

PILGRIMS

"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

John 12:26a (NRSV)



Epiphany Lenten Guide
2023

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (Collect for Fifth Sunday in Lent)

Editor's note:

To the writers who contributed to this booklet, and to Lisa Farrell and Fr. Ignacio Gama, who offered up their time and labor in gathering, assembling, and creating it, thank you.

This year's devotionals fit alongside the Daily Office Lectionary Year One schedule and focus on the Gospel readings, nearly all of which are from the Gospel of John. These are, with only a few exceptions, the same Gospel readings you'll encounter if you keep up with Morning Prayer and/or Evening Prayer this Lent. This booklet can serve as a companion piece for the Daily Office, a resource in helping you keep the Gospel readings in your heart and mind throughout each day.

You will notice a wide range of styles, intents, and personalities among the devotionals. We sinners, in seeking to follow Christ and to be with him as his servants, are not unlike a great band of pilgrims treading the Way together. As we walk together in love, we share our testimonies. We marvel at the beauty of God's works. We gripe (well, *I* gripe). We confess. We pray for our own needs and those of others. We minister to one another.

Every Ash Wednesday, we are invited to observe a holy Lent, with self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and the study of scripture. Before you set out on this journey of forty days and forty nights, put this booklet in your pilgrim's satchel. Like the figures in Jacob Haynes's beautiful and rich cover illustration, we must walk a narrow path, but the way is illuminated by the Light of Christ. Thanks be to God.

We wish you a holy and blessed Lent!

Your servant,

Randy Kinnett

Cover Illustration by Jacob Haynes.

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Me, oh my, how I can identify with the Pharisee!

Whereas the Pharisee thanked God for his own moral and religious uprightness, I found in my own uprightness a knock against God. I had grown up baptized but unchurched and doubting. Still, I was good and didn't get mixed up in the wrong extracurriculars. By late high school, God seemed superfluous, and I knew I was an atheist, though I kept it hidden. I measured my goodness against others' goodness, or lack thereof, and relished any chance to feel morally superior to Christians who didn't act according to the popular slogan at the time, "What Would Jesus Do?" So, I can imagine how the Pharisee felt as the tax collector slunk into the temple, this fellow countryman who did the dirty work of the occupying Romans and lined his pockets all the while.

My and the Pharisee's problem wasn't that we were doing good. My choices to abstain from certain activities and to respect and obey my parents and teachers generally served others and me well. The Pharisees, despite their oft-caricatured portrayal in the gospels, earnestly kept the Mosaic Law in gladsome response to God's profound act of grace, that of making and keeping the Jews His chosen people. When a Pharisee asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment, Jesus distilled the Law and the Prophets: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37-40). Our problem was that we measured ourselves over against our neighbors and, in doing so, became contemptuous of them. We had to bring them down to bring us up.

Me, oh my, how I can identify with the tax collector!

Years of trying to do and be good on my own terms, under my own steam, eventually left me feeling broken. Like the despondent tax collector standing alone in the temple, unable to direct his eyes upward, there came a point when all I wanted was for something true and life-giving to enter into my brokenness and make me whole. I remember vividly the love and mercy I experienced when, at my lowest, I first let Christ into my life in earnest. It dawned on me then that the creator of heaven and earth is with me, that human perfectionism is folly, and that Christ has saved me. We do not know from the parable whether the tax collector's contrition led to repentance, to a turning away from a life of sin, of separation from God, toward a life in relationship with God. Despite this, Jesus ends the parable by proclaiming the good news of his Father's upside-down Kingdom, where the last will be first and the first will be last: God is with us in our weakest, most vulnerable moments, when we are ready to acknowledge that we live off of nothing but His extravagant grace and mercy.

This passage from the book of John helps us frame who Jesus is in multiple ways: 1) using a metaphorical reference (“the Lamb of God”), 2) clear visual evidence (“I saw the Spirit come down...”), and 3) simply spelling it out (“God’s Chosen One”). John uses all of these ways to make his message as clear as possible, that this one is the REAL deal. To me, John’s surprise and enthusiasm come through in this passage, almost like a child who is eager to share a new discovery, repeating himself multiple times and in multiple ways to emphasize the point. Yet, there is significant depth to these descriptions that John uses for Jesus. John encompasses references to figures in historical texts as well as his baptism of Jesus, and in doing so, he incorporates so much into this short passage.

First, in likening Jesus to the Lamb of God, most of us would conclude that John is describing Jesus as the sacrificial lamb that was customary in Jewish culture at the time. However, other authors suggest that the word used in the original text brings to mind “The Lamb of God” as a familiar warrior-like figure in Jewish prophetic writing. The embodiment of both realities—the lamb as a warrior, as well as a sacrifice—is an interesting concept to me, and speaks to how Jesus is not a simplistic figure. The unidimensional view of Jesus as a passive offering for the sins of the world seems to underestimate his powerful influence. We may forget how radical Jesus’ teachings were at the time, and how he elevated vulnerable populations who lived on the fringes of society or were excluded from religious life (e.g. the poor, the sick, women, tax collectors, etc.). With John’s use of the word for the warrior lamb, he may have intended to invoke both concepts to describe Jesus as a sacrifice as well as a protective figure.

When John gives his testimony of the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven in the form of a dove and remaining, he is describing when he baptized Jesus, which was recorded in more detail in each of the synoptic gospels. In this way, John is speaking to those of us who seek hard evidence for our beliefs—the concrete thinkers and scientists among us. The reference to the dove hearkens back to other familiar stories (e.g. the dove bringing the olive branch back to Noah at the end of the 40 days on the ark, as a sacrifice in addition to or in place of a lamb in multiple passages, and as a symbol of innocence). So, the dove is clearly well-accepted as a symbolic and Godly creature. With that understanding then, the act of the dove coming down and staying on the newly-baptized Jesus, sounds surreal. It gives the concrete thinkers and scientific minds clear visual proof of Jesus being God’s Chosen One. God’s use of the natural world to give us messages is not unique to this story, and it is likely no coincidence that exposure to the natural world has repeatedly been shown to improve our health and mental well being. Nature provides a clear connection to God and when we understand the nature around us, we can better identify the surreal natural events that God may use to communicate with us. I have felt the presence and clear message from God at a vulnerable time in my life in the form of double rainbows (I know, sounds incredible, right? It truly was!). I’ve heard of others coming to terms with God’s existence through the uncanny (yet perfect) timing of flowers blooming every spring. John knows that many people understand God’s presence through nature, and he brings back the memory of the dove descending on Jesus as additional

proof that Jesus is the Son of God.

Lastly, in John's final summary, he states very directly, "I have seen and I testify, that this is God's Chosen One." In this closing argument of the passage, John tells us what he knows is true based on the evidence. Through all of his teaching, John conveys that he knew his role was to set the stage for Jesus ("I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel"). John did not necessarily understand the full details of the bigger picture at the time, but he humbly continued his work. The absence of ego stands out here. Luckily for him, and perhaps because he worked with great humility, John gets to see the culmination of what he was working for. He paved the way for Jesus' ministry and then got to see and proclaim Jesus as the REAL deal. In this, John serves as a role model for all of us as we work to use our talents to humbly serve God even though we may not see the bigger picture at the time.

In my own life, I first see this passage as a reminder that Jesus, and my relationship with him, are both multidimensional; secondly, the natural world—including the amazingly complex inner workings of the human body in both health and disease—are a testament to God's presence in our lives; and lastly, that I have a role to fulfill in God's plan even if I do not understand the larger view, but in remaining humble, I may be so lucky to someday see the culmination of my work.

Feast of Saint Matthias the Apostle

February 24

Acts 20:17-35

Today I am struck by the themes of transition and change. We have the feast for St. Matthias, who was appointed as the twelfth apostle after Judas' betrayal, the first of the twelve who was appointed by the apostles instead of Jesus but prior to the receiving of the Holy Spirit. I can't imagine how he must have felt being added to this special group of leaders in the earliest days of the new Christian church. Although he was an original follower of Jesus according to tradition, his appointment signaled a change in that leadership team. Similarly, in the second half of Acts 20, we have Paul's final speech to the elders in Ephesus. This is interestingly the only speech of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul is coming to the end of his third missionary journey en route to Jerusalem for the fifth and final time, and he foretells the difficulty and persecution he will face ahead. He knows he will not be with these leaders of the church in Ephesus again, and he is reminding them that the only path to salvation is through Jesus. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus teaching and living among them, and now they were going to be faced with continuing without his guidance. Similarly, our Epiphany community is facing a time of changing leadership with Betsy's departure and the search for a new rector. We are blessed to have Canon Neal's leadership and Father Ignacio, Father Chris, and Deacon Dave. However, change can be uncomfortable and unsettling for many. As we begin this Lenten season, we should all be reminded that if we follow the teachings of Jesus and accept Him as our savior, the path forward is clear, regardless of who our leaders are and will be. Matthias and Paul both made the ultimate sacrifice for their leadership through martyrdom, a reminder

that the small sacrifices we make this season to help us better prepare are absolutely worth the gift of Jesus in our lives. That is, indeed, the Good News.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

February 25

John 1:43-51

Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

In studying this passage and some commentary, my understanding is that this passage speaks to the true nature for us as Christians to follow, devote ourselves, and commit our actions to Christ and His teachings. However, He recognizes that we may question this following, and He is not upset by our questioning our following if it is in efforts to seek true knowledge and truth without deceit. We should examine our motives in how we follow and how we judge others who follow. We may have preconceived ideas, but through seeking the truth and knowledge that Christ provides and following that truth and knowledge, we will open our hearts to greater things in our communion with Christ. Through this ongoing retrospection of our own weaknesses, looking to find good where we may have thought there was none, and continually acting on this, we are promised that, indeed, we will see all things in Heaven and Earth reconciled.

What does this mean to me now? That I am a Christian and my faith is in following the Word of Christ, looking for the good and committing to the teachings. That Jesus knows that I am not perfect but He says to keep following, and even though I am not perfect and have failings, He will always be in a relationship with me, and I am promised to always be with Him from and through eternity when all are reconciled and united. I am loved always, even in my imperfection.

Monday in the First Week of Lent

February 27

John 2:1-12

“Do whatever He tells you”

In my experience, the season of Lent points to three important truths in a Christian's life. These truths are death, grief, and repentance. In other words, some of the most necessary and uncomfortable elements of living like Christ. There is a yearly twinge in my body as Lent's season comes closer. The season's poignancy always has a way of catching me off guard. It wakes me up from a slumber. The season always finds a way to push us “little Christs” to face the tension of wrestling with God and our neighbor. It is a season that reveals when we have

lacked, where we are currently lacking, and the reminder that we will continue to lack. Through Christ's actions in the past, the present, and the future can the season of Lent also point to what we have to gain. To help your Lenten journey, let's look at Christ's first miracle in John's Gospel.

In the Wedding in Cana narrative, we encounter a sad dilemma. A party is about to die. The wine is gone and the guests are not ready to leave. It's a simple equation: no party juice = no party. Mary's keen eye is aware of the dilemma and asks Jesus to save it. Christ shares that it is not his time to reveal his identity. Mary responds to Christ's question by commanding servants to follow Christ's words. For my ears, the words are piercing.

"Do whatever He tells you."

As a creature who loves certainty, I prefer to have a grasp on what the process will look like. How will I feel during the command? Will I be enough for the task? What will the outcome be? This is how I feel during the Lent season. Will the removal of a few of my self-constructed barriers be worth it? Can I trust in God during times of uncertainty and repentance? It's easy to say on paper that it will be well worth it. It is the living out or "doing" of the command that will show if it's been worthwhile. Just like the servants, I am usually unaware of what Christ is able to do with my small sacrifices. In my read, the servants had no clue that the water would turn into wine and save the party. Without their willingness to perform what Christ has commanded, they would not be able to see the end results. They would not have seen the continued pleasure, joy, and the best tasting wine. Christ calls me to "do" in the season of Lent, and I need His grace to even attempt to follow His commandments. Christ calls me to allow Him to work in grief, pain, and discomfort. In this season, Christ transforms our lives and "doing" into something so much greater. I wonder what the "whatever" is in your life at this time. I also wonder how Christ will transform you by "doing whatever" He tells you. At the end of the Wedding at Cana narrative, we see Christ's glory revealed by the disciples. The disciples believed Him. This Lent season, let us call on our Savior and neighbors to help us believe in the commands that Christ has given us.

Let us "do whatever He tells" us.

Tuesday in the First Week of Lent

February 28

John 2:13-22

When I was a young teen, a friend and I went to LSU to summer vocal music camp. We walked the beautiful campus scattered with large oak trees, and we learned to sing classical sacred music. We both sang in the adult church choir at our small country church, but we had never sung in Latin or in the beautiful harmonies offered in classical music. One day, while walking back to our dorm, we stopped and watched students who were sitting under a tree playing guitars and singing. For the first time in my life, I was intrigued with the simplicity of the musical scene and the joy I saw on the faces of the students. I thought to myself: "I want to do that." And when

I went home, I taught myself how to play my father's 4 string guitar with the help of a book he had, entitled *Teach Yourself to Play the Guitar*.

In our lives, we travel down roads of various experiences: some planned, some unexpected. I never asked my father why he had a guitar (I had not seen him play it) and the book with that title. I have a brother and a sister, and yet I wonder if he knew it would be me who would take the opportunity to enrich myself with the joy of knowing how to create music in a new way. Eventually I sang and accompanied myself both with that instrument and, later, a 6-string guitar. I also taught others how to play that wonderful instrument.

In the Gospel verses for today, Philip says to Nathaniel: "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth!" Nathaniel is puzzled: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip says: "Come and see." When Jesus speaks to him, Nathaniel wonders aloud "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answers: "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathaniel replies, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Nathaniel is a bit of a snob this first meeting of Jesus, doubting that anything good would come from Nazareth. Then soon he was proclaiming the miracle he was seeing—the Son of God! A casual walk for both Nathaniel—and for me—caused revelation. Something unplanned, something very simple and every-day (sitting under a tree!), became something very important. Life-changing.

As you walk through Lent this year, give yourself time to consider how the very simple and beautiful experiences that come your way everyday can cause your life to be enriched with creativity, joy, and love. "Come and see."

Heavenly Father, open my eyes and my ears and my heart to your love that surrounds me every day. Make me aware, Lord, to hear your voice, see where you would have me go, and lead me into your loving arms. Amen.

Wednesday in the First Week of Lent

March 1

John 2:23-3:15

My first reaction when I read this assigned scripture for today was – **"DARN IT – Why didn't it go just one verse more?"** because the very next verse is rather famous and is maybe one of the most quoted and memorized verses in our Bible – **JOHN 3:16! We all know this one by heart.**

But as I read and re-read these verses leading up to JOHN 3:16, I realized some important and significant insights. In these verses, Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, approaches Jesus, and Jesus tells him that he must be born anew to see the kingdom of God. This really confuses Nicodemus as he immediately thinks of being born in a human sense—somehow returning to his mother's womb and going through birth again. It seems impossible and nonsensical to him—and indeed it is in a human sense. Jesus explains that Nicodemus must be

born of the spirit, not of the flesh, and gives an example of the wind which we can feel blowing but we know not where it comes from or where it is going—so it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus still doesn't understand and Jesus proceeds to get a bit exasperated and asks Nicodemus, "How can this be, are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand this?"

I had to ask myself—would I understand? Could I understand? Would I be like Nicodemus, and just go away confused, refusing to believe in something that I could not comprehend?

This is not the only time in the Gospels that Jesus gets a bit exasperated trying to explain the kingdom of God. Jesus knew and understood the "Kingdom of God" because He came from there. But the kingdom of God must be so wonderfully different from the kingdom of our earthly lives that we cannot fully comprehend it. Jesus is fully human and fully God, so He understands both kingdoms. To give us some limited insight into God's Kingdom, He uses earthly examples—"being born again," "the blowing wind," parables, etc. And He also gives us peeks into its attributes—the beatitudes, the way He lived His life, no sin, no evil, no death, no pain and suffering, and more. In the very first line of the prayer He taught us to use—"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"—Jesus taught us to pray for God's Kingdom to be brought to Earth just as it was in heaven because He knew that it was made for us, and we were made for it. I can only conclude that God's Kingdom must be incredibly wonderful.

And how do we get to partake in God's kingdom? **"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but shall have everlasting life."**

Thursday in the First Week of Lent

March 2

John 3:16-21

"For God so loved the world He gave His one and only son"

To truly live, we have to believe in God, and that God is Love and the Light. God's Love for us is unconditional; however, this love still has certain conditions that are achievable through our undeniable belief in Jesus' teachings. We have to practice those conditions on a daily basis. In simple terms, God is the "parent" of the world, and those conditions are achieved through the teachings of His son, Jesus, and by our prayers and actions.

One of the things that this passage reminds me of is being a parent myself. The first time gazing upon my precious gifts from God, Teresa and Doug, I can feel nothing short of the intense love and responsibility that I have been given. As parents, Don and I had the responsibility to teach our children the rules of life, as Jesus strived to teach, and it is their responsibility to open their hearts and minds and, by our examples, to learn and live by those teachings to the best of their abilities.

One of the most important lessons of life is of God's love and desire for us to share that love with one another, and, through our continued efforts, believe in the name of Jesus, and that He is the Light of Life and light is good and true. Darkness is achieved through sin. We want to strive to live in His Light and fight the temptations of the darkness.

God sent Jesus to save us all from death, and by striving to live in the Belief and the Light of the Lord, and forsaking darkness, we may gain eternal life in Heaven. AMEN.

Friday in the First Week of Lent

March 3

John 3:22-36

You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:28-30)

John the Baptist testifies that he is not the Messiah (the bridegroom); he is the friend of the bridegroom.

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God's wrath. (John 3:34-36)

John testifies that Jesus is the one who comes from heaven. Jesus is the one God has sent. Jesus is the bridegroom. If we believe this, we will have eternal life.

Throughout scripture there are many names and many descriptions. John recognizes that his name is not just the Baptizer, he is the friend of the bridegroom. He acknowledges and names Christ as the one, as the bridegroom and the one that God has sent.

Recently I heard a wonderful teaching that hit home for me. Just as God in the Old Testament would change some names; Christ changed some names as well. In John 1:41,

He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter). (John 1:41-42)

Peter means Rock in Greek. Ultimately Peter came to believe in these names as he believed in Jesus as his Savior.

We accept and believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Do we accept our new names in Christ? Do we

dwell in the names that Satan works to convince us that we are? Names like unworthy, disgusting, unlovable, less than, lost, stupid or you don't measure up? For me it was easier to believe those lies rather than that I am loved and that I am a child of God. I did not see myself the way God does. When we accept the lies, we do not allow God to use us as He sees us... a friend of the bridegroom, a Rock.

Will you, like John the Baptist, acknowledge that you are a friend of the bridegroom, and the church is his bride? Will you acknowledge that Christ is the bridegroom, that He is the One God sent? Will you cast off the names Satan has given you and accept your new name in Christ?

Saturday in the First Week of Lent

March 4

John 4:1-26

A Transforming Meeting

Please ponder with me this special Gospel reading. In Samaria, a Samaritan woman is making her regular journey to Jacob's Well to draw water for her family. She travels the dusty road in the heat of the day to avoid the critical, judgmental comments of her neighbors regarding her sordid past. The woman is quite surprised to see a Jewish man seated at the well. She is even more startled when he speaks to her, "Give me a drink."

This request begins Jesus' longest recorded conversation (Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well*, p. 110). The woman responds. The first words out of her mouth are "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan?" There is much to learn from this dialogue. Jesus' humanity is emphasized as we see him thirsty and weary from a long walk to Samaria. He has crossed the boundaries between male and female in even speaking to a woman, especially a Samaritan. There are centuries of rivalry and hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Jews would generally avoid any contact with a Samaritan, but Jesus has found it "necessary" to go through Samaria that he might extend his ministry there also. Jesus' request for a drink begins a real dialogue with the woman. She does hold her own quite well with Him asking questions. I am sure she feels Jesus' compassion and acceptance. Jesus guides her thinking, speaking to the deep yearnings of her heart: "If you knew who was speaking to you, you would ask him for 'living water.'"

The woman is quite interested in this "living water." Jesus tells her to go and call her husband, and she responds that she has no husband. When Jesus reveals his knowledge of her life situation, she responds, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet!" She moves the discussion to talk about the proper place to worship. When Jesus talks about worshipping God in spirit and truth, she responds, "I know the Messiah is coming and will teach us all things." Then comes the great announcement, "I am He, the one who is speaking to you!" This is the first time these words have been spoken in the Gospel of John! They are spoken to the Samaritan Woman and she is transformed! (Come back to tomorrow for the rest of the story.)

May our hearts and minds be opened to meet Jesus again and again this Lent! May we, too, cross boundaries that separate the children of God.

Monday in the Second Week of Lent

March 6

John 4:27-42

Jesus so elegantly wanted to ensure that the disciples were aware and reminded that he is the source of their knowledge which is supplied by him and our God in heaven. When children slowly grow up, they are still truly hungry for the guidance and help of their parents. Once they get older, that need fades away towards independence and growth.

Like my metaphor, Jesus tries to show the disciples how the people are the “field” and their new work to teach and cultivate them will be their harvest. Yes they have not worked in the field much like the Samaritans have but they too will enjoy the harvest of their hard labor and work.

As the community of Epiphany goes through some changes, I hope we all take this time to really reach out to different members in the community and try to make some time to learn a little about them and their background. I truly am blessed and thankful to be able to contribute and pray with you all.

Tuesday in the Second Week of Lent

March 7

John 4:43-54

The second of seven signs reveals to us the almighty power of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has control over illness, suffering, and pain. Jesus enters Galilee triumphantly after turning water into wine and is received with glory. The people of Galilee heard of this miracle and welcomed him back. But, he did not come for fame or recognition. He came to reveal himself as the true Messiah and spread his truth.

Upon his return, he is approached by a father begging for the healing of his dying son. It is easy to put ourselves in the position of the father. We can imagine how desperate the father must have felt. But there is also a desperation in Jesus’ response to the father as well. “Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “You will never believe.” One has to wonder: does he tire of having to prove himself to us? He is not only responding to the father, he is crying out to mankind, “Why don’t you believe?” “Why do you lack faith?”

His response is quick and almost dismissive. “Go,” Jesus replied, “your son will live.” The father does not plead

or beg for Jesus to come in person to his son so that the healing may be witnessed. The father does not question or plead further. Jesus' supreme authority and ability to heal through time and space is accepted with blind faith by the father. He immediately returns home to find his son healed. The father understands that our God has a power we cannot even begin to understand or comprehend. How many of us possess this type of faith? This is true faith. The father didn't question Jesus; he just obeyed. True faith is not about what you feel, it is about what you do.

Many of us possess this type of faith. We have come to God with a request or prayer in times of need. When the walls are closing in and we feel desperation, we cry out and pray. We have a preconceived idea about what it is we think God must do to resolve our situation. We pray hard, but sometimes God has another plan, one we cannot anticipate. Although he may not always answer our prayers in the way we expect, we begin to understand his amazing power in our lives. We are sometimes placed in situations we don't want to experience just so we can achieve what we desire. Going through those trials increases our strength and our faith. We become stronger and more resolute about his power. Our Father sent to us a perfect Son, one who sacrificed for us and has all good things planned for us. Faith in him leads us to a more perfect path in this life.

Those who believe will not need a sign. What we do and how we live is a testament to our belief and faith in our Heavenly Father.

Let us always be the kind of people who seek to sacrifice and help anyone in need or distress.

Let us obey without question.

Let us pray for our own needs and the needs of others.

Let us come to a deeper understanding of the power our Father has in our lives.

Let us rely on faith to lead us.

Let us feel his presence in our lives each and every day.

Let us not question our path, just follow his lead.

Let us strive to do his good work here on earth until we enter his eternal kingdom.

Wednesday in the Second Week of Lent

March 8

John 5:1-18

“Do you want to be healthy?” How many commercials have you watched and articles have you read that pose some version of that same question that Jesus put to the paralytic beside the pool at Beth-zatha in John 5:6?

Theleis hygies genesthai? You'll recognize the root of words like hygiene and hygienic in the middle there. Health fads come and go, but the health craze, our central preoccupation with being and becoming healthy, is perpetual, and has been for at least the last two millennia.

Beth-zatha was an ancient health fad. Its waters held healing, so they thought, if only you could get into them first whenever they were "stirred up." A missing verse in our story (#4) contained the spurious later legend that an angel of the Lord would periodically cause the waters of the pool to seethe, and that's why they could heal illness. Jesus obviously didn't countenance such folk gossip, and so neither do modern editions of the Bible, which by and large leave the line out or else relegate it to a footnote.

This is a cruel sort of race that the text depicts by the Sheep Gate, isn't it? Considering how all the competitors languishing in the various colonnaded porches beside the pool were blind, lame, or paralyzed. But health fads can be cruel, can't they? They prey on our infirmities and insecurities, pitting us in our desperation against other desperate folks in a bum rush toward some vanishing point of hope.

Yet Jesus delivers us from all that. "Do you want to be made well? ... Stand up, take your mat and walk." You may draw the ire of those still mired in the faddish cultural paradigm, like the Jewish authorities in our story, but it's no more than Jesus himself will bear, for the "sin" of making others well and free.

Jesus wants you to be healthy. Contrary to popular wisdom, though, he needs you to realize that true health, lasting health starts outside yourself, as you leave the porches and pools to walk about, announcing who it is that has made you well, participating in him, with him, and through him in healing others just like you, instead of racing to beat them to the water.

Thursday in the Second Week of Lent

March 9

John 5:19-29

This is a very timely passage by John for our current social and political climate. Judgment is a hot topic—who should judge, what should be judged, and what are the consequences of (or lack thereof) this judgment. I have chosen to focus this meditation on who is to do the judging.

This passage states unequivocally that judgment is the purview of the Son, Jesus Christ. When, in my adult Christian journey, I finally understood this, I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I had been silently critical of most people I met. I wrestled inwardly with whether their conduct was "good or bad." When I realized that I was not the one to judge others, I quit being so critical and worrying about whether they were good or bad. I understood that only Jesus knows the true heart of a person, so only he has all the facts to judge that person. What a relief! My only job was to love that person as well as I could, not judge them. (And loving others is a big enough job!) It affected my entire perspective of the world and how I interacted with

people on a daily basis. I felt more positive, more apt to be kind, and more open to people unlike me. Of course, I still fall back into old patterns of criticism and judgment, but I am usually quick to realize it and change my way of thinking and behaving.

This all makes me think of a ubiquitous, but, I think, very good rule of life that is often seen on social media:

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”

Friday in the Second Week of Lent

March 10

John 5:30-47

In the reading for today, Jesus is speaking to the Jewish leaders. Jesus had been healing on the Sabbath, and the leaders wanted to persecute Him. In a rather strong speech, Jesus says he is dependent on God the Father. He acts on God's behalf. Jesus tells the leaders that they have believed John the Baptist, but do not believe Him. Jesus strongly accuses the leaders of diligently studying the scriptures, yet do not relate the scriptures foretelling of Jesus to Himself.

Is this a dilemma we face? We can read, mark, learn and believe, but do we really understand? How important is understanding to our belief? To feel God's love we pray and listen to God in various ways.

In my life, there have been a number of difficult times, such as a major career disruption. During these times, prayer for God's support has been offered, and real support was received. God is available to us in times of need. He is always there.

Also, a real closeness to God has happened at retreats, special services, prayer time and at a quiet time very early on a Good Friday morning.

As I slowly admit, I am in my declining years. I want to be closer to God. I believe I am ready.

A very significant Bible verse for me is Mark 9:24, where the father of a young boy whom Jesus has just healed exclaims “I believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”

Saturday in the Second Week of Lent

March 11

John 7:1-13

Hidden In Plain Sight: The Unbelief of Jesus' Brothers and the Festival of Booths

During this year's Super Bowl, a series of new ads debuted featuring Jesus as he would be seen in today's world. "He Gets Us" cost millions to run in that prime ad slot during the Super Bowl and features an expertly produced website without the baggage of a connection to a specific church or denomination. I wonder if the series will ultimately result in more followers of Jesus, or if it's another example of how we rely on our own worldly wisdom. Do we need a slick ad campaign with cool t-shirts and hashtags in order to spread the Gospel?

In this passage, Jesus has entered a transition point. When he returns to Galilee, he has performed many miracles and has fully entered into his ministry. Yet when he shares what it means to follow him fully, describing how people must eat his flesh and drink his blood to attain eternal life, many of his disciples walk away. Who is this person exactly? What prophet would make such claims or ask us to do such things? He makes it clear that he is not merely another prophet, not offering a path to enlightenment or a means to be a good person or a military victory for the Jewish people. He is no less than the son of God, who must be offered as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Nevertheless, even his own brothers do not recognize who he really is.

Instead, his brothers challenge him to prove himself. If you are who you say you are, then you should be as loud and open about who you are as you can. Go out and advertise! You know the public is gathering for a big festival in Judea, so take your opportunity. Rather than fully considering the truth of what he is saying, they are thinking in worldly terms about how he can gain the most attention and the most power. However, as Jesus says, his time has not yet come.

After his brothers leave, he still attends the festival, but in disguise. At the Festival of Tabernacles, not so ironically, the Jewish community remembered 40 years of wandering in the desert. As he passes through the crowd, he can hear the gossip from all sides. Whether he's a good man or leading people astray, they do not seem to understand any better than his own brothers.

Jesus is walking among his family and his community, telling them exactly who he is, yet deciding not to draw attention to himself at a time when it would be most expected. I wonder - where might Jesus walk incognito among us? What would be revealed if he was sauntering by, listening to our conversation? What would he say about our attempts to rely on worldly wisdom to build the church? Why might he choose to wait just a bit longer, when all are daring him to "prove it"?

Monday in the Third Week of Lent

March 13

John 7:14-36

When I read this particular chapter, I came across this verse: “My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” These words from Jesus were some of the powerful words that came from him, when the Jewish people were amazed by his sermon. Still, a few people questioned his intellect, but he replied to them calmly and composed. There are many people in our life who question us in various circumstances, but when we discover the purpose in life, “what God has in your life,” we don’t have to be afraid of these people and their questions.

In another verse, Jesus says,

I did one miracle, and you are all amazed. Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually, it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. Now if a boy can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing a man’s whole body on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.” (John 7:21-24)

In this particular verse, Jesus compares Moses with the miracle he did on the day of Sabbath, where people were judging him due to his appearance. I feel in our life people judge us based on our appearance and our ability, but if God is with us, “NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE” is what I learned from this verse from Jesus.

As a final verse, I going to quote a verse from this particular chapter here (John 7:33) where Jesus says “I am with you for only a short time, and then I am going to the one who sent me.” In this verse, we can clearly understand the purpose of his life so we should also need to find what God has in our life.

Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent

March 14

John 7:37-52

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus tells his brothers, who are urging him to go with them to the Feast of Tabernacles, that his time had not yet come. He says that for them anytime will do, but Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit and is waiting for the right time to speak at the festival.

Verses 37-38 say, “On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice. ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’” Jesus knows that what he has to say is life changing. Even though he is being hunted

by the Jews who want to kill him, he is compelled to speak these most important words to those who are thirsty and to those who believe in him.

Jesus promises living water to the thirsty and to those who believe in him. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says in Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

When we are really thirsty, our bodies, which are made up of between 55-60 % water, crave water. When you are really thirsty, water is the only thing that satisfies. But to be thirsty can also mean having a strong desire for something, such as attention, approval or publicity as on social media.

O God of my life, I'm lovesick for you in this weary wilderness.
I thirst with the deepest longings to love you more, with cravings in my heart that can't be described.
Such yearning grips my soul for you, my God!
I'm energized every time I enter your heavenly sanctuary to seek more of your power and drink in more of your glory.
For your tender mercies mean more to me than life itself.
How I love and praise you, God! (Ps 63: 1-3 TPT [The Passion Translation])

I have been reading about an outpouring of God's love and manifest presence at Asbury University in Kentucky. This evangelical school of 1,639 students has experienced a number of revivals in the past in February 1905 and February 1970. A sophomore from Dallas, Elena Overman said, “Through the past three days (February 8th, 2023), the Lord has revealed himself and his unfailing love and faithfulness to everyone who has stepped through the doors of Hughes Auditorium. He is radically transforming lives. The Holy Spirit is at work in this place and all around the world through our prayers, and he's not stopping anytime soon. All glory to God” (Denison Forum).

Why does it seem like such a long time in between outpourings of the Holy Spirit? Perhaps, it is because we are not thirsty for God.

Pray with me. Holy Jesus, you promised living water to the thirsty and to those who believe in you. Forgive me for thirsting after so many other things more than for you. Help me to be like the Psalmist and thirst for you with deepest longings and to seek more of your power and drink in more of your glory. I bless you for your promise that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled. Fill us up Lord Jesus, fill us up. AMEN.

Wednesday in the Third Week of Lent

March 15

John 8:12-20

When I was six, my parents bought me a guinea pig. By day's end, I was red, puffy, and wheezing—allergic,

apparently—so my pet couldn't stay. I'd never seen an allergy before, nor heard of one. I'd never seen an animal make someone itchy and sneezy on account of just being itself. That sounded crazy to me. The next day, I told my teacher that the guinea pig had fleas, and those fleas made me sick. That made sense to me, and frankly, after the trauma of receiving and losing a pet so suddenly, I needed the sense of control that comes from having an explanation I could wrap my mind around.

Such is the Gospel. In the Gospel of John alone, Jesus makes wine from water in moments. He tells a woman her own life's story, to her bewilderment and joy. He heals one man's child from a distance on the basis of the man's faith. He heals another man who can't walk by simply commanding him to. He somehow feeds over five thousand people, with a surprising amount of leftovers, after he thanks the Father for the meager five barley loaves and two fish available. He. Walks. On. Water. And that's just in the first several chapters, all amid Jesus' preaching.

But to Jesus' followers, these weren't mere stories but rather experiences. When they heard Jesus preach that he was salvation sent by the Father for all who believe, and when they heard him offer eternal life, they heard the words of someone who *already* did impossible things, unexplainable actions that healed people, unverifiable miracles that they not only witnessed but actually ate and drank, as bread and wine. Even before the wedding at Cana, the first disciples had made that Messianic connection: they knew Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. So, when Jesus said in the Temple, "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life," his followers heard the words of someone perfectly capable of unimaginably extraordinary deeds.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, are more like many of us (myself included): they hadn't seen the miracles, but they heard these teachings and had questions. Look at how the Pharisees respond to Jesus' teaching in today's reading: where are your two witnesses who will testify to this, Jesus? Who is this father of yours, Jesus? And in all of that, not much reflection on what Jesus means when he claims to be the light of the world (Nicodemus already knows—Jesus told him back in John 3:19-21). Consider how the Pharisees' ongoing concerns about Jesus (Is he breaking Sabbath? Is he blaspheming?) attempt to shrink him into something they could wrap their minds around. Sometimes, we try to do that, too.

That teacher of mine asked us to write sentences about something that happened in our lives, with a crayon illustration. Mine was about the guinea pig. I brought my work home to show my parents after school, and they were surprised. "Fleas? Don't you remember us telling you? It was allergies. We've even made you an appointment to see an allergist in a few weeks." My parents had told me this from the beginning, but I dismissed it because I couldn't yet conceive of the fullness of what had happened. In fact, I can still remember continuing to secretly disbelieve their explanation even then, as they admired my crayon guinea pig and fleas.

It can be hard to fathom, that if we walk in the way of Christ, who lived, died, and defeated death with self-sacrificial love, we will have the light of eternal life. Just think of it: the same one who spoke these things to the Pharisees was, in the beginning, the very Word who was with God and was God, through whom all things were made. Wow. It's enough to overwhelm a man's mind, let alone a kid's. But to believe that, and to live a life

rooted in that belief even while we experience doubt, is the beginning of far more than all we can ask for or imagine.

Thursday in the Third Week of Lent

March 16

John 8:21-32

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” This seemingly simple instruction from Jesus on how to become free from sins comes after a seemingly contentious interaction between Jesus and the Jews in which he tells them he has “much to condemn” about them. But in the same moment, Jesus is frustrated with the people he is talking to; he continues to spread the message of freedom from sins. We often feel that we may not be living up to the standards that God sets for us, but this passage reminds us that we don’t have to be completely sinless. Jesus tells the Jews that he is not of this world and says in this passage, “I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.” Jesus is telling the Jews that in order to not die in their sins, they simply have to believe who he is. Jesus explains to them that this is because of the Father, saying “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.” This line reminds us that Jesus did not do anything through himself, but that everything that Jesus did came from the Father. With this thought, it’s not Jesus telling us that we will be free from our sins by continuing in the word; it’s the Father. So even when we have moments that it feels that we are not living up to the standards that God sets for us, he is the one that sent his Son so that we could be free from our sins and not die in our sins.

Friday in the Third Week of Lent

March 17

John 8:33-47

Not exactly a barrel of laughs, this Jesus!

John 8:33-47 and the passages that precede it find Jesus once again at the center of controversy. Only verses earlier, he has declared himself the light of the world and one who provides the water of life to those who thirst. These are powerful images to a Jewish audience celebrating Sukkot—the Festival of Booths. The celebration marked Israel’s annual reminder of their travels in the wilderness, housed in the tents (“booths”) God provided for them as they made their way to the Promised Land. It doesn’t take much thought to imagine why water

would be important in a festival celebrating the Hebrews extended stay in the desert; Jesus calling himself the provider of that water is a scandalous claim, and it won't be his last.

Here, Jesus finds himself embroiled in a public debate—just prior to verse 33, Jesus has said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The scribes and Pharisees return with a real headscratcher: “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.” Never been enslav... wait, what?

There's much to learn about Jesus by what he doesn't say in response. Oddly, Jesus passes on the opportunity to remind his audience exactly where they came from, exactly how they ended up in the desert so many centuries ago in tents, reliant on manna from heaven and the billowy white cloud coverage that informed the shape and color of the very Booths they were in Jerusalem to celebrate.

It seems, though, that Jesus is onto something: he even says only moments later that they “seek to kill [him] because [his] word finds no place in [them].” Indeed, there are many more words said in the verses that follow, but precious little understanding. This will become more and more frequent as Jesus's time draws near. The Pharisees argue that they are born of Abraham; Jesus hastily rebukes them. They say they are born of God, not of adultery; Jesus rebukes them again. One wonders if the adulterous woman Jesus defended earlier in the chapter is still within earshot.

A more observant author would build this little write-up to something; this, I'm afraid, isn't building to... well, anything! I'm not sure what to make of Jesus's prescriptive tone here—he seems genuinely exasperated in a way I don't often associate with him—and I've certainly found it a difficult passage to apply to my daily life in any meaningful way. Jesus speaks directly to his audience's character in a way that modern parenting (and this passage is, if anything, full of familial language) actively discourages. I can hear myself saying, “They're not bad people, Jesus; they're doing bad things! Address the behavior!”

And I think ultimately he does. Just... not in a way that's decipherable to me. Maybe next year!

Saturday in the Third Week of Lent

March 18

John 8:47-59

“Whoever is from God hears the words of God.” (John 8:47)

Earlier this month I was in Sam's stocking up on paper products and laundry detergent. As I checked out, I noticed cart after cart full of not just party food but also big screen TVs. Thinking I was missing some big entertainment deal, I made a quick pass through the electronics section. It was PACKED! No huge deals or sales really, just people getting ready to host game watching parties. Apparently, Super Bowl Sunday is big business!

The closer we got to game day, the conversation on social media and news broadcasts was not just about the sport, but also the commercials. Advertising for the Super Bowl is also big business. It's a captive audience, tuned in and ready to listen to whatever sales pitch companies want to give us. At our house, at least half of the people watching the game are really watching the commercials. Companies spend millions to have just a moment of our attention on Super Bowl Sunday. Advertisers bank on the power of suggestion, but their goal isn't to tell us the truth or challenge us or inspire self-reflection. They want to sell us something we likely don't really need: something we want, something fleeting, something temporary. What would it look like if Jesus advertised during the Super Bowl?

In today's reading from the Gospel of John we get a pretty good idea of how Jesus' message might be met by the world. In this passage Jesus is speaking to the Jewish community, telling them the absolute truth of who and what he was, is and will be. Present at creation, called to live in time and history, judge of the end days, Jesus lays out to the people of Israel exactly why they can and should believe in him. They can't hear it because it doesn't fit their expectations. They can't hear it because they are deafened by their own failings. They can't hear it because they refuse to take a moment to listen, and to be changed. They can't or perhaps won't hear it, so they pick up stones to silence the Son of God.

Today, as we reflect on Jesus' words, let us take a moment to listen. Let us drop our own expectations for how God should work in our life. Let us sit in our unknowing and allow Jesus to speak truth into our world. Let us open not just our ears, but also our hearts and minds.

Monday in the Fourth Week of Lent

March 20

John 6:1-15

"Let there be one lord, one king!" These words are attributed to the third Emperor of Rome, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, known more popularly by his nickname Caligula. History remembers Caligula for his extravagant building projects, lustful behavior, murderous violence, and claims of divinity. Though he ruled Rome for just under four years, his insatiable—some say insane—quest for power echoes through time and space. He is even purported to have planned to make his horse a consul.

Herod the Great, King of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth, implored the magi who visited Jesus at Bethlehem to bring word of the young Messiah's birthplace in order to kill the child. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the magi chose not to oblige Herod's demand, thereby keeping Jesus' location secret from Herod. In a nearly unspeakable act of depravity and for fear that his authority might be contested, the King of Judea then ordered the deaths of all boys under the age of two.

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, was the ruler of Galilee at the time Jesus and his disciples served five

thousand from five loaves of barley bread and two fish. He imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist for criticizing his marriage to his niece, and is believed to have had an audience with Jesus during Jesus' final days. Scripture tells that when Jesus did not perform a miracle for him upon demand, Antipas handed him to Roman authority which, in the form of Pontius Pilate, ultimately ordered Jesus to be publicly executed.

Caligula's plans to instate his horse as a political figure, Herod the Great's plan to massacre the innocent, and Antipas' interaction with Jesus are historically hazy, with scholars in great disagreement over their historicity. What is most important, however, is this depiction of "kings" in the text.

Kings are cruel. They dominate, divide, and use their subjects to their own advantage. Their inhumanity was long-known before the time of Jesus and has been known throughout the ages since. It is no wonder that Jesus escaped into the mountains after the feeding of the five thousand when the mob sought him to crown him as their king. They still did not understand. The "kingdom" for which they sought was not an earthly kingdom. The "king" for which they sought was not an earthly king.

The Christ conquers cruelty. He is subservient, unites, and shepherds his flock. The true Kingdom is not a polity or a land bounded by rivers and mountains. It exists in the hearts and minds of those who believe and follow, and is radiated by our feeblest attempts to behave like Christ and emulate his sacrifice.

It is not enough to simply have faith. One must contemplate accounts like the feeding of the five thousand with reason and sense as well as with faith. We must contextualize the story of Jesus against the past and present.

Tuesday in the Fourth Week of Lent

March 21

John 6:16-27

Our Only Goal

They leave the recent miracle
And set sail upon the waves
Capernaum their destination
The robust winds they brave.

A three-mile destination
The moon shines from above
No Jesus there to help them?
Where is His mighty Love?

A sudden, fearful vision
The laboring disciples perceive

Christ, indeed, has come to them.
He walks upon the sea.

But the people fail to recognize
He had been there all along
Their illusion short-sighted
Their vision was all wrong.

John tells us what we oft forget
Jesus watches as we toil
His eyes are ALWAYS on us
He keeps us from our foils.

But when we labor fervently
For tangible treasures found on Earth
And we strive to fill our hungers
And satisfy our worldly thirsts

We forget those wealths will never be
The food that fills our souls
Nourishment of the spirit
Must be our only goal.

Wednesday of the Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22

John 6:27-40

“Sir, give us this bread always.”

Today’s reading comes from John’s Gospel, soon after the feeding of the five thousand. After teaching all day, Jesus had the crowds, miraculously, with only five barley loaves. Jesus and his disciples then boarded a boat to cross the sea, traveling to Capernaum. The next morning, when the crowds realized that Jesus had left them, they followed him to Capernaum. The conversation that ensues is the focus of today’s reading.

There are at least two takeaways in this conversation. The first comes after they ask what acts they must perform to do the will of God. Jesus responds, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” Faith, not actions, leads to salvation. We are not saved because we do good works; we do good works because we are saved.

The second takeaway comes when the crowd asks Jesus to “give us this bread always.” They wanted actual,

physical bread. Faith in God does not work this way. When we accept Christ into our lives, and when we live in faith and obedience to him, we are not guaranteed worldly wealth, health, or comfort. God, through our faith, provides spiritual food. We will still encounter hard times and challenges in this world, but this spiritual food that God provides will sustain us through life's challenges.

Thursday in the Fourth Week of Lent

March 23

John 6:41-51

Holy Red Rover

When I was in school, I used to play a game called "Red Rover." To play the game, the class makes two lines, one on each side of the playground. One side joins hands to make a chain and faces toward the other team. They call one of the opposing team's members to run toward the chain and try to break through the clasped hands. If they can break through, then they can join the team and keep playing. If they can't, then they have to sit out until the game is finished. It seemed impossible for me, but my friend on the opposing team had a plan. Cathy had told me before we started that I should run toward her and I would be okay. So when the other team chanted "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Denise right over," I ran as fast as I could toward Cathy. When I got to her arm it fell away quickly, and she grabbed my hand. I was part of her team now and could happily keep playing with my best friend.

The day after a huge crowd had been fed with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish, they had a request of Jesus. They were remembering that Moses gave the Israelites manna from heaven, and they asked Jesus for a sign so that they could believe that He was from God. Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life." They weren't satisfied with this answer and started grumbling, because to them, He was just Mary and Joseph's son who grew up in Nazareth.

Jesus stopped their complaining with five points that apply to you (and all of mankind):

1. You are being called by the Father in Heaven to Him
2. Listen and learn, for you are being taught by God
3. He will raise you up on the last day
4. If you believe in Him, you will live forever
5. The bread that He is offering is His flesh

Using my game of Red Rover as an illustration, I was called by name over to the other side just as God calls us by name. Cathy taught me what to do, but we are taught by God Himself. It was not my efforts that broke through the linked hands, but it was Cathy's plan and her effort that gave me extended playtime. Likewise, it is not our efforts that give us eternal life but God's plan of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that will lift us up on the last day to

live with Him forever.

The fifth point cannot be understood with an analogy. In fact, it is difficult for us to understand it at all. Jesus tells us that “...this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is my flesh” (John 6:51). Unlike the manna that only provided subsistence for that day, Jesus offers us subsistence for eternity with His very life. He tells us that we will only live eternally by believing in Him, His death and resurrection.

Eve of the Annunciation

March 24

John 6:52-59



Then the Jews began to argue among themselves. They said, “How can this man give us his body to eat?” Jesus said, “Believe me when I say that you must eat the body of the Son of Man, and you must drink his blood. If you don’t do this, you have no real life. Those who eat my body and drink my blood have eternal life. I will raise them up on the last day. My body is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my body and drink my blood live in me, and I live in them. The Father sent me. He lives, and I live because of him. So everyone who eats me will live because of me. I am not like the bread that your ancestors ate. They ate that bread, but they still died. I am the bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.” (John 6:52-58 ERV [Easy-to-Read Version])

It’s sin and sacrifice. No matter whether we call it “a piece of bread and a sip of wine” or grew up with the words *Hoc est enim corpus meum*. Body and blood. Sin and forgiveness of sin.

On a street corner at 29 Rue Pasquier in Paris stands a building which is part memorial and part church. The Chapel Expiatoire, or the Expiatory Chapel, was built on the site where the beheaded corpses of a King and Queen were hastily buried in 1793. Their deaths were to be later recalled by those worshipping at the church altar placed there in 1815. Today, it is a place little used. Tourists may purchase tickets to wander the grounds, but the expiation, the atonement for the acts of murder, seems absent from the equation.

In Judeo-Christian scriptures, sin and requisite sacrificial acts for the forgiveness of sin are gears upon which our relationship with God turns. God, who created man and woman, bade them to be fruitful. But through their sin, they were cast out to eke a painful existence: “by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground” (Gen 3:19).

Through sacrifice, a new relationship with God was forged.

The Law given to Moses was sealed in blood:

Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." (Exod 24:6-8 NIV)

Further dietary laws of Kashrut, meaning "fitting and proper," were scripturally derived. Ingestion of blood was forbidden:

I will be against any citizen of Israel or foreigner living with you who eats blood. I will cut off that person from the people. This is because the life of the body is in the blood, and I have given you rules for pouring that blood on the altar to remove your sins so you will belong to the Lord. It is the blood that removes the sins, because it is life. (Lev 17:10-11 NCV)

Not surprisingly, the invitation to eat of Christ's body and drink of his blood was abhorrent to his contemporaries. The wording still confounds. And the question of transubstantiation versus consubstantiation continues to divide the followers of Christ.

Despite eating bread, and drinking water, humankind is mortal. We go down to the dust. Our eternal life, however, has been purchased by the sacrifice of Christ: in his Incarnation, Birth, Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35 NIV)

And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb 10: 10 NIV)

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, **which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.** Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me." (BCP 1979 pp. 362-363, emphasis added)

The Annunciation of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the Blessed Virgin Mary

March 25

John 1:9-14

Today is the Feast of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel visited Mary in Nazareth and told her that God had chosen her to become pregnant and give birth to His Son. It is a beautiful scene, recounted in Luke 1:26-38. Gabriel declares her blessed and tells her that she has found favor with the Lord. She contemplates what is happening. Though she doesn't fully understand it, in faith she says "yes" to God. Thus our salvation was initiated here on Earth with the Incarnation of our Lord.

John speaks of this same incarnation in our passage for today. The first chapter of John's gospel is often called "The Prologue," an introduction to the life of Jesus that he is recording. John makes it clear who this Jesus is—the Word, God, creator, life, light of the world, full of grace and truth. The key verse is 14, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...." God himself became human and lived with the disciples. They saw him, touched him, spoke with him.

There is a popular misunderstanding today of the nature of Jesus being both God and Human. The idea put forth is that the earliest Christians thought of Jesus as a prophet or teacher but not as God; Jesus' divinity was a later addition when the Church was consolidating its power so that it could better control the masses. But this is a misreading of the first 400 years of Christianity. All of the major controversies about the nature of Jesus was around his humanity. For God Himself to become human, suffer and die was unthinkable. Surely Christ only seemed human. Perhaps Christ put on flesh like clothes but then left when Jesus' body was crucified. God cannot suffer or He wouldn't be God.

Yet this is exactly what God did. Paul tells us in Philippians 2:7 that Christ emptied himself and took on humanity and was obedient even unto death. The Word indeed became flesh. Gregory of Nazianzus, writing in the 4th century, coined the phrase "what is not assumed is not redeemed." Assumed, here, means "taken on," as in Christ assumed, or took on, humanity. Gregory was arguing that if Christ was not fully human in mind, body, and soul, then humanity could not be fully redeemed. In taking on our flesh, Christ healed humanity and elevated us to take part in the divine.

God created everything Good. Sin didn't destroy the good, but obscured it. The Incarnation heals and restores our goodness. Yet we must believe in Christ to receive this restoration. Why? Christ is the life, the light of the world. Just as Mary said yes and allowed Christ to be born from her, we also say yes and let Christ be born in us.

Monday in the Fifth Week of Lent

March 27

John 9:1-17

In this miraculous story of Jesus healing a blind man, a story comes to mind of one of our Epiphany Uganda team trips. Our team works at Chain Foundation in Mukono, Uganda. Chain Foundation is an orphanage for both blind and sighted orphans. During one of our team visits, our team, along with the school nurse, were measuring the blind students for canes. We were gathering students one and two at a time, to measure their height, arm length, etc. After returning to the U.S. with these measurements, another Christian nonprofit would be sending these canes to Uganda for the blind students. After some time, we noticed that the blind students were hiding and running away from us as we moved down the list of names! When a social worker and I finally caught up with one of the 10-year-old girls still needing to be measured, we asked her, “why are you running from us?” She told us that she knew we were giving out shots at the nurse’s clinic. We assured her this was not the case and asked her where she got this information and she answered, “I have seen this with my very own eyes!”

A common belief in Jewish culture was that calamity or suffering was a result of some great sin. This is also true in Uganda, as blind children are often cast out into the streets to fend for themselves as many Ugandans believe this is a result of some great sin or a curse! Jesus used the man’s suffering to teach about faith and to glorify God. We live in a fallen world where good behavior is not always rewarded and bad behavior not always punished. Therefore, sometimes innocent people suffer! I can assure you these blind children of Uganda are truly innocent victims of some of these long-held beliefs. If God took away suffering whenever we asked, we would follow him for comfort and convenience, not out of love and devotion. Regardless of the reasons for our suffering, Jesus has the power to help us deal with it. When suffering from a disease, tragedy, or disability, instead of asking “why me” or “what have I done wrong,” instead may we ask for strength for the trial!

Tuesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

March 28

John 9:18-41

“Your disappointments may be God’s appointments.” - author unknown

One of the points that nonbelievers often make in their rebuttals of Christianity is alluded to in this piece of scripture. The argument often goes, “If your God is so great, so powerful, and so loving, why then—in his capacity as the Almighty creator—does he create people who are disabled, sick, or otherwise physically limited?” To the nonbeliever, this seems like a reasonable question. Even to followers of Christ, this question might seem difficult to answer. Perhaps you have struggled to respond to this yourself.

God promises us many things in scripture.

He promises strength to the weary (Isaiah 40:31).
He promises wisdom to those that ask (James 1:5).
He promises forgiveness when we confess our sins (1 John 1:9).
He promises eternal life (John 3:16).

But one thing that God does not promise is an exemption from hardship. We all experience our own difficulties in life, and as Christians, we are called to reflect and respond to these hardships by returning to the very creator that made us just the way we are. Adversity happens to Christians, too. It's God's design.

Earlier in the passage, some of Jesus' disciples assumed that the blindness was a result of God's wrath and had been brought on by sin, maybe his or maybe even the sins of his parents. Jesus assured them that the man's troubles had not been caused by sin but "so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3). In other words, God was honored when the man was able to see.

We see this longing desire for things to be "made right" in our everyday lives. People suffering from affliction are willing to try almost anything to be radically healed. But in this scripture, religious leaders wanted to overlook the healing miracle because they were only willing to accept it if it happened according to their rules. And then their interrogation ended abruptly with the man making a bold proclamation: "I was blind, but now I see!"

God puts us through difficult times to strengthen us, to move us to where He needs us, to teach us lessons, or just to bring us closer to him and spread the good news of his works.

God keeps his promises, and one of his greatest promises of all is that his love does not fail. It is up to us to recognize that his love is manifested and shown to us in many ways.

Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

March 29

John 10:1-18

When we read John 10:1-18, two characters, the shepherd and the sheep, stand out. However, a less noticed character that slips through the rightly focused role of the shepherd or, by implication, of our relatedness to the image of the sheep, is the character of the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper, nonetheless, has a significant role in the sheep-shepherd business.

The gatekeeper stands between everyone else and the sheep. That "everyone" not only includes the outsider but also the good shepherd. If the gatekeeper is not satisfied or on good terms with the shepherd, he may cause trouble when the good shepherd comes to meet the sheep.

Just like the shepherd, being a gatekeeper must require a good résumé. Must be trustworthy. Have to stay on

high alert. Be prepared to fight off thieves. Should be self-motivated to care for the sheep in the absence of the shepherd. The gatekeeper's failure to meet these responsibilities was risky for the sheep. On the other hand, as long as the gatekeeper makes the right choices, the sheep have all the opportunities to follow the good shepherd and, as the Berean translation puts it, to "have life, and have it in all its fullness" (John 10:10).

In his novel, *The Holy War*, John Bunyan tells the story of the town of "Mansoul." As the enemy, Diabolus, plans to conquer the city, he understands that no one can enter the town without her consent. The only way to defeat the city was to deceive the citizens and the gatekeepers so that they open the gates of the impregnable city to the enemy. The names of the gates of the town are "Ear-gate, Eye-gate, Mouth-gate, Nose-gate, and Feel-gate." The town begins to fall as the townsfolk, being fooled, open the gates, starting with "Ear-gate" and "Eye-gate," allowing Diabolus to enter the city.

Now guarding too many gates may seem overwhelming for some of us. Here the author of the Proverbs gives us a quick tech tip. We don't need to worry about all the gates if we can only guard this one processing point well. He says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov 4:23 NIV).

Guarding the entry point in our lives, families, and churches results in a safe environment to experience the goodness of the Good Shepherd.

Thursday in the Fifth Week of Lent

March 30

John 10:19-42

"Like a rodent..."

Gathered masses,
Not yet yearning to be freed.
With chisel-shaped teeth,
Doubt gnaws, like a rodent.

Disbelief in the messiah,
Is ridden deep in their souls...
With red, beady eyes,
Doubt gnaws, like a rodent.

"Blasphemy!" They cry,
To the tune of their demise.
With cropped wings, and broken feet,

The devil gnaws, like a rodent.

Stones, they throw.
Superficial cuts, they bestow.
With impermeable skin,
The Lord stands strong.

Friday in the Fifth Week of Lent

March 31

John 12:1-10

The reading appointed for today tells a familiar story. Jesus is at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus for dinner. Lazarus and presumably all the disciples (since Judas is mentioned) were all there listening to Jesus. While Jesus is teaching, Mary (wastefully according to Judas) anoints his feet with the very costly fragrant oil.

Two things really jumped out at me in this passage.

First, “Martha served.” Since I am pretty much a “Martha,” I was glad that she was mentioned! However, as a “Martha,” I’ve often been too busy getting things done to listen to what God wants me to do. More than once, I have had to be abruptly stopped (sometimes painfully but sometimes with a whisper in the night) so I could see the path I was supposed to take. “Marthas” are definitely needed to make things happen, but we also need to listen and learn!

Second, while reprimanding Judas for questioning Mary’s use of the expensive nard to anoint his feet, Jesus said to leave her alone because he was there for only a short time but there would always be the poor. I don’t believe Jesus was dismissing the needs of the poor but was saying that now was the time to listen and learn from him. There would be time to help the poor later.

We are incredibly blessed here at Epiphany to be able to listen and learn through sermons, Bible studies, Sunday School classes, etc. We also have many ways to serve. We can be office angels, lay readers, participate in mission trips, help with special events, the list could go on and on! Bringing food to the Network wagon, giving to Episcopal Relief and Development for disaster relief, and volunteering or monetarily supporting any non-profit are all ways that we can help the poor that Jesus knew would always be with us.

Let us continue to be SERVANTS FOR GOD, OUR PARISH, AND OUR COMMUNITY!

Saturday in the Fifth Week of Lent

April 1

John 12:37-50

Since I was a child, a strange feeling looms over me when Palm Sunday rolls around. It is a joyous occasion which commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem—the fulfillment of prophecy and the declaration that He is both the king of Israel and the long-awaited Messiah. We mark the occasion by blessing palms, lifting them up enthusiastically as we join in procession, and the words which we say or chant before the Eucharistic Prayer throughout the year take a central place, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" This was the cry of the crowds who went out to meet Jesus in Jerusalem, echoing Psalm 118. However, even my eight-year-old self would be aware of a big letdown—many, if not most people who welcomed Jesus would, in a matter of days, exchange their songs of praise for calls to crucifixion. "False friends, all of them," I would think.

Therefore, it is sobering that the Gospel reading for the Office today, the day before Palm Sunday, takes us to a scene that happens not before, but after Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. His words, accompanied by many signs, have fallen on deaf ears. John tells us that the people do not believe in Jesus and that this too is a fulfillment of prophecy—Isaiah had declared that God himself would blind the eyes of some and harden their hearts. This apparent contradiction is a mystery that has and should continue to confound us. Why is it that some hear the words of Jesus and follow them while others don't? This was something that perplexed me as a child and continues to perplex me now, and which only the broader message of Holy Scripture has helped me to come to terms with—that faith is always a gift from God, as Paul tells us (Ephesians 2:8).

In our passage, Jesus cries out, "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." This single phrase gives us enough to meditate on, not just on Palm Sunday or Holy Week, but all year round as we follow Christ Jesus. It is a recognition that we have all dwelled in darkness. As sinners, we have at different times rebelled against God and refused to walk in his holy ways. With this perspective, it is indeed appropriate that we should identify with and sing the words of the crowds that welcome Jesus into the city. We have all been false friends. Like them, we would be ready to cheer for a Messiah in our own terms, one that affirms our choices and predilections. What is more, it is for us that he was nailed to the cross to die. Were it not for Christ's sacrifice, the hope to break free from darkness would be nothing but a delusion.

In that spirit, it is good that Palm Sunday is also called Passion Sunday. The King is triumphant in death, and His followers participate in that death—to sin and to everything else that they would choose over Jesus. And through His resurrection they are born again by God's mercy.

Monday in Holy Week

April 3

John 12:1-11

When Mary, the sister of Martha, anointed the feet of Jesus with the expensive ointment made from pure nard, technically called spikenard, and wiped His feet with her hair, it was a very extravagant gesture. This ointment may well have been the most expensive of Mary's possessions, perhaps something intended for her dowry. It was so precious that she had to break its jar in order to use it. John's Gospel says that the ointment was worth 300 denari, which would have been the wages of a common laborer for 300 days. In the United States, the average wage of a laborer is \$16.47 per hour. Assuming an eight-hour day (Theirs may have been longer.), the daily wage would be \$131.76, and 300 days would be worth \$39,528!

Of course, the people around Jesus were generally not wealthy. Therefore Mary's gift of such expensive ointment was truly amazing, as was her loving application of the ointment to the feet of Jesus, and using her hair to wipe the oil from His feet. Mary wanted to illustrate that only the best and most precious was worthy of the Lord's Messiah. And Mary was willing to give all she had for Jesus.

Why did she use her hair instead of a cloth? Perhaps because it would allow her to be close to Jesus. Surely the aroma remained in her hair for days. She wanted to show her love for Him, and give Him the best gift possible, which was herself.

Holy Week, when we follow Jesus along the Way of the Cross, the altar and vestments change to the color oxblood for Holy Week from the purple of Lent, signifying a new intensity of worship and devotion. How will you seek to be close to Jesus during this Holy Week?

Like Mary, may we offer the best of ourselves during these special few days. Then, when our work on earth is done, may Jesus welcome each one of us with open arms, when we can finally see Him as He really is, in the life that has no end.

Tuesday in Holy Week

April 4

John 12:20-26

This vivid portion of scripture includes Jesus reaffirming his commitment as the Paschal lamb, the sounding of God's "thunderous" voice, and Jesus' commandment that his disciples "believe in the light while [they] have the light, so that [they] may become children of light." Time is running out, both for the disciples in their time with Jesus, and for the rest of us who still abide in the world of the living.

For this devotional, I would like to focus our attention on how Jesus tells us not to overvalue our lives. Sit with

his proclamation: “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” It should give rise in modern readers a well-warranted confusion. If my life is going well in this world, how could I not love it? How could it be that the fruits of my life, as I know them now, pale in comparison to the hope of eternal life?

The answer, I suspect, has something to do with God directing our attention not towards those who live in prosperity, but towards those who suffer. Rowan Williams understands Jesus’ sacrifice as: “[n]ot to say that God prescribes suffering for the sake of glory; but it does say that through the cross, God identifies with the suffering of the world and of God’s people.” Leading up to this Lenten season, let us trust that God’s love penetrates the darkest corners of the world and of our own hearts. It is into those recesses that Christ invites us, so that we may bring his light with us. Amen.

Wednesday in Holy Week

April 13

John 13:21-32

After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”

There is, I suppose, no more tragic figure in the Bible than Judas Iscariot. We often think of Judas as making this quick decision to betray Jesus, but the few other references to Judas in the Gospels reveal that Judas was the treasurer of the band of disciple (John 12:6; John 13:29), and complains when a follower of Jesus named Mary—whom we believe to be the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead—anoined Jesus’s feet with expensive perfume as an act of worship. This Judas Iscariot complained that such an extravagance was a terrible waste of money could have benefited the poor (John 12:5).

John also tells us, point-blank, that Judas did not really care for the poor but was, in fact, a thief. Gifted, yet terribly flawed, Judas’s passion for the well-being of the disciples eventually turned in on itself and caused Judas to betray Jesus.

So now, rather than expose Judas, Jesus nevertheless invites him to the Last Supper and encourages him in his plan to betray Jesus.

The Good News is that Jesus is not surprised at Judas’s plans and still invites him to the supper. And the Good News for us is that Jesus is not surprised at our sins, either. He loves us, not in spite of our sins, but in the face of our sins.

Two questions arise from this vignette of Judas and Jesus:

1. *What am I doing with the gifts that God has given me? Judas's financial and administrative gifts turned into resentment and betrayal. What am I doing with my gifts and talents?*
2. *What am I doing with the gift of love and forgiveness that Jesus has given me? Does his forgiveness produce gratitude in me? Or judgment of others because I now live a better life? What does gratitude look like?*

Maundy Thursday

April 14

John 17:1-11(12-26)

How to Have Eternal Life and Help Answer Jesus' Dying Prayer

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

These intimate words spoken by Jesus on the night he prayed in the garden before he was arrested show me how relational he is. He is the connection between God and us. Jesus wants God to give us something big. He is the access point, the hinge, the hub of the wheel to know the Father. He wants us to have eternal life... is it to have an endless supply of wealth, fame, wisdom? No, it's to know God and himself. The relationship is everything. In this fast paced world, ever evolving with technology, changing family demographics, shifting politics, how can we find peace, eternal life? Stop and consider that Jesus prayed for us to simply know him. Simplify your resume, your to do list, your expectations of the future. Refine those New Year's resolutions, try this one... know God the Father, and his son, Jesus.

Relationship. But not only with the Father and the Son, with one another—to be one as THEY are one. This is how we are going to make it, people. With peace from the Father that comes from us being One with each other.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.”
(John 17:11)

Father, we want to know you and be one.

Good Friday

April 15

John 13:36-38

Peter wants to know where it is that Jesus is planning to go and what is going to happen next. Jesus answers that He is going to a place that Peter will be unable to follow for now, but he eventually will at a later time. This answer must have felt like a riddle to Peter. He knows that Jesus is preparing himself and his disciples for a confrontation, so Peter asks an obvious question: Jesus, why can't I follow you now? I would die for you. Jesus' answer that not only would Peter not die for Him, but he would proclaim that he does not even know who He is three times before the sun rises tomorrow!

Jesus is ready and prepared to suffer the cross and take on the sin of humankind. Peter is yet to understand the full meaning and power of the events soon to unfold. He is naive, he thinks there is going to be a fight, a battle in which he will need to defend Jesus. He does not have all of the information, he is going to have to experience the suffering of Jesus, and share it with the world. He will surely follow Jesus, but it will be later.

Today, we tend to carry out our own plan, without hearing what His plan is. God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. If Peter walked closely with Jesus for three years but still missed understanding Jesus, we shouldn't think that we understand all of His ways.

Prayer: LORD, strengthen us today to listen to your voice and to leave behind our own ideas, agendas, and plans. May Your will be done in our hearts and in Your Church. Amen.

Holy Saturday

April 16

John 19:38-42 (transferred from Friday)

For most of his ministry, Jesus bore his burdens alone. The 40-day fast, the devil's temptations, endless wrangling with the Pharisees and confrontations with demons—it is always Jesus alone, facing the power of sin and death. He retreats to a mountain to pray with his disciples, but they fall asleep. And in his greatest hour of trial, he is utterly abandoned and betrayed—his enemies crowding in while his friends follow at a distance. The twisted road from Gethsemane to Golgotha is wet with the tears of a lonely man. He had told his disciples to take up their cross and follow him; but in the dark night of his passion, as he bears the weight of the whole world's sin, not one of his friends helps him carry his cross (John 19:17).

Now he is dead, and there is the unpleasant business of taking his bludgeoned, bloody, lifeless body down from the cross. Someone must be found to pry loose the nails and receive the remains of this disgraced criminal, this failed itinerant preacher, this traitor both to the Jewish people and to the Roman Empire. No one would pray with him, defend him, or carry his cross; but someone must bear this final burden. Who?

Joseph of Arimathea is a disciple, but only in secret. He's a respected member of the council who did not approve of their actions against Jesus, but he is too afraid to oppose them publicly, lest he lose his position and his hard-earned reputation. During Jesus' life and up to the moment of his death, Joseph of Arimathea has offered no public support, has borne none of the savior's burdens.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader among the Jews. He "had at first come to Jesus by night," afraid to seek him in the light of day. He was the first to hear Jesus' cryptic saying, "You must be born again"—and the first to hear the gospel of salvation by faith, the promise of eternal life to everyone who believes (John 3:16). His response is not to publicly proclaim his conversion, or even to support Jesus' ministry, but simply to tell Jesus that he is asking the impossible.

Are these the right men to bear this heavy burden, caring for the body of the crucified Lord? After that body has borne the weight of sin and death for all of us, will these men have the courage to receive the stamp of its public disgrace? Will they, of all people, come publicly to ask Pilate not to throw the body in a mass tomb, but to allow a proper burial in a place of honor, with an extravagant gift of ointment and spices? Will they, of all people, be stained with the gore of his corpse, marked by his body and blood?

These two men who followed in secret, who came to Jesus by night, who were ashamed to be known as his followers: These are the ones who honor his body in death as the Magi honored him at birth, providing a hundred pounds of myrrh and swaddling his body for burial.

As our Lenten fast draws to a close, some of us may be looking back on these 40 days in disappointment or even despair. Perhaps, like the disciples, we have been drowsy or distracted, or have abandoned Jesus altogether. Some of us, like Joseph, have played it safe rather than boldly living as Jesus' followers. Some, like Nicodemus, have even been tempted to despair: the rigors of the fast and the hard facts of life have been too much for us; the commandments of Jesus too onerous, his promises too extravagant. Perhaps we even suspect that a new birth is impossible, at least for us, weak and tired as we are.

Some of us, it is precisely now, as we are tempted to despair, that Christ calls us to bear one last burden: to honor his body in death, to embrace the whole truth that the Son of God was dead indeed, weighed down by the same burdens that we carry. He bore our burdens; now we must bear his, and one another's, to fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6). Christ calls us now—the people who dwell in darkness—to prepare for the day when we will see a great light.