

Week 4

MARCH 14-20, 2021

Freedom for the captives

by Roger Gench

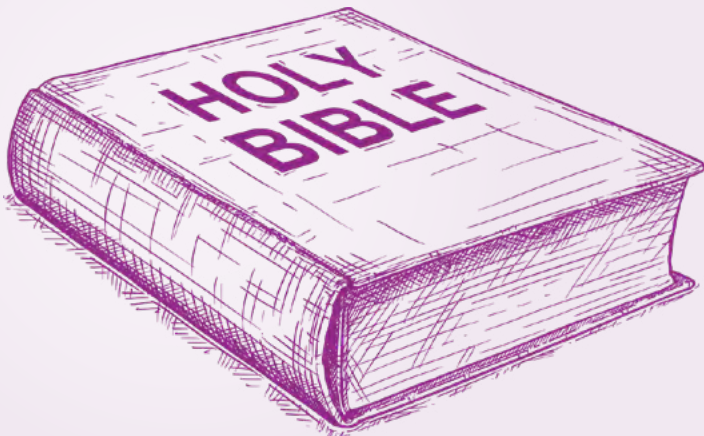


HYMN OF THE WEEK: "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"

PRAYER FOCUS: Thanksgiving — What blessings have I received from God? How can I put into words what Jesus has done for me and for my loved ones?

ACTION: Give thanks to someone for their work each day. Write an email to a colleague. Send a thank you letter to a public servant or frontline worker in your community. Express gratitude to those you encounter in customer service. Tell your pastor or a church volunteer what you appreciate about their service.

**WORSHIP THE
LORD YOUR
GOD, AND SERVE
ONLY HIM.**



Sunday, MARCH 14, 2021

LUKE 4:1-13

On the heels of his baptism, Jesus faces diabolic temptation in the wilderness that tests his mettle for the ministry before him. None of the temptations the devil sets before him have ignoble ends in view — daily bread, the good of nations and victory over death all are worthy goals. But each temptation entails selfish manipulation rather than service to the glory of God. Jesus models service to others, refusing to give in to the diabolic temptation to serve himself.



Practice: Pray this Scripture slowly and imagine that you are present in this scene, observing the devil's tempting of Jesus. Consider his responses to them, and how you might frame your own.



Journal: Record in your journal any questions, thoughts or emotions that emerge as you pray with this Scripture, noting your sense of whether they move you toward God or away from God.

Monday, MARCH 15, 2021

LUKE 4:16-30

This scene represents the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry in Luke. The words he reads from the Isaiah scroll in his hometown synagogue constitute the programmatic message his ministry will embody — bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free. As his ministry unfolds, it will fulfill each of these bold works of liberation.



Practice: You are invited to pray this Scripture with special attention to the words of Isaiah in verses 18-19. What images arrest your attention or challenge you, and why?



Journal: Note in your journal your sense of movement toward God and away from God as you engaged in prayerful reflection on this story.

Tuesday, MARCH 16, 2021

LUKE 4:31-37

Exorcism is a characteristic aspect of Jesus' public ministry — a reality outside the range of our own experience. But if we ponder the demonic as a spiritual condition, we can surely recognize realities that distort and disfigure human life in our own time and place from which we may need release. Racism, for example, is surely a spiritual deformity in our lives and in our society. In this exorcism story in Luke 4, Jesus represents a comprehensive threat to the whole realm of demons, providing release, here and now, from forces that deform and deface our lives.



Practice: Prayerfully and slowly read this story from Luke, pondering realities in your own life, and in the life of the world around you, that distort and disfigure life, and thus can be described as demonic.



Journal: Note in your journal any insights that emerged during your prayer time, and any demons you can identify in your own life that keep you from the life that God intends for you.

Wednesday, MARCH 17, 2021

LUKE 5:1-11

This story about Jesus' calling of the first disciples invites us to consider our own calling as disciples. Have you ever felt called to put your boat into deep water and been uncomfortable or challenged by that call? It is not easy to be a disciple of Jesus. So if we follow Jesus, we too might be called into deep waters to face into the brokenness of our world.



Practice: Read this lesson slowly and imagine yourself in the scene. Where are you in this story and what do you see, hear and feel?



Journal: Write in your journal of your experience of praying this story, and the movement of your spirit toward God or away from God that engagement with it evoked.

Thursday, MARCH 18, 2021

LUKE 6:27-36

In this scene from Luke's Sermon on the Plain, Jesus exhorts us to love our enemies — surely one of the hardest things he asks us to do. Theologian Miroslav Volf claims that loving our enemies goes to the heart of the Christian faith. In his book "A Public Faith," he writes: "Love doesn't mean agreement and approval; it means benevolence and beneficence, possible disagreement and disapproval notwithstanding." Thus, loving our enemies does not absolve us or deter us from pursuing justice as we understand it, from our calling to stand in solidarity with the marginalized among us, or from calling evil by its name. Justice and mercy go together — both are works of God.



Practice: Prayerfully read this passage from Luke and reflect deeply on what it might mean to love your enemies. When you think of your enemies, who comes to mind? Members of your family or church? Fellow citizens? Foreign adversaries? If you are to pray for your enemies, what will you pray for? As you reflect on Jesus' admonitions, what do they compel you to do?



Journal: Note in your journal any insights that emerged from your prayerful engagement with Jesus' teaching.

Friday, MARCH 19, 2021

LUKE 6:6:36-42

Another hard teaching of Jesus is before us: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged." In the hyperpolarized times in which we live, judging others is part of daily discourse and seems to have become a virtue rather than a vice. This passage challenges that notion at its very core. Today's Scripture, combined with yesterday's injunction to love our enemies, highlights mercy as a central characteristic of the Christian life — because God is merciful, and we are God's children and are to reflect that family resemblance.



Practice: Prayerfully read this passage, mulling over aspects of it that stand out to you and that resonate with your own experience. Reflect on ways in which the merciful character of God informs our identity as God's own children.



Journal: Note in your journal what happened as you prayed with this text.

Saturday, MARCH 20, 2021

LUKE 6:43-49

Jesus' teaching in this passage is very simple yet weighty: good trees produce good fruit. Thus, good conduct comes from a good heart. Moreover, the words that come out of our mouths reflect what is in our hearts.



Practice: Prayerfully read and reflect on this Scripture, with special attention to the connection between fruit and tree — between action and heart, and speech and heart.



Journal: Note in your journal key reflections that emerged in your prayer with this passage of Scripture.

As a Lenten devotional discipline this year, you are invited to pray with Scripture as a way of discerning what God is calling you to be and to do during this season.

John Calvin spoke of the Bible as the “lens of faith,” likening it to a pair of eyeglasses that enables us to see the world with clearer vision as God’s creation. As theologian Serene Jones notes in “Inhabiting Scripture, Dreaming Bible” (a chapter in “Engaging Biblical Authority”), this was Calvin’s way of saying that Scripture “brings clarity and focus to all aspects of our lives” and “lets us see what we otherwise would not.” In short, once we have these eyeglasses on, “there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that escapes their vision-framing power.”

PRACTICES:



- **Scripture as prayer:** One of the ways we can “put on” Scripture is by praying or meditating contemplatively on a biblical text — slowly and contemplatively reading it as a prayer to God. Indeed, this is an ancient and robust practice of prayer. When we pray with Scripture, we ponder deeply the words and images of the text. Using our imaginations, we can even enter into the world of the text in order to discern God’s wisdom.



- **Movement of God:** Praying with Scripture in this way can be an aid – a focusing lens – to help us discern the movement of God in our personal lives and in the life of the world around us. Throughout the season of Lent, you will be invited to pray with one passage from Scripture each day and prompted to reflect on what it is disclosing to you about *movement toward God* and *movement away from God* in your life.



- **Prayer journal:** You may find it helpful to keep a journal in which you briefly note what surfaces in your prayer time, so that over the course of the Lenten journey you can track the movements of God’s Spirit in your midst. Also, consider the *prayer focus* of the week as you journal and pray.



- **Bringing the Bible and hymns to life:** Each week, a *hymn* will be suggested for worship and reflection. During your devotional time each day, read the words (or sing or play the hymn!) and reflect on the truths the text reveals to you. (If you don’t have a hymnal, you can Google the hymn or visit hymnary.org.) Likewise, consider the *action* prompt each day and note how the Spirit nudges you to fulfill it.