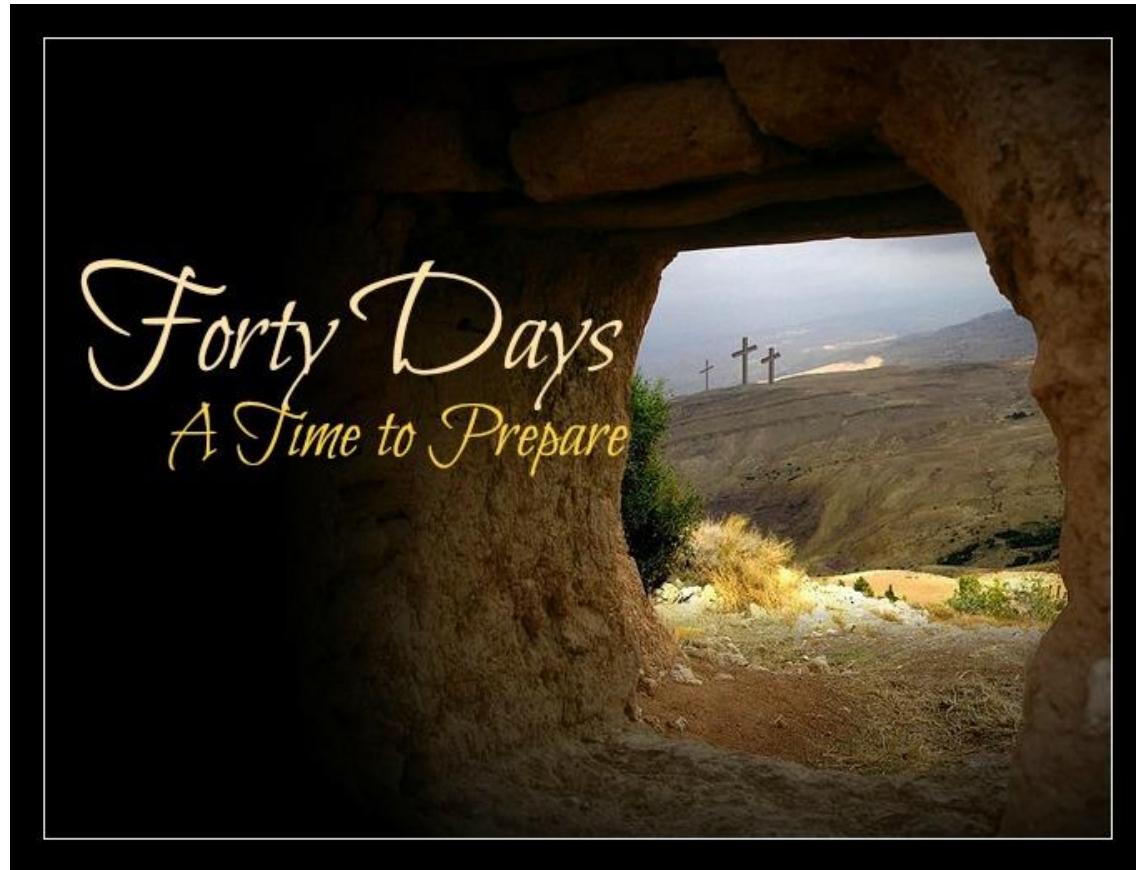


FOR LENT

*Forty Days
A Time to Prepare*



By Debbie Salter Goodwin

March 1-April 16, 2017



Ash Wednesday

NOTHING BUT DUST

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:7

Without the breath of God, we are nothing but dust. While scientists study our DNA and cell structure and people debate our origin, dust is usually not part of the discussion. We try to sweep dust out of our house, vacuum it up. No one sets up monuments to the possible dust balls we came from. But God, with a handful of dust and His celestial breath, joined, formed, and layered common, earthly dust into a creature so complex that no one really understands the whole of this creation.

If this journey to Easter is anything it is a journey to appreciate the difference that the breath of God makes in our lives. We can dress up our dust, try to hide our dust, hope no one sees remnants of our dust; but the truth is,

We can dress up our dust, try to hide our dust, hope no one sees remnants of our dust, but the truth is that without the breath of God, we are nothing but dust.

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Today is Ash Wednesday. For centuries, people wear an ash-marked cross on their forehead to remind them of their created origin and earthly end. Whatever we do for this remarkable or failing body will not protect and extend life in Heaven. We need the breath of God to make a difference. We need His whisper in our ear to go, see, repent, confess, turn around, help, forgive, restore. His words propel us. Ours can ruin us. This is where a journey to the cross begins: sitting with the truth of our utter helplessness without the breath of God. This is where our first prayer for these days begins: "Woe is me! For I am lost."

(Isaiah 6:5, ESV)

Today

Think about God who saw your possibilities in common dust, breathed His life-giving breath, and created you so that you could carry His life-breath to others. Who does that mean you are?

My Prayer

O God of Life-giving breath, breathe on me today. Protect me from any misguided thought that I am self-made by my goals and accomplishments. Remind me that without your breath, I am worthless dust. I need your mighty rushing wind to blow through me again and again so that I may be all you created me to be. I am ready for a journey to rediscover who that is.



Thursday after Ash Wednesday

LOOK AT THE LAMB

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. John 1:29

Where is our focus for these days of preparation? John gave us the answer. We focus on the Lamb

of God. Is there anything more endearing than a lamb, cavorting carefree in the field, pink-lined ears antennas for all the delightful sounds of their new world. Who doesn't love lambs? So when John the Baptist makes the stunning declaration that Jesus is God's lamb, what did everybody expect to see? A winsome, smiling, knows-no-stranger innocent who could be everybody's best friend?

The problem with this picture is that the Jews understood that a lamb was for sacrifice. It was all metaphor. The innocent would stand-in for the guilty, take the death blow, and the plea for forgiveness would swirl in a smoky trail to heaven. To think of this man, who walked with a sense of purpose to be baptized into the life John compared to the life of a lamb raised for slaughter was outrageous. Did anyone really understand Jesus as God's lamb?

Besides, the priests had plenty of lambs for sacrifice. If someone had asked them, they would have declined the need for another lamb. Still, the idea that God had set aside *His* lamb to take away was a truth too raw for comprehending.

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truth too raw for comprehending.**

Isn't that what our Journey to Easter is supposed to do? Make us look again at *God's lamb*, the *darling of Heaven* as Darlene Zscheck writes in "Worthy is the Lamb." Aren't we supposed to see this beginning from its end? Aren't we supposed to see our lives on

the line in Jesus' purposeful walk into the Jordan River?

Look at God's lamb as you take this journey of review and reflection. Look at his focus, his restraint, his availability, his teaching, his gift. Take your place beside the Jordan River and see what God allowed John to see as the story started . . . God's lamb sent just for you.

Today

What part of this story startles you? Confuses you? Angers you? Humbles you? Remember, you don't have to put yourself in Jesus' place because Jesus came to put himself in your place. That's lamb work.

My Prayer

Lamb of God, help me see you as my lamb, sent to take my place in a death that I cannot save myself from. I repent of self-centered, casual following that is not worthy of your lamb's work. Oh, Lamb of God, I come to you because there is no one who came for me like you did.



Friday after Ash Wednesday

PLEASING GOD

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son...I am well pleased. Mat 3:16-17

Jesus pleased His father. The sky opened, a fluttering of pure delight settled, and a voice confirmed the deep pleasure and unfailing love of His Father.

For what? Taking a walk to the muddy Jordan and letting a camel-haired wild-man push him under the water? John had already described “the one who would come” as being beyond the need for baptism. He had no sin to wash away. John understood that Jesus was God’s sin-taker in a way that water baptism never would be. And yet, Jesus comes resolutely to John without invitation, silencing John’s argument.

Pleasing God involves knowing God's heart for you.

It pleased God that Jesus understood His mission and took action to make it public. It pleased God that Jesus began the journey to number himself with transgressors so that he

could take the sin of the world upon him. It pleased God that Jesus did not refuse this dirty water bath as something he didn’t need but accepted his path as a servant, humbled by every earthly limitation.

Pleasing God involves knowing God’s heart for you. Pleasing God involves living in rhythm with God’s purpose to give you a life without sin’s complications and reversals. Pleasing God is a love bond so deep that nothing or no one detours you.

Our journey to Easter must start with a reaffirmation that the journey that pleases God is one where your heart is one with His. Then, the heavens will open to share the soul-satisfying pleasure of the God with you. Then you will hear: “You are my son/daughter and I am pleased.”

Today

Where do you need to accept God’s love rather than search for it? Let God’s love wrap you in what He knows about your lovability and live with God’s pleased voice in your heart.

My Prayer

God, I admit that I don't always please you. Help me understand that when I know your pure, unfailing love for me, I will also know what pleases you in a way that narrows my journey but enlarges my life.



Saturday after Ash Wednesday

DESERT VOICES

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Matthew 4:1

Why do we think that a big victory or even a quiet one finally wins us relief from every self-doubt that plagued us? Why do we expect easier accomplishments and more predictable success on the other side of some soul-buoying moment? Jesus went to the Jordan River and was baptized to say “yes” to His Father about the journey ahead. Still savoring this deep and settling affirmation, where did His Father send him next? Into the desert. Who wants isolation after a big affirmation moment? The desert was absent of ready voices to tell him how wonderful he would be as he started this ministry journey. Instead he would only hear three: his, His Father’s and the Tempter. The most important temptation to address is whose voice you will listen to, then. The common denominator in temptation is to entertain dialogue with the Tempter before listening to the One who loved you first and best.

We are easily swayed by loud voices. Often they are in our heads repeating lies about our worth, skills, or lovability. Sometimes it is collective contemporary thought tumbling out of talk shows. Silence has a way of revealing who you have been listening to. It takes more determination to sift

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through the voices you hear in the silence, refute them using God’s Truth until you are left with the whisper that says, “you are my son/daughter who pleases me.”

There may not be an accessible desert where you live, but you know where your dry, empty

places are. And you know when you hear the accusing voices. Jesus heard them, but he didn’t listen to them, debate them, or argue with them. He simply repeated the Truth of His Father. God’s Truth sends the Tempter packing.

Today

Where is your dry and empty place where “other voices” get your attention? What lies are you listening to? Listen more closely to the One Who knows how to refute them.

Prayer

You have led me into deserts before and I did not recognize it was to silence the wrong voices. Protect me from accusing you of abandoning me in a desert when I should remember you are Emanuel, with me in every desert of tempting voices. If I want your voice to win over all others I must practice listening today.

First Sunday of Lent

Real worship grounds us like no other activity, rests us deeper than sleep, and re-focuses us in ways God will use to grow us.

A Review for the Heart

Think about your desert voices. What voices did you listen to this week that didn't help you prepare for worship. Which voices pointed you to the truth Jesus would teach you? Prepare your heart to set aside all the aggressive, finger-pointing, put-down voices you have heard this week. Prepare your heart for the one Voice that will settle you, direct you, and confirm your worth.

My Sunday Morning Prayer

God, I am tired of trying to sift through so many voices to find whose I listen to and whose I discard. I long for the sanctuary where your voice is the strongest and most compelling. Protect me from the petty distractions that take my attention from you. You want this Sabbath to rest me, renew me, and prepare me to hear your voice more clearly during the week. This First Day I give you my first attention so that you will have it more fully for the rest of this week.

Preparing for Worship

As the deer pants for streams of water, so I long for you, O God. Psalm 42:1, NLT

Have mercy on me. Psalm 4:1b, NLT

Tell me clearly what to do. Psalm 5:1 b, NLT

I wait quietly before God. Psalm 62:1, 5, NLT

A Blessing for Worship

May the God of the Beginning Word of Creation speak so clearly that no other voice is more recognizable or welcome this day as you as you worship Him.



Monday, Week One

THE IF QUESTION

If you're the Son of God . . . Matthew 4:3

After a 40 day fast, Jesus was hungry. His starved brain, growling stomach, and nonexistent energy made him desperate for food. He was Isolated and hungry; two dangerous predictors for disaster. We can only wonder about the thoughts and prayers of his heart in this desert time. Was there deeper understanding and new resolve for his next step? Had the uninterrupted time with His Father washed over him in much the same way the Jordan water had? Was he really ready? Not yet. At his lowest energy when hunger pangs were demanding satisfaction, the Tempter came. He knew his moment. He always does. I find it interesting that the Tempter never has to settle a fearful reaction like angels do. Our pictures of a wild-eyed villain are overdone. He comes with sweet talk and gentle voice, telling us something we want to hear. That's the test. Will we give in to what we want to hear or let Truth counter?

If questions accuse. They twist the truth so that it is easier to believe a lie.

Twice the Tempter snarled, "*If you are the Son of God,*" introducing self-doubt. The almighty If! We listen to the Tempter's If's more than we realize. *If you are who you think you are . . . if God is who He says He is . . . if, if, if!* The problem with *if* is that it asks you to rethink something you thought you knew. *If* questions accuse. They twist the truth

so that it is easier to believe a lie.

Jesus didn't fall for it. Perhaps this is where Jesus learned to affirm the truth that God would not lead him *into* temptation but He would lead him to face it with *every word that comes from the mouth of God.* (Matthew 4:4)

Because Jesus faced the Tempter's *if questions* without succumbing to their lies, he can help you face your lie-based, reality-denying if's. Take some desert time to fortify yourself with God's Word and the Spirit of Truth will remind you what really need to hear.

Today

What if questions are you most vulnerable to? Remind yourself of God's Word about who you are in Christ: redeemed, made new, resourced abundantly, loved with unfailing love, directed, steadied, comforted, and claimed as cherished blood family.

My Prayer

God of Truth, I have entertained too many if's not understanding when they came from the Tempter. Remind me that your truth about me never begins with if. Help me use your words, not mine, to refute the if questions and reject the Tempter's lies.



Tuesday, Week One

BECAUSE JESUS FASTED

For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry. Matthew 4:2 NLT

Jesus fasted for forty days. He spent concentrated, undistracted, and uninterrupted time with His Father. Is that where he learned to say, *my food is to do the will of my father?* (John 4:34) Is that where he strengthened his inner listening and tuned his heart to be one with his Father? Something powerful happened in that desert, so powerful that no argument or prejudice or preference prevented obedience from this moment all the way to the cross.

We have a lot of mixed up ideas about fasting, especially in our culture where food, pleasure, and distracting noise are closer than we need them to be. Something happens if we do without for the right reason. It doesn't produce complaint; it develops a different appetite. Fasting empties you so that God can fill you. Fasting does not get us more of God's attention. Fasting helps us give God more of our attention. Fasting that does not produce spiritual growth, Christlikeness, demonstrating evidence that the fruit of the Spirit is growing in our lives is a false fasting, useless and empty.

True fasting uncovers dependencies.

True fasting uncovers dependencies. It brings to the surface what you think you can't live without. Never fast the gifts of God. They were given on purpose to grow you. Fast what you use to self-protect to know how God wants to protect you. Fast what takes

your mind and heart away from God. While the original word and practice meant doing without food, fasting isn't limited to removing food. Remove a time-robber, an unhelpful attitude, an indulgence, a noise-maker. Give God more space in your mind, heart, and time.

Because Jesus fasted, shouldn't we? Start small. Make it a journey of discovery. Find out what God wants to say and do because you give Him more attention. Make it a journey of growth, not deprivation. If you come to Easter having listened more to the voice of God, what will resurrection truth mean for you then?

Today

Because Jesus started his three year journey to the cross with a fast, fasting has been part of Christian preparation during the days leading up to Easter. Ask God what He wants you to do without for the remaining days until Easter. Then, just start and listen.

My Prayer

God, you know I live in an over-indulged society. You know I am addicted to activities and attitudes that do not help me live your way. If you will show me something to fast, I will take this journey to Easter to face my misplaced dependency and grow an appetite for your will and way.



Wednesday, Week One

WHEN YOU FAST

You are fasting . . . only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:18

Fasting only for God is not as easy as it sounds. We want things from God. We often think that if we prove our desperation, God will take pity on us and give us what we want. But that's backwards. Fasting demands that we put all our wants aside to want one thing: more of God. More of His wisdom. More of His Truth. More of His Spirit living in us.

When Jesus fasted, he feasted with his Father. He grew his appetite for His Father's plan and methods. His Father's greatest joys and deepest griefs became his. While the beginning of a fast

may make you more sensitive to what you are doing without, eventually your focus is less on *without* and more on *with*. The end of a fast demonstrates that God has more of you and you have more of God. At least it should.

While fasting is between you and God, it doesn't have to be so secret there is no accountability. The emphasis on secret is to stress the opposite of showy behavior that

Jesus called hypocrisy. Everyone knew when the Pharisees fasted: they were dramatic about it from their clothing to their countenance. But it's always what's in the heart, and their hearts were not tuned to God.

Fasting reveals the addictions that take you away from God's resources for meeting needs you try to fill your way. Few people leave God's need-meeting encounter saying, "I'd rather do it myself." What happened to Jesus after his fast? The angels came. It was God's reward. God knows how to make his presence known to you in a way you need Him the most. Let Him surprise you.

Today

Start your fast if you haven't already. Give up one thing, activity or attitude that you know will make more room for God in your day and focus. Each pang of withdrawal is a reminder to give God more of your attention.

My Prayer

God of all Resources, You know I have too many things and too many dependencies. With your direction, I am doing without this one thing to see how you will meet the need I thought I could handle on my own. I take this step of faith that I may receive the reward only you can give.



Thursday, Week One

DO WITHOUT

Do . . . without a grudging heart. Deuteronomy 15:10, NIV

Do everything without complaining and arguing. Philippians 2:14

If you want to scriptural reminders about what we should be living without, our scriptures for today give us some important choices. How about fasting a “grudging heart.” The Deuteronomy passage has just reminded God-followers to live “open-handed” and “generous.” The reminder is in connection with the seventh year practice of canceling debts. A heart that is reluctant to give, forgive, extend grace is a heart that holds on to what God says you should live without. What seven-year (or more) rift does your heart keep alive? Maybe your forty-day journey helps you take that raw wound before God to be canceled through the power of God’s forgiveness. Or maybe your heart is reluctant to encourage those who don’t meet your standard of trying hard enough. Is this a family member? What would happen if you fasted your expectations about that person and ask God to give you His?

Paul reminds of something we can all do without: complaining and arguing. Usually we want everyone else to pay attention to this reminder. We excuse and rationalize it in ourselves. What would happen if you made a pact with God that you would do without complaining and arguing,

**The antidote for a
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even when it only appeared in your thoughts? The antidote for a complaining spirit is gratitude. Live thankful for what you have. Keep a list during these days and refer to it when that negative ire rises and threatens the peace that thankfulness shares. The antidote for

argument is affirmation. Affirm the person before you argue and the need for argument weakens.

Fasting isn’t a box to check, a way to do without something you won’t miss. It is heart work from the start. Nothing excites God more than when you give Him permission to point out what you should live without. Besides, you have more room to receive what God doesn’t want you to live without . . . His unfailing love!

Today

Give God permission to point out what is in your heart that you could live without.

My Prayer

Generous Father, my heart is an overstuffed closet. I harbor grudges. I store complaints. I am too quick to argue. My heart is small and stingy. Your heart is overwhelmingly generous. I cannot have your heart without cleaning out mine. Let the work begin today. I want your heart!



Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. Matthew 4:11

It was the last temptation. Jesus had already said *no* to fast food and a free fall that would obligate angel intervention to protect him. Now the Tempter plays his trump card. Be done with all of these low-life ways, worship me and I will give you the kingdoms of the world. The frightening truth is that he could because he had already won the allegiance of so many rich and powerful people. Jesus would have been another pawn in Satan's power play.

What makes a person say *no* to that kind of power? Someone who knows a greater authority than all the kingdoms of the world. Someone who does not fall for the lie that there is another way to get God's promise other than obedience. Without hesitation, Jesus told the Tempter to leave. The amazing part of this story is that he did.

When Jesus said an unequivocal *no* to sharing any of the worship and loyalty that belonged to His Father, the angels came and took care of him. Can you imagine the release and restored peace? Every time Jesus said no to the Tempter, he used it as a more forceful yes to His Father.

The Tempter will never stop building his kingdom until Christ comes back.

The Tempter will never stop building his kingdom until Christ comes back to establish the full victory He won on

the cross. Until then we will all hear the lies of the Tempter trying to make God's truths sound outdated, irrelevant, not applicable to the 21st century, forward thinking mind. The Tempter knows too well the lies we want to hear and can provide a logical argument to make them hard to refute.

Here's the lesson: don't argue or debate the Tempter. He knows how to win that battle. Don't just refute the lies; reject the liar in the name of Christ and his desert example. When you do, the sweet presence of God comes to comfort and affirm; something you will never get from the one who uses lies to get his way with you.

Today

Where is your desert, your vulnerable place where temptation exists? You never have to be afraid of the desert if God and his angels are there.

Prayer

God of my desert, where I have faced the Tempter I have lost. Remind me of the power of the right no. Protect me from destructive rationalization that gives the Tempter's lies respectability. Teach me to say no in a way that will always mean yes to You!



Saturday, Week One

WHERE IS YOUR DESERT?

He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land.

Deuteronomy 8:15a, NIV

God has used deserts to confront, discipline, prepare, and teach His people. He met Hagar in a desert and she learned God *saw* her. He showed up to Moses in a burning bush in the desert and gave him a burning call that changed his life. He took the nation of Israel the long way, through the desert, to shape and strengthen them for Promised Land.

There is something about a desert that overwhelms you, removes your control, reduces life to simple essentials, and isolates you. Deserts can quickly become life or death experiences depending on your choices. While God used actual hot, sandy, waterless regions to do His work in the lives of His people; He also uses other desert-like experiences. For us they may be times when everything is out of our control, where isolation traps, where change overwhelms, where energy and motivation leave. These are the times we desperately cry for God to change something, bring something new, turn down the heat, and make life easier.

God doesn't do easy; He does best.

God doesn't do easy; He does best. Sometimes desert time is what we need but do not want. Remember, Paradise was lost in the Garden. Jesus reclaimed it in the desert when he rejected all shortcuts.

Don't be afraid of taking time in a desert as long as you do it with God. Let the absence of your many dependencies teach you to depend on God more fervently than ever. Let the forced silence make you listen. What you learn in a desert time may be your bridge to the still waters and green pastures you crave.

Where is your desert? God can find you in your desert, lead you through it, and teach you what you wouldn't learn anywhere else. A desert path will take you to growth that has already survived the worst to help you live God's best.

Today

Where have you spent desert time? How did you respond to it? What truth will make you more teachable next time?

My Prayer

You are God of every desert. Teach me to take no shortcuts through a desert you allow. Help me see desert time as your place of intensive care where you will feed me, teach me, and bring me through stronger than I would have been without it.

Second Sunday of Lent

Whatever empties us in painful or isolating ways, worship restores. Come to be filled.

A Review for the Heart

Where have you let “if’ voices rule your emotions? What can you do without that will help you have more of what God wants you to live with? What emptiness do you lay before God? Instead of coming to God with your cries and complaints, just come empty and let Him fill you His way. Am I hungry for what God says will take away my emptiness?

My Sunday Morning Prayer

I come empty to your plenty, craving manna for my starving heart. You prepare feasts for those who hunger and thirst. I am all need. Feed my emptiness so that I do not fill my cravings with anything or anyone that will not satisfy.

Preparing for Worship

You fill me with the joy of your presence. Psalm 16:11 NIV

We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple. Psalm 65:4 NIV

Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it with good things. Psalm 81:10b, NLT

For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things. Psalm 107:9 NLT

A Blessing for Worship

May the God of unlimited resources fill every good hunger for Him with more than enough as He welcomes you to His heart where He wants to fill your empty places with His unfailing love.



Monday, Week Two

GO DEEPER

Now go out where it is deeper. Luke 5:4

Peter thought he was getting a fishing lesson when Jesus came to his empty boat. He and his fishing partners were washing their nets at the end of an unproductive night. Jesus, who didn't look like a seasoned fisherman, told them to throw the nets where it was deeper. Do you hear just a little bit of annoyance when Peter made sure that Jesus knew they had given it their best with no results? Peter didn't see how one more throw of the net could make any difference. Was he trying to prove his point or was he beginning to sense an authority in Jesus? Peter agrees to try again, this time according to Jesus' specific instructions. He went deeper and caught so many fish that the full net almost sank their boat.

"Go deeper," Jesus said. Surface fishing wasn't enough. Yesterday's fishing holes wouldn't bring

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another full net. Trying harder wasn't good enough. Only following Jesus' timely directions produced results.

Where do we shortchange ourselves with shallow "fishing?" Where do we give ourselves a check in the spiritual growth box because we did our best and tried

hard? Jesus will always take us where we wouldn't have gone on our own. He will take us out of our complacency with "good enough" and empower us with his Spirit that to become more like him and less like our best.

This Lenten journey can take us deeper if we understand that Jesus' journey to the cross must take us there also. Don't settle for good enough. Go deeper and let the deep love of Jesus take you where you would drown without him. There you will grow the dependence and willing obedience faster than you would if you stayed in the shallows.

Today

Where have you settled for good enough in your spiritual growth? Go deeper with Jesus.

My Prayer

Lord, I admit fear of deep places. My insecurity is my undoing. Give me a deeper understanding of my need so that I realize how going deeper with you is your answer to my fear.



Tuesday, Week Two

TEACH ME TO PRAY

Once when Jesus had been out praying, one of his disciples came to him as he finished and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." Luke 11:1

Jesus had just returned from one of his prayer times. The disciples had learned to give Jesus space and privacy for this time. Something about how he returned from those times told the disciples they had something to learn about prayer, so they asked for a lesson. Always the teacher, Jesus gladly granted a private lesson. You know the model. We call it the Lord's Prayer. But do we really apply the priorities of this prayer to everything we pray? Do we really understand intimacy that is the result of praying what was in Jesus' heart? If this prayer took Jesus beyond the cross, where could it take us?

Jesus began his lesson with non-compromising priorities. Everything we pray must honor God's name. To use God's name for any self-serving request is to miss the oneness Jesus always found in prayer. Answered prayer should always reproduce that character in me.

We miss the unity and intimacy if we ignore these prayer priorities.

In the same breath, Jesus prayed for God's kingdom to have first place before his comfort or convenience. Praying the kingdom-come prayer is a dangerous prayer because the righteous kingdom of God is usually opposite to cultural acceptance. Kingdom living is set apart living.

He prayed for food and forgiveness as if they were connected. In other teaching, Jesus made it clear that God's will was forgiveness and to refuse to give forgiveness starves you more than the one denied. Are we hungry enough for God's will when we have been wronged or rejected? When we are, God's kingdom comes closer to us and we can share it better with others.

He prayed for protection from temptation because he had experienced that protection first hand. God cannot reject temptation for us but He can strengthen our resolve to choose His ways. When we do, we experience a oneness that feeds our soul more than yielding would have.

We miss the unity and intimacy if we ignore these prayer priorities. True prayer is work of the heart guided by God's kingdom priorities. Then, "Your will be done," becomes a victory shout. For the oneness with our Father will always be the first answer to any prayer.

Today

Pray each part of our Lord's Prayer slowly enough to let it examine your heart.

My Prayer

Lord, teach me to pray for my prayers sometimes come from longings not in line with your will. Teach me to value your name and kingdom as I do food and breath. I want prayer to bring oneness with you more than I want to satisfy my wish list. Lord, teach me to pray!



Search me, O God, and know my heart. Psalm 139:24

T

he Spirit led Jesus into the desert not to taunt, interrogate or humiliate him. That was what the Tempter would do. The Spirit led him to refine, shape, invigorate, and prepare him for what lay ahead. Since what is in the heart will come out in some form, it makes sense to start there.

For us, too. Asking God to search our heart is like asking a friend to come to your house and look through all your closets and drawers and tell you what you don't need. Only the most trusted person in your life has all-access to the secret places. God is the only one who should occupy that place. Out of the trust you have in His all-for-you love, you ask him to conduct a thorough search of your heart. It's the place where dreams grow. It's the center of who you think you are and who you want to be. It's the place where you hide your hurts and still-raw rejections.

This is an invitation, not an inquisition. God will not break down the door to enter. And He's not looking for what will make you look bad. He's looking to help you actualize every prayer you have ever prayed to be everything God knows you can be.

This is an invitation, not an inquisition.

When *search me* becomes the first prayer we pray, no matter the encounter, unfairness, or life reversal; we become the clay that God can and will shape. It is a trust exchange. We trust God to tell us the truth and God trusts

us to do the right thing with it. In that exchange there is always enough strength to let go, confess, repent, forgive, and grow.

In the next days, we will continue to explore this beautiful and frightening prayer of examine. Remember that God's search comes from His unfailing love. His pure and powerful love wants nothing but the best for you. Let the search begin.

Today

Pray this simple several times during the day. Pray it before you self-analyze yourself or the situation. Freeing growth and empowering protection waits.

My Prayer

Loving Father, take the light you fuel by love and look into every corner of my heart. I want to know my heart the way you do. I want to understand what is there that helps me and hurts me. I trust no other with this invitation. Because I trust you, I know you will give me truth I can find from no other. You already know my heart. I am the one who doesn't.



Thursday, Week Two

TEST ME

Test me and know my anxious thoughts. Psalm 139:24

T

ests have a bad rap. We can blame it on school, and they probably did make us think about tests in a bad way. Actually, tests are good. Tests reveal what you know. Tests reveal what is true or pure. Tests alert you to problems. Without that knowledge, we deny, ignore, or pretend to our own undoing.

Don't confuse testing with temptation.

Don't confuse testing with temptation. Professionals take tests to validate their readiness to use their skills in a broader way. They aren't fun, but they are necessary. Some medical tests are painful but when they reveal a problem

that can be addressed, they are worth the discomfort.

The Spirit took Jesus into the wilderness to test him. The testing refined his purpose and reminded him of God's resources to empower him. The testing revealed Jesus' strengths empowered by his Father that would equip him for anything he encountered. The Tempter came after the testing, after God had revealed the strength Jesus could use to stay focused on his mission. The testing prepared him for the tempting!

Requesting God to test your heart and make you face your anxious thoughts means you want to examine them from God's perspective, not yours. What wisdom there is in requesting this test! Anxious thoughts, better known as worry, skew our thinking, distract us from the focus God wants for us, and often push us to wrong choices. Knowing what worries us allows us to take worries back to God, lay them before His unlimited resources, and understand that fear about the unknown is unnecessary when you look into the face of the One who knows the future.

God does not lead us into temptation but He will test us. We need His test to reveal the anxious thoughts that will trap us, paralyze us, or detour us. While he make not take away the problem or make hard places easier, He reminds us there is not a forward step we take that He has not prepared us for.

Today

Pray this prayer early in your day and often. Listen for God to remind you that His strength empowers yours. Never let an anxious thought blind you to your strength or God's.

My Prayer

I want your testing, God. I want to know how your knowledge about my unknowns, your strength made perfect in my weakness, your gifts of my abilities; prepare me for this season of life. I want to refute anxious thoughts with your unfailing love and unlimited resources. I want to live above unnecessary fear and worry. Here is my heart; test me.



Point out anything in me that offends you. Psalm 139:24

When you give God permission to search and test you, it is worthless unless you allow Him to share His report. Why take a test if you don't find out your score? While God doesn't rate you on some Heavenly curve, He will point you to unchristlike attitudes, misordered priorities, anything that takes you away from how He wants to shape you.

The challenge we face is to let Him point out what troubles Him without our explanation, excuses, or rationalizations. Why give them to the One who knows everything in our minds before we say anything? When we are ready to accept what God points out as Truth, we start asking different questions. *How can I move past this? What should I have done? How can I respond differently next time?* God won't use your excuses to grow you. He uses what He's always used: confession and repentance.

Confession is not God trying to humiliate to rub your nose in some misguided motive or response. Confession is agreeing with God that what He points out does not belong. Our response to His point

reveals how much we value His evaluation. Refusal to admit wrong is self-centered because it is self-protective. What He points out isn't up for debate; He points it out so you can't hide it from yourself and believe a lie. He points it out so you can grow past it.

Repentance is the next step. It is the action that puts teeth in confession. Repentance is simply turning away from whatever God pointed out. Turning away might mean learning a new way to respond. Turning away might mean getting rid of an activity or attitude that slows or sabotages your growth. The good news is that God doesn't take a back seat to this process. He stays with you to empower you to make the right choice in order to accomplish growth.

When you pray this prayer, stay with it for God's report. When you believe that what He points out comes from His most helpful, loving, compassionate heart, you welcome His point even when it is uncomfortable. You determine to receive His Truth from His perspective so that you grow by His Spirit and grace.

Today

After praying the "search me" and "test me" prayer, listen for the "point out" part. Just listen.

My Prayer

God, I want to be ready to hear what you point out in me that won't contribute to my growth. I admit fear that leans slightly toward arrogance. Your pointing humbles me. Without this humility, I will continue to pursue my own way and responses. Point me in your direction. I want to grow.



Saturday, Week Two

LEAD ME

Lead me along the path of everlasting life. Psalm 139:25

God has only one overarching goal as He shares His searching, testing and pointing counsel. He wants to bring us home. Not to an address on some tree-lined street. He wants to help us live our lives on this earth so that He can seamlessly extend our life with Him in Heaven. Our culture helps us forget this goal. Lots of good things distract us from it. But God reminds us that this life is important but temporary.

Without God's leading, we are lost. Lost in our own ways. Lost in our own arguments. Lost in our own self-rule. Unfortunately, living lost is accepted in our culture. But not in God's. He wants to lead us. He wants to be the first voice we listen to. He wants to live close enough to whisper and nudge us toward the right path.

How willing are we to let God lead us? That's what God's searching and testing reveals. That's why He points out where we are not as willing as we thought. He wants to get us back on the right path, the everlasting life path.

Finding the path to everlasting life does not take a map; it takes a heart change. The initial change comes when we receive His forgiveness and turn our hearts toward Him in every way. This "lead

**Finding the path to everlasting
life does not take a map; it
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me" prayer is not an empty prayer to cover what you want to do or to pretend you really want God's way when you don't. This prayer must begin in a heart tuned to God's heart and mind set. It's not what some might call a "spiritual" path only for Bible reading,

meditation, and prayer. This path involves your work, your family, your leisure, your thoughts, everything you call "this life." To follow God on the path to everlasting life means you make kingdom-first choices in all areas of your life.

To live where life never runs out is the hope and sure promise we have in Christ. No other insurance plan, philosophy, or cultural acceptance can help us find the path to everlasting life. Only God's leading. While this life on earth is all we have now, it is not all there is. From the rising of the sun to its setting, keep asking God to lead you; and He will.

Today

When have you asked God to lead you without waiting for His instructions? Don't forget to listen.

My Prayer

God, I live more lost than I want to believe. I am as sure-footed as a mountain goat with shoes on. You offer life-assuring next steps. With all my heart I pray, lead along the everlasting life path so that I make it all the way home to You.

Third Sunday of Lent

Worship becomes my time to examine and confess when I show up for the God who has always shown up for me.

A Review for the Heart

How could you change every prayer request on your heart into a kingdom priority prayer? Where have you been slow to pray a search me prayer? Do you allow a testing time to help you know what change God points you to? How quickly do you ask God to lead you? How quickly do you follow?

My Sunday Morning Prayer

God, no other time in my week gives me such uninterrupted time to focus on You.. Help me anticipate worship the way I look forward to a reunion with a close friend or family member. Too often I am present in body but absent in spirit. You invite me to worship so that I can receive something for my week that I cannot get any other way. I am a slow learner but at least I know where to start. Search me-test me- point me-lead me and I will live my gratitude all week.

Preparing for Worship

I love your sanctuary, Lord, the place where your glory shines. Psalm 26:8 NLT

My heart has heard you say, “Come and talk with me,” and my heart responds, “Lord, I am coming.” Psalm 27:8 NLT

Be still, and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10 NIV

Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for our hope is in you alone. “Psalm 33:22 NLT

You are God, my only safe haven. Psalm 43:2a NLT

A Blessing for Worship

May you come joyfully into the sanctuary of the Lord knowing He waits there with more to say than you can live all week. Be as present for Him as He is for you.



Monday, Week Three

THE TIME HAS COME

"The time has come," he said. Mark 1:15

When Jesus left the wilderness and his time of testing, he left with new purpose and single-minded focus on what His Father wanted him to do. He knew it was time to act and speak. Knowing what time it is for us is more than a quick glance at some time-keeper. Learning time from God's perspective is difficult because He doesn't use the same ways to mark time that we use. He is more interested in seasons and direction and mission. He would have you satisfied with a time when nothing new is happening when it is time to prepare. He would have you untangle yourself from unproductive busyness when He wants you available to change your plans for His agenda.

We all have time; we just don't know how to use it. We waste time, spend time, and lose time. While we have the same amount of time; we fill it differently. To be in rhythm with God's time-keeping we have to think less in minutes and hours and more by purpose and mission: His, not ours.

Has your time come? Of course it has. God is always telling us it is time for something He has planned. It's when it isn't the time we expected that produces struggle. Never try to discern God's time for you without allowing Him to search, test, point out and lead. When you agree with God's time in your life, submission is sweet and freeing.

God's time doesn't always mean easy, fun, or comfortable.

While He never brings disaster or disease, He knows they are our stalking tigers in this life. That's why he revises such times to be for strength or perseverance or learning. His time with us, His time for us is what steadies us.

The time has come. It always does as sure as sunrise follows moonlight. The key is to know what time it is from God's perspective. Don't look at your digital time piece; look into His eyes. Then, you will know.

Today

Ask God what time it is for you and let Him tell you.

My Prayer

God of all time, tell me what time it is for me. I live by the wrong clock too often. I want to live in your time, by your rhythm, with your purpose and at rest in ways that deepen trust and quicken obedience.



Tuesday, Week Three

DO WHATEVER HE SAYS

His mother told the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” John 2:4

Jesus had gathered a curious group of followers who sensed something life-changing in his teaching and invitation. They barely knew each other when they accompanied Jesus and his mother to a wedding in Cana. Sometime, too early before the festivities began to wind down, there was a wine shortage. This was a serious hospitality breach. Jesus' mother had eyes for the problem and took the matter immediately to Jesus. But what was Jesus supposed to do? Go buy more wine? Without an overly positive response from her son, Mary turned to the nearby servants and instructed them to “do whatever he tells you.” When the servants obeyed that directive, a miracle occurred. Jesus took the not-enough ordinary and turned it into something extraordinary and more than enough.

That's what Jesus continued to do in his ministry. He took a boy's lunch and fed more than 5,000 with leftovers. He took a Samaritan woman to an endless supply of living water her broken soul needed. He used mud on blind eyes as a healing balm to return a man's sight. Eventually he would allow himself to be nailed on a disgraceful wooden cross and placed in an ordinary tomb, both of which are no longer ordinary to us.

**More than enough . . .
appeared on the other side
of obedience.**

Don't miss the obvious. The miracle provision, the more than enough quality wine, appeared on the other side of obedience. No one prayed for this miracle. No one knew to ask for it. It was past their problem solving. It was all gift.

Be reminded that the servants followed instructions that didn't make sense. They luggered 10-gallon stone jars and filled them with water. Was part of the miracle the obedience itself?

What would happen if you lived these forty days by that simple instruction: “Do whatever he says.” Don't question. Don't overthink. Just follow Jesus' instruction. Do whatever he asks. What miracle opening waits for a relationship? What restored balance is on the other side of honoring God's priorities? What more-than-enough, top-quality, need-meeting provision could be yours that you didn't even know to ask for? And all you have to do is what he says.

Today

Where are the water jars Jesus asks you to carry? Do whatever he says.

My Prayer

Jesus, you take my ordinary and exchange it for the extraordinary. All I have to do is carry something big enough for your answer. Forgive me for complaining about inconvenience or timing. With new resolve I will do whatever you say.



Wednesday, Week Three

WITH THE FATHER'S HEART

Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching . . . preaching . . . and healing. Matthew 4:23

What did Jesus do with the time he had? He used it purposely, with great resolve but without fear of having enough time. We never have enough time for our agenda. We load our to-do lists with more than anyone could possibly accomplish. The convicting truth we learn from Jesus is that we always have enough time to do God's will.

For Jesus it was teaching, preaching and healing. He took God's purpose to the people he encountered. He brought God's life and freedom wherever he went. He never turned anyone away. Never got testy with pushy crowds. Never posted working hours. Never demanded personal time.

Was there something so powerful in his full submission to his Father's purpose that it protected him from the internal chaos we so often experience? Could it be that we stress ourselves with too much to do out of fear rather than purpose?

Following Jesus on his too-short life reminds us that he didn't have time for five-year goals and ten-year goals. However, in three years he accomplished His Father's assignment; he finished his work.

Jesus didn't get a list of what to accomplish from his Father; he received his Father's heart.

What can I learn from Jesus that will take me purposely through my day, keep me patient through interruptions, protect me from unnecessary what-ifs, and help me accomplish everything God wants? How can I be God's proclaimer, teacher, and healer and weave it through family, work, and leisure in the same seamless way that Jesus did? I have to believe that I can never plan or act

beyond God's searching, testing, pointing and leading. I know I believe that when His Spirit fills me, I become more useful without trying harder. I find a rhythm that brings peace even to the days when other people's agendas load mine.

Jesus didn't get a list of what to accomplish from his Father; he received his Father's heart. With his Father's heart came all the resolve, focus, and energy to do His will. Perhaps we have looked for His list before we receive His heart.

Today

Make sure you have God's heart for the work and people that may not be on your list.

My Prayer

God, I fail miserably with my own pushing, planning, and panic. I need your heart for my work, my family, and everyone I encounter. Protect me from making any list before I receive your heart.



"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." John 4:34

Jesus had been talking with a Samaritan woman about living water. The disciples return from their forage for food to see Jesus with her. They are probably relieved when she leaves, but they say nothing. The disciples spread their picnic lunch only to be interrupted by new crowds who have come to see Jesus at the invitation of the Samaritan woman.

The disciples press Jesus to eat first. When Jesus responds, he teaches them, and us, another upside down world truth. He compares God's will to food. He talks as if God's will gives him more energy than lunch.

I don't know about you, but when I'm hungry, I don't want a scripture verse; I want something to eat. Trying to get my understanding around the depth of satisfaction Jesus had in God's will is mind boggling. My hunger drives me to the pantry or fridge. It is a must-be-noticed attention getter.

But isn't that what Jesus wants us to understand? We should have the same response to God's will. I should be so hungry for God's will that nothing else will satisfy.

**I should be so hungry for
God's will that nothing else
will satisfy.**

Am I that hungry? Are you? We have a ways to go here, but here is something I am learning. If God's will is just something to do, it will never become the appetite God desires. If God's will gives me His heart, His closeness, His lap; I am not just hungry, I am starved.

Anytime we reduce God's will to something we do to keep on God's good side, we miss the whole idea. God's will isn't for God's good; it's for ours. That's why Jesus compares it to life-sustaining food. We can't have the life God dreams for us without His will. When we understand how God's will connects us with God's best, a hunger begins that we can nourish only one way: by making a feast out of every God-pleasing attitude, priority, and action. And we stay hungry.

Today

Have you developed an appetite for more of God? Start there. A deeper love affair with God produces a hunger for His will.

My Prayer

God, if I am honest, I admit that I think about your will as something I ought to do more than what I want to do. Help me understand that doing your will is less about pleasing You and more about receiving You.



Friday, Week Three

BE BLESSED

[Jesus] went up on a mountainside and . . . began to teach saying blessed . . . Matthew 5:1, 2, 3a

When Jesus sat down on the hillside above the Sea of Galilee and began his first recorded teaching, he built a foundation for everything else he would teach about living God's way. He had a passion to share God's blessings with love-starved listeners. Don't you think he hoped that if people understood the unlimited blessings God had to share, they would turn whole-heartedly to Him? Unfortunately, his words were counter to culture and tradition, as they still are. While some accepted them, many did not.

Jesus said God's blessing would be with anyone who took his words to heart. He talked about a need for God and His kingdom like it was daily bread. He spoke of comfort in a grief-stricken land. He called the meek victorious in a gentle way they had never seen modeled. He identified a hunger and thirst that could always be satisfied. The merciful, the pure, and the peacemakers could all receive blessings that satisfied more than the revengeful, self-serving, or trouble-makers. It was an upside down kingdom for sure. Some would call it a utopia so far removed from earth's reality that it was foolish to believe such idealism.

**Seek the blessing and miss it.
Seek God . . . and blessings
come before you ask.**

We are more than 2,000 years from that mountain top gathering and we still live with too much disbelief. Could

God really share such blessing? He can and He does. As with all of His promises, they are by-products of a right relationship with God. Seek the blessing and miss it. Seek God, live in transparent oneness with His character; and blessings come before you ask.

The world has had long enough to prove whether their best ideas and philosophies work. It's time to let the upside down teaching of Jesus put our world right side up. It doesn't start with a protest; it starts with a transformed heart.

Today

Make a list of the heart characteristics that bring the blessing of God. Which blessing do you need? Which characteristic must grow more to receive it?

My Prayer

Jesus, my heart cries for blessing in a world that delivers too many curses. Take my heart and shape it to your world values for my world has learned to crush and control before it would bless.



Saturday, Week Three

IF YOU ARE WILLING

If you are willing, you can make me clean . . . I am willing! Luke 5:12b-13a

Few diseases were as devastating, isolating, or repulsive as leprosy. Lepers covered their faces and warned people of their presence by shouting “Unclean.” On this day early in Jesus’ ministry, a leper, who obviously had heard that Jesus could heal all kinds of diseases, threw himself at Jesus’ feet. The leper asked Jesus to make him clean if he was *willing*. Jesus affirmed his compassion and power when he answered, “I am willing.”

To come to Jesus with a desperate prayer and last-hope fear is to cower before the possibility that without Jesus’ willingness; life with yesterday’s potential is over. The problem is that often we bring the wrong prayer. We ask for circumstantial change, not heart change. The problem is not that Jesus isn’t *willing* to do what we ask; the problem is that what we ask for what won’t take care of the real problem.

The leper asked for cleanliness. His uncleanness separated him from family, community, and worship. The leper wanted his life back. Jesus had done it for others. He came to see if Jesus was *willing* to do it for him.

What if Jesus asked you, “If you are willing, I can make you clean.”

What waits on the other side of Jesus’ willingness to do his cleaning in your heart? Peace about a complicated situation in the face of God’s empowering resources? Unburdened ability to look at the future knowing that God can give you the next step to His plan?

But there is more. Turn the prayer around. What if Jesus asked you “If you are willing, I can make you clean.” How willing are we for his heart work that removes whatever does not make it clean and pure from his perspective. That’s where powerful prayer begins. Jesus is always willing to start there.

Today

Spend some time contemplating your willingness for God’s work in your heart. How willing are you for His cleaning?

My Prayer

God, your willingness is not in question, mine is. I hold on to hurts and dreams and listen to cultural voices that will not keep my heart clean. I must find my place at your feet asking you to make me clean, beginning with my heart. I want to be as willing to receive the work as you are to do it.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

*Worship is not about getting something out of it.
Worship is about God getting something out of you.*

A Review for the Heart

Whose time do you know best; God's or yours? Do you have as much of God's heart as He has of yours? Who needs to give more? Where do you need to develop a hearty appetite for God's will? Are you as willing to change as God is willing to change you?

My Sunday Morning Prayer

You are the God I come to worship in my awkward, insufficient ways. How I treat this time reveals whether I have any other gods before You. I need blinders to keep me focused and dark glasses to blur everything else but You. You can't do anything more to get my attention; the cross did it all. I come to worship the God who created me from nothing but gives me everything.

Preparing for Worship

The Lord Almighty is here among us. Psalm 46:7 NLT

My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Psalm 84:2

Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker, for he is our God. Psalm 95:6

Worship the Lord with gladness . . . Acknowledge that the Lord is God! He made us and we are his. Psalm 100:2

A Blessing for Worship

May you see God waiting for you in His sanctuary with open arms as if you are the only one He was expecting. May your joy in His welcome become obedience in the week.



Monday, Week Four

WHERE'S YOUR FAITH?

Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? Mark 4:40

When Jesus told the disciples to take a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the disciples assumed it would be an uneventful trip. They were wrong. A furious squall blew in without warning and nearly swamped their boat, threatening to sink it. Where was Jesus? Sleeping. More than a little annoyed, the disciples woke Jesus and asked the question we have all asked when we feel Jesus' absence and non-action at a critical time. "Don't you care if we drown?"

Jesus answered the question with action. He stood up and spoke to the storm: "Be still!" Immediately, the vicious waves stopped curling; the boat stopped its wild dip; and the disciples sat stunned.

Jesus never let a teachable moment go by. That's why *following* him is so important. He calls class to order everywhere. In this moment, he asked his followers the same question we must answer when our days turn stormy and our little boat threatens to sink us. Luke asks it this way: "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25)

**We put our faith in who Jesus
is before we put our faith in
what we want him to do.**

We quickly forget that when Jesus is in our boat, we are safe, sink or swim. Putting our faith in some have-to-happen-this-way prayer is not the same as putting our faith in Jesus. We put our faith in who Jesus is before we put our faith in what we want him to do. When we do, our prayers change. We pray less for

Jesus to change the here and now and more for direction.

When fear claws at your heart and threatens your security, why are you afraid? Most of the time our responses begin with *because I . . .* We've placed some expectation on ourselves, our routines, our careful plans. Of course there is fear if we are left to our best ideas and plans! In these topsy-turvy moments or seasons, when fear grabs you by the throat and won't let go, immediately remind yourself: you aren't in charge and never were. Listen carefully for what Jesus says in your out-of-control predicament. And when he says "Be still," make sure you know whether he's speaking to the storm or to you.

Today

Why are you afraid? Where's your faith? Let Jesus ask both questions and answer honestly.

My Prayer *Jesus, I fear too many things for the wrong reasons. I want to remember that you are my storm-stiller: the ones inside as well as outside. Speak your stilling words to me so that I am able to listen to what you say next. I never want my fears to have more influence than faith.*



Tuesday, Week Four

A PERSONAL CONFESSION

Who do you say I am? Matthew 16:18

On a morning in Caesarea Philippi, at the base of Mt. Hermon, beside the Jordan River, Jesus began time with his disciples by asking a question, “Who do people say I am.” Perceptions, while unreliable, share insights that must be compared to ultimate truth. The disciples repeated what they had heard. People saw John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, and other prophets in the acts and teaching of Jesus. They compared Jesus with what they already knew.

Then, Jesus asked the penetrating question that his disciples could not answer with other people’s best idea. “Who do you say I am?” Already the disciples knew they were following someone special. Jesus was the most authoritative, informative, practical, radical teacher they had ever encountered. They knew that Yaweh walked with him like with Abraham and Elijah. He was more than a teacher, more than a prophet, more than a healer, and all of them at the same time. However, it was not enough to identify Jesus by his good roles.

Peter did not hesitate. He blurted his answer with the unaffected honesty of a child. “You are the

**We cannot mouth the words of
our parents [or] repeat a
theology. Something must
happen in our heart.**

Messiah, Son of the living God.” There was hope and fear and faith all wrapped in his answer. Jesus blessed Peter and affirmed his answer. Finally, perception was truth.

There comes a time for all of us when we must answer the same question. We cannot mouth the words of our parents. We cannot repeat a theology. Something must happen in our heart that pushes our answer out. *Who is Jesus to me and why do I need to know him?*

If he is only good, he stands in a very long line of very good and generous people who leave their goodness for us to follow. If he is only a teacher, he joins a gathering of wise teachers who have shared wisdom and innovation throughout the ages. If he is only a miracle worker, unfortunately he joins a group of questionable proclaimers for whom integrity teeters. But if he is really God, then my eternity rests on that understanding. Then, I cannot pretend that personal perception is my way to God. Then, I must allow Jesus to be my only Truth and Way.

Today

How will you answer Jesus’ question from your heart and not your head?

My Prayer

Jesus, you are my Truth and Way. All other ways make me stumble. Help me personalize this confession without reducing its transforming power and hope.



*Peter and his companions were very sleepy,
but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory. Luke 9:32 NIV*

Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to pray. However, the long day and the quiet night got the best of the trio. They felt more drawn to sleep than prayer. Hasn't the same happened to you? You sit statue-still in a too-quiet place where best intentions hope to make an intimate connection with God. However, your body has another agenda: sleep.

The disciples were familiar with this habit of Jesus to find a quiet place away from needy crowds and the aggressive scrutiny of his critics. The disciples were learning that prayer was not ritual to Jesus; it was his lifeline. It was an intimate exchange with his Father. Jesus came to prayer to be loved, directed, focused, and sent. Prayer changed him, rested him, and steadied him.

Something happened on this mountain that helped Peter, James, and John understand Jesus' intimate, sustaining, can't-live-without-it connection to prayer. Whose sleepy eye caught it first, we don't know for sure, but Jesus' face changed. And more than that, Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus as if the disciples were invisible. Did Jesus speak their names? Is that how they knew them?

Awake my soul and live!

That's when Peter, James, and John woke up! Sleep no longer had power over them. They saw what they would have expected a dream to produce, but this was no dream. Glory was close enough to touch but holy awe froze them. It was as if Jesus' prayer lifted a veil that allowed them to see the otherness that always existed but they never perceived. They woke up to the reality of prayer. They woke up to the glory of God. They woke up to the truth that nothing would be the same again.

We need to wake up to the unseen but very present reality of who Jesus is. We need to wake up to the powerful possibilities of prayer as a way to lift whatever veil blinds us. We need to wake up to glory in the highest, Jesus come to share God's unfailing love for us. We need to live awake to how the glory of God transforms because we need His transformation on the mountains and in the valleys of our lives. As the hymn writer reminds: *Awake, my soul, and live!*

Today

Where is your mountain where Jesus would help you see his transforming glory?

My Prayer

*God who never sleeps, I fear I sleepwalk my days oblivious to your glory. Wake me up to your glory.
Open my sleepy eyes to who you sent Jesus to be to me. If your glory transformed a mountain top,
how might it change my day if I live awake to you?*



Thursday, Week Four

NO ROOM, STILL?

Some of you are trying to kill me because there's no room in your hearts for my message.

John 8:37

When Jesus was born, someone made room for him in a stable because all the best places were taken. Since then Jesus has looked for places where he was welcome. Peter had room for Jesus in Capernaum, and Jesus healed his mother-in-law of a frightening fever. Mary and Martha had room to share with Jesus in Bethany. In a short time they would be very glad they did. Good things happened when people had room to take Jesus in.

But Jesus wanted more than a place to stay. He wanted people to give him room in their hearts and understanding. He wanted them to accept his message and enjoy life with his Father the way he did. Close. Personal. Securing. Free. However, his message was too startling, especially for the religious leaders. Why were they so unwelcoming? Didn't he teach people a good way to live? Wouldn't his teaching make a better world, bring world peace!

If Jesus was only trying to tell people how to be nicer to each other, the Pharisees could have found a place for his message. But Jesus took his message where the Pharisees could not give him room. Jesus claimed to be God. That was blasphemy!

We run the risk of closing the same door and leaving no room for Jesus in our hearts. We can listen to his teaching, try to live by his good words about love, but take it no farther. If Jesus was not God

come to us, God, Himself, in flesh and bone and heartbeat; we follow a philosophy that cannot save us. It means we will only give Jesus room that serves our purpose.

At the heart of Jesus' message is who he is.

Accepting his divine claim is the dividing line where there is no tolerance. Believing Jesus is God means that you want his from-the-beginning-of-time rule in your heart. You give him full access to all you say you are so that he can make you more than you could be on your own. When we understand that he transforms what he occupies, we will only want to give him more room.

Today

Where do you need to give Jesus more room to do his transform what you cannot?

My Prayer

Jesus, Spring clean my heart. Sweep away my overworked goals that have no transforming power. Empty my stuffed closets of the fears I hide. Repair the wounds I carry. You are more than my Fixer Upper; you are God and I will make room for your authority and perfect rule.



Friday, Week Four

UNWRAPPED

And Lazarus came out, bound in grave clothes, his face wrapped in a head cloth.

Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him go!" John 11:44

A grave scene sobers. Grief is fresh and palpable. Death is a selfish visitor and takes more than it gives. Such is the scene we find when Lazarus, well-loved brother to Mary and Martha, died and was laid in a tomb.

By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead for three days. The finality is setting in, though it does not lessen the grief. The mourners give Jesus his moment at the tomb to weep and pray. What he does next; no one expected. He speaks directly to Lazarus but not in the softness of memories and grief. He shouts in the authority of a commanding officer, a startling, inappropriate sound for the subdued gathering. "Lazarus, come out!" And he does, still in the immobilizing strips of cloth, he waddles forward. "Unwrap him and let him go."

Do you see what Jesus saw? A man with fresh life wrapped so tightly he could not enjoy it. Grave clothes fettered him. Life had no freedom inside grave clothes. The first step in accessing new life is to remove the grave clothes.

If this time to prepare teaches anything it is that new life always waits outside of grave clothes.

**Jesus comes with both
command and invitation to leave
our living death and be born
into new life, his life.**

Who wrapped you in grave clothes? Who sucked life out of you and imprisoned you in darkness. What wounded your heart, delivered death blows you still feel? Sometimes we do it to ourselves by repeating self-destructive, death-producing patterns.

Into our cemeteries where hope or love or dreams have died, Jesus comes with both command and invitation to leave our living death and be born into new life, his life. He calls you out of whatever restricts his love, closes your heart, or robs you of the abundance he came to give. Just like Lazarus could not unwrap himself, sometimes it takes another to remove the binding strips. Let anyone who comes to your aid by the call of Jesus, unwrap you. You were created for life, and Jesus shouts for you just as loud as he did for Lazarus.

Today

What binds you that Jesus would unwrap?

My Prayer

Jesus, I am tangled in my choices, memories, and wounds. Unwrap me so that I may live your resurrection life to its fullest.



Saturday, Week Four

THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's. Mark 8:33

Jesus tried on a number of occasions to talk about his impending death. The disciples would not hear it. On one occasion, Peter took Jesus aside and told him he couldn't talk about dying and coming to life again. It just didn't make sense. Jesus rebuked the Tempter's influence in Peter and reminded us that our human point of view is never enough. God's perspective always casts the deciding vote. He sees all and knows all from the beginning of time to every motive of every person. Logic doesn't figure in. At best our human perspective is restricted, incomplete, and often just plain wrong.

What do we do, then, with our point of view? We must always lay it before the all-knowing God for complete examination. If we use our human point of view as the absolute, where do we place God's wisdom? In second place to ours? Many do. However, the purpose of this journey is to help us remove what does not give us God's perspective and His Truth. Of course we have ideas, and we evaluate situations based on previous experiences and knowledge. However, if we become arrogant about our perspective, we have to acknowledge we are in the same situation as Peter and in need of rebuke.

If we use our human point of view as the absolute, where do we place God's wisdom?

James reminds us that we can have as much of God's wisdom as we need to do His will. All we have to do is ask. Not asking is a form of arrogance. Put the pieces together the best you can, but lay them before God and ask for His approval or revision. Always.

After the rebuke, Jesus pulled the disciples together for a special lesson. The lesson gives us reason to believe that Peter was doing more than looking after Jesus' best interest. Jesus warned the disciples about selfish ambition. Peter knew that talk about resurrection could make Jesus sound like a lunatic and discredit his followers. There was self-interest hiding his human perspective.

Human perspective gives us our limited, often self-protecting way of looking at things. God's perspective lifts our sights, extends our view, makes us a part of a bigger picture. We need God's perspective if we want Truth. Our best truths trap us; His Truth frees.

Today

Where have you acted as if your human perspective about a person or situation is all you need? Let God lift your sights to a perspective that you cannot have without Him.

My Prayer

You are the God Who Sees more than I do. Protect me from tunnel vision that makes me act as if what I see is all the truth there is. I need your perspective. I need your Truth.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

*Worship that does not bring all of you into the presence of God
is no worship at all.*

A Review for the Heart

How are you continuing to deepen your understanding of who Jesus is? Are you fully awake to the message and mission of Jesus as it applies to your rescue? What squeezes out room for Jesus that he should have had from the beginning? How could Jesus release you from whatever does not help you live with the freedom Jesus has to give?

My Sunday Morning Prayer

All seeing God, I am a sheet of glass you can see all the way through. My first response is to fear what you find as much as I fear what an MRI might reveal when the doctor suggests cancer. But whatever you see, I need to acknowledge. Then, I can offer it back to you as an expression of worship. Honesty from the heart reserves nothing so that I can be all present for You in worship.

Preparing for Worship

Oh that my actions would consistently reflect your principles! Psalm 119:5

Keep me from lying to myself. Psalm 119:29

You desire honesty from the heart, so you can teach me to be wise in my inmost being. Psalm 51:6

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. Psalm 145:18

A Blessing for Worship

*May you come before God without fear of retribution when you speak from an honest heart.
May you know His nearness and complete acceptance in an empowering way that helps you choose obedience more strongly than ever.*



Monday, Week Five

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Then Jesus asked the man, “What do you want me to do for you?” Luke 18:41a

Jesus' healing encounters always make me understand there is more to healing than physical change. In this story, a blind man begs for mercy in the kind of loud and obnoxious cry that must be heard or silenced. The crowds, of course, told the man to be quiet because they wanted to hear Jesus. Crowds tend to miss the obvious.

When Jesus heard his plaintive cry above the crowd noise, he asked the crowd to bring him to the front. Then, he asked a simple, startling, but most important question, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Wasn't it obvious? The man was blind. He had pawed his way through the crowd, head jerking in the direction of sound. He had tapped his way through life with a stick. He was always running into people and knocking things over. The man was a nuisance.

**Jesus' healing encounters always
makes me understand there is more
to healing than physical change.**

But the man was not a nuisance to Jesus. It was as if Jesus had been waiting to hear that the man knew what he needed so that Jesus could give it. As soon

as the man's requested sight, Jesus restored his vision. End of story? Not for me.

The question that Jesus asked haunts me: “What do you want me to do for you?” We ask Jesus for a lot of things we don't really need. We *want* some pesky annoyance removed. We *want* easy answers about questions of the future. We *want* a lot of things. But what would we answer if we stood before Jesus, his full attention waiting for the answer to his question. What one thing would change our life from here until the day we die?

The truth is we have the full attention of Jesus. He has resources that will change our lives. He waits to give us what we recognize meets the real need of lives. Unlike our culture who quickly tells us what we need, Jesus asks us to identify our need. Can we?

Nothing pleases Jesus more than to give us what we need. Perhaps today is your day to ask. Nothing helps you take the journey to Easter better than agreeing with Jesus about what you really need. Just ask.

Today

Hear Jesus' question, “What do you want me to do for you?” When you are ready, answer him.

My Prayer

Loving Savior, I juggle so many needs. I don't know where to start. Quiet my heart so I can recognize my need from your perspective. Then, help me want what you want to give me.



"Lord," he pleaded, "I want to see!" Luke 18:41

Jesus asked the beggar who would not be quiet, "What do you want me to do for you." Had one of us been standing in the crowd, we would probably be thinking: *Don't you get it Jesus? The man is blind. What do you think he wants?* But Jesus never does all the work of healing. The person who needs it has a part. So Jesus asked his question so there would be no doubt. "Lord, I want to see!" the man pleaded with the frozen stare from eyes that only know darkness.

"Receive your sight," Jesus said. And it was done. The blind man threw his stick away, focused on the astonished faces around him, ran without fear of falling, and soaked in the colors he had seen only in his memories. He could see and now his choices in life are numberless. Now, he could choose what he sees. If he chooses well, he will never be accused of missing the obvious, of being blind.

Jesus valued spiritual sight over physical sight. He knew that whatever took away physical sight was

not as debilitating as what took away spiritual sight. He could heal physical blindness because a person, who was physically blind, knew it. Spiritually blind people are ignorant to the darkness they live in.

Sometimes I wonder how blind we are to what is in front of us to see. The pain of people around us. The inability to see where God is working in a life that frustrates us or in a circumstance we don't like. What truth do we miss that makes us blind in unnecessary ways?

Perhaps we need to come to Jesus with only one answer to his question. "Lord, I want to see." Perhaps we need to admit our ignorance perpetuated by self-assurance and ask that our eyes be opened. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves to choose to see where God directs. Then we will understand what the blind discovered: sight is a responsibility and a choice.

Today

Practice seeing today. Who is tired, frustrated, closed, fearful, filled with self-doubt? How could you reach out to that person today?

My Prayer

All Seeing God, I miss too much about the people around me. Open my eyes. Help me to focus where you would look. If I am to be your hands and feet in this world, I must be your eyes first. Since you will always heal blindness that starts in the heart, I want to see!



Wednesday, Week Five

THE MEAGER AND THE MUCH

A poor widow came by and dropped in two pennies. Luke 21:2, 3a Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it. John 12:3

These two stories remind us how backwards we think about value. The widow brought her two coins worth less than a penny to the Temple. She would have called her gift “nothing” because she compared it to what she could not give. But Jesus knew she gave what the others did not with all their clanging coins. She gave her heart.

On a different occasion, Mary brought an expensive jar of perfume, essence of nard imported from the Himalayas worth a year’s wages. She gave it to Jesus in an unusual and scandalous way. She poured it on his feet. The gasp must have been as audible as the fragrance was powerful. Jesus saw her heart, too. The gift of her heart was incalculable.

Financial counsellors would reprimand both women because they determine worth in terms of buying power. Judas revealed this lean when he called Mary’s gift a complete waste. The disciples

with Jesus in the Temple probably didn’t even notice the widow until Jesus called their attention to her.

How do you compare the meager gift of last coins with the extravagance of expensive perfume? There is only one way and that is to look at the heart, which we

cannot do. But Jesus can. To him, what the widow gave was of equal value as the extravagance of Mary because each gave from their heart. Careful and restraint were not in either of their heart’s vocabulary. Jesus knows the generous heart will always find a way to give. He knows that a closed heart will always calculate. How does he know this? Because he came to give his heart to us. All of it. To accept his heart-gift, we have to give all of ours to him. A generous heart grows from that exchange.

Today

What do you call generous that Jesus calls meager? What do you call meager that Jesus calls generous?

My Prayer

Jesus, my heart measures the wrong values. I withhold out of the fear of giving too much or not enough. But when I understand the value of your gift to me, I touch unbounded generosity. Remove my tendency to calculate, compare, or control. I would be generous with my meager and my much.



USEFUL WASTE

A woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume . . . broke the jar and poured it on [Jesus'] head . . . Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste?" Mark 14:3

Jesus and the disciples were enjoying down time before their Passover gathering at the home of Lazarus, the one Jesus raised from the dead. Unnoticed, a woman entered with a jar. She stood behind Jesus reclining at the table, broke the jar and poured the expensive oil on his head. The woman Mark does not name is probably Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Some think the confusion between John's story (12:1-8) and Mark's comes from Mark's storytelling as he contrasts Mary and Judas. Don't get sidetracked. Stay focused on her action and others' reaction. The woman is focused on Jesus, but others are focused on the waste.

"What a waste!" some said. Before you point a finger, think about taking a year's worth of your take-home pay and splurging on a thank you gift to the surgeon who saved your loved one's life. Would it be irresponsible or generous?

There is a time when waste is generous and hoarding is closed-hearted.

The problem is that there is no formula here; only Jesus' response: "She has done a beautiful thing." The story reminds us that there is a time when waste is generous and hoarding is closed-hearted. There is a time when pouring it on is better than giving up a drop or two. There is a time when monetary value is irrelevant and only the heart can measure the gift.

Who would I have been in this scene? One of the indignant ones who saw the waste? One of the quiet ones waiting for Jesus' response? Or wishing I had thought of doing such a "beautiful thing?" Remember, Jesus taught that you lose what you save and you gain what you give up.

Following Jesus to the cross makes me realize I need more lessons about useful waste. Jesus poured out his life and no one who receives new life from him ever calls it waste.

Today

Who are you in this scene? Who do you want to be?

Prayer

Jesus, I fear I don't always know the difference between hoarding and useful waste. Teach me where I save to the peril of the generous heart you would create in me. Help me find more reasons to give love, forgiveness, and second chances in the extravagant way you continue give.



To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. Mathew 13:12

So many were closed to Jesus' teaching. The rich ruler was not open to life without his possessions. The Pharisees were not open to teaching that pushed their authority aside. They became selective listeners who heard what they wanted to. They could leave with a good story or a good truth.

In our loud and busy culture, it is easy to hear the loud voices. They shout through the television, social media, and texts. Discerning listeners are more selective. They have learned that the loudest or best sounding voice doesn't always deliver truth. Christian listeners take it farther. They hear the whisper of Jesus as if he is the only one speaking.

Openness is the key. Think unbounded landscape, free flowing river, unlocked doors, 24/7 access. No dams. No bookends. No locks. Openness entertains the questions, "What do you want me to do to?" Openness prays the search me, test me prayer without any restrictions.

Jesus said that openness was the key to understanding his teaching. It has less to do with academic degree or IQ and more to do with removing what would make us sift, choose, excuse or rationalize.

**If you are open, Jesus will
teach you more.**

This is not tolerance for every philosophy or voice. That kind of openness treats truth and lies as the same. Jesus asked for openness to him and his words. He asked for undistracted focus. He said if we give him openness, he will give us understanding.

Understanding brings acceptance and acceptance leads to obedience and every abundance Jesus has to give. It is a good exchange.

If you are open, Jesus will teach you more. He will teach you more about peace, forgiveness, and fearless living. He will teach you about priority and balance that brings unity and healing. He will teach you about kindness and generosity in ways that make you rich in what matters.

Be open to Jesus. Let his words simmer in you until they boil with a thirst for more. To the one with an open heart who asks for more understanding, Jesus always says yes.

Today

Ask Jesus how open your heart is to his truth. Use the search me, test me, point me prayer. Practice openness until you recognize and understand what Jesus wants you to understand..

My Prayer

Jesus, you are sure Truth in my world of many lies. May I listen open to you so that I will have the understanding to reject lies and obey your Truth.



Saturday, Week Five

IF YOU ONLY KNEW

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace." Luke 19:41-42

I don't think we really understand the love Jesus had for Jerusalem. It represented what God wanted His people to enjoy: intimate and authentic worship, powerful protection, a place of coming together for unity and encouragement. Jerusalem was called the City of God because it was his Father's city. It was supposed to reflect His Father's character and compassion, justice and gentleness. They also called it the Holy City because it was to replicate on earth that precious gathering in Heaven with its protection and peace. After all, didn't its very name mean peace? Where was this peace?

As Jesus stood and took in the panorama of this city on a hill, he cried. He knew what Jerusalem could be. He also knew that one day Jerusalem would be nothing but rubble. He cried for the gap between; he cried for the peace they would not know.

How do you connect with the compassion of Christ and his mission to bring heart-peace to your neighborhood and city?

What brings you to tears? How do you connect with the compassion of Christ and his mission to bring heart-peace to your neighborhood and city? We can protest injustice without passing His peace and miss the point. Unless we know his peace; we can't share it. Anyone can pass out food and clothing to those in need, but who will pass them peace?

Maybe Jesus cried for what his disciples didn't understand in that moment. Maybe he cried for what we still don't understand, that our world, including our families, lack God's peace because we don't share it. We don't lead with a heart guarded by the peace of God. We succumb to our world's unrest, chaos, and arguments. We take on the rhetoric of world without the peace of God to which Jesus would say, "if only you knew what would bring peace."

Today

Where do you cry for peace and reach for it from the wrong source? Let Jesus give you his peace.

My Prayer

Jesus, Certain Peace of my world, help me know your peace. Protect me from words that do not share your peace. Restrict me from actions that do not lead with your peace. Shape me for a life where your peace so fills me that I have nothing more than your peace to share.

Sixth Sunday of Lent: Palm Sunday

Worship is more than the words you sing or say.

Worship results in your everyday response to those words.

A Review for the Heart

Where do you need God to open your eyes to what He wants you to see? Who do you let judge between your meager and your much? How open are you to God's truth, especially when it conflicts with cultural acceptance? What praise brings you to Palm Sunday?

My Sunday Morning Prayer

On this day of Palm Sunday Worship, I do not want to join a one-day celebration that ignores you on Monday. What praise I raise today, I must also lift tomorrow. Protect me from responding to any crescendo but that does not resound with gratitude to you for who you are and what you came to do for me. I will raise my praise today and be a follower who will stay.

Preparing for Worship

Praise the Lord, I tell myself, I will praise the Lord as long as I live. Psalm 146:1b, 2a.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Psalm 118:26

I will declare the wonders of your name to my brothers and sisters. I will praise you among all your people. Psalm 22:22

I will praise you as long as I live. Psalm 63:4

A Blessing for Worship

May your heart speak the truth in praise about who Jesus is and what he came to do so that your good words prepare you to celebrate what this week means to your salvation and eternal life.



Monday, Holy Week

STIRRED BUT NOT CHANGED

The entire city of Jerusalem was stirred as he entered. Matthew 21:10

Unlike other crowd-spurred events, no teaching or miracle seems to have precipitated this joyous escort into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. However the scene developed, we know one thing, something electric and contagious happened that unified the crowd into one voice of praise. The swell seemed to float Jesus through the sea of people on waves of utter joy.

But where were they on Monday? What difference did it make as they made their Passover preparations? That's the problem with crowds. They can make a lot of noise, gather a lot of people, and make no difference in their individual lives. They are stirred, but not changed.

As you consider the tumultuous tremor of Palm Sunday, think about such implications in your life. You gather on Sundays. You join your voice singing praises to Jesus just like the Palm Sunday crowd. You make a joyful noise together. But what difference does it make on Monday? That's the compelling question.

And we know more about who Jesus was, what his mission was, and why he came. What stirs our

hearts in unified voice should take us to our Mondays with the same focus to live our praise where the crowd does not join in. This scene warns us of the danger of being one more voice in a crowd. No one really hears us there. Where our voice must be heard is where the crowds do no gather to praise the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Compare this to the shepherds who returned home glorifying and praising God. They left the event that stirred them to tell others. They took their praise home.

That's the lesson we should learn from Palm Sunday. It does no good to join the crowd unless you take the praise home and live it there.

Today

As you gather to share your voice with others in praise, think about how you will take the praise home.

My Prayer

Jesus, too many times my Sunday praise makes no difference on Monday. Stir my heart this day, but help me to live it with my family, friends, and work associates. May I never just follow the crowd, but find the way to make a difference with my single heart, stirred and changed.



Tuesday, Holy Week

IF YOU BELIEVE

If you believe you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer. Matthew 21:22, NLT

Jesus was on his way back into Jerusalem after his hero's welcome. The region was known for fig trees, so it was no surprise to find a tree. What Jesus wasn't expecting was a leafy tree without a single fig. I think it reminded him immediately of everything he was up against with the Jewish religious leaders, a lot of show but no fruit. He cursed the tree and the disciples were amazed at how quickly it withered. They shouldn't have been surprised. If the words of Christ calmed seas, healed blind eyes, raised the dead; they should have realized the power of Jesus' words. However, Jesus used the withered fig tree to teach about prayer and the power of rightly rooted belief.

What does it take for you to believe, really believe, that something will happen. Consider something you have thought about, analyzed, and see no other way to work it out. Are you able to believe it into existence? Can you pray hard enough, long enough, and live as if it is as good as done? Is that what Jesus taught? Was this a *claim it/receive it formula?*

Most of the time when the pressures, reversals and complications of our life mire us hopelessly in such unwanted tangles, it's what we wish could be true. Our own histories tell us it's not. Or they make us doubt our ability to believe strongly enough.

Instead of reducing prayer to a formula to help you get what you think is best, shouldn't you focus on everything God sees and knows?. Shouldn't your belief be in Him and His perspective about your motives and needs? Prayer grounded in Who you believe helps you untie every tentacle hold on what you think should happen. If you believe God loves you more deeply than anyone else, then your belief in how He answers your prayer is better than anything you could imagine..

Instead of reducing prayer to a formula to get what you think best, shouldn't you focus on everything God sees and knows?

Take your focus off the fruitless circumstance in your life and turn it toward God who is the giver of all good gifts. Make your prayer your desire to be fully known by God. It gives God all the openness He needs to give you all His best.

Today

Examine your prayers by how they affirm Who God is more than what you want from Him.

My Prayer

Jesus, I am too often a fruitless fig tree. My prayers limp when my belief focuses on my perspective. Increase my belief in Who you are so that my heart opens to what you want to give.



As you know . . . I . . . will be betrayed and crucified. Matthew 26:2

Jesus had just finished private conversations with his disciples about the tumultuous times they must persevere through. He used the story of the ten bridesmaids and five talents to remind them how true servants behave. He was painting a picture to prepare them. Then, he takes a big breath, looks into their eyes and says heart-stopping words, “As you know . . . I will be crucified.”

But they didn’t know. Their minds were still fixed on the momentous crowd approval they believed would counter everything the Sanhedrin were trying to do. Did they think he used this torturous word metaphorically or did they hear it all? What did they know? Not enough to make the leap to Jesus’ imminent death.

Why did Jesus want the disciples to know about his death before it happened? Would it make it any easier? Probably not. Was he testing their understanding? Maybe. Perhaps he told them so that they could put a true story together after it happened. He wanted them to know that he accepted his death as part of his mission. He wanted them to know there was no reason for revenge.

We know he was headed to the cross . . . we still have to account for what we do with that information.

We know he was headed to the cross. We sing about it, read about it, and hear sermons about it. We can point fingers at the disciples because they should have known, but we still have to account for what we do with that information.

“Knowledge is power,” Francis Bacon said. So what do we do with that power? It is a haunting question on this journey to Easter. This was the watershed time for our personal history. Jesus died for me; he died for you. The key question we must all face, did his death make enough difference? Am I living the abundant, obedient, fruitful life that Jesus made possible on the cross? Knowing what he did isn’t enough. I have to use that knowledge to live the life he came to share.

Today

As you think about your day and your life, what difference does Jesus’ death on a cross mean for you today? Live in that power.

Prayer

Jesus, I know what you did for me, and I want it to make the difference you intended. My world is just as messed up as yours was when you were here, maybe more. I must live in the power of the life you purchased for me at the cost of the cross. Nothing less honors you. Nothing less satisfies me.



Jesus replied, "if I don't wash you, you won't belong to me." John 13:8b

The disciples had finished the Passover meal with Jesus. Think Thanksgiving dinner and full stomachs and story-sharing around the table. Think family meal that was good because of who shared it with you, not because of the food. That's the picture of Jesus' last meal with his disciples. You know the story of what happened after the meal. Jesus removes his robe, picks up the servant towel and basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet. While meal service and a foot bath aren't usually what we would put together, it was exactly the right way for Jesus to leave one of the most remembered calls to servanthood he ever taught. Be willing to do the dirty work. Be open to the unexpected. Never hide behind protocol. Never turn away from a chance to serve.

Peter considers this action backwards. He seemed to have a better understanding of who Jesus was than the others, but he still had more to learn than he realized. He blurted out his discomfort, probably loud enough for the rest to hear. "I should be doing this for you."

**We would rather do without
than do it ourselves. We
aren't made of servant stock.**

What he said was true. One of the disciples should have filled in for the absent foot-washer's job before they ate the meal. But it wasn't their place; it wasn't their job; it wasn't their gift . . . it wasn't . . . well, you understand.

That's the problem. We do understand that line of thinking because we've used it. We've used it in our

homes, at our work, and at church. We have let little things go undone because of it. We would rather do without than do it ourselves. We aren't made of servant stock.

Jesus knows exactly what we're made of. That's why he took the cloth first. That's why he would wash away misunderstandings about our place or job or status or responsibility.

Whatever needs to be done, whether it is your job or not, just do it! Demonstrate that you have been washed by Jesus so you can claim your place in the family of servants Jesus came to call.

Today

What servant task do you turn away from in your family? Do it because Jesus served you first.

My Prayer

Jesus, your servant model always humbles me and reveals where I have complained more than served. If I am to serve others in ways that make a difference, I must be your servant first. I wait for your instructions. This time, I plead no exemptions.



Good Friday, Holy Week

WHY?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Matthew 27:46b

T

he scene cannot be adequately described even though we try. Three crosses with three men in utter agony. Blood streaked bodies writhing, gasping for precious oxygen. Each knows that death will come, but not soon enough. Jesus receives no pass for pain. But it is not the pain that makes him speak. It is his feeling of utter abandonment, a separation, a darkness he has not known. In the desert and in Gethsemane, angels came. Today there are no angels, no reprieve, no rescue.

When he speaks, his words come staccato but clear enough to be recorded. He asks the question that beats in our hearts about endless situations that turn against us. The three letter question has paralyzed lives, confused the best of us, and sent many to come up with their own answers that malign the character of God. "Why?" Jesus asked. "Why have you left me?"

We ask why. Why the cancer? Why Alzheimer's? Why now? What truly answers the why of a broken-hearted person living through a dark place? Somehow we think that answers to why questions lead to acceptance. But they don't; they just lead to more unanswerable questions.

Does it offer any comfort to know that Jesus asked why?

Does it offer any comfort to know that Jesus asked why? This was not when the heavens opened and the dove descended and the voice proclaimed, "This is my beloved son." Jesus received the same answer we receive: silence.

It's not that we can't ask *why*. After all, Jesus did. It's just that their answers won't help us as much as we think they will. There are better questions. *How* is one. *How will I make it? How will you help me?* *How* is a question God loves to answer. He comes to us in the tangle of our unanswered why's to stay with us until we are ready to ask how.

Jesus' example reminds us that he did not turn away from his Father because of the silence. Eventually, he came to the place we all must come, to leave ourselves and our why's in the hands of our God who knows what we really need and what the answer to why will not give.

Today

Is there a why question you can't get past? Remember the cross and begin to ask how.

My Prayer

Patient Father, you know I have asked my why's. I have misunderstood your silence. Help me change my why's to how so that I will know that my story does not have to end with why.



SECURE THE TOMB

"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go make the tomb as secure as you know how." Matthew 27:65

Jesus was dead in all of death's hopeless finality. The religious rulers had won. They had silenced their most frustrating opposition. Now they could return to what they did best, keep the law. However, there was one minor detail they needed to take care of. They went to Pilate to remind him that Jesus predicted he would rise after three days. Isn't it interesting that Jesus' enemies remembered what the disciples had not. The chief priests asked Pilate for permission to secure the tomb so that the disciples could not steal the body of Jesus and claim resurrection.

They posted Roman guards and sealed the tomb, probably stretching a cord across the millstone-sized closing to which they added a lump of clay and made a Roman imprint. This announced that severe Roman consequences awaited anyone who broke the seal. It was as secure as they knew how to make it.

Remember Jesus' words, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's?" The tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. The body within belonged to the Creator of life and death. Pilate had no jurisdiction here.

**[Jesus] will always open the
tombs others try to seal us in.**

What the religious and the political leaders did not understand is that you cannot control God's power. You cannot secure what God would open. Nor can you open what God secures. You cannot manipulate God's power to serve your own purposes. You can only

submit to it or be caught in its judgment. However, God's power is not a force separated from God's character. When we submit to God's power, we submit to an all-loving, all-knowing, ever compassionate God. The result of that submission is security we can't accomplish. We are not pawns in His eternal plan; we are the photos on his fridge and the birthdays he never forgets. We are the faces he carries in His heart and the calls He never leaves to voice mail. He hovers, follows, leads, heals, opens, and always loves so powerfully that if we submit to Him, He will always open the tombs others try to seal us in.

Today

Where do you feel caught? Submit to God's power there.

My Prayer

God of all power, my heart cries for submission but my will is stubbornly slow. Help me close the gap so that I live by your incomparable, undefeatable, inexhaustible, all-sustaining power.



Resurrection Sunday

LET ME REMIND YOU!

Let me remind you . . . of the good news . . . that saves you. Christ died for our sins . . . was buried and was raised from the dead on the third day. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

The morning was heavy with fresh grief. They still couldn't wrap their minds around what had happened even though they had seen it with their own eyes. Jesus had died. They remembered gray ashen flesh, vacant eyes, stiffened body quickly wrapped to place him in the tomb before sundown and the start of Sabbath. Everything went into slow motion as if they moved through oil. Nothing seemed right or fair or good.

Three women were on a mission in the early morning to finish the loving task of preparing the body of Jesus for final burial. They brought the spices that would somewhat overpower the putrid smell of death as they tucked them inside the strips of cloth, layered as a caterpillar would a cocoon. It was a last thing that would bring devastating finality to these days.

But they couldn't complete their mission. There was no body. The nearly 2,000 pound stone hewn to fit the opening of the tomb was conveniently resting next to the dark opening. An angel delivered the Good News: "He is not here! He is risen as he said!"

Life returned to a dead body. Not like Lazarus who would have to die again. This was Eternal Life. This was Creator God Life. This was move-through-locked doors life. To be in the presence of life completely void of earth's limitations, to receive a tiny glimpse of where eternal life takes us; isn't

that enough to turn people around? Isn't that the Good News we are missing these days? That there is LIFE and Jesus showed it to us. God ripped the veil between death and life to help us see that no matter what this world gives us, God would give us His life the same way He gave it to Jesus. And now, the only veil that needs to be destroyed is the one in closed hearts, covering unnecessary dead places.

**God ripped the veil between
death and life . . . to give
us His life the same way
He gave it to Jesus.**

For some, tearing it away is like trying to roll a 2,000 pound stone. The Good News is that God will roll away the stone; all we have to do is look at the empty tomb and let LIFE fill it.

Today

Where is the closed tomb God would open for you to show you the power of resurrection life?

My Prayer

God of Resurrection Life, to live dead to your life is Satan's highest wish. The Good News is that I can live in the fullness of our resurrection life. Take me to the empty tomb again. Help me live in the power of your unstoppable, death-defying, hope-producing resurrected life. Your life opens my tombs, too.