LENT

Enduring

Adoring

Listening

Remaining faithful

Serving

Waiting

Hoping

Rejoicing
“Journey” provides the metaphor for the readings in this Season of Lent. There is a physical one, of course, that we follow as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem. There is also the many-faceted spiritual journey of Christian discipleship: the journey from our false selves to our true self, the journey from our solitary self to living with others, and the journey of our soul to God.

The Psalms during Lent are taken from the “Songs of Ascent” in the Psalter (Psalms 120–134), as is the Psalm for Easter. These psalms were sung by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem and then up the hill to the Temple. They reflect many aspects of the history of Israel, as well as hope in what has been promised.

The Psalms for Monday through Thursday of Holy Week are taken from the “Laudate Psalms,” (Psalms 145-150), which are Psalms of praise. The Gospel readings are episodes from the life of Jesus. His words and deeds become models for us as we pursue our spiritual journeys.

Members of our community who have prepared the reflections for this booklet reflect upon these themes and narratives in the light of their own experiences and understandings—sharing their journeys as fellow pilgrims toward a common destination.

—David W. Johnson  
Associate Professor of Church History and Christian Spirituality
INTRODUCTION TO THE WEEKLY PRACTICES

We invite you to engage in a series of spiritual practices during this Lenten season. These practices are intended to help you make this time an opportunity for repentance, renewal, and growth. If you feel led to engage in them, feel free to adapt them to your own personal circumstances. In all of this, it might be helpful to have a conversation partner—someone in your life who can act as a spiritual friend who is able to help you understand and assess what is happening in your life.

The following weekly pattern, adapted in part from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, is intended to help you interpret the readings and apply them to your own life. You will need a Bible, a notebook, and a quiet place.

The pattern of the week:
SUNDAY: The spiritual discipline for Sundays is being together with others who are important to you. Spend some time with your faith community. The most obvious way to do this is go to church. If you currently do not have a church, this might be an ideal time to do some exploring—you need a community that will both comfort and challenge you. If you are a member of a congregation, dedicate yourself to attending each Sunday during Lent and all the services in Holy Week. Sunday also might be a good day for activities with family or friends.

MONDAY: Read for comprehension. Read through the psalm, the Gospel story, and the reflection. Write down any insights that occur to you, or any questions you might have. If you want to learn more, a study Bible, a commentary, or a search on the Internet might be helpful. However, do not feel obliged to do anything more than sit with the story.

TUESDAY: Reflect on the theme or quality for the week. Think about how this quality is present in your life—or how it might become present. Meditate on how the Gospel story exhibits or illuminates that quality. Write down any insights that occur to you. You might keep your notebook with you during the day so you can write things down as they occur to you.

WEDNESDAY: Wednesday is a day of assessment. Be honest with yourself. What can you do to make the quality grow in your life? What do you need to change or eliminate? There will be individual suggestions each week to help you do this. Your goal is to end the day with one or more resolutions that you can put into practice.

THURSDAY AND FRIDAY: The task for Thursday and Friday is to make it real. Do what you can to put your Wednesday resolutions into practice. At the end of the day, or sometime during the day, use your notebook to record what seems to be working and what is not working. If it is necessary to revise your Wednesday resolutions, do not hesitate to do so.

SATURDAY: Review the week. Reread the Monday material and ask yourself, “Has anything changed in how I understand this story?” If you have received new insights, write them down. If you have more questions, write them down. Think and/or write about your experience with your Wednesday resolutions. Finally, think about anything—ideas, questions, resolutions—you want to carry over to the next week.
The call of Matthew happens suddenly. Jesus speaks two words to a tax collector who follows without question or conversation. This jarring story captures a dramatic change in Matthew’s life, appropriate for a story that, at least in part, is about conversion. I imagine that Matthew could recall the details of that day, even years afterward: what his life looked like from one side of the tax booth before he met Jesus and what he saw from the other side after Jesus called him.

Some of us can point to a similar story, perhaps even naming a day and an hour when our lives were forever changed. Others of us, like me, don’t have a story like Matthew’s. I remember a time in high school when I was disappointed that I couldn’t point back to a time when the definitive change in my life happened. It was during a Presbytery-wide youth rally at my home church, complete with a Christian rock band. One of the speakers at the rally asked us to testify to a moment of conversion in our own lives. I couldn’t, and I felt inadequate. I didn’t speak up because it didn’t seem like I had anything to say. Or did I actually have something to say?

There is no one template for Christian discipleship. Our stories are as varied as our number. But among our stories is a common thread: Jesus’ call to follow is meant for our whole lives. Not to follow him one day of the week, not to follow him only in spiritual life, not to follow him to one

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words, spoken during the Ash Wednesday service as the ashes are imposed on our foreheads, remind us that our earthly life will be ended by our death. But within our lives, there are smaller deaths that are necessary for our well-being. This spiritual exercise will help to identify those things.

1. Begin your notebook by writing across the top of the first page, “My Lenten Prayer.” Leave the rest of the page blank for now.

2. Turn to the next page. Divide it into two columns. On the top of one of the columns, write “Live.” On the top of the other, write “Die.”

3. Over the next few days, start making lists. In the “Live” column, write those items or qualities in your life that you want to encourage and nourish—healthy...
place only. But to follow him. Lent offers one time in the Christian calendar when we can focus our discipline to follow Jesus’ call: not in order to deprive ourselves, but in order that we might live more abundantly.

Whether we can point to a definitive moment in our lives when we became aware of Christ’s call, or whether we awakened to it more gradually over time is not the point. The point is for our stories to be shaped by the story of the One who invites us every day anew, to taste life in its abundance each moment of the day, to hear the Good News that he proclaims as if for the first time. As if we had just heard it and had to leave the tax booth behind.

Gracious God, your Son calls each of us by name, but we often do not hear because of the noises that surround us. Yet your Son calls us still. Help us to hear our name, and to follow as if we were meeting your Son for the first time. Amen.

– Dr. David H. Jensen

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

practices, good qualities, habits of love and generosity. In the “Die” column, list things you need to eliminate from your life—destructive behaviors, bigoted attitudes, overwhelming temptations, actual addictions. Do not censor yourself or impose any rankings.

4. On Saturday, review your list. Choose ONE item from the “Live” list that you would like to devote special attention to during this season.

5. Now look at your “Die” list. Identify those items that impede or inhibit the item from the “Live” list that you chose above. If you have more than three, choose the three items that most seriously oppose your “Live” item.

6. Turn back to your first page and write a prayer asking God to help you nourish the item you chose from your “Live” list and eliminate the item or items from your “Die” list. This will be your Lenten Prayer.
My husband and I love to travel. We have some favorite locations to which we return, but can always find interesting and unknown places that lure us into packing our bags, juggling the challenges of modern-day travel, and heading down an untraveled road in search of new experiences.

Lent is an invitation to a journey of a particular kind. A journey of discovery, a pilgrimage, a time set aside to “go into the House of the Lord.” And while this journey is metaphorical, it shares certain things in common with the physical journeys we take.

One of those things is the preparation for the journey. What will we take with us to this new, unknown destination? What will go into our bags? Seasoned travelers know it is best to travel light. That means we have to choose carefully what we should take and leave out much of what we think we need. That is not an easy task. However, our task is simplified when we can bring ourselves to include the spiritual discipline of humility. Through humility, we can focus on those things that are important rather than those that simply make us look good.

Today’s reading puts this discipline into perspective. Simon, apparently a man of some importance, has invited Jesus to his home for dinner, and Jesus has accepted. But the evening holds some surprises. Luke tells us that we need to pay close attention to what happens next. “Behold!” he writes (v.37, RSV).

Simon’s carefully orchestrated dinner party is interrupted by the unannounced arrival of an uninvited, unnamed woman, one well-known for her unsavory

Lent and Advent are the Penitential Seasons. They are times of promise and hope, and of preparation and repentance in view of the promise of hope. Repentance always involves a double turning—a turning away from sin and darkness and a turning to God and light.

The woman in this week’s Gospel story came weeping to Jesus. We are not told exactly why. All we know is that she was a sinner, she wept, and she came to Jesus.

As you work through the basic pattern of spiritual
reputation. As the host and other guests sit, staring in shock and indignation, she kneels behind Jesus. Weeping, she breaks open a costly jar of ointment and begins to massage his feet with her hair.

In order to serve Jesus, she has risked rejection and humiliation. But to her surprise and, even more, to Simon’s, Jesus challenges Simon’s behavior rather than the woman’s. Through her humility, the woman showed love. Through his pride, Simon could only show condemnation.

There is no room on our Lenten journey for both pride and humility, and we do well to leave pride behind. It is excess baggage of the worst kind, weighing us down, requiring many accessories. Can we do it? Can we promise, “I will, with God’s help?”

Loving God, help us to set aside our need for pride and self-importance. Grant us the humility that delivers us from concerns of “what will people think” so that we are free to more truly love and serve you. In the name of Christ our Lord, Amen.

– The Reverend Jane Caperton Johnson (MDiv’06)
PASTOR, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
SMITHVILLE, TEXAS

practices this week, take special notice of what makes you weep. Keep track of such occasions in your notebook. Your weeping might be literal, or perhaps it is metaphorical—you might feel like weeping, even if tears do not come. Especially note when your weeping is over yourself. These are tears of repentance. The words of Jesus to the weeping woman are also Jesus’ words to you. At the end of the week, write a prayer to Jesus expressing your feelings.
Psalm 134 has only 3 verses. This “Song of Ascents” or “Pilgrim Song” escapes most commentaries and lectionaries. As the concluding song to this section of the Psalter, I like to think of it as a “closing hymn” in worship. The hymn that sends us out from worship and back to work as the church “scattered” is always important. Psalm 134 sends us out into the 2nd week of Lent by way of invitation.

Growing up Baptist, I heard “invitation hymns” every Sunday. Psalm 134 invites us to worship: “Come, bless the Lord…Lift up your hands … May the Lord bless you.” These words recall worship and sacrament and the faith community. They invite us to remember acts of worship: we gather, greet, listen, sing, pray, read; we hear and reflect on the Word of God; we accept the grace of the sacraments. And the constant refrain is invitation: To come, join, participate, be welcomed, be included. That’s how I got to the PC(USA), through worship, by invitation. Worship gathers us in and then sends us out; it is a service of worship after all.

Luke’s version of the Transfiguration invites us to see Jesus at worship. As Peter, James, and John went up the mountain with Jesus, I wonder if they sang Psalm 134. When Jesus prays, “the appearance of his face changed” and Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain to speak with Jesus about his “departure.” The Greek verb for that is “exodus.” I’m with Peter when he asks to put up some tents and stay a while longer. But that invitation is rejected. None of those present at the Transfiguration can stay on the mountain. The Transfiguration is an ending too, like Psalm 134. It leads all of us to the next part of this exodus, this journey of faith.

The Transfiguration happens while Jesus is praying, a basic element of worship. In Luke, Jesus also prays in the Garden before he is arrested and on the cross while he is dying. Jesus’ identity is revealed in these times of prayer. We are turned towards God every time we participate in these scenes from the life of Christ. I hope worship does that for all of us, every Sunday.
Christ our Redeemer, Light of God, you are made for our salvation. This Lenten season, make us a living worship service, that the world may know your Good News. We pray in your strong name, Amen.

– The Reverend Andy Blair (MDiv’89)

WEEK TWO: WORSHIP–TURNING TOWARD GOD

We tend to have a rather stereotyped understanding of worship. We think that worship is what happens when we go to a special building (“church”) on a special day (“Sunday”) at a special time (often, but not always, 11:00 a.m.), with a bunch of other people, some of whom we are likely to know. That is worship, to be sure. But it is not the only way that worship happens. Worship happens any time that we acknowledge God’s presence. God’s presence, of course, never varies. But our awareness of God’s presence varies considerably. Sometimes, we know that God is near. Often, we feel that we are alone and abandoned.

This week, note those occasions when you feel God’s presence. You do not have to do this in any elaborate way. You can simply write “God is near” or “I feel God” at the top of the page, and then make a little mark each time you sense the presence of God. At the end of the week, count your marks. You might discover that you worship much more than you realize.

Additionally, any time you feel that God is far away, ask for help: “God, help me to feel your presence.” You can say this prayer as often as you need to. But remember: Even the desire to say this prayer is an indication that God is near.
Gandhi once said, “My most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him I seem to have very little influence.” This hauntingly humorous quote is telling of the internal struggle we face during the Lenten season. As we continue along our journey of repentance and preparation, we come to Jesus’ declaration to love our enemies and we hear the Psalmist cry for unity. Through these passages, we are invited to overcome that which divides and live in complete, full relationship with God. It seems impossible, but we are told we shall be perfect (Matt. 5:48) if we extend love and prayer to the one who wishes us harm and pain.

What a special gift Christ is sharing with us. The opportunity to envision a new love, a bold and courageous kind of love that breaks down barriers and sets us toward a picture of serenity and hope founded and built by God. This is what makes Lent so unique. At this point in the Christian cycle we are being asked to focus on the sins we commit and name them together, because together we are strengthened, we are bonded, and when we can see the other suffering as we are, then our vulnerability becomes our source of unity.

Yet the great chasm that separates us so often from this unity, from this perfection, is the other we see when we look into the mirror. The irony Gandhi levels is like an anvil upon our shoulders. Sure we can name our shortcomings and acknowledge our foibles, but until we can truly relinquish the guilt we feel and accept forgiveness for that which is wrong or shameful, then we only allow it to erode the relationship God desires with us and for us. Consequently, the search to overcome that which leaves us broken as people, broken as a society, broken as a world cannot begin with us mending our own brokenness. It must begin and end with the healing and restorative presence of God.

What this reveals to us is that achieving perfection and unity through God means not relying on mere human strength and wisdom. Rather it means humbly proclaiming our brokenness by giving to God the sins we offer and the shortcomings we share. It means acknowledging that the Lenten journey is not a test to see where we can go, but rather an invitation to see where God can lead us. And from this part of the world, perfection sounds like an amazing destination.
God of perfection, source of all strength and wisdom, we are a weary and broken people. Lead us to a place of perfection, a place where brokenness is present, doubt is welcome, and fears are shared, so we can overcome that which separates us from the love you provide through Christ Jesus. Amen.

– The Reverend Barrett Abernethy (MDiv’13)
  PASTOR, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
  LIVINGSTON, ALABAMA & MEMBER OF THE AUSTIN SEMINARY ASSOCIATION BOARD


This week, let your focus be on intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is prayer on behalf of others. Often, those others are known to us: family, friends, and co-workers. But we should also offer prayers for people we do not know and might never meet. We can pray for national leaders, victims of disaster, soldiers in danger, and people in helping professions.

It is Jesus’ express command that we should love and pray for our enemies. This is difficult to do. It is hard for us to pray for those who want to hurt us or who we see as a threat to our well-being. Yet they, too, are the objects of God’s love.

This week, pick a person who might be an enemy to you. Pray for that person every day. Make this prayer as honest as you can. Acknowledge your own feelings—they will be no surprise to God. But make your prayer genuine. Pray in spite of your feelings. Record your prayer, and any difficulties you might have, in your notebook.
Some journeys are fun. Some others are painful! But the journeys always take us to our destination. In my particular case, when I started my own journey of faith, it was out of despair, abandonment, and survival. I was a “baby Christian” at the time, but my God, whom at times I screamed at and looked for in the sky, never left, and as a matter of fact, responded in loving, caring ways. Psalm 121 explains much better how I found God in the midst of total abandonment and desolation: God was everywhere, in the air, in the trees, on top of the hills, and in the valleys!

And then I realized that I was no longer alone! My God, my Rock, the Holy Spirit was around me and with me!!! Yes, it was an amazing, winsome discovery: “The Lord is your guardian, your protector at your right hand; the sun will not strike by day nor the moon by night; the Lord will guard you against all harm; he will guard your life!” Then come the assurance and the blessing: “The Lord will guard you as you come and go, now and forevermore.”

So after you arrive at your destination, you must or should confess and give glory and credit to whom it belongs! That’s what Peter did when Jesus asked: “And how about you? Who do you say I am?” Peter said: “You’re the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” I didn’t quite say it that way, but I wish I had; I did begin to tell everyone how much God loves me and how blessed I am to be one of God’s children. And then I become even bolder: I remind those who need to hear it that they are made in the image of God; therefore we are all heirs with Christ, and we must profess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

Like Peter, I did not accomplish this boldness on my own: the Holy Spirit, My Heavenly Father and Mother let me in on this secret of who Jesus is and what He does, not only for me, but for all of humanity!

I also have the assurance that there is no longer a lock in Heaven ... I have the key! I have my Jesus and by His power, his death on a cross, his burial and resurrection, I’m free and I have eternal life! What a magnificent gift that we are to share with others! As we wait, repent, lament, we also must begin to prepare our minds and souls to rejoice for the Good News: that through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are assured a permanent place in the Kingdom of God!
Awesome Creator, help us to remember that You are with us all the time: we only need to look up, to see the sun, the moon, the stars, all gifts that You made for us! And when we look into someone else’s eyes, help us to see the face of Jesus! You made us in your image; we are all your beautiful creation! May we find the promise of everlasting love, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

– The Reverend Consuelo Donahue (MDiv’96)  
MEMBER OF AUSTIN SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES

WEEK FOUR: CONFESSIONING–DECLARING OURSELVES AND OUR FAITH

Sharing our faith can be difficult. In our society, religious convictions are regarded as very private and personal. Many of us have been the target of some evangelist or other that we feel has been intrusive and aggressive.

Faith does not have to be aggressive in order to be shared. If we believe what we say we believe, it will show in the way we live our lives. Deeds can express our faith just as surely as words can.

During this week, be alert for opportunities to share your faith through deeds. Record these opportunities in your notebook. Especially note the times such occasions have led to conversations in which you could put your faith into words.
What have you to do with me, Jesus?” The question the demoniac voices rings through the ages. What have you to do with me, Jesus? Jesus has this way of directly seeking us out, even calling us out. The big work of redeeming the world happens through a series of individual encounters. Jesus’ destination is Jerusalem, but the journey inevitably involves stops along the way as he responds to personal situations. As Luke presents it, Jesus has come all the way across the sea to the land of the Gentiles in order to engage this one person. What have you to do with me? Why have you sought me out? How did you hear my prayer? How did you know my brokenness? Why did you not pass me by?

Jesus makes it personal. It happens again and again in the gospel of Luke. Jesus seeks out the tax collector, Levi, and bids him to follow (5:27). He engages the widow of Nain with deep compassion (7:13). He scandalously forgives the sins of the woman who lavishly cares for him in the Pharisee’s house (7:48). Jesus interrogates his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (9:20). He teaches the inquiring lawyer about neighbors with the story of a good Samaritan (10:30). He directs a certain ruler to sell all he has and give it to the poor (18:22). He calls Zacchaeus to come down from the tree and to open up his house (19:5). On the cross he assures the nearby criminal that they will be together in paradise (23:43). Three days later, on the road to Emmaus, he clandestinely teaches Cleopas and his companion “all the things about himself in all of the scriptures,” and then later reveals his identity as he breaks the breads at the table with them.

It’s one encounter after another, all the way to Jerusalem, all the way to the cross and beyond. What have you to do with me, Jesus? The journey of Jesus is a series of specific encounters where faith is challenged, shaped, corrected, assured, and deepened. What have you to do with me? For the demoniac, Jesus offers healing and wholeness. What is he offering you? Why has he sought you out?
Faithful God, whose love seeks us out, give us courage to name what we need, give us faith to trust what you teach, and give us strength to follow where you lead, so that our journey may lead us to wholeness and peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

– The Reverend Dr. John Wurster (DMin’01)
PASTOR, ST. PHILIP PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, HOUSTON, TEXAS

We are now on the verge of Holy Week. In order to prepare for Holy Week, review your notebook. Read your beginning prayer. Has anything happened? Look at the lists you have made, the reflections you have written, the occasions you have noted. Note any changes, and also any constancies, in your life. Has the experience of these five weeks made you more authentically yourself? If so, express your thanks to God. Are there still aspects of your life that are occasions for repentance? Ask God for extra help. Compose a prayer that will both summarize what has happened during this season of Lent, and will help you move into Holy Week.
Experiencing Holy Week in its fullness is its own spiritual practice. A large part of this is experience in community. Many congregations hold extra services during Holy Week, either on their own or in conjunction with other congregations. A typical Holy Week schedule might include regular worship on Palm Sunday; a Thursday evening Communion Service, which sometimes involves a Seder, a Good Friday Foot Washing Service or a Seven Last Words Service, a Saturday evening Easter Vigil, an Easter Sunrise Service, and an Easter Day Worship Service. Quite often, the Seven Last Words and the Easter Sunrise Services are community-based, involving several congregations.

Most peoples’ schedules are such that they cannot attend all of these services. However, being present at as many as you can will enable you to relive the day-by-day happenings in ancient Jerusalem that form the core of the Christian faith. You might make day-by-day entries in your notebook, discussing what you attended, what happened, and what effect it had on you.

During Holy Week, the schedule of scripture readings becomes more intense. This year, we are following the events of Holy Week as told in the Gospel of John. We also have a selection of daily Psalms from the so-called “Laudate Psalms,” Psalms 145-147, which are Psalms in praise of God. The other Psalms are those appropriate for the day.

Through the Gospel readings, we are able to follow Jesus through the last week of his earthly life. We move from the entrance into Jerusalem to his preaching in the Temple, to the preparation for the Last Supper and the Supper itself, and then to Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The so-called “Triduum,” the three days from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, takes us from the cross, to the tomb, to the Resurrection.
As you read the daily Scriptures, try to imagine yourself there in the story. Visualize the settings in and around Jerusalem. Think about what sounds you might be hearing. How are the onlookers reacting? What are Jesus’ disciples thinking? Who is hearing him gladly? Who is joining with those who are plotting his death? Take note of anything that strikes you in a special way—record such things in your notebook and meditate on them through the week. Your prayers could take the form of conversations with Jesus. Do not hesitate to ask him questions, just as the disciples did. Respond to him from your own point of view, and see what answers come.

There are brief suggestions of things you might do on each day of Holy Week. Most of them involve reflections in your notebook. Use them if you find them helpful. Otherwise, just do what you can to join with Jesus’ disciples in spending the week with him.
Let the record show that on the day of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, the suspect proceeded to ride a colt down the center of the street at a slow pace and stirred up the people. When the suspect was confronted by authorities for disturbing the peace, the people became aggressive and Jesus himself became defiant, saying “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

“Stirring up the people.” This, according to Luke 23:5, is the official reason Jesus was taken into custody. They tried time and time again to make trumped-up criminal charges stick, but even after they brought Jesus into custody, Pilate “examined him ... “and found no basis for your charges against him” (23:14). Jesus never committed a crime, but was still cast as criminal par excellence when the empire’s leading lawyers, preachers, and politicians surrounded him with a spectacle of mockery and accusation. Why? They said it was because he was caught disturbing the peace, stirring up the people just outside of Jerusalem. This can only mean, of course, that the people were asleep. To stir them is to wake them, to stir them might create a movement.

The truth of the gospel was doing the unthinkable in one of the tiny outskirts of the Roman Empire. It was bringing to life an entity not known in Rome for some 270 years, during the days of the Roman Republic: the people. The Roman concept was a flawed idea, to be sure, excluding women and slaves, but was nonetheless an antique symbol of freedom. With the decline of Roman democracy and the rise of the rule of Augustus, ordinary Roman citizens had long forgotten themselves and now wore the masks of slaves. However, Jesus’ gospel had begun to challenge all this. Perhaps due to his experiences as a darker skinned brother, Jesus’ gospel had a vision that included women, slaves, and all sorts of other curious characters. His ministry emphasized justice and generosity toward the poor and neighborly love. And such a gospel disturbed the imperial peace.

Today, as we remember Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem so long ago, and prepare for his coming yet again, we also remember that one sign of Jesus’ presence was a stirred-up people and a disturbed imperial peace. This season, let the good news of Jesus stir us toward justice and generosity toward the poor and toward neighborly love.
“There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that Island there is an altar ... Nothing [is] placed upon your altar unless it be a part of ‘the fluid area of your consent.’ This is your crucial link with the Eternal.”

– Mr. Asante Todd (MDiv’06)
INSTRUCTOR, CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Prayer Excerpt from “The Inward Sea” by Howard Thurman from Meditations of the Heart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953, 1981)

Many people followed Jesus for a while and then left. The disciples who entered Jerusalem with Jesus were only a portion of those who initially found him attractive. Think about why you yourself remain a disciple of Jesus. What are the factors that might tempt you to leave off following him? Use your notebook to explore these thoughts.
I sympathize with Judas. And not because I’m a thief: I’m just a Presbyterian. Our Book of Order speaks of “a faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation” (F-2.05), and I’ve always been suspicious of the extravagant gesture and always concerned to use things—or even time—in a way that is practical and productive. I, too, would shudder at pouring out all that perfume without accomplishing something more tangible and necessary than just making a house smell good.

But even if Judas’ concern for the poor had been sincere, Jesus’ response might have been the same. “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Mary bought the perfume for Jesus’ burial. Death is a powerful reminder that some moments are sacred; they must be attended to now, for they will not come again. And while Scripture calls us to care for the poor and vulnerable, it isn’t a competition. True caring grows as we grasp the deep truth that all of us are lovingly created children of God. What we do in any given moment may not change the world. But the joy, tenderness, compassion, and even beauty found in an extravagant gesture of love will forever be a part of who we are.

I am the mother of two young children, constantly torn between my never-ending “to do” list and giving myself over to their play. When I do turn my full attention to the children, the delight and wonder can be overwhelming. To momentarily set everything else aside and fully embrace that joy is, for me, an act of praise. Sometimes, yes, the chores must be done, but the chores will always be with me, and this is a fleeting time of life.

Our church hosts a weekly breakfast, begun with the primary goal of providing food for those in need. But as the fellowship and sense of community among guests and hosts have grown, we’ve discovered something more important. When one guest marked a milestone birthday—a day that would have passed unacknowledged if not for this small community singing and celebrating—when we saw what that meant to him, we began to better understand that “Man does not live by bread alone.”

And many of us have witnessed at the other end of life, as death creeps near, when a spouse or child lovingly washes
a face or sits and holds a hand. All else is put on hold to attend to this person, a moment steeped in the presence and promise of God.

We will move on to the more practical tasks of discipleship—we must—but let us also embrace these fleeting, sacred moments, with wonder and adoration and praise.

God of each and every moment, help us to attend to the sacredness in our everyday lives. Help us to attend to those fleeting moments when we discover and honor your presence through our love for one another. Amen.

– The Reverend Ann Herlin (MDiv’01)
ASSOCIATE PASTOR, OLD PRESBYTERIAN MEETING HOUSE, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA & MEMBER OF THE AUSTIN SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES

MONDAY—ADORING

Once again, we see a woman bathing Jesus’ feet—this time with expensive perfume—and using her hair to dry them. This was an act of great love. How in your life do you show that you love Jesus? How might you show that you love Jesus?
Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Who talks like this anymore? Certainly not the average Twitter crowd. On Twitter, Jesus’ words might have sounded like this: “Wigged out. Talked out. What’s up with that, dad? Oh well. Bummer.”

In contrast, consider Walt Whitman from *Leaves of Grass*: “There is, in sanest hours ... a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity ... Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual ... yet hardest basic fact. ... In the midst of the significant wonders of heaven and earth ... creeds, conventions fall away and become of no account before this simple idea.”

Although Whitman was not musing on John’s Gospel, he might have been. Jesus is making his ascent toward the temple in Jerusalem, staring toward the cross on the horizon. It’s a bit like a marathon runner who has settled into a certain rhythm when suddenly facing a climb. She knows her pulse will pick up and her muscles will ache. Yet, she is committed to finishing the race. It’s also a little bit like us on our Lenten journey. We have settled into a liturgical rhythm. Now, we realize that Holy Week is here and our pulse quickens in anticipation of Easter.

It is, as Whitman wrote, “A miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual ... yet hardest basic fact.” And the most basic fact of life to which Jesus alludes is this: something, or someone, has to die so that someone else might live. As disciples of Christ, we face the same predicament: Are we willing to die so that others might live? When was the last time we laid down our lives—like giving up a dream, taking a job we did not want but that pays the bills, living in a place we would not have chosen? We also might know someone who has literally laid down their life for others.

Again Whitman: “All parts away ... all religion, all solid things ... all that was or is ... before the procession of souls along / the grand roads of the universe.” For this reason, Jesus has come to this hour: to teach us how to strip away all that is insignificant so that that we might worship God by showing us how to die in order to gain life everlasting.
Ever-living God, teach us to live according to your will, not ours, and help us die to all that keeps us from serving others as you have died for us and served us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

– The Reverend Dr. Dieter Heinzl (MDiv’98)
ASSOCIATE PASTOR, LADUE CHAPEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI & PRESIDENT OF THE AUSTIN SEMINARY ASSOCIATION

TUESDAY–LISTENING

A voice came from Heaven—the voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism and at the Transfiguration. Many heard it, but some did not understand it, or think that it was a voice at all. Yet that voice was for their sake. How do you hear God’s voice? Are there times when you did not realize that God was speaking to you? How can you listen to God in the days to come?
Judas’ feet were clean, after all. They were as clean as the feet of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, of James and his brother John. As clean as the feet of Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, and Simon. Twenty-four feet’s worth of accumulated grit and grime, wounds and wear had just been washed and wiped afresh, one by one, by the loving hands of Jesus, back at the beginning of chapter 13.

Judas’ heart was not as clean. The gospel writer tells us that the devil planted betrayal in Judas’ heart, that this fulfillment of scripture is no secret to Jesus. With troubled breath Jesus testifies to the disciples draped around the table, “One of you will betray me!” Before the puzzled looks have time to resolve, Jesus passes the telltale piece of bread to the betrayer. Judas is out the door and into the darkness to do what he is going to do. And on the heels of Judas’ exit, in response to this betrayal, Jesus bursts into doxology. Into a repeated chorus of how God will be glorified in all of this, and how Jesus will be glorified, and how all of this is happening right now in front of our eyes with more of God’s glory to come.

Filthy feet and a loving Christ who kneels to wash us. Betraying hearts and a faithful God who sings glory into our darkness. Psalm 147:1 invites us to sing back to God in response to God’s faithful and steadfast love: Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for God is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.
Gracious God, In this holy week, help us to see and confess the ways that we betray you, one another, and ourselves. When our spirit is troubled in the confusion and pain of betraying and being betrayed, guide us through it by your glorious grace and mercy. Through Christ our Savior, Amen.

– The Reverend Katie Bywaters Cummings (MDiv’05)

PASTOR, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BENTONVILLE, ARKANSAS & MEMBER OF THE AUSTIN SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Judas is one of the mysteries of the Passion Story. When Jesus said that one of his disciples would betray him, there was great confusion. The disciples did not know who would betray him, but evidently they all realized that any one of them could betray him. Can Jesus still be betrayed by his followers? How? What can we do to avoid or prevent such betrayals?
I’m always glad to see Peter show up in one of the gospel stories. He’s so earnest. He tries so hard. He always gets it right—almost. He’s like the little kid who makes a cake all by himself and then drops it on the floor. He’s so human.

We understand his reaction to Jesus’ stripping to the waist and washing the disciples’ feet. It must have been embarrassing. Here was the Messiah of God doing the job that only the most menial servants usually did. So Peter drew back. “Not me, Lord. Don’t humiliate yourself over me.”

“You don’t know what I’m doing,” Jesus said. “Someday you will. But you have to let me do this.” Then Peter flipped. “Okay, wash everything!” he said. But Jesus shook his head. “Only the feet.” Any other washing Peter might need was going to take place at a different time in a different way.

Then Jesus addressed them all. “This is what it means to be my disciple. You must serve, as I have served.”

In John’s account of the Last Supper, Jesus does not break the bread and pour the wine saying, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Instead, there is the foot washing—but there is also the command: “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Foot washing has never been understood as a sacrament, but it is similar to Holy Communion in that we follow our Lord, we obey our Lord, by imitating our Lord: “I am among you as one who serves” (Lk. 22: 27).

The greatest service Jesus performed, the redemption won by his time on the cross, is far beyond us. But our service does not have to be great. Many small services add up to great service. The daily care for a child. Nursing an invalid. Rescuing an animal. Bringing food to a grieving friend. None of these services are great in the sense that they will change the world. But they are still service. They can relieve pain, provide guidance, soothe souls. Small services can and do manifest great love.

To refuse to serve is not simply disobedience. It is blasphemy. Such refusal implies that we consider ourselves greater than the Master. The unfortunate truth is that we often do refuse to serve—not out of delusions of godhood,
but for reasons that are petty: We are rushed. We are tired. It’s someone else’s responsibility. And so on. But just as small services can result in great love, small refusals can result in a great denial.

So let us be content to simply follow, serving when and how we can, and thus obey our Lord.

Lord Jesus, give me eyes to see another’s need, hands to help meet that need, and a heart that will serve out of an overflow of love. Let me receive Jesus’ service with a grateful heart, and by serving others extend Jesus’ love everywhere I go. In his name and Service, Amen.

– The Reverend Dr. David W. Johnson
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Try to do something with your hands today that would be a form of service to others. Help carry a burden. Cook something. Pick up or clean up after someone. Record your feelings. Has someone served you today? What was your response?
“It is finished.” He spoke his last words, bowed his head and it was silent.

How did that happen?
With his death, there are no more words from Jesus
   They thought that this was exactly what they wanted
   ... for him to stop talking,
   for him to stop preaching,
   for him to stop teaching.
Now, with this last word, he will not speak to us anymore. Do you suppose in the silence that someone, anyone may have recognized how frightening this is?

He didn’t talk like we talk.
   Blessed are the poor, the meek, the peacemakers ...
   The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has
   anointed me
   To preach good news to the poor.
   You must be born again.
   Love one another as I have loved you.
He was a rabbi who could see beyond our capacity for imagination.
   Go the second mile,
   Turn the other cheek
   Love God with all that you are
   Love neighbor as yourself
   Love the enemy as if the enemy was also someone God loves.

They didn’t want to listen to that kind of craziness anymore. They made sure he had said his last word. That’s what crucifixion means ... there will be no more words from Jesus. No more teaching from Jesus.

But they didn’t have to kill him.
   It’s much better just to ignore him.
   We know how to shut him up in a more civilized fashion.
Do you suppose in the silence they realized that he was not really the one who died that afternoon.

We tell ourselves we will do fine without his word.
We can raise our children.
We can spend our money
We can build our lives
and we don’t need any word from Jesus.
We can spend our time the way we want.
We can treat our neighbor and our enemy the way we want. Who needs Jesus telling us how to live?

*It is finished.* He bowed his head and it was silent.

The irony ...
If he stops speaking, he is not the one who dies.

- The Reverend Tom Are Jr.

**PASTOR, VILLAGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, PRAIRIE VILLAGE, KANSAS & CHAIR OF THE AUSTIN SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

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**GOOD FRIDAY—WAITING**

During the time of the crucifixion, the disciples could do nothing. Some of them watched. Some of them hid. Take some time today to pray for all those areas in which God’s work is proceeding unseen.
When I was in Central America my senior year of seminary, we had the chance to spend a day with theologian Elsa Tamez in Costa Rica. I learned from her that day, in the context of her teaching on the book of James, that “patience is an action verb.” It takes tenacity to wait, to wait it out (whatever “it” is), to trust in the timing of God more than our own.

I’ve come to believe that the notion of hope is an action verb as well. There’s nothing passive about it. It takes sheer, God-granted tenacity to hope in the face of all other evidence to the contrary.

How in God’s name can we dare to hope, especially on a day when we are given to read that the lifeless body of Jesus was entrusted to those who would prepare it for a traditional burial? Hope on a day such as this cannot be about denial or bargaining, as in “maybe he’s not really dead.” Such hope is required to look death squarely in the eye. It is indeed only in God’s name that we can hope, tenaciously holding on with every last ounce to the fact that hate, and sin, and death do not get the last word.

Prescott Williams taught us that one of the “tricks” of the psalmist and prophets was to proclaim God’s victory in the present tense, even when such victory was still clearly out of sight—years, decades, generations away. For Jeremiah, that meant blooming where you’re planted. For the psalmist, it meant enumerating deeds of goodness as though they were already done. For John of Patmos, it meant proclaiming God’s new heaven and earth in the face of the Roman Empire. What will it mean for you and for me?

Holy Saturday is precisely the time to declare God’s victory in the here and now while it is still dark outside. And if it doesn’t exactly look like victory at first glance, well, that’s when we get to persist in using and living out that active verb, hope.
Thank you, faithful God, for what you have already accomplished beyond our sight and knowledge. Your faithfulness gives us reason to hope. Help us to find the courage to share that hope with all, even and especially when the balance of evidence seems otherwise. May we live to testify to the fulfillment of our hope, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

– The Reverend Dr. Sallie Watson (MDiv’87)
MISSIONAL PRESBYTER / STATED CLERK,
PRESBYTERY OF SANTA FE & MEMBER OF THE AUSTIN SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES

HOLY SATURDAY–HOPING

Jesus is dead. Jesus is in the tomb. Everything seems to be over. If your life situation is such that everything seems to be over for you, remember that there are always reasons to hope. Read Romans 8: 38-9 and record your feelings.
As I write these words, the church is still captivated by the afterglow of Christmas. There are still lights in the trees and bushes of my neighborhood, and brightly-lit Christmas trees still shining from the windows of living-rooms. The challenge for me as I write is letting go of Christmas in order to look once again at the looming mystery of Easter—the day that celebrates more of an absence than a presence.

At Christmas, the props and evidence of a profound presence fairly litter the texts for the day. Stable, straw, donkey, splinters, Mary, Joseph, a census, a star, shepherds, wise men, gold, frankincense, myrrh. And, of course, at the center of it all, a baby named Jesus. At Christmas, God comes to us as a fleshly, tangible thing that we can hold in our hands and cradle in our arms.

But not so on this day. There’s nothing to hold on Easter, and that’s the main problem with it. The scene at Easter is muted and understated and tentative. Its setting is a cemetery. Here in John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene is there to come to terms with what is most terrible about that scene—that there’s nothing to hold.

This is how Easter begins, which is why it’s so hard to get a grip on resurrection—at least initially—because there’s just so little to grip.

We know that from our own cemetery experiences. At first, there are things to do—choose the casket, plan the service, receive the casseroles, hug the children back home from faraway places to do what they can. But sooner or later, the children and grandchildren leave again, the food stops coming, the flowers dry up … and there’s nothing to hold.

What Mary would like is Jesus—back! Back just the way he was! But when the resurrected Jesus reveals himself to her, she learns that he is back not just to validate a past but, more profoundly, to usher in a promise. Easter is not about going back and having something to hold. It is rather about going forward, with nothing to hold—except the contours of a new kingdom coming in.
“Do not hold on to me,” he thus says to Mary, “because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” He is not on his way back to a remembered past; he’s on his way to God, and he’s taking the whole world with him.

On this day, the bad news with which it begins—that there’s nothing, really, that we can hold—ends up being the Good News. There’s nothing, really, about Easter that we can hold!

What we can do is what Mary does next. We can run forth rejoicing, telling anyone who will listen that “I have seen the Lord.” Even as things in this world are falling apart, the Good News is that other things—through Jesus Christ our Lord—are coming together. We can be grateful for the past, but, more importantly, we can live expectantly toward the future; for Easter reminds us that God is there!

We rejoice with you, Risen One, for you have done great things for us. If we cannot hold on to you, then hold onto us, we pray, as you lead us not back to the past but to your promised future! Amen.

– The Reverend Theodore J. Wardlaw
PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS

EASTER DAY–REJOICING

Spend the day in joy. Tomorrow, review your entire Lenten and Easter journey by rereading your notebook or recalling your thoughts and feelings. On the basis of all that, compose a prayer. Write this prayer in your notebook. But that is for tomorrow. Today, spend this day in joy.
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