

Mar/Apr 2014

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



**FOLLOWING  
JESUS TO  
THE CROSS**

**ALSO: NEVER-ENDING LOVE**

Friends:

When I was in college, my school held an Ash Wednesday service. It was the beginning of Lent, a season of reminding ourselves of our need for a Savior. As we left the service, we were each given a square nail tied on a leather strap, and we were encouraged to wear the nail around our necks until Easter. I had never really observed Lent as a special time, but I wore the nail. I found that it reminded me daily that Jesus was pierced for *my* transgressions. Easter was all the sweeter because I knew that Jesus died and rose again *for me!*



As we approach Easter this year, we will explore the gospels' retelling of Jesus' final days and why they matter *to you and me.*

In March, Dean Deppe will lead us as we follow Jesus to the cross. We seek to be faithful followers of Jesus, but none of us is as faithful to God as he is to us.

In April, we'll continue our journey with Ruth Boven as we explore God's never-ending love for us and his world. We lament that it is *for us* that Jesus suffered and died in our place, and we rejoice as he emerges resurrected from the grave, giving us abundant life in him forever. Praise be to God!

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

—Steven Koster

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**“Following Jesus  
to the Cross”  
Dean Deppe**



**“Never-ending Love”  
Ruth Boven**

**Managing Editor:** Eleanor Lamsma  
**Executive Editor:** Steven Koster

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**re** FRAME MEDIA

# this month

## Following Jesus to the Cross

**Dean Deppe**

**Grand Rapids, Michigan**

Disciples are followers. Christian disciples imitate Jesus. We follow in his footsteps. The church has even set aside forty days called Lent in which we remember Jesus' walk to his death on the cross for our salvation. This is the event that changed the world.

In this month's devotions, we will relive Jesus' journey to the cross, recapturing the significance of many events in the final days of his mission to save us. In the process, we can expect the Scriptures to come alive as we enter into Jesus' rejection, visualize his triumph over suffering, and benefit from his living words and redemptive persistence. Because of Jesus, our everyday dreariness becomes filled with eternal meaning and everlasting hope.

*Dean Deppe has served as Professor of New Testament Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary since 1998. Before that he served churches in Michigan, Ohio, and Minnesota. He and his wife, Julie, have four children and two granddaughters.*

**“IN MEMORY OF HER”**

*“Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”* —Mark 14:9

Along the road he traveled to the cross, Jesus met a woman who did “a beautiful thing.” Her anointing of Jesus was so important that he said her story would be proclaimed “throughout the world.” We aren’t told her name, but her actions do become famous.

Not everyone liked what she did, however. “Why this waste of perfume?” they exclaimed. Why pour over the head of Jesus a costly jar of ointment so that it is gone in a minute? They were convinced that this affectionate gift was misdirected. The perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

But Jesus said the woman did a remarkable feat. She perceived what no one else had imagined: the Messiah would soon suffer and she used the perfume to prepare him for burial.

This unnamed woman might well be Mary of Bethany (see John 11-12). Perhaps instead of using this burial ointment on her brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from death, she lavished the perfume on Jesus in an act of intense thanksgiving. In the process, she prepared Jesus for his burial.

Today we sometimes pull up our noses at acts of religious affection, pious prayers, and emotional outbursts of praise. But Jesus calls every action of extravagant sacrifice “a beautiful thing.” So pour out your affection on Jesus and offer him your stored-up treasures. Give him your heart and life!

Lord, you are worth more than all my love and devotion. May my life be in tune with all you have done for me. Amen.

## A MURDEROUS PLOT AND BETRAYAL

*Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.*  
—Mark 14:10

Psalm 2:2 predicts that “the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed.” This prophecy is fulfilled when the priests and teachers of the law form an unholy alliance to bring Jesus down. The religious leaders of the day want Jesus dead.

At the end of this scene we discover a traitor on the inside as well. Judas, one of Jesus’ closest followers, secretly turns his back on Jesus and aids the enemy. Judas decides that he has had enough talk of Jesus’ crusade to establish the kingdom of God.

This is a powerful plot. The leaders with their temple soldiers and an insider who can lure Jesus into their net—what chance does Jesus have? But as Psalm 2:4 reports, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs.” God’s ways triumph in the end.

Through this event God wants us to know that human schemes cannot thwart God’s plans. We, as followers of Jesus, often feel overmatched, puny before cultural movements that might appear to threaten Christianity, and betrayed by insiders who abuse the teachings of Jesus for their own gain.

But God has a surprise for us. Even enemies accomplish God’s plan. Even in suffering and death Jesus is King. God uses little people, unexpected events, and even the struggle of suffering to accomplish his purposes. That is our confidence in Jesus Christ.

We praise you, Lord, that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus. To that we say, Amen!

## THE LORD'S GUEST ROOM AND SUPPER

*"Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"*  
—Mark 14:14

Today's society is, for the most part, individualistic and self-centered. I am taught subconsciously that the whole world revolves around me. These are my possessions. I control my own assets. But, as a Christian, I am learning to say that every square inch of my life belongs to God. I know that everything I have and everything I am belong to Jesus!

Jesus asks, "Where is *my* guest room?" He who owned practically nothing knew that everything was his. The donkey owned by some other master became his ride into Jerusalem. (See Matthew 8:20; 21:1-11.) The upper room used for normal activities became his guest room, where Jesus offered a heavenly meal to feed the souls of his followers for eternity.

Interestingly, we have named Holy Communion the *Lord's*

Supper. It is not our supper; the Lord Jesus is the most important person at the meal. If we fail to spiritually see the Lord and hear his words, "This is my body . . . . This is my blood of the covenant," we miss the fact that we are guests at Jesus' table, where he is truly present.

Suppers and guest rooms are ordinary parts of life. And we are called to make every meal a supper where the Lord is present, every room of our house a guest room for the Lord. Christ has placed his name on us. Hear his words today: "You are mine."

We are grateful, Lord, that the eternal God wants to occupy our guest rooms and make our suppers a divine experience. We are thankful that you are our God—always. Amen.

## THE LORD KNOWS EVERYTHING

*“Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.” . . . “Truly I tell you . . . before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”* —Mark 14:18, 30

Some theologians say that God doesn't know what the future will hold, that he leaves it open for human activity to determine. But today's verses show that the Son of God knows the future. In fact, Christ holds the future in his hands.

Jesus knew that one of his disciples would betray him and turn him over to the authorities. Jesus also revealed that Peter would deny him before the rooster crowed the next morning.

God knows us through and through. Psalm 139:1-2 exclaims, “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.”

Unfortunately, we do not know whether our lives will yield good or ill. But Jesus has shown that nothing takes him by surprise.

Jesus prepares us for his suffering as well as his glory. All of life is in his hands. He warned, “In this world you will have trouble.” But he followed those words with a promise: “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

God is present in both our joys and our struggles. Jesus promises, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). That means now and every day to come—no matter what we face.

Lord Jesus, just as you were prepared for death and glory, so prepare us by your Word for everything that comes our way. In your name, Amen.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME

*"I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."* —Mark 14:25

While talking with his followers at the last supper, Jesus said that the next time he would drink from the fruit of the vine, it would be in the kingdom of God. That must have stirred the hearts of his disciples. The kingdom of God was ready to be revealed!

This text is often applied to the teaching about the new heaven and earth that will come with Jesus when he returns. But I think this verse must be tied to Jesus' drink on the cross. Mark teaches that the kingdom of God comes surprisingly in Jesus' suffering. On the cross just before Jesus gives up his spirit and dies, he drinks in the new kingdom of God (see John 19:28-30).

The kingdom comes through Jesus' death and resurrection. In Jesus' death we have already been judged and not condemned (John 3:18); in Jesus'

resurrection we have been raised to new life (Colossians 3:1). Thanks be to God!

Eating and drinking with each other implies the closest fellowship possible. Joy and merriment are always associated with the fruit of the vine. Our fellowship with Jesus can be much deeper and richer than we can imagine. Joy unspeakable, intimacy with the divine, table fellowship with Jesus—all of these are realities of the kingdom that Jesus achieved at the cross. So we can begin to celebrate already in this life!

Thank you, Jesus, that we do not have to wait for eternity to know that our sins are forgiven and that we can experience the joy of the kingdom now. Praise your name! Amen.

## RIGHTLY ESTIMATING OUR COMMITMENT

*Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.*

—Mark 14:31

We have all made promises: New Year resolutions, attempts to exercise and lose weight, efforts to read the Bible daily. Have we kept our promises?

Jesus' disciples said they would stick with him, no matter what. Peter declared that not even the threat of death would affect his commitment. But no one stood with Jesus through his trial and crucifixion.

Circumstances often alter our commitments as well. We confess our faith in church one day but keep our mouths closed the next day at work. We determine to spend time in prayer, but then our interest in the latest news or sports event draws us away from our commitment. Distractions, distractions!

The everyday things of life can easily replace our spiritual disciplines. But Jesus places us in sit-

uations in which we must verbalize our commitment. Jesus pointed out a weakness in Peter so that he would understand the life-and-death nature of the decisions before him. Peter failed on this occasion, but Jesus later restored him and changed his life (see John 21:15-19).

Every decision has consequences. Some are brief, but others are long-lasting. These verses can help us think about our commitments and confess with humble certainty, "Lord, help me not to deny you with my words, my decisions, my lifestyle, or my time."

Lord, I confess that my commitment to you ebbs and flows. Fill me with your Spirit so that I keep my promises. Amen.

## PRAYING ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL

*"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."*  
—Matthew 26:39

Jesus taught his disciples to say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). In today's verses Jesus models the process of seeking God's will.

First, Jesus honestly tells his Father that he would like this trouble to pass by him. We should not be ashamed to express our wishes and desires to God. God wants us to know ourselves and to establish an honest conversation with him. But too often we stop there. Our prayers are often about what we want.

Jesus waits for confirmation of his request. Prayer is a dialogue. He makes this same request a second time and then a third time. He has confidence that his prayer fits the will of his Father. But eventually he becomes convinced that his will is not God's will. So he submits to the

result that the cup of suffering is God's will for him.

Our prayer time with God often changes us and moves us in a new direction. We see possibilities that we were blind to before. We receive a deeper capacity to face challenges that seemed out of reach. Continued prayer assures us of God's presence and affirms that our destiny is safe in his hands, whatever his will may be.

Sometimes the words "If it is God's will" flow flippantly off our tongue. But praying that God's will be done is no easy matter. Our best prayers must yield to God's will, since that is the safest place to be.

Our prayer, Father, is that your perfect will may be accomplished in our lives. In Christ, Amen.

## WATCHING

*Returning the third time, [Jesus] said to them, "Are you still sleeping . . . ?"*  
—Mark 14:41

Telling his disciples about his eventual return at the end of the world, Jesus instructs his followers to keep watch. Like the servants in that illustration, they must watch and be ready for their master's return.

In Gethsemane, during the long night of sorrow that overwhelmed his soul, Jesus told his disciples again to keep alert and watchful. But they fell asleep and failed to identify with Jesus in his suffering.

The disciples were not ready for Jesus' suffering. They paraded their commitment to him, but Jesus revealed that all of them would flee. They fell asleep instead of keeping watch for him while he prayed. And they all abandoned him during his trial and crucifixion.

Like the disciples, we are often ready to receive applause and

reward but not to stand with Jesus when the going gets rough. We crave a cup of blessing but not the cup of sorrow. We imagine a crown of glory, not a crown of thorns. We demand a full night's sleep, not a vigil of anguishing prayer to discover God's will. We fail to anticipate that we can grow to know Jesus in our anguish, struggles, and failures.

Mark's gospel is not easy reading. Each episode presents a challenge. But every convicting challenge and call to commitment is matched by a grace sufficient for the task. Jesus leads the way through suffering and struggle, and we must follow.

Thank you, Lord, for not sleeping when we needed you to win the victory for our salvation. Keep us awake to your will. Amen.

## THE SPIRIT IS WILLING

*“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*  
—Mark 14:38

We rarely see the flaws in our character until we are tested. Jesus asked his disciples to watch and pray with him, but they dozed off. By surrendering to a small temptation, they lacked the spiritual strength to fight off a much greater one. The disciples gave in to the weakness of the flesh, and as a result they were not prepared to support Jesus during his trial and crucifixion.

Our flesh is our own weak-willed human nature without the power of God. Our natural capabilities fail in the midst of temptation, so we need a divine infusion of persistence and endurance from the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit, we have the ability to defeat any temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Throughout the Bible we learn that the Holy Spirit equips us for many tasks. The Spirit empowers the believer in many ways.

As Mark shows, the Spirit of God leads Jesus' followers into and through struggles and adversity. We do not have to be worried if we are in trying circumstances, because the Holy Spirit will give us words to speak that come from God himself (Mark 13:11).

We live in the age of the Spirit today. We can call upon the Holy Spirit to strengthen our spirits to resist any temptation. What a gift from the God who never stops giving himself for us. Ask, seek, and knock—call on the Lord!

Lord, we confess that we are weak in fighting temptations. May your Holy Spirit enlighten our spirits to the divine power at our disposal. Amen.

## BETRAYED WITH A KISS

*Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him.*

—Mark 14:45

Friendship usually comes from the depths of our heart. In the culture of that day, a kiss on the cheek was an ordinary greeting between friends.

For three years Judas had followed Jesus around the countryside. But now he turned on his Master. Shame must have registered in his conscience when he made a pact with Jesus' enemies. But with the cold heart of a hypocrite, he faked friendship and betrayed his Lord and teacher.

If Judas had reflected on the Scriptures, he might have realized the seriousness of his actions. Jacob, pretending to be his brother Esau, slyly kissed his father, Isaac, to receive the blessing reserved for Esau. And because of his deceit he had to leave home and family (Genesis 27). Absalom, in an effort to undermine the authority

of his father, David, kissed anyone who bowed down to him (2 Samuel 15:5-6). Judas should have recalled the wise words of Proverbs 27:6: "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."

But we too can betray Jesus. We can sit in a church service on Sunday while our mind is a million miles away. We can have ten Bibles in our home and yet rarely open one.

Pretended affection is a dead-end street. But when we dwell in the presence of Jesus, true devotion and compassionate kindness flow through us. We can be loyal defenders of Jesus in all we think, say, and do.

Lord, help me to renounce disloyalty, pretense, and fakery in my life. Keep me loyal to you. Amen.

## THE WEAPONS OF OUR WARFARE

*"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."* —Matthew 26:52

These words of Jesus largely go unheeded today. We choose war over peace, intimidation over cooperation, propaganda over mutual understanding.

Judas and the armed crowd approached Jesus with weapons and a deceptive greeting. When they seized Jesus to arrest him, Jesus' disciples reacted with reciprocal violence.

In pressure situations we are tempted to use weapons of this world. We grab the dagger of forceful words and chop people to pieces. We insist on revenge. We are ready to strike if we don't get our way. We take people to court. Christians often play the game of intimidation, control, and approval just as much as the world does.

But non-violence is the path Jesus chose. We must disarm our mouth, demilitarize our mind,

and pacify our heart. We all know what happens when the honeybee uses its stinger; it dies. Jesus calls us to produce honey rather than a stinger. Do not return evil for evil. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. Jesus manufactured weapons of love and persuasion. Paul insists, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

In his death Jesus purchased peace with God for us. He says to us, "Put your sword back in its place."

Lord, may every fiber of our being bristle against violence and stand up for your peace and justice. Amen.

## FINISHING WELL

*Everyone deserted him and fled.*

—Mark 14:50

The Bible includes many stories in which God's people start out well but end up forsaking the way of life and truth.

Jesus calls twelve followers to be his disciples. They learn from him and follow his ways. They even go out two by two to spread the good-news message and do miracles. But in the end Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies him, and all the other disciples flee and hide.

There are also some women who faithfully follow Jesus from Galilee. But when he is arrested, they too hide in fear. Jesus' disciples and other followers all turn out to be discipleship failures.

If you read about the leaders of God's people in the Old Testament, you find that King David began as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). But when he became

powerful, he gave in to adultery and murder and lost his kingdom to Absalom (2 Samuel 11-15). David's son Solomon began as the wisest king Israel ever had, but when he married women who worshiped other gods, his heart turned from God, and the kingdom split apart (1 Kings 3; 11-12).

These figures serve as examples to prod us to faithfulness and perseverance. Will you stay devoted to God for your entire life and never flee from following Jesus? That is God's call on our lives, and his Spirit gives us the strength to be faithful.

Jesus, you were faithful to the end and were finally vindicated in your victory over death. Father, give us the perseverance of your Son, our Savior. Amen.

## DISCIPLESHIP FAILURE

*He fled naked, leaving his garment behind.* —Mark 14:52

*As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side.* —Mark 16:5

In past readings we've looked at Jesus' disciples who sleep instead of pray, flee when Jesus is arrested, and deny him during his trial. Today's reading shows another example—a young man who would rather lose his clothes than lose his life for Jesus.

Though we are not told the young man's name, many scholars read this as a reference to Mark—the writer of this gospel account. In a way, Mark confesses his own sin here and calls us to a deeper commitment. We read more about Mark in Acts 15:36-41, which reveals another discipleship failure on his part. But later he returns to discipleship and serves faithfully (see Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13).

Mark 16 describes an angel in the resurrection story as “a young man dressed in a white

robe.” Could this description be a picture of how the gospel writer Mark wanted to be? Through Jesus' transforming power in his life, and despite his failures, Mark did become someone who proclaimed the good news of the resurrection. His account in the Bible still brings the message to us today.

Though we might fail, we can return to discipleship too. Every one of our failures can be wiped away because of Jesus' saving work and resurrection. And his Spirit fills us to serve.

Thank you, Lord, for wiping away our failures and restoring us to new life so that we can serve in your strength. Amen.

## CONFESSION

*"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"*

*"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

—Mark 14:61-62

Picture yourself standing before the highest legal officials and church leaders—all in the same room and all wanting to find you guilty. That is what Jesus faced as he stood on trial. There was not one supporter in the entire place as he faced a judge and jury who would allow false testimony and fiery bursts of emotion to skew the evidence in the courtroom.

In the face of such antagonism Jesus stood his ground. He knew that all he needed was the backing of his Father in heaven. Jesus boldly let everyone know that he was the anointed one who came to save God's people and rule over all things.

Jesus' confession of his divine identity takes place at the same time as Peter's denials. While Jesus is standing before the judi-

cial authorities who want to put him to death, Peter is confronted by people without power who are curious and think he is one of Jesus' followers. Yet he falters in his ability to confess his faith three times in a row.

Whenever we are tempted not to acknowledge our loyalty to Jesus, we should remember the good confession that Jesus uttered instead of taking the route of Peter and hiding our true allegiance. Remember who you are and to whom you belong!

Thank you, Lord, for saying "I am" in the crucible of criticism. May there not be even one occasion in our lives when we forget to confess your name. Amen.

## CURSING UNDER PRESSURE

*[Peter] began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."*  
—Mark 14:71

Peer pressure often holds us captive. The need for acceptance is so tyrannical that we are willing to do almost anything to join the crowd. A young person is murdered for a popular brand of shoe. A huge ad campaign to "Say No to Drugs" is necessary because some say it's cool to use drugs.

Imprisoned by his need to be like everyone else, Peter denies his true identity and compromises his love for Jesus. Not only that, but in his third denial he also ends up cursing.

Just as Peter tried to blend in with the crowd, we too struggle to stand up for our convictions. I remember golfing at a championship course. Emotionally I was looking for a relaxing time, but I was put with a group of guys who were drinking, swearing, telling about their sexual escapades, and putting down

the church. When they asked what I did for a living, I was embarrassed to say I was studying to be a minister, so I said I was a lawyer. During the whole game I felt like I wanted to hide. It was like denying Jesus.

Peer pressure controls all of us from time to time. We want to be accepted, approved of, popular. We don't enjoy being different. So we allow ourselves to be shaped by people's opinions rather than by what God wants. When that happens, we need to hear the rooster crow so that we can recognize our sin and repent.

Lord, we often prefer the favor of people to the approval of God. Forgive us and remove our need for human acceptance, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## RESPONDING TO THE LORD'S LOOK

*The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him. . . . And he went outside and wept bitterly.*  
—Luke 22:61-62

Two captivating stories are happening at the same time. Inside the high priest's court Jesus reveals his true identity as the Messiah. Outside near the fire in the courtyard Peter denies his Lord three times. Then the climax brings the two story lines together. Jesus' look at Peter changes everything.

Peter had surrendered to the paralyzing fear of standing alone. But fortunately Jesus enabled Peter to break out of the cage of conformity. The rooster's crow activated the alarm of Peter's conscience. Immediately he repented. In extreme sorrow, Peter wept bitterly. Later he reaffirmed his love for Jesus and was recommissioned as the Lord's representative.

In John 21 we find that Jesus refused to let Peter cover up his unresolved past. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved

his Lord. And Peter asserted repeatedly, "Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus then empowered Peter to put his past behind him and walk confidently into the future.

Jesus' aim is to rehabilitate us whenever we fall from grace. And our conscience can halt us before we yield to temptation. But even if we slip into sin, God wants to restore us. For us this means responding to the alarm of our conscience, removing ourselves from the place of temptation, repenting of our sin, and reaffirming our loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Lord, we know that your convicting look is filled with convincing grace. Thank you for your transforming power! Amen.

## WHEN SILENCE SPEAKS

*Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.*

—Mark 15:5

When someone challenges us, we usually try to defend ourselves with a lot of defensive talk. We attempt to establish our innocence with elaborate excuses. That's why Pilate expected Jesus to deny the false accusations made by the chief priests. But Jesus said nothing—and Pilate was amazed.

The word “amazed” is used most often in the gospels at the close of a miracle story to describe the reaction of people who saw what Jesus had done. Jesus' silence in this story also needs to be seen as a miracle. And Pilate responded with awe.

Jesus' silence fulfilled a prophecy in Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet . . . as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

Sometimes silence is cowardly. There are times when we need to voice our convictions.

But often silence is golden. Silence is always better than truth spoken without love. Silence calls attention to the value of the words we do say. When Jesus finally spoke, his words were intensely powerful.

If silence is golden, most of us are paupers. Often we talk a lot without saying much. The discipline of silence, however, guides us to reflect on what we do say. We become better listeners, both to God and to those around us. We choose our words carefully and build people up rather than tearing them down. Amazing!

Father, we need your wisdom to discern when to speak and when to be silent. May our words always honor you. Amen.

## JESUS BARABBAS, OR JESUS THE MESSIAH?

*"Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"*  
—Matthew 27:17

We face difficult choices every day. And often, instead of standing up for the truth, we compromise our convictions or let someone else decide. But the results can be disastrous.

Pilate tried to negotiate a way to remain popular while avoiding a decision for the truth. He would let the crowd decide who would be crucified: Jesus the Messiah or Jesus Barabbas. What a clever move on Pilate's part. Certainly the crowd would not want a murderer set free!

Knowing that Jesus was innocent, Pilate wanted to release him. But without the backbone to stand for truth, Pilate looked for an easy way out. He thought he had the perfect plan to spare him from making this difficult decision. But God closed the door. Nothing can stop the plans of God: not inept leaders or rebellious mobs or

cleverly conceived strategies. In the midst of political injustice, mob hysteria, and mischievous deceit, God finds a way to establish his perfect will.

The crowd had to choose, and they chose wrongly. We too have to make our choice. When we choose for Jesus the Messiah, we recognize the Son of God who came to earth to die for our sins and rose again to save us from eternal death. When we choose for Jesus the Savior, we honor the one who has chosen us and who made the hard decision to die so that we might live.

Lord, we are thankful that your ways are higher than our ways. You overcame the schemes of human beings to provide for our salvation. Thank you! Amen.

## TAKING THE BLAME

*Pilate . . . took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. —Matthew 27:24*

Taking the blame requires character. But we often prefer excuses to responsibility. I saw this alot when I used to visit the county jail as part of a weekly ministry: almost everyone there had a story of innocence.

The characters in Jesus' trial were no different. After designing a plan to lure Jesus into the Jewish leaders' trap, Judas could not bear to take the responsibility for Jesus' arrest. He returned the money and wanted to undo what he had done. But it was too late.

Pilate tried to avoid blame by suggesting that Barabbas might take Jesus' place. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, but he could not find the strength to act on his convictions. So in a final act of avoidance, Pilate washed his hands in front of the crowd and claimed he was innocent of Jesus' blood. He

didn't have the backbone to stand for the truth.

But excuses, rationalization, and avoidance of the truth have no place in the presence of God. Each of us must face our own guilt, our own responsibility for the death of Jesus, our own accountability to the Almighty. The Son of God came all the way from heaven to earth, and we killed him. God was among us, but we failed to recognize him.

Only when we take the blame can we receive the blessing of forgiveness and new life that he came to provide for us.

Jesus, Son of God and Lamb of God, I deserved to die, but you took my place. I was the guilty one, but you took the blame on yourself instead. What a Savior! Amen.

## MOCKED AND MOCKED AGAIN

*The chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!"*  
—Mark 15:31

Being mocked is one of the most devastating of human experiences. Sneers and insults cut deep. Mockery threatens our deepest emotional needs: to be loved, protected, and cared for.

Jesus was mocked several times during his trial and crucifixion: Jewish guards, Roman soldiers, Jewish religious leaders, and people who passed by the cross—all took their turns. In all of this, Jesus experienced the harsh reality of rejection with all its rudeness.

Each act of ridicule, however, also revealed Jesus' true identity. The purple robe and crown of thorns depicted the King who was willing to sacrifice himself for his people. The spitting and striking blows proved that Isaiah 50:6 spoke the truth about the servant of the Lord: "I offered my back to those who beat me.

... I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting." The sign above Jesus' head on the cross, "The King of the Jews," declared a blessed truth. Ironically, the only way for Jesus to save his people was to stay on the cross instead of coming down and saving himself.

Within this greatest of all rejections comes a promise. Because Christ was rejected, we will never be rejected. "By his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). What a sacrifice!

We avoid mockery at all costs, but you, O Lord, bore every tirade of human disgrace for our salvation. Thank you for taking the sting out of mockery. In your name, Amen.

## HEROIC MINOR CHARACTERS

*A certain man from Cyrene, Simon . . . was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.*

—Mark 15:21

We've already read about Simon Peter, the disciple of Jesus who denied Jesus three times. Today's verses tell us about Simon of Cyrene, who walked behind Jesus as a disciple carrying his cross. Simon of Cyrene became one of the minor heroes in the good-news story of Christ's suffering.

Simon was compelled by Roman soldiers to carry Jesus' cross. But our compulsion has to come voluntarily from the Holy Spirit within us. Paul leads the discipleship parade when he declares, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10). We too must follow in the footsteps of Simon and Paul when we commit to live out the call of the gospel. I too am like a seed that must

fall into the ground and die to myself (John 12:24). I must take Jesus' yoke on myself and learn from him (Matthew 11:29). And when I am afflicted, God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). I must deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23).

Like Simon, we are outsiders who have an opportunity to respond positively to the gospel. Though we are only minor characters on the world's stage, taking up the cross God has given us is our calling.

Father, show us what it means to take up our cross each day and follow Jesus. Thank you for answering this prayer. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

*“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”  
... “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

—Luke 23:42-43

Paradise is something we all dream about. A place without pain, tears, loneliness, boredom, and death—that’s where I want to go.

But only good people will go there, right?

Not according to the good news of Jesus. Paradise is a gift for everyone who sincerely responds to Jesus with the words, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Surprisingly, these are the words of a violent revolutionary, a terrorist. But of the few words that Jesus utters from the cross, the longest dialogue is between that criminal and Jesus. In fact, Jesus’ last conversation on earth is with that convicted prisoner. And Jesus promises that they will soon meet again in paradise.

Even in his deepest pain Jesus reserved a place in his heart for

the underdog and marginalized. In paradise, as Jesus taught, the first shall be last and the last first. This helps us see other people differently, doesn’t it?

I like the word “today.” The where and what of life after death are so fuzzy that we wonder what it will all be like. But Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” The criminal’s death and his entrance into paradise happen on the same day. What comfort these words give!

Jesus wants to tell us too, “You will be with me in paradise.”

Lord, my simple prayer is this: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

## NO SORROW LIKE HIS SORROW

*They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.*

—Mark 15:23

The first event recorded at Jesus' crucifixion is the offer of wine mixed with myrrh—probably to help dull the senses and ease the pain. But Jesus refused to drink it. He willingly drank God's cup of suffering instead. He submitted himself to the worst suffering a human could experience.

Jesus' road to the cross involved sorrow upon sorrow. His trial was conducted hastily in the shadows of night. The leaders altered the rules and broke the law to condemn him. His own people disowned him. False witnesses lied, upright men physically abused him, respected spiritual leaders spat on him, and the highest of priests mocked him.

Isaiah 53 explains the consequences of Jesus' decision to face every human sorrow. "He was pierced for our transgres-

sions, he was crushed for our iniquities." He willingly suffered, and we unknowingly benefited. What a wonder!

How did Jesus respond? Hebrews 12:2 reports, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame." Extreme sorrow and anguish normally breed anger and bitterness. But Jesus' pure heart would not allow sin to enter in.

Jesus, who deserved no punishment for sin, bore it all for us. His response to suffering enables us to overcome the hard times and abuses of life. In his strength, we too can remember the joy set before us.

"Man of sorrows—what a name for the Son of God, who came ruined sinners to reclaim: Hallelujah, what a Savior!" Amen.

## THE CURSE OF CRUCIFIXION

*It was nine in the morning when they crucified him.*

—Mark 15:25

Crucifixion was the most horrible of deaths. Some victims hung for days in the scorching sun until finally the weight of their body, nailed at the hands and feet, collapsed their lungs. Any other death was preferable. Crucifixion was so horrible that it was inappropriate to mention it in conversation.

No one imagined that the cross might become a religious symbol. Because of the cross Minucius Felix in his dialogue *Octavius* called Christianity a sick delusion. He said that anyone who worshiped a crucified person should himself be crucified.

The Bible also talks about the horrors of crucifixion. The cross is called an offense (Galatians 5:11), a sign of shame (Hebrews 12:2) and foolishness, and a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 1:23). Deuteronomy 21:23 states that “anyone who is hung

on a pole [crucified] is under God’s curse.”

All of this adds significance to the fact that Jesus Christ was not just killed, but crucified.

Have you noticed that Mark uses segments of time (“nine in the morning,” “noon,” “three in the afternoon”) to describe Jesus’ crucifixion? He wants us to reflect on the long, agonizing struggle Jesus endured for us on the cross.

And Paul sees the transforming blessing for us: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” Jesus took on the curse so that we will not be cursed.

Lord, amid our busyness, may we stop to focus on all you have done for us. Through your death we can live! Amen.

## ENDURING FORSAKENNESS

*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

—Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1

A classic case of forsakenness involves the famous couple Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. Elizabeth's parents so disapproved of her marriage to Robert that they refused to associate with her. Every week for years she drafted a letter to her parents to say how much she loved them. She hoped that one day they would respond with love for her too. After ten years she finally received a large package in return, containing all her letters unopened. Forsakenness is devastating.

Far more disturbing is the picture of Jesus on the cross crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" To pay the price for our sin, Jesus was abandoned by his eternal Father. God turned his face away, and his Son suffered the complete separation from God that we deserve.

Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, was born into a secular family and never felt the need for God. He became very skeptical when his best friend was killed in the fierce bombing of Germany during World War II. Entering the army, he was taken prisoner by the British. Receiving a Bible from a chaplain, he read until he came to Jesus' cry. Reading that, Moltmann said, "I found in Jesus somebody who understood me. And from that time, I became a Christian."

By enduring the darkness of God-forsakenness for us, Jesus ensured that we need never be alone.

Lord, thank you for taking our place and bearing our punishment. Your cry inspires within us cries of thanksgiving. Amen.

## PASSOVER RELIVED

*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."*

—John 19:30

In today's verses sour wine is given to Jesus on a hyssop branch. This reminds us that on the first Passover in Egypt, Israelite families used hyssop to put the blood of a lamb on the doorframes of their houses. That night, a destroying plague of death covered all Egypt, but it passed over those houses so that God's people were spared—and their exodus from slavery began (see Exodus 12).

Jesus' death on the cross began for us a new exodus—from our slavery in sin. His shed blood protects us so that we can celebrate a new Passover feast with the Lord's Supper.

At the end of his suffering Jesus took a drink and said, "It is finished." What did that mean? Certainly Jesus' life of suffering on earth was finished. But there was more. "It is finished" meant that Jesus had fulfilled all the

requirements of the law so that we no longer have to live in the grip of legalism.

Further, Jesus' sacrifice of himself for our sin meant the end of all animal sacrifices. No more do we need an intermediary between us and God, an earthly priest who would pray and atone for us. We have direct access through Jesus, our ultimate High Priest.

Our eternal King has won the battle for us. Our sin has been crucified with Christ, our guilt is buried in his grave, and death has been overcome in his resurrection. The devil is defeated, and the gates of hell are barred to all who believe in Jesus. Eternal life is ours!

Lord, you completed all the work of salvation for us. Thank you for your indescribable gift! Amen.

## GOD'S NEW TEMPLE

*The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

—Mark 15:38

While Jesus suffered on the cross, it may seem that God the Father was passive. But as soon as the Son's sacrifice was complete, the earth shook, rocks split, and the temple curtain tore from top to bottom. (See Matthew 27:51.) God was on the move.

What is the significance of the torn temple curtain? Jesus, our ultimate High Priest, atoned for our sins with his own body, represented by the curtain (Hebrews 10:20). When he gave up his body to death, the curtain tore, and the Most Holy Place in the temple (God's dwelling place among his people) became open to all peoples.

Further, Jesus had announced, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." . . . But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead [on the third day], his disciples re-

called what he had said" (John 2:19-22). So by his death and resurrection, Jesus laid down his own life for us and set up a new temple, his body of believers throughout the whole earth.

Now, because of Jesus' finished work "once for all" (Hebrews 10:10), we do not have to enter a building to find God. God is with us always in Jesus through his Holy Spirit.

Everyone has equal access to God in Jesus. Every day we can enter the holiness of God. Our hearts can become God's home. So let's draw near to God every day. He is always near (see Isaiah 46:13; 55:6; Philippians 4:5; James 4:8).

Thank you, Lord, that we can find you because you are near. Thank you for finding us. Amen.

## THE SON OF GOD

*When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"*

—Mark 15:39

The crucifixion story is filled with anguish. Jesus is arrested by violent soldiers, deserted by his followers, betrayed by one of his own disciples, tried by a kangaroo court, condemned by a mob, and crucified at the place of the skull (Golgotha). Then a Roman centurion proclaims him the Son of God! Jesus' true identity shines through the darkness.

In Mark's gospel the centurion's confession of faith parallels two earlier voices from heaven. At Jesus' baptism God's voice speaks, "You are my Son, whom I love." Later the same voice from heaven informs the disciples of Jesus' identity: "This is my Son, whom I love." And at the cross the centurion, seeing how Jesus died, said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

The centurion's words are like a voice from heaven that again

confirms that the suffering of the Messiah has been intentional. It is only when we look steadfastly at the cross that we can see the kind of Savior we need.

The centurion was a Gentile. Through his words we can see that the Son of God is for every nation. We need to see how Jesus died and respond with all our heart, "Surely he is the Son of God!" Every day these words should be on the tip of our tongue. Confessing our faith is the most crucial response to our salvation.

Jesus, I proclaim today that you are the very Son of God. May my profession ring through my daily living! For your sake, Amen.

## SCRIPTURE IS FULFILLED

*These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled.*

—John 19:36

The Bible is composed of 66 books written over the course of about 1,500 years. How can so many different authors from diverse time periods compose a book that fits so intricately together? The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the life of Jesus is truly miraculous. Let's look at just a few.

We see the suffering of Jesus in many psalms. Psalm 22 begins with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It also talks about this person being mocked, people dividing his clothing, and people casting lots for his garments. Psalm 41:9 foresees Jesus' betrayal: "Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me." Psalm 27:12 says, "False witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations." And, quoting Psalm 31:5, Jesus

says, "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

The prophets add many more examples. Only Jesus can wear the names mentioned in Isaiah 9:6: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Only Jesus can fill the descriptions of Isaiah 53: taking up our pain and bearing our suffering; being pierced for our transgressions, and much more. Zechariah 13:7 adds that the sheep will scatter when their shepherd is stricken (see Mark 14:27).

In today's uncertain times we need to reflect on the certainty of God's Word. God's promises always find their "Yes" in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Father God, hold our lives together, we pray, through your Word in Christ. Thank you! Amen.

## “SECRET” CHRISTIANS

*They would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God.*

—John 12:42-43

Two prominent leaders, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, paired up to bury Jesus. These two men had been secret Christians, afraid at first to openly confess Jesus because they would have been excommunicated from the synagogue, the Jewish worshiping community.

But Jesus' death brought a crisis of commitment. Would Joseph and Nicodemus continue to side with family, friends, nation, culture, and place of worship, or would they identify with Jesus?

Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night to ask him some questions (John 3). And in a council discussion he had tried to stand up for Jesus but was quickly shouted down (John 7:50-52). After Jesus' death, though, he came forward to help prepare Jesus' body, and Joseph provided the burial place (Matthew 27:59-60).

In our day a new wave of tolerance is winning college campuses and social network discussions. Public pressure is rising not just to respect someone else's views but to say they are also true. Our culture wants us to say there are many ways to God, and that what is true for me is not necessarily true for you. Yet Christians believe that Jesus is God and is the only way to eternal life (John 14:6).

Are you willing to speak up for Jesus? What stance do you have to take in order to side with him?

Lord, we confess that we like to be comfortable in our culture. Empower us to stand up for you, whatever the cost. Amen.

## THE GOOD NEWS

*"They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."*

—Mark 9:31

On three occasions Jesus predicted his suffering at the hands of the Jewish rulers and his death by the Roman authorities. But he didn't stop there. Each time he also said he would rise from the grave. The resurrection turns the upside-down world of Jesus' suffering right side up. And yet his followers paid little or no attention to this teaching.

As the women approached the tomb early on Easter morning, they must have been reviewing the terrible events of the past few days. Their hero was dead. Their vision was cloudy. Their purpose in life was confused. The morning was dark.

But as they left the tomb, they were good-news bearers. They had come expecting nothing, but they left anticipating everything. They came in the dark; they left in the light.

There are a lot of bad-news bearers in our world today. People say, "The world is headed for hell." "The church is going down the tubes." "Our young people are lost." Naysayers harp on what's wrong with society and the church. They focus on problems and negative statistics.

Yet we are called to spread the good news. Because of Easter we can no longer be pessimists. We can light up the darkness with the good news of Christ's resurrection. Thank God—we have good news to share with the world!

Good news is sweet to the soul, and your resurrection, Lord Jesus, is the sweetest news of all. Thank you, Jesus, for resurrection hope. In your name, Amen.

# this month

## Never-ending Love

**Ruth Boven**

**Grand Rapids, Michigan**

This month we'll spend much of our time in a quiet place, often called "the upper room," with Jesus and his disciples (see Mark 14:14-15). John's gospel account dwells there for a good long time. While they share their last meal together, Jesus delivers his final instructions to those who will carry on his ministry.

We listen in and pay attention, for these life-giving lessons are for us as well. Jesus not only speaks words for his followers to live by, but he also demonstrates—both in the upper room and in his journey to the cross—a love that never ends. John's gospel shines a bright light on the love of God that we see in Jesus Christ. So I invite you to open wide your heart and mind "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep" is Christ's never-ending love for you (Ephesians 3:18).

*Ruth Boven serves as the minister of pastoral care at Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She and her husband, Greg, have two adult children. They find rich purpose in urban ministry and delight in enjoying the wonders of God's good creation.*

## FULL EXTENT OF HIS LOVE

*Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*  
—John 13:1

Everybody needs to be loved. It's one of the deepest truths of our shared human condition. More specifically, we all need to be shown love.

When my children were small, they sometimes engaged in trying to express how much they loved me. With arms and hands outstretched as far as their toddler-sized bodies would allow, they strained to show the extent of their love: "This is how much I love you, Mommy!" Of course, I was delighted!

As Jesus spent precious final hours with his disciples, his primary project was to make clear why he had come to earth. While the shadow of the cross crept steadily toward him, Jesus showed his disciples the central meaning of his mission: God's love (see John 3:16).

How did Jesus communicate that message of love? He knelt

down in front of his disciples and washed their feet. The One who had come from heaven humbly washed away the earth's dirt from between his followers' toes. What an unusual expression of love!

Jesus' message of love is surprising. It's countercultural. Its claim is that through the cross-shaped giving of himself, Jesus showed us the full extent of his love—he loved his followers "to the end."

Jesus' love bends low. His love washes us clean. Jesus' love searches and reaches out for us. Have you opened your heart fully to his love?

Lord, thank you for loving me. Help me to grasp how high and wide and deep and long your love is for all people. Amen.

## WILLING TO BE WASHED

*Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."*

—John 13:8

It's a humbling, maybe even humiliating, thing to have someone wash you. Nurses know the awkwardness as well as the importance of bathing patients who cannot bathe themselves. Sometimes a broken body prevents patients from getting themselves cleaned up.

This is also true in the life of faith. Most of us cherish our independence. We are doers. We are achievers. We resent needing to rely on others for things we think we can do ourselves. Yet the truth is that we are broken because of sin. The Bible teaches that in order to enter into the fullness of life that God intends for us, we need to be washed clean. But we are unable to do that for ourselves.

Peter's refusal to be washed by Jesus was vehement. It could be translated this way: "You will never ever wash my feet—

ever!" Peter thought he was saying the proper thing. It didn't feel right for Jesus to be acting as a servant to him. How could it be fitting for his Master to descend to such lowliness?

Jesus' reply to Peter was also vehement. In essence, Jesus said, "If I can't wash you, you can't have me." Peter needed to humble himself. He needed to receive the forgiveness of sin that Jesus was offering.

So do we.

So, give in. Be washed. And receive fullness of life!

God of grace, wash me clean of all my sins. Help me receive the fullness of life that you offer through Jesus. Amen.

## DAILY HYGIENE

*“Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean.”*  
—John 13:10

When I was a child, Saturday night kicked off preparations for Sunday worship. Dresses were pressed, shoes shined, grimy hands, faces, and bodies scrubbed clean. Imagine my mother's distress when one of my pajama-clad brothers would escape to rescue a forgotten ball from the dirt driveway. Thankfully only his feet needed rewashing!

Jesus told Peter he was clean. Jesus' message was this: If you've been washed by me, you are clean once and for all. This is the great claim of the Christian faith. We believe that the precious body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ were given for the complete forgiveness of all our sins. Because of Jesus we are clean, now and forever.

Yet the call to Peter and to us is to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. Daily we place

our feet on the path of faithful living. Daily we confess the ways our feet stray from that path. And daily we are invited to rejoice in the assurance that we've been pardoned, that because of Jesus we are freed, forgiven, and wonderfully clean!

There is no better news. The truth that although we are sinners Christ died to make us clean compels us to grateful living. Gratitude guides our feet to others who need to hear good news.

To whom will your feet bring you today?

Gracious God, move my heart to daily confession and gratitude. Guide my feet to those who need to know your forgiveness. Amen.

## I HAVE SET YOU AN EXAMPLE

*"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."*  
—John 13:15

Jesus has done an outrageous thing. Jesus, the Master, humbly bows before and serves his disciples. Philippians 2:6-7 says that Jesus, though "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant." Jesus came to serve among us for our benefit, for our salvation, so that we might know and enter into the love God has for us.

Jesus also set us an example. As he washed his disciples' feet, Jesus was showing and telling how we can live in the most blessed way possible—in humble service. When we serve others, we give our time, our attention, our resources, our very selves for people's benefit and flourishing. It's a way of life that influences our every inter-

action. As imitators of Christ, we practice things like good listening, generous hospitality, and faithful care for people in need, starting with those closest to us. In Romans 12:10 we are instructed, "Honor one another above yourselves."

Following Jesus' example of humble service is no easy calling. In fact, we cannot do it without the Spirit of Christ living in us. Scripture promises that as we serve others, Christ, by his Spirit, is present to guide, to equip, and to bless.

Loving God, we thank you that Christ Jesus came among us as a servant. Help us today to humbly serve others in his name. Amen.

**BEING KNOWN**

*"I know those I have chosen."*

—John 13:18

Do you remember picking teams when you were young? The way it often went was that after two captains were chosen, the captains chose their teams, one person at a time, picking the better players first. If you weren't good at the game, you hated the process. It would feel awful to be chosen last.

Jesus makes clear that following him is first of all about being known and chosen. It's always God who acts first. God is the Creator, the initiator, the One who seeks us first. One of my favorite hymns melodically testifies that God "moved my soul to seek him, seeking me."

If you are seeking to know and follow Jesus, you can be confident that Jesus has already been seeking you. And, unlike the process in those childhood games, being chosen has nothing to do with favoritism or

your accomplishments. In love God chooses the undeserving, the weak and helpless, even the worst sinners.

So what can we say about Judas, who betrayed Jesus? (See John 13:26-30; 18:2-3). We can only say what Scripture says. Jesus indicated that Judas refused to accept the abundant life Jesus came to offer.

Thankfully, God is the judge. We are not. We are called to rejoice in the truth expressed in that favorite hymn: "It was not I that found, O Savior true; no, I was found, was found of thee."

O God, you know me completely. Thank you for seeking me out. Move me to seek you always. Amen.

## INTO THE NIGHT

*As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.*  
—John 13:30

It isn't hard to feel the weight of this scene. Jesus, while sharing a meal with his disciples, identifies his betrayer. It's Judas. We can picture Judas slinking out of the room, his cloak sweeping briskly behind him.

Did you notice that the writer made a point of saying, "It was night"? John was doing more than telling us the time of day. Judas was now joining forces with the prince of darkness. But that's only part of the picture.

John's gospel account began with the good news that Christ Jesus, God in human flesh, the light of the world, came to live among us (John 1:9, 14). Isaiah 9:2 prophesied that people living in darkness would see a great light. Jesus came among us to shine the light of God's love and grace into a dark and suffering world, our world.

We don't have to watch or read the news very long to detect darkness all around us. And Scripture teaches that the darkness is also in us. All of us sometimes prefer darkness that hides to light that exposes.

The good news, however, is that Jesus dispels our darkness and radiates his light into our hearts and lives. As the light of Christ dwells in us, we too can dispel the darkness we encounter all around us.

How will you dispel darkness and shine the light of Christ today?

God, "I want to walk as a child of the light; I want to follow Jesus." Lead and guide me, I pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

## WHAT GLORY LOOKS LIKE

*"Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him."*

—John 13:31

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines *glory* as great "praise, honor, or distinction." Christians use the word *glory* often, especially in worship. In the church I serve, we sometimes sing these words: "We will glorify the King of kings. We will glorify the Lamb. We will glorify the Lord of lords, who is the great I AM." Giving glory to God lifts our hearts upward toward the reigning King. We praise him for his greatness, power, and majesty.

But Jesus gives us another angle on glory in our text today. Remember that Jesus is on the brink of his brutal march to the cross. "Now the Son of Man is glorified," he said. Jesus' glory is first of all about the fulfillment of his Father's purposes. Jesus' obedience to his Father's plan would be his glory, even though it meant suffering and death on

a cross. Jesus showed us that glory comes through sacrificial love and obedience to God.

How do you and I think about glory? Our world would like us to think glory comes through achievement and status. Sacrificial obedience to someone else's plan would not seem to be the path to glory. But, truly, that's what it takes. Our submission and obedience to God's loving plan for this world is the only achievement worthy of praise, honor, and distinction.

To God be the glory!

God of glory, help us to realize that glory comes through sacrificial obedience to your loving plan for this world. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.

## A NEW COMMAND

*"A new command I give you: Love one another."*

—John 13:34

I would like to have been there. Wouldn't you? Jesus was giving his final instructions to his disciples. To them he would soon entrust his life-giving mission. The tone of Jesus' speech was tender yet urgent. His instructions were specific. Perhaps the clearest and most direct command was this: "Love one another." While Jesus elsewhere taught that his disciples must love all people, even their enemies, here he told his followers they must love each other. This is how the world would see and understand the message of God's love.

If you are connected to a church, you know the challenge of this command. It can be hard to love fellow believers. Differences in theology, culture, lifestyle, worship style, and many other things can create conflict and division among Christians. Yet Jesus said that

the world will know we are Christians not by our uniformity of thinking or practice, but by our love for one another, which comes from God (see 1 John 4:7-21).

The good news is that the love we are commanded to share is not self-generated. Romans 5:5 tells us, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." In other words, the more we open our hearts to receive the gracious love of God, the more we are able to love one another.

Is there a fellow believer to whom you might show love today?

Almighty God, fill me with your love. Help me to show love to all my brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

## HOPE FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled."*

—John 14:1

The Bible does not ignore trouble. From the garden in Genesis to the final battle in Revelation, trouble is a part of the picture. Even here in the room with Jesus and his disciples there has been trouble. Jesus has spoken of Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial. While the intimate picture John paints of Jesus' last hours with his disciples is beautiful in many ways, it is not a perfect picture. And for this we can be glad, for our lives are not perfect pictures either.

A spiritual song that came out of the United States' use of slavery says, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." Not one of us gets through life without encountering difficulty and pain. Sometimes our trouble is so deep, our pain so profound, that it's hard to have hope. If this describes your life, know that Jesus' words are for you.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me."

Please notice that Jesus is not saying we should simply ignore or minimize our troubles. No. Jesus' instructions are simple: *Trust the Father; trust me.* That is what's needed. That is what brings hope to a troubled heart. Trust the One who holds your future. Trouble does not have the final word. Trust Jesus, who has given his life to secure for you an eternal home and who offers hope for your troubled heart today.

Loving God, thank you for Jesus and for the hope he offers. Help me to trust that you hold my future and that Jesus is preparing a place for me. In his name, Amen.

## FINDING YOUR WAY

*Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* —John 14:6

Several years ago I traveled with my daughter to a foreign city where we needed to navigate a complex train system, using a language that was very unfamiliar to me. I wasn't very good at it. Thankfully my daughter was. She consistently showed me the right way to go.

Sometimes getting where we want to go in life can be confusing. After Jesus told his disciples he would be leaving them, Thomas said he didn't know where Jesus was going or how to get there.

I like Thomas's honest questions. He doesn't hide his confusion. Sometimes Christians think they need to know all the answers. But Jesus doesn't scold Thomas for not understanding. He gives him directions. Jesus tells Thomas the way to navigate successfully. And that way is Jesus himself. If the goal of life

is to get with the Father, to get with God, then Jesus is the way.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." It might help to think of it this way: each one of us has a God-shaped void in us that only God can fill. As we long to be filled with God, Jesus is the way there. The truth of his Word will guide us. And along the way, his life in us gives us the power to stay on track. What a wonderful journey! What a wonderful Lord and Savior!

Dear God, thank you that through Jesus we have a way to get with you. Help us to follow Jesus, our way, truth, and life. Amen.

## NEVER ALONE

*"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."*

—John 14:18

One of my childhood memories is of waking from a nap on a stormy Sunday afternoon to find myself alone in our house. Neither my parents nor a single one of my seven siblings were anywhere to be found. Frightened, I ran to a neighbor's home. I was comforted by the presence of familiar faces. As it turned out, my family was in the barn watching our horse give birth to a colt we named Lightning.

Being left alone can be frightening. Jesus describes it as being orphaned. With tender urgency, he comforted and prepared his disciples for the events that were nearly upon them. Soon their friend and teacher would be brutally arrested, beaten, and crucified. Jesus knew that would frighten his disciples. He knew they would feel abandoned, orphaned, alone. So he gave them

this unspeakably good promise: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

There are two ways Jesus made good on this promise in his disciples' lives and in ours. First, he did come back, personally and physically. He rose from the dead, having defeated death. He walked out of the tomb. Jesus' resurrection secures our place in the family of God. We are not orphans. We are heirs with the risen Christ. Second, Jesus has sent us his Spirit, who is with us always. Indeed, we are never alone.

Faithful God, thank you for your promise that we are not orphans but heirs. Help us to trust that by your Spirit, Jesus is with us always. Amen.

## REMAINING IN CHRIST

*"I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."*  
—John 15:5

I've attended many weddings recently. One point emphasized in nearly every wedding "message" I heard was the *work* involved in being married. Staying connected to one another in a mutual relationship of love and fidelity does not happen automatically. It takes effort. It takes commitment. It takes intentionality to remain together until death does its work of separation. Simply put, it takes *work*!

Jesus says something similar to his disciples. He indicates that he and his followers are already connected, united, bonded together: "I am the vine, you are the branches." And Jesus is the source for all that is needed. As branches attached to the vine, which is Jesus, we are completely dependent on him for life, nourishment, and fruitbearing. It is a tremendous blessing that

our lives will flourish because we are connected to Jesus.

This great truth is something to celebrate, but it also makes us responsible. Jesus calls us to stay connected. We are given responsibility in our relationship with Jesus. We are called to remain in him. We do that by being steeped in God's Word and by participating in a community of believers who feast together at the Lord's table. We remain in Christ through prayer and through loving others as Christ commanded. And the fruit we bear by his power will last forever.

God, you are the giver and sustainer of all life. Help us to remain in Christ Jesus and to bear fruit for your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE PALM PARADE

*They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!"*  
—John 12:13

Today is one of my favorite days on the church calendar. This morning in many churches children will march up and down the aisles, singing praises and waving palm branches. There's always some delightful mishap, such as a child who sings more exuberantly than the rest, or a youngster who tries to take someone else's bigger branch.

I learned recently that the palm branches in Jesus' day had patriotic meaning. Rebels rising against Rome would mint coins stamped with palm branches on them. So, as Jesus entered Jerusalem to the waving of palms, the scene spoke of Israel's national hopes, hopes that were pinned on him.

Likewise Jesus chose to make his entry on a donkey, a humble symbol of both kingship and peace. But Jesus wasn't the political king the people expected.

His message in this was for the entire world. Jesus came not to save one nation but to offer salvation to all people. "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17).

It isn't by way of weapons or war horses that Jesus saves. Jesus came to lay down his life so that all people might claim him as Lord and King. Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed are you, our Lord and King, for you came to bring peace and salvation to all people. Equip us to join you in that great calling. In your name we pray. Amen.

## GRIEF TO JOY

*"You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy."*

—John 16:20

Some of us know the deep grief of being separated from a loved one. When we are steeped in grief, it's hard to imagine that we could ever experience joy again. Jesus knows that about us.

My husband and I once served a two-year term in East Africa. One of the hardest parts was to leave our dear family members back home. Toward the end of our term some of our family members came to visit. I had never before experienced such great anticipation and joy over a family reunion.

Jesus knew his disciples would grieve when he left them. But he assured them that their grief would not last. In fact, their grief would turn to joy because there would be a reunion. Their friend, teacher, and brother would be among them once again—talking, eating, and

teaching. And great joy would overwhelm them.

We can say more about the joy Jesus promised. It is for us as well. We too wait for Jesus to return. And although we will continue to face situations and losses that will cause us grief, we do not grieve without hope. Our hope is in Christ Jesus and the saving work he finished for us. In believing and receiving the forgiveness and new life Jesus has won for us, one day our joy will be complete. A family reunion like no other awaits us. Let's rejoice and be glad!

Gracious God, sometimes our hearts are weighed down with grief. Reassure us that our hope is in Christ, who will lead us into joy. In his name, Amen.

## THE BEST PROTECTION PLAN

*"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."*  
—John 17:15

Sometimes Christians are accused of "pie in the sky" thinking. Some people say that our minds are so fixed on heaven that we're of no earthly good. Perhaps we've been wrongly accused. Or could the critics be at least partly right?

The truth is, Jesus spoke of heaven, but mostly he spoke of God's kingdom in our world. The mission he entrusted to his followers was not about pining for heaven but about making disciples and growing God's kingdom here on earth. And as Jesus prayed for his disciples, he clearly pointed out one of the fiercest challenges they would face: the evil one.

The work of the evil one is the work of undoing. We don't talk about this ugly truth often enough. But here's a question to consider: Why would Jesus pray

for his disciples' protection if there were no real threat?

The evil one is real. He schemes to undo God's good work in our world. And he often targets us, Jesus' followers. So real is the danger of the evil one's plots that Jesus asks the Father to protect us.

Yet think about it. Could there be a better protection plan? Jesus himself is praying for us. As we work with the Lord to grow his kingdom here on earth, the power and presence of almighty God is with us—always!

Lord, thank you that your power is infinitely greater than that of the evil one. Thank you for protecting us. May your kingdom come here on earth, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## LETTING THE WORLD KNOW

*"I in them and you in me. . . . Then the world will know that you sent me."*  
—John 17:23

There's a lot of togetherness in Jesus' prayer for all believers. Jesus prays that all believers will be one and that the Father and Christ himself will be "in" all believers.

Opening our hearts and lives to God and to one another is foundational to living for the Lord who calls us. It shouldn't surprise us, for this is the way that God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three in one—lives, in a relationship of deepest fellowship and love with each other.

What should surprise us is that we are invited into that holy fellowship. The psalmist marvels that the God of the universe even pays attention to us: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4). In sending Jesus to live in our world, God opens the way for us to enter into an

intimate relationship with him and with other believers. This is a beautiful and joyful communion—God and his people joined together in purpose and unity. Jesus said that when we get this right—when we share and celebrate the love of God in Christian community—the world is compelled to enter in. Do you find that to be true?

Jesus is at the leading edge of showing the world the full extent of God's love. May that love be evident through every Christian community.

Loving God, we long to show the world the love that you showed in sending Jesus. Help us to live in ways that draw others to join in communion with you and one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## A TRUE AND OTHER-WORLDLY KINGDOM

*Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world."*

—John 18:36

In the three-act play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, the audience senses through the narrator that there is more going on than meets the eye. There's more than a simple story being presented. In other words, the drama is taking place within the bigger drama of real life.

What happens to Jesus in our story today is dramatic. Jesus has already been betrayed, arrested, questioned, and assaulted. He is sent to stand trial before Pilate, the Roman governor, who also questions Jesus. Now, Pilate can't quite figure out why this non-threatening figure would cause the Jewish leaders so much concern. Pilate must have found it amusing and even ridiculous that Jesus claimed to be a king.

Sadly, Pilate could not see the whole picture. He could not see the bigger drama unfolding

around him. Pilate could not see beyond the Roman Empire to the kingdom Jesus was bringing in. We might say that what Pilate couldn't see was even more real and true than what he could see.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Jesus' kingdom is not established or maintained by military might. Jesus' kingdom runs on an economy of love and grace. And it cannot fail. Our lives today are under Jesus' reign—within his true, other-worldly, and eternal kingdom. What a great comfort and joy!

Eternal God, we rejoice that Jesus is King and that his kingdom is established by the power of love. Equip us for your kingdom work, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## “IT IS FINISHED”

*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.”*

—John 19:30

“It is finished.” This three-word sentence may be the most important sentence ever uttered. We can understand more about its meaning by considering it in Greek, the language of the New Testament. In Greek the entire sentence is only one word. Even more interesting is that the tense of the word signals an action completed in the past with an ongoing effect in the present. In other words, Jesus is saying that something’s been completed and that it has meaning for us still today.

So what has been finished? The Bible provides at least two answers. First, what’s been completed is the great revelation of the love of God to the world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .” (John 3:16). On this Good Friday it’s critical to know that Jesus went the way of the

cross because of his great love for the world—which includes you and me. God’s love for you and me put Jesus on the cross and kept him there until his dying breath.

Also completed by Jesus was our cleansing, the payment and forgiveness for all our sin. Jesus accomplished our reconciliation with God. Jesus carried and paid for all our sin, once and for all. We are freed and forgiven and are now heirs with Christ in the family of God. What wondrous love this is!

Gracious God, you have poured out your love on us through the cross of Christ, our Lord. Our hearts overflow with thanks for your wondrous love. Hear our grateful prayer, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## HOPE IN THE GARDEN

*At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden. . . .*

—John 19:41

Today is sometimes called Dark Saturday. It's the day Jesus' body lay lifeless, breathless, in a dark garden tomb. Today is a strange in-between kind of day. Perhaps our hearts still mourn the stinging reality that Jesus' death was about our sin and about our wandering away from a loving God.

But perhaps our hearts are also beginning to thrill at the hope of what tomorrow will bring. When you think about it, that's where we live our lives. We live between what's been already accomplished for us in Christ, and the hope of what is yet to come.

The truth is that while Jesus' body lay in the grave, the world still turned, children played, families sat down to eat, and life, for many, went on as usual. The same is probably true for us, even as we take note of this day, this week, in the twenty-first century.

How will you live this day? Likely you will eat and laugh and perhaps enjoy some leisure time. Will you also spend some time in expectant hope? Consider that there, in a garden tomb, lay the hope of the entire world. Give thanks that the One who gave his life, out of love for us, has won the victory over death and hell. Let your heart anticipate tomorrow, a day of wonder. There's resurrection hope in that garden!

God of wonder, our hearts both grieve and hope. Forgive our ways of wandering from you. Help us, with joy, to celebrate the resurrection hope that is ours through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## A DAY LIKE NO OTHER

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb . . . .*  
—John 20:1

In the church I serve we will greet one another this morning with the greeting “Christ is risen!” and the response will be “He is risen indeed!” We join centuries of Christians in marking this day as the day that changed everything. We celebrate the amazing truth that although Jesus was dead, he’s now alive forevermore. Christ Jesus rose victorious over death. He is risen!

It’s interesting to notice how John, the gospel writer, anchors the event of the resurrection to a day, a time, and a witness. On a particular day in history, early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene saw that the stone had been moved away from Jesus’ tomb. John wants to be clear. The resurrection of Jesus happened on earth’s soil, in our time, for the benefit of us humans whom

God created and loves. Because Jesus is risen, life for us is forever anchored in good news.

Christ’s resurrection gloriously demonstrates that God’s sovereign love has the last word. As a powerful hymn puts it, “No power of hell, no human plan, can ever pluck me from his hand.” We now live in the joyful assurance that because Christ lives, we too will live for all eternity.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Living God, our hearts are lifted to you in praise and thanks that the grave could not hold our Lord Jesus. He is risen! Help us to live joyfully, hopefully, and boldly in the power of his resurrection. Amen.

## NAME RECOGNITION

*Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").* —John 20:16

Mary was participating in one of the oldest dramas in the world: she stood at the grave of a loved one and wept. Many of us have been there too. And perhaps, like Mary, as grief swelled, it was hard to see Jesus in the midst of it.

In her deep sorrow, Mary didn't recognize that it was Jesus who stood near her. In fact, she mistook him for the gardener. Ironically, Mary was wrong at one level, but right at another. For Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, had come to bring order to the chaos that had invaded God's world. Jesus came to plant seeds of new creation, to uproot the thorns and thistles, the sin and pain and decay of this world—and to replace them with the blossoms of forgiveness, grace, and everlasting life.

But perhaps what is most striking about this scene is that it

wasn't fanfare, lightning bolts, or the blasting of trumpets that helped Mary see her Lord. She recognized Jesus when he called her name: "Mary."

Jesus calls your name too. In the midst of your grief, Jesus is near. He cares about your loss and pain. He lived, died, and rose again so that you might have hope and comfort, even in the depth of your sorrows. Jesus knows your name and speaks it in love. Take time today to listen and answer.

God of grace, thank you that in Jesus we see how much you love us. Enable me to hear him speaking my name. Help me enter into the comfort of his risen presence. In his name, Amen.

## THE PEACE OF CHRIST

*Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"*

—John 20:19

What do you fear? Fear is pervasive in our world. We fear that harm might befall our children or that our finances won't be secure. We fear what others may think of us or what others may do to us.

Jesus' disciples were afraid that what happened to Jesus might also happen to them. And then Jesus showed up among them. "Peace be with you!" he said, and he repeated it more than once to his frazzled followers. At first blush one might think Jesus was out of touch with how his disciples were feeling. Jesus knew about their fear but offered assurance that his risen presence with them meant peace. Jesus' risen presence among them signaled that they too were conquerors and had nothing to fear from earthly powers. Jesus now reigns over every square inch of this world,

so, united to him in perfect love, they could live without fear (see 1 John 4:18).

In addition, Jesus breathed on his disciples. He actually exhaled his Spirit into them, who would always be with them as they were sent out to serve him.

You see, the peace of Christ isn't simply a matter of a calm, cozy feeling. For us it's a matter of being sent, unafraid, as Christ's witnesses into the world, trusting that the Spirit of Christ will lead and guide and be with us always.

God of peace, you send us as your disciples into a world filled with turmoil. Fill us with the peace of Christ so that we may be channels of that peace to others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## BELIEVING AND NOT SEEING

*“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* —John 20:29

After a traumatic encounter with a storm when she was six, my daughter developed an intense fear of wind. She was convinced that when the wind blew hard, one of the trees around our home would come smashing through our roof. Wisely, a trusted friend reassured her that what she couldn't see was an enormous root system that secured each tree in place. Eventually she was persuaded and believed.

Following the traumatic events of Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus' disciples were dizzied by shifting emotions. How could it be that Jesus went from being dead to alive, from lying motionless in a tomb to walking and talking? Thomas said he wouldn't believe until he saw Jesus with his own eyes and touched him with his own hands. Thomas thought that seeing was the only way to believing.

But Jesus gently addressed Thomas's assumption. After inviting Thomas to see and touch his wounds, Jesus said, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus declares that all who believe and haven't seen are truly blessed. That includes you and me! Believing is about trusting God's sovereign love revealed through Jesus by God's Word and Spirit. God plants the seed of faith in us and helps us believe, even when we cannot see. Blessed are we!

Lord, help us to see how blessed we are to believe. Grow our faith, that we may share it with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## A DISCIPLE'S PURPOSE

*These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah,  
the Son of God . . . .*

—John 20:31

The apostle John has recorded what he has witnessed and experienced of Jesus' mission here on earth. John has written down many—but not all—of Jesus' words, teachings, and miracles (or "signs"). But John isn't reporting these things as a hobby, as a news reporter, or even as a historian. John states that his purpose for writing is "that you may believe."

The book of John is one of the most translated books in history. Missionaries who translate the Bible into other languages often begin with the Gospel of John because it so clearly delivers the saving truth, in story form, to those who read it. But John's message is much more than a story to be read and then set aside. Rather, it is aimed directly at people's hearts and promises abundant and eternal life! In believing John's message

about Jesus, you are assured of God's love and forgiveness, and you are equipped to live as God's child.

It's almost as if John is looking down a corridor leading into the future, and what he sees at the end is your face. The message is for you. Jesus loves you. Jesus came to earth and died for you. Jesus arose from the dead for you.

Believe! And have life in his name!

Almighty God, thank you for John's message about the saving work of Jesus. Help me to believe that the message is for me and to embrace the abundant life Jesus offers. In his name, Amen.

## GONE FISHING

*Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."*

—John 21:10

Seven of Jesus' disciples have gone fishing. Perhaps after experiencing the shocking events of Jesus' horrible death and his startling resurrection, they needed to do something familiar. Or maybe it was simply for practical reasons—for income and basic survival they may have needed to return to work. Whatever the reason, Jesus' disciples went fishing, and when things were not going well, Jesus showed up with a miracle.

John makes clear that the main purpose for this miraculous resurrection appearance was to provide another opportunity for Jesus' disciples to witness his risen presence and divine power. But there are other messages in this story as well.

Did you notice that Jesus engaged the disciples on their own turf, as they were going about their everyday lives? Jesus blessed

their vocational efforts with his goodness and power. Then he also called them to offer their work, to bring the fruits of their labor (some fish) back to him.

It's the same for us. Jesus enables us to use our gifts, talents, treasures, and vocations to the glory of God. In addition, we are called to offer the fruits of our work, to share the blessings we have received so that others can benefit, also to God's glory.

What do you have? What have you been given? What gift, treasure, or talent can you offer in service to the Lord today?

Lord, help me to see you at work in my everyday living. Help me to use the gifts and talents you've given me and to offer them back to you. Amen.

## FEED MY SHEEP

*Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."*

—John 21:17

It's hard to miss the repetition in these verses. Three times Jesus asks essentially the same question. Three times Simon Peter answers in a similar way. Three times Jesus responds with nearly the same command.

"Simon . . . do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

In this triple exchange between Jesus and Peter, we hear a note of grace. We are reminded that when Jesus was arrested, Peter denied his Lord three times, just as Jesus said he would. Three times Peter disconnected himself from Jesus and claimed he did not know him. Now, after Jesus' resurrection, the Lord gives Peter another chance. Three times Jesus gives Peter an opportunity to express his love for him. And three times, Peter does. What a gift!

But Jesus gives even more than a second chance. He also gives a command.

Jesus gives Peter the responsibility to graciously tend the sheep of Jesus' flock. I've heard that a good way to summarize Jesus' three commands is this: *Take really good care of the people I place in your path.*

Of course, the command isn't only for Peter. It's for all of us! Jesus says to you today, "Take really good care of the people I place in your path."

Tender Shepherd, thank you for being the God of second chances. Help us to embrace the calling you give us to care for the people you place in our paths. We pray in your name. Amen.

## FOLLOWING JESUS

*Jesus answered . . . "You must follow me."*

—John 21:22

Do you know someone who likes to ask lots of questions? I do that sometimes. My husband can verify this. The problem comes when I get too caught up in the details of something and miss the main point.

I think that's what's happening here to Peter. Peter is asking a question that misses Jesus' point. Peter is wondering about what Jesus has in store for John. Jesus tells Peter he doesn't need to worry about that. It almost sounds like Jesus is scolding Peter. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that Jesus is urging Peter to "keep the main thing, the main thing." And the main thing is to follow Jesus.

Jesus has put his finger on a temptation we all struggle with. We look at others and wonder about God's dealings with them in comparison to God's dealings with us. Jesus is telling us that's

not what we must focus on. The main point is to follow him.

Following Jesus is not just a one-time decision. It's a daily one. Daily you and I must decide whom to follow. But the Spirit helps us in this. Reading God's Word and daily prayer also keep us focused on walking in the footsteps of Jesus and showing his love and care as we go. In our lives today, let's "keep the main thing, the main thing."

Loving God, you have given us Jesus, and you call us to follow him. Help us to be faithful followers and to show his love and grace today. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## MORE THAN WE CAN IMAGINE

*Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.* —John 21:25

It's called hyperbole. That's the literary device John uses here to express his thoughts about the astonishing signs and wonders of Jesus. John is using wonder and imagination to say that Jesus' life and teachings and all the amazing things he did were so great that the world could barely contain them all.

Hyperbole is a tool that helps us express the inexpressible, to say what words cannot fully say. John's words clue us in to the fact that no human agent can fully capture the divine. Who Jesus is and what he has done cannot be adequately transcribed by human hands and grasped by human minds. Jesus is more than what can be expressed in words. "Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise," says one of the church's hymns.

Sometimes we may think we have Jesus completely figured out. But that's impossible. Jesus is always more than what we can wrap our minds around.

Thankfully, Jesus wants to be known, and he reveals himself to us. He shows that he is God, that he is the way, the truth, and the life. In receiving his love and forgiveness, Jesus becomes our brother, friend, and Savior. In the words of another church song, "Jesus is all the world to me"!

O God, your love is greater than we can imagine. Thank you for your salvation, revealed and offered to us in Christ Jesus. May our hearts and lives overflow with thanks. Amen.

## GOD IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

—John 1:14

In *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible, Eugene Peterson articulates John 1:14 this way: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

It’s unthinkable, really. What reigning king, with access to all the riches and privileges of his position, would willingly move into slums? The apostle Paul says Jesus “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). God the Son, who with the Father and Spirit created our universe, set aside the splendor of his heavenly position and moved into our neighborhood.

One of the most important questions to answer as a believer pursuing faith is, What is my picture of God? For some, God is a distant figure with little to no interaction in our world. For others, God is like a giant Santa

Claus in the sky who blesses all who show good behavior. But that’s not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches that God got his hands and feet dirty with our soil. God came to be with us, close enough to touch, close enough for us to hold him in our arms. He became one of us. And the Son of God eventually stretched his arms out on a cross, for our forgiveness, peace, and joy. And by his Spirit, he’s still in our neighborhood. Thanks be to God!

Thank you, gracious Lord, for taking on our flesh and blood. You know us. Remind us that you are still in our neighborhood, and help us to live our lives for you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

## AMAZING LOVE

*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

—John 3:16

I don't know what's on your heart. I don't know what you believe. As you read John 3:16, which is probably the most well known verse of the Bible, I don't know what comes to your mind.

What I do know is that the world we live in is full of pain and strife. Just this morning on the news I saw images of chaos and violence—again. The world that God created good is not the way it's supposed to be. And that's because of human sin. I'm quite sure you see evidence of that in the world around you and in your own life too.

What I want you to know is that as I write this meditation, I am praying for you. It is my prayer that you will hear the good news of John 3:16 and know it is for you. God loves you deeply. It was for you that Christ Jesus came to earth. It

was for you that he went the way of the cross. For you Christ broke the bonds of death and arose on the third day. For you he reigns and will one day return. I pray that you will know this good news deep in your heart.

When we know the truth, we cannot keep quiet. This news is meant to be shared.

Friends, live gratefully and tell the good news!

Eternal God, you are the beginning and the end. You hold this world in love. You hold my life in your hands. Inspire me to share the good news and to live with joy and thanks. In Christ's name, Amen.

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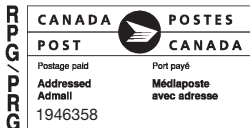
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