

The Sanctuary for *Lent* 2021

April Casperson

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Mercy

Ash Wednesday, February 17

*Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your hearts,
with fasting, with weeping, and with
sorrow;*

*tear your hearts
and not your clothing.*

*Return to the LORD your God,
for he is merciful and compassionate,
very patient, full of faithful love,
and ready to forgive.*

(Joel 2:12-13)

The journey through Lent requires putting the self aside. God made us all, and God made us good. And yet, we are completely dependent upon God's mercy as we go about our lives.

I used to work in a theological school. Often, when students shared about their lives and what brought them to ministry, their stories took my breath away. With torn hearts, their response to the brokenness of the world was to study and prepare for a life of ministry and leadership. They felt calls that were deeply personal, while also coming directly from God. They knew God was the one who changed their hearts.

We are not saved by our own strength, our own works, or our own ambitions. Our salvation comes from God in Jesus Christ. And the wondrous thing is that God continually welcomes us back, even as we turn away and focus on what we can do for ourselves rather than what God does for us. When we start to become aware of God working in our lives, we see how we have been shown mercy over and over again.

*Prayer: God, in this Lenten season, open my eyes
to how you have shown mercy to me.*

Thursday, February 18

*Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
Please don't throw me out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit away from
me.*

*Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.*

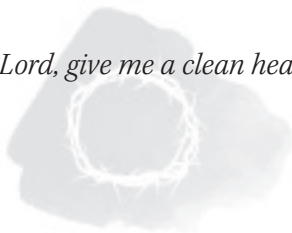
(Psalm 51:10-12)

Some people have the ability to recalibrate their perspective and their emotions through willpower. I, however, do not—I find that when my mind is running to and fro, I must look outside of myself for peace. I am not able to create peace for myself; I must turn to God through prayer and worship, hearing God's voice in the voice of others.

Today's scripture is a request for mercy—the psalmist is asking for mercy and restoration from God, like a fresh start for a new season. Part of asking for mercy is the urgent request for God to draw closer, rather than to create a distance from God.

Mercy is not a one-time experience. We experience mercy continuously because God is consistently faithful to us. It is truly a gift to be able to turn to God and ask for mercy. What does it mean for you when you ask God for a new, faithful spirit? Are you trying to turn away and repent from previous ways of living? Is your mind ruminating on things that are not good for you or helpful for your mental well-being? Do you feel like you are separated from God?

Prayer: Lord, give me a clean heart again.



Friday, February 19

God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

(2 Corinthians 5:20-21)

It is a heady thought that God is proud of us as God's creation. I know that my mind and heart are self-centered. Even when I do something intended to be of service to another, I am often thinking about my role in the act and how I will look to others by being so selfless. Talk about having an inward focus when doing outwardly good!

Mercy is what God gives us every single day, even when we are ruled by our own desires. God knew and knows now that we are bound by our own egos when it comes to saving ourselves. This becomes glaringly obvious as we age or if we get sick—we realize that our own mortality is much closer than we pretend it to be, and nothing we can say or do can erase that truth. But even more than that, our own mortality gets wrapped up in our attempts to "be holy" on our own—without God's intercession.

How do God's actions in your life bring you closer to righteousness? How does your mortality change how you think of God's righteousness? Perhaps accepting God's mercy could change how you view yourself.

Prayer: May your mercy fall upon me, O God, and may I become covered in your righteousness.

Saturday, February 20

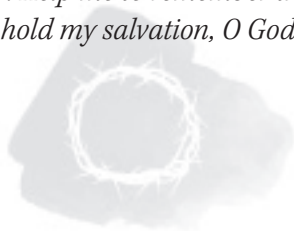
“And when you fast, don’t put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. Then you won’t look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

(Matthew 6:16-18)

Our mortality is ever apparent when we restrict parts of our life in order to become more virtuous or perceived as in control or religious. I am struck by how we connect physical appearance, and especially thinness, with morality and self-control. Obsessing over fitness, diet, and health—turning them into performances—can open the door to disordered thinking, eating, and practices.

Sometimes Lent becomes a way for us to say that we are focusing on our faith, but instead we are simply looking for a lever or rationale to “perform” health and wellness. When this happens, I suspect that there is a part of us that is hoping that if we “just do the right things,” then we can escape some part of our own mortality. God shows us mercy when we fall into thinking that we can save ourselves. Even though we may forget that God is the One who saves us, God still offers us mercy.

Prayer: Help me to remember that you hold my salvation, O God.



Covenant

First Sunday in Lent, February 21

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, and with every living being with you—with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you."

(Genesis 9:8-10)

With God's mercy comes the offer of God's covenant. God's covenants are so much more than promises. A covenant is an eternal commitment that is grounded in something unmovable, unchangeable, and consistent. God's covenant to Noah extends into the infinite future, which is more than we can ever fathom. In addition, God's covenant extends to all of creation.

The Lenten journey is a season that in many ways welcomes an individualistic faith. What is my relationship with God? How do I need to "get right" with God? How has my faith journey changed, and how can I turn back toward God? However, the Lenten journey is also about the greater community. God made covenants with all of humanity, as we can see with Noah's experiences, and Jesus came to the world for all people. He did not come just for some, and he did not simply come to the world to have individual, transactional relationships rooted in rule-following. Jesus's existence in the world and his journey to the cross are about so much more than simplistic transactions—he brought all of humanity back to God.

Prayer: Eternal One, help my faith to expand from self-focus to an awareness of the world.

Monday, February 22

God said, "This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth."

(Genesis 9:12-13)

Covenants that come from God are unchanging, steady things. And yet, there is power in having reminders of covenants. After all, as humans we tend to forget things, even though God doesn't. Part of the path to the cross during Lent is the deliberate spiritual reflection upon God's promises to us—that God's grace is sufficient, that Christ came for all people, that salvation is open to everyone. Throughout scripture, these promises are expressed in covenants like the one God made with Noah.

In addition, reminders are rooted in out-of-the-ordinary experiences, like the appearance of a rainbow across the sky serving as a reminder of God's covenant with and to us. Symbols of God's covenants can take so many forms. While rituals and images are powerful, sometimes God's covenants are shown in invisible ways, like through sustaining relationships, caring for creation, and expanding boundaries to ensure that all are welcomed. In this time, consider how your life can be an expression of God's covenant to all of humanity.

Prayer: Gracious Leader, let my actions be a reflection of your covenants with humanity.

Tuesday, February 23

I offer my life to you, LORD.

My God, I trust you.

(Psalm 25:1-2)

Trusting God and learning how to stop relying fully on ourselves is a challenge. We are strong-willed people. I know that when I am overwhelmed by work, family commitments, and other obligations, I think that if I just simply “rely on myself” and try to “push through,” then I can somehow get everything done. As a bonus, no one else will then know just how overwhelmed I am!

Relying on myself is a sure-fire way to harm my body and spirit and to center my life upon my own abilities rather than upon God’s, whose covenant to us is simply that God is sufficient. We cannot defeat death (whether of the body, the mind, or the spirit) on our own. When we rely on ourselves for salvation, dependent upon our own skills and power, we create ourselves in the image of a false god. Thankfully, God’s covenant to care for us remains even when we are oblivious to it or willfully ignoring it. Lent invites us to consider when we choose to prioritize ourselves over God’s covenants. Perhaps you are being called to make God the center of your life once again.

*Prayer: God, may my ego be set aside,
and may your covenants with me reign.*

Wednesday, February 24

LORD, remember your compassion and faithful love—

they are forever!

But don't remember the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing.

Remember me only according to your faithful love

for the sake of your goodness, LORD.

(Psalm 25:6-7)

I take a long time to build deep relationships. When I look back, I realize that my closest friends have been present in my life for years, and I confess that I am often slow to trust. Those whom I trust and love deeply tend to have seen me at my darkest, whether I was in a stressful season at work, dealing with interpersonal challenges, or hoping for futures that were simply not visible at the time. And yet, these close friends walked with me and loved me, even when I was not at my best.

God fully knows us—including our strengths and our weaknesses. God was there when we made poor decisions, when we focused only on ourselves and ignored others, and when we simply didn't live a faith-guided life. The psalmist pleads with God to ignore "the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing" and to remember them only through the grace-filled gaze of God.

Lent is a season when we can turn back to God and know that God loves us fully, even the parts that aren't upright and exemplary. God loves us because God is God. May we be reminded that God's covenants depend on who God is, and not upon who we aren't.

Prayer: O Lord, I trust you.

Thursday, February 25

*God guides the weak to justice,
teaching them his way.*

(Psalm 25:9)

At first glance this brief scripture could feel a bit insulting and punitive. God guides the weak because they don't know any better? After all, the Lord is over us all. Surely I'm not one of the weak ones who needs extra guidance, right? After all, I have a faith and I care about following Jesus in my daily life.

Lent is about reconnecting to God and remembering that God's guidance is good for us. But part of this Lenten journey is also about remembering that we cannot save ourselves. God's covenant to us—to guide us and teach us—is a reminder that we cannot save ourselves through our own works, our own energy, or even our own self-deception. It's in our weakness that we discover this, and learn how to rely solely on God's guidance.

As humans, we work hard to try to present ourselves in the best light. You can see this through so many forms of media, where people share their carefully curated moments of success or their “relatable” challenges. What would it mean if you truly stopped trying to show yourself in the best light and embraced God's guidance?

*Prayer: Humble me, Teacher, as I choose my ego
over you.*

Friday, February 26

Baptism is like that. It saves you now—not because it removes dirt from your body but because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God. Your salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

(1 Peter 3:21)

Baptism is a symbol of the work that God has already done in us. Part of God's covenant with us is that baptism is offered to us freely, without cost; and the work of baptism isn't based upon our own deeds, intent, or actions. While we often ask parents of babies to prepare to bring their child forward for baptism, and we ask adults to learn about the sacrament and make a public commitment to God, Jesus, and the church, we are continually reminded that baptism is about God's work within us—not about our own actions or mindset. Baptism also reminds us that the sacramental covenant is not simply an individual connection; baptism unites all people as we remember the promises God made with all of humanity to offer salvation and grace without cost.

Lent is a time when we are encouraged to remember that we cannot save ourselves, and that God is the one who offers salvation. And that salvation comes from grace offered to us—a grace that is rooted within God's own nature, rather than anything we can do or accomplish on our own.

*Prayer: God, as I remember
the waters of baptism, remind me of
the covenants you have made with me.*

Saturday, February 27

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

(Mark 1:9-11)

When God spoke to Jesus through the Holy Spirit, I have to think that there is a reason why this act took place in public. It had to be a profoundly unique and moving experience to hear the voice of God as Jesus moved up from the water after his baptism. God's pronouncement of God's love and delight in Jesus is a statement of covenant—God cares about Jesus, and as a result God also cares about all of humanity.

Lent is a time of reflection upon our shortfalls, yes, but it is also a season when we can return to the truth that God loves and cares for us fully. God's covenant is that God's love is all-encompassing and steadfast. Even as we are all united as a community when we remember our baptism, God's covenants are present in the water, offering us grace without barriers.

Consider where God is reminding you about God's covenants. How does God's unchanging nature affect how you are called to connect to the world in this season?

*Prayer: God, renew me
through the waters of your grace.*

Presence

Second Sunday in Lent, February 28

When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants."

(Genesis 17:1-2)

God's covenant is always deeply connected to God's presence. Today, when we are under stress or don't have a clear answer, we tend to assume that all viewpoints are equal, and we begin to value our own individual assessments over facts. We see this attitude of "Do What Works for You" in the news, in conversations, and even in religious settings. We center our opinions on our own presence and connections in a narrative or experience.

God is outside of our own assessments and assumptions about what may be right or true. Part of the power of God's intersection in our lives is that God keeps promises. It may not be obvious to us today, but part of the power in God's words to Abraham is the promise to be fully present to a human and to all of humanity. No rituals necessary, no conditions, no exceptions.

In this Lenten season, how are you exploring God's promises to you? Do you have a memory or an experience that speaks to God's promises in your life?

Prayer: Lord, help me to see your presence today.



Monday, March 1

*All of you who revere the LORD—praise him!
All of you who are Jacob's descendants—
honor him!*

*All of you who are all Israel's offspring—
stand in awe of him!*

*Because he didn't despise or detest
the suffering of the one who suffered—
he didn't hide his face from me.
No, he listened when I cried out to him for
help.*

(Psalm 22:23-24)

God's promises are unchanging, and they are based upon God's nature and not upon anything humans can do. That said, there *is* something expected of us: we are called to walk alongside those who suffer. Because we are all covered by God's promises, our own salvation is tied to that of our neighbor.

Included in God's promises to humanity is God's presence through life's difficult seasons. The Lenten journey is a reminder that we all will die—an unsettling thought even to those near the end of a long and fulfilling life. When someone is dying, the only thing we can offer is presence—and sometimes, even that isn't possible. But God's promise to never leave is woven throughout the biblical narrative, and especially in the journey to the cross. Jesus was fully present with the people in their challenging moments, breaking down the assumption that the Divine only showed up when everything is going well.

*Prayer: Gracious Leader, open my awareness
to the truth that you are present in all times.*

Tuesday, March 2

*Future descendants will serve him;
generations to come will be told about my
Lord.*

*They will proclaim God's righteousness
to those not yet born,
telling them what God has done.*

(Psalm 22:30-31)

Speaking of the faithfulness of generations to come is a way of bringing God closer to humanity. A present God is a divine being that intercedes, that acts, and that is engaged with humanity and the world.

Many Christians talk about their faith journeys in a way that articulates how they came to know God's presence in their lives. While some speak of sudden conversion experiences, others tell of the prevenient grace and growing awareness that God had been with them always. Both are valid, and we can also have a series of conversion experiences throughout our lives.

Experiencing the presence of God is a part of traveling through the Lenten season. While Lent can be seen as a time to reflect upon one's mortality, Lent is also a season when we are asked to turn toward God and become more aware of God's presence in all things. There is no place that we can escape God's presence. Even if we cannot feel God, God is there.

Telling the story of how your life has been impacted by God is a way of proclaiming God's righteousness to future generations. Make the commitment to share your story in ways that can be heard by the people around you and see how God may be using you to share about God's presence with all people.

*Prayer: Sustaining God, may my testimony
name your presence in all people.*

Wednesday, March 3

What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Workers' salaries aren't credited to them on the basis of an employer's grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous. . . .

He didn't hesitate with a lack of faith in God's promise, but he grew strong in faith and gave glory to God. He was fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. Therefore, it was credited to him as righteousness.

(Romans 4:3-5, 20-22)

Flipping the script is hard. In so much of our culture, we are told that our worth is based upon what we can produce. Parenting, mentoring, providing, earning, innovating—all of these metrics slip into our psyche and make us think that our worth is tied up in outcomes. But over and over again, the scripture reminds us that our worth—our righteousness—comes from God, and from who God *is*, rather than anything we can do or create ourselves.

God's guidance is one way in which we are reminded of this. I am a person who likes fairness. As a kid, I would be truly outraged if someone cheated at a game, or if we didn't take a vote about a decision to make sure everyone's voice was heard. Fairness wasn't always fun, but it showed how rules can keep us safe. When I read today's scripture, I am reminded that we do not receive what we deserve, and we probably don't deserve God's continual presence. But God is always present anyway. What a gift!

*Prayer: Remind me, O God, that you
do not give me what I deserve.*

Thursday, March 4

The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us.

(Romans 4:13-16)

Promises are a symbol of God's unending presence in our lives and in the arc of humanity. While God's promises are based upon God's nature and not upon anything of our doing, God's presence in a way becomes even more real as we live faithfully.

Today's scripture lays out the truth that God's grace is not based upon following rules that were designed for one group, or by following rules without error or deviation. Instead, God's grace comes from God. It is not conditional. In that way, grace is given to all, and there are no barriers to God's presence in our lives.

This is a freeing scripture because it expands God's presence and grace to all people. It is a radical notion to think that all are welcome in God's presence. It also makes it more difficult to point fingers at a group and say that they are not loved.

Prayer: Lord, show me where you are present in those whom I do not like.

Friday, March 5

But the scripture that says it was credited to him wasn't written only for Abraham's sake. It was written also for our sake, because it is going to be credited to us too. It will be credited to those of us who have faith in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was handed over because of our mistakes, and he was raised to meet the requirements of righteousness for us.

(Romans 4:23-25)

Delving into scripture is such an important part of the Christian journey. It is deeply problematic to assume that scripture was only written for people in the distant past. We must critically read and reflect upon the biblical narrative to understand both its cultural context and its application today.

Guidance comes from scripture. God's guidance also comes from tradition, wisdom, and experience. We benefit from generations of wisdom and an ever-evolving ability to read the Bible. And again, the biblical narrative reminds us that we are not the ones responsible for our own salvation. God is the one—through Jesus Christ—who made a path for us to seek righteousness, and God's presence in the world is not hindered by anything we can do.

The corporate, overarching grace that comes from Jesus's death and resurrection is another way of understanding God's presence in our lives. Nothing we can say or do can pay the price of salvation, and absolutely nothing we can say or do can keep God from pouring out God's grace upon us.

Prayer: Creator, push aside my assumptions about what keeps you far from me.

Saturday, March 6

After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?"

(Mark 8:34-37)

We are willful beings. I like to be right, and I like to be well regarded. When I am under stress or in challenging situations, I must work hard to not go in these directions. I confess that I have chosen my own personal ego over relationships with others before, and I will most likely do it again in the future.

And yet, Jesus reminds us that we cannot find salvation on our own. When we try to save ourselves, we fail. When we try to rely only upon who we are, what we produce, or the nature of our souls, we fall short. When we try to tie God's presence to our goodness, we limit God. Jesus's sweeping statements to the crowd reveal how God is fully present in all lives. There is a pathway to salvation, and it is open to all. In the same way, God is present in all lives, in all situations, in all brokenness.

Prayer: God, call me out when I try to limit you.



Guidance

Third Sunday in Lent, March 7

Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

(Exodus 20:7)

After we are aware of God's presence, we must become open to God's guidance. It is a radical and cross-cultural action to stop treating God as a perpetual vending machine in the sky, a being that dispenses blessings upon request and therefore is dependent upon our own actions, thoughts, and spirits. It is powerful to speak of God's presence in the world, and it is a righteous thing to point to God as the source of all good. But when we only speak of simplistic blessings, we ignore entire aspects of God and manage to sidestep that our Lord doesn't only dispense blessings—God guides us in every area of our lives.

This translation of the third commandment frames how we tend to speak of God...and calls us out for it. How many times have you willfully and intentionally made a poor decision in your life? And how did you sidestep your awareness of your poor decision-making by telling yourself that God offers blessings or that God wants you to be happy? When we turn God into a blessing dispenser, we get to conveniently ignore God's guidance.

This Lent consider what you need to come clean about around this tendency.

Prayer: God, help me to stop deceiving myself.

Monday, March 8

Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you.

(Exodus 20:8-10)

Work can glorify God. Work can also become its own god in our lives. An unbalanced life—even when created in response to one's faith—is not pleasing to God.

The nature of work has changed substantially in the past few years. For those who work remotely or outside of the home, there is a relentless edging toward constant availability and an “always on” work culture. For those who spend their time either managing a household or raising a family, or both, the ever-growing array of tasks that must be attended to simply does not stop. And many of us hold both of these roles in visible and invisible ways. Taking a sabbath feels like a radical action—and an action that will simply leave us further behind tomorrow.

But our spirits were not designed to simply work and toil. Even God delighted in and rested on the seventh day. If we think that we can “push through” day in and day out, aren't we putting ourselves above God? Consider how God is guiding you into rest, sabbath, and silence—and consider whether this Lenten season is an invitation to finally take your sabbath seriously.

*Prayer: Divine Leader, I will listen
when you tell me to rest.*

Tuesday, March 9

*Heaven is declaring God's glory;
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.
One day gushes the news to the next,
and one night informs another what needs
to be known.
Of course, there's no speech, no words—
their voices can't be heard—
but their sound extends throughout the
world;
their words reach the ends of the earth.*
(Psalm 19:1-4)

The phrase “what needs to be known” has an abundance of layers. Have you ever been in a situation where an awareness about a problem or a relationship simply appeared to you? Some speak of experiences of justifying grace, when God’s love and care became suddenly and fully present at a specific time in one’s life. Looking back, God had always been present, but this new awareness and warming of the heart could be seen as heaven “declaring God’s glory” and informing the world of what needed to be known—that God’s grace is sufficient.

God’s grace is a form of guidance. Allowing ourselves to consider that God wants to guide us (and not punish us) opens up new ways of encountering the Holy Spirit. What would change in your life if you truly embraced the guidance of God in your life? Would you pay more attention to what the Holy Spirit may be telling you in any given day? Would you consider that the voices of loved ones and strangers may be a way of God guiding you in your life?

*Prayer: May your guidance, O Lord, be welcomed
as direction and not as punishment.*

Wednesday, March 10

*The LORD's Instruction is perfect,
reviving one's very being.*

*The LORD's laws are faithful,
making naive people wise.*

*The LORD's regulations are right,
gladdening the heart.*

*The LORD's commands are pure,
giving light to the eyes.*

*Honoring the LORD is correct,
lasting forever.*

(Psalm 19:7-9)

Faith is often stereotyped by the assumption that a faithful person lives a rigid lifestyle following a stringent set of rules. Christianity does have a multitude of guidelines to consider when living a faithful life, yes. But rule-following is not the point of Christianity.

The psalmist writes of God's "perfect instruction" for living a faithful life. The joy found in God's law is not about blindly following direction, but about being open to how God's guidance can help us become wise. God's guidance shapes the mind and the heart, "giving light to the eyes." This expansive understanding of the goodness of God's guidance calls us to ask harder questions when we are faced with pain or injustice. What is God's guidance in this moment?

In this Lenten season, what is the guidance God is pouring into you? In what ways are you being nudged to consider how you live your life?

*Prayer: Redeemer, help me to follow your
guidance in a way that honors you.*



Thursday, March 11

*Clear me of any unknown sin
and save your servant from willful sins.
Don't let them rule me. . . .*

*Let the words of my mouth
and the meditations of my heart
be pleasing to you,
LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

(Psalm 19:12-14)

The Christian journey is one of continual growth, and God's guidance includes opening our eyes to our own shortcomings. Just as we became aware of God's mercy, presence, and promises over time, we also become aware of our own shortcomings.

It has been interesting to see how social media can help bring awareness to brokenness in the world, as well as to those who have committed their lives to eradicating brokenness. Racism, sexism, classism—all the “-isms”—aren't new, but our society's access to information has brought them into light as they've never been before.

Unknown sin is oftentimes the most challenging sin to face. When God makes us aware of how humanity is interconnected and how we are often complicit in the brokenness in the world, it is humbling. And yet, through God's mercy, presence, and grace, we are offered guidance in how to respond.

*Prayer: Push me to see as you see, Gracious God,
and guide me to respond.*

Friday, March 12

Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God’s power and God’s wisdom. This is because the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

(1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

The point of this scripture is not to scapegoat a group of people, but to symbolically show how the message of the cross goes against any rational understanding of power and authority. As we edge closer to the cross in this Lenten season, we are reminded that a criminal’s death on the cross is the ultimate humiliation for someone who had been lifted up as the Son of God and the One who would save humanity. The death on the cross makes no sense for those who proclaim that following the rules would lead to salvation—and safety.

A “rule breaker” is so antithetical to our understanding of what it means to be a good person that we often gloss over how many rules Jesus broke in his ministry. He talked to women, touched the unclean, crossed racial boundaries, broke economic rules, and generally caused *a lot* of disruption wherever he went.

Christ is God’s power and God’s wisdom. What does it mean for you if God’s guidance is pushing you to upend the status quo and live your life in a way that makes a difference for Christ?

*Prayer: Teacher, embolden me to question
“how we’ve always done things.”*

Saturday, March 13

It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there. He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency. He said to the dove sellers, "Get these things out of here! Don't make my Father's house a place of business."

(John 2:13-16)

It is so very easy to engage with the world in a way that helps make your life easier. After all, God wants us to be happy, and God gives us abundant life, right? But what happens when we let the desire for profit, ease, and power guide us, rather than the desire to live a Christlike life?

We see an angry Jesus in this scripture, and rightfully so. Technically, the money changers in the temple were not breaking any rules—they were simply taking the opportunity to make a bit of profit from those who needed their services in order to practice their faith. But Jesus was not on board with using those at the bottom to line the pockets of those at the top—and we see his reaction clearly.

Following God's guidance means going deeper than just "following the rules." We can follow every rule we are given and still live an unfaithful life. God's guidance pushes us to go deeper and to open our eyes to how we may be benefiting from others while simultaneously pushing them down.

Prayer: Convict me, God, when I benefit from the misuse of others.

Grace

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14

The people went to Moses and said, "We've sinned, for we spoke against the LORD and you. Pray to the LORD so that he will send the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live." Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. If a snake bit someone, that person could look at the bronze snake and live.

(Numbers 21:7-9)

God's guidance can open our eyes to our failings, our selfishness, and our tendency to not see what is right in front of us. In today's scripture we read about how the Israelite people realized that they had sinned, and they asked Moses to intercede with God on their behalf. While a story about supernatural snake statues and repentance may not make a lot of sense for us today, you can see that Moses's prayer and God's grace created a way for the people to become whole and safe again.

The people were not able to save themselves—they had to turn to God after they acknowledged that God's guidance was set up to keep them safe and spiritually centered. In this Lenten season, how is God responding to you with grace? How have your eyes been opened by God's guidance to see where you have been trying to save yourself? What is different in your life when you let God's grace in?

*Prayer: Lord, forgive me
for trying to save myself.*

Monday, March 15

*"Give thanks to the LORD because he is good,
because his faithful love lasts forever!"*

*That's what those who are redeemed by the
LORD say,*

*the ones God redeemed from the power of
their enemies,*

*the ones God gathered from various
countries,*

from east and west, north and south.

(Psalm 107:1-3)

People who call themselves "de-churched" often ask about the "so what" of faith. "Praising and giving thanks is great, but then what? So what?"

Grace is a gift freely given to us and offered without cost to all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, or even theology. Our response to grace is praise and thanksgiving, which take a multitude of forms. Words, celebration, and worship matter. So do actions. Faith without works is dead, and so we are called to respond to God's grace by our actions and our work in the world.

It breaks my heart when I hear stories from people who still follow the faith of their childhood, although they have been pushed out of their church because of theological differences, implicit or explicit prejudice, and shunning. God gathered us all from "various countries, from east and west, north and south" to worship. May God offer us grace for those we have excluded from community.

*Prayer: God, may my treatment to all be
a reflection of the grace you give to all.*

Tuesday, March 16

At one time you were like a dead person because of the things you did wrong and your offenses against God. You used to live like people of this world. You followed the rule of a destructive spiritual power. This is the spirit of disobedience to God's will that is now at work in persons whose lives are characterized by disobedience.

(Ephesians 2:1-2)

Destructive spiritual powers take so many forms. Sometimes they are blatantly obvious, like greed, abuse, and causing harm to others. But sometimes destructive spiritual powers lurk beneath the surface, such as inequality, racism, sexism, and lack of access to good health care. When we uphold the values of this world or turn away from brokenness, we are living “like people of this world” rather than a life impacted by grace.

I know of a church that is open to all and is also especially welcoming for those in recovery from addiction, primarily to drugs and alcohol. The narratives around addiction and God's grace are breathtaking. Fighting addiction is one of the hardest things a person can do, and understanding that addiction can take the form of a destructive spiritual power is helpful for so many.

With God's grace, we are all saved from sin to life. While we cannot simply pray away our problems, we can and should respond to destructive powers with the awareness that without God's help we tend to choose selfish desires over the greater good. In this Lenten season, consider what destructive powers are at work in your life and your community, and see where grace can make a difference.

Prayer: Protect me, Defender, from destruction.

Wednesday, March 17

However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace!

(Ephesians 2:4-5)

Some models for Christian community are based in personal growth and self-help. While God calls us into continual renewal and abundant life, the Christian walk is about so much more than self-help. A self-help and personal growth model of Christianity makes our Christian journey of faith into something that we are fully in control of. It puts the burden of success, growth, and spiritual formation on the skills, willpower, and abilities that we possess and try to cultivate on our own. It also gives us the permission to simply step away when our “personal journey” gets a little too difficult or too self-revealing.

In contrast, God is rich in mercy and brings us life, inspiring within us abundance, wholeness, and a Christlike spirit. We have to do our part and respond to the unmerited grace we are given, but we must remember that grace came from God's love for us and not by the work of our own hands. The grace of God is what allows us to examine ourselves and not be broken.

*Prayer: Lord, help me to be honest about myself,
and save me with your grace.*

Thursday, March 18

You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

(Ephesians 2:8-10)

We are saved because of our faith. That said, our faith and our grounding for what we believe in is rooted in God's nature, God's care for us, and God's love for the world shown in Christ Jesus. Our faith in God certainly matters! But if we had to possess a certain amount of faith or live our faith in a specific way or with specific actions in order to be saved, we would all be lost.

We humans struggle to recognize that we do not always deserve what we have earned—though we are quick to acknowledge the hardships that we did not bring onto ourselves. God's salvation is outside and beyond what the world promises us. We are “created in Christ Jesus to do good things.” Our response to grace is to do good in the world and help others see that grace is also right there for them, too. May we have the grateful astonishment that salvation is for us, and grace is God's gift to us, simply because God loves us fully.

*Prayer: Humble me, O God,
for I cannot be saved without you.*



Friday, March 19

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

(John 3:16-17)

We see a lot of juxtaposition in this familiar scripture—the difference between life and death, judgment and salvation, light and dark. Oftentimes this scripture comes to mind easily when we ponder the fundamentals of our Christian faith. And yet, even within this scripture is the foundation that we have salvation because of who God is and God's eternal love and care for all of humanity.

As humans, we like to have structure, guidelines, and rules. We also like to know that we are loved and taken care of, and that we have a future to look forward to. Knowing that God is the giver of salvation and a future is a joy; naming that we cannot bring grace to ourselves by ourselves is sometimes a bit harder to deal with.

We see in the scripture that God's grace is saving the entire world, which brings up challenging questions about who has access to grace and salvation. If God's grace comes from God, and God saves the entire world, what is our role in gatekeeping and determining who is saved and who is not? In this Lenten season, spend some time thinking about what it means for the whole world to be saved, and consider how your Christian journey is a part of moving from judgment to offering grace.

Prayer: God, forgive me for being a gatekeeper.

Saturday, March 20

"This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. All who do wicked things hate the light and don't come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

(John 3:19-21)

In my current role, I work with churches, laity, and ministry leaders to better connect with one another and with their communities, especially when they do not look, sound, or act the same. The very nature of my ministry usually gets a nod of approval from people. It is worthy work that I love, and I am thankful to be doing it in this season. It is also challenging and emotionally taxing, and sometimes I just want to ease back and engage in surface-level work.

People are drawn to darkness. Sometimes this takes the form of tangible challenges: a desire for power, the struggle of addiction, the despair of isolation, the brokenness of inequality. But sometimes darkness is subtle, and it sneaks into our day-to-day lives. From apathy to disengagement to the willful blind eye when faced with injustice, darkness leads us to evil.

Grace is the antidote to evil, because it is all-encompassing and reveals our hidden parts, and it reminds us that we cannot earn our salvation. When we lean into grace and live according to God's direction, we move from darkness to light.

Prayer: Sustaining God, may your grace move us from darkness to light.

Renewal

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21

This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the LORD!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

(Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Grace brings renewal. When God spoke of a new covenant, God was explaining to humanity how grace—abundant, unmerited grace—leads to renewal. The Christian faith is about both the “now” and the “not yet.” God’s grace that covers all of humanity is present even before we are aware of God in our lives. This prevenient grace is wholly dependent on God’s nature rather than based on who we are or what we are aware of. Once we become aware of God’s grace, the door is opened for us to see the future—a future where God will know all of us and we will all know God.

Paradoxically, Lent is the perfect time to view the future as God intends it to look. We enter into Lent knowing the power of the resurrection; traveling through Jesus’s life, work, and ministry all the way to the cross helps us to remember both the “now” and the “not yet” of renewal. In this Lenten season, what has grace illuminated to reveal the renewal ahead?

Prayer: As I move toward the cross, O God, help me to become aware of the now and the not yet.

Monday, March 22

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

Wash me completely clean of my guilt; purify me from my sin!

Because I know my wrongdoings, my sin is always right in front of me.

(Psalm 51:1-3)

Grace provides renewal. But before we can get to renewal, we must be honest about what it takes to have a fresh and clean start. There are a multitude of ways in which people articulate what taking communion means to them, but my favorite is this: it is the outside sign of the invisible grace of God, which is fully present when we come to the table together.

Celebrating the sacraments is a way in which we invite renewal into our lives. Just as grace comes to us because of who God is and not because of what we do, renewal through the sacraments comes to us because of who God is. If you feel that your mindset or recent actions are a barrier to taking communion, remember that God's renewal is based upon the goodness of God, and renewal is given to us without cost.

Prayer: Gracious God, renew me and have mercy on me.



Tuesday, March 23

*Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;
wash me and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and celebration again;
let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.
Hide your face from my sins;
wipe away all my guilty deeds!*
(Psalm 51:7-9)

Renewal comes from God, and renewal can take so many forms. One of the ways in which we can frame renewal is through baptism. When we baptize babies, children, and adults, and when we remember our baptisms, we are naming that God is a renewing God who makes us new and whole.

When we encounter rituals that remind us of who we are and who God is, we are participating in God's path for renewal. It can be incredibly powerful to engage in rituals of renewal after a big change in one's life. Transitions in family, work, home situations, and the like can leave us looking backward while facing forward. Sometimes we need to be reminded that it is okay to grieve, and it is okay to be able to look ahead and into renewal.

If you have had experiences that have emotionally, physically, or spiritually made you ask God to "let me hear joy and celebration again," consider how God's grace has led you toward a sense of renewal. Lent is an opportunity to lean into renewal and see how God encourages us to honestly ask God to make us new.

*Prayer: Sustaining God, renew my life
in this day.*

Wednesday, March 24

*Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
Please don't throw me out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit away from
me.*

*Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.*

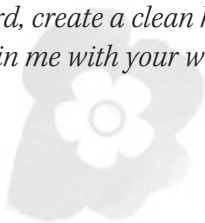
(Psalm 51:10-12)

There is a reason why teenagers and young adults often go through periods of reinvention and renewal. Shedding an outward look or persona to claim a new identity is a way of moving from the old to the new. Even celebrities and social media personalities jump into renewal as a way to restart a brand or to gain a new following. When we think about renewal in the context of our faith, we can see that God gives us a way to leave behind our past and become a new being.

Part of asking God for renewal is an acknowledgment that we don't deserve God's grace. While God created us to be good, we cannot earn salvation on our own. The path to renewal is a way for us to return to God and ask to be made new through God's power and not through our own means.

Asking for a new spirit and a clean heart is a way to set aside the ego and to claim God as the priority in one's life. Are you at a point where you need to ask God for renewal? It is a humbling ask, but it is always available to us, freely given because God is faithful.

*Prayer: Lord, create a clean heart for me
and sustain me with your willing spirit.*



Thursday, March 25

During his days on earth, Christ offered prayers and requests with loud cries and tears as his sacrifices to the one who was able to save him from death. He was heard because of his godly devotion. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. After he had been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for everyone who obeys him.

(Hebrews 5:7-9)

It can be problematic to assume that suffering comes from God, and that suffering is intended to teach us obedience. If this were the case, then abuse is sanctioned by God; racism, sexism, and discrimination are holy; and brokenness in our personal lives and community spheres is intended to “teach us a lesson.” That said, sometimes when we experience hardship, we have our eyes opened to what it means to be truly obedient to God and live in response to God’s grace.

As a child, I had a lot of problems with asthma, bronchitis, and pneumonia. While I don’t struggle with asthma as an adult, it seems like every illness I catch, big or small, ends up in my lungs. The inability to breathe and sleep well is a particularly disturbing form of suffering. Everyone has experienced some sort of suffering, whether it be physical pain or emotional strife. Renewal is what comes after suffering. Sometimes the renewal comes as an ending. Sometimes it comes from a new awareness of personal or community brokenness. God encourages us to lament and grieve even as we move toward renewal.

Prayer: For the suffering I face, O God, help me to look for your renewal.

Friday, March 26

Jesus replied, "The time has come for the Human One to be glorified. I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever."

(John 12:23-25)

Renewal is described as a new path forward. For people who have already been baptized, we often celebrate a remembrance of baptism. Whether this takes place in a large worship service, in a small group, or as part of personal reflection, we must know that renewal includes both the individual and the community.

Jesus's words in today's scripture talk about a multiplication model of ministry and discipleship. When we focus inwardly and try to hold tightly to what we want for ourselves and ourselves alone, we are isolated, and we miss the opportunity for God to work in us and through us. But when we put our own desires aside and allow the self-centered parts of ourselves to die, we open up the door for God to bring new life and to multiply the good that was growing just beneath the surface.

Consider how God is calling you in this time to move away from personal glorification and toward multiplying your connections. Do you love parts of your life in a way that keeps you from turning toward the renewal God has in store for you?

*Prayer: Convict me of selfishness, Lord,
and help me to choose you.*

Saturday, March 27

"Now I am deeply troubled. What should I say? 'Father, save me from this time'? No, for this is the reason I have come to this time."

(John 12:27)

The problem with evil is the conflict that if God is all good, all powerful, and all loving, why do bad things happen in the world? There is no simple answer to this age-old question. We even see Jesus struggle as he talked to a crowd about his imminent death: *"I am deeply troubled. What should I say?"*

Sometimes we have to move toward brokenness and difficulty in order to bring about renewal. Making a change usually means letting go of something old in order to bring in the new. God's renewal is about completely changing the world so that the least become those who are lifted up. God's renewal is also wrapped up in the redemption of the cross. We would not have the resurrection—the ultimate renewal—without the journey to the cross.

Jesus's very human words and emotions come through in this scripture. I appreciate his honesty. Jesus knows that in order to bring about renewal, he must take the path that leads to the cross and the humbling of himself as a servant, rather than a king. As we prepare to take the journey to the cross, consider how God is urging you to move from control to servanthood. What are you being asked to lay down so that you can be renewed?

Prayer: Creator of All, be with me as I submit to your renewal.

Ending

Palm Sunday, March 28

*The LORD God gave me an educated tongue
to know how to respond to the weary
with a word that will awaken them in the
morning.*

*God awakens my ear in the morning to
listen,
as educated people do.*

(Isaiah 50:4)

Renewal comes after an ending. Offering hope in a hopeless moment is a gift. At one point in my life, uncertainty had me twisted up as I questioned the next step in my career and in my work-life balance. A colleague prodded gently, asking whether I'd KNOWN what had lain ahead the last time I was in transition. (The answer, of course, was no.) My colleague then reminded me that having a vision of the future is not required for God to move.

Sometimes seasons end, and we don't see what is coming next. It is humbling to know that God gives the faithful servant "an educated tongue" when things come to an end. While we may all assume initially that we are the faithful servant who speaks, it is probably more likely that we are the weary who need a word to awaken them in the morning.

As we begin the journey to the cross, let us remember that all things must come to an end. God gave us gifts of mercy, guidance, and grace to be able to face the end, and to face the unknowns in our lives.

*Prayer: Help me to face the endings
that need to come so that I can fully follow you.*

Monday, March 29

But me? I trust you, LORD!

I affirm, "You are my God."

My future is in your hands.

*Don't hand me over to my enemies,
to all who are out to get me!*

Shine your face on your servant;

save me by your faithful love!

(Psalm 31:14-16)

When I was facing the final earthly days of a family member, I knew that there was nothing I could do to pause the relentless approach of death. While my family member had lived a long, full, and grace-filled life, I didn't want to let this person go. All I could do was ask for God to be with me as that earthly journey ended.

I didn't know what life would be like after this person died. I could see the end coming quickly, and I couldn't see what would come after. It is humbling to be reminded that our futures are in God's hands, and not in our own.

Holy Week takes us through the journey to the end—an ending that centers on the cross. While we know what comes after the cross, it is a good spiritual discipline to be reminded of what it feels like when an ending is inevitable. In today's scripture, the psalmist writes of trusting God and placing one's future in God's hands. May we all be reminded to place our trust in God.

*Prayer: Redeemer, help me to stay
on the path to the cross.*

Tuesday, March 30

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

*Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with
God something to exploit.*

*But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.*

*When he found himself in the form of a
human,*

*he humbled himself by becoming
obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus everyone
in heaven, on earth, and under the
earth might bow*

*and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the
glory of God the Father.*

(Philippians 2:5-11)

Holding on to power is a very human tendency. While these words in Philippians may be familiar from creeds, songs, or sermons, the message is still profoundly radical. In this passage, we have an almost melodic description of Jesus's life, work, death, and resurrection. But even though the language is smooth and familiar, it starkly illustrates that Jesus *chose* an ending—one that would lead to his horrific death—in order to save the world. By doing so, Jesus showed humanity that choosing the end of power leads to new life.

What would it mean for you to “adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus”?

*Prayer: When I fear the end, Divine Ruler,
remind me of Christ's sacrifice.*

Wednesday, March 31

The chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas to them instead. Pilate replied, "Then what do you want me to do with the one you call king of the Jews?"

They shouted back, "Crucify him!"

Pilate said to them, "Why? What wrong has he done?"

They shouted even louder, "Crucify him!"

Pilate wanted to satisfy the crowd, so he released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus whipped, then handed him over to be crucified.

(Mark 15:11-15)

Sometimes choosing the right thing to do opens us up to disgrace, mockery, and derision. You may have an experience in your life where you had to stand up for the right thing, even knowing that friendships and family relationships would be impacted.

Choosing to end something can be the right thing to do, but it is not easy. I can only imagine what Christ felt as he stood silently as the crowd urged Pilate to send him to the cross. Christ was following the path laid out for him, and he knew that there would be brokenness, no matter what.

*Prayer: God, as I stand up for what is right,
sustain me as I endure endings.*

Maundy Thursday, April 1

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means Skull Place. They tried to give him wine mixed with myrrh, but he didn't take it. They crucified him. They divided up his clothes, drawing lots for them to determine who would take what. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The notice of the formal charge against him was written, "The king of the Jews." They crucified two outlaws with him, one on his right and one on his left.

(Mark 15:22-27)

I like to think that Christ had the option to simply step away from his journey to the cross. But when we get to the point of the Passion narrative when Christ is nailed to the cross and lifted up for the crowd to see him as he slowly died, it truly shows the finality of his commitment to God and his servant status.

Christ chose the end so that we could live. While we know what comes after the cross, it would do us well to remember how final Christ's decision was to die for all of humanity. Choosing the cross meant becoming as low as a common criminal, a spectacle to the masses who were hungry for entertainment and punishment. Choosing this kind of ending goes against every worldly understanding of what power is supposed to do for us. Perhaps we need to consider how we cling to power in our own lives and what we need to end.

Prayer: Creator God, may I give up my power so that you may reign.



Good Friday, April 2

The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly God's Son."

Some women were watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James (the younger one) and Joses, and Salome. When Jesus was in Galilee, these women had followed and supported him, along with many other women who had come to Jerusalem with him.

(Mark 15:38-41)

When we come to the end of Christ's death on the cross, it is important to note that there were people who truly saw Jesus for what he was, who were there *with* him, including the centurion and the women mentioned in this passage.

When we are facing an end—whether it is the end of a season, the end of a loved one's life, or the end of our own time on earth—we should be reminded that there are those who are with us, even if we are not aware of them. The centurion and the women are examples of the Holy Spirit observing, naming, and claiming where God is at work, even when we don't see or feel God's presence.

*Prayer: In the darkness of the cross,
may I find you, O God.*

Holy Saturday, April 3

Since it was late in the afternoon on Preparation Day, just before the Sabbath, Joseph from Arimathea dared to approach Pilate and ask for Jesus' body. (Joseph was a prominent council member who also eagerly anticipated the coming of God's kingdom.) Pilate wondered if Jesus was already dead. He called the centurion and asked him whether Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that Jesus was dead, Pilate gave the dead body to Joseph. He bought a linen cloth, took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in the cloth, and laid him in a tomb that had been carved out of rock. He rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was buried.

(Mark 15:42-47)

Funerals and burial rituals are ways for us to find closure. I can only imagine what Joseph was thinking as he so reverently prepared Jesus's body for burial in a tomb. The ritual actions must have intertwined with heartbreak—the one who was supposed to save the world instead ended up dead on a cross, no better than any common criminal.

We should also note that Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, saw part of the ritual and knew where Jesus was buried. Sometimes when we are facing an ending, we are watching what is happening in someone else's life and are unable to intercede. The death and burial of Jesus remind us that even when we are facing the end, there is always a divine Observer.

*Prayer: God, in the darkness of the tomb,
may I find you.*

Beginning

Easter Sunday, April 4

Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, [Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome] came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you."

(Mark 16:2-7)

The women arrived at the tomb expecting an ending, but instead they were confronted with a beginning. From the darkness of the tomb came unexpected life.

Can you imagine the fear and the astonishment of the women as it dawned on them what had happened? The Lenten journey is about the path to the cross; we know that life comes after the death of the cross, and that God was and is truly in all parts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this Easter season, may you open yourself to how God has offered you mercy and nudged you from an end to a beginning.

Prayer: Redeeming God, may I embrace the new life you have poured out upon us all.