

Psalms My Lord Said

A Lenten Devotional

Welcome to "Psalms My Lord Said," a Lenten journey through the Psalms quoted in the Gospels. From now through Easter, we will be sharing devotionals written by a variety of pastors and scholars. This is an opportunity for us to dig deeply into our faith and pay attention to Scripture – and to Jesus – as we move towards Holy Week and Easter.

Our theme for this year's devotional is "Psalms My Lord Said." The Psalms are the prayerbook of the Bible. They have been read and sung and prayed by worshippers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for countless generations. And they were read and sung and prayed by Jesus, himself. This devotion will look at the psalms that we see quoted in the Gospels. Some entries will focus merely on the psalm itself. Some will focus on the interplay between the context of its usage in the Gospel and the content of the psalm. Some will look at what this particular psalm reveals about the God who meets us in Christ. And through it all, we shall discover the love and grace of God that lead us to pray and sing: Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

May you encounter God – and discover new riches of Scripture and faith – as we journey together with Jesus through the psalms.

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Wednesday, March 2 | Psalm 72 & Luke 1:68

Written by Lindsey Baynham Freeman, Pastor at [Welborne United Methodist Church](#) in Richmond, VA.

[Psalm 72](#), a prayer for the king, is all about reversals & God's wondrous works throughout all creation. It is a litany that walks us through the hopes for a king that, by God's support, would bring restoration to a people.

And not just any people, not just the high and mighty, but the poor and needy, too. This Psalm encompasses all the wondrous things of God and the prayer is that the king might find favor with God, living a life of faith & justice, too.

The Psalm concludes with these words:

**¹⁸ Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.**

**¹⁹ Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth.**

Amen and Amen.

I do not think Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, had any idea that these words would come from his mouth when they did. Especially after an encounter with the angel Gabriel announcing his son's birth. It is after a time of intense silence that the Holy Spirit fills Zechariah's being and these are the first words he speaks:

**"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."**

It is a recalling and continuing of the Psalmist's prayer. It is an affirmation that God is continuing to do wondrous things. God continues to see the people and redeem them. This time, it begins with the prophet, John, who will prepare the way for the salvation that comes through the Christ child.

And John's sole purpose is around reversals and pointing to the power of God manifesting in Jesus.

The rough places made plain and the crooked paths straight. To be **"...a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."**

These passages and themes are strong in the Advent season as we await the birth of Jesus. However, in this time of Lent, the challenge and invitation is to live into the reversals Christ embodies for the sake of all. To walk a life of faith that welcomes those in seats of power and on the margins. To intentionally reflect on God's wondrous works and our sinful ways. The path to Good Friday is one of confession and acknowledgement that though we are dust, we have been redeemed.

It is a time of receiving the grave words: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." *And*, it is holding the Psalmist's words of thanksgiving close:

**"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."**

May each be guidance and hope for the journey ahead.

Friday, March 4 | Psalm 78.17-24 & John 6.25-35

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor of [Raleigh Court United Methodist Church](#), Roanoke, VA.

Jesus spends the afternoon feeding 5,000 through his divine mercy. And, when all is said and done, bellies full to the brim, a crowd gathers to question the behavior of this God in the flesh.

Jesus' response - "You all are looking for me but for the wrong reasons. I delight in giving you food to eat, but I also have something else to offer."

"What must we do?" The crowds intone.

"Believe" Jesus answers.

"Okay, we get that, but how do we really know you can make good on your promise? Can you rain down from manna from heaven for us like Moses did?"

And then Jesus says, **"Moses didn't give you the manna! It was God who gave the good gift!"**

"Sure," they say, **"That's fine. We'd like some of that bread from heaven please."**

And Jesus answers them, **"Have you not heard anything I've said? I am the bread!"**

What wondrous good news it is that, when Jesus showed up proclaiming the beginning of God's new kingdom, he did so not with sermons about the Trinity, or the atonement, or justification, or any other big and abstract theological mishmash. Instead, Jesus began by pointing right at our stomachs, to that gnawing, unsatisfied, emptiness within and then invited us to dinner.

Jesus feeds the hungry - that's who Jesus is.

Think of the crowds during the days of Moses and during the days of Jesus, imagine how they felt while eating the bread.

Did they deserve it? Did they earn it?

No!

The Psalmist reminds us that they had done everything but deserve it! God's wrath was kindled against them and yet God gave them the bread anyway. The 5,000 didn't have to lay out all their good works before Jesus delighted in filling their bellies.

This is grace.

Grace plus Nothing.

Just when we, the people of God, expect to be clobbered with guilt - "You didn't listen in the wilderness!" "You haven't loved your neighbors enough!" - we actually get clobbered by grace.

And, when that happens, we begin to realize that whenever we've gone

looking for peace or happiness by doing this, that, and the other we've actually overlooked the God who has always been looking for us.

The One who offers us the gift we simply don't deserve.

The heart of Christianity is this - We don't have to give or say or pay anything - In Christ it has all been given, said, and paid for us.

It is by grace and only by grace that we are accepted by God.

Can God spread a table in the wilderness?

That question is often still our question. We look at the wildness of our lives, we spend more time looking backward than forward, and whenever we encounter our own disappointments and shortcomings, we wonder if God can really do anything about it.

Frankly, it's why some of us keep showing up to church week after week, in-person or online - we want an answer to our question. Can God make something of our nothing? Can God spread a table in the wilderness?

And the answer is, quite simply, yes.

God can and God does all the time. God is the Good Shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep, God is the Prodigal Father who rushes out to find us in the street even before we have a chance to apologize, God is the One who, rather than leaving us to our own devices, comes to dwell in the muck and mire of this life to offer us Grace plus Nothing. Amen.

Wednesday, March 9 | Psalm 91.9-13 & Luke 4.1-13

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor of [Raleigh Court United Methodist Church](#) in Roanoke, VA.

The temptation scene set out in the wilderness really is as strange as it sounds. And when you take a step back from the whole thing you can't help but notice that Jesus and the Devil aren't even really talking to one another.

"If you really are God then prove it Jesus."

Jesus' response: "I really am God, so I'm not going to do anything."

And the devil actually has some good suggestions for the Messiah: Why starve yourself when you can easily rustle up some grub? Why let these fools destroy themselves when you can take control of everything? Why let the world struggle with doubt when you can prove you are entirely worthy of their faith?

And, perfectly, Jesus responds to each of the temptations by quoting scripture right back into the Devil's face.

The devil here, frighteningly, actually sounds a whole lot like, well, us. His ideas are some that we regularly champion both inside, and outside, of the church.

Who among us wouldn't want to give food to the hungry?

Who among us wouldn't like to see how politics get in order?

Who among us wouldn't enjoy seeing a powerful demonstration of God's power every once in a while?

But Jesus, for as much as he is like us, he is also completely unlike us. For, in his non-answer answers he declares to the devil, and to all of us, that power, whether it's over creation, politics, or miracles, doesn't actually transform the cosmos.

Jesus, in his refusal to take the devil's offers, reminds us that we, humans, are obsessed with believing that power (and more of it) will make the kingdom come here on earth.

We've convinced ourselves, over and over again, that if we just had a little more control, if we just won one more fight, if we could just get everyone to be exactly like us that everything would turn out for the best.

But it never does.

Instead, the poor keep getting poorer and the rich keep getting richer.

Marriages keep falling apart.

Children keep falling asleep hungry.

Churches keep fracturing.

Communities keep collapsing.

Therefore, though it pains us to admit it, Jesus seems to have a point in his squabble with the Adversary. Because the demonic systems of power, even those

under the auspices of making the world a better place, often lead to just as much misery, if not more.

The devil wants to give Jesus a short cut straight to ends that Jesus will, inevitably, bring about in his own life, death, and resurrection.

The devil wants Jesus to do what we want Jesus to do.

Or, perhaps better put: The devil wants Jesus to do what we want to do.

But here's the Good News, the really Good News: Jesus is able to resist temptations that we would not, could not, and frankly do not.

Even at the very end, when Jesus' hands are nailed to the cross, he is still tempted by the Adversary through the voices in the crowd: "If you really are who you say you are, save yourself!"

But at the end Jesus doesn't respond with passages of scripture. He doesn't offer a litany of things to do or things to avoid. Instead, he dies.

Instead of saving himself, Jesus saves us.

Friday, March 11 | Psalm 37 & Matthew 5:5

Written by Charlie Baber, Pastor of Youth Ministry at [University United Methodist Church](#) in Chapel Hill, NC.

“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.” - Matthew 5:5

When Jesus delivers the beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount, he pronounces blessings on people who typically wouldn't consider themselves #blessed. For example, we traditionally have translated Matthew 5:5 to read, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Certainly, the meek are humble, but meekness also implies submissive, easily imposed upon. The meek are those who will not resort to violence and coercion to get their way.

And in what scenario are the submissive claiming land? Usually, the conquest goes to the mighty victor. The land is sold to the wealthy. In our present housing market, the cost of land continues to soar, and it's certainly not the meek who are able to purchase houses right now. You have to have cash in hand, the privilege to forego housing inspection, and the conniving luck to beat out all other buyers as soon as a new house goes on the market.

This particular blessing of the meek is not new to Israel's faith story. Jesus is actually quoting [Psalm 37](#). This Psalm is attributed to David, and instead of being a praise or petition to God, it is more like the book of Proverbs. Psalm 37 is an acrostic poem, where the author seeks to instill wisdom for the disenfranchised. Take a minute to pause and read Psalm 37 in its entirety.

Much like the book of Job, this Psalm challenges the popular rhetoric that God categorically blesses the righteous with health and wealth. This Psalm recognizes that often, the wicked do prosper at the expense of the righteous, and that it can become a temptation to participate in wickedness in order to get ahead. Over and over, the psalmist encourages the disenfranchised, “trust the Lord,” “enjoy the Lord,” “Commit your way to the Lord,” “be still before the Lord and wait for him.” We are encouraged not to get upset or angry over the injustice, because such emotions unchecked could lead us to fight evil with evil.

Part of the promise to the meek is that the wicked are temporary. They may be powerful. They may seem to get whatever they want. But it will not last. Their victory is a passing storm. Justice is the heart of God, the arc of the universe. And God's justice is not won through might or power. As we learn in the Gospels, God's justice is won through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we unite ourselves to this crucified Savior, we participate in the way of meekness, humility, non-violence, and yes, suffering. But being united to this Christ makes us

co-heirs ([Romans 8:17](#)), inheritors of the full promises of the Holy Spirit. Though the storms of the wicked come and go, though our suffering and struggle may be long, the final word is this, *“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.”*

Monday, March 14 | Psalm 2:7 & Mark 1:9-11

Written by Anna Adams Petrin, Lecturer in [Religious Studies at Marywood University](#), Scranton, PA.

**I will announce the decree of the LORD:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son.
It is I who have begotten you this day.
– Psalm 2:7**

**In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”
– Mark 1:9-11**

Between Baptisms: The Desert Highway

Each year around the time of Lent, my Facebook newsfeed and Instagram stories begin to fill with people announcing that they are “leaving for Lent,” and articles from religious and non-religious sources alike make the rounds explaining why all these Christians are in the process of giving up something that they enjoy for roughly the next forty days. The emphasis repeated over and over again is one of discipline (the ancient word for this was *askesis*), and if we rely solely on this great renunciation, it can seem as though Christians have something against the created order or the material world. All of the focus on the *discipline* of Lent – whatever form that might take – can sometimes cause us to lose sight of the purpose of that discipline, and of the glorious Easter sunrise we are training our eyes to take in. So here, at the beginning of Lent, it can be helpful to “zoom out” and to contextualize this season within the wider Christian calendar, so that we can reorient ourselves toward the Christ that we are trying to follow by taking up these disciplines.

The Christian calendar allows us to walk, each year, through the story of Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. Lent works as a connecting fast that sits between two of the Church’s major feasts: Epiphany and Easter. The origin of Lent is probably related to *both* of these other feasts. It is likely that the 40-day fast that we now celebrate developed in some parts of early Christianity as a way for new Christians, who had been baptized at Epiphany, to imitate Christ’s time in the wilderness after his own baptism (which used to be celebrated at Epiphany). In those contexts, the fast *followed* the feast, just as Christ’s journey into the wilderness followed the revelation of his identity at his baptism. Elsewhere in early

Christianity, Lent developed as a period of imitating Christ's time in the wilderness *before* celebrating baptisms at Easter. Over time, the feast of Lent came to be celebrated in the way we know it today.

Our Scripture passage links these two baptismal feasts of the Christian year. It first appears in the Psalms, Israel's collection of hymns for worship. It then reappears in a moment of revelation at the very start of Jesus' ministry. In this moment, Jesus is baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist, and as he comes up out of the water, a Trinitarian revelation is reported. The Gospels say that those standing by saw not only Jesus but also the Holy Spirit, descending in the form of a dove, and they heard the voice of the Father saying to Jesus, "You are my Son" ([Mark 1:9-11](#), [Matthew 3:13-17](#), and [Luke 3:21-22](#)). Directly following this revelation, Jesus enters the wilderness, fasts, and faces temptation in preparation for his ministry. Christ's journey into the wilderness, then, is not a rejection of any of God's lovely created order – not even a rejection of coffee, chocolate, or Facebook (though setting these aside are great disciplines!). Instead, Christ's journey into the desert is born of his very identity – his identity as the beloved Child of God – and it prepares him for the vocation, or call, that is inherent in that identity.

This passage also appears a third time in the life of the Church: in early Christian baptism. The idea is implicit in the prayers that many of us use today, but in the early Church – especially in the East – this Psalm played a regular role in the celebration of Christian baptisms. Those baptisms attempted to imitate Jesus' own, and they included both an anointing with oil (symbolizing the Christian's inheritance of the Holy Spirit) and a quotation of Psalm 2:7 over the newly baptized Christian ("You are my child; today I have begotten you").

Taken in this context – "between baptisms" – our own Lenten disciplines are not rejections of the created order, but rejections of distraction. And in this process of laying aside every distraction and allowing our focus to settle instead upon Christ our Lord, our "laying aside" becomes also a task of "taking up" and "taking on." We take on the characteristics of the Savior that we follow. We take on the vocation of this Child of God who loved the world and gave his life for it. We take on the joy, grace, love, and peace of the Lord with whom we walk through the "desert" of Lent. Our spiritual world begins to take on the springtime hues of the warming world around us, and our hearts echo with the words of Isaiah: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing" (35:1-2).

In short, if we take up the identities that we celebrate through baptism at Easter, when God says to us, "You are my child; today I have begotten you," the dry path of discipline will become for us not a wandering in the desert, but a highway that leads us home to the house of our God.

Wednesday, March 16 | Psalm 48 & Matthew 5:35

Written by Jonathan Page, Pastor of [Herndon United Methodist Church](#) in Herndon, VA.

We humans love protection. We do a lot to keep ourselves safe, and, amazingly, it often chalks up to what we are wearing. Usually these are temporary measures like seatbelts in cars or steel-toed boots on worksites. There might be some measures that feel more permanent right now like masks in public spaces. The functions of what we wear are distinct as well. Consider the thoughts of stand-up comedian Demetri Martin around vests: “I think vests are all about protection. You know what I mean? Like a life vest protects you from drowning and bulletproof vests protect you from getting shot and the sweater vest protects you from pretty girls.”

Protection is so personal to us that we have to put it on. It becomes our most proximate line of defense, what keeps us safe when everything else is dangerous. In the [48th Psalm](#), there is an observation that protection isn't just an individual effort; rather, in many cases, protection becomes the work of the community. The prayer of the Psalmist here is for the security of Jerusalem, for the protection of the temple. May God uphold these places in such a way that royalty cannot. It's as if there is an anticipation of testifying to God based on God's action to preserve what is known, what is there.

And yet what happens? The walls will fall. What has been built by people to protect will no longer serve that function. And in the midst of this, God's vision will be greater.

I love the latter half of [John 2](#). Jesus enters the Jerusalem temple to find all sorts of shenanigans going on. This is where the whole table-turning, people-chasing side of the Christ comes to life. This doesn't please the Jewish leaders, who will ask Jesus by what authority he is doing “these things”. And how does Jesus respond? “Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up” (John 2:19, CEB).

What he means by this is not the temple with walls of brick and stone, but this body of his that will die and be raised. This body that is vulnerable to the scourges and scars of whips and tattered cords. This body that will be a vehicle for the teaching and preaching and healing and grace-filled love of God. This body that has no seatbelts or boots or vests.

And yet when we can see the person of Jesus as the true temple of God, perhaps we find the protection we need. It won't be something we point to with a sense of pride like we had something to do with it. It isn't through anything our hands could do or build.

Instead, through the abundant and abiding love of God, born to tear down the walls and loose the chains to set a people free, there we will find everything we will ever need. To live in the auspices of this God is to be made vulnerable, exposed, and simple. But perhaps within this susceptibility is a different kind of susceptibility: to see our neighbors as a people to be loved more than feared. To see our possessions as means more than ends. And to see our God as greater than any temple or city or location. Maybe, just maybe, we would for once be susceptible to seeing God as God, eternal and right now. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen.

Friday, March 18 | Psalm 62 & Matthew 16:27

Written by Dan Kim, Pastor of [Gum Spring United Methodist Church](#) in Gum Spring, VA.

Psalm 62, New Revised Standard Version

Song of Trust in God Alone

To the leader: according to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.

- 1 For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.
- 2 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.
- 3 How long will you assail a person,
will you batter your victim, all of you,
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?
- 4 Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.
They take pleasure in falsehood;
they bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse.Selah
- 5 For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
- 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
- 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
- 8 Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.Selah
- 9 Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.
- 10 Put no confidence in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.
- 11 Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.
For you repay to all

according to their work.

Matthew 16:27, New Revised Standard Version

27 *“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.*

Drive. Repent. Repeat.

I do a lot of my praying while driving. It's quiet, I'm alone, and I can be as confessional and ineloquent as I want. I will usually pray for the day that I'm having, but every once in a while, perhaps more oftentimes during rush hour, I will pray for the cars/drivers around me. I remember this one time I prayed for a lifted Ford truck that was behind me. He was tailgating me; all the while trying to push his way through what is clearly a traffic jam. I may have passive-aggressively driven even slower as a result. My prayers started out genial. "Lord, be with this truck that is right behind me. May he realize that he's too close and drive more safely. Amen." However, and I'll be honest here, my so-called "prayers" turned rather ugly, especially when he got right next to me, honked, and stared me down while speeding off. I prayed, "God of all power and might! Be with this truck right now! May your justice roll like waters and righteousness! May he realize the error of his ways!" Ok, maybe I was being a little too overzealous, but the most incredible thing happened 10 minutes later. I saw him pulled over by a police officer and receiving what I hoped was a hefty ticket for his reckless driving. I felt vindicated. I felt avenged! I shook my fist in the air and declared, "Vengeance is mine in my Toyota Corolla!"

However, it's not. And the following scriptures would say otherwise. Psalm 62:11-12 says, "*Once God has spoken, twice I have heard this; that power belongs to God and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.*" Jesus says in Matthew 16:27, "*For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.*" Romans 12:19 says, "*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'*"

Prayer is not a weapon I can wield like some tattletale hotline for God to police through divine justice. Prayer is an experience of God's love and grace that shapes us to those ends. And justice belongs to the Lord. That's indeed the lesson these passages teach me. But, I still want to pray in my car and for those cars around me. How then should I pray? Well, I turn to another passage in Matthew for that. [Matthew 5:43-45](#): "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his*

sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” I should pray like that more often in my car. God bless and be with the truck tailgating me. God bless and be with the car on my right that is texting while driving. God bless and be with the red-light runner in front of me. God forgive me who doesn't pray righteously or drive safely all the time in my car.

Monday, March 21 | Psalm 82 & John 10:34

Written by Lauren Lobenhofer, Lead Pastor of [Cave Spring United Methodist Church](#), Roanoke, VA.

God Among Gods

I often hear people ask, “Where is God when bad things happen?” Where is God when God’s people suffer from poverty and illness, or when creation is damaged or destroyed? In the face of immense suffering within creation, we find ourselves wondering why God allows such horrors to occur.

In [Psalm 82](#), God flips the script on that conversation. In this Psalm, instead of humans asking where God is in the midst of suffering, God asks those who exercise power in the world why they have allowed injustice and hardship. The “divine council” mentioned in verse one may refer to the local deities worshiped by the other people in Canaan, or they may simply be a metaphor for the powers and principalities we elevate within our societies. However we understand this phrase, it points to the people and institutions who wield power in the world. It is these people and institutions God confronts.

Just as humankind wails “How long, O Lord?” in [Psalm 13](#), God returns the question in Psalm 82. God sees the brokenness of the world and cries out, “How long?” The Almighty names conditions that break our hearts: Injustice, poverty, oppression, the suffering of the vulnerable among us, and God laments these ills, too. Just as our hearts cry out for our hurting siblings in our community and around the world, God mourns the suffering of God’s children. God shows deep compassion for God’s people and powerful longing for the world to be made whole.

But where we wish to cast the blame on God, in this Psalm the Holy One points to our complicity in our neighbors’ misery. God calls to account the power structures that cause harm and suffering and, by extension, those of us who support and participate in these systems. God says in Psalm 82:6, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you;” our Creator reminds us that we have the power to contribute to harm or to resist it. We have the ability to change things for the better or allow them to get worse.

It is this power Jesus points to when he quotes Psalm 82 in [John 10](#). Earlier in the chapter, Jesus contrasts the self-sacrificing love of the good shepherd with the selfishness of thieves and bandits. He proclaims his identity as the Son of God and cites his care for God’s flock as evidence of this truth. When the religious authorities push back on this assertion, Jesus quotes Psalm 82. Like the Almighty in the Psalm, Jesus reminds these religious folks that they are God’s children, that they have the power to make things better. In the midst of this assertion sit challenging questions: Where have you been while your neighbors have been suffering? Have

you used your power to make the world better?

Jesus then answers the question for himself. Jesus tells his audience to look at what he has done, to recall that he has fed people, healed people, cast out demons, and revealed God's kingdom love. Jesus reveals his identity as the Son of God and the Savior through his acts of love—those he has already performed and, most importantly, in the death and resurrection for which he is already preparing.

In Jesus we see where God is when humankind is suffering. God is with us. God is lamenting alongside us, sitting in solidarity with our pain and grief, crying out "How long?" God is working for good, for redemption, for the transformation of the world. God is giving God's Son to save us. And God is inviting us to join in this task, to use our power as children of God to love others as the Son of God has loved us.

Wednesday, March 23 | Psalm 110

Written by Michael Petrin, Assistant Professor of [Philosophy and Religious Studies at Marywood University](#), Scranton, PA.

*The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet.” – Psalm 110:1*

Christians often forget that Jesus was Jewish. Because we tend to think of “Judaism” and “Christianity” as two completely separate things, it’s easy to forget that Jesus was raised by Jewish parents, observed the commandments of the Jewish Law, and gathered around himself a predominantly Jewish group of disciples.

Maybe we forget this because we don’t spend enough time reading the Gospels. After all, if we did, we might remember how Jesus, time after time, entered into dialogue with other Jewish leaders and debated with them about the correct interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures.

There’s a great example of this in [Matthew 22:41-46](#), where Jesus asks the Pharisees a seemingly straightforward question: “*What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?*”

The answer to this question is, from the Pharisees’ perspective, an easy one: “*The son of David,*” they say with certainty.

The Pharisees don’t explain their reasoning here, but they’re expressing a common Jewish belief: the belief that the Messiah (God’s “Anointed One”) will be a king from the line of David, “*a shoot...from the stump of Jesse*” ([Isaiah 11:2](#)).

This belief is one that Christians share, though we of course also believe that this prophesied “*Prince of Peace*” ([Isaiah 9:6](#)) has already come. We believe that this Messiah is none other than Jesus himself, who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey amid shouts of “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*” ([Matthew 21:9](#)).

Jesus, however, complicates this understanding of the Messiah. For he asks the Pharisees:

*“How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,
“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet””?*
If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

What exactly is Jesus saying here?

First of all, he is quoting from the book of Psalms, which has traditionally been attributed to King David. In particular, he is quoting from Psalm 110, which proclaims God’s promise of victory for an unnamed person who is both a king and a

priest.

Jesus interprets this unnamed figure as the Messiah, and he points out that the Psalm therefore raises a problem. After all, if the Messiah is supposed to be the son of David, why does David call him “Lord” instead of “son”?

The point that Jesus is making here is that the Messiah is superior to David himself, that he is not only David’s son but also David’s Lord.

This is precisely what Christians believe about Jesus.

On the one hand, we believe that he is truly human. We believe that he was really born to a Jewish mother named Mary and that he really suffered and died for us on the cross.

But we also believe that he is truly divine. We believe that he is the eternal Son of God, who was “*in the beginning with God*” and through whom “*all things came into being*” ([John 1:2-3](#)); and we believe that it was this very same Son who became flesh for our salvation and suffered death on Good Friday – before rising again in glory on Easter Sunday.

So every time we call Jesus the “Christ” (which actually means “Messiah” or “Anointed One”) we should try to remember the faith that we profess. We should try to remember that this one person – this one Son – is both truly human and truly divine, that he is both David’s son and David’s Lord, and that only *he* can be our Savior, only *he* can be our peace.

Friday, March 25 | John 6:9 & John 2:7

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor of [Raleigh Court United Methodist Church](#) in Roanoke, VA.

Jesus was nothing if not zealous.

Jesus sees possibilities where we, too often, see failure.

Jesus believes in those who have quit believing in themselves.

Jesus makes a way where there is no way.

That's exactly who Jesus is!

And, lest we ever forget, God is at least as nice as Jesus which also means that God is at least as zealous as Jesus. Because Jesus, as Paul reminds us, is the fullness of God revealed.

God is not merely sitting idly by watching the world spin down the toilet - **God is showing up in places, flipping the tables of complacent, and is probing us to wonder about the ways things are so that we might move to where things can be.**

Taking a step back from Jesus' temple tantrum, with the tables overturned and the money-lenders cowering in the corner, it's not hard to imagine the headline in the next issue of the Jerusalem Times: Jesus - The Disturber of the Peace

There have always been disruptors of the peace, those zealots who shake up the status quo.

And yet, the peace disturbed by Jesus that day, and still disturbs today, was no real peace. The weak and the marginalized were getting abused and forced into economic hardships all while God's blessing were being construed as something to be purchased or earned.

And then God in Christ shows up to remind us there is no real transformation without disruption. Faithful following is only every possible because of disruption and dislocation - otherwise we are doomed to remain exactly as we are.

And, for some of us, that doesn't sound too bad. Some of us would do quite well if things remained exactly as they are. **But God is in the business of making something from nothing, of taking us from here to over there, of deliverance.**

Change, real change, good change, is never painless. It's why we put crosses in our sanctuaries, an ever present remind of what happened should any of us start asking all of the *right* questions.

We have a method for dealing with disturbers of the peace.

And yet, it only takes a quick glance at the great stories of history to be reminded that the most important shifts from one thing to another have always

come because of disruption.

We can point to the real change makers of the world, those who refused to accept things as they were, but Jesus, whether we like it or not, is the most striking example of disruption, dislocation, and painful challenge to our status quo. Ever since he showed up we've never really be able to return to normal because God in Christ is marching on, all while bringing us along for the ride.

“Zeal for your house will consume me,” the psalmist writes and the disciples apply to Jesus. And they were right - The zeal Jesus had for a new day did consume him. So much so that we killed him for it.

But even the grave couldn't stop our disturber of the peace.

Monday, March 28 | Psalm 98 & Luke 1:54

Written by Grace Han, Pastor of [Trinity United Methodist Church](#) in Alexandria, VA.

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things!

Psalm 98 isn't a very "Lenten" Psalm. After all, Lent is supposed to be serious and somber. We put away our Hallelujahs and exchange them for ashes. We give up sweets and meat to enter into a season of fasting. We sing in minor keys and quietly and politely whisper our confessions.

But Psalm 98 seems to ignore all our rules about Lent. There is little that is quiet or minor about this Psalm. There is no holding back or restraint present here. Instead, the Psalmist boldly proclaims that we sing to the Lord a new song! And the reader is to be joined with a cacophony of voices—the seas and the hills, the trumpets and the horns, the entire earth is to *break forth into joyous song!*

It's as if the Psalmist couldn't help themselves. Once God revealed the good news, the Psalmist could not wait any longer, the good news could no longer stay contained—victory has come! *All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God!* The Psalmist burst into song, unable to contain their joy, overwhelmed with this truth.

God's revelation has that effect on us.

Thousands of years later, when an angel appeared before Mary to reveal that she would conceive a child called the Son of God, Mary had a Psalm 98 moment. Overwhelmed with joy, full of grace, Mary could not contain this revelation and she burst into song— *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!* (Luke 1:46-47). In fact, she even goes on to quote directly from Psalm 98: *He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.*

Psalm 98 seems to know something that those of us stuck in Lent often forget. That Christ has already won. We have already received his victory!

For us, in the season of Lent, we are still awaiting the victory that comes at Easter. But today we get a glimpse of what has already come. And it's enough to make us want to burst into song.

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things!

He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy.

Wednesday, March 30 | Psalm 8 & Matthew 21:16

Written by Hung Su Lim, Pastor at [Trinity United Methodist Church](#) in Richmond, VA

A few years ago, I visited the Grand Canyon. It was an exceptional experience to sense the vastness of the creation. It was natural to feel overwhelmed by the splendor and majesty of the Creator's touches in the creation. I stood in awe of God's creation and joined in singing with nature with a hymn, "How Great is Our God." The psalmist in Psalm 8 praises the glory and majesty of God and cannot stop singing God's magnificent works.

*"O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens."*

The purpose of this psalm is to offer testimony and a witness to God's glory and majesty. The name of the Lord reaches out to the heavens, and the heavens are filled with God's glory. There is no place where God's glory has not been revealed. In verse two, the psalmist makes a remarkable statement that the mouths and the lips of babes and infants prompt God to work,

*"Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger."*

Through the praise of babes and infants who are considered as some of the most vulnerable, God silences foes and avengers and fulfills God's justice and righteousness. God raises the weak to shame the powerful and the arrogant. So, the psalmist praises who God is and how God displays God's special interests in the weak and the vulnerable. Then, the psalm moves its perspectives from the most vulnerable to the most vast in the creation:

*"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?"*

When the psalmist turns to the universe and sees God's works in the creation, the psalmist realizes who human beings are. Human dignity is defined and restored by the creator. By recognizing who God is and what God has done, human beings find their real identity. Even though God creates something immense and vast and stretches out God's fingertips throughout the universe, God shows unique concerns on something considered small and unworthy. Even though we acknowledge the smallness of human beings in the vastness of the creation, God calls us to be part of God's creative works and to cultivate a way of love and grace (vv. 5-6). The psalmist notices that through singing the phrase again in the end.

*“O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!”*

Psalm 8 praises the majesty of God, which is unfathomable and incomprehensible, and God’s caring works that are extended to the most vulnerable in the creation. It sings for God’s characters, attributes, and interests. God’s heart is always toward the least, the marginalized, the afflicted, the poor, the sick, and the hungry.

Thus, God’s loving and caring touches are visualized in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who quotes the verse of Psalm 8 (Matt. 21:16) to criticize the dead religious ways that do not reflect God’s own hearts any longer. Jesus comes to listen to the small voices of the vulnerable and responds to their needs with love and care and strengthens them to join in God’s redemptive works. The voices of children singing may look insignificant but become powerful when God acknowledges them. God’s majesty becomes powerful and influential because God’s glory does not stay on the magnificence of the creation but remains in the lowly places where love is shone.

We, human beings, have experienced the brokenness in the creation, and humanity has been challenged by hatred, racism, violence, lack of equality, poverty, global warming, etc. There is an endless list of issues that we face. How do we restore our brokenness? How do we live as stewards of God’s creation? Humanity can only be found in God as we acknowledge God as our creator and turn our responses to God with praise, thanksgiving, and love. The brokenness in humanity can be restored and healed in a right relationship with the creator. As we deeply experience the closeness with the creator and are immersed within God’s love, we can serve as God’s stewards, and our religious practices can reflect God’s love. Psalm 8 invites us to live the life of wholeness in praise and love.

Thus, as we experience the time of self-denial and repentance in Lent, let us turn to God, who not only comes and listens to us but also invites us to join in God’s continued and redemptive works. God empowers those willing to follow the way of love to bless others with hope and peace.

So it is a joyful song that we lift up our voices to praise the creator. It is a hope that we share God’s love with every person we encounter everywhere. It is a prayer that we may experience God’s presence profoundly and newly in places that we may abandon and forsake. It is a lenten prayer that we constantly join in singing and proclaiming that God cares for all and invites all to do the same.

*“O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!”*

Friday, April 1 | Psalm 41.4-10 & John 13.1, 12-20

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor of [Raleigh Court United Methodist Church](#) in Roanoke, VA.

The synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) treat us to the scene of Jesus' final evening with his friends as they sit around a table sharing bread and wine.

John, however, takes the scene a little bit further.

While eating at the table, Jesus gets up, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself. He begins washing all of the disciples' feet and wipes them off with the towel around his waist.

Peter, of course, objects to the humble (read: humiliating) act of his Lord, but Jesus hits him hard with, "You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand."

Only after every disciple's feet are washed does Jesus arise, and begins to teach:

"Listen, you call me Teacher and Lord which is good and fine because that is who I am. But check this out: If I, your Lord and Teacher, am willing to get down on the floor to wash your feet, you also out to wash one another's feet. This is what the Kingdom of God is all about - the first being last and the last being first. Things are getting flipped upside down right here and right now. And I do and say all of this knowing that one of you will betray me, it is to fulfill the scripture, **'The one who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.'**"

Shortly thereafter, Judas leaves and sets in motion the world turned upside down. In mere hours the guards will arrive in the garden, Jesus will be arrested, put on trial, sentenced, beaten, and left to die on the cross.

The foot washing has always been a little strange and a little weird to the people called church. For one, as mentioned, the other Gospels don't include it, and for another, it reveals the heart of God in a way that feels uncomfortable.

Not only does Jesus, God in the flesh, get down on his knees to wash the dirty feet of the disciples, one of whom will shortly betray him, another will deny him, and the rest will leave him hanging to die on a cross, but then Jesus has the gall to command us to do the same for one another.

And yet, in a way, more than being told what we are supposed to do, the whole message of this final moment is, again, about what Jesus does for us.

In the foot washing, Jesus repeats in himself the great lengths to which God was willing to go for a people undeserving - how far God was willing to go to wash us clean from our transgressions.

This moment, one that might make us cringe or, at the very least, furrow our brows, it reveals to the disciples and to us that the Lord, the Alpha and

Omega, the Beginning and the End, is about to suffer and die just to rid us of the stench and dirt of sin and death that latches onto us.

And, notably, this is the final act of Jesus toward his disciples before Easter and, as John so wonderfully notes, Jesus loved his disciples to *the end*.

Including Judas.

Do you see what this means? Even the worst stinker in the world, even the one who betrays his Lord to death, is someone for whom Christ died.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus, bewilderingly, loves us to *the end*, loves us so much that he was willing to take our sin upon himself, mount the hard wood of the cross, and leave them there forever. Thanks be to God.

Monday, April 4 | Psalm 31

Written by Drew Colby, Pastor of [Grace United Methodist Church](#) in Manassas, VA.

One year on Good Friday a friend decided to recite all 150 Psalms out loud while kneeling in front of the cross at his church (a practice I do not recommend, dear reader, because I care about your knees!). I think the idea was to use the Psalms, and a little physical pain and discomfort, as the lens through which he pondered the crucifixion. While he prayed the Psalms he imagined all of them as the words of Christ from the cross.

[Psalm 31](#) is a Psalm of absolute pain and discomfort. It's a prayer of complete distress.

*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.*

*For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;*

Christ quotes this Psalm from the cross in Luke in his moment of complete distress (I know, it seems as if Lent has barely begun, and already we find ourselves at the cross!).

*I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.*

But none of the above verses is the one Christ chooses to pray aloud in [Luke 23](#). In the midst of ultimate suffering, in the midst of despair, Christ chooses not the verses from Psalm 31 that express the depths of his despair. He chooses verses that express the depths of faith.

*I am in distress, but...
I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, "You are my God."
My times are in your hands;
Into your hands I commit my spirit.*

I find this level of trust both beautiful and, well, impossible. How could you trust a God who has left you to suffer and die despite your complete and unwavering obedience to this God's commands? It is impossible, unless...

Unless you know this God completely... Unless you know this God has not left you at all. It's an impossible trust unless you know you can trust this God like a Son can trust a Father, unless you know you are not suffering this alone, and that this is

not the end. It is an impossible trust... unless you know that this God and you are one.

And that is the key.

When Jesus prays this Psalm from the cross he reveals to us the triune life of God into which humanity is being reconciled. Here, at the depths of suffering, the Son entrusts his Spirit into the hands of the Father, and three days later, when he is raised, his trust is vindicated eternally.

This is the good news: by the power of Christ's death and resurrection, given to us in our baptism by grace through faith, we have become those who, with the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, can fully entrust ourselves to the eternal hands of God the Father. And we can do so even and especially in the depths of despair.

In the cross our despair is revealed to be God's own despair, and in the resurrection Christ's trust becomes our own trust, freeing us to rise from our knees, and walk by faith in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Wednesday, April 6 | Psalm 109

Written by Joe Lenow, Rector of [St. James' Parish](#), Lothian, MD.

Psalm 109 (Book of Common Prayer)

- 1 Hold not your tongue, O God of my praise; *
for the mouth of the wicked,
the mouth of the deceitful, is opened against me.
- 2 They speak to me with a lying tongue; *
they encompass me with hateful words
and fight against me without a cause.
- 3 Despite my love, they accuse me; *
but as for me, I pray for them.
- 4 They repay evil for good, *
and hatred for my love.
- 5 Set a wicked man against him, *
and let an accuser stand at his right hand.
- 6 When he is judged, let him be found guilty, *
and let his appeal be in vain.
- 7 Let his days be few, *
and let another take his office.
- 8 Let his children be fatherless, *
and his wife become a widow.
- 9 Let his children be waifs and beggars; *
let them be driven from the ruins of their homes.
- 10 Let the creditor seize everything he has; *
let strangers plunder his gains.
- 11 Let there be no one to show him kindness, *
and none to pity his fatherless children.
- 12 Let his descendants be destroyed, *
and his name be blotted out in the next generation.
- 13 Let the wickedness of his fathers be remembered before the LORD, *
and his mother's sin not be blotted out;
- 14 Let their sin be always before the LORD; *
but let him root out their names from the earth;
- 15 Because he did not remember to show mercy, *
but persecuted the poor and needy
and sought to kill the brokenhearted.
- 16 He loved cursing,
let it come upon him; *

he took no delight in blessing,
 let it depart from him.

17 He put on cursing like a garment, *
 let it soak into his body like water
 and into his bones like oil;

18 Let it be to him like the cloak which he wraps around himself, *
 and like the belt that he wears continually.

19 Let this be the recompense from the LORD to my accusers, *
 and to those who speak evil against me.

20 But you, O Lord my God,
 oh, deal with me according to your Name; *
 for your tender mercy's sake, deliver me.

21 For I am poor and needy, *
 and my heart is wounded within me.

22 I have faded away like a shadow when it lengthens; *
 I am shaken off like a locust.

23 My knees are weak through fasting, *
 and my flesh is wasted and gaunt.

24 I have become a reproach to them; *
 they see and shake their heads.

25 Help me, O LORD my God; *
 save me for your mercy's sake.

26 Let them know that this is your hand, *
 that you, O LORD, have done it.

27 They may curse, but you will bless; *
 let those who rise up against me be put to shame,
 and your servant will rejoice.

28 Let my accusers be clothed with disgrace *
 and wrap themselves in their shame as in a cloak.

29 I will give great thanks to the LORD with my mouth; *
 in the midst of the multitude will I praise him;

30 Because he stands at the right hand of the needy, *
 to save his life from those who would condemn him.

It's the children that get me, every time. This psalm—this prayer that God and the brilliant hymnists of ancient Israel have given us to put on our lips, to offer up as praise—asks God that children might be orphaned, that they might be reduced to beggary, that they might be driven from the ruins of their homes. I dread this psalm coming up in the rotation for Morning Prayer; I know intimately the sour feeling

that settles into the pit of my stomach as my sleep- and coffee-deprived mind wakes up to the realization of which psalm we've just begun praying ("Set a wicked man against him..." is usually when it happens). This is the psalm that threatens, every time, to break my understanding of what the Psalms are: the prayers God has given us to teach us how to pray, forming us into the faithful covenant-partners of the Lord; the prayers of Jesus himself, a window into the way the Father is loved by the incarnate Son. But how can this be the prayer of our Lord? How can we imagine these words as the words of Jesus?

Any answer to that question—any answer that doesn't evade the difficulty of this prayer, at least—has to start from an appreciation of the psychological depth this psalm shows. This is a psalm that gives lie to any easy descriptions of the Bible as "a manual for life," or some trite sentiment of the sort. If we take this psalm as a depiction of the sort of person God wants us to be, we'll very quickly become monsters (and reading the Bible wrongly has made a great many people monsters). This is a psalm that's trying to do something to us—it's trying to draw us into its trap. Become, it's asking us, the sort of narrator the psalmist imagines: one who has been truly, devastatingly wronged by very particular people; one who has been made like a shadow at sundown, twisting into an encroaching darkness. Be that person, if just for a moment; you may, someday, find yourself inhabiting that position more convincingly. Imagine the anger, know yourself to be passed over and ill-used—drink the cup of your resentment to the dregs. And then open your mouth.

Feel—really feel—what it's like to put a curse on your lips. It's going to feel wrong at first; you're a good person, you're not the sort who would genuinely wish another ill. But don't let yourself off that easily, the psalmist is telling you. Set an accuser at his right hand—let him get his comeuppance, let the world finally see this person for who he is. That's the gateway drug; that's the moment in which the psalmist is drawing us into the shadows more deeply. Who hasn't wished that a bad person who's wronged us would finally be publicly exposed, and fall in the estimation of his (and our) peers? He's guilty; let him be judged to be so. Is that too much to ask? Let him be stripped of all the honors, all the prestige; let him be replaced. (By me?)

It's cathartic to think this way, especially when you've been hurt. It's seductive, too: you get used to cursing, especially when you know you're on the side of the good. But the psalmist knows where this road leads: if we fail to show mercy, if we fail to learn how to love our enemies by first listening to the cries of the poor and brokenhearted, we will fall in love with cursing. You can see it happening in this psalm: what starts as a prayer for a just judgment curdles soon into a desire that one's enemy's children will be starving in the streets. Let there be none to pity his fatherless children—who is it supposed to be, again, that has forgotten to show

mercy, that has persecuted the poor and needy, that has sought to kill the brokenhearted?

The psalm asks us to put on cursing like a garment; it invites us to feel it soaking into our bodies like water, and into our bones like oil. It forces us to remember that even as we may curse, God will bless—we who have been wronged, and even the enemies who have wronged us. By asking us to make this prayer our own, it effects a substitution: we, who take ourselves to be innocent, quickly surrender ourselves to the curse.

Christ redeemed us by becoming a curse for us, Paul tells us in Galatians. Christ redeems us by putting on our curse as a garment, letting it soak into him like water, letting it sink into his bones like oil—and yet, because he is the LORD, he still blesses. He is mocked; “those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads” (Matthew 27.39). He makes our sin his own, carries in his body the full horror of a world that would pray for children to be orphaned, hungry, and subjected to the violence attendant to homelessness. He delivers us through the same substitution we find in this psalm: the wronged person who comes to occupy the place of the one cursed with cursing; the innocent who is judged and found guilty in our place. Despite his love, we accuse him—and nevertheless, he prays for us: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Friday, April 8 | Psalm 118:22-23 & Matthew 21:33-46

Written by Brian Johnson, Pastor of [Haymarket Church](#) in Haymarket, VA.

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes. – Psalm 118:22-23**

When I was 23, I listened to the whole Bible as an audiobook. I worked for a moving company, and I spent 4-5 hours in the car every day - driving around the DC area, visiting people's homes and helping them get ready to move. And, so, at some point, I decided to start listening to the Bible as I drove.

I remember sitting in the parking lot of a grocery store one afternoon, eating lunch out of a cooler, listening to the Bible, when these words struck me. I remember thinking that I'd heard these words before - and, I had. This quotation from Psalm 118 is repeated 5 times in the New Testament - in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, along with the books of Acts and 1 Peter. I remember thinking that these words must have meant a lot to the early Christians - to the people who wrote the New Testament - otherwise, why would they repeat them so frequently? I remember being struck by the power of the imagery - God has taken something rejected, something deemed unworthy, and made it essential. The cast-off has become the foundation. The outcast has become the heart of the community. Human wisdom tells us that it's worthless - but God's wisdom makes us look foolish, and shows us that it is of infinite value.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Psalm 118:22-23 is quoted as part of a parable - a short story Jesus tells to illustrate a deep truth about God. This parable ([Matthew 21:33-46](#)) is often called "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants." In the story, a landowner plants a vineyard and leases it to some tenant farmers. When the landowner sends servants to collect his share of the harvest, the tenant farmers refuse to pay what they owe - instead, they reject, beat, and even kill the messengers who are sent to them. So, the landowner decides to send his son - assuming that the tenants would never hurt the landowner's beloved son.

But, of course, the tenants are wicked, and so they kill the son, figuring that, with the son out of the way, the land is theirs for the taking. So, Jesus says, the landowner will now surely take the vineyard away from the wicked tenants and give it to new tenants who will fulfill their obligations. In other words, Jesus says, "the stone that the builders have rejected shall become the chief cornerstone."

There are two essential ways of reading this parable that I want to highlight. The first is as a challenge to the religiously powerful - and to everyone who thinks

they have a monopoly on God's love. When we exclude folks because they seem unworthy, unfit, or outside God's grace, we put ourselves on the wrong side of this parable. If we think we are holier than someone else, we should be wary. If we think that someone else doesn't deserve to be part of God's people, then we should think again – because God has a habit of choosing the outsider and welcoming the outcast. God, it seems, is the kind of builder who rejects the proper building materials and instead prefers to work with the stones that we have rejected. Jesus is warning religious insiders (people like us) not to look down on others – because God is ready to welcome the people who we think least deserving of it.

The second essential way of reading this parable is as a reminder that Jesus is the "stone that the builders have rejected." God is the one who owns the vineyard, and Jesus is the beloved son who was sent to us. We rejected him – we killed him. And, yet, the one who we rejected is, in fact, the foundation of the universe. God's upside-down grace means that the Creator of the universe was crucified as a criminal, the King of kings took the form of a slave, the Lord of Life was handed over to death.

And, what's crazy is how God responds. By the world's way of doing things, God should respond to the violence of the wicked tenants with even more violence. The kings of this world would get revenge. But that's not the kind of god that our God is. Instead of responding to our sin and violence with destruction and revenge, God responds with mercy. Through the death of God's beloved Son, we, the wicked tenants, are saved – ushered into new life. We cheat and we steal, we run away from God, we are selfish and self-centered – and God forgives us anyway, sends God's Son to save us anyway. The stone that we rejected should be used to crush us – but, instead, it is the foundation of our new beginning.

Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God, gives himself up for us, in all our sin and failure. We rejected him, and yet God glorified him, raising him up into eternal life on the third day. Jesus Christ was rejected for us, and because of that, he is the foundation, the chief cornerstone – not just of our faith, but of all that ever was, is, or shall be.

The stone that we rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Amen.

Sunday, April 10 | Psalm 118 & Matthew 21:9

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of [Bethel United Methodist Church](#) in Woodbridge, VA.

[Psalm 118](#) is a Psalm of Victory. Literally. I'm not dipping into any special pastor knowledge to say this; it's the Psalm heading in the NRSV. **Psalm 118: A Psalm of Victory**. And it is not hard to see why this Psalm has been assigned the heading. This Psalm speaks of vindication. This Psalm speaks of deliverance. This Psalm speaks of a powerful God who gives the singer victory over their enemies. After calling on all of Israel to praise the Lord, the Psalm declares: I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly; the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly." I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD."

This Psalm is a Psalm about the steadfast love of the Lord overcoming evil, oppression, sin, suffering. This Psalm is a Psalm about the steadfast love of the Lord granting victory to the faithful.

But the telling thing is precisely how that victory of God is meted out.

This Psalm is quoted during the Gospel telling of the Triumphal Entry, when Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna. As Jesus enters Jerusalem a crowd gathers and begins shouting "Hosanna" meaning "please save us!" And then quoting this Psalm: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The crowd says "Please save us" and then references a Psalm of God's victory.

When I think about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, I often think about Marcus Borg's articulation of the two processions that occurred in Jerusalem that year in the lead-up to the Passover. The Bible articulates what Jesus' procession looked like. But Jesus' wasn't the only (grand) procession that occurred that Passover.

Pontius Pilate would have arrived in Jerusalem ahead of the Passover to be a presence in the city during a time of heightened tension. And Pilate would have arrived in such a way as to demonstrate the power of Rome. Pilate's job was to keep the peace, to ensure that order was maintained. And he would have shown the manner in which he intended to keep the peace. He would have arrived with a massive military garrison. Thousands of foot soldiers. Multiple divisions of cavalry. He would have arrived through the main gate in Jerusalem, riding on a powerful war horse, and taken up residence in the governor's palace. He would have arrived with the full power and might of Rome at his back and the message would have been clear: behave...or else.

Jesus arrives on a donkey. A humble beast of burden. Jesus arrives with the poor at his back, not a powerful army. Jesus engenders not fear of retribution, but the hope of an oppressed people.

Psalms 118 is a Psalm of victory. But how does our God achieve God's victory? Not through the fear and coercion of Pilate's procession. Not through might or strength. Not through threat. Instead, our God achieves victory through the voluntary offering of God's self for the sake of the world.

Pilate's procession leads to violence, as it was always meant to. It leads to him ordering the execution of the Son of God. And victory through the logic of Pilate's procession will always lead to violence, domination, oppression.

Jesus' procession led to the cross, as it was always meant to. It led to Him willingly accepting death that we might live. And victory through the logic of Jesus' procession leads to resurrection, atonement, and salvation.

Psalms 118 is a victory Psalm. And we will be tempted to desire and seek out victory through the logic of Pilate's procession. But when we sing our songs of victory, when we pray for God's victory in our lives, when we desire our vindication, may we remember our salvation comes through Christ's procession. A road that leads to the cross. A road that leads to the empty tomb. Having walked that road, then shall we sing "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."

Thursday, April 14 | Psalm 42 & Matthew 26:38/Mark 14:34

Written by Elaine Ellis Thomas, Rector of [All Saints Episcopal Parish](#), Hoboken, NJ.

My conversion did not come easy. God had to work hard to entice me, and music was God's weapon of choice.

"Here, little girl, sing this solo on Christmas Eve."

"Here, young teenager, a beautiful organ for you to learn to play."

"Here, young mother looking for fulfillment, the organist is retiring, and they know you play."

And before I knew it, I had seven choirs and a flourishing ministry, and that's when God said, "Over here. This is the chair you need to sit in, not on that organ bench."

And that, my friends, is the abridged story of my call to ordained ministry.

Somewhere during that long process, probably when, as a young teenager, I sang in the adult choir where the person closest to me in age had at least four decades on me, I first sang Herbert Howells. It might have been the Gloucester Service for Evensong (for the non-Anglicans among us, that includes the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*). But no Howells piece so wrenched my young soul than *Like as the Hart*, a setting of [Psalm 42](#) composed in the early years of World War II when England's survival was not a sure thing.

The sopranos sing "My tears have been my meat day and night" (the music builds) "while they daily say unto me" (loud d-minor chord) "where is now thy God?"

And when those words repeat, there is the sound of defeat. "My tears have been my meat day and night..." (trailing off).

As a teenager, that just felt like the angst of trying to figure out who I was in a body I didn't recognize around people who seemed to expect me to be an adult.

But for Jesus, the cry of "Where now is thy God" was part of the anguish to which he willingly subjected himself as the death of his very human body drew near.

Jesus in the garden says, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake" ([Mark 14:34](#)).

Where now is thy God, Jesus?

We have heard the cries of the sorrowful hundreds of thousands of times over the past two years. People dying in isolation from those they love, last rites offered on FaceTime, final words of goodbye from a cell phone held up to an as-yet still listening ear.

Where now is thy God?

The Church, for ages quite content to proclaim her longing, "Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God" ([Psalm 42:1](#)) has

been confronted with the cries of abandonment that weave their way through this psalm

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?

I will say to the God of my strength, "Why have you forgotten me?"

Where now is thy God?

Two years of pandemic have confronted us, as individuals and as churches, with our mortality. The longing of our hearts, the thirst for God's living waters, are the confession that we are nothing without God's presence, that our thirst will never be quenched until our trust is solely in God "who is the help of my countenance and my God."

Jesus knew this. Even in his deep grief, begging that the cup might be taken from him, he knew that the cup that he drank would become the cup of our salvation. Wherever God was in that moment, Jesus still prayed. Still called "Abba." Still understood that God's will must be done.

God's will be done, on earth as in heaven, where no cries of "where now is thy God" are heard ever again, because we all dwell in the knowledge and love of God. We all go with the multitude to God's house, with voices of praise and thanksgiving.

Just as the psalms point to fulfillment of God's promises to us, so Howells ends *Like as the Hart*, with a soft, tender E-major resolution to the question, "When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" There is, even in the questioning, an assurance that we *will* yet come into God's presence, that our longing *will* cease, and our thirst *will* be quenched with streams of living water.

Friday, April 15 | Psalm 22 & Matthew 26:46

Written by Stephanie Kimec Parker, Pastor of the [Gathering at Scott Memorial](#), Virginia Beach, VA.

In Matthew 26, after Jesus had been on the cross for 3 hours, Jesus cried out with a loud voice “Eli, Eli Lema Sabbach thani” - “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.”

This is one of the moments in the Gospels when Jesus is very relatable. How many times have we done the same, cried out to God, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This pandemic has stretched all of us to our limits. I am learning my breaking point, sometimes after I have reached it. The honest cries to God have grown as we all try to navigate life in new ways together. We are not alone. The Bible is full of beautiful stories of people who have cried the same to God, allowing us to know it is ok to be raw and honest with God.

I grew up thinking we could only bring our best to God, that God did not want to hear our complaints but only our praises. This passage shows that God wants to know all of us, the parts that praise and the raw parts that cry out in the middle of despair. God can handle all of us, the parts we put on display and the parts we hide from ourselves until they burst out.

The first readers of Matthew’s gospel would have known that Jesus prayed the entirety of [Psalm 22](#). It changes how we understand Jesus’ cry when we read the entire psalm and imagine Jesus reciting it on the cross. Though this psalm starts out in despair, it does not stay there. The psalm also proclaims God’s goodness and faithfulness. Jesus did not stay in the place of despair. He expressed his despair and he continued through the psalm. Jesus knew that God did not hide, but heard his cries.

Jesus models for us faithfulness, even on a cross. We don’t know what Jesus was experiencing in those final moments of his life. He may have felt abandoned by all. In those final moments of his life, he prayed Psalm 22, a psalm that proclaims God’s holiness even when we do not hear an answer from God.

Psalm 22 ends with proclaiming God’s faithfulness and goodness. One day all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn towards the Lord. Jesus knew that one day God’s kingdom would fully reign. One day Christ will return and all will be restored. One day God will dwell among us. As the Psalmist wrote, I shall live for him.

Saturday, April 16 | Psalm 88 & Luke 23:49

Written by Ashleigh Elser, [Assistant Professor of Religion, Hampden-Sydney College](#),
Hampden Sydney, VA,

Psalm 88 translation by Robert Alter

A song, a psalm for the Korahites, for the lead player, on the mahalath, to sing out, a maskil for Heman the Ezrahite.

Lord, God of my rescue,
by day I cried out,
by night, in your presence.
May my prayer come before You.
Incline your ear to my song.
For I am sated with evils
and my life reached the brink of Sheol.
I was counted among those who go down to the Pit.
I became like a man without strength.
Among the dead, cast away,
like the slain, those who lie in the grave,
whom you no more recall,
and they are cut off by your hand.
You put me in the nethermost pit,
in darkness, in the depths.
Your wrath lay hard upon me,
and all Your breakers You inflicted.
You distanced my friends from me,
You made me disgusting to them;
imprisoned, I cannot get out.
My eyes ache from affliction.
I called on You, Lord, every day.
I stretched out to you my palms.
Will you do wonders for the dead?
Will the shades arise and acclaim you?
Will Your kindness be told in the grave?
Your faithfulness in perdition?
Will your wonder be known in the darkness?
Your bounty in the land of oblivion?
As for me—to You, Lord, I shouted,
and in the morn my prayer would greet You.
Why, Lord, do You abandon my life,

*do you hide your face from me?
Lowly am I and near death from my youth
I have borne Your terrors, I am fearful.
Over me Your rage has passed.
Your horrors destroy me.
They surround me like water all day long,
they encircle me completely.
You distanced lover and neighbor from me.
my friends—
utter darkness.*

The eighty-eighth psalm is a psalm of lament. The Psalmist cries out from “the depths”—praying for rescue, questioning the faithfulness of God. Like other psalms of lament, the speaker begins in distress, tired and afraid, “distanced” from friends and family, alone in their despair. They envision their experience in vivid terms: the loneliness of being stranded at the bottom of a pit after dark; the terror of drowning in the sea as waves continue to break overhead. But unlike all of the other lament psalms, Psalm 88 ends there. It refuses movement—there is no turn in the end toward hope or praise, no thanksgiving for deliverance. The speaker and their prayer remain, in the final lines of the psalm, in “utter darkness.”

In the middle of this prayer, the speaker poses to God a series of what appear to be rhetorical questions: “*Will you do wonders for the dead?...Will your kindness be told in the grave, your faithfulness in perdition? Will your wonder be known in the darkness?*” Biblical scholars often explain these questions as the Psalmist’s daring attempt at bargaining as they try to make the case that they are of better use to God alive than dead. Within the frame of the psalm, these questions receive no response: God remains “hidden” and the psalmist afraid and alone.

As bleak as it is, Psalm 88 may still be a comfort to those who find themselves raising their fist at God as they pray. The text canonizes the speaker’s distress together with this series of questions, refusing to sand off the sharp edges in their tone. Together with so many hymns of praise, the psalter makes room for the loneliness and even the anger of unanswered prayer.

Some commentators make a connection between Psalm 88 and [Luke 23:49](#)—a moment in which Luke’s gospel tells its reader that even those few followers of Jesus who didn’t flee the scene when he was arrested stood “at a distance” to witness his crucifixion—leaving him alone, near death, in the strange midday darkness described by this gospel. While the writer of Luke may or may not have been consciously alluding to Psalm 88 when he wrote the phrase “at a distance,” there is something remarkable about this connection. To imagine Jesus in the

position of the speaker of Psalm 88—perhaps the bleakest of all the psalms—enables us to reflect on different dimensions of his suffering, what [Acts 2:24](#) terms the agonies (plural) of Jesus' death.

But there is yet another possibility here. To see a connection between Psalm 88 and the scene of the crucifixion—to imagine this cry of dereliction together with the one Jesus speaks from the cross—reminds us that in the Christian tradition, the questions raised by the speaker of this prayer (whether the wonders or kindness of God extend to those in the grave) are answered in the very next moment.

In one of the more mysterious phrases of the Apostles' Creed, we rehearse the belief that after Christ was crucified and before his resurrection, he “descended to the dead.” The church mediates on this mystery each year during the space between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. What might it mean that Jesus descended to the dead? Does Jesus teach in parables and perform miracles for the dead as he did for the living? Does he break the chains of the dead, releasing them from captivity, as [1 Peter 3:9](#) imagines? Or should we imagine instead that Jesus just remains there for a time, accompanying the dead in death, sharing in another element of human experience?

However we think about Holy Saturday, the belief that the incarnation of Jesus extends even to death provides a striking response to the barbed questions raised by the writer of this Psalm—questions they raise in protest, confident in their sense both of the limits of power of God and the bounds of human life. *Will Your wonder be known in the darkness?* Yes. The wonders of God extend even to the grave, even to those prayers that reflect the limits and obscurities of our own understanding.

Sunday, April 17 | Psalm 111

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of [Bethel United Methodist Church](#) in Woodbridge, VA.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed!

Theologian Kathryn Tanner says that God is the giver of all good gifts. That God's essence; who God is and what God does, is to give us good things. The Psalms are such a gift from God. We have been looking at different Psalms throughout this Lenten devotional because the Psalms are a good gift given to us by God.

What we have seen as we have looked at different Psalms is simply how different the Psalms can be. There are Psalms for all of life's occasions. Over the last few weeks we have encountered Psalms of praise, Psalms that declare God's majesty and might and goodness, Psalms of victory, Psalms of pain, Psalms of the afflicted, Psalms for times of tragedy. We have even seen Psalms that call curses upon our enemies.

And what's more we have seen that the Psalms were the prayerbook, not just of the Church, but of Jesus Christ Himself. These were the words said and prayed by God incarnate. When God came to be with us and among us in Jesus, the Psalms gave God-in-the-flesh words to narrate life and teach truth. These same Psalms that Jesus spoke to narrate his experiences can also be used to narrate our experiences; these same Psalms that fit the life of Jesus also fit our lives.

In the low parts of our lives, the Psalms are there to give words to our experience. And Jesus is there to pray those words along with us. To be present with us in moments of pain. That abiding presence is a good gift given to us by the giver of all good gifts.

And Jesus shares in our moments of triumph too. When we pray Psalms of praise and victory, Jesus is with us to pray and praise along with us.

But what's more, not only does Jesus come to pray with us, but we pray along with Jesus. Not only does Jesus share in our experience of life, but we come to share in his experience, too.

We saw on Good Friday that as we prayed Psalm 22 along with Christ, we were united with him in his suffering.

And today, we pray [Psalm 111](#) with Christ. And share in his victory.

Psalm 111 is a Psalm of praise to God for God's amazing works. Psalm 111 begins, "Praise the Lord. I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever." Psalm 111 is quoted twice in the first chapter of Luke's gospel: Mary puts a line from Psalm 111 in the Magnificat as she sings about the greatness of

God in coming to be with us in Christ and Zechariah quotes Psalm 111 as he sings about the miracle that is the birth of his son John.

Psalm 111 is a song we sing on Easter as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. We sing this Psalm as God comes to us in Christ and we sing this Psalm as God defeats sin and death in Christ. We sing **great are your works, God. Majestic are your deeds.** For our God is gracious and compassionate. Our God hears the cry of those in need. Our God acts decisively and victoriously on our behalf. Our God is great. Our God is good.

We pray this in celebration of Christ's victory. **And as we celebrate Christ's victory, we are made to share in that victory.** We are present with Christ in his victory.

God is the giver of all good gifts. God has given us the Psalms to be our prayers throughout our lives; God has given us the gift of God's abiding presence with us all our days. And God has given us to share in God's victory in Christ over sin, over death, over evil, over wickedness. Our God has won! And because our God has won, we, too, have won. Because of the resurrection, we are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus. Today is our victory day.

Today we sing:

7 The works of his hands are faithful and just;

all his precepts are trustworthy.

8 They are established for ever and ever,

enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.

9 He provided redemption for his people;

he ordained his covenant forever—

holy and awesome is his name.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed! Alleluia. Amen.