

2021
Lent
DEVOTIONALS

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE DURING LENT

The Presbyterian
OUTLOOK

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.

Praying Scripture

FEBRUARY 17 – 20, 2021

Forgiveness leads to life

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: "Be Thou My Vision"


PRAYER FOCUS: Daily examen — reflect on the events of the day and discern God's presence in them.


ACTION: Connect with a friend or family member each day. Via phone, text, email or social media, say: "I don't say it often enough, but I love you" or "I'm grateful to you."

Ash Wednesday, FEBRUARY 17, 2021

PSALM 51:1-10

The first biblical text for our Lenten journey is Psalm 51, which is traditionally read on Ash Wednesday. Psalm 51 is striking not only for its honesty about sin, but also for its confidence in God's merciful love amid the brokenness in our lives and in the world. The psalm is a prayer - a penitential prayer - and you are invited to pray Psalm 51:1-10 in a translation of your choosing.

 **Practice:** Read the psalm slowly two or three times and ponder deeply its images, noting which ones capture your attention. Such images can be points at which God is speaking to you and focusing your attention. Reflect on the images for at least five minutes (longer if you desire). As you do so, sense the movements of your spirit and the emotions that they evoke — both movements *toward* God and *away* from God. Movements toward God could include, for example, a sense of hope, peace or love that surfaces. Movements away from God might include a sense of guilt or despair.

 **Journal:** Note these movements in your journal so that you can review them during your Lenten journey.

**HAVE
MERCY
ON ME,
O GOD.**



Thursday, FEBRUARY 18, 2021

ISAIAH 55:1-5

Isaiah 55 invites us to ponder the abundance of life in God, in marked contrast to the scarcity we experience in a world that so often seems short on resources. While in Babylonian captivity, exiled Israelites were faced with the scarcity of basic necessities of life, as are many people around the globe and in our own country, especially amid a pandemic.



Practice: You are invited to pray Isaiah 55:1-5. Ponder deeply the images in this text and sense the movements toward God and movements away from God in your life that your reflection evokes. Where is there scarcity in your life? Where is there abundance?



Journal: Take note in your journal of movements away from God and movements toward God that surface in your awareness.

Friday, FEBRUARY 19, 2021

JOHN 4:1-14

“Eternal life,” a key concept in John’s Gospel, refers not just to life after death but to a rich quality of life available *now* in relationship to God in Christ — life that partakes of the goodness and joy of Godlife that is full and enduring. Fullness of life, symbolized by the vivid imagery of living water, is God’s intent for us in the present, as well as the future. However, many realities can keep us from the fullness that God intends — realities such as fear, anxiety, self-hatred or social conditions of oppression on account of racism, classism or sexism, to name but a few.



Practice: You are invited to pray John 4:1-14 in light of your particular circumstances. Slowly read the story two or three times and ponder deeply its images. You might even imagine that you are present at the well in the story as Jesus converses with the Samaritan woman. What do you observe? What movements of your spirit and emotions emerge as you ponder this story? Are they movements toward God such as liberation, hope or joy? Or movements away from God such as anxiety or even despair?



Journal: Note what surfaces in your prayer with this passage in your journal.

Saturday, FEBRUARY 20, 2021

ISAIAH 43:1-5

Isaiah 43 is written to exiles in Babylon who long for homecoming, thus it is a potent word for exiles in our own time and place who long for the same. This passage is one of the most powerful expressions of God’s love for Israel – indeed, for all people – in Scripture: “You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” Isaiah 43 is perhaps especially poignant in our present pandemic moment, when so many are feeling isolated and alone.



Practice: You are invited to read Isaiah 43:1-5 slowly, two or three times, taking time to meditate on images that most capture your attention. What do they disclose to you about movement toward God, and away from God, in your life at present?



Journal: Note what surfaces in your journal.

Week 1

FEB. 21-27, 2021

God is our creator and our shepherd

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need”


PRAYER FOCUS: Reception — How can I receive God’s forgiveness for my own weaknesses and failures? In what ways is God speaking healing and grace into my heart?


ACTION: Pay attention to creation this week. Go for a walk and observe the Creator’s handiwork. Look out a window and take notice. Look for photos of landscapes in regions far from where you live and give thanks for the beauty and variety of creation.

Sunday, FEBRUARY 21, 2021

PSALM 46:1-11

Psalm 46, one of the most beloved of the Psalter, inspired Martin Luther’s celebrated hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It articulates deep trust in God amid turmoil and chaos — realities with which we are all too familiar in our current historical moment. There are many ways to pray with this psalm.

 **Practice:** You may wish to follow the practice of reflecting on images that compel you, or you may want to focus on certain lines of the psalm, such as the words from verse 10: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Suggestion: Repeat these eight words eight times, each time omitting the last word until you are left only with the word “Be.” This is a powerful, contemplative way to pray this psalm.

 **Journal:** Note in a journal what surfaces in your awareness, what thoughts or emotions are evoked as you engage this Scripture in prayer — movements toward God or movements away from God. Whichever the case may be, rest assured of the loving presence of God.

**BE STILL,
AND KNOW
THAT
I AM GOD.**



Monday, FEBRUARY 22, 2021

PSALM 8

Psalm 8 invites us to consider our place in God's creation — a lofty place, "a little lower than God." Though we are not God, the psalmist affirms human dominion over God's good creation. It is important to note that the word "dominion" does not connote domination, much less exploitation. It conveys, rather, that we are caretakers of God's creation, who care for it as God does. We play a representative role that carries responsibilities for stewardship on God's behalf; thus, exploitation is hardly in view. As Clint McCann writes in his essay on Psalms in "The New Interpreter's Bible," "God and humans are partners in the care of creation, because God has made a risky choice to share power!" A risky choice indeed!



Practice: Pray this psalm with special attention to our stewardship of God's creation.



Journal: As you meditate on this psalm, attend to movements toward God and away from God that surface in your awareness, and note in a journal what the psalm evokes.

Tuesday, FEBRUARY 23, 2021

PSALM 36:5-9

Psalm 36 is a profound affirmation of God's unconquered, life-giving power amid the brokenness of our lives and of all of creation — "you save humans and animals alike." This affirmation is foundational for our prayers throughout the season of Lent. It undergirds the movements of our spirits that we discern — movements both toward God and away from God. It is important to affirm God's life-giving power even as we recognize movements away from God, because it is especially during experiences of despair, fear or anxiety that we need this psalm's assurance of God's steadfast presence. The promise of resurrection out of death is foundational to our faith as we journey through Lent toward Easter.



Practice: You are invited to pray with Psalm 36:5-9.



Journal: Note what surfaces in your awareness in your journal.

Wednesday, FEBRUARY 24, 2021

PSALM 104:14-26

Psalm 104 is a majestic creation psalm, describing the interdependence of the creatures of the earth and God's manifold wisdom in creation. The psalm evokes a sense of wonder and awe as we consider the creation that surrounds us.



Practice: Read Psalm 104:14-26 slowly, two or three times, and consider its many references to the creation around us.



Journal: Note in your journal any movement toward God or away from God that is evoked as you pray this psalm.

Thursday, FEBRUARY 25, 2021

ROMANS 8:26-35

In this passage from Romans, Paul assures us that even when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. Have you ever prayed with audible emotions — groans, deep humming or sighs? We do not necessarily need words when we come before God in prayer.



Practice: Read Romans 8:26-35 slowly and open yourself to become aware of God's Spirit as it prays for you in the depths of sighs and groans — stay with this awareness for several minutes.



Journal: Note in your journal what surfaced in your awareness during this prayer time.

Friday, FEBRUARY 26, 2021

MATTHEW 6:7-13

Today's text is Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer — familiar to every Christian around the world. You probably know it by heart, but you are encouraged to read it slowly and prayerfully, pausing over each line, in order to see and hear it anew.



Practice: Pray this passage slowly several times in the manner we have been practicing. Note phrases and images that shimmer for you, asking how God might be speaking to you through them.



Journal: Note in your journal movements away from God or toward God that surfaced in your awareness as you prayed this Scripture.

Saturday, FEBRUARY 27, 2021

PSALM 42:1-8

This psalm is rich with imagery for prayer, especially in times of difficulty, distress or even in the midst of aridity — dry spells in our spiritual lives. The psalm may be especially poignant in the midst of the isolation, social distancing and loneliness we experience in a pandemic stricken world. God, too, may seem distant from us.



Practice: Pray the psalm slowly at least three times, then set your Bible aside and meditate on the images that come to mind, trusting that the images or words that you are most in need of will be present to you.



Journal: Record in your journal what happened in this prayer time. Note especially any images that stood out for you, and what you think they may convey with respect to movement toward God or away from God in your present experience.



**MY SOUL
LONGS
FOR YOU,
O GOD.**

Week 2

FEBRUARY 28 – MARCH 6, 2021

From lost to found

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: "Amazing Grace"

PRAYER FOCUS: Confession — In what ways have I done those things that I ought not to have done, and left undone those things I ought to have done?

ACTION: Each day, pray "God, send someone into my life whom I can encourage." Pay attention to how God responds, and how you are called to encourage that person.

Sunday, FEBRUARY 28, 2021

LUKE 15:1-8

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are powerful stories in and of themselves, but the context in which they appear is also important. Jesus tells these parables in response to grumbling about his hospitality to sinners! How might these parables prompt reflection on our own perception and reception of sinners? How might they bring to our awareness that within each of us that is lost?



Practice: Read one or both of the parables slowly, and using your imagination, place yourself in the story. Where are you in these scenes? How do you feel about what is happening? Are there questions you would like to ask of the shepherd or the woman?



Journal: Record in your journal what happened during this prayer time. Describe movements toward God or away from God that came into view.

**REJOICE WITH
ME, FOR
I HAVE
FOUND
MY
SHEEP
THAT
WAS
LOST.**



Monday, MARCH 1, 2021

LUKE 15:11-24

The parable of the prodigal son – or, better, the parable of two lost sons – is likely the most familiar and beloved parable in the Gospels, and it is a moving framework for prayer. Using your imagination, enter into this story, noting where you are in this scene. Focus on each of the three main figures, noting what each evokes for you. (Feel free to mix up the genders in the story: you may wish to imagine two lost daughters or sisters, or a compassionate mother.)



Practice: Read the story slowly and prayerfully three times, each time focusing on a different character in the story. Take a few moments after each reading to reflect on what surfaced in your awareness.



Journal: Note in your journal what occurred in your three prayers — be as specific as you can. Write also of any movements toward God or away from God you discerned.

Tuesday, MARCH 2, 2021

PSALM 139:1-12

Psalm 139 is a comforting or disquieting text, depending on one's situation. It can bring peace to one who is in turmoil ("the darkness is not dark to you"); it can also unsettle us as we recall unguarded or unkind remarks ("Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely"). God permeates every facet of our lives. The psalm assures us that we are never cut off from the presence of God; but neither can we get away from God.



Practice: Read the psalm slowly and prayerfully several times, mulling over its images and letting them sink into your innermost being. Stay with the images that resonate with you most and ponder their significance for you. Reflect on God's comforting and disquieting presence that is always with you.



Journal: Note in your journal any movements toward God and away from God you discern.

Wednesday, MARCH 3, 2021

GENESIS 1:1-5, 26-31

Genesis 1 invites us to a cosmic perspective on creation and our place within it. As we have already noted with respect to Psalm 8, the word "dominion" does not mean domination, but rather refers to our role as caretakers of God's creation, who tend to it as God does. Most important, God beholds the creation and declares it "very good."



Practice: If possible, prayerfully read this Scripture outdoors (or at least in proximity to a window) so that you too can behold creation. Read it three times, contemplating the images that speak to you the most, aware of God's sustaining presence in all creation and in your life.



Journal: Note in your journal any movements away from God and toward God that you discern.

Thursday, MARCH 4, 2021

JOHN 1:1-14

John's prologue corresponds to Genesis 1: both transport us to the beginning of creation. The Word (or *Logos*) in John 1 evokes the cosmic reason giving order and structure to the universe in Greek thought. It also evokes the "Word of God" that came to Israel's prophets as well as the concept of Wisdom, the female personification of God in later Jewish thought (see Proverbs 8-9). All of these rich and varied associations together convey the light that came into the world that darkness cannot overcome. The climax to the prologue in 1:14 affirms that "the Word became flesh" — not just human, but "flesh" (*sarx* in Greek), signifying God's solidarity with all living flesh and the biological life of all creation.



Practice: Read John's prologue slowly and prayerfully, pondering the utterly profound imagery in this ancient hymnic text.



Journal: Note in your journal any movement toward God or away from God that surfaced during your prayerful reflection.

Friday, MARCH 5, 2021

ROMANS 8:19-25

At this critical juncture in Paul's letter to the Romans, the remarkable image of childbirth is used to convey God's work of restoration and recreation in the world. The whole creation, and we ourselves, says Paul, are groaning with labor pains to realize the fullness of our created nature, to be set free from bondage and be fully known as children of God. These words are especially poignant amid the ecological crisis that we currently face, as we ponder not only the groaning in our own hearts, but in all of creation.



Practice: Pray Romans 8:19-25 several times, with special attention to the images of creation it projects and our relationship to it.



Journal: Write in your journal of the movements of your spirit while praying with this Scripture.

Saturday, MARCH 6, 2021

ISAIAH 61:1-4

Isaiah 61 provides an inspiring vision for profoundly disorienting, destabilizing times, such as the one we currently face as a nation. In our here and now, a pandemic surges and racial reckoning and political polarization demand attention and action — realities that have impacted the life and ministries of all congregations. Like those who returned to Judah after Babylonian captivity, we too face harsh circumstances and are in need of the prophet's proclamation of God's renewal of a devastated country.



Practice: Pray Isaiah 61:1-4 several times, dwelling on the images in this text that speak powerfully to you in this moment of your life.



Journal: Write in your journal of movement you discern toward God or away from God, with special attention to the times in which we are living.

Week 3

MARCH 7-13, 2021

Dry bones come to life

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

PRAYER FOCUS: Adoration — Consider the praiseworthy qualities of God. How can I praise God's majesty and glory in my words and in my actions?

ACTION: Each day, reach out to someone (by letter, text, phone or email) and say, "I care about you" or "Let's have a coffee date by phone and catch up."

Sunday, MARCH 7, 2021

PSALM 23

For the next three days, we will pray with Scripture that can help us reflect on our graced histories — that is, on your personal history of *light* (special experiences of God's presence, love and justice), your personal history of *shadows* (doubts, questions, reflections of brokenness and sin), and your history of *light out of shadows* (compassion and insight out of pain and disorder, isolation).



Practice: Pray Psalm 23 with special attention to your *light* history — that is, to experiences of God's presence in your life (experiences of love, care, hope, justice). Gently sift through your light history from your childhood to the present, moment noting varied experiences of God's presence along the way.



Journal: Sketch in your journal as much of this personal history of light as possible.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT WANT.



Monday, MARCH 8, 2021

EZEKIEL 37:1-3

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones can help us reflect on the *shadows* in our personal histories.



Practice: Read today's passage and imagine surveying the dry bones of your life story – that is, times of suffering, betrayal or lost relations – times when you were keenly aware of your own brokenness and that of the world. Gently sift through your shadow history from your childhood to present, noting varied experiences of brokenness along the way.



Journal: Sketch in your journal as much of your personal history of brokenness as possible.

Tuesday, MARCH 9, 2021

EZEKIEL 37:4-10

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones can also help us ponder our personal history of *light out of shadows*.



Practice: As you pray with today's vision from Ezekiel, imagine the breath of God infusing the dry bones of your life. Remember the times when you sensed hope, justice or love emerging from the difficult moments of your life. Gently sift through your *light out of shadows* history from childhood to the present, noting varied experiences of God's presence along the way.



Journal: Sketch in your journal as much of this personal history of *light out of shadows* as possible.

Wednesday, MARCH 10, 2021

MARK 4:1-9

Jesus' parable of the sower in Mark 4 prompts reflection on how we have responded differently – and at varied times in our lives – to the gospel. The seed from the sower falls in varied places: on the path, the rocky ground, among the thorns and into good soil. If time and interest allows, you might also read Jesus' interpretation of the parable of the sower in Mark 4:13-20.



Practice: Read Mark 4:1-9 slowly and prayerfully, and imagine that you are part of this scene, observing the sower of seeds. Imagine the seeds falling in varied places or situations in your life. What circumstances come to mind, and what thoughts or emotions emerge as you consider your own life story in conversation with this parable?



Journal: Note in your journal what emerged as you prayed with this Scripture.

Thursday, MARCH 11, 2021

ISAIAH 42:1-9

The figure in this “Servant Song” from Isaiah 42 is generally thought to represent the people of Israel who are called by God to bring forth justice among the nations. Note especially the powerful image of how the servant goes about the work of justice: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”



Practice: Prayerfully read these verses two or three times, noting the images that shimmer for you and the reflection they evoke.



Journal: Write in your journal of movements toward God or away from God that emerge into view.

Friday, MARCH 12, 2021

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

This passage at the heart of Philippians has been described as Paul’s “master story” of God and the world. As such, note how the text presents God’s movement toward us — a movement of decidedly “downward mobility” in which God’s own self is emptied in Christ in order to transform, redeem and liberate the world. This divine movement of love toward the world, in the world, with the world, and for the world is the very power of God.



Practice: Prayerfully read this text several times, noting the images that shine for you.



Journal: Write in you journal of movement toward God or away from God that you discern.

Saturday, MARCH 13, 2021

MARK 1:4-11

The story of Jesus’ baptism in the wilderness is an occasion on which to remember our own baptisms — even if we were infants at the time and were scarcely aware of what was happening. Mark tells us that when Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were “ripped apart” — they did not simply “open,” because something that opens can close. The heavens were ripped apart, which is to say that reality was irreparably altered as a fissure in the heavens appeared — a permanent elimination of the boundary between heaven and earth. God’s Spirit, in other words, is loose in the world and in our lives.



Practice: Pray this Scripture with special attention to the powerful images in this text, and as you ponder Jesus’ baptism, also remember your own. Imagine God’s voice identifying and claiming you as a beloved child of God and the vision of the heavens ripped apart. Reflect on the significance of these revelatory events for Jesus’ life, your own life and the life of the world.



Journal: Note in your journal what emerges in your prayerful reflection on Jesus’ baptism and your own.

Week 4

MARCH 14-20, 2021

Freedom for the captives

by Roger Gench

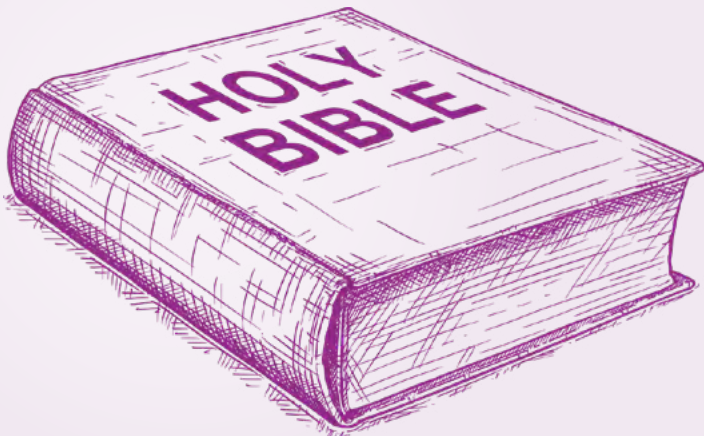


HYMN OF THE WEEK: "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"

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.

Week 5

MARCH 21-27, 2021

Transfiguration and transformation

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: "Crown Him with Many Crowns"


PRAYER FOCUS: Supplication — As I pour out my heart as a needy person, what do I long for from God? What friends or relations are hurting? Where would I love to see God's healing power at work?


ACTION: Reflect on a mentor or teacher from your past who helped you grow in some way. Reach out to those you can to share what their influence meant to your life.

Sunday, MARCH 21, 2021

LUKE 8:22-25

As you pray this passage, imagine that you are present in the boat with Jesus and his disciples, endangered by the raging wind and waves of a storm. The boat is often depicted as a symbol of the church. As you pray with this text, think of storms that currently endanger your life and the life of the church and that threaten to undo us.

 **Practice:** Prayerfully read this story and enter into the boat with Jesus and the disciples. What assurance or challenge do you hear Jesus addressing to you in the midst of storms?

 **Journal:** Note in your journal what emerged in your prayer time, and your sense of movements of your spirit toward God or away from God as you prayed with this text.


WHERE IS YOUR FAITH?




Monday, MARCH 22, 2021

LUKE 9:12-17

The story of Jesus' feeding of 5,000 people is the only miracle story found in all four Gospels, which highlights its importance in the memories and imaginations of early Christians. The story prompts our reflection on how we perceive ourselves and the world around us: do we perceive and act out of a sense of scarcity or a sense of abundance? Scarcity is the world's logic, but abundance is the gospel's logic.


 **Practice:** Prayerfully read this story several times and imaginatively enter into the scene. How does it challenge your perception of scarcity or of God's abundance?


 **Journal:** Note in your journal any movements of your spirit that you discern – toward God or away from God – as you prayed with this Scripture.

Tuesday, MARCH 23, 2021

MATTHEW 17:1-8

This story takes us to a mountaintop with Jesus and his disciples, where he is transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white as a cloud overshadows them. Most startling of all, however, is the very voice of God, which we rarely hear in the Gospel stories. That voice was heard at Jesus' baptism, and commands our attention as it is now heard for the second time in Matthew's narrative, declaring: "This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!"


 **Practice:** Prayerfully read this story and enter into the scene in your imagination, noting what it evokes in you. Listen as the divine voice identifies Jesus and urges you to "Listen to him!" When you think of listening to Jesus, what do you recall hearing and learning from him — from both his words and the life that he lived?


 **Journal:** Note briefly in your journal what you remember of the essential teachings of Jesus.

Wednesday, MARCH 24, 2021

MATTHEW 25:31-46

The parable of the sheep and goats is not a scenario of individual judgment; "all the nations" are gathered before the Son of Man and held accountable. Have they tended to "the least of these," feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting those in prison? The parable invites reflection on the church's engagement in civic matters and its public witness to God's concern for "the least" among us.

 **Practice:** Prayerfully read this passage from Matthew, meditating on "the least" in your community. How might the church embody God's concern for their well-being in its public witness?

 **Journal:** Write in your journal of your experience reading and praying this passage from Matthew.

Thursday, MARCH 25, 2021

LUKE 10:25-37

Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a question that a lawyer asks of him: "Who is my neighbor?" After sharing this parable, Jesus flips the question, asking instead, "Which of these do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" From Jesus' perspective, the important question is not "who is my neighbor?" but rather "how can I be a neighbor?"



Practice: Prayerfully read this passage, pondering the lawyer's question, as well as the question Jesus flips back to him. Ask yourself: How can I be a neighbor in my community and world?



Journal: In your journal, record your answer to this question.

Friday, MARCH 26, 2021

JOHN 1:35-42

The first words out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospel of John set before us a critical existential question: "What are you looking for?" At the other end of the Gospel, on Easter morning, the risen Lord asks Mary Magdalene a similar question: "Whom are you looking for?" (John 20:15). Who or what are we looking for? These questions frame John's Gospel and invite reflection on our deepest longings. They also reflect John's conviction that our deepest longing is for relationship with God, made available in Christ — a conviction shared by St. Augustine in his "Confessions": "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."



Practice: Pray and ponder deeply John 1:35-42 with special attention to Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?" How would you answer this question?



Journal: Note in your journal what reflection on this question evoked for you.

Saturday, MARCH 27, 2021

JOHN 11:1-44

The church has traditionally pondered the Gospel of John's vivid story of the raising of Lazarus in its journey toward Lent. In it, Jesus makes a statement that goes to the heart of John's Gospel, followed by a very important question: "I am the resurrection and the life. ... *Do you believe this?*" Do you believe that Jesus offers eternal life — that is, fullness of life, a rich quality of life in relationship with God *now*, not just life that extends beyond death? When Lazarus emerges from the tomb, Jesus also articulates an important command for the Christian community — "Unbind him and let him go" — charging us with the ministry of unbinding others, that they may experience fullness of life.



Practice: As you pray with this vivid story, imagine that you are present in this scene. What most captures your attention as the story unfolds? How would you respond to the question Jesus asks? How might you assist in the unbinding of others?



Journal: Make a note in your journal of reflection evoked by your prayer with this story.

Holy Week

MARCH 28–APRIL 7, 2021

You are the son of the Living God

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”

PRAYER FOCUS: Sanctification — How can I ask God to make me more into God’s likeness — more generous, forgiving, trusting, caring, creative, just? How can I care more for the “least of these” and less about what people in power think?

ACTION: Each day reflect on a time your mourning turned to joy or growth.

Palm Sunday, MARCH 28, 2021

MARK 11:1–11

Jesus’ triumphal entrance into Jerusalem is ironic. The people want a king who comes with power to deliver them, but Jesus will suffer, be crucified and resurrected, which suggests a different kind of power. Jesus does not come to rule over people but rather to model mutual service with people. The story invites reflection on the reign of God and what it might look like.



Practice: Prayerfully read today’s Scripture with special attention to what it might mean for the reign or reality of God to be present in daily life. What does the commonwealth of God look like for you? How is it present in your community?



Journal: Write in your journal of your answers to these questions, as specifically as you can.


BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!




Monday, MARCH 29, 2021

JOHN 13:1-17

The Gospel of John's account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples features a foot-washing — a symbolic act that conveys both the nature of discipleship and the significance of Jesus' death as a sign of his love for his disciples and of his humiliating death on their behalf. Two interpretations of the foot-washing are presented: the first asks us simply to *receive* Christ's act of hospitality (verses 6-11), the second to *extend* it to one another (verses 12-15). The first tends to be overlooked, but receiving Christ's gesture of love and accepting it fully precedes and grounds extension of it to others.


 **Practice:** Read the story slowly and prayerfully at least twice and imagine that you are part of this scene. What do you see? What do you feel? Do you identify with Peter's deep discomfort? Do you find it easier to receive or to extend hospitality — and why?


 **Journal:** Sense the movements of your spirit and the emotions they evoke as you reflected on this story — both movements toward God and away from God — and note in your journal what emerged.

Tuesday, MARCH 30, 2021

MARK 8:27-33

"Who do you say that I am?" In this watershed moment at Caesarea Philippi, we hear Peter's answer to Jesus' question — and also Jesus' rebuke of Peter when he objects to Jesus' prediction of death and resurrection. The story invites us to consider our own response to Jesus' question — and our own reaction to his passion prediction.


 **Practice:** Prayerfully read this text from Mark, placing yourself into the scene. Imagine how you would answer Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" Imagine your response to Jesus' rebuke of Peter.


 **Journal:** Note in your journal your own response to Jesus' question, and to his rebuke.

Wednesday, MARCH 31, 2021

MARK 8:34-38

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." When Jesus exhorts disciples with these words, he is not suggesting that they pick up crosses they do not already bear, but rather that they acknowledge and name the crosses already bearing down upon their own lives and upon those around them — and that they resist all such savage forces. The exhortation invites our reflection on crosses and systemic evils that may bear down on our own lives.


 **Practice:** Read this Scripture slowly and prayerfully, naming the crosses that bear down on your own life and that of your community — and the shape that your resistance to them is taking. Be as specific as you can.


 **Journal:** Briefly note in your journal the crosses in your life and signs of your resistance to them.

Maunder Thursday, APRIL 1, 2021

MARK 14:32-42

In this story, we eavesdrop on Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane on the night before his death and witness the struggle of his disciples to stay awake with him while he prays. What does Jesus' struggle evoke for you? What does the disciples' struggle evoke for you? With whom do you most identify?


 **Practice:** Prayerfully read this story, reflecting on the various struggles it conveys and their impact upon you.


 **Journal:** Sense the movements of your spirit and the emotions that they evoke as you reflect on this story - both movements toward God and away from God - and note in your journal what happens.

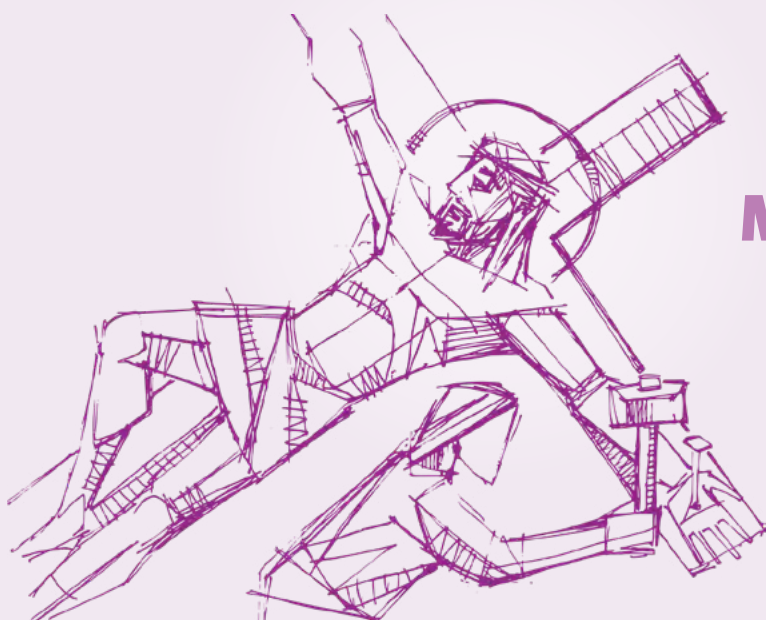
Good Friday, APRIL 2, 2021

MARK 15:33-47

In Mark's account of the crucifixion, Jesus is radically alone as he is publicly humiliated on the cross, subject to mockery. Soldiers ridicule him; passersby deride him, shaking their heads at him; religious authorities mock him; and even those crucified with him taunt him. Jesus' final words from the cross are of abandonment even by God. Roman crucifixions were staged in public places, often along roads where all who passed could witness their horror, as a deterrent to bucking civil authorities. On Good Friday, we are drawn into this public place.

 **Practice:** Prayerfully read this story, imagining that you are present in this public place. Note the senses and emotions the scene evokes as you meditate upon it.

 **Journal:** Painful though it may be, note in your journal what emerged as you prayed with this story.



**MY GOD, MY GOD,
WHY HAVE YOU
FORSAKEN ME?**

Holy Saturday, APRIL 3, 2021

JOHN 20:19-28

Holy Saturday is an occasion on which to reflect on the wounds of Jesus — and on wounds that linger in our own lives. When the risen Lord appears to his disciples, he shows them his hands and his side; Thomas even insists that he must touch the mark of the wounds, and the risen Lord invites him to do so. As theologian Shelly Rambo notes in her book “Resurrecting Wounds,” Jesus directs the attention of his disciples toward the wounds, inviting us to do the same, with a “readiness to hold pain and to stay with difficult truths.”



Practice: Prayerfully read this story with special attention to the wounds of Jesus. Reflect also on wounds that linger in your own life that mark you.



Journal: Note what emerges in your prayer with this story, and of movement toward God and away from God that you discerned.

Easter Sunday, APRIL 4, 2021

MATTHEW 28:1-10

Reflect on the women’s encounter first with the angel of the Lord and then with the Risen Christ. As you read the Scripture, think about how they experience these scenes with all of their physical senses. Imagine how they might have felt and contemplate their actions and responses.



Practice: What have you learned in these weeks of Lent? Are you “ready” for Easter — for meeting the Risen Christ yourself? Think about you how will live into the resurrection in a new way as you go forward into the Easter season.



Journal: Read over your journal entries from these Lenten weeks. What have you learned from thinking so often and deeply about “moving toward” and “moving away” from God? Is this just a pendulum, or does it bring a new awareness of your proximity to Christ? Note your observations and summarize what you have learned. List any practices you commit to continuing.

Christ is risen!
Christ is risen
indeed!

