



JESUS *in* THE OLD TESTAMENT

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Saturday, February 20: Introduction

Who is God? What is God like? Are Jesus and God different? Why are there two parts to the Bible? Does God change in between? Why does God seem so judgmental in the Old Testament and so loving in the New Testament?

These questions and others like them have troubled Christians and people of faith for centuries.

As Christians we believe that God is who God has always been; God is unchanging. And God has always related to humanity with grace and love. We believe that the great story of Scripture is one of God unveiling God's love for us throughout time and history. We also believe that love was made most prominently known through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But, from the very beginning, the Bible has always been pointing towards Jesus. Lent is a 40 day season in the life of the church when we prepare our hearts to hear again the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. In order to reflect on that story in a new way this year, we present this devotional series that seeks to highlight places in the Old Testament that serve as teasers for Jesus, that show us how God's story of salvation has always been oriented towards the cross and empty tomb, and that highlight how both the Old and the New Testament are centered around God's amazing love, grace, and provision for us.

Each day there will be an image or story from the Old Testament. Stories like God protecting his faithful servants in the fiery furnace or providing manna in the desert. Images like the suffering servant from Isaiah or the Paschal Lamb from the Exodus. And the writers will show us how each story or image shows us what Jesus is like, reminds us of Jesus, points us to Jesus in the New Testament.

We hope that as we reflect on these previews of Jesus found in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible that you will have a new or greater appreciation for the Old Testament. Perhaps you will learn something new or encounter a story you've never read before. But, ultimately, we hope this will deepen your love for God who has been loving us, providing for us, and meeting us with grace literally for forever.

Monday, February 22: The Inverted Babel (Genesis 11)

Written by Stephanie Kimec-Parker, Pastor of the Gathering at Scott Memorial United Methodist Church in Virginia Beach, VA.

In [Genesis 11:1-9](#), we see the people have come together to make something great. They are using their intelligence to build a wonderful city, to include a tower so tall, it reaches the heavens. They want to make a name for themselves and are fearful of being scattered abroad. There are several ways to interpret this passage. Some believe the people were being prideful, trying to be as great as God. Other scholars believe the people were striving for homogeneity, as the word “one” is used 4 times in this passage. Scholars believe the expression “a tower with its top in the heavens” was just a cliché for a tall tower, and that they wanted to be known for building something that would last. God may have been concerned that they were trying to be homogeneous, one people.

We have seen the dangers of homogeneity throughout history and to the present day. When we begin to unpack our split-second reactions to things and people, we are struck by how drawn we are to people who look like us. I attended seminary in Washington D.C. and took the Metro or bus to my classes. It hit me one day that when getting on the metro or bus I would usually sit beside someone who shared my skin color (if there were options). In that split second of looking around and walking towards a seat, my gut reaction was to choose someone who looked like me. I had to start pausing, looking around longer, and deciding to overcome that gut reaction. I had prided myself on being a person who tried to overcome homogeneity, and yet the desire still existed within me.

Jesus came to dwell among us. Jesus brought together different people. Jesus welcomed unlikely disciples to come and follow him. Jesus welcomed women to follow him. Jesus invited the children to come to him and dismissed those who tried to shoo them away. Jesus interacted with the Samaritans, people seen as outsiders, and offered them the living waters of eternal life. Jesus also came to tell us the good news of God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom is a kingdom of diversity. God’s kingdom is people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and languages coming together to live together with God. All the “isms” that we have created as people to separate us from one other will be torn down. All those barriers we have created to say who isn’t worthy, who doesn’t belong, who isn’t one of us, will be torn down.

God’s kingdom will be a great reversal of the tower. God scattered the people because their drive for homogeneity was so strong. Through Jesus Christ, God will gather the people back together. In the scattering in [Genesis 11](#), God confused the language. We see a foretaste of what is to come in [Acts 2](#) when through the Holy Spirit the people are able to understand the disciples. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability. The people were so amazed!

The reversal of Babel is at hand, God is bringing diverse people together as part of God’s kingdom. When God’s kingdom is fully here, there will be a new heaven and a new earth, no towers will be needed to reach the heavens because heaven will be here. How can we join God in ushering in God’s kingdom of diversity?

Wednesday, February 24: The Elected Rejected

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor of Cokesbury United Methodist Church, Woodbridge, VA.

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” – Isaiah 43:1

Election is, often, a dirty word in the church. In our particularly problematic political times we like to keep people happy so we generally avoid talking about politics and partisan ideologies. We encourage people to think for themselves and make their own decisions in regard to such matters.

However, even more divisive than American electoral politics is the church’s struggle to respond to the Doctrine of Election.

Put simply - The Doctrine of Election attempts to explain the lengths of God’s sovereignty. Or, perhaps even more simply, it is a theological way to respond to questions like “Why did God allow this/that to happen?”

To talk about election is to take steps into mystery. We, of course, don’t care much for mystery. We like to have answers to all of our questions. We like things being neat and orderly. However, God often hands us the complete opposite.

And so, because we like to make order out of chaos, we have disagreed throughout the history of the church about God’s electing work and we now have the great mosaic of denominations rather than “dwelling together in unity.”

Enter Karl Barth. [Karl Barth was a very significant Christian theologian in the middle of the 20th century. He wrote a four-volume work of theology called “Church Dogmatics” that, in many ways, revolutionized the ways that contemporary Christians talk and think about God.] In II.2 of the Church Dogmatics Barth sets out to define what it is that makes one “elect.” He begins with a general answer about how election is not something to be earned or deserved, but simply is the way that it is. But then, in a profound and rather long excursus, Barth compares the elected and the rejected characters throughout the Old Testament in order to bring home exactly what it means to be elect in Jesus Christ.

Cain and Abel - The difference between the brothers is not based on any prior mark of distinction, but from a decision on God’s behalf concerning them. However, even though Abel is clearly favored and Cain is not, this does not mean that God has abandoned or rejected Cain. Notably, even though Cain killed his brother, God promises to protect Cain’s life.

Jacob and Esau - Esau is the older and favorite son of Isaac, but it is Jacob (the little heel grabber) who ultimately receives the birthright and the blessing. However, God does not abandon either of them to their own devices, but promises to bless the world through their offspring.

Rachel and Leah - Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah but Leah is the one the Lord makes fruitful. However, God does not reject Rachel and she, eventually, gives birth to Joseph.

Joseph and his brothers - Joseph is rejected by his brothers and sold off into slavery. However, Joseph is instrumental in the deliverance of God's people from famine who are then brought into the land of Egypt.

On and on we could go. Barth's central point is that even though certain figures appear rejected by God, they are, in fact, blessed and intimately involved in God's great story that culminates in Jesus.

Without them the great narrative simply isn't possible.

And then, in Jesus, we discover both the elected and the rejected. The Elect Son of God, born for us and among us, is ultimately rejected by us.

He is regaled by the crowds and dismissed by the religious authorities.

He is celebrated by the last, least, lost, little, and dead only to be chased out of town for preaching a sermon about himself.

He is surrounded by followers who hang on his every word only to be abandoned by all of them when he, himself, hung on the cross.

And yet, how does Jesus choose to use some of his final earthly breaths?

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

We, all of us, deserve rejection. We all choose to do things we know we shouldn't do, and we all avoid doing things we know we should do. That, in a sense, is what Lent is all about. This liturgical season is focused on considering the condition of our condition.

To borrow an expression of Paul's: There is nothing good in us.

We, to put it another way, are up the creek without a paddle.

And yet, strangely enough, the elected rejected, Jesus Christ, takes all of our sins, nails them to the cross, and leaves them there forever. Thanks be to God.

Friday, February 26: The New Sabbath

Written by Sarah Locke, Pastor of Hickory United Methodist Church in Chesapeake, VA.

“Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.’” - Mark 2:24-28

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” – Matthew 11: 29

For people who have spent more time in our home this year than ever before, I cannot say that I am “well rested.” The demands of family, church, work, and the regular routine have not ceased – they have just morphed. I have found it harder than ever to find a way to feel rested. The things that have always worked – a day of binging Netflix, a walk in the park with our kids, a date night with my husband – they all used to be things that left me feeling rejuvenated and ready to face the world. And now I wake up after a “day off” still weary. Can I get an Amen? I think as Christ followers, there are times we hear Sabbath and all we hear is a biblical mandate to take a day off and simply to do no work. Sabbath is just about a “day off” or a “vacation” right? We think this because while God had every resource and all the energy needed to create the whole world, and as scripture promises God never sleeps or slumbers on the job, God still took a break. On the 7th day of creation, God called the day holy and did no work. And so, we see the command to practice the Sabbath as just that. A command that while sounding nice doesn’t mean all that much in our modern world.

As a mom of five, a wife, a pastor, and a person highly influenced to over work and under rest this command often feels unrealistic. And then COVID hit and in my optimism, I thought, okay quarantine. Take this. I will name you Sabbath and I will come out the other side healthier. If God rested so can I.

Now 11 months later, I would say that while I have done many of the “right” things, I am wearier than ever. And for many of us that is the case. We have survived one of the hardest years of most of our lives. And the resources that used to work just do not anymore. A day off does not prepare me for the other six. And here is why: Because my resting is not what powers my life. In Mark, we see Jesus taking some heat from the Pharisees who feel that Jesus’ rule-breaking tendencies are not honoring the commandment to keep the day holy. Jesus has been healing folks on the Sabbath. Jesus’ response is simple: Sabbath is not a commandment to get us to bend to the will of another, but, instead, the day of rest which was made for us. It is a gift. And gifts are not something we can give ourselves. Sabbath is experience of the Lord’s presence or grace in our lives in spite of our inability to sit still well. The commandment of Sabbath is simply SO that we can experience the grace and love God has always wanted to offer us.

One of the many problems that we have experienced in COVID is that our work has changed. And while we may not be commuting and our time has been spent differently, the internal work of navigating the world has gotten more intense. Our emotions have been tested,

our relationships have been strained, physical connections have been broken, we have been more isolated, experienced greater anxiety, and heightened fear. And while Netflix and walks help quiet our minds for a few moments or hours they don't stop the chaos that lives with-in. There is only one source of Sabbath- there is only one source of peace and rest and it requires that I place myself in the presence of the Lord.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath. Jesus offers us a picture not of a God that simply takes a nap, but instead offers to carry our burdens. Jesus offers to yoke himself to us. That is the gift. We will not carry this alone. Rest is not a lack of work; it is instead a change from trying to carry the load ourselves. When we are yoked to Christ, we can experience the lightening of that the heavy load of fear, anxiety, and loneliness we have been carrying. We can know that those things we drag along behind us will not overwhelm us or leave us stuck in the mud. Jesus becomes the power of our rest. The old ways don't work because they never really did. The only rest we need is to place ourselves in the path of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has been called "Lord of the Sabbath." Amen.

Monday, March 1: The New Adam

Written by Yun Kim, Pastor of St. Peter's UMC in Richmond, VA.

YHWH Elohim breathed in 'ADAM'

“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” – Genesis 2:7

Job 33:4 says, *“The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”*

In the original language of the Bible, *niš-maṭ ḥay-yîm* means “Breathed the Divine Spirit” in English. In other words, the Spirit of God came into the soul and the soul became alive. This is the story that we intend to convey through the creation story today.

What is required of the earth to become a man? The only one is to fill the spirit of God in the earth. God filled the earth with the Spirit of God and called his name Adam. If you translate the name 'Adam' into Korean, it is Sa-Ram (person). In this sense, the filling of the Spirit of God means that a person is truly living as a person.

Ultimately, for a person to be a real human being, one should be filled with the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, to be truly alive. When we are full of the Holy Spirit, we can function as God intended as God's creation.

The state of being filled with the Holy Spirit is not a perfect human state of being completely delivered from sin, but a state of having His Spirit and His love so completely that there is no space for sin to intrude. When the Holy Spirit fills us, we are in a state of being a complete human. John Wesley explained that state as Christian Perfection.

In [chapter 2 of Gospel of John](#), the first sign Jesus performed before starting his public life is recorded. What is it? It was changing water into wine. Have you ever thought about why Jesus' first miracle was changing of water into wine, something that doesn't seem that impressive? Wouldn't it have been better if it had been another, more powerful, miracle? For example, a miracle of feeding 5,000 or calming the storm? Wouldn't it have revealed more clearly that Jesus is Christ? Changing water into wine could be seen as just a visual deception that any magician in the world could do.

This miracle is just like preface to the gospel of John. It reveals what Jesus Christ would do in the days to come. There were six water jars used for cleansing ceremony. It was not for cleaning hands and feet for hygiene, but to symbolize forgiveness of sin and to become clean before God and people according to Jewish ceremony. Whenever the chief priest went into the holy place, he had to wash his hands and feet in water from the jar. Only when his sins were washed clean could he face God. So, he cleansed the visible body to symbolize the required purity of soul.

In a way, those jars symbolize the outer layer of old religion. It symbolizes those who repeat meaningless act void of life. Many religious people – of Jesus’ time and of ours – have only the outer layers of religion left, but Jesus filled them with the new wine. He breathed the new spirit inside the outer layer of dead religion.

That is the very thing the Lord did for us. To fill the new wine in us who are like a jar that looks like alive but not. He fills the new wine to the top in us who were dysfunctional because we are not alive.

In The Family, a book written by John Bradshaw after he was delivered from the trap of long-term addiction, he wrote, “This starting point assumes the innocence of mankind as children, who have this mental cup waiting to be filled with love, nurture, and acceptance. When the cup is filled with the toxic pollutants of the world, you get people who just react badly.” In the end our true new life would not come from our effort and will power but what gets filled inside us. I pray that inside of us will be a recurrence of the new creation through death and resurrection of new Adam.

Wednesday, March 3: The Three Strangers

Written by Michael Petrin, a professor at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

Genesis 18:1-8:

And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, "My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I fetch a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

In chapter 18 of Genesis, we find Abraham and Sarah living in a tent by the oaks of Mamre. It's been about 25 years since the couple first left their home and settled as strangers in the land of Canaan. And it's been the same number of years since God first promised that he would make of them "a great nation" ([Gen. 12:2](#)). So far, however, Abraham and Sarah have been unable to conceive a child, and they know firsthand just how difficult it can be to have faith—just how difficult it can be to trust in the promises of God and to walk in the way of righteousness.

When three strangers show up unexpectedly at their camp, then, we might expect Abraham and Sarah to turn them away. We might expect them to say, "Sorry, we already have enough to deal with right now. You should ask somebody else for help."

But that's not what they do. Instead, when Abraham sees the three men, he jumps up from his seat and runs to meet them. He calls himself their "servant," and he invites them to rest at his camp and wash their feet. He and Sarah also set out a sumptuous feast: cakes baked with fine meal, curds and milk instead of mere water, and the prime meat of a freshly slaughtered calf. After the strangers enjoy the couple's remarkable hospitality, one of them promises Sarah that she will finally give birth to a son within the year.

Who are these three strangers? And does Abraham know their identity? The Letter to the Hebrews offers us a preliminary answer to these questions. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers," the letter says, "for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" ([13:2](#)). According to this verse, the strangers to whom Abraham showed hospitality were angels, but he did not know their identity.

Subsequent Christian interpreters have disagreed about precisely which of the strangers were angels. Some, such as Saint Irenaeus, have claimed that two were angels, but that the third was the Son of God himself, whom Christians worship as "Lord" (see [Gen. 18:1, 22-33](#)). Others,

such as Saint Augustine, have argued that all three of the strangers were angels, but that God's own presence was made manifest through them.

Christians have thus long understood the visit of the three strangers as a story that teaches us about the very nature of God. According to some, the story prefigures the incarnation of Christ: that wonderful event when the eternal Word of God became flesh and was born into a world that did not know him ([John 1:1-18](#)). According to others, the story is an image of the Holy Trinity: the one God who exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, an eternal communion of divine love ([2 Cor. 13:14](#)). Either way, the story of the three strangers is about more than meets the eye; it is a story that tells us something about who God is.

It is also a story that tells us about our relationship with God. For example, it teaches us that we are able to meet God—to encounter his very presence—in the process of eating a meal. And of course for Christians this happens in a special way at the Lord's Supper, when we have the chance to share in the body and blood of Christ himself ([1 Cor. 10:16](#)). In a way, whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup, we join Abraham in welcoming the divine stranger who is our Lord. This is a lesson that two of the first disciples learned on the road to Emmaus, when they first encountered the risen Christ as a stranger but later recognized him “in the breaking of the bread” ([Luke 24:35](#)).

The story of the three strangers also teaches us that we can meet God by performing concrete acts of love in service of other people. Jesus himself offered us a model of this loving service when he washed the feet of his disciples and commanded them to love one another as he had first loved them ([John 13:1-35](#)). He also taught us that when we love our neighbor, we actually love God as well—because when we feed the hungry, we feed Christ himself; when we clothe the naked, we clothe Christ himself; and when we welcome strangers, we welcome Christ himself ([Matt. 25:34-40](#)).

When we read the story of the three strangers in Genesis 18, therefore, we can find various levels of meaning. We can, of course, learn about Abraham and Sarah's hospitality, but we can also learn about God's own nature and about where we can encounter God in our daily lives. As Christians, then, we should follow the example of Abraham and Sarah in being always ready to show hospitality to strangers and thus always ready to welcome God into our hearts. What is more, we shouldn't forget to thank and praise God for the hospitality that he has shown to us, who have fallen away and become strangers to him through sin. For if “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” ([Rom. 5:8](#)), how can we choose anything but to love him in return?

Friday, March 5: Jesus and Isaac

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of Bethel United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, Virginia.

[Genesis 22:1-14](#)

Once upon a time there was a man named Abram. One day Abram was out working in his father's fields and God spoke to him. God promised a great nation would come from Abram, which in the ancient world meant he'd have lots of children. But in the midst of their travels and trials, Abram and his wife Sarai are unable to conceive. Along the way God renames the couple Abraham and Sarah but even as they both mature into old age, they have no children.

Then, in miraculous fashion, Sarah conceives and gives birth to a son in her old age. Isaac is the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham and Sarah. And that promise was a long time in being fulfilled. But God kept God's promise!

And then Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his son. The same God who promised to make of Abraham a great nation is now asking Abraham to sacrifice the only means to see that great nation come to fruition. And beyond that, a father who has waited so long to have a child, waited so long to see his wife become a mother, is now being asked to give all that up. I'm glad God never asked that of me.

But Abraham gets Isaac one morning and starts on a journey towards a particular mountain. He makes all the preparations for the sacrifice and they set off. It's a three-day journey. Of course, it is. And when they've gotten to the base of the mountain Abraham tells the servant he's brought that he and his son will go the rest of the way alone. Abraham has Isaac carry the wood for the sacrifice. Of course, he does. Abraham carries the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" I can just picture Isaac, and every time I picture it Isaac is the same age as my oldest son, looking at the items they are bringing, seeing his little brain spinning, working it out, and gathering as much courage as the little man can and saying, dad, aren't we missing something? How can that not break you? How could that not break Abraham?

They go up the mountain. They find a spot suitable for sacrifice. They build the altar. I wonder at what moment Isaac knew. But Abraham puts his son on the altar. And raises the knife.

And then the Angel shouts, "STOP! This has gone far enough!" Abraham is told to take Isaac off the altar, a ram is found, and indeed God has provided the means for the sacrifice. Abraham walks down the mountain with his son.

What do we do with this story? What do we make of it? If we're honest, this story doesn't sit well with us, does it? If we're honest, this is a story that elicits complicated feelings

about this God. This God that would give a man a child by means of miracle and then ask that man to give the child back. And all just to see if he'd really do it. On some level we get to the end of this story and we ask, what was the point? To prove a level of faith that many of us would consider fanatical?

This story elicits many complex feelings. And at this point I want you feeling all of them in full. Because all of the questions we have, all the feelings we have, all the nuances we want to add to this story, it's time to feel them all fully.

Because the ram wasn't the sacrifice God provided.

At least the ram wasn't the sacrifice that took Isaac's place.

Another would come, who would be destined to be a sacrifice, who would place the wood of the sacrifice upon his back and would make a three-day journey.

Jesus.

Jesus is the new Isaac.

And I wonder if this story doesn't give us a tiny insight into what God went through for our salvation?

Jesus is the new Isaac. Jesus is the sacrifice God would and did provide. Our world is out of whack, our relationships are out of whack and it's our fault. But God did what was necessary to right and renew and redeem our relationship with God. And through a renewed and redeemed relationship with God, God intends to redeem all things. God did it, God has done it. God provided what was needed.

But the thing that was needed, and which God provided, was God's son. God's only son.

Oftentimes with this story we ask the question what kind of God would ask a father to sacrifice his son? In some respects that's the lens through which we read all of the Bible. What kind of God is this that we are called to love, follow, and worship? We are troubled by the type of God who would ask a father to sacrifice his son, yet we don't realize that that isn't the end of the story. In the ancient world lots of gods asked fathers to sacrifice sons. Our God is the God who tells Abraham to stop and instead offers God's own son as the sacrifice. I think it's telling that at the crucial moment, God shouted "stop" to Abraham, but we shouted "Crucify Him" to Jesus.

But that is what our God has done for us. Instead of making us pay the price for our own redemption, God accomplishes it Godself. God does it for us. God does what we cannot do for ourselves. God gives and gives and gives. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Monday, March 8: Christ as God’s Wisdom, the Heart of Creation

Written by Andrew R. Guffey, Priest-in-Charge of St. Mary’s In-The-Hills Episcopal Church, Lake Orion, Michigan.

Our lives are full of information. We can get answers to just about any question of trivia we might have on Google within seconds. We can look up our symptoms to see if we can figure out what ails us. We can search out the most arcane knowledge, but the questions that matter most to us—How long will I feel alone? Why is that so beautiful that my heart feels full to bursting? What is my life for?—Google can’t really answer those sorts of questions. For the questions that mean the most to us we know we need something deeper, we need wisdom. In an age of information, we are desperate for wisdom.

The book of Proverbs speaks constantly of Wisdom, in which all of creation was founded. In chapter eight, Wisdom cries out:

The Lord created me as the beginning of God’s ways for God’s works....
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—
When he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil.
When God established the heavens, I was there,
When God drew a circle on the face of the deep,
When God made firm the skies above,
When God established the fountains of the deep,
When he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress God’s command
When God marked out the foundations of the earth,
Then I was beside God, like a master worker;
I was daily God’s delight, rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race. ([Proverbs 8:22-31](#))

As the early Christians marveled at the world God had made and God’s delight in humankind, is it any wonder that they identified this Wisdom through which God created all that is with Christ? The Wisdom of Proverbs is like the Logos (the Word) in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word...through whom all things came into being, and without whom not a single thing came into being that has come into being” ([John 1:1, 3](#)). Christ was there at the beginning, when all was created, and it was through Christ, the Divine Wisdom, that the heavens were established, the skies and the depths and the very foundations of the earth were made. Christ was and is and always will be God’s daily delight, rejoicing before God in the work of creation, and delighting in the human race.

What does Divine Wisdom have to say to our deepest questions? What does it mean for us that the world was created through Wisdom, through the Divine Word, through Christ? It might mean, as theologian Rowan Williams writes, that “God makes the world to be itself, to have an integrity and completeness and goodness that is—by God’s gift—its own. At the same

time, God makes the world to be open to a relation with God's own infinite life that can enlarge and transfigure the created order without destroying it" (*Christ the Heart of Creation*, xiii). At the heart of Creation is not God's judgment or disfavor, but the God disclosed in Christ is a Triune God who creates everything—including we ourselves—out of overflowing delight.

Where is Wisdom to be found? In the very creation all around us. This Lent, as we ponder wherein we might have strayed, and our need to be renewed in God's image, may we be inspired not by our disappointment, but by the infinite beauty of God disclosed by the creation of all the world, a work of love between God and Christ, the Divine Wisdom. How might this world, charged with God's grandeur, lead us to the heart of the Triune God, who daily and constantly delights in God, the world, and, believe it or not, in you and me?

Wednesday, March 10: Joseph – “Dreams and Drama”

Written by Lauren Lobenhofer, Pastor of Cave Spring United Methodist Church in Roanoke, VA.

Genesis 37:17b-20 (NRSV): *“So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”*”

In Joseph’s brothers’ mouths, “dreamer” sounds like an insult. You can almost hear them spit the word as they begin to plot their little brother’s murder. Joseph is their father’s favorite, spoiled with the gift of a luxurious robe. It is not just their father’s preferential treatment that his brothers resent, though. They also, as their comments reveal, resent his dreams.

Joseph dreams of a world turned upside down, in which a younger son attains high rank and his mighty older brothers are brought down. His dreams were of a radical reversal. In a world of patriarchal primogeniture, where the biggest, oldest sons could expect to rule over their younger siblings, Joseph’s dreams of his older brothers bowing to him were upsetting, even offensive. They expected and wanted a certain arrangement of power, an arrangement that their young upstart brother, with his wild dreams and father’s blessing, threatened to undermine.

Yet God does not submit to our expectations. God wills a world that is different from the one we envision—a world we can scarcely imagine because it reverses or obliterates the status quo that we take for granted. When God’s vision conflicts with our expectations, though, it makes us uncomfortable, resentful, even violent. When Joseph’s God-given dream subverted their expectations, his brothers lashed out. They betrayed and abandoned Joseph, first leaving him in a pit for dead, then selling him for silver to line their own pockets.

Likewise, when Jesus’ ministry went against their expectations, his disciples turned away from him. Jesus refused to fit himself into the expectations of those who followed him. He resisted their plans to start a violent uprising against the occupying Roman forces. He refused to participate in the judgment and hierarchical posturing of the religious elites. He eschewed attempts to place him on a royal pedestal, preferring instead to sit at tables with sex workers and tax collectors. He preached about his dream for a divine kingdom where the mighty and powerful were brought low and the lowly were lifted up. Eventually Judas, his expectations frustrated and his hopes stalled, betrayed Jesus for silver to line his pockets, just as Joseph’s brothers had betrayed him. The other disciples, nervous about their own fates, abandoned Jesus to his fate. Even in the face of betrayal, abandonment, and violence, though, God brought salvation. Joseph’s suffering became a means for his family’s rescue from famine. His dream came to fruition years later in Egypt. Jesus’ suffering became a part of God’s saving work. In the fullness of time, God’s dream modeled in Jesus’ ministry, will be fulfilled as well.

Prayer: God of dreams and visions, give us eyes to see your kingdom breaking forth on earth. Give us hearts to seek your will above our own expectations. Give us courage to overcome our fears and work for your dream for all creation. Amen.

Friday, March 12: The Bronze Serpent

Written by Leah Wise, a student at Yale Divinity School

The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.
- Numbers 21:7-9, NRSV

The Exodus narrative (which is retold in Numbers) is full of stories of God’s people complaining to Moses as they wander through the wilderness. In Numbers 21, the Israelites finally summon the courage to complain directly to God. Their suffering has gone on long enough. But just as they think they don’t have the strength to survive another calamity, poisonous snakes take over their camp in pandemic proportions, ravaging the community. The death toll rises. The future is uncertain as ever.

So God commands Moses to make a bronze serpent on a pole. Though it’s hard to know what this actually looked like, what comes to mind is the medical symbol, except with one snake, not two. In any case, healing happens here. When the afflicted Israelites gaze upon it, they recover from their poisoning. They live to see their future, however uncertain it may be.



Many theologians have suggested that this serpent on a pole foreshadows the cross. Anyone who gazes upon that indignity of Christ crucified sees life. But, unlike the serpent on the pole, Christ doesn’t remain on the cross. No, he gets down and walks with us. He appears to us in the midst of our grief, and in the midst of our chaos. He beckons us to look and listen for signs of the Kingdom of God as we wander through uncertain terrain. We are tired and fearful, but the full story of Scripture reminds us that Christ knows our deepest suffering. He heals us over and over again, though not always in the ways that we expected or hoped for.

Sometimes, we think that following Christ is like becoming that serpent on a pole. We’re supposed to slither up and wrap ourselves tightly around suffering to prove something to God. But Christ got off the cross. He beckons us to grab his hand, get down from the cross, and keep on the path of the Kingdom of God. A path that always leads toward hope. We have already been redeemed. Thanks be to God!

Monday, March 15: Daniel and the Immaculate Conception

Written by Ashley Faulkner, a professor at the University of North Florida.

Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible. This image's head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass,

His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay.

Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces.

Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure. —Daniel 2:31-34, 45

In Daniel's striking image of the immaculate conception, we are promised the gift of destruction. At the height of our golden glory, established on our feet of clay, we will be blessed by God with the redemptive gift of humility, of a fall. God promises, in the words of the prophet, to grind us to powder, to raze us to the ground.

And this grace—this dream come true—comes to us from God's own hand and the Virgin Mary, not from the man-made artifice, the brass and costly metal, of this world's brazen and costly life. Surely nothing we can do will "help" God to bring about this salvation, certainly not images of gold and brass....

So why go to church?

A wise theologian once said, "Beautiful churches distract the faithful from the word of God.... And ugly churches are much more distracting!" At the Cathedral of Amiens, in northern France, the image of the destructive stone of Christ's incarnation—the stone cut without hands, coming free from the mountain by God's own will—is physically depicted on the outside of the building, carved into the rock of the façade. It is a sculptor's handmade reminder both that our salvation is out of our hands and that our hands should be busy with the work and message of the Gospels. "The work of our hands, establish thou it," we pray with Moses in the psalm ([Psalm 90:17](#)). The works of our hands can be established, made firm, by Our Lord. He Himself teaches us to pray so. And the edifice of the church is never vain, if it celebrates and shelters the Eucharist, the incarnation of Christ, and the thing our handiwork alone can never bring, His redeeming grace.

In Lent we have the gift of being broken and ground down by that gracious stone. And when it has ground our idolatrous lives to powder, we see and behold Christ building us up again—building the Kingdom around us, all the weight of our redemption borne by the Cornerstone.

Wednesday March 17: Jesus and Moses

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor of Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, VA.

We think the “law” can save and fix our messed up and broken lives. From infancy we’re spoon-fed a narrative of righteous self-determination, that if you do all the right things, and go to the right school, and marry the right partner, then everything will be as it should be.

Until it isn’t.

And then the “law” refuses to let us go.

So we adopt new habits: we buy a Peloton, we go on a new diet, we stay up late into the evening looking at Zillow for the next perfect house, we “Marie Kondo” our lives in order to get things under control.

And, even if some things change, even if we get that nice dopamine hit from imagining ourselves in a new place or we can fit into clothes we haven’t worn since college, we still can’t actually fix ourselves with the “law.”

At some point the new house becomes the old house, a few weeks away from the gym brings our waistline back, and on and on.

Enter Jesus.

Jesus came to bring us something better than another law, something better than another set of things we must do in order to get God to do something for us. Sure, we’re called to love God and neighbor, turn the other cheek, pray for our enemies, but those are never prerequisites for the Kingdom.

Remember: The Kingdom is already among us. Our sins were nailed to the cross and left there forever.

The Law (from scripture and from life) is good, but it kills us. It exists to accuse us and it shows us, over and over again, who we really are. For, to borrow an expression from Paul, no one is righteous, no, not one.

Even our subtle exercises in self-denial during Lent help to remind us of the condition of our condition: Lent isn’t about participating in spiritual olympics in which we compete with one another to see who can be the most holy - instead it’s about confronting the fact that our desires will always get the better of us.

But the Law, and its ability to deaden us, is Good News and exactly what we need. It’s only in death (read: Baptism) that we begin to know the One who came to give us grace.

Contrary to how we often water down the Gospel, we worship a rather odd God. Our God who, among other things, speaks from a burning bush, promises offspring to a wandering octogenarian, and saves the cosmos through death on a cross.

And for Christians, we know who this odd God is because we know Jesus Christ. Therefore, Jesus is not a new Moses who displaces the old law with a new one. Instead, Jesus is the New Adam who inaugurates an entirely new cosmos.

Jesus is not a new Moses because, as the Gospel of John reminds us, the Word was God before the foundation of the world.

Jesus is not a new Moses who offers a set of guidelines to save ourselves and the world. Instead Jesus comes to be our salvation in himself.

Here's the Good News: On any given Sunday (even in the midst of a global pandemic) the people of God called church gather together to hear the most important word we will ever hear: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that proves God's love toward us - In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Notice - Christ died for us while we were sinners, not before and not after. Christ chooses to die for us right in the midst of the worst mistake we've ever made or will ever make.

In the end, that's what it's all about.

We don't follow Law in order to get God to save us.

We are already saved which then frees us to follow the Law - we do the things Christ calls us to do not because it earns us anything, but simply because it makes life a whole lot more fun.

Jesus isn't a new Moses - Jesus is God. And that's the difference that makes all the difference.

Friday, March 19: Rock & rolling stones Cleft for Me.

Written by Dan Kim, Pastor of Gum Spring United Methodist Church.

They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. - 1 Corinthians 10:2-4

In 1987, Aretha Franklin was the first woman to be inducted in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Long overdue and unquestionably deserving of her place in the annals of Rock N' Roll history, her Gospel-inspired sound, prodigious voice, and gift for music earned her 18 Grammy awards and 26 nominations. During her induction ceremony, of which she was unable to attend, Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones started his casually poetic induction speech with these words, "Dictionary's been used up, there's no superlatives left...What can I say about Aretha? You're in baby!" Just before her retirement in 2016 and for a production by Time Magazine, she returned to perform inside New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit where her father served as pastor and her singing career began. To set the scene, the Queen of Soul sits at a relatively ordinary piano, in an ordinary church, singing just one song that lasts for six minutes. A singular yet timeless performance of an ordinary hymn. Of course, there was nothing ordinary about her or her performance, which belies the modest church setting. Afterwards she said, "I just felt it. In my spirit today." She continued to say, "You have the ethereal feeling there. It is the house of the Lord. It is the Supreme Being. So there is no greater space to sing than the church."

Better than any Lenten devotional I could offer, let me invite you to watch that performance in its entirety. (<https://youtu.be/FUjJhHgix4M>)

See her play, hear her say, feel her pray; "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me." And read the hymn written by Augustus Toplady. That would be devotional enough.

During the season of Lent, we are traditionally invited to see Christ in the empty spaces of our lives made apparent by the abstinence of typical but seemingly necessary consumables. Meat, coffee, social media; these are the ordinary things from which we commonly fast in our journey towards a deeper Lent. However, what if Lent can also be an invitation to see Christ in the ordinary? To see Christ in the everyday fullness of our lives? For the church in Corinth who struggled with enculturation, perhaps that is why Paul offers an argument against idolatry by spiritualizing food, drink, and this accompanying rock. The way Paul sees Christ in an ordinary rock from which God miraculously provides water for the Israelites could also be an invitation to see Christ in the ordinary things from which God provides spiritual quenching for us. Don't get me wrong, I don't see Christ on Facebook or Twitter all that often. But coffee? In the mornings? Absolutely, that's my java with Jesus. For the liturgical nerds among us, what is Lent if not the intentional spiritualization of 40 days before Holy Week that would otherwise be "Ordinary Time"? What makes Lent lenten is precisely the invitation to experience the ordinary in intentionally consecrated ways. Music, reading, food, or a rock; these things can become extraordinary equipment from God that can help us along in our faith and not merely ordinary obstacles if we but avail ourselves to Christ who transforms water into wine, wine into blood, and blood into forgiveness.

Christ is accompanying you throughout this season. Maybe we be open to transformation. May we be ordinary vessels of an extraordinary God. I pray, “**As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**” ([1 Peter 2:4-6](#)).

Monday, March 22: Manna – What is it?

Written by Jonathan Page, Pastor of Herndon United Methodist Church.

The Israelite people called it manna. It was like coriander seed, white, and tasted like honey wafers. Moses said, “This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Let an omer of it be kept safe for future generations so that they can see the food that I used to feed you in the desert when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.’”

Moses said to Aaron, “Take a jar, and put one full omer of manna in it. Then set it in the Lord’s presence, where it should be kept safe for future generations.” Aaron did as the Lord commanded Moses, and he put it in front of the covenant document for safekeeping. The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a livable land. They ate manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. -Exodus 16:31-35

“What is it?” The question likely reverberates in the ears of a parent listening to a curious child, in the mind of the bored student in the lifeless lecture hall, and even in the hearts of people this day and millenia before this day. Manna, the blessing from God to God’s people in the midst of their deepest wandering, is really uncertain stuff. At the root of the word manna, the Hebrew offers this question that can be both the simplest of curiosities and the fullest question of the soul. Quite simply, what is it?

In this question, there is not only exoticism, but something even greater for the Israelite people of then and us in this day: provision. Manna, even though it is unfamiliar and different, is meant to be enough for the Israelites as they navigate the wilderness of their day. For us, perhaps it is meant to be enough as we navigate the wilderness spaces of our own lives.

As Exodus 16 concludes, there is this instruction from Moses to Aaron about how the Israelite people will memorialize this blessed gift from God. They are to fill a jar with one omer of manna and keep it in God’s presence for generations to come. Because of this, it will be a persistent reminder of God’s faithfulness even in the midst of people’s uncertainty. It will be a story that is passed from generation to generation. A gift that long exceeds its present fruitfulness.

For us, perhaps this is the reminder we need of the Messiah we long to encounter in the season of Lent. In this particular season, we’re likely aware of just how mortal we are and just how lost and broken the world around us might feel. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a very wilderness-like feel to an otherwise ordered and controlled life. We are searching and longing for some kind of provision and some kind of hope.

It is into this reality that Christ is born, that Christ lives, ministers, teaches, and heals. It is into this world that Christ is beaten, given over to suffering and death upon a cross. But it is into this space that Christ journeys through all Hell, through every wilderness we may ever know, to bring about the good news of resurrection, redemption, forgiveness, and the gift of life eternal. So often the way Christ comes into our lives and into God’s creation is curious and unbelievable. We wonder how God might have know this or done that? We are left begging the question “What is it?”

But when the what or the who or the why or the how or whatever the question might be receives the response of Jesus, perhaps we find ourselves to be not so different from the Israelites. In our own wandering, there is enough. Jesus is provision for the otherwise unthinkable spaces of this life, the story worth sharing from generation to generation. May Christ be a blessing, a generous portion, enough for our lives. Even when our lives are found in the wilderness of all creation.

Wednesday, March 24: Isaiah 63:1-3 - The Grapes of Wrath

Written by Joe Lenow, Rector of St. James' Episcopal Parish in Lothian, Maryland.

*“Why are your robes red, and your garments like theirs who tread the wine press?”
“I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their juice spattered on my garments, and stained all my robes. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come.”*

There's an image that's been seared into my memory by too many adolescent re-watchings of 2000's *Gladiator*: it's Russell Crowe with a sword in each hand, spattered with the blood of his enemies, declaring vengeance against those who have wronged him. I think of that whenever I read this passage from Isaiah—the hero of Israel coming over the horizon, seen hazily at first but approaching to tell the people they have been liberated from those who would conquer and oppress him. The day of vengeance has come: his robes are darkened with the blood of Israel's persecutors, stained like the robes of one who has been treading on grapes in a giant tub to make wine. The grapes of the Lord's wrath have been pressed: the enemies of Israel have been defeated; the people have been freed, restored to the worship of the Lord.

I've always been a little uncomfortable with the fact that this image has been associated with Jesus from some of the earliest days of Christianity. Those themes are there in the life of Jesus, of course. At the Annunciation, traditionally observed March 25, Mary sings that God “has shown the strength of His arm, He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.” St. Paul writes in [Romans 6](#) that we have been crucified with Christ, our “old self” put to death so that “we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” [Revelation 19:13](#) is most explicit in connecting Jesus to this passage in Isaiah: “He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God.” But this image is so violent, so grim; is this really how we're supposed to imagine the All-Merciful Redeemer of the world?

Here's the thing: when early Christian writers turned to this text, the part that interested them most wasn't the warrior—it was the grapes. It was the grapes pressed to the point of bursting their juices poured out on the pavement to make wine. It was the juices that get everywhere, staining everything they touch. And it was the solitary figure, bearing the weight of God's redemption alone as he works in the presses. For the early Church, this passage from Isaiah is an image of Eucharist: God's victory over sin and death is accomplished by the Savior who treads the winepress alone, but just as importantly, is the grapes—by the one who, pressed by weight of the world's darkness, redeems us by giving himself to us as wine.

This image tells us that we do see the wrath of God on the Cross, and there is a victory accomplished there. God makes no compromise with evil; the violence and oppression that so define the world around us today are given no quarter in the Kingdom of God but are annihilated totally. Whatever is sinful in us, the “old self” about which Paul speaks, is put to death fully and finally on the Cross. But the manner in which Christ accomplishes this is unexpected: by giving himself as the grapes to be crushed by the weight of the world's sin; by pouring out his own

body and blood, giving himself to us in bread and wine and nourishing a new life in us. What we need is to be cast down, overcome by the power of God. That's what makes us truly free.

Friday, March 26: Joshua and Jesus

Written by Charlie Baber, Pastor of Youth Ministry at University United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, NC.

“I’ve commanded you to be brave and strong, haven’t I? Don’t be alarmed or terrified, because the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” - Joshua 1:9, CEB

Israel entered the promised land through the courageous and faithful leadership of Joshua, whose name means “Yahweh saves.” The book of Joshua tells the story of the military campaigns against the peoples of Canaan, and can be quite troubling for the modern reader as the Israelites violently kick out the natives. The book is meant to evoke the flood story, where God destroyed wicked humanity in order to start over with a righteous family. Joshua of Nun has long been understood to be a “type” of Christ, someone who exemplifies characteristics that we see in the person of Jesus. To begin with, they have the same name (Joshua is the Hebrew form and Jesus is the Greek form, but the name is the same). Like Joshua followed Moses, so Jesus fulfilled the Law. As Joshua conquered Israel’s enemies, Jesus conquered our ultimate enemies of Sin and Death on the cross. Joshua led Israel faithfully through the River Jordan into the Promised Land, so Jesus leads us into the kingdom of Heaven through baptism.

During Lent, we face internal and external enemies as we practice penitence and spiritual development. Christ has taught us to deal with our enemies differently than Joshua’s violent conquest. In Christ, we conquer sin by dying with Christ, we overcome our enemies by loving them as Christ does. We enter the kingdom by the blood of the Lamb, not the blood of our foes. And the price has already been paid, the victory already won through Jesus Christ our Defender and Savior. Still, like Joshua, we are called to be brave and strong, to courageously face the world each new day, trusting that because of Jesus, the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. You can claim victory in the kingdom of God, and yet you still have to do the hard work in order to realize that victory. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Reject the spiritual forces of wickedness and work for God’s justice in this world. We are called to partner in the work of the Lord each new day, and we do not face the battle unequipped. So don’t be alarmed or terrified when things seem to fail or go utterly wrong. God is with you wherever you go.

Prayer: Lord our Savior and Defender, strengthen us when courage fails, go before us and prepare the way for victory in Jesus Christ as we seek to build your kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sunday, March 28: Christ our Great High Priest: Resting In Prayer

Written by Anna Petrin, a Professor at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC.

“Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” - Hebrews 4:14-16

This beautiful passage from the Letter to the Hebrews is one of the most well-known parts of the Bible. It conjures up an unforgettable image of Christ as our High Priest – and quite a High Priest at that! A High Priest who has “passed through the heavens,” who is “tested” and yet is “without sin.” A High Priest who is somewhat like Aaron and his descendants in the Old Testament ([Exodus 28-29](#)), but who is also not like those high priests – because those men were sinners, and they offered daily sacrifices not only for other people’s sins, but for their own as well ([Leviticus 9:7](#)). Christ is therefore the perfect High Priest: a High Priest who offered himself “once for all” as a perfect sacrifice not for his own sins, but for ours ([Hebrews 7:27](#)).

As a teacher of worship at a seminary, I am lucky enough to work with students across all age ranges and denominations as they develop their own patterns of daily prayer and learn the history of Christian worship. And in reading journals, personal meetings, and assignments for the past decade now (from clergy and laity alike), I have heard again and again two similar refrains: “I’m worried that I pray the wrong way, so I just don’t pray,” and, “I can’t really pray because I’m too busy leading worship.” These honest moments offer us, as a church, a critical insight into our need for Christ in both our personal prayer and our communal prayer. They teach us that sometimes our desire to make our prayer “perfect” (as some of my students put it) ends up sidelining our great High Priest and places us in a role that we can never hope to fill.

As Hebrews teaches us, nobody else’s prayer can compare to Christ’s – not even that of a high priest in the Temple. What, then, are we called to as Christians? We are called to “hold fast to our confession” and to “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” The point here is not that we are supposed to say certain words (like the “confession of faith” in the United Methodist liturgy). Instead, the point is that we are supposed to open our hearts to receive the mercy and grace that Christ, our great High Priest, has already offered us once for all time.

Ultimately, Hebrews exhorts the followers of Christ to abandon self-sufficiency and to rest – to rest in the trust and knowledge of God’s goodness and provision. It reminds us of the words of [Psalm 95](#) (“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...”), and it calls us to become people of faith who are open to “the promise of entering his rest” ([Hebrews 4:1](#)). In short, to name Jesus as our great High Priest is to situate our own prayers – the prayers we pray in our hearts and the prayers we offer as congregations – inside the prayer of Christ. Our lives of worship are united not only to one another but to the great and unending prayer of Christ who comes to us, enlivens us, intercedes for us, and resurrects us, so that we can escape from our

own prisons of achieving and performing, and instead live and move and have our being in the great and wide mercy of the God who made us.

This idea of resting in the Lord may seem obvious and even easy. And yet I suspect it is one of the most difficult steps that we have to take in a genuine life of prayer. It is hard to embrace the land of divine rest and to stop wandering in the wilderness of self-sufficiency. But the Bible calls us back to a relationship with our great High Priest, calls us back to rest in the knowledge that Christ's mercy and grace are waiting to soothe and heal our every need. The Lenten season can easily become a season of work: a season in which we try to haul ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps with the tool of fasting. But the Lenten period is not only a period of fasting; it is a period of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. A time in which our needs both as individuals and as communities are set within the proper perspective. A time in which we are called to set aside the work of human gaining and striving in order to enter more deeply into the rest of prayer and love of neighbor. I invite you to ask yourself this Lenten season: What could I give up that might allow me to rest more deeply in the mercy and grace of the great High Priest who will never let me down?

Monday, March 29: Stories of fish with Jonah and Jesus

Written by Hyo G. Kim, Pastor of the West Brunswick Charge in Farmville, VA.

Jesus eats a fish; a fish eats Jonah.

Jonah is a book about God's calling for repentance, obedience, salvation, grace, and so much more. It is one of the well-known stories that even people who never read the Bible know. Most people think of Jonah, who ran from God and was then swallowed up by a fish. Yes, the "a big fish story" part of Jonah has intrigued me for a long time. Regardless of this book's significant meaning, I was always obsessed with the story related to a fish. "How could a fish swallow up a human?" "Wow! Jonah survived from a fish belly."

However, there is also an opportunity to find connections and play with the analogical meaning of fish between Jesus and Jonah. What makes these two characters different? It is obedience. Jonah ran from the difficult calling God gave Him ([Jonah 1:3](#)), whereas Jesus perfectly obeyed God's will and went to the cross. Interestingly, I found the difference in how they play with a fish. The Bible challenges us, "Are you gonna eat a fish or let a fish eat you up?" This impractical question is asked and determines our character of obedience in faith. A fish is often used as an intermediary in scenes where obedience needs to be explained. An obedient little boy brings five loaves and two fishes. Consequently, many people could share fish to eat. What would people think while eating those fishes?

When Jesus was just resurrected and appeared to disciples, He asked them to bring food. They gave him a piece of broiled fish ([Luke 24:42](#)). What would they think while resurrected Jesus was eating a piece of fish?

Undoubtedly, a fish is considered as a food in those contexts in the Bible. The laws of nature and the logic of the cycle of life are simple. To live, people must eat food. From this point of view, obedience thus eating a fish is not simply an act of following. This is the matter of life. Are you going to live by eating fish? Or are you eaten by a fish and die?

A big fish ate disobedient Jonah for three days. What would Jonah think of himself for three days in a fish belly?

I remember being an 8-year-old and going fishing with my father for the first time in my life. Before throwing the fishing rod, my father said, "Wait a minute, I'll teach you how to fish!" I couldn't wait and threw a fishing rod without listening to my father's advice, thinking of catching that big, nice fish. What was the cost of disobedience? The fishing hook I threw caught on my forehead and was pulling at my flesh. I was in pain and said to myself. "I came to fish but caught myself in pain."

Are you ready to follow Jesus? Are you ready to fish? Jesus called the disciples and said, "Follow me, I will make you become fishers of men" ([Mark 1:17](#)).

Remember that Jesus ate a fish, and a fish ate Jonah. Which one are you?

Tuesday, March 30: Jesus, the Paschal Lamb

Written by Grace Han, Pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Alexandria, VA.

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” - John 1:29

“Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.” - Exodus 12:3-13

If you’ve been to church during Lent, you’ve most likely heard of Jesus referred to as the “Paschal Lamb” or “Lamb of God.” You have probably read scriptures with that reference or may have sung songs that use that image. You may have wondered it meant for Jesus to be compared to a lamb, or perhaps you never thought about it too much. But understanding the meaning of Jesus as the Paschal lamb is incredibly significant for us who are seeking to grow our faith this Lenten season.

To truly understand Jesus as the “Paschal Lamb” or the “Lamb of God,” we need to go back before the gospels to the very first Passover in Exodus 12. In fact, the word “paschal” means Passover (or in the Christian context, Easter) and calling Jesus the “Paschal Lamb” links him to the first Passover. Recall that when the book of Exodus began, the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. God heard the cries of his people and sent Moses to deliver the people from the bondage of sin. While Moses performed nine signs, the Pharaoh was unmoved. The night before God freed the Israelites from slavery, God instituted the First Passover meal, where each family was to take an unblemished lamb, slaughter the lamb, and use the lamb’s blood to paint the door posts of every house where they would eat the flesh with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. That night, the Angel of Death would “passover” the homes protected by the blood, but take the lives of the first-born children who did not have blood on its doors. It was after this final sign, that the Pharaoh finally relented and “let the people go.”

As this first Passover meal was instituted, the instructions were clear: this feast was to be kept “throughout your generations...as an ordinance forever” ([Exodus 12:14](#)), as a Day of Remembrance of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Because this Passover meal was not

only a feast, but a religious ritual, the meal required specific rules for how the sacrificial animal was to be prepared. They were to choose an unblemished one-year-old male lamb. The lamb was sacrificed in the Temple and its blood was collected in silver basins and poured out on the altar by the priests. The Israelites were required to eat the flesh of the lamb to be in covenant with God. Most importantly, it was a day of remembrance, so the Israelites would always remember how God delivered them from slavery.

Later, in the gospel of John, when John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God--“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ([John 1:29](#)), this was an incredibly powerful identification. John understood that Jesus was no ordinary prophet, no ordinary religious leader. John knew and anticipated that Jesus was the Messiah who came to atone for our sins, to deliver us from sin and slavery, so that we could experience true redemption and new life.

That designation became much more acute in the Passion narrative as Jesus prepared for his death. As many of us know, Jesus came to Jerusalem because of the Festival of Passover, as many faithful Jews gathered together to celebrate that important holiday. On Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, that fell on the same day that the lamb that was to be sacrificed for the Festival of Passover also came into the city. As the blood of the sacrificial lamb was poured out on the altar by the priests, similarly Christ’s blood was poured out for us. Just as the Israelites were required to eat the flesh to be in the covenant, Jesus instituted the Eucharistic meal, offering his body and blood to his disciples and to us, to bring us into covenant with Christ.

Perhaps, most important, is what the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb achieved. In the first Passover, it was the blood of the sacrificed lamb that protected the Israelites from death. The meat of the lamb nourished and strengthened the Israelites for the journey ahead. Through the sacrifice of the lamb, they were redeemed from their past sins and led into the promised land. The Paschal Lamb was more than just a ritual, it paved a way for a new life.

When Jesus died on the cross, he died as our Paschal Lamb. Through his blood we are saved from sin and death. Through his body we are nourished and brought into covenant, and through his death, we are given a path toward resurrection, toward new life.

But while Jesus achieved the purpose of the original paschal lamb, he also went on to ensure that we would never need another Paschal lamb again. In Jesus Christ, the ultimate sacrifice was made. It is in his body and blood that we are atoned for again and again. It is in Jesus Christ that we are offered a second, third, and fourth chance. It is in Jesus Christ that we know and remember who we and whose we are.

God loved us so much, he sent his son to be a “Paschal Lamb” on our behalf. Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to be sacrificed for our behalf, so that we would be freed from sin and slavery and know new life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Wednesday, March 31: The Suffering Servant

Written by Hungsu Lim, Associate Pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Richmond, VA.

Isaiah proclaims a profound message to the people in exile. This prophet sings a new song of hope and speaks comfort to the people, and his message is unique and powerful, written for a people who experience devastation and have to live in despair in a foreign country. The series of his messages called “Servant Songs” ([Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-7, 52:13-53:12](#)) offers hope and envisions a new possibility for the future.

“But here is my servant, the one I uphold; my chosen, who brings me delight. I’ve put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations.” (42:1)

Isaiah identifies the servant as the one God has chosen and put the spirit to carry on God’s mission. The servant is called to bring justice to the nations. The people who are in exile and suffering might have expected to hear a message of retaliation or retributive justice through the military messiah (anointed one). But this kind of servant is called to bring light to the nation so that God’s salvation may reach to the end of the earth (49:6). This mission is not nationalistic but universal. The image of the servant repeats the way that God calls and blesses Abraham and Sarah, “In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” ([Gen. 12:3](#)) God’s chosen ones should not live for their own sake or their own benefit but should be a light for the nations. Thus, Isaiah gives us a critical message because we, as human beings, tend to put ourselves first. If we are exploited or abused, we want retribution as justice. Of course, God confronts those who exploit the poor and advocates justice for them. But the mission that the servant is called to do is for all the families on earth, not for her/himself. Furthermore, the lifestyle of the servant is stunning because it may lead to times of suffering and humiliation. Being a light for the nations is not easy and requires sacrifice.

“I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.” (50:6)

How could the servant tolerate humiliation and confront this injustice? How could the servant have been living as the suffering one? Suffering has been a deep issue in human history, and there is no easy answer to these questions of why. But the servant has found meaning in suffering. The one who is willing to suffer for the sake of God’s mission will make redemption and wholeness available for all. Suffering is not the end of the story because it can be redemptive and bring light to the nations. That does not answer the serious questions of why, but suffering can mean and make a difference beyond what the servant willingly embraces.

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises, we are healed.” (53:5)

The image of the suffering servant is both an image of the community in exile and an image of how the early church understands Jesus Christ’s death on the cross. Jesus is the perfect example of the suffering servant who dies to save all. So, these texts become meaningful once

the community of faith claims its belief and faith through them. They offer a meaningful way to follow what they are called to do.

We enter into a time of self-denial and repentance in Lent. Lent offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on the lifestyle of the suffering servant. It is a crucial time for us to identify who we are as God's servants. When we also claim ourselves as God's servants, we may be able to follow the examples of Jesus Christ, who lived as the suffering servant on earth and loved all unconditionally. Lent invites us to be a light and bring justice to the nations, even though we may undergo a time of humiliation and suffering. We have hope because God may use our sacrifices, suffering, and pains to bring redemption and restoration for others. Then, we can follow Jesus and his loving ways because Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Thursday, April 1: Adam and Jesus in the Garden

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of Bethel United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, VA.

Two stories and their settings are the same. A man stands in a garden, before God, and is afraid.

Two stories whose settings are the same but couldn't be more different.

Adam stands in the Garden of Eden. He has just eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He's naked. He's ashamed. And he hears God walking through the garden. God is seeking him out, ready for their evening stroll.

But Adam has disobeyed. He has done what God specifically told him not to do. HE HAD ONE JOB! He knows that the second God sees him, God will know. Know what he's done. Know that he's disobeyed. Know that he's failed.

So he hides.

He's afraid. He's afraid of what God will do to him. What will happen when the truth of his actions is brought to light. He's afraid that he cannot stand before God, he's afraid of what will happen when he stands before God.

Jesus stands in the Garden of Gethsemane. He's praying. He's praying so hard he's sweating blood. He's afraid. But unlike Adam, he's not afraid of God. He's not afraid because of his disobedience. He's not worried about what God will do to him. He's afraid of what we will do to him.

"Father, let this cup pass from me!" he prays. He is not worried about the price of his disobedience. He is worried about the cost of his obedience. What it will mean for him to be obedient to God's will. "Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Adam couldn't help but be disobedient; Jesus cannot help but be obedient.

Adam fears that the price of his disobedience deserves death. Jesus is afraid because the cost of his obedience is death.

Adam fears that, because of his disobedience, his relationship with God will be severed. Jesus fears that his obedience will, for a time, sever the link between the Father and the Son.

Adam leaves the garden walking on his own. Jesus leaves the garden committed to walking fully with God, even if that means walking to His death.

How much of our lives do we spend with Adam in the garden, fearing the results of our own disobedience? Afraid that God will discover exactly who we are and what we have done? How often do we fear standing before God knowing that we have not been faithful? How

often do we try so hard to hide from God, lest God feel about us the way we feel about ourselves?

What if, instead, we prayed in the garden with Jesus? We prayed for Jesus to have the strength to be obedient where we have been disobedient? To watch the conviction in Jesus' eyes, the love in Jesus' eyes. What if instead of focusing our thoughts on our own disobedience we focused instead on Jesus' obedience?

Tomorrow, Jesus will go to the cross out of obedience to God. Out of love for you and for me. On Sunday Jesus will defeat death, defeat sin, defeat those things that we fear alienate us from God.

Today, leave behind Adam's garden and its fear of alienation. Leave behind the fear of what God will do to you should your obedience be discovered. Leave behind the shame. Join Jesus in Gethsemane. See what God will do in order to show God's love. See what God will do to win your salvation. Stop looking at all the things you and Adam haven't done. Look instead at what God does.

Friday, April 2: Cursed is the One who Hangs On A Tree

Written by Brian Johnson, Pastor of Haymarket Church in Haymarket, VA.

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—because it is written, Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed.” – Galatians 3:13

Paul, the early Christian missionary who wrote much of the New Testament, had a problem. Paul had spent his life studying, learning, trying to obey God’s law. And, in the law – in what we would call the Old Testament – there is this very clear statement that “everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed” ([Deuteronomy 21:23](#)). Paul believed – as he had spent his whole life believing – that the law was a direct message to the people from God, a message that told them how to live, how to act, what mattered to God.

And so, when he heard about Jesus, he knew deep down that Jesus couldn’t be the Messiah, because the Messiah was the promised savior, God’s chosen and blessed one, and Jesus had died a cursed death: hanging on a cross, from a tree. So, Paul became an intense opponent of the early Christians, because he was sure that they were dead wrong. But then, Paul had this radical experience while traveling—overwhelmed by a blinding light, he heard the voice of Jesus speaking to him, calling him to follow Jesus and share his Good News.

So, now, Paul’s got a problem. He believes that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s chosen savior for the people. And if God has chosen Jesus, he must be blessed. But Paul also still believes that God’s word in the Old Testament is true – which means that Jesus, as someone who was put to death on a cross, is somehow cursed. How can Paul hold these two radically divergent – even contradictory – ideas together? How can someone be blessed – sent by God, even – and cursed at the same time?

The answer Paul comes up with – an answer he passes down to us through the New Testament – is that Jesus bore the curse for us. The logic of Paul’s argument is this: the law, as found in the Old Testament, is pretty clear: those who follow it, who do everything that it says we should do, will be blessed. But those who fail to keep the law in its entirety are under the law’s curse. The reality, as Paul points out (and as anyone who has ever been a human being knows), is that we all fall short, we all screw up, even the best of us fail sometimes. The line between good and evil, it has been said, doesn’t run between people, or between groups of people. The line between good and evil, between light and darkness, runs down the center of every human heart. So, says Paul, we are all deserving of punishment. We are all, in a sense, under a curse.

Paul sees Jesus hanging on a tree, on the cross, and he sees something amazing happen. Jesus, he says, is taking on the curse on behalf of the rest of us. He who had no sin, who was the only person ever to be free from the power of sin, has nevertheless accepted the full weight of sin, he has borne the curse for us, so that we might be set free, so that we might receive God’s promise, so that we might come to know, to be, God’s own righteousness. He takes what we deserve, and accepts it for himself, so that we might know, experience, revel in what he deserves: God’s goodness, God’s love, God’s light. Because Jesus accepted the full weight of

sin, because he suffered under sin's curse, everyone else who has ever been cursed, who has ever sinned, is given forgiveness instead.

We aren't nearly as comfortable talking about curses these days as Paul and his contemporaries were. And, yet, let's be honest: there is much about this world that is not as it should be. Disease, hatred, bigotry, injustice, oppression, greed, hunger, fear, white supremacy, poverty – there is much in this world that is broken. There is much that is wrong that needs to be put right. We might even, if we want to use spiritual language, call some of that stuff “a curse.” In Jesus, God says, “I see all the evil you've done, I see the injustice you've ignored, I see the broken systems that put the poor and vulnerable more at risk when things like famine and pandemic and disasters strike, and it's going to take a lot of painful work to put it right, but I love you too much to make you bear the weight of your curse – and, anyway, it's too much for you to bear – so, I'll bear your curse myself.”

Jesus is God entering into our world and giving us something better than we deserve – better than we could ever earn on our own. Jesus is God saying, “there are real consequences to all the evil you have done – cosmic consequences. But I won't make you face those consequences on your own. I will face them for you.”

No matter what brokenness we face, no matter what evils we encounter, we do not face them alone. God, in Jesus Christ, has borne the curse for us. Thanks be to God.

Saturday, April 3: “My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

Written by Elaine Ellis Thomas, Rector of All Saints Episcopal Parish in Hoboken, NJ.

As part of my training for ordained ministry, I spent a summer as a hospice chaplain. Sitting at the bedside praying with those nearing life’s end was an extraordinarily holy time. For those with dementia or who were otherwise non-responsive, it always seemed like something of a miracle that, as soon as I began to say the [Lord’s Prayer](#) or sing an old hymn, from somewhere in the recesses of memory, they could recite or sing along with me. The [23rd Psalm](#) was another favorite. Everyone seemed to know the words.

When you grow up in church, spend your life in bible study or daily and weekly liturgies, the words that we say and pray become like breath to us. For Jesus, the psalms would have been the hymns he learned from childhood. It is no wonder that, in the moment of his greatest distress, he would cry out to God in dereliction and anguish. This was his language. These were the words inscribed on his heart.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As with all psalms of lamentation, [Psalm 22](#) does not stay with the theme of abandonment. It moves through God’s faithfulness, a prayer for relief, and a promise to praise God for deliverance, but Jesus only gets out those first words.

The onlookers and others gathered around enacted other parts, deliberately or not. They pierce his hands and feet and cast lots for his clothing. They mock and scorn him; they taunt him saying

"He trusted in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, if he delights in him." (v. 8)

The gathered chorus fulfills the verses of the psalm while Jesus remains at the opening cry of sheer rejection.

But Jesus knew the psalms. Was there some glimmer of hope in his lament? Did he recall that God’s faithfulness endures forever, that “They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn the saving deeds that he has done” (v. 30)?

Perhaps not, but this is the promise to us. In the salvific work of the cross, we are not forsaken. Even as we cry out to God during these months of pandemic and death and anxiety and loss, we know that

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations bow before him. (v. 27)

Sunday, April 4: Easter and God's Laughter

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of Bethel United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, VA.

*Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and his anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us."*

*He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord has them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
"I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." – Psalm 2:1-6*

We conspired. We plotted. We counseled together. We hatched a plot. We arrested the Innocent One. We tortured the Prince of Peace. We killed the Lord of Life. We hung the Holy One of God on a tree. We shouted curses and jeers at the Blessed One. We crucified Jesus of Nazareth.

God came into the world and we cried "NO!" We told God that this was our world and we were content to be our own kings and rulers. And we shoved God out as loudly and as violently as we could.

But today isn't a day for remorse. Today isn't a day for sorrow. Today isn't a day for grieving.

Today is a day for laughter!

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! God shouts this day that God's Son is the King of Zion. And He has been raised from the dead. He has been raised to live and to reign forever and ever. God has set His Son in the highest place. God has defeated death. God has defeated sin. God has defeated evil. Forever and ever, Amen!

And in so doing God has exposed sin, death, and evil for what they are: losers. Things defeated. Things finished. Sin will not define us. Death will not hold us captive. And evil has no power where Jesus reigns.

This is our victory. This is our celebration!

So, we also laugh. We laugh at the sin that had so long ensnared us. We laugh at death that once held pompous sway. We say, "where O death is your victory?" (Paul's version of shouting "SCOREBOARD!") We laugh at the principalities and powers that thought they could defeat our God. We laugh at any notion that our God could be outdone by evil.

Our God wins! Our God reigns! Our God is the victory!

Jesus Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

And ours is the victory. God's Yes in Jesus is God's Yes to us, a yes that says we are loved (any notion that you aren't lovable is laughable). A yes that says we are not forsaken (any notion that says we are alone is laughable). A yes that says we are God's children and heirs (any notion that says God doesn't love us is laughable). A yes that says God is with us forever and we shall be with God forever (any notion that says we are condemned is laughable). A yes that says God will redeem every bit of us until we are who God has always made us to be (any notion that says our past will forever define us is laughable).

Laugh today. Celebrate today. Be joyous and raucous and boisterous today. Because Jesus is Risen. And God is laughing.

Monday, April 5: The New Temple

Written by Joe Lenow, Rector of St. James' Episcopal Parish in Lothian, Maryland.

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. – John 2:19-22

It's rare, to get a moment like this; a moment when Jesus points to some bit of the world and says explicitly, "This is my Body." It happens in the Upper Room on the night he was handed over to suffering and death. It happens here when Jesus is standing before the Temple of God's covenant people.

This Body had been awaited by the people of God. They spent decades in the wilderness, moving from place to place, wondering if there would one day come a dwelling of God among them that would bring them rest and peace. It had been anticipated, hazily outlined in the mobile tabernacles that the Israelites would construct in the center of their camps.

This Body was prepared for, purified for worship. It could not be built by David whose hands were too stained with blood and violence. To enter this world, it required the true peace of Solomon's Wisdom, and the consent of Mary.

This Body is a place of sacrifice, the site where life is offered over to the Lord for the restoration of God's covenant with Israel. This life is innocent, spotless; yet in being given, Israel is restored, proven to be faithful. Built on the spot where Abraham was saved from sacrificing his son, this Temple shows us that God will hold nothing back in redeeming us from the power of sin and death: not even God's very self.

And then all was lost. This Body was cast down, razed to the ground by the empires of the world. Babylon, in its hubris, believed that Nebuchadnezzar was the true king of the world; Rome's governors believed that this Body's truth was theirs to judge and dispose of. Not one stone was left on top of another, but each lay silently in the cool earth. No further worship was possible; God had deserted the people.

Yet on the third day, this Body was raised—rebuilt, in even greater glory. For this Temple is the Holy of Holies, the dwelling of God with humanity. In it, the hem of God's majesty drapes down in our midst, uniting heaven and earth. In this Temple, the luminous darkness of God's mystery reaches its greatest intensity, hidden in fire and the clouds of smoke and incense rising with our prayers. Here, once a year, we enter into this mystery, and know that even the power of death cannot separate us from the God who has elected us. This Temple is the Seat of Mercy, the Ark of God's presence, Emmanuel. Here, we come in adoration: falling on our knees; stunned into silence; moved to worship with all the people of God; given a new song to sing, a psalm to raise in the courtyard of this Temple:

Christ is Risen!