it back to him.

The cross, in John’s Gospel, is not a tragedy to be mourned but rather a moment of supreme victory to be celebrated. Which is still, two thousand years later, difficult to grasp or accept. That sometimes suffering can lead to healing, that death is not as powerful as life, and that what we see as defeat may be God’s means of accomplishing victory. But there it is: Jesus’ defiant, triumphant cry that, on his cross, everything that God had purposed comes to its intended end.

*Dear God, let us look for your activity even in the most difficult times of our lives, knowing that you do not desire or cause harm to happen but trusting that there is no situation which you cannot redeem and turn to victory and life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

# Palm Sunday

MARCH 29, 2026

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

*THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY*

*JOHN 12:12-19*

# Holy Week at Mount Olivet

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1

THE SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST BY DUBOIS CONCERT

MPLS: 7PM

THURSDAY, APRIL 2

MAUNDY THURSDAY: THE LIVING LORD'S SUPPER

MPLS: 7PM

WEST: 7PM

FRIDAY, APRIL 3

GOOD FRIDAY

MPLS: 8AM, 12NOON, 5PM, & 7PM

WEST: 5PM & 7PM

MONDAY, MARCH 30, 2026

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*Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.*

JOHN 19:31-34

**A** reminder, from John, that we are not yet at Passover, but the day before, the day of Preparation, the day on which the Passover lambs – or in this case, the Passover Lamb, is sacrificed. A part of this timetable that is unique to John, as we've noticed, is the symbolic and theological interpretation of what is happening at the cross and of what it means for John's community, and for us. For with the death of Jesus on the cross, we've come full circle to the first public act of Jesus when he drove the money changers from the Temple because such sacrifice was no longer necessary.

John's theological aim and confession in all of this? In short, to tell us that God has drawn near to us in the Word of God to demonstrate to us that God loves the world – the whole world – to the point of giving his life for that world so that all who desire to draw near to this God has access via faith in Christ.

In addition to the theological and symbolic importance of Jesus' death falling on the day of Preparation, there is also a practical element regarding the concern of the religious authorities about having to remove the bodies before the beginning of both Sabbath and Passover that evening. As the Sabbath precludes work, the grisly task of removing the bodies had to be completed before Sabbath commenced that evening.

And so the soldiers come to break the legs of those who had been crucified in order to speed up their deaths. But when they come to Jesus, they see that he has already died and so they don't break his legs. Instead, one soldier pierces Jesus' side. Why he does that – to ensure that he's dead, out of malice, for a last insult to this pretender to the throne? – that we don't know. What we do know is that Jesus is dead. His life has expired. His earthly existence is over.

And with the announcement of his death, the rest of the story about Jesus, the one confessed as Christ, is about to begin...

*Dear God, when we hear the story of the death of Jesus, let us be reminded that Jesus went to the cross to demonstrate your love and commitment to the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 31, 2026

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*(He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)*

JOHN 19:35

I find this verse about the trustworthiness of the one witnessing the events John describes an interesting interruption of the story he is telling.

Why does John do this? Perhaps it's simply because the events he describes are so hard to believe: that the one who was rejected by the religious authorities and put to death by the state is, in fact, the one God worked through to redeem the world. And so in the middle of this death scene, John inserts a reminder that, indeed, these events are not mere hearsay and the one who witnessed them is telling the truth about them.

And who is the one testifying? It's easy to assume that it's the author, the one we call John, although he doesn't identify himself. I've suggested earlier that much of the material woven together to form this Gospel may have come from the preaching of a disciple of Jesus, likely one not as well known as the Twelve. This disciple may likely have been the one who founded the community for whom John now writes and whose witness served as the inspiration for this distinctive gospel. And so calling to mind the fidelity of this witness would then further bolster the faith of those reading John's Gospel, as they are reminded of the preacher who first gathered them around the good news.

Of course, it's not just the events being described that the faithful witness recounts, but also their meaning. That is, the disciple and preacher who gathered this early Christian community perceived truly that in this one forsaken by the religious and political authorities, God was working to redeem all of us and, indeed, the whole world. And that's what Scripture is always about. Not just what happened, but why it matters. Not just facts of history, but confessions of faith. For anyone can say, "Jesus died," but only the believer can say, "Jesus died to demonstrate God's love and to redeem the world."

That is the confession John makes, and it's the confession he hopes we make as well after hearing his testimony.

*Dear God, when we look upon your love for the world demonstrated in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, inspire us to witness to our faith in word and deed. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1, 2026

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*These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."*

JOHN 19:36-37

It's not just the details leading up to Jesus' crucifixion or even his death that John describes in light of the traditions of Israel, but also those things that happen after his death. Here John makes two references, both tied to the action of the executioners to break the legs of those crucified in order to speed their death so that the bodies may be taken down before the Passover.

The first reference is to the Exodus story and, in particular, instructions about not breaking any of the bones of the lamb to be sacrificed on that first Passover (Ex. 12:46, Num. 9:12). The second reference connects to prophecies about the house of David (Zech. 12:10). Once again, we see John interpreting everything about Jesus' death in light of several of the great traditions of Israel; in this case, the Exodus and the Davidic monarchy.

But of course John isn't just interpreting these events, he is also constructing a narrative specifically designed to reflect these theological commitments. That is, John shifts the celebration of Passover – a floating holiday in terms of what day of the week on which it falls – from Friday (as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) to Saturday precisely to make these links between the Christian tradition about Jesus and Israel's story of God's ongoing commitment via deliverance and monarchy.

What are we to make of the literary license John exercises so liberally? Again, I think the key is to keep in mind that John is not writing a twenty-first century history informed by post-Enlightenment sensibilities about historical accuracy, but rather is offering a first century narrative confession of faith that in this one, Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, God is keeping God's promises to Israel by redeeming Israel and, indeed, the whole world. And in response to John's robust and vibrant confession, I can only say, this is most certainly true.

*Dear God, each and every day remind us anew of your great love for us that we may, in turn, love those around us.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

THURSDAY, APRIL 2, 2026

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*After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.*

JOHN 19:38

**J**oseph of Arimathea is described in each of the four gospels as the one who donated his own tomb for the burial of Jesus. He is variously described as a rich man, a righteous man, a member of the religious council, one who looked forward to the kingdom of God, a disciple of Jesus, and sometimes several of these things at the same time. Which is a lot of information about his status, but not all that much about him as a person. Indeed, apart from these various designations, we actually know very little about him.

Except this: Joseph was also extremely brave. His decision to appeal to Pilate for Jesus' body and to give over his own tomb for his burial took tremendous courage. Keep in mind that Jesus had just been condemned by the religious and political leaders alike and then executed as an enemy of the state. To be associated with him was to be associated with his crimes. And yet, whatever his relationship to Jesus previously – John suggests that fear led him to be a disciple in secret – he now openly declares his allegiance to Jesus by these acts.

What was it about Jesus' death that moved him to overcome his fear? I mean, think about it: now that Jesus is dead, it would have been so easy to hide his sympathies for this rebellious rabbi and quietly go back to his previous life.

Yet something about the way this man lived and died moved Joseph to faith, even when it looked like there was no longer any point. Sometimes that's the way it is with faith. It doesn't seem to make any sense and yet it still moves us anyway.

All of this might serve as a reminder that it is, indeed, never too late to come to faith, never too late to recognize God's profound love, never too late to respond to God's invitation to abundant life. And so, even at this late moment, Joseph declares himself openly as a disciple of Jesus and is remembered for his generosity and courage across the millennia.

*Dear God, we give thanks for the faith, generosity, and courage of Joseph of Arimathea and ask that you might grant the same to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 2026

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*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.*

JOHN 19:39-40

**W**e haven't seen Nicodemus for quite a while. You might remember him as the Pharisee who came to visit Jesus by night and ask him questions all the way back in the third chapter of John's story. By the end of John's account of that encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus has literally faded away. Whether he believed or continued to wonder, whether he was satisfied by Jesus' answers or still had more questions, whether he becomes a disciple or remains only a seeker, is hard to tell.

That scene happened, according to John's chronology, two years before this one, the scene of Jesus' burial. Except for another brief appearance in chapter seven, when he reminds his colleagues that their tradition is to give people a hearing before trying them. Nicodemus is absent from the rest of John's story about Jesus.

Until now, that is, when he reappears and, with Joseph of Arimathea, receives the body of Jesus and prepares it for burial. And, as with Joseph, his decision to care for Jesus' dead body takes courage, as by his actions he is aligning himself with the cause of this recently executed enemy of the state.

So if we learned from Joseph that it is never too late to become a disciple, we learn from Nicodemus that sometimes faith takes time, a lot of time. Sometimes, that is, we might hear Jesus and not understand. Sometimes we have more questions than answers and more doubt than faith. Sometimes we need to think, or brood, or mull over what we've experienced for a while before we can respond.

All of which suggests that our persistent questions and lingering doubts are not just okay, but quite often a vital part of the life of faith. And so are those of others. So perhaps our churches can become those places that welcome questions, doubt, and more, because we realize that the journey of faith can be a long one and, as Nicodemus demonstrates, that's just fine.

*Dear God, we thank you for Nicodemus and for Jesus' encounter with him and the time he was allowed to come to faith. Let us be patient with the questions in our hearts, knowing that through the pursuing these questions we may indeed hear your voice. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 2026

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*Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

JOHN 19:41-42

**O**f course it's a garden.

We've seen at several points how John has not only interpreted the story of Jesus in light of the traditions of Israel, but how Israel's Scriptures have actually shaped John's telling of the story. Two of the key strands of Israel's story that have influenced John's story about Jesus have been the Exodus account of God's deliverance of Israel from the oppression of Egypt and the Davidic stories, traditions, and Psalms connected with Israel's greatest king.

But here at the end of the story, John takes us back to the beginning. And I mean, quite literally, the beginning...of both John's account and of the whole of the biblical narrative. For John begins his gospel with a bravura few could rival, not just imitating but actually borrowing wholesale the first line of Genesis: "In the beginning..."

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep," the storyteller behind Genesis records. And "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," proclaims John, taking us back to the beginning to profess that he was writing a new Genesis, an account of God's re-creation of the world through Jesus.

And so the story naturally ends at a garden, a garden that calls to mind that first garden, the garden of temptation and sin and fall from grace. Jesus is buried in a garden, in this garden, that we may know that in his death all our failure, disappointment, and brokenness are also buried. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded, and if Death thought it was taking Jesus into the ground for good, it really was taking Adam's failure – our failures – into the ground instead.

Of course it ends in a garden, just where our story began. And, of course, it doesn't really end here. As the drama and adventure of God's re-creation of the heavens and the earth is actually just beginning...

*Dear God, let us remember and believe that in Jesus' death you took all our sin, disappointment, and brokenness – all in short, that stands between us and abundant life – and buried it once and for all. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# *Easter Sunday*

APRIL 5, 2026

WORSHIP:

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

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

*THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD*

JOHN 20:1-18



