2024 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

riverbend
CHURCH

RIVERBEND LENTEN SEASON DEVOTIONAL

FEBRUARY 14 - MARCH 30, 2024

The Riverbend staff invites you, your family, and friends to consider these daily devotional readings and practices for the Lenten season, beginning Ash Wednesday, February 14th, and culminating in our Easter celebration on Sunday, March 31st. Each devotion was thoughtfully written by a Riverbend staff member and is designed to bring you into communion with the Passion Story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as revealed through the Holy Scriptures.

Lenten Season lasts 40 days and for many includes 'giving up' or abstaining from something, a practice that then compels us to instead focus on a conversation, prayer, thought, or meditation with our Lord. The 40-day season does not include (or count) Sundays, thus, there will not be devotionals those days. We suggest you follow along with the Scriptural stories that will be featured in Sunday mornings services.

We pray that together we may experience a renewed love and passion for Jesus, and carry His goodness into our communities and world.

Shalom.

WEEK 1

PRELENTEN SUNDAY - FEBRUARY 11

"LOSING YOUR PAST"

READ JOHN 4:1-42 – The Woman at The Well

1 CORINTHIANS 11:25

"In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

DAY 1

WEDNESDAY – FEBRUARY 14

Sharing Supper in the Fellowship of the Body of Christ

As we begin Lent, we begin to honor a calling to review our commitment to resurrection. This singular calling is what binds us together in the Christian Faith. We invite you to use this week and the days leading up to Easter to reflect on Jesus. Just as in Baptism when we are buried in the likeness of His death and raised in the likeness of His resurrection, so too can Lent be a time when we choose to exercise a tangible identification with Christ.

Some of you joined us for our Ash Wednesday service and identified yourself with a cross on your forehead for the day. Some may choose to fast, and while this is often from food, our freedom in Christ allows us many choices of self-denial (alcohol, chocolate, TV, other electronic entertainment, or anything you would identify as habitual). Lent allows you to choose to create a physical hunger inside of you so that you might experience a spiritual filling from God. Being forced to suffer is torture; but choosing suffering (emptiness) for the sake of intimacy with Jesus and a greater filling to come, is like a sweet reunion.

Remember, there can be no reunion if we were never apart - just as there can be no resurrection without a prior death. May you choose to observe Lent in a fashion that is yours alone to choose, but also in a way that makes your heart hungry for God.

This day's invitation is to consider someone you might need to share a meal with, and then invite them into your home or meet at a favorite restaurant. Like Jesus and the Woman at the Well, the purpose is conversation (communion), and we all know the absolutely best conversations happen in the kitchen. If you need to team up with a friend or two to invite someone over, feel blessed to do so.

QUOTE:
"We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own." - Caesar Chavez

- Mark Johnson, Pastor of Boomers

JOHN 7:37-39

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

DAY 2

THURSDAY – FEBRUARY 15

Flowing Love Inside and Out

Just this week a dear friend and I were talking about trying to increase the daily amount of water we drink. Her suggestion was to sip a few ounces every 20-30 minutes consistently throughout the day, not only in an attempt to reach our goal, but for our bodies to better metabolize this life-giving fluid. In today's passage Jesus stood and boldly declared several epic truths that refer to water: We all possess a thirsty soul, and He himself is THE quencher of our soul's thirst, providing an abundant flow of living water within each one who believes. And to make it profusely plain, the author clarifies that this living water is the actual provision of the Holy Spirit designed to take up permanent, supportive residence in the inner being of the believer.

So much hope, so much provision, and such utter soul satisfaction is promised here! God himself seeks to abundantly pour out his very life and love to overflowing within us. This is where it actually begins and is intended to be experienced: inside of us in our inmost being. It may be your sincere desire to let his living water flow out from you to all those around you – a most worthy and humble aim.

But be careful to also seek, acknowledge, and experience this extravagant flowing of God's life and love within you, for every single part of you. 1 John 3:1 (NIV) says, *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!"* It is this same infinite love that God has poured into our souls through the Holy Spirit. Let's commit to seek and connect with this love from the inside out.

SUGGESTED PRAYER AND MEDITATION:

John Eldredge in his book, *Resilient*, urges his readers to seek to connect or tap into the deep presence of God who dwells in us. He offers several simple prayers that can be very effective in helping us to connect with the Holy Spirit within. Consider conveying to God in prayer, "I love you God. I love you, God. I love you," and, "I give everyone and everything to you, God. I give everyone and everything to you." (pp. 142-145)

- Diane Haney, Women's Pastor

MATTHEW 8:1-3

When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.

DAY 3

FRIDAY – FEBRUARY 16

The Peddler

Leprosy, during Jesus' time and through much of human history, has been a skin disease that resulted in excommunication from all society. Lepers were forced to live outside of all human contact, except in the company of other lepers. They could never go home, never work, never feel a hug or the touch of their unafflicted loved ones. In addition, and to their ultimate humiliation and degradation, in the presence of others, they were required to scream out in warning, "Unclean! Unclean!" To the Jews, leprosy was a mark of God's displeasure.

This leper, relegated to living outside the community, knew Jesus could heal him, and he had the courage to ask.

Have you ever, like the leper, stood on the fringe of a crowd yearning to be part of it - desperately needing what is just beyond your reach? Have you been the victim of others' condemnation or perhaps hounded by your internal, negatively critical voice? The voice seems to be on "repeat" – reviewing and reliving your past mistakes. There is someone who wants us to live out the rest of our lives constantly hitting the "repeat" button – forever trapped in our past. I call him the Peddler.

The shouts of the Peddler can be heard long before he can be seen,
bringing back memories and distant times as if in a dream.
People and places thought left behind,
unexpectedly return for no reason or rhyme.

With each taunt of the Peddler's ill will,
the past becomes sharper and nearer still.
As I approach his cart and peer inside,
I notice it contains all the mistakes I have tried to hide.

"This is who you are; buy some more guilt for the road ahead,
or maybe weakness, selfishness, or callousness will do instead.
These things have served you so well in the past,
creating vicious memories that will forever last."

"For you can never be what you are not,
you are all these things, even those you wish you had forgot."

His deception seeks a familiar grasp,
one that has origins in my past.
For he pedals what I fear most might be true,
hoping I will purchase old failures and make them new.

Life-strangling lies take hold with his telling;
lies made bolder by my buying what he is selling.
As the chains of the old nightmare begin again,

in a panic, I moan, "Oh God, not that same old sin."

Then, in answer to my desperate cry,
the Spirit of God breaks through to fight the Peddler's lies.

"No purchase necessary," the Spirit cried.
"All was bought when the Savior died.
Just accept what He freely gives.
His only desire is that you might live."

"Free to live in the Father's presence,
claiming as yours your eternal residence.
For you are only who God says you are,
His most precious creation under the sun, moon, and star."

"Only one moment in your past means anything,
that moment when you chose Christ as your King.
He will define who you will be,
trust in His guidance to set you free."

"Leave the Peddler's wares to rot,
they are only what you were and now are not."

I challenge you to have the bravery of the leper and strive to see yourself as who you really are and not who you have been. You are a child of the one true God, part of His large family with untold numbers of brothers and sisters. You are never alone, never relegated to the shadows. You are loved – every part of you – all of you.

– Susan Kennedy, Children's Pastor

MATTHEW 9:1-5

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?

DAY 4

SATURDAY – FEBRUARY 17

Who's in Control?

There exists in our current society and cultures a desire to control outcomes and opinions before knowing the full story. This approach seeks to not only be aware of every issue or event, but to also weigh in and attempt to be the arbiter of truth, justice, and 'what is right' – and, to ultimately, control the narrative. All too often these observations, judgments, and pronouncements come through the lens of busy-bodied, back-seat driving, arm-chair quarterbacking 'best-intentions' (Hmmm. What road was paved with those again…?). Some call this Pharisee-ism – or at least, one aspect of it.

What often happens in these instances is exactly what happened here: We miss the bigger picture – the fullness of the event, issue, or person in question. Jesus was masterful at seeing the entirety of each situation and addressing the reality therein. By asking his question in response to criticism, maybe we can see what was really happening. Maybe Jesus just came to heal – all of us.

MATTHEW 9:6-8
But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. "So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man.

This day's invitation is to wait for the full(er) story to emerge – and to wait to judge, to accuse, or to control the narrative in your own time. Let Jesus 'heal', in His time.

– Kevin Hedges, Spiritual Formation & Men's Pastor

WEEK 2

SUNDAY - FEBRUARY 18

"LOSING YOUR SKEPTICISM"

READ JOHN 1:43-51 – The Unbelief of Nathanael

JOHN 14:26-27

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

DAY 5

MONDAY – FEBRUARY 19

Embracing the Peace of the Holy Spirit

In the Gospel of John 14:26-27, Jesus assures His Disciples of the coming of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. This divine presence, sent by the Father in Jesus' name, is promised to teach us all things and to bring to our remembrance the words spoken by Christ. As we journey through life, faced with challenges and uncertainties, we can find solace in knowing that the Holy Spirit is our ever-present guide and teacher. The profound gift of peace is also extended to us by Jesus himself. Unlike the peace that the world offers – fragile and fleeting – the peace of Christ is enduring and transcendent. It surpasses human understanding, providing a sanctuary for our troubled hearts and dispelling fear.

PRAYER:
Heavenly Father,
We thank you for the precious gift of the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Teacher. May the Spirit illuminate our hearts and minds, guiding us in wisdom and understanding. Help us to be receptive to the gentle whispers of the Holy Spirit, reminding us of the profound truths revealed by your Son, Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus, we receive with gratitude the peace that you freely give. In a world filled with turmoil, may your peace be a constant presence in our lives. Grant us the strength to resist the troubles that seek to trouble our hearts and the courage to cast away fear, knowing that your peace is our true refuge. As we embrace the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the peace of Christ, may our lives reflect the love and grace of our Savior. In Jesus' name, we pray.
Amen.

– Nick Steinloski, Executive Family Pastor

JOHN 8:27-30

They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." Even as he spoke, many believed in him.

DAY 6

TUESDAY – FEBRUARY 20

Surrender

Most of the Jewish leadership in Jesus' day wanted to be rid of him. He threatened their power and prestige, their comfort and control. Whether they realized it or not, they expected God to conform to their image, and not the other way around. Here, Jesus models that true righteousness is found in the scary and often vulnerable work of surrender: Jesus let God teach, direct, and guide Him; He let God keep His company always; He submitted His will to God's.

This is our work, too, if we are going to pick up our cross and follow Jesus, but it can be unbelievably difficult. Give yourself a few minutes to reflect on your life. What might be some areas you clutch extra tightly, areas you might resist change? Are there parts of your life you'd rather not let God into, or let Him see? It might be a thought topic, treasure, concern, weakness, habit, lifestyle, or any other area you've identified. Today, consider inviting Him to see it, share it, or have it.

- Stephanie Rollins, Teaching Pastor

MARK 9:17; 21-24

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

DAY 7

WEDNESDAY – FEBRUARY 21

Mic Drop

Set the stage here: Jesus is just returning with Peter, James, and John from the transfiguration event where the three disciples saw Moses and Elijah, and heard for themselves God affirming his own Son. Pretty heady stuff. They then head back to the valley where they encounter a commotion.

Apparently, the apostles who weren't invited up the mountain, were trying to heal a boy who was possessed by a demon – but were failing in the exorcism. Jesus – with his questioning, and the boy's father – with his answers, made it clear that this was a serious and dangerous situation. In fact, he clarified that this boy's condition was not merely a physical ailment, as outward behaviors such as those this boy displayed were culturally diagnosed as a sign of someone (or a family) being cursed.

To me, it's fascinating the intersection that comes together here:

1| a father who is desperate;

2| ¼ of the disciples coming off a mind-blowing experience;

3| the rest of the disciples frustrated in their inabilities.

The players here are all forced to drop their own fears, sadness, frustrations, and pre-conceived notions – upon hearing Jesus' rhetorical response to the boy's father: "If you can??" Wow! They all must have been waiting for what was coming next! And Jesus, as he so often does, provides them a 'mic drop' moment!

Now, take the boy's father: Do you share the same conundrum he does – 'believing' even though you may struggle with your 'unbelief'? Of course you do ... we ALL do! But now is the time to reflect on what is contributing to your own unbelief. Now is the time to take the steps to eliminate it. Now is the time to be bold to name it. Now is the time to be courageous in casting it out. And finally, now is the time to be humble and repentant - calling on the Holy Spirit's help. Only THEN can you free yourself of your unbelief.

- Paul Viebrock, Pastor of Men's Ministry and Director of Operations

JOHN 14:12-14

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

DAY 8

THURSDAY – FEBRUARY 22

Can we do greater works than Jesus?

There have always been a few things that I can't really wrap my head around. The size of the of the oceans and vastness of space blow my mind. Another is the net worth of Elon Musk at $238 billion dollars. I can't begin to grasp these examples.

The scripture today is equally bewildering to me. Jesus shares that whoever believes in Him will do the works that He did. Not just the same works, but greater works? I can't help but think that this would be like waking up one morning to find that Elon had died and left his fortune to me. As I wrestle with the passage, Jesus' words reminded me that His wonderful power is available to me, and to you: the broken, battered, bruised, and bored.

What does doing greater works mean? What is it that Jesus came to do in the first place? He came to reveal the Father and the way to the Father. But **how can I do greater things than Jesus did?**

One, we have the ability to make greater impact because of the tools God has made available. Our use of social media and our networks can instantly impact hundreds of people. Secondly, and read this carefully, we have the full picture to share. Jesus told people to believe in Him and to trust what he was telling them before it came to fruition. We now know the full story. It came to fruition. We have the full scriptures. We can share the news of His life, death, and resurrection and its impact on our own lives to our circles in ridiculous ways.

He was never able to preach the whole gospel because he had not yet died and been resurrected. We can do greater things by sharing how our story has been impacted by His. I think this is what we are called to do with others on our faith journey. I might not be able to fathom the wealth of an Elon or Bill Gates, but I can share my faith story with others to offer hope of greater things.

– Scott Reeves, Community Engagement Pastor

LUKE 24:44-49

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

DAY 9

FRIDAY – FEBRUARY 23

The Empowering Ascension

The best authors have mastered the technique of writing an ending that incites readers to reflect on the beginning with a newly inspired perspective, having taken us on a moving journey.

This moment in the book of Luke is a mastery of that writing technique. (We can ultimately credit God for the creativity of His divine plans.)

In these passages, the disciples are taken through three phases: 1) they are reminded of the necessity of each past event that occurred because God's promises had to be fulfilled, because God is the ultimate promise keeper, 2) as witnesses to these events, they now have an active responsibility and call upon their lives to spread the news of Jesus, and 3) they receive the Holy Spirit as a parting gift, and a blessing to continue the work Jesus has begun.

Woah. That definitely qualifies as a "moving journey."

Just as the disciples received these parting words as Jesus ascended to Heaven, he blesses us in the same way. As promised, he has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit, thus providing us with the strength and supernatural power to do the sometimes messy, sometimes uncomfortable, but deeply meaningful work of ministry.

How might you approach your work, relationships, and calling with a new, inspired perspective knowing that you have the Holy Spirit inside of you to guide you and Jesus advocating for you from Heaven's throne?

- Maddie Schulte, Worship Arts Director

MATTHEW 12:17-21

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."

DAY 10

SATURDAY – FEBRUARY 24

Not So Great Expectations

God always keeps his promises and fulfills His story – though His ways and His timing may not be what we expect or prefer. Here, Matthew is restating prophetic verses from Isaiah 42 that were written centuries before the birth of Christ. Isaiah's prophecy came forth from God in a time when many of the Jewish people were living in exile in Babylonia and were without a Jewish king. They were collectively at a low point and needed encouragement that God had big plans for hope, justice, and victory.

Though they believed God's promise in the Book of Isaiah, the Israelites still had to wait much longer than they hoped or preferred for it to be fulfilled. The promise was not answered in their lifetime, or in their children's – or even in their great-great-great grandchildren's. In fact, it was over 700 years before God sent Christ to fulfill His promise.

But keep in mind that as that ancient prophecy was being fulfilled in and through the life of Christ, many people did not recognize or accept that it was finally happening. In fact, many Jewish leaders saw Jesus as the complete opposite: a nuisance, a false prophet, and a blasphemer worthy of death. Their own earthly expectations were not met, so they missed God's answer to His promise.

Has it taken longer than you'd like to have some of your own prayers answered? If so, be reminded that God's timeline is fully sovereign and trustworthy. **Pray a prayer of surrender today over how quickly God acts in your life.** And then consider the harder question: Is it possible God has already answered the cries of your heart... but you haven't recognized His blessings because they've come in very unexpected ways? Pray today to be able to see Christ's clear view of your life and what God has unfolded within it.

– Audrey Parker, Connections Director

WEEK 3

SUNDAY - FEBRUARY 25

"Losing Your Shame"

READ JOHN 8:1-11 – The Woman Caught In Adultery

MATTHEW 6:14-15

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

DAY 11

MONDAY – FEBRUARY 26

A Liberating Act

How can we dare go before God and ask him to forgive us if we refuse to forgive others? God's grace is to be shared! If we do not share that grace, then it sours in us, and we lose its blessing. We are forgiven to be agents of forgiveness. Daily, our awareness of God's grace should help us re-start the forgiveness cycle in our own lives by forgiving others before we ask for our own forgiveness. This desire to forgive and bless is just another evidence of being children of God who long to liberate others from their sin and bless them with grace.

PRAYER:
Holy and exalted God,
Thank you for your forgiveness and grace. Help me let go of all bitterness and vindictiveness and forgive those who have harmed me. May your work of redemption and grace touch their hearts as it has mine. In Jesus' name, I pray.
Amen.

– Dean Busboom, Senior Adults Pastor

JOHN 20:21-23

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

DAY 12

TUESDAY – FEBRUARY 27

Peace Amidst Chaos

On that Sunday evening following the death of their beloved Teacher, the disciples were frozen in fear, taking silent refuge from those seeking to end their lives as well. It is here that the risen Savior appears in the midst of their fear, sorrow, and despair. And the first thing Jesus expresses to them is peace. He even repeats it after revealing to his beloved the scars He bore.

This wasn't simply a well wish or hope Jesus conveyed to his disciples. The Conqueror of death was declaring a new and miraculous reality. Jesus had laid a revolutionary and perfect foundation of peace through his experience and accomplishment on the Cross. ***For he himself is our peace,*** *who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.* (Ephesians 2:14)

Truly, one of the most significant triumphs of the Cross was and is PEACE. Jesus was willing to die to deliver this transformative experience to his disciples and to us on several levels:

- Peace with our Father in heaven (Romans 5:1).
- Reconciliation for hostile enemies, Jew and Gentile, with Christ making the way for us to be on the same team, in the same family (Ephesians 2:14).
- Peace in our innermost being (Colossians 3:15, John 14:27).
- Peace with one another, creating beautiful unity within the family of Christ (Romans 12:17-18).
- In our world (John 16:33).

FOR REFLECTION:

Our peace was on the heart and mind of the Savior as he went to the Cross. So, let's open our hearts to the provision and blessing of peace that is truly, currently ours. Pause, reflect, and pray about what Jesus said, *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33). And Paul's prayer for us as well: *"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all."* (2 Thessalonians 3:16)

- Diane Haney, Women's Pastor

MATTHEW 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

DAY 13

WEDNESDAY – FEBRUARY 28

7, or... 77?

In today's world we place value on living financially debt-free. During Lent let us also be reminded of our calling to be spiritually debt-free. The Story of the Unmerciful Servant illustrates how God has already forgiven our multitude of sins, and therefore we should also do the same for our brothers and sisters. But have you ever thought you had forgiven someone only to realize underneath still lies a kernel of resentment?

Jesus calls us to forgive with our heart not seven times, but seventy-seven times...or, as long as it takes. Forgiving others as we have been forgiven... Forgiving doesn't mean condoning the wrong made against you; rather it means you choose to let go of the debt.

This day's invitation is to consider someone you may need to forgive (perhaps again), and offer your complete forgiveness by writing it out 7, or maybe even 77, times.

- Martha Sloan, Pastoral Care Director

MARK 11:20-25

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

DAY 14

THURSDAY – FEBRUARY 29

Agreement with God

Did you know that agreement with God requires actions of confession? We must learn to speak the right words. When my wife and I were in seminary, we and some friends found ourselves in front of huge mountains. After we decided to pursue our calling to be ministers of the Gospel, we spent all our savings in training, but there was no job, no more money to pay the school bill, and we needed a miracle. It was then that one of our teachers invited us to declare the Word of God and speak to the mountains in front of us.

A few days later, we had a breakthrough and we learned how speaking God's word is powerful. Although our words do not have creative power, they do have agreement power. So, when you confess with your mouth what you believe God has for your live, you will experience the extraordinary He has already prepared for you.

HOW TO CONFESS MY AGREEMENT WITH GOD:
Choose a few psalms and read them out loud. In this exercise, do not read the Scriptures in your mind only, but allow your speaking to emanate the words of the psalms as you meditate on them. If you prefer to read 5 psalms per day, skipping by 30 (e.g. Psalm 1, 31, 61, 91, 121), you can meditate on all the psalms in one month - it's a very cool exercise. Remember to speak out loud.

- Thiago Duzzi, Associate Missions Pastor

LUKE 17:3-6

Watch yourselves. "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

DAY 15

FRIDAY – MARCH 1

When a Messy World Meets Radical Grace

Wouldn't it be nice if we could just tell someone they hurt our feelings, they profusely apologize for the err in their ways, change their behavior in response to the injustice, and then we forgive them and forget the incident entirely, skipping away into a rainbow with a basket full of kittens?

Unfortunately, that's not reality. And Jesus knew this.

He knew that humans are imperfect and messy and don't (usually) get things right the first time. He knew that we'd come up against countless situations throughout the course of our time on earth to where we'd need to forgive someone not just once, but again, and again, and again, as the rebuking and repenting process rarely ever travels in a straight line. So, he asked us to forgive as many times as needed.

In a typical human response, the disciples expressed what we all feel to that challenge, "That's too hard. Can't you just give us more faith?" (Paraphrased, of course.)

No can do. You see, Jesus also knew that this is what it means to show grace – a grace that doesn't always make sense, a grace that is beyond what we deserve (and perhaps more than we feel they deserve), and a grace that brings glory to God.

He wants us to say 'yes' despite discomfort, to lean in despite how it may require us to bend and stretch. He wants us to do the hard thing, the thing that requires the faith as small as the mustard seed...and forgive as he has forgiven us.

To whom can you offer this kind of radical grace to today?

- Maddie Schulte, Worship Arts Director

MATTHEW 26:6-10

While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

DAY 16

SATURDAY – MARCH 2

The Extravagance of Love

In the Gospel of Matthew 26:6-10, we witness a poignant moment in the home of Simon the Leper. A woman, moved by deep love and gratitude, approached Jesus with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume. Without reservation, she poured this precious fragrance on Jesus' head as he reclined at the table. This act of extravagant love prompted a reaction from the disciples, questioning the perceived waste.

During the Lenten season, as we reflect on sacrifice and devotion, this passage invites us to ponder the nature of our own offerings to God. The woman's gesture was not about practicality or worldly value; it was an expression of pure love and devotion to her Lord. In the eyes of the disciples, it seemed excessive, but Jesus recognized the beauty of her sacrificial act.

As we journey through Lent, let us consider the depth of our love for Christ. Are we willing to offer him the most precious aspects of our lives, even if the world questions the wisdom of such devotion? Lent is a time of self-examination, repentance, and surrendering our most valuable treasures to the One who deserves them.

PRAYER:
Gracious Lord,
During this season of Lent, help us to reflect on the extravagant love demonstrated by the woman with the alabaster jar. Open our hearts to the understanding that true devotion may not always align with worldly expectations. May our acts of worship be marked by a genuine outpouring of love, regardless of how they may be perceived by others.

Forgive us, Lord, for the times we have questioned the sacrificial offerings of others. Teach us to appreciate and honor expressions of love, recognizing that they are a beautiful response to your grace. May our Lenten journey be characterized by a deepening love for you, expressed in heartfelt and sacrificial ways. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

– Nick Steinloski, Executive Family Pastor

WEEK 4

SUNDAY - MARCH 3

"LOSING YOUR COMFORT"

READ Mark 10:17-29 – The Rich Young Ruler

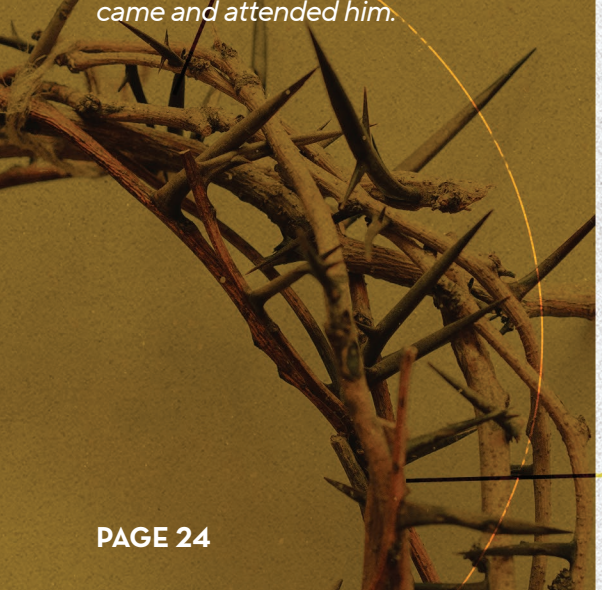
MATTHEW 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' " Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.' "

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.



DAY 17

MONDAY - MARCH 4

Desert Refuge

Jesus had a desert appointment, so He showed up, fasted, and waited. It wasn't until He was good and hungry that his opponent came to the scene. Did the devil come at Jesus' weakest point, or at His strongest?

I suspect that while Jesus was physically at his lowest, He was spiritually at His best. In fact it was Jesus who taught His weary disciples that their spirit could be willing even when their flesh was weak. Your body has limits, yes. But it also houses an eternal, strong, and willing spirit.

Let that sink in. Whatever you face in the flesh—no matter how hard—within you, in your inner self, in the place where God dwells, is a resource of strength and determination.

PRAYER:
God,
I recognize that I am more than my body, more than my feelings, more than my circumstances. The limitations, temptations, and sufferings of this world cannot separate me from your love. They cannot attack the strength, the hope, or the peace that you offer my spirit. Help me to find shelter there—in the place where You dwell. Meet me there, and "be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come." (Ps 71:3 ESV). Amen.

- Stephanie Rollins, Teaching Pastor

MATTHEW 8:18-22

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

DAY 18

TUESDAY – MARCH 5

Follow Me Down

My study bible refers to this chapter of Matthew as the "Proof of the King", with sections in the chapter each indicating a 'power' that Jesus had dominion over. This particular passage is about his power over the disciples. Now, we aren't just talking about the original 12, rather this was inclusive of a group that had amassed over the course of His ministry. There were all kinds of people lining up, and Jesus was teaching them a lesson on what it looked like to be a true disciple.

Note the designation that Jesus gives himself: "Son of Man." He uses this phrase (truth!) eighty different times to self-identify, and it clearly separates himself from his disciples. The secular community might want us to believe that he does that to create a lofty, even cultish persona - making himself popular and therefore gather more followers. But in fact, the separation is so much deeper. Jesus actually 'lowers himself' among humanity ("no place to lay his head") and through the example of his suffering and death ("let the dead bury their own dead"). The message is clear: following Him provides no guarantee of an upwardly mobile outcome.

In fact, as the theologian Charles Swindoll notes, if we pay close attention along the way, Jesus reveals approaches of how ***not*** to follow Him! This passage provides two examples in how our hearts can respond to **His uncompromising authority** to **make the demands** of us to be His disciples:

1| Are you the one who enthusiastically jumps in without fully understanding what is required (follow wherever)?;

2| Or are you the one who is distracted by the perpetual motion and the requirements of this world (busy burying their dead)? Spend time in discussion with a mentor/friend to help you see your approach and find new ways to follow Jesus "down."

- Paul Viebrock, Pastor of Men's Ministry and Director of Operations

JOHN 16:31-33

"Do you now believe?" Jesus replied. "A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

DAY 19

WEDNESDAY – MARCH 6

Courage and Confidence

We all have times in life where we feel alone or have gotten ourselves into bad situations and feel like no one understands or cares about our troubles. Perhaps you are in a similar place today. In this passage we find Jesus warning, then comforting and encouraging, the Disciples, reassuring them of His peace and power to overcome the challenges ahead. He modeled to us how to respond in these times of discouragement and uncertainty. He reminds us of a peace residing within those who seek to know Him.

Sure, he doesn't shy away from the fact that difficult times are a part of life. It isn't always sunny outside and the storms of life will come. In this passage, He forecasts His coming death on the Cross, and envisions a moment where even He might feel lonely and abandoned as His very disciples, His friends, run for cover! But then He so beautifully encourages us to "take heart." Another version says "be courageous and confident," that God (the Father) is with us and will not leave us alone.

God has kept no secrets about this life. He told us that we will experience trouble. Disease will afflict bodies. Failed relationships will break hearts. Death will devastate us. We shouldn't expect any less. In John 16:20 it reads that "Our grief will turn to joy." In those times when we feel all alone, broken, bruised, and battered by the storm, these verses encourage us that peace through relationship with Him is available to us. His death and resurrection overcame the sadness, darkness, and loneliness that the world can bring. We can, and should, take comfort in this truth.

PRACTICE:
What would it look like for you to express gratitude to God for His abiding faith in you – to rest in His comfort and care, to 'take heart!'? Consider starting a 'gratitude list' – an entry per day, or per week, where you can look back and see God's goodness in your life.

– Scott Reeves, Community Engagement Pastor

MATTHEW 10:40-42

"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

DAY 20

THURSDAY – MARCH 7

The Cost of Discipleship

Whoever said following Jesus was easy? Certainly not Jesus.

This passage lies within what is termed "The Mission Sermon," beginning in Matt. 10:1, when Jesus sends out and prepares the twelve disciples for what awaits them now, and post-resurrection. Having just witnessed a number of miracles, the Twelve must certainly feel empowered to do great and mighty things. But, hidden in these verses are two most convicting instructions.

First, it is from God the Father that Jesus is sent, and now Jesus is sending these Twelve. Power and authority has come right from the Source of all goodness, as witnessed in the previous healings. For the Chosen, there is now no mistake that the power is real, and this power will overcome much persecution – which will no doubt be coming.

Secondly, this power is not assumed to bring adoration or adherents, nor earthly elevation of status. In fact, the translation of 'little ones' most likely refers to 'these who are humble in rank or influence'. Thus, the Disciples understood that their new assignment is going to be difficult.

How do we view our positions with Jesus? What are we seeking to gain? What will it cost? And, what is our reward? After prayer and meditation, what could you identify as reward(s) at the cost of following Jesus?

"These men without possessions or power, these strangers on Earth, these sinners, these followers of Jesus, have in their life with him renounced their own dignity, for they are merciful. As if their own needs and their own distress were not enough, they take upon themselves the distress and humiliation of others. They have an irresistible love for the down-trodden, the sick, the wretched, the wronged, the outcast and all who are tortured with anxiety. They go out and seek all who are enmeshed in the toils of sin and guilt. No distress is too great, no sin too appalling for their pity. If any man falls into disgrace, the merciful will sacrifice their own honor to shield him, and take his shame upon themselves." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship

– Kevin Hedges, Spiritual Formation & Men's Pastor

LUKE 13:34-35

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

DAY 21

FRIDAY – MARCH 8

Wing and a Prayer

There are some common stumbling blocks we all face in our humanness. In general, we tend to try to control our lives, keep things the same, and avoid discomfort. But the problem with these human tendencies is that they often fly in the face of Christ's example and stop our full surrender to God's will in our lives. And when we don't allow God to live through us, it grieves Him.

Christ drew a lot of criticism during the days of his ministry because he spent time with people who were commonly judged to be unclean sinners. He drew near to people with severe illnesses and unsavory professions, healed and blessed the homeless and lame, and even forgave and commended a criminal being crucified on the cross next to him in his final moments of life. To demonstrate that kind of living and loving was – and still is – very uncomfortable.

But these verses today bring us a strong reminder - and warning! - to lean not on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). When deciding what we face, who we embrace, and in what place, we need to follow the Holy Spirit's leading entirely. Let us find the faith and courage to indeed say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" – and then to follow where the Holy Spirit leads us. It won't be comfortable... but life is always profoundly sweeter and more richly blessed when God has us gathered under His wings.

PRAYER:
God,
I'm sorry for the times I've thwarted Your work in my life. I am Your beloved child whom you wish to use to further Your Kingdom – and as such, I choose to trust Your will over my own. Help me release the reins of control over to You and give me the courage to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

- Audrey Parker, Connections Director

MATTHEW 27:45-49

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

DAY 22

SATURDAY – MARCH 9

"Sabachthani" (The Aramaic cry of distress; forsaken, renounced, given up, abandoned, shunned, alone.)

The word "remember" is used over 352 times in scripture. If you add all the different variations of "remember" to the count, that number jumps to more than 500. Considering these statistics, it is difficult to overstate the importance to God for us to be mindful of significant moments in our past. Through memory, God sometimes brings comfort to our present and hope for our future. However, sometimes, memory brings past painful moments into the present. You may ask, "How can that be a good thing?" Let's consider for a moment what Jesus may remember.

As Jesus hung on the Cross, he became the embodiment of evil itself. At that moment, all the viciousness of humanity – every act of hatred, cruelty, selfishness, betrayal – all of it, past, present, and future – rested on his shoulders. As this enormity crashed onto His broken body, the bond that had existed through all eternity between Jesus the Son, and God the Father, snapped.

For the first time, He was alone. Jesus felt the anguish of abandonment, the gut-wrenching sadness of being completely isolated. I do not believe He lost sight of the purpose and reason for His death. He knew His sacrifice was necessary to purchase our freedom from the bondage of our destructive human condition that had necessitated our separation from God. However, the knowledge of this necessity did not protect Him from the despair of being forsaken.

In that moment on the Cross, when Jesus cried out, *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), He gave testament to his humanity. The image of Jesus on the Cross does not look like a conquering God but more like an abandoned human. It is this reality that closes the gap between God's divinity and our wretched human existence. It shows that Jesus experienced the full range of human emotions: love, joy, friendship, pain, grief, and despair. He knows what it is to be you.

Why is that significant?

We have all been there – forsaken, abandoned, alone. I am sure you can remember just such a moment in your life. A time when grief was so tangible that it robbed you of words. A time when you felt utterly, devastatingly alone. But the truth is we are never alone. In our darkest moments, we can cry out to Him. Jesus will have sympathy - and empathy, because He has been there, too.

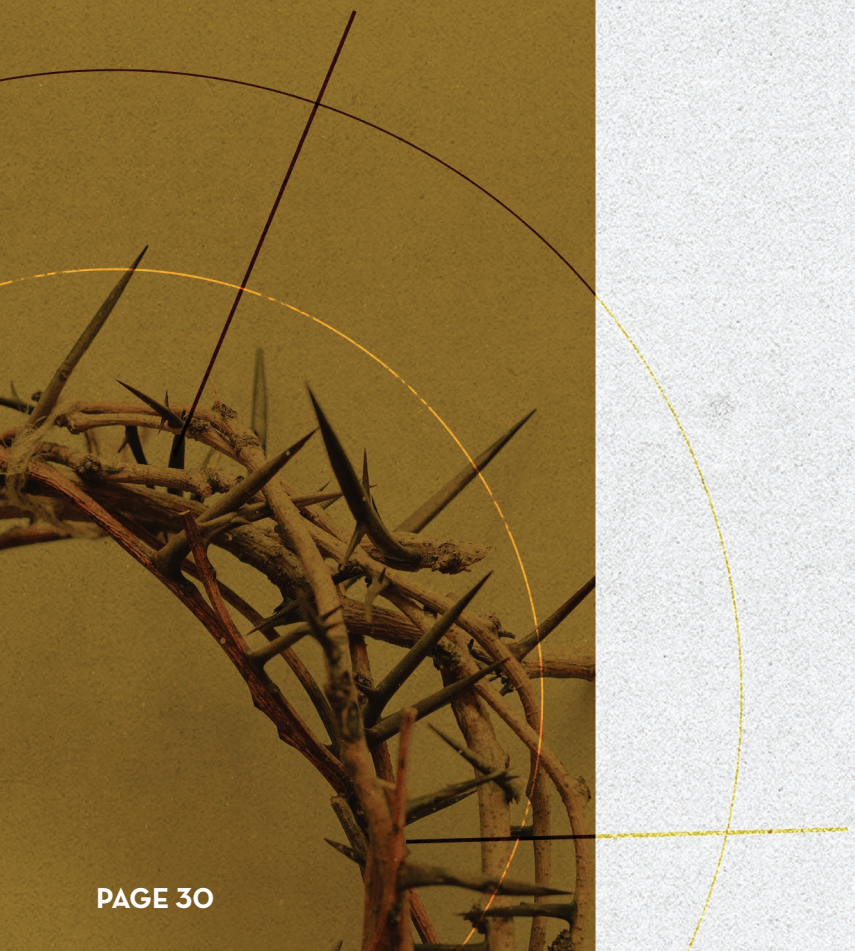
He will do, as scripture tells us more than 500 times to do; He will remember. He will remember when He was "sabachthani" – forsaken. Then, out of His great love and concern for you, He will bring comfort

and hope for your joyful future. He understands, and He gets it. He is always there with an understanding ear and comforting embrace. Lean into it!

PRAYER:

Jesus,
I am forever grateful for your empathic presence. You are more than a Savior for all. You are, more specifically, a Savior for me—one who is always available, forever understanding with infinite love. I thank you, Jesus! I love you, Jesus!
Amen.

– Susan Kennedy, Children's Pastor



WEEK 5

SUNDAY - MARCH 10

"LOSING YOUR SELF"

READ LUKE 19:1-10 – The Story of Zacchaeus

MATTHEW 5:38-42

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

DAY 23

MONDAY – MARCH 11

Law of the Land, or Law of Grace?

To keep society in order we apply a necessary system of laws. These laws give us a guideline for right and wrong, and an expectation of consequences if broken. But in our personal interactions Jesus guides us to respond beyond the limitations of law and to be generous with each other. His command to "turn the other cheek" simply means to forgo a retaliatory response, aka worldly. Responding to hatred with love strengthens and displays our communion with the indwelling Holy Spirit and through grace cultivates God's true gift of freedom for us all.

REFLECTION:
Reflect on how applying the Law of Grace in your relationships can be improved in your life.

– Martha Sloan, Pastoral Care Director

MATTHEW 7:7-12

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

DAY 24

TUESDAY – MARCH 12

Ask, Seek, Knock

Most of us remember with fondness when, as children, we asked our parents for gifts. We had an inherent sense that if we behaved, our parents would fulfill our requests. We also knew that our parents had our best interests at heart, and that they would never give us anything that could harm us. And so it is with our God. When God instructs us to "ask," "seek," or "knock," he is simply asking us to "pray." Praying often and praying with authenticity. And in asking, we must always knock on God's door, seeking his will in our lives. And if we do that, we have God's promise that, regardless of who we are or what circumstances we face, we will receive His extraordinary provision. Will you consider asking, seeking, and knocking?

PRAYER:
Heavenly Father,
Today we ask that you prepare our hearts and minds for a lifetime of authentic prayer. We long for the day when we not only seek you, but find you in everything we do, everything we see, everything we say, and everything we hear. And we desperately desire that you reveal your door to us, so that we may knock and glorify you in all that we are. Father, we ask for these things in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

- Brian Rawson, Missions Pastor

MARK 3:31-35

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

DAY 25

WEDNESDAY – MARCH 13

An Everlasting Family

Jesus lovingly breaks open and expands the definition of "Family" with these words filled with power and potential! This is a truly revolutionary concept, as the view of the human genetic family has carried so much weight and importance throughout the ages. Family has long been the primary way we humans have found our belonging, secured protection, passed down wealth, and built our identities. And those facts explain why, to this day, we often experience such crippling sadness when our earthly families separate – through death, divorce, abandonment, differing beliefs, or distant geography.

But how perfect for God to use His Son to paint a newer, more everlasting picture of Family! Those of us who come from broken homes, or who carry unfair expectations placed upon us by our earthly families, now have a path to freedom from those limitations... here in this life. I know that I (and many others) have arrived at Riverbend without an intact family have experienced sadness or shame when seeing advertisements for "Family Ministry" offerings here. We can instinctively feel left out, like we don't fit, or have failed in some way.

But here at Riverbend, every person from any earth-family scenario has a full, healthy experience of God's Family available to us! We feel it on Sunday mornings as we gather in God's name with grateful hearts and sing together. We sense it in our small groups and Bible studies. And we experience it when we eat dinner together on Wednesday Nights in the Community Center. OUR children run and play. OUR Brothers and Sisters, and Mothers and Fathers, laugh and cry, and learn and question, and share and do, life together.

Jesus' whole life was about saving and resurrecting. Let us be grateful that He also provided us a way to have our experience of Family saved and resurrected as well. So, ask yourself today: Which Brothers, Sisters, Fathers, and Mothers do you want to thank God for bringing into your life through His Family? And which gaps in your earthly family could God still have plans to fill in ways that go beyond what you've expected?

– Audrey Parker, Connections Director

MATTHEW 5:43-45

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

DAY 26

THURSDAY – MARCH 14

Radical Love: A Lenten Call to Embrace Enemies

In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus challenges our conventional understanding of love. He contrasts the familiar saying, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy," with a radical directive: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." During this Lenten season, we are called to reflect on the transformative power of love that goes beyond societal norms and expectations.

Loving our enemies is not a passive act but an intentional choice to break free from the cycle of hatred and retaliation. Jesus urges us to emulate the boundless love of our heavenly Father, who causes the sun to rise on both the good and the evil and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). By loving our enemies, we become children of a Father whose love knows no boundaries.

As we navigate the Lenten journey, let us examine our hearts. Are there individuals we consider enemies or adversaries? The call to love them challenges us to see beyond differences, hurts, and conflicts, embracing the divine perspective of love that seeks reconciliation and redemption.

PRAYER:
Heavenly Father,
Your call to love our enemies echoes through the teachings of your Son, Jesus Christ. During this season of Lent, help us to embody the radical love exemplified by Jesus on the Cross. Grant us the strength to love those who may stand against us, and the grace to pray for those who persecute us.

Lord, soften our hearts and remove any bitterness or resentment that may hinder the flow of your love through us. May our actions and attitudes be a reflection of your love, reaching beyond the boundaries of human understanding. Transform us into vessels of reconciliation and agents of your mercy. In the name of Jesus, who loved us even when we were enemies, we pray.
Amen.

- Nick Steinloski, Executive Family Pastor

MATTHEW 10:37-39

"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

DAY 27

FRIDAY – MARCH 15

The Cost of Discipleship II

How harsh a statement! At least it certainly seems so. And yet, Jesus' words to his twelve disciples were part of an encouraging and comforting pep talk. Not only had each of them left families, and entire lives, to follow him, but they were heading out into the world to continue His ministry without Him: to confront the darkness and to heal, restore, and resurrect.

Jesus knew that their work would divide cities and homes, as some believed the good news and others resisted it. Not only did Jesus see the sacrifices they made and the battles they'd fight—but He guaranteed it was all worth it. Following Jesus infused their days on earth with meaning, purpose, and LIFE, and guaranteed their lives extended beyond the grave.

Spend a few minutes contemplating ways you may have felt overlooked or under-appreciated. What are some ways you feel you are doing your best, but it just doesn't seem to be enough?

NOW CONSIDER PRAYING THESE WORDS:
God,
Thank you for being a faithful Witness to my life. Thank you for paying attention to my every sacrifice and effort. I know that pursuing You is always worth it. Please encourage me today even as you encouraged your disciples, and help me to feel empowered, eternal, and intimately connected to You.
Amen.

- Stephanie Rollins, Teaching Pastor

MATTHEW 19:16-22

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."

"Which ones?" he inquired. Jesus replied, "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

DAY 28

SATURDAY – MARCH 16

The Problem with Stuff

Have you heard the saying "Do you own your stuff, or does your stuff own you"? In this passage, Jesus speaks to a man who seems to have it all. It seems that he has lived a good life. In fact, he is just trying to get his ticket to heaven. Jesus' response shows us that the man has all the moral instruction needed. He knows how to live a good life. But something is missing. Jesus makes an alarming suggestion – that poverty can be a sign of God's favor and blessing too. He tells the man… to go sell it all and give to the poor. Let it all go and follow Jesus? Really? And like most of us would have been, the young man was speechless.

This passage speaks to me too. My family lives in comfort compared to most of the world. My wife and I work hard to provide for our daughters. I must ask the very question Jesus asked of the rich young man: Am I willing to let go of all my stuff in order to follow Jesus?

If you're like me, you immediately think of the things that wouldn't be that hard to let go. Does my stuff keep me from investing in relationships or serving others? Jesus wasn't referring as much about the rich man's wealth, but what those comforts were doing to his heart: in and of themselves the material things we surround ourselves with are not bad. But Jesus asks us, do we own the stuff, or does the stuff own us? Can we set the distractions in life aside to love others and love God?

PRACTICE:
In what ways might you seek and discover whether 'your stuff is owning you'? What would it look like for you to consider what it is that God is asking you to give up?

– Scott Reeves, Community Engagement Pastor

WEEK 6

SUNDAY - MARCH 17

"LOSING YOUR FRIEND"

READ JOHN 11:1-41 – Jesus Wept.

JOHN 15:9-13

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

DAY 29

MONDAY – MARCH 18

Jesus Goggles

Many Lenten devotional guides involve studying and reflecting on selections of Jesus' sermons and parables. They utilize dissecting original language and implore the use of metaphor and study of theme to help one arrive at an impactful interpretation of complex scripture. John 15:9-17, however, is amazingly direct in its simplicity. In this passage, Jesus' singular demand is this: "... Love each other as I have loved you." The first part of His directive is simple – we are to love each other.

"Easy enough," you might think; after all, the word "love" is, as some would say, overused as it communicates varying degrees of affection. We convey deep affection with phrases like "I love you with all my heart" and "I love you more than anything," but we also use them to express a milder sense of affection like, "I love you; you are the best," or "I love your company."

In contrast, in John 15:13, Jesus is particular in the kind of love He directs us to have for one another. He uses the term "agape." Agape love is selfless, unconditional, unchanging, and sacrificial. Agape is the love between God the Father and Jesus the Son - the love that kept Jesus dedicated to the plan of salvation, knowing that the plan ended with His crucifixion. The essence of agape love is giving, not getting.

Can we love like that? Is it even possible? While most of us will never experience an event that requires dying for someone, we can be sacrificial in almost every aspect of our lives. Sacrificial living, at its core, requires giving for the benefit of others. While it means sharing what we have in abundance with the less fortunate, it also calls for us to be generous with empathy, compassion, and understanding. It requires humility and thinking the best of people. The truth is sacrificial living can be accomplished in every aspect of everyday life (home, work, and school), enhancing every relationship (family or stranger).

Can we love like that? Of course!
Is it easy? No.
Is it something God desires from us? Yes.

Love like Jesus loved—love who Jesus loved. Be generous in thought and deed. Live a sacrificial life.

ACTIVITY:
As you go about your day and interact with others, try to visualize Jesus in the situation with you. What would He think? What would He say? What would He do?

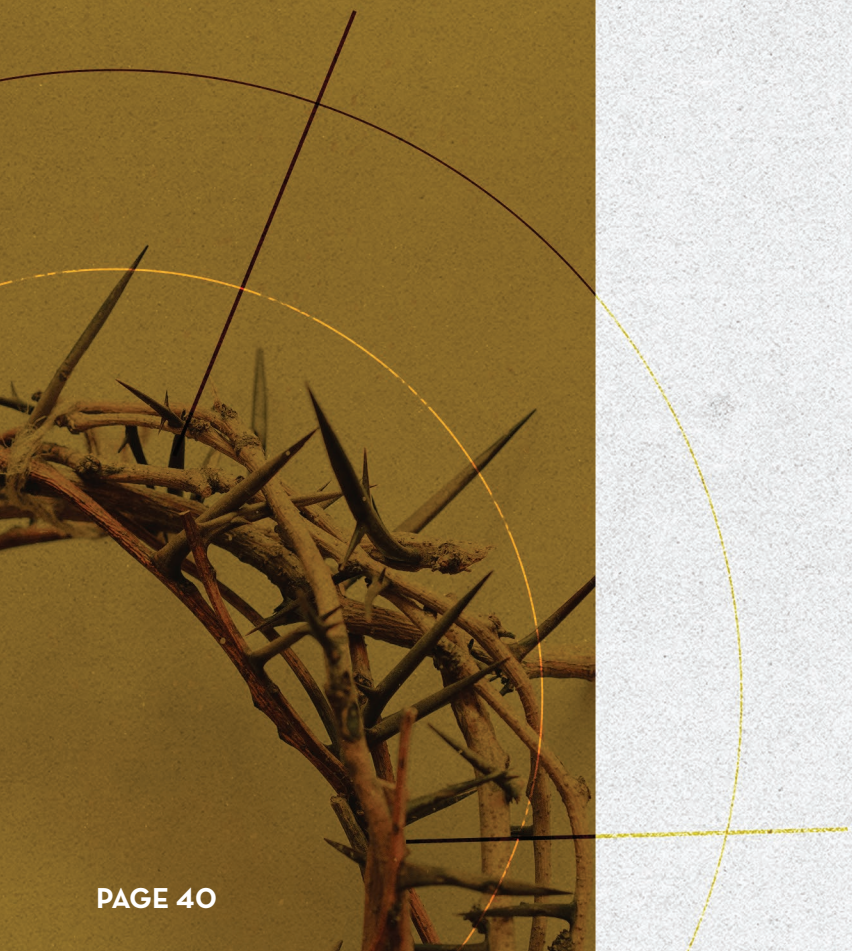
- Susan Kennedy, Children's Pastor

LUKE 4:16-21

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."



DAY 30

TUESDAY – MARCH 19

Unwrapping the Gospel

The Bible says that God's message is near us, in our mouth and in our heart. As a good rain that falls all over a city, the Spirit of God is constantly hovering around us to reveal wisdom and peace. If you want to learn more about who God is and what plans he has for your life, simply start asking him questions. You don't need to do that in front of others (so they don't think you are crazy – but, who cares, anyway)? Now, I promise you, the most true and deep knowledge you can get in the world will come from those interactions between yourself and the Holy Spirit. He always answers our questions, but first we need to unwrap them.

How to unwrap it: Pause for a moment and think about some questions, doubts, and fears that you have but nobody (not even Google) can help you with. After you identify them, simply share those topics with the Holy Spirit by speaking to him as if you were talking to a good friend. Invite the Holy Spirit to come into your heart like never before and let him guide you with his abundant peace and wisdom.
(For more, read 1 John 2:27)

- Thiago Duzzi, Associate Missions Pastor

JOHN 13:34, 35

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

DAY 31

WEDNESDAY – MARCH 20

Known By Our Love

There is a hymn we sang in youth group when I was a kid. It was easy to sing, had a bit of an ominous tone to it, and finished each stanza with a crescendo that was worthy of belting out with gusto: "And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." That hymn is titled "We Are One in the Spirit."

The command Jesus gives in the passage comes right before Peter's (proud?) insistence that he would lay down his life for his Savior. Jesus' famous reply is that before the cock crowed, he would deny Him three times.

The obvious message here is that Jesus doesn't need saving or anything else. Instead, we honor him simply by loving one another – as He has loved us. And not in a shallow manner, like having a loving 'attitude' or warm feelings. He is commanding (even requires) loving when it's not convenient. Loving when it hurts. Loving to the point of putting someone else's welfare ahead of our own.

So how we doing, Church? Are we showing Christ-like love to ALL peoples? Or are we getting consumed by jealousy, mistrust, bitterness, and division? What kind of example are we setting to non- or marginal-believing brothers and sisters - who are already stained by the sting of betrayal, hurt, and abuse?

Vow to always love as Christ did. That way they will know we are His, and that we are indeed "One in the Spirit."

- Paul Viebrock, Pastor of Men's Ministry and Director of Operations

LUKE 7:11-14

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."

Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

DAY 32

THURSDAY – MARCH 21

Waiting to Wail

The widow of Nain had just lost her son. The crowd surrounding her was weeping, wailing, and mourning. When Jesus meets her, he sees her pain and decides to comfort her. And he says to her, "Do not weep." Initially, the words are shocking. Why would he say that? If there's one thing you don't say to someone grieving, it's "Do not weep." But it says he had compassion and that is why He told her not to cry. He feels, knows, and understands her pain. She senses this in His words.

If Luke 7:13 is surprising, so is Luke 7:14: His only concern is to comfort the mourning mother. So, He touches the coffin. He defiles Himself. Notice the mother has not yet said a word. She has not asked for anything. As far as we know, she doesn't even know who Jesus is. Which makes Christ's next words so astounding. So, He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." So, what happens? Jesus raises the boy from the dead. And, the boy sits up in his coffin and begins to speak.

If you are going through a time of trial and testing, if you are facing a tragedy, Jesus knows, Jesus sees, even when everybody else does not. And He says to you today, or when that tragedy comes, "Do not weep. Don't cry. I'm about to turn your mourning into laughter."

PRAYER:
Father,
Thank you for the compassion I see displayed so spontaneously in Jesus. I'm so glad that you are full to overflowing with such compassion. Increase my faith in your love and compassion. And help me to be filled with your compassion also. In Jesus' name, I pray.
Amen

– Dean Busboom, Senior Adults Pastor

JOHN 14:1-4

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

DAY 33

FRIDAY – MARCH 22

Releasing the Need to Know

I don't know about you, but my heart always seems to find a way to be troubled. If it's not anxious and worried about, like, ALL of the things ALL of the time, then what are we even doing? I'm at my most content when I know what's coming so I can properly prepare, wear the right shoes, and pack snacks.

But that's not what Jesus is calling his disciples – and consequently, us – to in this passage. Contextually, we must remember that Jesus is delivering this message during the Last Supper. Jesus very well knew what his tomorrow would hold, but he decided not to meet his disciples' worries and anxiety with a play-by-play of what would occur. Rather, he chose to remind them to continue to trust God without knowledge of what may lie ahead.

The same is true for us.

What anxieties can you lay at the feet of Jesus today, wholeheartedly trusting that HE holds your tomorrow, regardless of what your tomorrow may hold?

- Maddie Schulte, Worship Arts Director

MATTHEW 14:23

"And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there."

DAY 34

SATURDAY – MARCH 23

Solitude

In the study of Proverbs, we see that Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, personified both (Lady) Wisdom and (Madame) Folly in his teachings. In doing so, Solomon gave us insight into how to deepen our connection to God and showed us how to greet our memories and life practices as welcomed guests.

This week, you are invited to host Solitude as a trusted friend. Entertain this friend just as you would a person and allow them to escort you into the presence of God. Imagine they are your guide, ushering you into His living room for Him to meet you.

To start, just as you would not show up un-announced to an important meeting without an appointment, we need to make the time for this meeting with Solitude. Today, literally write into your calendar a time each day when you will give seven minutes to Solitude to be ushered into the presence of God.

It may be easiest to do it at the start of the day (set your wake-up alarm seven minutes earlier), but anytime will work as long as you are alone and open to speak and listen to God. You may not receive any revelation from God in your first times meeting with Him, but gradually as you meet with Him more, you will find you begin to hear both your inner voice as it longs to speak, and His reply to your heart as He answers.

QUOTE:

"Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. Jesus himself entered into this furnace. There he was tempted with the three compulsions of the world: to be relevant ('turn stones into loaves'), to be spectacular ('throw yourself down'), and to be powerful ('I will give you all these kingdoms').

*There he affirmed God as the only source of his identity ('You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone'). **Solitude is** the place of the great struggle and the great encounter - the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and **the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.**" - The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen*

- Mark Johnson, Pastor of Boomers

WEEK 7

SUNDAY - MARCH 24: PALM SUNDAY

"Losing the Plot"

READ MATTHEW 21:1-17 – The Triumphal Entry

MATTHEW 26:36-38; 41-46

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

DAY 35

MONDAY – MARCH 25

Does Jesus need us?

In earlier passages, Jesus often went away alone to pray, seeking solitude to commune with the Father. Why the change? What did Jesus need from His disciples in this particular moment, just before His arrest?

Echoing the warnings given the Disciples earlier about the difficult task before them (Matt. 10), and just after relaying the imminent reality of His death as a 'ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28), Jesus appears to need the company of His three most trusted Disciples. Specifically, He needs them to pray (vs. 41) despite the weakness within their bodies and their susceptibility to temptation [πειρασμόν (peirasmon)], translated as "adversity," or an "experience of evil." What was this temptation?

Could it be that Jesus was still teaching His disciples, even in the midst of great suffering? Could it be that Jesus didn't need them to 'do something' for His benefit, rather for their own? What if this temptation towards "adversity," or an "experience of evil," was our susceptibility to seek our own solutions, and not seek God and His?

In times of adversity, when things are falling apart around us, when life throws us another curve, there is a first priority – even for the God of the universe: prayer.

PRAYER:
God of the Universe,
Guide my heart, my hands and my feet, my thoughts and my voice. "Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matt. 26:39).
Amen.

– Kevin Hedges, Spiritual Formation & Men's Pastor

JOHN 17:1-5

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

DAY 36

TUESDAY – MARCH 26

Glory!

Do you find it difficult to pray into the darkest moments of your life? If so, you are not alone. But Jesus Christ has set the perfect example for each of us. In what was surely the darkest moment of His earthly walk, only moments from being arrested, denied by his best friend, tried in a kangaroo court, savagely beaten, and ultimately crucified, Jesus prayed a solemn but extraordinary prayer to his Father.

It was a prayer that was a preface to his sacrifice and his departure from this life. And what was the focus of this prayer? Glorifying the Father! It may seem counterintuitive, but we must all understand that those who glorify God in this life, and persevere through our darkest times, shall be glorified with the Father. What a great lesson for all of us as we each deal with our own darkness. Glory to God!

PRAYER:
Heavenly Father,
Today and every day, we seek to glorify your Holy Name. We seek your strength to help us persevere through our darkest moments, and we seek your Light to guide us out of the darkness. We thank you for the gift of your Son, and for the sacrifice He made so that we each of us may have eternal life. Glory, glory, glory Father! We praise your Holy name! We pray all of this in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

- Brian Rawson, Missions Pastor

JOHN 19:25-27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

DAY 37

WEDNESDAY – MARCH 27

The Real Family Tree

It's incredible to imagine that while Jesus was coming to the end of his time on the cross, nearing the final moments, he still looked upon his distressed mother with such compassion and concern for her care that he declared his disciple John become her caretaker. What encouragement we can take knowing our savior can ALWAYS meet our needs, and with the perfect provision too.

It's curious to think that Jesus chose a disciple as caretaker for his mother, instead of a blood relative which was customary. When Jesus told Mary to "behold her son," He demonstrated that family was no longer defined by blood relation, but instead by obedient followers of Christ.

THIS DAY'S INVITATION:
Take time to reflect on the people closest to you who are not blood-related, but instead are faith-related. Acknowledge the spiritual family tree in your life and rest in deep appreciation for the faith and encouragement you all share.

- Martha Sloan, Pastoral Care Director

LUKE 23:32-34

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

DAY 38

THURSDAY – MARCH 28

Forgiveness in the Midst

As our Savior headed to, then hung on the Cross, what did Jesus the God-Man exhibit in these final, agonizing hours? We initially see that Jesus demonstrated extreme endurance, patience, and tolerance while undergoing excruciating torture and humiliation. In the midst of great suffering, our Savior showed tender care and compassion toward his mother, his followers, and even the criminals hanging alongside Him.

He displayed supernatural commitment to the goal of rescuing us, the lost. And from a human standpoint perhaps most remarkably, we see Jesus asking the Father to forgive the very ones responsible for placing Him there.

How could He in the midst of unimaginable anguish, look beyond his own pain to the deepest need of his tormentors? Forgiveness. Throughout his ministry Jesus encouraged and expressed forgiveness as he cared for those around him. But on the Cross we see that he actually modeled forgiveness when it was the most difficult. In spite of being the object of hatred, beatings, torture, and rejection, Jesus loved and forgave those who were responsible. Even from the Cross mercy and grace flowed unhindered, bathing all participators in full forgiveness.

Many that day caught up in this unfolding drama were wholly unaware that at the end of the day they were fully forgiven by the Father in heaven. And he forgives us as well. Let us not be so unaware. May we this day raise up hands, hearts, and souls, reaching and receiving a surpassing forgiveness from our Beloved risen Savior and Lord!

A PRAYERFUL MEDITATION:
Consider setting aside a time to sit in rich and quiet contemplation, experiencing the surrounding presence of God who pours over you infinite love and complete forgiveness. Reach up to the Father to receive this love and the forgiveness offered. And, offer back to the Savior a heart filled with thanksgiving that we are fully forgiven.

- Diane Haney, Women's Pastor

LUKE 23:44-46

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

DAY 39

FRIDAY – MARCH 29

My Soul to Take

Do you remember bedtime prayers as a child – how mom or dad ended the day with prayers before going to sleep, maybe kneeling at our bedside, or sitting together on the bed, or maybe all tucked in? For many of us, this is one of our first faith memories. We can pray in all of these ways. And what we ourselves received as children from our own parents, we then pass on to our children as well: that sacred time of prayer as we get ready to fall asleep. Many of us know and love that bedtime prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep…" That is the one we know best.

In his evening prayer, Luther invites us to pray: "Into your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things…". If that sounds familiar, that's because Luther's words echo Jesus' words on the Cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And in praying these words, Jesus himself quotes from one of the most familiar bedtime prayers of the Jewish people, from the Psalms: "Into your hand I commit my spirit" (Psalm 31:5).

LUTHER'S EVENING PRAYER:
I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands, I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.
Amen.

– Dean Busboom, Senior Adults Pastor

JOHN 19:31-37

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.

The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

DAY 40

SATURDAY – MARCH 30

Liminal Space – (the uncertain transition between the no longer and the not yet: between preparation and sabbath, between death and resurrection.)

The revelation of Jesus' death ushers those who love him into uncomfortable, ambivalent, liminal space, pushing them to the edge of their understanding and leaving them perched there. Their rabbi, messiah and friend has died. For the skeptics this is proof of his humanity, validating him as a fraud. For the believers it is shattering, unthinkable, and incredibly difficult to process. All that his followers had come to know about Jesus did not provide a frame of reference for imagining that death was not the end.

However, this moment marks a beginning, a journey into the depth of God's power and plan. As hard as it is to comprehend, is far easier than what is to come - a risen Savior. When we arrive at the end of what we know, standing on the precipice of our beliefs, we inhabit liminal space - a place of faith, where vulnerability, teachability and the desperate need for the presence of God converge.

When have you found yourself on a precipice of belief, perched at the edge of what you have known, feeling the thinness and the vulnerability of needing more from Jesus? Perhaps even this week you are there in some aspect of your life.

Can you consider that this uncomfortable, uncontrollable space is one of grace? Can you surrender to taking a step into the unknown, a step of faith, trusting that what you have known, and believed, about God will unfold into more intimacy with him? Trusting that this is not the end?

"Liminal space (from the Latin limen for "threshold") is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in genuinely new ways. It is when we are betwixt and between, having left one room or stage of life but not yet entered the next. We often enter liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed – perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, engagement, or at the birth of a child.

During this graced time we are not certain or in control. This openness allows room for something genuinely new to happen. We are empty and receptive – an erased tablet waiting for new words. Liminal space is where we are most teachable." - Richard Rohr (Adapted from Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation)

- Tracy Johnson – Founder, Rent Tent Living

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