

# LENTEN DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

## 2020



Baylor University

GEORGE W. TRUETT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

As we follow along on the journey with Jesus to the cross, the season of Lent engages our hearts and minds so that we are truly ready to celebrate once we arrive at Resurrection Sunday. Lent is a time of contemplation, a time of dedication, and a time of preparation. In our tradition, we have sometimes been tempted to gloss over Lent and Holy Week in a rush to get to Easter, but it is in the journey of contrition and repentance that the true splendor of Christ's triumph over sin and death is magnified. To fully realize the beauty and hope of the Risen One who loves us so deeply, we must also know the disorientation of the darkness.

Students, staff, and faculty of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary have written these Lenten devotionals from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Each 2020 devotional entry is paired with a section of Matthew so that we might read through the entirety of the gospel while observing the season of Lent. If you are viewing the guide digitally, the daily Scripture readings are hyperlinked for easy access.

Our hope and prayer in compiling and sharing these reflections is that they might encourage you and enhance and deepen your experience of the Lenten journey this year. It is our hope that you will use and share this guide freely.

In Christ,

BEN SIMPSON

*Office of Spiritual Formation*

SHAWN BOYD

*The Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching*

ADAM JONES

*The Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching*



# ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26

## *Matthew 1:1-17*

I get why you want to skip to verse 18. Verse 1 seems to be all I need, and instead of trying to read through a bunch of Old Testament names, how about we call them all “yada yada yada” and be done with it? It is as if Matthew put the credits at the beginning of the movie to force everyone to sit through them. Not cool, Matt.

Some of the names we do know well: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, King David, and Solomon. We know these men because of how God’s interaction and promises with his creation developed. Many of the names you read are only memorialized here in Scripture. Maybe you remember a handful of the lesser known names. That is great—your Sunday School teacher would be proud.

But Matthew’s genealogy is also peculiar with the inclusion of women. The burden of proof and significance of one’s lineage came from who is the father and who was his father. Including women is not just unnecessary and uncommon but also unwelcome. Who are the women he included?

Tamar, the widow of two of Judah’s sons. Judah, fearing the life of his third son, denied Tamar his hand in marriage and thus denied her a future. Tamar used her wits to steal back a future. She tricked her former father-in-law into laying with her and gave birth to twin sons.

Rahab, a Gentile prostitute, was living in Jericho when two Israelite spies snuck in to survey their promised land. Rahab treasonously hid the two men from the king of Jericho.

Ruth, a woman from Moab whose husband and father-in-law die, but who is unwilling to reject or depart from her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth followed Naomi home and won her way into the heart of Boaz.

Bathsheba, who might not be explicitly named in your translation. In the NIV, it designates her as, “whose mother had been Uriah’s wife.” Bathsheba was King David’s failed one-night stand.

Mary, a virgin girl, betrothed to be married to Joseph. Mary will not become the first girl to become pregnant before she is married, nor the last, but will claim her virginity despite what is growing inside of her.

Why does Matthew scandalize his genealogy by including these women? He mixes in foreigners, prostitutes, seduction, failures of Jewish leadership, and stories of pain and heartache.

Matthew did this because it is the truth. Jesus is born as the fulfillment of the promise—a promise that is bigger than the Jews and what they hoped for in a Messiah.

Jesus is born into a world of scandal, sin, and pain. If this was not the state of creation, then why would Jesus need to come?

The cross lies ahead for Jesus. He goes there not just so he can save the people we like, but so that all might be saved.

I invite you to think about your past sins, the great atrocity you bore upon the world. Despite this, God wrote you into his family. He willingly scandalized his family tree by giving you a branch on which to rest.

### **Prayer:**

*Why me, oh God, a wretched sinner, would you send your perfect son to die? Understanding your love will forever be mystery, living in your love will forever be majesty.*

SHAWN BOYD

Program Coordinator for the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching and  
Grant Coordinator for the Lilly Endowment Preaching Grant

# THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27

## *Matthew 1:18-25*

The genealogy that opens Matthew's Gospel establishes that Jesus has the appropriate family pedigree to be the Messiah. But there's a catch: the family line traced by the genealogy belongs to Joseph, and Joseph is not Jesus's biological father. How can Jesus be part of the appropriate family line to be Israel's Messiah if he is not Joseph's biological son? Our text today answers that question.

Joseph and Mary are betrothed. According to Jewish law, a betrothal is legally binding and carries much more weight than a modern engagement; breaking a betrothal requires a divorce. However, Joseph and Mary are not yet allowed to consummate their marriage. When Mary becomes pregnant by the power of the Spirit, Joseph naturally assumes either that Mary has been unfaithful or that another man has forced himself upon her. Either way, the betrothal has been irreparably violated and Joseph cannot marry her. He has two options. First, he could demand a public investigation to determine the circumstances of Mary's impregnation. This would expose Mary to public disgrace but absolve Joseph of any responsibility. Second, Joseph could divorce her secretly. This would spare Mary the public shame but require Joseph to pay the financial obligation he owes to Mary and her family should he end the marriage. Joseph, being a righteous man, opts for the second choice.

Before Joseph can go through with his decision, he has a dream in which an angel of the Lord tells him not to divorce Mary. Her pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit and fulfills an ancient prophecy from Isaiah 7. Jesus is destined to be the Messiah of Israel. Joseph awakens from his dream and follows the angel's instructions. Joseph takes Mary as his wife and claims Jesus as his son. Although it is not readily apparent to our modern eyes, Joseph adopts Jesus. As Joseph's adopted son, Jesus is now a fully legitimate and legal member of Joseph's family line. This resolves the conundrum posed by the genealogy. But keep in mind that this is not a solution God thought up at the last minute. God did not paint himself into a corner and then exploit a loophole to fix the problem; Jesus's adoption by Joseph was part of God's plan from eternity past. From the very beginning, God planned to use this adoption to help bring about his salvation of the world. Just as Jesus's substitutionary death on the cross and resurrection from the dead were part of the plan from the beginning, so also was Jesus's adoption as Joseph's son.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- 1. Joseph has the right to expose Mary to public disgrace, but he chooses the way of mercy at cost to himself. How might we as Christians set aside our own rights to take the path of mercy, and in so doing, imitate Christ himself (Philippians 2:5-11)?*
- 2. How does this story reshape our understanding of adoption? How might this story give greater depth and meaning to the act of claiming a non-biological child as one's own?*

JOSHUA SHARP

# FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28

## Matthew 2:1-12

*"When I am walloped by Christian condescension toward those who are not Christian, I remember how many religious strangers played lead roles in Jesus's life: the Canaanite woman who expanded his sense of agency, the Samaritan leper who showed him what true gratitude looked like, the Roman centurion in whom he saw more faith than he had ever seen in one of his own tribe... This is one of the reasons why I remain a devoted student of the Bible: because what it says is so often not what I have been taught it says, or what I think it says, or what I want it to say. Scripture has its own voice—sometimes more terrible than wonderful—but it has never failed to reward my close attention, either with a fresh hearing or with the loud slamming of a door that tells me to come back later."*  
-Barbara Brown Taylor, Holy Envy

This book led me to look with fresh eyes upon this passage about the wise people who visit Jesus after his birth. These are people whom we gladly include in our Advent season every year and in almost every Nativity scene. We even have a Christmas song all about them. Ironically, however, I have never fully considered what it means to include people of a different faith and background in this story. These are more of those "religious strangers" who played a vital role in Jesus's life, proclaiming the international importance of his birth. It is also through these religious strangers that we see how unlimited God is in ways to communicate. God can use the stars to speak and wants to use even those we have deemed as the "other" to proclaim the importance of the life of the Christ child.

In Jesus's life, and even leading up to his death, we learn how much he likes to surprise us. The God of all came to be born as a baby—the most vulnerable creature. The God of all went to death on a cross—the most humiliating sentence. In all of the moments in between his birth and death, Jesus kept inviting the people around him to embrace the paradox. Jesus still invites us to do that because he never stops drawing all people to himself. When we have written off the religious stranger as lost, Jesus might have been speaking to them and using them for good all along.

As we move through this Lenten season, I hope that we will have eyes to see how God always has and always will act through those we have deemed as "other." I hope we will have ears to hear how God keeps speaking through those we least expect to speak truth. I hope we will have arms that are open to welcome those who seem the most different than us. And I hope we will have lives that proclaim the beauty of the *imago Dei* in every one of us.

### Prayer:

*Creator God, expand our minds and our hearts so that we might align with your paradoxical kingdom, and may we take joy in the least expected like you do. Amen.*

BRIANNA CHILDS

# SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 29

*Matthew 2:13-23*

You'd be surprised how God works in the desert.

People often overlook that dusty, sunny, and dry ecosystem, but God has a knack for transforming our deserts into places of hope. In the reading today, the infant Christ escapes death and finds safety in the barren land of Egypt because God had been faithful to warn Joseph in a dream. The journey must have seemed crazy to Mary and Joseph. After finally getting comfortable in Bethlehem and the visit of the Magi, seeking refuge in a foreign nation was likely the last thing on the mind of these tired young parents. But just as the Joseph of Genesis had found refuge in Egypt from his violent brothers and the infant Moses had found safety in a basket floating down the Nile, the Holy Family was being called to a desert journey of faith. What seemed to be a place of death became a refuge of hope, nurturing, and faith for the Holy Family.

God blessed me with a desert experience before seminary. I graduated college in May 2014 with no direction and no idea where to go. In a series of events which could only be described as providential, I found myself not in Egypt, but in the beautiful plains of the Texas panhandle. The terrain was rugged, rain was scarce. But in the sacred space of a rural church and while working in a community college campus ministry, God bestowed grace upon grace. I would have never chosen that desert on my own, but it soon became a refuge of hope, nurturing, and faith.

You'd be surprised how God works in the desert.

When the danger had passed, the Lord was faithful to call Joseph, Mary, and the Christ child home to Nazareth. This, of course, was not the only time Jesus would be called to a desert journey. In Chapter 4, Christ will spend 40 days fasting and seeking God while enduring temptation. Perhaps the desert is not a single-use refuge, but a place to which we return time and time again. A place of surrender to the dreams of a loving God. A place of fasting. A journey of denying ourselves for our own good.

Christian, welcome to the desert of Lent 2020. Christ has called us here together in prayer and fasting that we might seek God's holy face. This will not always be a comfortable journey. The sun will be hot, the temptations will be myriad, the land may seem unfamiliar. But perhaps in this desert place, God is working all things together for the good. Perhaps as we deny ourselves and seek our maker, we will identify with the God who took on our flesh, the God who goes to the desert, the God who goes to the cross for us. Keep your eyes open in this season. You never know what good you may find on the journey.

God bless you as you see God work in this desert. Amen.

JACOB BRENTON



# SUNDAY, MARCH 1

*Matthew 3:1-17*

John the Baptist might best be understood as a road construction project manager. He yelled out orders to make the way clear for the Messiah. His orders included the instruction to repent—to turn from that which caused hazards in one's life and way to the Messiah. He had a curious wardrobe, not the usual hard hat and bright yellow or orange vest sported by road workers. Instead, he wore a long shirt made of camel hair, secured around his waist with a belt. His lunch bucket was organic, natural food: locusts and honey. I suppose one would want something sweet to slather on the bugs to be able to swallow them.

This road construction project manager attracted people, all kinds of people. They heard his warning words and came to him to undergo the ritual of baptism in the Jordan River, demonstrating their washing away of roadblocks that get in their way from getting to know the Messiah. John the Baptist claimed that he was not the Messiah, but was pointing toward him. That's what his message and his practice of baptism did; it pointed down the road to someone greater than John the Baptist.

John said, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry." John knew his place. He realized that he was only preparing the road for the Messiah. He wasn't the Messiah. John points to a promise: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Strong words. But, then again, one isn't surprised by such salty and threatening language since John's occupation was spiritual road construction.

Even as John was speaking, Jesus came to him to be baptized. The Son of God who has nothing from which to repent requested baptism. Even John the Baptist said to him in astonishment, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" Jesus went under the water of the Jordan River to "fulfill all righteousness," and at that moment heaven opened, the Spirit came upon him, and the voice of the Father spoke these powerful words, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." The road John the Baptist had constructed led right to Jesus, the Messiah.

When I was a young, new Christian, I thought that all the Johns in the Bible were the same: John the Baptist, John Mark, and John the author of the Gospel of John, along with the three letters and the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible. I was confused. Until I sorted out the Johns—and this John sorted out me. This John, John the Baptist, is a provocative road construction project manager who does his job and does it well. He points us to the savior.

The road is made clear for us, too. We are challenged by this character, John the Baptist, to recognize Jesus as Messiah, to give our lives to him because he was tasked to give his life for us.

## **Prayer:**

*Our Great God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, clear the road of my life from all hindrances and sin that I might be led to follow Jesus, the Messiah, wherever you lead me. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

SCOTT M. GIBSON

Professor of Preaching; Holder of the David E. Garland  
Chair of Preaching; Director of the PhD in Preaching Program

# MONDAY, MARCH 2

## Matthew 4:1-11

After 40 days and 40 nights of fasting, Jesus finally became hungry. I would have been famished a mere 40 hours in. Nevertheless, when the enemy comes to tempt Jesus to turn the stones around him into loaves of bread to eat, Jesus responds by saying, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Have you ever been in the kitchen to smell fresh baked bread being pulled out of the oven? The smell that immediately fills the air is nothing short of heavenly. I imagine the enemy tempting Jesus to turn those stones into piping hot, sweet-smelling loaves of bread. But Jesus refrains. Though my heart is lifted just imagining pulling apart a loaf of freshly baked bread, watching the steam escape through the cracked open crust, Jesus testifies of something much more satisfying.

"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Better than fresh baked bread, and all that life has to offer, is every word that comes from the mouth of God. Do we live longing for every word that comes from God? Like our stomach groans with hunger pains, does our soul ache for God to speak to us? Is God's word our very life and breath?

Once the tempter has tempted plenty, Jesus says, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Only him. Only God. Once Jesus says this, the enemy leaves him.

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good" (12:9). In our world today, we have gotten pretty good at hating what is evil, but we often fail to hold fast to what is good. I fear we have forgotten what good is.

In the wilderness, Jesus shows us not only what is good, but what is better. The enemy comes to tempt Jesus when he is at his weakest. Rather than merely hating what is evil, Jesus holds fast to what is good. By speaking out the good and life-giving word of God, evil flees from him. The enemy leaves him.

### Prayer:

*Father God, we spend so much time fleeing from what is evil, that we forget to cling to what is good. We confess that we have hungered for so much more than you, God. We want to worship and serve you, only. We want to live by every word that comes from your mouth. Help us to position ourselves to hear from you. We believe your word is better than life. Help us believe by the power and presence of your Holy Spirit who indwells us. Amen.*

### Spiritual Formation Practice:

*Though we may miss a meal here or there, we never forget to eat. And yet, how often do we forget to listen for every word that comes from the mouth of God? Whether you are a college student, a single mom, a pastor, a businessman, or a grandparent, I challenge you to dedicate one meal or snack time a day to dining with God. If you have a family, I encourage you to invite them into this daily spiritual practice. Bring God's word to the table and invite him into the conversation. Reflect on how his word relates to your day. Ask him to give you (and your family) life through his word.*

MEGHAN HENDRICKSON



# TUESDAY, MARCH 3

*Matthew 4:12-25*

Who am I?

Throughout my life, I have asked this question often. Who am I to preach the Gospel of a perfect Savior who sacrificed his life for me? Who am I to share about the work of a magnificent God, who, through power and might, created the heavens and the universe? Who am I?

In this passage, we see Jesus beginning his earthly ministry. We read about a perfect Jesus beginning to call others to repent. As a follower of Christ, I have asked myself that "Who am I?" question far too often. It can be easy to think to ourselves and ask God, "Why not choose someone more eloquent?" or "Why not choose someone more successful?" or "Why not choose someone more powerful than I?"

Jesus could have chosen the most powerful people of the time, but that's not what he did. As we continue to read this passage, we see that he chose fishermen. He chose ordinary, common people to assist him in his ministry. Even after two thousand years, he is still calling ordinary people like you and me to be witnesses of the work of Jesus Christ and the sacrifice he made for us on the cross. This perfect savior calls imperfect people today just as he called these fishermen to tell of his love, grace, and majesty.

So, when I have asked that question of "Who am I?" I am often met with the response, "You are my beloved child; someone I have called to share my good news." Just as he called ordinary fisherman, so too has he called me. As Christians, each of us are called, wherever we are, whatever we do, to be disciples for Christ and to proclaim his wonderful news of hope, healing, and restoration.

This, of course, isn't an easy journey. Later, in Matthew 16, Jesus tells His disciples to take up their crosses. Jesus came to give his life to save others. As sharers in his ministry, the disciples were told that they would face hardships and persecution. As they faced hardships, we also will face hardships. And yet, God can use our circumstances for his glory, for his purpose to bring hope and healing to so many who are lost and broken.

As you make your way throughout life's journey and as you focus on Christ's sacrifice this Lenten season, be encouraged, be motivated. God chose you. He chose you to be his disciple. So, share his good news and share how he has redeemed you.

## **Prayer:**

*Lord Jesus. Guide me to be your disciple and serve you. Remind me daily of the love you showed for me on the cross. Remind me that you called me to share this wonderful love with others. Use me. All of me. My trials. My circumstances. My abilities. Every part of me. To bring others closer to you. So that they can share in this amazing love. In your most precious name, Amen!*

JOSHUA STEWART

# WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4

*Matthew 5:1-12*

Lent is a solemn time of directed spiritual focus. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, it is a time to remember that from dust we came and to dust we shall return. I don't think we meditate or contemplate this somber attitude enough. During Lent we often engage in a practice of fasting from something in order to remember the suffering of Christ. In our small sacrifice, we remember Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us.

How does this connect to the beatitudes? The passage begins with the people sitting down and learning from Jesus. We too, during this set apart time, are meant to sit at the feet of Christ and remember his suffering and how he taught us to live.

Reading the beatitudes reminds us what Jesus considered blessed. When we are poor in spirit, when we mourn, when we are meek, when we are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, when we are merciful, when we are pure in heart, when we make peace, when we are persecuted—this is when we are blessed. As we remember the death of Christ, may we also remember that we need to die to our own presuppositions of what it means to be blessed. These simple phrases may be common ideals for those of us who have been in the Christian faith, but they are no less revolutionary. In the same way, it may be common to pause for 40 days in remembrance of Christ's death, but it is no less revolutionary.

May we gather at Jesus's feet and be taught. May we sit in our poor spirits, our mourning, our meekness, our hunger and thirst, in a merciless world, a chaotic world, and seek the kind of blessedness that can only come from a resurrected savior who needed to suffer and be crucified in order to bring this revolutionary kingdom.

**Practice:**

*Pray through each beatitude, asking the Holy Spirit to make you more and more kingdom-minded. Which beatitude is most revolutionary to you? How can you practically engage in sitting in Jesus's teaching this Lenten season?*

JESS GREGORY

# THURSDAY, MARCH 5

## *Matthew 5:13-48*

In the 2005 movie *Coach Carter*, Ken Carter returns to his high school alma mater in Richmond, California, to be the new basketball head coach. Ken Carter was the leading scorer in the school's history. On his first day coaching, he prints out contracts of requirements of playing for and representing Richmond Basketball. The contracts stipulate wearing coats and ties on game day, maintaining a 2.3 GPA, and calling one another "sir." Immediately after coach Carter reads the contract, two of the team's leading scorers from last year leave the gym. Coach Carter was not afraid of change, and therefore caused controversy.

After the team won a mid-season tournament to remain undefeated in the season, Coach Carter gets back the progress reports of the players only to find them failing classes. In indignation, he locks up the gym until the team collectively raises their grades to a 2.3 GPA. This included practices and important games of the season. The community and the Board of Education were outraged and confronted the coach saying, "You're being too hard. Basketball is all that these kids have!" Coach responded and said, "Maybe that is precisely the problem—basketball shouldn't be the highlight for their lives." Coach Carter wanted every one of the players to go to college and change the culture of violence and drugs that plagued students from Richmond.

The community and Board of Education decide to unlock the gym, to which coach Carter subsequently responds, "Then, I'll have to quit." As he goes to the gym to pack up his things, he sees all of his players in the center of the gym studying. They told him that they'll sit out until they get grades up; they didn't want to lose their coach. One of the more transformative scenes of the movie came when Mr. Cruz, a troubled basketball player whose cousin was recently killed by gun violence, quoted, Marianne Williamson:

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."*

The team would raise their grades and go to play for the playoffs. However, they lost to the number one ranked team, St. Francis. After the loss, Coach Carter addressed his team: "I came to coach basketball players, and you became students. I came to teach boys, and you became men." Jesus Christ, in the sermon on the Mount, invites us to *be* the salt and light of the world. Immediately, he follows with exhortation of internalizing the Mosaic law. For this Lenten season, let us not just to give up one or multiple things for the sake of another. Instead, let us practice resurrection—our transformation into *being* the salt and light—for the liberation of the world.

MICHAEL LIGA



# FRIDAY, MARCH 6

## *Matthew 6:1-18*

The Lord's Prayer—a prayer so familiar to Christians that many of us still recite it with "Thou"s and "Hallowed"s centuries after we started using different words everywhere else. But perhaps re-examining the Lord's prayer can help us see it again as *living* words given to the church (Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew: A Theological Commentary*).

*Our Father, which art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*

God's name is Holy, and God reveals his names for our sake. "I am that I am," God said to Moses, rejecting any attempt to contain him. We are given dozens upon dozens of names for God in Holy Scripture that we may cry out in prayer. Here, Jesus enables us to approach God as "our Father" at any time. Our conception of God as Father is not dependent on our good experiences with fathers. Rather all parental love, and all love, is to be measured against the Father's love for the Son. To Hallow God, and to say, "*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" is to pray for God to continue to disrupt the Kingdoms of this world. To pray God's will be done is to pray that God's will would shape, and lead, our wills. The will of humans is to reject Jesus and nail him to the cross. The will of God disrupts that will and ensures that what humans meant for evil, God meant for good. God's will insists that when we strike Jesus down, he is lifted up, exalted. That when humans sentence Jesus to the death penalty and *crucify him*, in the same act God enthrones him. And we pray that what God revealed in Jesus would be culminated here at his return: God's Kingdom on earth.

National Geographic Channel had a program called "Doomsday Preppers." It's about those who plan and store up goods for imagined civilization-ending scenarios. But, we non-"preppers" are not as different from them as we put on. Asking God to "*Give us this day our daily bread*" stretches us thin. But why? Because our attempts to control our own destinies always leave us in a mindset of scarcity: our anxious plotting is certain we can never have enough. Most of us are one peculiar hobby away from being exactly like Doomsday "preppers." Praying for our *daily bread* insists on our reliance on the one who is the Bread of Life.

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors* is doubtlessly the hardest, the weightiest line we pray in the Lords' prayer. To accept we have debtors, we *owe* something to others. It is easy to misread this line about forgiveness as some sort of "I scratch your back; God will scratch mine" transaction. Instead, we learn that we are sinners in need of forgiveness and become subject to the Kingdom in which forgiveness is the way of life. Forgiveness requires us to recognize how much we owe and cannot give.

*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.* Jesus honored the Father in all the ways we fail to honor God. And so, we are able to pray not to be led into that temptation, that suffering which we cannot withstand.

Jesus is always reminding us to fast, not to prove ourselves worthy, nor to pray to get an absent-minded God's attention, but to discover that what we are seeking is given in him. *For thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory forever and ever. Amen.*

We love, we fast, we show mercy, because God's love, God's nourishment, and God's mercy have been given without measure. We say the Lord's prayer together so we may trust and love God and one another all the more.

JONATHAN BALMER

# SATURDAY, MARCH 7

*Matthew 6:19-34*

A decade ago I almost failed my driver's permit exam because of a bizarre, virtual reality eye exam. Apparently, my hair had so much curl and volume that it created blind spots in my vision. So when I put my face towards the virtual reality headset to describe the moving images before me, my eyes could only focus on the distant, far-off images. Meanwhile, my eyes missed everything important happening close-up. Like a race horse wearing blinders, my hair kept me from seeing what was right there next to me. And such a simple mistake almost cost me my learner's permit.

But what's interesting to me is that while my hair accidentally created blind spots that day, too often I encounter Christians who have actively chosen to wear blinders in their lives. And it is costing us our peace.

We have bought into the false illusion that putting on blinders will allow us to see our lives and dreams more clearly. We have bought into the lie that focusing more fully on the potential future will guarantee a more likely outcome.

But glory be to God we are not trapped in this downward spiral because our future hope does not—nor has it ever—been rooted in our own works. And yet, despite knowing this truth in our heads, I suspect very few of us actually live with such a dependence on Christ. Our relationship with the Lord may be genuine, but is often limited to a particular area of our life—whether that be tradition, ethics, or need.

But in our passage today, God is calling us to more. God is calling us to take off the blinders and future-driven focus so that we may see how God is with us—and moving among us—today. This is the joy of the incarnation of Christ. Emmanuel: God is with us.

We do not have to wait for a shallow peace that comes when our lives fall according to a plan on some far day. No. We can have peace today because peace comes from the presence of God, who is already surrounding us, if we would only allow ourselves to pause, look, and see the God who is with us always.

What are you seeking today? If you're seeking the future with all intensity, then you are fighting a losing battle. Your focus is on what you don't have today and what you want to get later. And that deficit viewpoint steals joy. However, in the words of one of my favorite artists, Lauren Daigle, "God, set your promise to play on repeat in my head. When you meet my anxiety, put it to death."

God's promise is that he is present with me now, and that is more than enough. And if I am to live with true clarity, I have to repeat that promise to myself day-in and day-out, so that I may be more present with the Lord, My God, who is calling me to be with him today. I know that God is with me today. And that is always enough, my friends.

KENDALL ELLIS

# SUNDAY, MARCH 8

*Matthew 7:1-29*

*Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.*

Hypocrite!

Is there a worse insult than to be named as one who does the opposite of what one professes? And yet, our Lord offers this stern warning of sin, that is to say, the sin present in our own lives as opposed to the sins that are so easily seen in the people around us. Sin is never to be ignored, within ourselves or within the church. Make no mistake, this Scripture does not encourage us to allow our brothers and sisters to continue in sin for we know Jesus will later instruct believers to healthily confront sin (Matthew 18), and (among other places) in the book of James, the church is called to bring back the wanderer (James 5).

Rather, the warning in this section of chapter seven is against creating a hierarchy of sins in which we declare our sins small and the sin of others too large to be forgiven. We are reminded of the story Jesus tells his audience of the prayers of the Pharisee and tax collector; one pontificates of his faithfulness and the other cannot lift his eyes to the heavens for the shame of sin. Only the latter went home justified.

So then, if restoration from sin is our duty, how can we do so without being a hypocrite? We heed the call of Lent to remember first the log in our own eye. Lent calls us to deep reflection on the sin in our lives and to not deal with it superficially or flippantly. The sin that is carried to the cross on Calvary is our sin. We do ourselves no service by ignoring it, or worse, absolving ourselves without proper confession.

## **Spiritual Act of Response:**

*Confess your sins, one by one, before our Lord. Pry them up from your soul as you would a weed in a garden. Dig deep to the root of the sin and not the symptom. Feel the guilt and responsibility—feel the forgiveness and freedom.*

JACK BODENHAMER

Assistant Director of Ministry Connections



# MONDAY, MARCH 9

## *Matthew 8:1-17*

*Slowly read through Matthew 8:1-17 twice, prayerfully paying attention to what God may be trying to speak to you through this passage.*

In this passage Jesus heals three specific people and many more unnamed persons after. Both Jesus's power and his love are displayed in these stories as he is shown to be willing and able to heal those who need it. Further, Jesus is interacting, even if indirectly at times, with people who would have been stigmatized in the Jewish culture. First, Jesus heals a leper by touching him, breaking through the cleanliness code which would have rendered the man untouchable.

- What might it have meant to the man for Jesus to reach out and touch him, possibly being the first person in a very long time to do so?
- Why does Jesus ask the leper not to say anything to anyone?

In the next passage, Jesus is approached by a centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant. Again, Jesus is interacting with someone who, according to the custom of his culture, he should reject. In this story, Jesus heals from a distance and not through touch as he did with the leper, giving a different picture of the nature of Jesus's authority over sickness.

- What significance, if any, does healing at a distance have when compared to healing through touch?
- What role does the centurion's faith play in this healing?
- What can the centurion's speech teach us about Jesus?

In the final passage, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law along with many others. This passage goes into less detail about the healings than the previous two did, but instead it gives a glimpse of the breadth of Jesus's healing ministry. Jesus did not only heal a few select or elite people, but rather he healed all the sick who were brought to him.

- What does this story of Jesus's healing so many people contribute to this trilogy of healing accounts?
- What do the different methods used by Jesus to heal people reveal about him?
- What does the Isaiah passage mean when it says, "He bore our disease"?

In this passage we see Jesus encountering many people who are in need of healing, and in response to them, Jesus says, "I am willing." Jesus does not limit his willingness only to those who are culturally acceptable; instead, he ministers to the ostracized and unacceptable. During this Lenten season, meditate on the truth that Jesus is both willing and able to help you.

MATTHEW FULLER

# TUESDAY, MARCH 10

*Matthew 8:18-9:8*

Imagine going to the doctor for an appendectomy, but instead of being told your appendix has been removed, the doctor just tells you that your loans are forgiven. Thanks, but can you do something about this appendix?

As the paralyzed man lays before Jesus, praying for a miracle, Jesus tells him his sins are forgiven. This is not the news that the man was expecting. I imagine that, initially, the man who was paralyzed experienced disappointment. Maybe his friends convinced him that if he goes to see this Jesus everyone is talking about, then he will be able to walk again! But when he arrives, Jesus tells him his sins are forgiven and then turns around to chat with some critical Pharisees. He's probably disappointed because Jesus did not do the one thing that he expected Jesus to do. Then, Jesus turns around and without any grandiosity says, "Get up, pick up your mat, and go home." And the man who was paralyzed did just that.

It would be easy for someone to go around and say that a person's sins are forgiven. But to say that God has forgiven someone, to say that the barrier keeping them from God had been torn down? That's a pretty big claim, but Jesus backs it up by healing the man.

Jesus is both the forgiver of sins and the bringer of social good, but we whittle him down to one or the other. We think of him as a doctor who has one job to do: heal sin. He doesn't care about what else is going on in our lives as long as we aren't sinning. Or we ignore that he has the ability to bring people into a relationship with God, and we just make him a figure of moral teaching. But Jesus's work in the world is not an either/or mission; it's a both/and mission. Jesus came to heal the world holistically.

We have the ability as God's church to show that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins by carrying out his mission in the world. If we are to show people that Jesus has the ability to forgive sins, we need to participate in his holistic mission by helping the sick, poor, and oppressed. They will know we are Christians by our love, and they will know that he is Christ by our love.

During Lent, we participate in the story of Christ's cross. We join his life by adding to or subtracting from our lives. In doing so, we demonstrate that Jesus has the ability to heal the broken world holistically. We observe Lent because of the Son of Man who has the authority to forgive sins. We observe Lent because we are being healed through the wounds of Christ. We observe Lent to show the world that Christ is who he said he was and that all things are being made right by his Spirit.

## **Practice:**

*It is easy to become discouraged by the pain of the world. Lift these thoughts up to God in prayer. Then, write out one way that you can help heal some of the pain. Don't make it something unachievable or you'll get discouraged. Find a practical way to show the world that Jesus is at work in the world.*

## **Prayer:**

*Father, where there is brokenness, let us bring restoration. Amen.*

ADAM JONES

# WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

## Matthew 9:9-17

Each time I turn my face away from the sun, I still feel the warmth on my cheek. As I sit in my booth of sin, Jesus comes back for me every single time. He says, "Follow me," and by now, I know this is the only thing that will get me out of the heat.

With sweet smells of bread and spices coming from the kitchen, we sit around a table. Enjoying conversation at dinner, we feel comfortable talking about the silly things and the deep things. We feel completely safe with the house dimly lit and the soft colors surrounding us. However, the presence of Jesus is what really makes us feel safe.

We can eat and enjoy because the Savior is with us. He is sitting right across the table from me. I can touch his hair, I can hold his hand, and I can hug him. He answers all our questions, as well as theirs, with wisdom and profoundness. He doesn't get upset or bothered. But soon, we know that he will leave us.

Let's not think about that right now. Let's just enjoy our moments with Jesus. Dwell on the thought of eating with Jesus, being able to hug Jesus, seeing Jesus.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me... As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, 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." (John 15:1-4, 9-11)

For when he does leave us, we know we will be renewed. We will abide, remain, and stand firm in Jesus. We will not put old clothes on our clean body. We will not pour our drinks into dirty glasses. We now know what it is like to be in the presence of Jesus.

### Practice:

*Listen to "New Wine" by Hillsong Worship.*

### Prayer:

*Lord, I ask that you remind me daily what it means to be in presence. I pray that you teach me what it means that you desire mercy, not sacrifice. Please help me to mirror your ministry and help those who are spiritually sick. Reveal the ways I am sick as well. Make me your vessel, make me your offering, make new wine out of me.*

BETHANY DICKERSON



# THURSDAY, MARCH 12

## *Matthew 9:18-34*

Throughout this passage in Matthew, we see Jesus impacting the lives of many different people. There appears to be a strong contrast in socioeconomic status between the synagogue leader Jesus first meets and the woman who touches his cloak. Even so, both are desperate for his help. The Gospel of Mark says that this bleeding woman has spent all her money on doctors without ever improving. She believes that just touching Jesus's cloak will heal her. His response to her touch is remarkable: "Daughter, your faith has healed you." Jesus values this woman no differently than the daughter of the synagogue leader, which he demonstrates by calling the woman "daughter." Even after living for 12 years in pain, this woman still has faith in Jesus's power to heal, and he responds to this kindly.

Additionally, we find Jesus healing two blind men as well as a man who is demon-possessed and mute. Jesus acknowledges the blind men with the same response: "According to your faith, let it be done." This phrase is interesting. It implies that our job is merely to believe, to have faith in Jesus, not to become tied up in legalistic matters to earn anything from him. No matter who we are, where we come from, or what we have done in the past, we find healing in Jesus. This may not mean that God will immediately give us anything we ask for, but we know we find rest in a God who is working all things for good in the end.

This Lenten season is a time for reflective repentance, reorienting ourselves back to God in the midst of anything we may be experiencing now. We must turn to Jesus, just as the bleeding woman and blind men did. Our reality as sinners is that we have no other hope. It feels these days like busyness and strict schedules are inevitable, even desired. Throughout this time, we must not forget to turn to Jesus, resting in his love for all people.

### **Prayer:**

*Gracious God, turn us back to you. Give us the discipline necessary to rest, remembering who you are and who we are in you. Let us not hold tightly to the materials or matters of this world, but rather use them for your glory. Help us to let go of anything keeping us from getting closer to You. Provide healing for those in need, and give us the strength to be all you have called us to be. Amen.*

ALLISON TINSLEY

# FRIDAY, MARCH 13

## *Matthew 9:35-11:1*

This passage always captured my imagination as a child. I always pictured Jesus sending out people in a field of ripe greens to go and harvest the freshly grown vegetables. While it can be easy to make this passage all about growing the church and gathering numbers, as many missions agencies and church growth strategists suggest, this passage is more about Jesus commissioning his disciples and welcoming them into his healing ministry.

Matthew 9:35 says, "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." Then in 10:1, the author of Matthew says, "Then Jesus summoned his 12 disciples and gave authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." In 9:35, Jesus is the one who is healing. In 10:1, Jesus gives authority to the 12 disciples to cast out demons and to heal. The same Greek word for "cure" is used twice in this passage, the word *therapeuo*, which is where we get the term "therapy." Jesus is inviting the disciples to be part of the therapy ministry.

There are two questions which then come to mind: What is sickness? What is healing? I like to think of sickness as broken relationships with God, others, self, and creation. This gives us a more holistic picture of what sickness looks like. Sickness, while it can certainly manifest itself in physical forms, is not limited to what we might think of as physical ailments. Moreover, if one of the relationships is broken, it can affect the other relationships. Healing, therefore, is fixing these broken relationships. The exciting thing about that is that God gives us the authority to participate in Christ's healing ministry through the Holy Spirit.

This is my last semester of seminary, and I think I stand alongside many others who are going through transition and are uncertain where God is calling them. Perhaps this passage is inviting us to ask not, "Where is God calling me?" but rather, "Where are there broken relationships that God wants to heal?" In asking that question, God will equip you and give you authority to be part of Christ's incredible healing ministry.

DANIEL HARRIS

# SATURDAY, MARCH 14

## *Matthew 11:2-19*

In *The Lion King*, Simba, the protagonist, has run away from home due to overwhelming guilt and shame. He is living a life that is free from the responsibilities he would have where he belongs as the rightful king of his homeland. At a critical moment, Simba sees a vision of his father that tells him, "You have forgotten me because you have forgotten who you are." I think we can see John the Baptist going through a similar trial in this passage.

In Chapter 3 of Matthew, at the baptism of Jesus, it seems that John knows exactly who Jesus is. Yet, we see here in Chapter 11, years have passed and John now finds himself in prison. He probably knows that it is only a matter of time before he is killed. In this desperate state of mind, John allows doubt to creep into his mind. He forgets who Jesus is because he forgets who he is. Jesus then reminds John of both.

First, he reminds John that he, Jesus, is the Messiah. He tells John's followers to report back a list of deeds that Jesus has carried out. Starting with the blind receiving their sight, Jesus lists the miracles he has enacted in an ascending order of their impressiveness. He gets to "the dead are raised" and then we see why Jesus is the Christ. What could be more impressive than raising the dead to life? The climax of Jesus's list of deeds is "the poor have good news brought to them." This is the kingdom of God and this is more than just a healer. This would truly remind John who Jesus is, the Messiah.

Second, Jesus reminds John who John is. Verses 13 and 14 are a provocative statement by Jesus: "He (John the Baptist) is Elijah who is to come." Jesus affirms to the crowd and John's followers that their work has not been in vain, their lives have not been wasted, that John's voice in the wilderness did prepare the way for the Messiah. "You are more than a prophet, you are God's greatest prophet. Remember who you are."

When doubt creeps into our lives, it is easy to forget. When our marriages are plagued by suspicion and half-truths, we forget that love is selfless. When tragedy takes someone too soon from this world, we forget that we are not alone. When we are overwhelmed by our workload and feel incompetent, we forget that we belong. When doubt creeps into our lives, we can forget who God is because we forget who we are.

You are beloved. You are a child of God. You are worthy of being found, even if it means leaving everything to find you. Remember who you are and you will remember who God is. God is love. God is a perfect Father. God is a faithful shepherd.

Doubt came for John, and it will come for us. Remember.

### **Prayer:**

*Lord I confess that I forget. I forget who you are, and I forget that I am yours. Help me to remember that you are good, perfect in every way, and holy beyond compare. Help me to remember that a good, perfect, and holy God loves me. Amen.*

ADAM DUBBERLY



# SUNDAY, MARCH 15

*Matthew 11:20-30*

In our passage today, the Gospel of Matthew helps us understand who Jesus is and why he came through a two-part framework: revelation and response.

We open with an exasperated Jesus in our first segment from verses 20 through 24. Having given the people in the towns numerous miracles, he is expressing the heavy consequences of hearts that remain unrepentant. He clearly states, “and you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades.” Why is his denouncement so decisive for these people? Because revelation entails a response. Jesus had revealed himself through his miracles. Jesus had performed many mighty works of God right before their eyes so that they would see, repent, and believe. But through these verses, we learn that the outcome of these miracles did not follow that sequence. The people chose to respond with rejection of Jesus.

Verses 25 through 30 may feel like an abrupt turn, but there is an important point of connection. Jesus thanks the Father for keeping “these things” from the “wise and understanding” and revealing them instead to “little children.” He tells the people that “no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.” Jesus has now revealed himself in a second, more direct way, by confessing his closeness to the Father, so close that those who wish to see and know God can do so only by looking at Jesus. This second revelation has no wondrous miracle to grab their attention, but it holds the same purpose:—that the people would hear, repent, and believe.

We end today’s reading with a couple of beautifully comforting verses, a stark contrast to how we began. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” This is the call to respond to the love of God revealed in Christ.

Our passage concludes without a recorded response from the crowd. As we examine our hearts during this Lenten season, we should ask ourselves how we personally respond to Jesus. Let’s take the time to reflect on the rest that only comes through Jesus Christ, and remember that rest can only come as a response to Christ’s calling to “come to me.” Let us repent and trust in him.

KATHERINE RANDOLPH

Administrative Associate for Doctoral Programs

# MONDAY, MARCH 16

*Matthew 12:1-45*

But this,

This, is how we always do it.

"Come and

Eat, rest, and be filled."

But this,

This, should not be done.

"Come and

Be healed and know me."

But this,

This, people should know about.

"Come and

Delight in my presence."

But this,

This has never been done.

"Come and

Be forgiven."

But this,

This we must see.

"Come and

Open your eyes."

We are an oppositional, questioning, and demanding people. Jesus is grace, mercy, and justice.

Discipleship is both invitation and imperative.

## **Questions for Reflection:**

1. *What are some oppositions or demands you have of Jesus that need to be let go?*
2. *In what way is Jesus calling you to "come and" today?*

SAMANTHA BRONSON

# TUESDAY, MARCH 17

## *Matthew 12:46-50*

This text might seem dismissive of familial bonds, but when we read it in tandem with Mark 3, we get a clearer picture of what has transpired, what Jesus had just experienced, and what the focus text is meant to convey. In Matthew 11, we are told that Jesus had been traveling to various cities, teaching and preaching, yet the people would not repent (11:20). People had heard him and observed miraculous healings, yet their hearts remained hardened. Both Matthew 12 and Mark 3 tell us Jesus left those cities, entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and encountered a man with a withered hand whom Jesus healed out of pure love and compassion (12:9-10). Then, Jesus had a confrontation with the Pharisees. Matthew 12:15 tells us that when Jesus departed he was followed by a great multitude and he healed them all. Mark 3 fills in some details that Matthew omits. In Mark 3, we learn that Jesus departed the synagogue and went home (3:19-21) followed by a large crowd, and his family heard the commotion. His family went to restrain him because people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind!"

Now our text makes more sense. Jesus is surrounded by people who left everything to follow him despite the possible objections from their own families and friends. Jesus's own biological family is trying to get him to stop saying and doing the things he was born to do. When Jesus is told that his mother and his siblings are outside wanting to speak to him, Jesus asks, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Jesus is doing two things. First, he is making it clear that following him will bring tension between us and our families if they are not Christ-followers. And while the tension might be hurtful, we must remember what else Jesus did in this passage: he pointed out that all who choose to follow him are part of a much larger family. Things are no different today than they were then. Have you ever had friends or family members chastise you or ridicule you for choosing to follow Jesus? You are not alone. Stay faithful and stay encouraged. Remember that being part of Christ's family means we are never alone and never forgotten.

### **Prayer:**

*Dear Lord, thank you for accepting us into your family. Grant us the strength to face any obstacle with family or friends who don't understand why we love you and want to follow you. Help us remember that we belong to you and we are forever loved. Amen.*

RUBY WAYMAN

# WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18

## *Matthew 13:1-53*

Before last summer, every time I opened my Bible to Matthew 13, I thought of wheat, tares, mustard seeds, and a whole bunch of hard work.

But this year, it made me think of a funny inside-joke between my family and me while we were on a road trip through Wyoming. We were all piled in a van, gawking at the beautiful plains. About 100 miles outside of Wyoming, we saw a large, brown historical sign that read, "Point of Interest". Later, we saw the same sign about 50 miles out and again 10 miles out. By then, we were at the edge of our seats, excited to see this incredible piece of history. One mile out was the last tin sign. We began slowing down, peering out of the van, noses pressed up against the windows, and then we saw...a big pile of dirt. There was absolutely nothing in or around it. It was, literally, just a pile of dirt.

My family and I looked at each other in disbelief. "Did we miss it?" we asked.

We looked back and again, for miles, there was just land...and a big pile of dirt.

For over 100 miles, God had us on a wide-eyed and bushy-tailed adventure, and in 13 days of beautiful nature, wildlife, and mountains, I will not ever forget the excitement we all had leading up to the infamous, "Point of Interest," also known as a pile of dirt.

What amazes me is that when I saw this huge, dusty pile of dirt, in my spirit, I saw rich, beautiful soil. My mind later wondered, what is going on underneath? What exactly is that soil for? Who is building it? What is it going to be?

All I know is that someone, somewhere, knows there is something underneath that will eventually have numerous people in awe over it. Someone has bought this piece of land and has begun creating something wonderful for the world to see. Someone has sown seeds below and is now in the process of watching it grow.

In Matthew 13, we read numerous parables, most of them about sowing good seed in good ground. There are a few things that resonate with me after reading these passages.

It's apparent to me that we do not put seeds in the ground and instantly dig them up to make sure they are growing how they should be. We trust what's going on underneath by God's grace. We know if God has requested us to do something, we must only obey his request and keep going forward. There is no need to go back every day to try to figure out what God has planned.

Another revelation I received is that God encourages us to be good, fertile ground so we can bear much fruit. If we are full of weeds, stones, and thorns, we're not going to be able to produce what God has called us to do. We can be confident that every seed sown is being watered, nurtured, and well taken care of. All we must do is abide.

Lastly, we must be honest, loyal, and obedient to God's word and not be distracted by the enemy. We are encouraged to sow wheat instead of tares. Yes, they both might look the same in the beginning, but when the fruit begins to mature, it is quite apparent that the tares will eventually end up in the furnace of fire. Fortunately for us, the sons and daughters of the Most High God, we have eyes to see and ears to hear, and we begin to whole-heartedly abide—even if it takes a little more time.

CAROLYN SOTO JACKSON



# THURSDAY, MARCH 19

*Matthew 13:54-14:12*

Can you imagine going back to your hometown and having no one believe that you are who you say you are? And if that is not hard enough, can you imagine your own people rejecting you? This is what happened to Jesus as he returned to his hometown of Nazareth. The Nazarenes, his own people, rejected the Son of God who came to save them.

The people of Nazareth were skeptical of Jesus because of his miracles and his wisdom: "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" After questioning where Jesus received all of his power, they then continued to question his authority by asking, "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" It is evident that the Nazarenes remember Jesus as simply a young, ordinary boy who was born into a poor family. David Guzik states that the Nazarenes were so skeptical of Jesus's power because "these villagers were familiar with Jesus as a boy and accustomed to unspectacular things from him" (*Blue Letter Bible*, Matthew 13:53-56). This passage illustrates the low position that Jesus held within his society. The King of Kings, the Son of God, and the author of our Salvation came into this world so rich in grace, love, and mercy, yet endured the lowliest of human positions so that we may have eternal richness in him. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9, NIV).

Unbelief is present all throughout the Bible, and it is still present today. After reflecting upon this passage, I cannot help but think that I am just like the Nazarenes who were filled with unbelief. The amount of times I have doubted—doubted that Jesus would answer what seemed like an impossible prayer to answer. The amount of times I have had unbelief—unbelief that Jesus could rescue someone so far from himself. The amount of times I have had skepticism—skepticism that miracles still happen today. Although I have had doubt, unbelief, and skepticism just like the Nazarenes, God has still remained faithful. No matter how many times I have had unbelief, God has never left me nor forsaken me. Time after time, God continually chases after us with his never-ending grace, love, and mercy. In our unbelief, God always shows up.

My prayer for all of us today after reflecting upon this passage in Matthew is that God will fill our unbelief with belief. That we will have such a strong, unwavering love and devotion for Jesus that others will marvel at our faith. Let us not grow weary in taking hold of our faith in Jesus.

## **Prayer:**

*Lord, thank you for your word. Thank you for never leaving us nor forsaking us, even after we have had unbelief, doubt, or skepticism. Thank you for becoming poor so that we may become rich. I pray that you will ignite a fire within our hearts for you. I pray that you will fill our hearts with such a strong desire and love for you that it overflows. I pray that you will give us strong faith. In Jesus name, Amen.*

MARY KATHRYN HARRAH

# FRIDAY, MARCH 20

## *Matthew 14:13-36*

I will be honest—life as a seminarian does a great job keeping me busy. Whether it's reading textbooks or exegeting Scripture, serving in congregations or other ministries, or taking care of life's mundane tasks, I am a creature who strives (or struggles) to stay busy.

In this passage, a lot is taking place. It would be difficult not to see the pace of this text as we jump from one event to the next. We see Jesus perform two miracles: multiplying a limited food source and walking on water. These accounts show us that Christ is fully divine. As Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 11:1, we are to imitate Christ, yet we obviously are unable to perform these miracles because we are not divine beings (in fact, we're pretty far from it at times). I am not sure how often y'all try to walk on water or make one meal stretch out well beyond its ability, but I'm sure I know how it went. But there is something important to note in this passage that can be easily overlooked by the grandeur of miracles—something we should consider implementing more of into our lives.

These two miracles make mention of solitude. Before both miracles, we see Jesus retreat to be alone, once on the ship and the other to the mountain to pray. Was Jesus physically tired? Had he had enough interaction for the day and needed to recharge? Scripture does not give us those answers, but one thing we do see is that Jesus spent time away. How often do we consider what effect this had on his ministry? How should this inform our ministry? If Jesus, fully God (and fully man), took time to pray and time to be alone, what should that mean for us?

How often do we substitute time alone with the Father for our ministries? It's easy to justify passing on a time of rest with the Father in order to do more Kingdom work because Christians equate being busy with being used by God. In this passage, Christ is used in immaculate ways but, immediately afterwards, takes time to be alone.

One quote that sticks out to me comes from Charles Spurgeon. He says, "...If you are very busy, think and pray all the more, or your work will wear and weary you, and drag you away from God." Ministering to people, in any context, is taxing. There are many who can attest to this. If Jesus himself took time to be away, what makes us think we don't need to?

### **Practice:**

*Take time today to reflect on your schedule, ministry involvement included, and compare that to your alone time with God. What does your ratio of time look like? Are there areas that need to be adjusted in order to improve your spiritual walk? Are you giving yourself enough time alone with God to be used in powerful ways?*

TOM MORTON

# SATURDAY, MARCH 21

*Matthew 15:1-20*

The Lord our God speaks life into existence,  
And as created beings we live in Christ!  
but sin,  
Harbinger of death and decay,  
Poisons pure hearts  
And spews yellowish venom  
Words of hubris and hate.

I've given God a face,  
Like mine.  
Ethics,  
Like mine.  
So why does the mirror reflect a beast?

**Prayer:**

*Jesus, forgive us when we defile your name with our image or agenda. Rebuke us if you must, but not in anger, or we will become nothing. Help us honor the privilege to share your message of hope and promise of life to those within our community.*

ALEJANDRA VERASTEGUI

# SUNDAY, MARCH 22

## *Matthew 15:21-39*

"Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

Perhaps that is not the first part that jumps out when reading of the Canaanite woman. Rightly so, for such a remarkable story. We have a Gentile woman, her racial and ethnic identity linked to a group God commanded Israel to completely destroy in Deuteronomy. And this woman, despite the boundaries that exist between her and the Jewish people, calls out to Jesus for help.

Even more remarkable (or jarring) is Jesus's response. Our sensibilities today would probably have Jesus respond immediately with tenderness, offering a clear demonstration of love that transcends the lines that divide us. Instead, Jesus responds with silence, then rejection, and finally with insult, comparing the woman (and all Canaanites) to a dog.

She does not lose faith in Jesus. With both humility and confidence, she insists that Jesus's work is for her, too—even if it's just the crumbs. Truett Professor David E. Garland describes her faith perfectly: it is "tenacious." It is this great, tenacious faith that Jesus affirms when he grants the woman's request and heals her daughter.

With such a remarkable story, the "send her away" response of the disciples in verse 23 can easily get lost. But it's worth reflecting on as a mirror into our own hearts.

At first glance, the response might seem to be an example of cruelty. But cruelty is probably not what is going on here. Jesus's reply in verse 24—"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel"—was almost certainly a reply to the disciples, as the woman had not yet directly approached Jesus. To "send her away" for the disciples, then, meant to grant her request as soon as possible. The disciples' response reflected selfishness, exhaustion, or a desire for comfort rather than cruelty. They saw the Canaanite woman as an annoyance. The easiest way to eliminate that nuisance was to give her what she wanted.

How many of us can relate to this attitude? Sure, cruel indifference to the needs of those who don't belong to our groups undoubtedly lies within us—by all means, search your hearts and repent of this sin! But far more common and subtle when confronted with the needs of others is the tendency to look for the easiest way out, to search for a quick fix that will cost us as little as possible.

Perhaps this is why Jesus first communicates harshly with the Canaanite. He plays out the cultural script of his day before he and the woman turn it on its head. By blessing her faith—rather than blessing his disciples' desire to eliminate a distraction—Jesus provides a signpost of the community that is to come, a diverse community centered around shared faith in Jesus.

In our own lives, may we remember both the remarkable faith of the Canaanite woman and the ordinary superficiality of the disciples. By God's grace, may we emulate the former and turn our hearts away from the latter.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- 1. In your life, what are some ways in which you can identify with the Canaanite woman—whether in her circumstances, her actions, and/or her faith? Perhaps these are from specific examples in the past or in present situations.*
- 2. In your life, what are some ways in which you can identify with the response of the disciples to the Canaanite woman? Perhaps these are from specific examples in the past or in present situations.*



# MONDAY, MARCH 23

## Matthew 16:1-20

Stepping from their unsteady boat onto a rocky shore, each trying to avoid an unwanted slip from their shabby vessel, the disciples looked around for their teacher. In their haste to catch him, they had forgotten even the essentials. The grousing from their abdomens reminds them of faraway bread.

Jesus turns, finding them standing before him. Before they can speak, he warns them of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Confused, they surmise he knows they are hungry. He, of course, always knows. "Their teaching!" he continues without looking back. "Do you not remember how I fed thousands before? Yet, you worry about bread! Beware their teaching!"

Their chins take the usual route up to the sky and back down again. Their eyes assume a blank stare. The silence only disturbed by the dreadful tune of their stomachs. Bread. What a welcome sight it would be. Sure, their leaven is bad. But bread, oh yes, that is good. I bet they have bread, those religious leaders. In spades probably. Warm, fresh bread too. Besides, this isn't the first time I've been hungry. In fact, I'm hungry quite often. You feed thousands, but will you feed me?

I know that you can, but you are not mine to control. You feed the hungry at your behest, not theirs. The Pharisees and Sadducees have bread of their own. Bread they can control and eat anytime they like. Why should I follow you then? I need bread. Theirs I receive in certainty, yours by faith.

But I cannot leave you, for you have shown me who you are. What at the same time draws me near gives me reason to pull away. Your Lordship is both irresistible and terrifying. You ask me to die for you so that I may live. Despite your promises, I do not know this for certain. I know the Pharisees and Sadducees will live. They have bread. I do not. I have no certainty.

Give me a sign, oh Lord, one I cannot mistake. So that I will know that you will care for me like the Pharisees know they will eat. You won't give them a sign, but I am not like them. I have followed you, left my bread for yours. Give me certainty, Oh Lord. For in faith, I fear I cannot go on.

"Who do you say that I am?" No, Oh Lord, do not ask it of me. I have followed you, trusted you. Now, surely you can feed me. Don't ask me to say these words, for they will be my seal. In speaking them, I will resign all to you. Bread, the very thing I need, you ask me to reject for your sake. Have I not already given enough? Must I give all?

### Prayer:

*"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The one who calls me and bids me come forth to a life of uncertainty. I cannot deny that life with you makes life without you unthinkable. Still, I struggle with the uncertainties. I am but dust, and dust is fragile. Let my insecurity not be that which holds me back. Let my trust, my hope, my life be given into your hands. May I learn, day by day, the meaning of the words I have spoken. May resurrection be my song and you my God. Amen.*

DAVID JENTSCH

# TUESDAY, MARCH 24

## *Matthew 16:21-28*

A few weeks ago, I ordered a really cute scarf from one of my favorite online retailers. Imagine my surprise when the item I had been longing for arrived, and it was instead a shirt at least three sizes too small. This was a small mistake; I eventually got the item I had actually ordered.

This was a small and slightly hilarious mix up, but I am sure that you can relate. Maybe you expected your prayer for healing would send cancer into remission. Or that your prayers for a spouse would lead to the end of an aisle surrounded by friends and family. Or that your years of prayer and seeing doctors would lead to a nursery and cute little baby to snuggle. We all know the confusion, the feeling of despair, the frustration that comes when our expectations of God do not match the reality of the situation.

The disciples can relate. Imagine their confusion, these good Jewish boys who have left their families and their jobs because they had heard their whole lives—first at home, then in Hebrew school, then at the city gates—about a coming King, an Anointed One, who will restore their nation and make their political enemies a footstool. Finally, these prophecies that had been passed down through the generations had been fulfilled. They just knew that when their Messiah eventually came, their old kingdom, the one lost to war and disobedience, would be restored to its former glory.

Yet, here was the one they were sure was their promised King, but he is not talking about restoring an earthly kingdom. He is not concerned with defeating their political enemies. Instead, he is talking “great suffering” and being killed. This cannot be right. Peter exclaims, “God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!” Peter was trying to help Jesus understand how it was actually supposed to go. The king was supposed to make others suffer, not suffer himself. Yet, Peter is called Satan for his efforts.

Being called Satan is bad enough, but Jesus went even further. Not only would he suffer, but those who follow him will suffer too. “They must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” There would be no riches, no worldly status, no political power to be gained by following this Messiah.

Jesus confounds our expectations. This Anointed One was anointed to die. This King’s triumphant entry was actually a death march to a cross. Peter and his fellow disciples were being called into a different kind of kingdom—where the way up is actually down and to win is actually to lose.

There is a cost to discipleship. We may face suffering, disappointment, disillusionment, and despair. But, just as Jesus died and rose again, our choosing to die daily to ourselves leads to new life in Christ. We may never get the things our hearts long for on this side of glory, but in losing there is a far greater glory that outlasts and outweighs them all (2 Corinthians 4:17).

KATHRYN FREEMAN

# WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25

## *Matthew 17:1-13*

In this time of devotion, I ask that you reflect with me upon the narrative of the transfiguration. I invite you to place yourself into the narrative as a fourth person with Peter, James, and John. Imagine traveling with Jesus and the disciples up to a mountain top. Imagine, once you get there, that Jesus begins to radiate a divine aura; imagine witnessing with your senses divinity on earth and how you might respond. Imagine seeing Jesus along with Moses and Elijah, both of whom did not travel with you. Imagine being shrouded by a cloud, not able to see, and hearing the voice of God in your ears.

As you have placed yourself in the story of the transfiguration, contemplate the significance of what God the Father said to Peter. Peter, when he saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah, wanted to be as respectful and useful as possible. Two of the most holy and devout followers of God stood before him, people who have also been in the presence of God before. Like any normal person, Peter offers his service out of respect for those who came before him, but then God interrupts in the middle of Peter's offer. God says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" The kind and respectful thing to do is offer help in setting up the camp ground, but God wants Peter, and all of us, to know that what God wants is not our help, but for us to fall on our faces before him and listen. This means stopping what you are doing, listening to the instruction that has been given, and following that instruction.

The Examen is an ancient Christian practice of reviewing your thoughts, feelings, and actions and discerning how God has revealed himself to you in the recent past. Now, take this time to do the Examen spiritual practice. But instead of looking in the past, reflect on what God may want you to listen to, and remember the story of Elijah on the mountain where God was in the still, small voice. Take another five minutes to reflect on the last few verses and think about who may have been placed in your life by God, but you did not recognize at the time. Think about what it is that God wanted you to receive from that person, or vice versa.

ZACH BARBER

# THURSDAY, MARCH 26

*Matthew 17:14-27*

In this story, we find a man experiencing fear and uncertainty. Fear at the terrible situation his demon-possessed son is in and uncertainty after Jesus's disciple could not cast out the demon. Most surprisingly, we see the tension amplified when Jesus shows up and asks the abrupt question, "How long am I to be with you?" While Jesus goes on to show compassion to the man and the child by casting out the demon, it seems appropriate during this season of Lent to reflect on the question Jesus asks in this story, "How long am I to be with you?"

How long will we have the Christ with us? It is a question that only Jesus asks when he speaks about his impending death and resurrection shortly afterwards. The juxtaposition of this prophecy after this story should give us pause and make us think twice about Jesus's words. Was he thinking of the turmoil the disciples would face when he went to the cross when he said, "How long am I to be with you?" Was he distressed that if they were struggling to trust and believe now then how would his disciples respond to the trauma of the cross? Perhaps this distress is the reason for his abrupt response, for if there is anything the story of Jesus makes plain, it is that God has little tolerance for things that separate creation from their God.

How long will Christ be with us? It is a question that is deeply appropriate to ask during the season of Lent. For just as this story demonstrates, we see only in a mirror dimly (1 Cor. 13:12). We may—like the man in the story—desire healing and seek the Christ and find ourselves in places where we either struggle to trust in God or where we find God radically silent. Lent reminds us of many things, but perhaps one of the most powerful reminders is how important it is to read the whole story. For if we are to end the story only at Jesus's question of "How long am I to be with you?" or at the disciple's failure to heal the man's son, we would entirely miss the compassion Jesus shows to the man and his son. More importantly, if we were to end our reflections on the story of Jesus at his question, "How long am I to be with you?" we would entirely miss the radical, surprising, and staggering answer to this very question that Jesus gives his disciples and to all of creation when he says at his resurrection, "...behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age," (Matt. 28:20).

## **Prayer of Reflection:**

*God, in the midst of this season of Lent, we thank you for the story of Jesus. We thank you that you do not simply ask "How long am I to be with you?" but that you also answered, "...behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Thank you for being with us. We confess that we sometimes do not believe and trust in this promise. We thank you that this is not the end of the story. We thank you that we can trust, no matter our belief or unbelief, that you are with us always and that Resurrection Sunday is coming very, very soon.*

JEREMIAH BANKS



# FRIDAY, MARCH 27

## Matthew 18:1-14

Matthew 18:1-14 seems like a weird combination of verses. Matthew 18 begins with Jesus's disciples coming to him and asking who the greatest one of them would be. Jesus immediately calls a child unto him and challenges the disciples to become like children because "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (18:4). The next verses, Matthew 18:7-9, move into extreme precautions to take against temptations to sin: "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (18:8). Of course, these precautions are not to be taken literally, but instead portray the gravity of sin to a Holy God. After these precautions, the verses move to the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:10-14 and how the man "leaves the 99 in search of one that went astray" (18:12).

As I mentioned, the flow of these verses at a glance seems strange, which is why we naturally tend to read these passages as three separate stories: a call to be like children, temptations to sin, and the parable of the lost sheep. But I propose that we read these passages as one—to look at the links within these passages to capture what Jesus was calling his disciples, and us, to do. At the beginning and end of Matthew 18:1-14, we have the link of words such as, "child, children, and little ones" (18:2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 14), and we also have the link of sin concerning these little ones "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin" (18:6) and "one of these little ones should perish" (18:14). The repetition of children and little ones throughout the passage moves us to ask: Whom does the child represent? I suggest that when Jesus called this child unto him, he was also using the child as a symbol for those who are marginalized and vulnerable, those upon whom society cast a lowly value and status, persons not held in high regard by others, and those who had no power or prestige. This is important to note because the disciples were talking amongst themselves in deciding who the greatest amongst them was, yet Christ was calling them to a posture of humility.

### Reflection:

*When these passages are read together, it reminds us that we are all broken, no one of us was or is deserving of God's mercy and grace. If we were left to ourselves, we would all give in to the temptations of sin. Lent is a time for us to refocus our faith, a time to pray and ask for forgiveness, a time to repent and receive God's mercy, love, and grace. I'd like to challenge you to think of times when you've had the attitude of these disciples, when you have been more preoccupied with how great you are and disregarded others. Times in which you believe you are better or more deserving than others of God's grace. Times in which you have marginalized others (not only those who don't believe but those within the body of Christ). How have you marginalized those in your church community? Singles, those suffering from mental or physical disabilities, brothers and sisters in Christ from a lower socio-economic status or education? Those who are divorced, widowed, single parents, or those with a criminal background?*

### Prayer of Confession:

*Father, forgive me. Forgive me because at times I can become so wrapped up in myself. Forgive me for not extending mercy and grace to others. Forgive me for believing at times that others are not deserving of your grace. Lead me to humility so my heart may rejoice when the sheep who has gone astray returns. May I not only receive your love, forgiveness, and mercy but may I also extend it to others. Amen.*

NATALY MORA

# SATURDAY, MARCH 28

## *Matthew 18:15-19:2*

Confrontation is a word that tends to make people uncomfortable. I am sure you can think of a plethora of instances where confrontation seemed worse than anything. It is safe to assume that you have experienced confrontation. It is also safe to assume that you will continue to experience confrontation throughout your life. Matthew 18:15-19:2 lays out two passages where Christ imparts wisdom to his audience when considering confrontation.

Jesus's words in Matthew 18:15-20 advise us to confront one another directly in love and compassion. Note the importance of the word *directly*. Too often have Christians been instigators or victims of indirect confrontation. Whether it is to spare someone else's feelings or have your own feelings spared, refusing to confront one another directly creates a petri dish for the bacteria of gossip to cultivate. Christ lays out instructions for the instances where direct confrontation is ineffective by consulting additional people, and potentially the Church. If the person being confronted is unresponsive even after consulting the Church, we are advised to let things go. I would argue that is an invitation to pray for that person.

Hopefully, you pray for the person you are confronting before you confront him or her. Christ encourages us to confront one another in love and compassion. What better way to start then to pray for that person? Prayer allows us to air out our grievances to God first. Prayer also reminds us that when we have conflict with another person, that person is still made in God's image. As Christians, our actions and words are to reflect Christ, especially in the face of conflict.

Matthew 18:21-19:2 gives us a glimpse as to how we should forgive one another. While it could be interpreted that we forgive someone 77 times (or 70 times seven), true forgiveness should have no limits. These verses provide an illustration of a man unwilling to forgive someone who owes a debt to him.

As we continue through the Lenten season, we are reminded of the compassion and forgiveness we receive through the cross. It is by Christ's blood that our debt is paid, and he provides us the ability to have direct relationship with our creator.

### **Practice:**

*Read Matthew 18:15-19:2 along with Ephesians 4:32 and meditate on the words of Christ and the Apostle Paul.*

- 1. After reading these passages, what is your opinion on confrontation?*
- 2. Is there a time when you had a poor experience of confrontation? A positive experience of confrontation? What made those two situations different from each other?*
- 3. How does remembering Christ's compassion and forgiveness contribute to your views on confrontation?*

AMANDA CLARK

# SUNDAY, MARCH 29

## *Matthew 19:3-15*

When I read this story growing up, I pictured a group of beautiful, good tempered, joyful children all huddled around Jesus smiling, playfully laughing, and, of course, listening intently to his every word. Every time I imagined this scene, all of the children seemed to glow with goodness and emitted an aura of serenity and joy. Of course, the children patiently waited their turn to get close to Jesus and giggled softly and sweetly as they earnestly approached the mesmerizing Messiah. Perhaps my interpretation was heavily influenced by a picture tacked to the wall of my childhood Sunday School room. The purity and innocence on the faces of the little children surrounding Christ captivated me.

I am now the mother of a one-year-old. As I ponder these verses again, a different scene emerges. The children probably approached the King of Kings with sticky hands and filthy feet. The aura they emitted probably came from dirty diapers and sweaty heads. Maybe some of them jabbered away while poking things, pulling hair, dancing around, or squealing in delight. The scene I now picture is not as perfectly put together and orderly, but looks more like a beautiful menagerie of messy children surrounding their Maker. Why would Jesus allow such imperfect, seemingly unworthy beings so close to his pristine perfection? What could they possibly contribute? These children could not yet discuss lofty theological concepts in great detail or write essays about the character of Yahweh or analyze the law. They were disorderly, did not follow proper decorum, and could not contribute any money to the mission. It is no wonder the disciples rebuked them. And yet, Jesus responds differently. He does not join the rebuke or simply tolerate their presence while tiptoeing around them trying to keep clean. He does the unexpected, the illogical, and the marvelous. He not only welcomes these dependent, messy beings to come close, but allows them to cover him with their sticky hands and filthy feet.

Watching my daughter explore the world as she learns how to express her thoughts and feelings constantly fascinates me. She conveys her needs and wants, her pains and joys, without inhibition, complexity, or fear of judgment. She cannot help but live with a purity of spirit, vulnerability, and honesty. The more I interact with children, the more it seems they often convey the truest expression of humanity, which can be both captivating and unsettling. Perhaps their honesty is unsettling because it reminds me of how I used to be, or how I long to still be. When I was a child, I had not yet mastered the skill of hiding my pain, or learned how best to covertly cover my shame. I could not try to pretend my way to perfection. However, over time and exposure to sin, as awareness of my unworthiness grew, so did my efforts to cover it up.

What will happen when I honestly see the depth of my depravity, when my life seems too messy, my heart too dirty, my contributions too insignificant? Who would ever welcome me? The world would tell me to keep hiding in the darkness, covering my shame, and pretending my way to perfection. But Jesus responds differently. He does the unexpected, the illogical, the marvelous and says come to me. Come with all of your sin, with sticky hands and filthy feet, and I will make you clean. "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

### **Prayer:**

*Lord, forgive me for trying to hide my sin and pretend my way to perfection. Help me to see your purity of Spirit and to know that as your child, I can run to you honestly and earnestly, with all of my depravity, and you will welcome me with forgiveness, grace, and mercy. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray, amen.*

KRISTEN BOYD  
Coordinator for Recruitment

# MONDAY, MARCH 30

*Matthew 19:16-20:16*

"Many of those who are the first will be last, and those who are the last will be first."

How I experience this verse depends on my life at the moment. If I feel on top of the world, Jesus's statement is chastening. The kingdom of God is upside-down, and I don't get to take my status, achievements, or blessings with me.

If, however, I feel very last in terms of my own sin and failures or difficulties in relationships with others, or if following the call of God feels too costly, the upside-down nature of the kingdom is a real comfort. Jesus says those who give up the things of earth for him will receive 100 times that in eternity; he gives no such promise to those who hold on to what they have.

Sit with the statement that the first will be last and the last first for a moment—don't let it be a trite phrase. Does it sound like good news or bad news in your life right now?

In the season of Lent, we dwell on the fact that we are sinners, made of dust, desperate for the saving grace of God. Yet God freely gave that grace—he sent Christ Jesus to take all our sin on himself, though we weren't the smallest bit deserving. When you think about this humbling, unchanging truth, how does the statement that the first will be last and the last first strike you?

**Prayer:**

*Jesus, your kingdom does not operate according to our human rules, and we are so grateful. We do not deserve your mercy or grace, but you freely give it. Help us to remember your upside-down kingdom when we are tempted to seek status or success here on earth, and keep our hearts set on the everlasting life to which you are leading us when we grow discouraged.*

CLARA BINDER



# TUESDAY, MARCH 31

*Matthew 20:17-34*

For the third time, Jesus tells the disciples what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. This time, however, he reveals more details of the unusual coming events in the Holy City, in which he will experience the most tremendous insults and even death. Because of the sin of humanity, he has to pay the ransom to satisfy God's justice and wrath with his blood. The cup Jesus mentions is his suffering on behalf of sinners. The cup is what he will experience on the cross. Three days later, he overcomes sin and death. He fulfills the prophecy and brings salvation to people, freeing them from the control of death and sin and enabling them to live a free life.

For many people, it is not easy to understand what he does. We all tend to understand things based on what we know. The disciples' reaction after listening to these words reveals that his disciples need to ponder it. We may also do the same as the disciples due to our limited understanding. May the spirit of the Lord inspire us so that we can see the truth behind these words. The cup Jesus has taken, his followers take too. The cup of self-sacrifice leads to the road of glory. The cross of God is now passed to us. We live the way of the cross.

When the mother of James and John asked the Lord to allow her sons to sit at his two sides in God's kingdom, he tells her that she does not know what she is asking. She does not know that, unlike the high position in the world, being in God's kingdom comes with suffering. It is easy to be greedy and focus only on our desires. However, the benefit of the Gospel is not in this world, and the coming of our Lord is not to be the King of this world but the servant of his people. This is also the principle of the kingdom of God: that the one who is high will become low and the one who is low will become high. As the King of the universe, our Lord reveals to us the quality of the heavenly citizen—that is humility and self-denial.

This also reminds us what we need to pay attention to during our prayers. We may do the same thing as the mother of James and John while praying, asking God to fulfill our earthly desires. God has his own will; he is not controlled by our prayers. Instead of satisfying our own desires, our prayers should focus on God's will and our relationship with him. To be a believer and leader, one should not mimic the worldly leaders who expect to be served by others. In this special season, let's remember how our Lord Jesus has served his disciples and people. The story also reveals that growth of our spiritual life takes time, just like our bodies take time to grow from infancy to adulthood. We later see that the life of the two greedy disciples changed. One of them suffered for God's kingdom and the other becomes a favored disciple of the Lord.

The passage ends with the story of our Lord Jesus healing the two blind men in Jericho. Not only does this give us a vivid picture of how Jesus serves the lowest in the society, but also of what he most valued. The blind men were healed not just because they asked consistently; what healed them was their faith in the Messiah, the Son of God. Do we have faith like the blind men to desire not only blessings, but Jesus himself? Do we have a consistent spirit, driven singularly toward holiness, like the blind men?

SARAH WEI

# WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1

*Matthew 21:1-27*

## **The Donkey's Song**

I remember that day vividly.  
They came, untied my rope, and led me to  
a man.  
I was uncertain of him, at first, as any donkey  
Would be of a stranger—  
But he seemed different. He seemed kind.  
They placed blankets on my back  
and he mounted; gently, and with great care.  
Then off we went to Jerusalem. And as  
we entered the city we came across a strange sight:  
People, surrounding the roads, coats and branches  
waving in the air—men and women, young and old—  
crying out “Hosanna.” What a sight it was!  
And I, just a donkey, felt like a  
War Horse. It was as if I was carrying  
a King  
home from battle in triumphant victory.  
And yet this man seemed nothing like a king  
...he was gentle, humble, unassuming.  
And when we entered the city—  
I cannot be certain, but I thought—  
I felt him shudder.  
I wondered ‘Would a king shudder in his own city,  
and with all this adulation?’  
I figured he knew something I didn’t know.  
But surely his fear was unfounded:  
for fickle as they are, would people  
praise him one day and reject him the next?  
But what do I know—I’m just a donkey.

## **Prayer:**

*God, as we prepare our hearts for Easter, reveal to us our shortcomings. Reveal to us those actions and attitudes that separate us from you. Reveal to us our own fickle hearts; hearts that praise you one day and reject you the next. Forgive us for loving you when we think you fit our image of a Savior and rejecting you when you reveal your True Self to us. Conform us to your image—may we be humble, kind, and obedient to your will, no matter the cost. In Jesus’s holy name we pray, amen.*

JULIA WALLACE

# THURSDAY, APRIL 2

*Matthew 21:28-22:14*

An apple tree produces apples; a fig tree, figs; an orange grove, oranges. But what are the fruits of the kingdom of God?

In Matthew 21:28-22:14, we find three parables concerning judgment and obedience. The people of God are to produce fruit that is in keeping with the kingdom of God, fruit displayed in obedience. This is not what Jesus has found. Through these parables Jesus pronounces judgment—directed firstly toward the religious leaders of Israel and, unsurprisingly, they do not like what they hear.

Jesus compares the religious leaders of his day to a disobedient son who heard his father's instruction, agreed to obey, and then failed to follow through. He likens them to wicked tenants who murder the heir of the vineyard, seeking to take it for themselves. Lastly, Jesus calls them unworthy wedding guests, people who are too busy or preoccupied with injustice to join the king around his table as partakers in his joy.

Lest we think these warnings are only for the religious leadership of Jesus's day, Jesus reminds us that judgment comes for us all. We should each be careful to present ourselves in a manner that displays proper reverence for our host and for the occasion of the feast, unlike the man found unfittingly adorned. In the parable, God is represented by the king, Jesus is the son, and the wedding feast is the celebration of the coming union of God and his people. Jesus's words not only challenge those in "days of yore," but those who follow him now and today.

God has called us into relationship through Jesus Christ for a purpose. We are to give witness to Jesus as evidence of our faithful response to his glorious invitation: "Follow me." When we are obedient to that call, God brings forth in us "the fruits of the kingdom," outward and visible signs of the inner workings of grace and the Holy Spirit's presence, who produces in us "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

We're made to display God's glory. In *The Cross of Christ*, John R. W. Stott writes:

"Our body has not only been created by God and will one day be resurrected by him, but it has been bought by Christ's blood and is indwelt by his Spirit. Thus it belongs to God three times over, by creation, redemption, and indwelling. How then, since it does not belong to us, can we misuse it? Instead, we are to honor God with it, by obedience and self-control."

God has a claim on us. Therefore, let us be "doers of the word, and not hearers only," as James 1:22 says. Let's heed Paul's exhortation, conducting ourselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). Finally, let us remember the words of Jesus, who said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Let us be people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.

## **Prayer:**

*Dear God, produce in me the fruits of the kingdom so that I may give faithful witness to the Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

BEN SIMPSON

Assistant Director of Spiritual Formation

# FRIDAY, APRIL 3

## *Matthew 22:15-46*

God reveals to us in this passage something about love. God shows us in his son Jesus that it is not about logical arguments or having the best set of rules. Jesus was not concerned about taking sides with Rome or the Zealots when asked about money, but with building a loving messianic community where God is the ruler, even when there is still an earthly ruler like Caesar. In the same way, when the Sadducees brought forth the rule Moses gave, Jesus was not concerned with their logic, but with showing how the resurrection transforms us to see we are capable of loving all and being loved by all. His definition of the greatest commandment embodies every response he has just given. Jesus calls us to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind. This means we render God our love and service, and it means we love everyone the way God loves us. God reveals to us that his love is holistic and it transforms us. Love is not something just for our spouse, friends, church, city, country, or political party, but it is for every human being. We fully witness this love in Jesus Christ. He calls us to love because he gives us love. He is not like Caesar, who just takes his tax, but is a generous Lord in a living relationship with his people. God shows us love is not about putting ourselves first but about him. When we witness this love rooted in God, we are then able to bear witness in that love.

However, when we witness this love revealed by God, we are also given a reflection:

How do I define love? Do I start with a particular logic or reason? Do I look at marriage or money?

Where do I see the love God has revealed in my own life? Do my words reflect this love? Are my actions being given to God in love or to an idol? Have I placed Caesar over God?

What are ways I can bear witness to loving God with all of my heart, soul, and mind? What are ways I can love my neighbor?

In his book *Meditations of the Heart*, Howard Thurman quotes what a poet wrote:

"Love not the world nor yet forsake  
Its gifts in fear and hate.  
Thy life to God an offering make,  
And to Him dedicate."

May we also look to God first in love and from there love our neighbors as ourselves.

BEN FOUNTAIN



# SATURDAY, APRIL 4

## *Matthew 23:1-24:2*

We observe the humanity of Jesus and the Pharisees in these verses. We are familiar with the Jesus who is compassionate, gentle, and loving. Yet here in Matthew's Gospel, we observe an upset and indignant Jesus who severely criticizes the Pharisees for their religious hypocrisy. The Pharisees were a Jewish sect concerned with faithfully observing the Law, more specifically the laws of tithing and purity.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Jesus repeats this phrase several times and pronounces seven "woes" on the Pharisees. A "hypocrite" in Greek culture and understanding, was one who wore a mask on a stage and imitated the speech and mannerisms of the character portrayed. The Pharisees wore masks. In their meticulous rigidity to the laws, they neglected the weightier matters of the same law: justice, mercy, and faith. They were blind to the redemptive and liberating reality of the gospel.

I am reminded of the words from the prophet Isaiah, whom Jesus quotes in the Gospel of Matthew: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Jesus cares more about the postures of our hearts than our works. He desires us to draw near to him, to humble ourselves. Jesus laments over the legalism of the Pharisees because it is an impediment to those who possess genuine faith. The Lord desires mercy, not sacrifice, for to obey is better than sacrifice. We are not proselytes, but disciples. We are followers of The Way, not servants to legalism. Externally, the Pharisees appear like clean, whitewashed tombs, but inside they are decaying, rotting, full of dead and evil things. What a profound image that reveals the gulf between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit.

Let us be reminded that there is an inward reality to Christian faith and formation. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul. The Holy Spirit, in his grace and mercy, re-orders our affections, renews our minds, and sanctifies us so that we might grow in Christ-likeness.

### **Prayer:**

*Forgive me, Lord, when I honor you only with my lips, yet my cold and calloused heart is far from you. By your gentle grace and mercy, you transform me and make me new. May I be compelled to love you with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my strength, and with all my soul. Unearth any decaying bones that sit inside me so that I may partake in your Kingdom and righteousness. Burn a fire in my soul for you and your Word. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.*

### **Scripture for Further Meditation:**

*Isaiah 29:13, Matthew 15: 7-8, Isaiah 58, Proverbs 4:23, Jeremiah 20:9*

ALINA WARD

# SUNDAY, APRIL 5

*Matthew 24:3-25:46*

In the life of the seminary community, there is a moment at the conclusion of each term when all work is evaluated, grades are recorded, and a final mark is posted. Some hear, "Well done." Others, "less well done." Judgment Day.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus's final extended discourse concerns the coming judgment. Matthew 24:3-51 is apocalyptic literature, revealing to the disciples, and to us, that which is to come. Matthew follows Jesus's apocalypse with three parables: the parable of the 10 virgins, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the sheep and the goats.

Today's reading includes memorable, striking imagery: the desolation of the temple, false messiahs, the persecution of the faithful, cosmic upheaval, and the Son of Man coming on the clouds. We're told that the day of the Lord's coming is known only to the Father and are warned to keep watch. To be ready. God is coming to meet us. What will he find?

In *A Quest for Souls*, George W. Truett addresses the judgment to come in his sermon, "Preparation for Meeting God." Truett asks, "When ought you prepare to meet God? What does your best judgment say about it? When ought you make this preparation for meeting with God? What does He, who was and is the incarnation of infinite wisdom, say to us in response to that question, When ought this preparation for meeting God be made?"

Truett's answer is plain: "I come to affirm, on the authority of God's teaching, confirmed by all human experience, that today and now, every man and woman and boy and girl under the sound of my voice, who is wrong with God ought to see about preparation for meeting God today and now." Truett's words apply equally to those within and outside the family of faith.

Why prepare today? Because as in the case of the 10 virgins, the bridegroom could arrive at any time. As in the case of the talents, the master will call his servants to account. And as in the case of the sheep and the goats, we long to be among those who hear Jesus, seated upon the throne, saying, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

How will we prepare? We keep watch. We stand ready. We steward our talents well. We feed the hungry, offer drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. We do so in the name of the King, Jesus, for we are his, and his judgments are true and righteous altogether.

## **Questions for Prayerful Consideration:**

1. *Assess your walk with Christ. In what ways are you being faithful to his call? In what ways are you missing the mark?*
2. *How is God calling you to respond to today's Scripture reading? What needs to change, and how might God help you?*

**BEN SIMPSON**

Assistant Director of Spiritual Formation

# MONDAY, APRIL 6

## *Matthew 26:1-16*

Excessive piety often seems like a waste of time. People cannot earn their way to heaven. Some Christians devotedly text holy words to their friends. Some give up vacation to go and serve somewhere. Some Christians even walk away from job prospects, stability, and comfort to become missionaries. These types of Christians are not just strange to the world but also strange to many inside the church.

Jesus loves these people. Our Lord does not look at their devotion as a burden, nor does he advise them to learn to do things halfway. At the cross, Jesus gave his whole self for our humble lives.

This passage is surrounded by stories of people plotting to destroy Jesus. First, Jewish authorities conspire to kill Jesus. Then, Judas schemes to hand him over to the authorities.

Jesus is completely aware of what is about to happen, unlike his followers. He saw his cross clearly. The ones who hate Jesus, and even the ones who love him, cannot fully understand the way of the cross. Behold, this woman. She is anointing him, but is unaware that her actions foreshadow Jesus's funeral. No one understood the meaning of it, except Jesus. After everything was done, they understood what Jesus had said when they looked back on his words about his funeral. This is exactly why Matthew included this story in his Gospel. For Christians, the cross is the greatest mystery of history, one we still wrestle to fully understand.

The full mystery of the cross is hidden from everyone's eyes, but the cross does not require us to understand. The cross becomes easier to grasp when we quit running from pain and discomfort. Once we realize how fickle worldly stability and happiness are, then we can let it go and walk in faithfulness to God because that is where true security and joy are found. We hold to God's providence; we realize that, despite the pains of life, God was always present, pouring out his love as we poured out our sorrows. Paul put it this way: "...Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5).

The disciples criticize the woman: "How could she just waste all of this perfume!" "We could've done so much with the money we made from selling it!" Critics of the woman's holy sacrifice, pretending to care about the poor, failed to understand Jesus's message. Jesus certainly cares about the poor and the downtrodden; however, the grumbling disciple did not.

Why do we treat strangely those who say they will give all of their things to Jesus, taking it for granted that he has wasted, poured out, everything of himself for us?

JEONGTAE CHAE

# TUESDAY, APRIL 7

*Matthew 26:17-30*

German artist and priest Sieger Koder (1925-2015) painted many variations of the Last Supper. Each work depicts the face of the Christ reflected in the Cup and Bread extended to friends at the table. This illustration's primary point of distinction is the presence of rainbow-clad children expectantly looking toward the face of Jesus.

Rainbows are the result of sunlight passing through and bending in water; a process called refraction...#science. The light separates, and our eyes take in a bow of beautiful colors.

In today's reading, we see Jesus sitting at the table with his disciples, asking and receiving questions, sharing a meal, sharing parts of himself, singing together.

In this season the Church rehearses the darkness and uncertainty of the wilderness. However, we know not just from Scripture but from the great literary classics that the goal of any wilderness wandering is to arrive on the other side, into the light, illuminated. As we walk through the wilderness and rehearse suffering, we do so in anticipation of Resurrection morning. Like the children at the table with Jesus in this image, our eyes are transfixed on the Light that illuminates hearts, minds, bodies, and all of creation. We look to the Savior who would not only redeem humanity but who would welcome all of creation to the table of remembrance and love. As a Christian community, we are united across time, space, and age with people who have colorfully lived in the light of the Living God.

## **Maundy Thursday**

*By Malcolm Guite*

Here is the source of every sacrament,  
The all-transforming presence of the Lord,  
Replenishing our every element  
Remaking us in his creative Word.  
For here the earth herself gives bread and wine,  
The air delights to bear his Spirit's speech,  
The fire dances where the candles shine,  
The waters cleanse us with His gentle touch.  
And here He shows the full extent of love  
To us whose love is always incomplete,  
In vain we search the heavens high above,  
The God of love is kneeling at our feet.  
Though we betray Him, though it is the night.  
He meets us here and loves us into light.



Sieger Koder, *Kommunion*

## **Prayer:**

*May our imaginations be transformed by the Light of the World that we may have eyes to see the love of God refracted in every face we meet. Creator of all created things, how good it is to be united in diversity, to shine in your Light.*

CECILY MCILWAIN



# WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8

*Matthew 26:31-46*

## Gethsemane

Gethsemane! Gethsemane...The place where oil is pressed!

Gethsemane! Gethsemane...Mount Olive of Jerusalem...Jesus begins the test!

Gethsemane! Gethsemane!...Jesus communal spot with God...at night

Gethsemane! Gethsemane!...Jesus cries out to God... before the fight

Gethsemane! Gethsemane!...Jesus in agony alone...prayed and prayed.

Gethsemane! Gethsemane!...disciple as witness...near the oil press stayed

Gethsemane! Gethsemane!...Jesus says, "take this cup away!"

Gethsemane! Gethsemane!...Jesus he went a second time and prayed!

Oh Gethsemane!...Jesus pressed in the oil press...a second time prayed and prayed

Oh Gethsemane!...no disciple joined Jesus in the oil press...they slept and laid

Oh Gethsemane! Garden of Mt. Olive... Jesus. went again in agony and prayed

Oh Gethsemane!...disciples not willing but weak...never prayed, never prayed

Gethsemane!...Gethsemane!...the cup did not pass from Jesus, but answered Jesus's prayer

Gethsemane!...Gethsemane!... the Lord Jesus endured all the agony he was to bear.

In my Gethsemane!...In my Gethsemane!...I cry out in my agony and pray.

In my Gethsemane!...Gethsemane!...I say, "Lord Jesus I need you in my life today!"

Oh Gethsemane...in Jesus Christ, it is done and in him salvation is won!

Oh Gethsemane...in my pressed oil story, I agonize in prayer and I share.

Oh Gethsemane...I yield to God's will and cry out...without doubt.

I tell about Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

a victory in Christ Jesus for one...for...just one...for...one...I share!

VANNESSA GALLOWAY

# THURSDAY, APRIL 9

*Matthew 26:47-27:26*

## **An Imaginative Reading**

"Miriam, they're coming!" shouted Salome—a fellow servant-girl in the house of the high priest. I watched in awestruck terror as the mob dragged this trouble-making Galilean before the waiting council of the Sanhedrin. Could it be true? This same man who had healed so many and taught with deep wisdom was now on trial for high religious crimes?

Behind the mob was my friend and fellow servant Simeon, who ran to me wide-eyed with his hand over his ear. "Miriam!" he gasped, out of breath, "he healed me... Jesus of Nazareth. One of the men with him cut my ear off and he healed me!" I gawked at Simeon's neck and intact ear, unmarred except by the bloody streaks now almost dried. Could this be so? I had heard accounts of this Jesus healing, but I needed to know for myself if it was true. It would be impossible to talk to him now, as he stood before the council.

Then, just behind the masses, I noticed another man creep into the courtyard of the high priest. This man seemed different than the rest of the mob swarming around him. His face was twisted with grief, not anger, his accent unmistakably Galilean. And immediately I knew. This man had been with Jesus. Surely he could tell me all I needed to know of this miracle-working teacher. Running through the crowd, I made my way to the Galilean and declared "You were with Jesus!" Yet he turned away as if I had slapped him. "I don't know what you're talking about," was his reply. My heart sank.

My friend Salome saw what had happened and wanted to know the truth about this Jesus too, so she pursued the Galilean and remarked, "Yes, he was with Jesus of Nazareth!" But again, he denied it. By now the crowds were jeering as the high priest declared, "blasphemy!" Still I had no answers...

My heart felt like lead as I heard the Galilean swear he never knew Jesus to some men asking him a third time. Was there no hope of hearing the truth of who this Jesus was?

My mother loves to quote the psalmist's saying, "sorrow may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning," but this particular morning brought with it images of sorrow, not joy; images I will never shake. I am sure I will never forget how the Galilean man wept outside the gates of the temple as the rooster crowed. I will never forget seeing Judas, the one who led the charge against Jesus, repent before the high priest with great remorse over what he called his "betrayal of innocent blood."

And now I am filled with sorrow for the one called Jesus of Nazareth. The people before Pilate yell, "crucify him," but I cannot help feeling as if they might be making a mistake, for what if he is the long-awaited Messiah? The one who came to redeem our people? What can be done now? Only Adonai—The Lord God most high—can save him.

## **Prayer:**

*God forgive us for the ways that we deny you to those who are most desperate to know who you truly are. Guide us to be truthful with our words and actions so that we can experience your redemption in our lives and point others to your saving work as Messiah. Thank you for your love that claims us not once, not twice, not three times, but each and every moment of our lives.*

JENNI CHILTON

# GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 10

*Matthew 27:27-54*

There's a gospel song by Richard Smallwood called "Calvary." Richard Smallwood had Luke's account of the crucifixion in mind when he wrote it, but I believe it is fitting for any reading of the crucifixion. Give it a listen before you continue reading.

Everyone is waiting for the Messiah to save himself. Their belief in Jesus's claims about himself is determined by whether he will save himself or not. They'll even buy it if someone like Elijah will save him. Either way, if someone can get him off that cross and remove his suffering, only then can he be the Son of God.

Isn't it ironic to consider the immense horror these spectators would have experienced if Jesus would have actually gotten himself off that cross? It is also extraordinary to consider that our Lord chose to stay on the cross even though the very ones he was saving were practically begging him to quit his redeeming work.

It's so easy to judge their cruelty as readers of the text, but if we're honest, we make similar statements. If he will remove the suffering in our lives, then just maybe he is worth believing in and embracing. That's not what Calvary tells us.

It is only after Jesus yields his final breath that the day's events finally convince someone that he is the Son of God. One more voice I'd like to draw your attention to is that of the Roman centurion in verse 54. He makes the remarkable statement, "Truly, this was the Son of God."

And he is. The one who hung and bled on that cross and refused to call legions of angels to save him is the Son of God. The one who refused to cop out of suffering to prove a point is the Son of God. And it is because of his suffering that I can make sense of my own. Because of his suffering, I know he cares about mine. I don't always understand it but it is because of his suffering that I know I can endure my own.

All of us are dying as a result of sin, and instead of abandoning us to that fate like a typical leader would, he entered it. I see Jesus's willingness to endure the cross as his refusal to abandon me in my suffering.

In this season, I encourage you to refrain from basing the power of Jesus on his ability to remove suffering. Instead, use his endurance and suffering as a means of recognizing that you are not alone in whatever suffering you might be experiencing. There is more consolation than meets the eye in identifying with the Son of God in his suffering. There is also more in recognizing that the story does not end here at Calvary.

## **Prayer:**

*Jesus, thank you for enduring the brutality of the cross. Thank you for saving us instead of saving yourself. Thank you for showing us exactly who you are through your death. Lord, please help us to endure the various contexts of our own suffering. The brutality of the cross correlates with the brutality that is transpiring throughout our nation and abroad. Help us to remember that you identify with our suffering. Help us to remember that you care. Most importantly, help us to find hope in the purpose of your suffering. Amen.*

JOY MOTON

# SATURDAY, APRIL 11

*Matthew 27:57-66*

Grief affects all people in one way or another. Some spend hours or days in solitude reflecting on what has been lost while others fill any free moment with activities to distract from any feeling of hurt or pain. Regardless of what the reaction may be, it is impossible to hide from its effects. In this passage, Joseph, Mary Magdalene, and Mary are no exception to this rule of humanity. I try to picture myself in their situation—how would it feel to have watched the person you have loved and followed most dearly unjustly die in a manner that was only fit for a criminal? How would it feel to see the physical presence of hope disappear and turn lifeless? What would I do? What would my reaction be?

Grief affects all people in one way or another. When we look at Joseph, he takes it upon himself to ask for Jesus's body and give it a proper burial, wrapping him in clean linen and placing him in a tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary took a different method to approach their grief. They sat opposite the tomb, watching these events, reflecting on the day's events, and more than likely thought of the implications for the future. God was not more pleased with Joseph's response than that of the women, and he was not more pleased with the women's response than that of Joseph. In the midst of the confusion, hurt, chaos, and pain, God was present and cared that his followers chose to continue to honor him, even in death.

Grief affects all people in one way or another. The death and burial of Jesus can still cause grief today. We can grieve over the condition of humanity and its decision to crucify Christ and the ways it continues to do so now. We can grieve over the temporary loss of Jesus, the hopelessness that must have brought, and the seasons when we still feel hopeless. We can grieve. We are allowed to grieve. We should grieve.

As we prepare for a day of celebration, a day of promises fulfilled, and a day full of hope, have we created room to grieve the loss and brokenness that surrounds us today? Have we cleared the way to reflect upon the implications of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus? Have we allowed ourselves to feel the hurt and pain that comes alongside this season before we reach the joy?

## **Practice:**

*Take a few moments to reflect upon the burial of Jesus. Take some time to imagine yourself in the place of Joseph, Mary Magdalene, and Mary. Allow yourself space and time to experience any emotion that arises because of this. Write down your thoughts. Sing a cry for help. Give these emotions to God. Create room for this grief to prepare your heart for the celebration that comes in the morning.*

ABBY BENNETT



# EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 12

*Matthew 28:1-20*

After the Sabbath, as the light of the next day, the first day of the week, crept over Palestine, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb to keep vigil. Earlier there had been an earthquake. A messenger of the Lord had come down from heaven and had gone to the grave. He rolled away the stone and sat down on top of it. He veritably glowed. He was vibrating with light. His clothes were light, white like transfiguration, like fresh snow. The soldiers guarding the tomb were terrified. They froze like stone.

The messenger spoke to the women, to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.

**Messenger of the Lord:** Don't be afraid. I know you are here keeping watch for Jesus who was crucified. But Jesus is not here. He was raised, just as he said he would be. Come over to the grave, and see for yourself. And then go straight to his disciples, and tell them he's been raised from the dead and has gone on to Galilee. You'll find him there. Listen carefully to what I am telling you.

The women were both terrified and thrilled, and they quickly left the tomb and went to find the disciples and give them this outstandingly good news. But while they were on their way, they saw Jesus himself.

**Jesus** (greeting the women): Rejoice.

The women fell down before him, kissing his feet and worshiping him.

**Jesus:** Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. Tell them I will meet them there.

As the women were making their way to the disciples, some of the soldiers who had been standing guard by Jesus's tomb recovered themselves, went to the city, and told the chief priests everything that had happened—the earthquake just after dawn, the heavenly messenger, and his commission to the Marys. The chief priests gathered together all the elders, an emergency conference of sorts. They needed a plan. They decided the simplest course was bribery: they would pay off the guards and order them to say that the disciples had come in the middle of the night and had stolen Jesus's corpse while they slept. The chief priests promised the soldiers they would run interference with the governor so that the soldiers wouldn't be punished for falling asleep when they were supposed to be keeping watch. The guards took the bribe and spread the story around town—and indeed, you can still find people today who will tell you that Jesus did not really rise from the dead, that it was a trick, some sort of sleight of hand.

The eleven disciples, having spoken to the Marys, headed to Galilee, to the mountain where they were to meet Jesus. When the disciples saw Jesus there, many of them fell down and worshiped, as Mary and the other Mary had done. But a few hung back. They were not sure (and who can blame them?). Jesus came forward and addressed his beloved disciples.

The disciples don't know what to think or how to act. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

**Jesus:** I am here speaking with all the authority of God, who has commanded me to give you this commission: Go out and make disciples in all the nations. Ceremonially wash them through baptism in the name of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then disciple them. Form them in the practices and postures that I have taught you, and show them how to follow the commands I have laid down for you. And I will be with you, day after day, to the end of the age.

*(The Voice)*