Lent: Reflection, repentance, and renewal
During Lent we embark upon a journey of discovery. We learn to turn away from narrow self interest and toward God’s promise of redemption through Jesus Christ.

Austin Seminary offers this devotional to incorporate into your observance of the Lenten season. Written by professors, graduates, and others in the Seminary community, these reflections, prayers, and spiritual practices will take you along the journey with Jesus through the cross toward resurrection.

In the words of one writer, the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday is when “we seek to tell more truths about ourselves and to discover truths revealed about God.” It is our prayer that through these words and deeds, the Spirit will deepen your faith and draw you nearer to Christ.
How I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry.” Uttered by a character named Fowler in Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American*, these words reflect remorse over the life he has lived; one marked by self-absorbed attitudes and behaviors and by uncaring treatment of others. He recognizes his errors. He admits his remorse and the need to express regrets. In theological terms, Fowler wants to confess his sins and to be absolved of his consuming guilt. These actions and desires demonstrate a basic human need for contrition and pardon.

Isaiah speaks of similar living on the part of Israel, whose people have acted according to self-interest more than God-interest. They have focused on their own desires and overlooked God’s desires for them. Disobedient, sinful, and self-righteous, they stand in need of contrition and pardon. Like Fowler, and perhaps like us, too, though the Israelites recognize their condition and need, they respond in ways that continue to miss the mark and perpetuate self-absorbed living. This brief passage tells the story (Isaiah 58:1–12). The people ask of God “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”—to which the prophet replies, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers” (v.3). The prophet continues, calling the Israelites out for their quarreling among themselves and their practice of rituals empty of what God truly desires. Then, what God truly desires is named: “Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” What God desires of them, the prophet declares, is to share food with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into their homes, to provide clothing to the naked, and to welcome others as their own kin. “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly” (vv.6–8). True contrition and repentance lead to serving and providing for those in need.

The season of Lent may sharpen both our awareness and practices of saying we are sorry. Lent prompts reflection on our lives and repentance for our sins. A focus on prayer, preparation, and renewal serves as a precursor to the holiest of times, when we open our hearts anew, refresh
our commitments to God, and confront our sinfulness before our Creator. But how we repent matters. Isaiah teaches us this. God asks for repentance to issue not in a singular focus on ourselves but on others, too. God asks for repentance that leads us toward attending to others and their needs, offering them hospitality, sustenance, and care. True repentance requires bearing witness to God’s love as we demonstrate our own love.

The Lenten season also calls us to recognize that a sorrow that leads to true repentance fosters our becoming who we really are. This productive sorrow may in fact buoy us amid our sinfulness as it empowers us to become the human beings God created us to be (free, whole, holy, and forgiven), not merely as individuals or for ourselves, but as the collective people of God who live in service to one another—who “bear one another’s burdens” and fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

Ash Wednesday reminds us that apart from the grace of God, we are, like Fowler, powerless in the face of human sin. Lent invites us to say we are sorry by renewing our baptism, deepening faith convictions, and living more intentionally into our status as Easter people. As we embark on these forty days, may we embrace the call of Jesus himself, who said: “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).

The Lord will guide us continually, and satisfy our needs in parched places. Amen.

– The Reverend Dr. Allan Hugh Cole Jr.
ACADEMIC DEAN AND PROFESSOR IN THE NANCY TAYLOR WILLIAMSON CHAIR OF PASTORAL CARE
Lent is a time to reflect on how we live, including how we do not meet God’s expectations. Psalm 32 asks us to think about sin.

Sin can refer to a specific deed that is against God’s intention for us. For instance, stealing a car goes against God’s command “Thou shalt not steal.” Sin also can mean a nagging feeling that we are not in a right relationship with a holy God, even though we do our best to follow the Ten Commandments and Jesus’s command to love one another. Sin can mean our separation from God.

Forty years ago, a book was published called *Whatever Became of Sin?* The book noted that speaking about sin can make people feel ashamed or guilty, so Christians talk about sin less than they used to. Does God want us to feel bad for breaking God’s law? As St. Augustine noted, while it is possible for Christians to avoid a given sin, experience shows that it is impossible to avoid sinning throughout life.

The ancient Hebrews believed that the purpose of the Torah, or God’s law, was to reveal to people God’s vision for living well. When we fall short of what God expects—when we commit sins—God is eager to forgive us, our psalm says. God is our “hiding place” (v.7). God’s love is unfailing (v.10). So, sin and forgiveness belong together.

**PRACTICES FOR THE WEEK AHEAD**

**For Younger Children**

1. Read the Ten Commandments in the Bible, Exodus 20:1–17. If you can’t read, have a grown-up read them to you.

2. Can you memorize the Ten Commandments? I think that you can. Practice with a grown-up this week.

3. Talk about the Ten Commandments with a grown-up: Which commandments are about how we treat other people? Which commandments are about God? Which commandments are hard to understand?

4. Read what Jesus says about love in the Bible, John 15:12. If you can’t read, have a grown-up read the verse to you and talk about how you can show love to your family and to other people that you know.
The author writes about experiencing forgiveness in the second part of the psalm. The author owns up to sin, or confesses it. The psalmist says matter-of-factly that God “forgave the guilt of my sin” (v.5). What happened here? How does the psalmist know that sin is forgiven? The text does not say.

What is clear, though, is that the psalmist is confident of God’s forgiveness. This confidence has two consequences. One is grateful rejoicing in God’s gift of forgiveness (v.11). The second is the author’s eagerness to teach others about God’s law (vv.8–10).

Laws sometimes seem senseless, unreasonably limiting what we can do. Our psalm teaches that God’s rules are for our own good. They teach “the way that you should go” (v.8) to live a good life. Yes, we live in a world of sin. But it is also a world where our holy God moves to forgive our sins.

O God, throughout these forty days of Lent, make us aware of how we fail to live up to your vision for our lives. And make us even more aware of your forgiveness, shown most clearly in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

– The Reverend Dr. Timothy Lincoln
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR SEMINARY EFFECTIVENESS AND DIRECTOR, STITT LIBRARY

For Older Children and Adults

Read Psalm 32 slowly once a day. As you go through the week, have in mind a different question each day as you read the psalm.

Monday: Do I commit sins?

Tuesday: Do I sin more by doing what is wrong (sins of commission) or by not doing what I ought to do (sins of omission)?

Wednesday: What is the texture of feeling separated from God like for me?

Thursday: What is the experience of forgiveness like for me?

Friday: Is it hard, or easy, to accept that God has accepted me?

Saturday: How should I live because God loves me and forgives my sins?
This passage, a favorite of Protestants throughout the ages, offers a memorable depiction of faith.

But what is faith? Some people understand faith as equivalent to belief. We have faith when we believe something to be true; we lack faith when we don’t believe. The test of our faith, in this view, is whether we agree with statements about the Christian religion. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe that he died for the sins of the world? Do you believe in the resurrection of the body? Answer “yes,” and we have faith; answer “no” and we lack it.

But this passage—and the Old Testament stories about Abraham that it refers to—says something more about faith. Faith involves more than words we say with our lips or beliefs we form in our minds. Faith, instead, is a posture of trust. An example will illustrate the contrast I am making: I can believe that my teenage daughter is a good driver by telling her so. But I have faith that she is a good driver when I give her the keys and have her drive the family to visit her grandparents. On the way, I might even fall asleep in the passenger seat. See the difference? In the first instance, I am simply saying words; in the second, I am acting in accordance with that statement, trusting that my daughter will carry us to our destination safely.

Abraham trusts the remarkable promises that God makes to him: that God will give him a new home far from his ancestral land (Gen. 12); that as an elderly couple, he and his wife, Sarah, will have a son (Gen. 17); that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 22). Abraham trusts in God’s word and acts upon that trust. He goes to a new land; he prepares for the birth of a child; he lives into God’s promises.

Christian faith also makes astonishing claims: that God loves the world without exception; that God sends God’s beloved Son to save it; that God raises this Son from the dead. These promises are made in a world where much seems untrustworthy—from political leaders that fail to keep their word to TV commercials that we assume to be false. Amid these empty slogans is the promise of
God’s Son given for the world, a promise renewed every year at Lent. To “have” faith is more than believing a few statements about Jesus Christ; it is to trust in the living God who sent him and to act out of that trust.

Holy and Loving God, teach us to live not out of fear, but out of trust. You have given your Son to the world. And that is the source of trust that will cast out any fear. Amen.

– Dr. David Hadley Jensen

PROFESSOR IN THE CLARENCE N. AND BETTY B. FRIERSON DISTINGUISHED CHAIR OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

PRAC TIC ES F O R T H E W EEK A HE A D

1. Make a list of times when you were fearful. In a separate column, list some experiences of trust. Do you see any patterns in these lists? What are the things that cause fear in your life? What are the things that generate trust? Reflect on these two lists. Can you see any ways that you can face your fears in the coming weeks and months ahead with some of the trust and reassurance you have experienced?

2. Read Psalm 16 aloud. Reflect on the images and experiences of trust in God that this psalm portrays. What do you notice? What is familiar or unfamiliar to you in this psalm?

3. Imagine a world where there was more trust and hope than fear. What would that world look like? Draw a picture, write a poem, compose a few lines of prose, or say out loud some words that depict a world of greater trust.
We are halfway through the Lenten journey when we cross paths with Jesus and the woman at the well today. A story so familiar and yet unfamiliar each time we encounter it. We struggle with this passage or at least I do. We usually read the passage by beginning with painting an unworthy picture of the woman at the well. We make moral judgments of her that follow her to the end of the passage. I invite you to leave the moral judgment of her behind; Jesus and John, the gospel writer, make no moral judgments of her and invite us into something deeper. What you may notice when reading without judgment is that it seems so remarkably easy for the Samaritan woman and Jesus to set off on this truth-telling pursuit with each other. “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan. You are a male asking a female for water. You have no visible jar yet you claim to have an everlasting spring.” The Samaritan woman could have easily thrown in a lie without blinking an eye, especially when it comes down to the pressing demand of “Go and get your husband.” Rather she chooses to tell the truth about herself. I have no husband. In turn Jesus, publicly for the first time, reveals a truth about himself in a way he had not before. He simply says “I am the Messiah.” Truth-telling. I am your God and you are my people.

During Lent, we seek to tell more truths about ourselves and to discover truths revealed about the God we encounter at the well of our lives. We seek to take a hard look at what separates us from being who we are fully created to be. We seek to know our place in God’s story. We seek to know the truth of our lives. I believe the reason we tell the woman at the well story so often is because we want the freedom she possesses to tell the truth about who we are and who our God is. To say that our worth is dependent upon the truth revealed by Jesus at the well: “I am the Messiah. I am your God and you are my people.”

Our truth today lies in God who will journey through Samaria to do a little truth-telling about who each of us is and who our God is. Can we, during this Lent, tell the God-given truths about our God and about ourselves? Maybe it begins like this … I am a child of God, beloved, holy, etc.
Gracious God, you came to reveal yourself to us. May we tell the truth about who we are and who you are. For you are our God and we are your people. Amen.

- The Reverend Lisa Juica (MDiv’11)

ASSOCIATE FOR ADMISSIONS

Telling our God-given truths takes practice. The following practices will help you to say with more boldness the truth revealed to us in the crucified and risen Christ: God is our God and we are God’s people.

As you reflect on God’s truth and your own truths, may you also be aware this week that the Annunciation takes place on March 25th. The Annunciation is when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to announce that she will conceive and carry Jesus, the Son of God. How fitting that another truth of God is revealed to us this week.

The practice of Praying in Color can be a family practice and/or an individual practice. Use paper, markers, crayons, colored pencils, or any other artistic tools you have available. In a comfortable environment spend time with God, read John 5:4–52, and express the truth of who you are.

**Monday:** Start with the word “Holy.” Draw and color as you feel led to. You can use different colors, shapes, and designs to pray your thoughts around the word “Holy” as it comes to you. Express yourself freely and remember there is no judgment. It is truth between you and God.

**Wednesday:** Start with the word “Beloved.”

**Friday:** Start with the words “Child of God.”

**Closure of practices on Saturday:** How did praying in color practices help reveal truths you might or might not have been aware of? What sense of freedom did you experience in meeting God in this way?
People who know me and spend any time in my home know that I have a proverbial “green thumb.” I have several beautiful plants in my space. I love greenery and the gift of life that having them in a space gives. One of my friends once said that the plants that live in my house sing. And she is right. I think they sing, mostly, because I talk to them and encourage them to grow and blossom. They turn their leaves toward the sun and soak up the nutrients I provide through plant food. And when visitors come, my plants welcome them with outstretched foliage.

It is a rare thing for a plant to die in my care. I have taken plants that look as if they were already dead and washed off their roots, sometimes dried them off, re-potted them, fed them, sang to them, and before you know it: they’re back! I love that challenge. And besides, I hate to see plants die. For some time now, my own ability to nurture and cultivate houseplants has been tied to my sense of my ability to thrive. As I wrote in a poem once, “I can nurture life, if not in myself, at least in a plant, and that gives me hope.” The ability to nurture a plant or a soul and to see results is no small feat.

But in 2012, I did the unthinkable. I allowed not one but three potted plants to die. I made attempts to keep them alive, but unlike in the past, I made no heroic efforts to save them. When it became clear that my earnest efforts were failing, I rested assured in the fact that I had really tried. But I started saying to them (yes, to the plants): “I want you to live. I really do. I have watered and fed you. I’ve moved you to the sunshine (or away from it if that’s what was called for). I’ve sang to you and talked with you. But I can’t do anything else. I hope you will live. I want it. But I do know that things and people die.” And then these three plants died over the course of a couple of months.
In this Lenten season, I take this lesson of dying plants to heart. Things die. People die. Relationships morph and change and, yes, die. It is always sad to me. I can feel the grief welling up long before the final breath. I do not discard plants with a cavalier notion. Neither do I cavalierly let go of places, people, or things. But things do die. Even with our best efforts thrown into their life. And we have to let go.

I’m learning the lesson of letting go without God or anyone else having to pry my fingers away from its death grip on the dying or dead things in my life. The road to the cross, the Lenten journey, is a road to letting go in preparation for death. It’s the acknowledgement that we must. It’s not easy. But I’m trying to learn.

— The Reverend Valerie Bridgeman, PhD (MDiv’90)
PRESIDENT & CEO OF WOMANPREACH! INC.
IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT OF
AUSTIN SEMINARY ASSOCIATION

PRACTICES FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

Spend a few minutes in silence each day listening for how your life speaks to you. Notice what is flourishing. Recognize and celebrate what people, institutions, plants, animals, or gifts are alive to themselves, serving others and God. Second, notice what is dying. Recognize what of these is in the throes of dying. Allow yourself to grieve their loss, but also remember that all things will be given new life in the risen Christ. Allow yourself to hope for the coming redemption of all things great and small. Give thanks in all things.
The human will is a coiled spring that compels us toward greater life. Strength of will is a peculiarly North American virtue. By sheer force of will, European immigrants tamed this wild land and its native inhabitants, forging a new society. In the twentieth century, we mustered our collective will to fight two world wars against fascism. In the 1960s President Kennedy cast a vision for space travel which was accomplished by the willpower of the American people. American entrepreneurial spirit—the will to create new and better products—drives the world’s economy, popular culture, and global politics. The notion of willpower is embedded in our theories of human development and parenting. Woe to the parent who allows a child to nurse too long or delays potty training or to young adults who lack the willpower to find a purpose beyond their parents’ basement. Every American parent conveys to their son or daughter that only a weak will stands between them and the presidency. It is self-evident to Americans that little good can come of passivity in the face of the status quo. Only action born of will is capable of taming the wild forces of the world.

Of course, such dogged commitment accomplishes much good in the world—many evils are fought and foes vanquished—but the testimony of the Bible is that true salvation can only be received as a gift. Yielding to a Mystery is counter-intuitive to a nation born of such willpower. The season of Lent provides us space to wonder, Is it possible that willpower is finally a strategy for avoiding our own conversion?

PRACTICES FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

These practices teach us to attend to pulses of grace; and to impulses of willfulness.

1. Distraction diary. Daydreams feature our programs for happiness—those things we imagine will make us happy. As you catch yourself daydreaming, make notes about the content of your daydreams. We are made for single-minded preoccupation with God and neighbor, and this practice helps us notice those things that inhibit our love of God and neighbor.

2. Ignatian Examen. At the end of each day, St. Ignatius instructed monks and spiritual seekers to recall: Where is God manifest in beauty, love, other gifts of grace? Where is God yearning to be more manifest in your life each day?
Reflections on the 23rd Psalm often emphasize the satisfactions of dwelling in the Lord’s house—such as green pastures, quiet waters, refreshment, comfort, goodness, and love. These are the self-evident goods we seek—and for which we grasp by means of innumerable self-improvement strategies. Yet, in our grasping we often miss the ascetic character of life with God—the friction that makes demands on us, binds us in certain ways, and calls for us to surrender our wills in order that something higher will be loosed within us. The 23rd Psalm bids us to relinquish control of our wills, to allow the Lord to “make us” lie down, to lead and guide us. In the Lord’s house we do not earn our keep by force of will, but despite ourselves we are anointed with oil, given food and care. We do not overcome the shadow of the valley of death by force of will, but by remaining close to the Lord.

The season of Lent does not burst forth with rejoicing angels; nor does its triumphant glory stun attendant women and disciples. Lent relies on a more difficult rhythm of dying to self, reflecting on how we, by force of will, obscure the gift of God’s life in our midst.

We come longing for the Lord’s house, trusting in God’s mercy and not in our own will. We come yielding ourselves, to be made to lie down, to be guided in the ways of God’s truth, to experience the joy of God’s salvation. We come, in the midst of our Lenten journey, aware of God’s steadfast love navigating the valley of the shadow of death. Lead us, O God, teach us to follow the humble way of Christ, your beloved Son, our crucified and risen Lord.

– The Reverend Dr. David White
THE C. ELLIS AND NANCY GRIBBLE NELSON PROFESSOR OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

3 Centering prayer. Centering prayer is a method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God’s presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within. When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.
Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah 9:9–10
Palm and Passion Sunday is the start of Holy Week, the beginning of a week that leads to the cross and, through it, to Easter joy. Some years ago it was possible to liturgically skip from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, to celebrate Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem singing the “Glad Hosannas the Little Children Sang.” Then, the very next Sunday, we’d return in the joy of the resurrection singing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.” Of course that meant we might bypass going to the cross, experiencing the suffering, the betrayal, the terror, the horror. So now we try to balance both moods in one festival day. The challenge to us from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi helps with that aim.

The passage has two essential movements: emptied and exalted. Paul encourages us to be of the same mind as the sacrificially emptied, now exalted, Savior. We are invited to live a dynamic process that tilts the creation toward knowledge of how the creator operates. Paul suggests that we Christians make the model of Jesus emptied and exalted instructive for our daily living.

To be absolutely emptied and absolutely filled is to be reminded of the in between. Our ordinary lives are lived somewhere between starving and stuffed. That is often where we hang out: between exhausted and energized. We hope that this Lenten season has helped us practice our faith beyond our norms. In Jewish tradition, the household preparation for Passover, the feast of unleavened bread, involves a search for old leavened products, (chametz) all must be swept away; not even a crumb must remain. My friend, a nutritionist in a Jewish nursing home, told of how the scouring and emptying of cupboards and bins was a spiritual discipline for her: to be emptied of the old year’s

As you know, during Lent we often give up something in a sacrificial manner. When we think of that habit, we are reminded to pray on Christ’s sacrifice for us. Why not also trade in the time/energy/money that you give up for Lent in order to benefit someone else? For instance, if you give up your daily coffee/tea/soda routine, you could add up the dollars you would have spent on that routine in a week
leaven enhanced her understanding of being filled with new joy in the Lord.

One of the pivotal words in this text is the Greek harpagmos. Snatch or seize. Jesus Christ did not consider his “equality with God” something to cling to and seize hold of. Christ emptied himself and surrendered to suffering even death on the shameful cross, the death row of that long-ago empire.

What have we seized upon that we refuse to let go, becoming empty? How can we practice emptiness? How can we incorporate fresh expressions of the experience of having the same mind as Christ? One balancing practice suggested in rabbinical tradition may be instructive:

One way, says Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Psischke (1765–1827), is to always carry two notes in your pockets. The one in the right pocket reads: “The world was created for my sake.” The one in the left pocket reads: “I am but dust and ashes.”

What will we keep in our two pockets this Palm and Passion Sunday as we seek to have the same mind as Jesus Christ our Lord? For me one pocket note will be: “Was I there when they crucified my Lord?” and the other “He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today!”

Gracious God, in your mercy make Christ’s journey into Jerusalem and to the cross real for us today. Empty us of anything that separates us from your love and fill us with wonder in your divine salvation through our exalted Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord.

– The Reverend Dr. Rose Niles
DEVELOPMENT OFFICER, HOUSTON

and give an anonymous gift to someone in need. If you were to give up watching television or logging onto facebook, perhaps you would use your extra time to volunteer at a local non-profit or your church. This week, find a thoughtful way to give to others in the moments when you would usually do what you’ve given up for Lent. Make love a little more visible in the world.
In his book *Telling the Truth* author and preacher Frederick Buechner makes a statement that is remarkable in its simplicity and power, particularly for Holy Week. He writes, “The gospel is bad news before it is good news.” The gospel is the news of our sin and brokenness before the reality of Christ’s saving grace and atonement. It is doubt before faith. It is the treachery, betrayal, torture, and death of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday before the resurrection and new hope of Easter Sunday. The gospel is bad news before it is good news.

Sometimes it is bad news and good news set beside one another. In John 12:1–11, we encounter Jesus in Bethany six days before Passover at the house of Lazarus. In this one brief passage, so many of the themes and emotions of the rest of the week, bad and good, are foreshadowed. Mary’s anointing of Jesus with the costly nard foreshadows Christ’s death and also his resurrected glory. Judas’s greedy objection to the use of the costly nard gestures toward his eventual betrayal. The raised-from-the-dead Lazarus anticipates Christ’s own resurrection. The chief priest’s plan to kill Lazarus portends the plot with the Roman officials to crucify Christ—death, sin, betrayal, and murder set next to love, glory, new life, and resurrection.

Our observance of Holy Week often takes the form of a wave of emotion oscillating from joy, to deep sadness, back to joy again. The reality of Passion Week is much more nuanced, much more passionate. It is bad news, good news, and everything in between. On this Monday of Holy Week in John 12:1–11, we begin to get a sense of how emotional and challenging this week will be.
God of the broken and redeemed, give us strength for the journey of this week. For all of its highs and lows, betrayal and faith, good and bad, hopelessness and hopefulness, grant us your Spirit. Travel with us, as we travel with your Son from Bethany to the cross to Easter. Amen.

– The Reverend Timothy Blodgett (MDiv’07)
PASTOR, CONNECTING POINT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, OKLAHOMA CITY
Empty. This is not how I like to find milk cartons or gas tanks. Especially on a hectic Tuesday morning when there are just a few moments to grab breakfast before running out the door to school and work, when there is definitely not time to stop at the gas station if I am going to make that meeting on time. We’ve all had mornings like this, haven’t we? Mornings when we reach for what we need only to find it empty. These moments challenge us because they illuminate the emptiness of our spirits; we discover that we have become empty of energy, optimism, patience, and joy.

Empty. This is how we often find ourselves. Fatigued by the pace of over-full schedules, competing demands, and too little time, we become like the empty milk carton placed back on the refrigerator shelf: good looking on the outside with nothing left to give on the inside. And then we hear these words from the prophet Isaiah: “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity” (Isaiah 49:4). Yes. That is how it feels to work so hard only to feel empty inside.

Empty. That is what we are called to be during this season of Lent. But this is a different kind of emptiness. This is not an emptiness reflecting scarcity, but an emptiness proclaiming hope. Many people choose to give something up for Lent, to engage in the spiritual discipline of fasting. Some choose to adopt a spiritual practice like daily prayer or acts of generosity. Perhaps these are different ways of accomplishing the same goal: creating space in our lives for the light of Christ. Perhaps, the only way we can make room for the light of Christ is to empty something of ourselves: empty time in our schedules, empty space in our lives, and make room for Christ to dwell in our hearts. Unless we are first emptied, as uncomfortable as that may be, we cannot be refilled with something beautiful and life-giving.

“I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth,” says the Lord (v.6). Christ is our light and our salvation. When we allow our hearts to be empty of vain pursuits, we leave room for Christ to shine through in our lives, so that we may help proclaim salvation, hope, and joy to the ends of the earth and to those in our own homes and neighborhoods.
Lord, help us empty our lives of the things that don’t matter so that we have room for your light. Help us give your light away to the people we encounter each day, in the name of Jesus, who emptied himself for us. Amen.

– The Reverend Leanne Thompson (MDiv’06) 
CO-PASTOR, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, WILLMAR, MINNESOTA, AND PRESIDENT, AUSTIN SEMINARY ASSOCIATION
Some traditions call Wednesday of Holy Week “Spy Wednesday.” For the kids or kids-at-heart reading this, Spy Wednesday may sound like all the right kinds of adventurous. For instance, if I were a spy, I would like an invisibility cloak of the Harry Potter variety. Perhaps some would be Jennifer Garner’s character from Alias. Sounds fantastic.

However, Spy Wednesday is not on the fun or glamorous side of danger. Sadly, Spy Wednesday involves betrayal. Betrayal involves not being fully honest about ourselves with others. If we make part of who we are invisible, we do not make it safe for others to be fully visible. We erode trust. It is not as fun as it may seem.

We are all at risk of playing Judas. This day is named after him but perhaps, in part, after us, too.

At times we may all be tempted to betray others by not making our whole selves known to one another.

We come to love the idea of outsmarting and overpowering. We pursue the upper hand by quiet moves and foolish disguises.

But we know no matter what, nobody outsmarts God; nobody outdoes Love. God is so utterly visible in Christ. How is it that total power comes in such a vulnerable package? Even as Love proceeds steadily to the cross, preparing ripe ashes for resurrection, Love does so in a painfully visible way. The cross waiting for him compels him to be in ever more visible and vulnerable postures as Light prepares to break the darkness: breaking bread, washing feet, praying in the garden, crying out from a cross.

The darkness protects no one. Yet being fully visible can mean being fully alive.

I wonder if Jesus prayed Psalm 70 as Holy Week drew him closer to the cross. Did he pray for confusion for those that wished other humans harm, for a visible sign that their ways should change? Maybe he prayed that even in the darkness, humankind would be compelled by a sense of joy as Light began its endeavor to break through the night.
We know he called to the Father, to hasten and be present with him and ever visible to others through him. As we reflect on Christ our Light praying through the enveloping darkness, may we share this prayer with him.

Loving God, may Your presence be so visible that it stifles us when we pursue faulty disguises. May the promise of Your Light make joy gush up from the dry ground in our lives. May your distinguishing Light hasten to be with us and in us always, and so extinguish our desire to be silly spies lurking in darkness. Amen.

– The Reverend Carrie Graham
PROJECT COORDINATOR, MINISTERS FACING MONEY
I grew up as a Roman Catholic in Bogota, Colombia. I lived in two worlds. During the week I attended the Presbyterian high school. At home and on Sundays we were “cultural Catholics” who attended weekly Mass and received communion only if we had gone to confession beforehand. The Mass itself was more an aggregate of individuals each praying privately than a community of worshipers. The years passed and I immigrated to the United States where I “rediscovered” the Presbyterian Church and became part of a loving and worshiping community in Las Vegas, Nevada. The Eucharist took on a completely different meaning. We gathered around the Table to hear the Word of the Lord and to share the Sacrament. We were not a collection of individuals, but a community connected to one another and to sister churches throughout the denomination. “Connectional Church” took on flesh and blood meaning for me.

Paul understood the centrality of the Eucharist for Christians. At the Table of the Lord we remember the Word made flesh in both Scripture and Sacrament. Then as we share the bread, we are connected to one another in our journey as “Companions” or in Spanish “Compañeros,” that is, “those who eat bread together.”
Lord, as we accompany you on your Lenten journey, we thank you for the compañeros you have given us. Keep us connected to you and to one another as we follow in your footsteps of service. Amen.

– The Reverend Consuelo Donahue (MDiv’96)
CHAPLAIN, GOODWILL INDUSTRIES, SAN ANTONIO, AND AUSTIN SEMINARY TRUSTEE
It is finished. His last words, as John tells it. They thought that this was exactly what they wanted ... for him to stop talking, to stop preaching, to stop teaching.

He says his last word and he will not speak to us anymore.

What do you suppose he said that made so many want to put a stop to it?

He was always turning things upside down:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me
To preach good news to the poor,
Release to the captives,
Recovery of sight to the blind,
And liberty to those who are oppressed.

He was a teacher who could see life beyond our capacity to imagine. He spoke from a place so holy it was always hard to trust:

Go the second mile,
Turn the other cheek
Repay no one evil for evil.
Love your neighbor ... your enemy.

But now, it is finished. No one would have to listen to him anymore. That’s what crucifixion means: there will be no more words from Jesus.

He had come into the world accompanied by angel song. He had moved by the sea and in the synagogue and he taught of seeds and weeds and surprisingly good Samaritans. Through it all he painted pictures of life in the Kingdom of God. Maybe they needed to shut him up because God’s kingdom is just that—God’s kingdom and not ours.

Or maybe, it was the things he said to the broken ones. The lepers were pushed out of town; the lame and blind waited by the pools and in the gates; the widows and orphans were ignored and simply waited in silence. These were always beyond the reach of words; no one spoke to them. But Jesus spoke to them. He spoke words of welcome. More than welcome, he spoke words of transformation:
Go your way, your faith has made you whole
Rise, take up your pallet and walk
Come out of him unclean spirits.

When you speak words of transformation to the broken of any culture it’s not just the broken that are transformed; everyone is transformed.

Maybe that’s why they needed to stop his words.

Or maybe it was his complete disregard for boundaries.
He prayed with sinners.
He welcomed the children.
He spoke to the women.
He loved his neighbor and his enemy.

But not anymore. This Friday his last word is, It is finished.

Do you suppose in the silence they realized that he was not the only one who died that afternoon. For if there are no more words from Jesus, how can we live?

God of grace and patience, keep not your Spirit from us. And take not your word from us. For if there ever comes a time where there is a last word from Jesus, we are lost. Look on us in mercy, we pray. Amen.

– The Reverend Tom Are Jr.
PASTOR, VILLAGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
(PRAIRIE VILLAGE, KANSAS) AND CHAIR, AUSTIN SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.”

Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.

(Matthew 27: 62–66)

As a child my Easter memories include a new dress each year, leaving the house early to “get a seat” at our church, and the beginning somber tone of the opening hymn.

“Lo, in the grave he lay, Jesus my Savior. Waiting the coming day, Jesus, my Lord. Vainly they watch his bed ... Vainly they seal the dead...”

The first two verses of this hymn represent the totality of my childhood understanding of Holy Saturday. Our church was non-liturgical, a term I didn’t know, along with Lent and Holy Week. It was surely for the joyous chorus this hymn was chosen each year.

“Up from the grave He arose... Hallelujah, Christ arose.”

As an adult, and in large part because of my seminary professor Alan Lewis, I came to appreciate the day which stands “at the interface of cross and resurrection.” Dr. Lewis invited students to explore Holy Saturday from the perspective of the disciples, whose Lord was dead and whose body was sealed in a tomb. They experienced this day without hope and without knowledge of the astounding resurrection power of God.

In a way similar to the guards’ sealing of Christ’s tomb, our lives can become closed off to the resurrection power of God. But through the spiritual discipline of self-reflection, the “stone” that blocks our pathway, can also be “rolled away.”

April 19

HOLY SATURDAY
In remembrance of this day between cross and resurrection, set aside time for honest self-reflection.

What promises of God have you failed to believe? What blessings have you refused to receive? Are there kindnesses you have withheld from others; gifts not extended that could have been freely given; those who have asked for forgiveness and have been refused?

Dr. Lewis reminded us that, “just like Christ, the church and those who live and die within it exist not for ourselves, but for the world.” Through the discipline of self-reflection, we understand how we have failed others in the world. Through it also, we acquire the knowledge to make amends.

Gracious God, in all places we have sealed our hearts from resurrection power, open them, we pray. Make us mindful that your promises are trustworthy and your blessings are freely given. Grant us the grace to serve as Christ served, to forgive as Christ forgave, and to love as Christ loved. Amen.

– The Reverend Dr. Karen Greif (MDiv’92, DMin’06) Co-Founder, Cancer Connection, Austin, and Member, Austin Seminary Association Board
One of my favorite pieces of art is a bronze sculpture in my office—a gift of a well-known sculptor in Dallas—which is the embodiment of this text. Two women are speechless as they behold an empty slab upon which a body, that of Jesus, had been laid out. One of them stands looking at the scene with her hand over her mouth, as if she doesn’t know what to say, or is afraid of what she may say. The other women is kneeling, as if she needs to be nearer the slab in order to take in its grim reality, and she’s looking up at her companion as she gestures helplessly and forms an unthinkable question. There are swaths of cloth scattered across the slab, and they form a pile—like a pile of dirty clothes in a laundry room—on the floor.

I love this piece because it captures, if you think about it, the obvious first reaction that the earliest disciples had to the news of resurrection. And at this very point, we stand far removed from their point of view. Two thousand-plus years later, as we prepare for Easter worship in our congregations, having a number of other such services under our belts, we are expecting, after the somberness of Lent, a full-throated and joyous proclamation of the Easter news that “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” We will go to church in our brightest, most colorful Easter best, expecting brass and tympani and anthems and preaching that unwrap this day with confidence and high-noon certainty. The choreography of Lent and Holy Week have taken us deliberately from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and we are well-rehearsed with respect to what to expect in today’s worship.

Which means that we do not readily connect with the astonishment and fear of these women there at that empty slab of stone. The news of this text from Luke, and of this day on our liturgical calendar, is first an unbelievable shock, and all the more so when it emerges from a cemetery—the last place we expect to encounter the evidence of resurrection. Only with time (for it takes time for such news to seep into our hearts) does it become the core of the Church’s message for the world. This is why Fred Craddock, a beloved biblical scholar and professor of preaching, said long ago that some truths are meant to be proclaimed with a shout; and others are meant to be proclaimed with a whisper.
“While they were perplexed about this,” writes Luke, an angel came upon that scene and triggered the faithful act of memory. “Remember how he told you,” said the angel, “while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Christians in every age are forever needing to remember this news, in order to tell it well and faithfully. That’s exactly what these women did next: “they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.”

When we gather today to worship the Risen Lord, look around the room you will be in. You will be surrounded by people standing at many points between that journey from fear to full-throated faith. Just remember that that very Lord, the Christ, prepares to welcome them wherever they are, and to walk with them on that long road from the whisper to the shout.

As you cause the Easter sun to rise, O God, bring the light of Christ to dawn in our souls and dispel all darkness. Give us grace to reflect Christ’s glory. And let his love show in our deeds, his peace shine in our words, and his healing felt in our touch, that all may give him praise on this day and on every day to come. Amen.

– Theodore J. Wardlaw

PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS
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