

2018 Lenten Devotional



LENT, 40 days, not counting Sundays and 7 Sundays counting Easter. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness wrestling with Satan's temptations. We also wrestle with temptations every day. As we journey through Lent with Jesus, let us keep in mind that we also need to know how to handle those temptations. Put yourself beside Jesus. Watch how He handled tough situations. Get to know the people He used to carry out God's plan. How would you react to the miracles? Do we listen to God's call as Jesus did? Do we speak up when we see injustice? Do we offer help when there is a crisis? Would we fall away as the disciples did, when Jesus was arrested? Jesus showed us the WAY. We will struggle to follow Him, but all He asks is to follow Him, have FAITH, and try our best, and He'll take care of shortcomings. So as you read these scriptures, ponder the question, "What's that say to me?"

Ash Wednesday - February 14th

Read Matthew 4:1-2

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and fort nights.

If we say “The Spirit led me to this place,” we expect the place to be lovely, happy, running smoothly. But the Spirit led Jesus into a wilderness, where his soul was severely tested. What Spirit is leading us into a wilderness of the imagination, a period of testing: Lent. For several weeks, we will focus our minds more intently than usual on God, wiping cobwebs from the corners of the soul, noticing what has crept in that is not of God, remembering how God is yearning for us to grow spiritually.

We may fast, doing without something we love, denying some desire so we might discover the deep hunger we have for God, so we might identify with people in our world who are hungry. In this season we will find ourselves on a journey. Matthew will be our map as we ask “Who is Jesus? Where is he going? How do I get close to him?”

Prayer: Lord, this year during Lent, reveal yourself to me. I want nothing in life so much as to know and be close to you.

Genealogy - February 15th

Read Matthew 1:1-18

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament begins with a genealogy? “Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob” – 42 begots in all. The Greek word is *genesis*: beginning, birth, new life. “In the beginning God created heaven and earth,” and God has been orchestrating history toward the climax” a new genesis, the ultimate embodiment of God’s love and purpose, Jesus. His genealogy unveils the hidden plot of history, celebrating God’s constancy and reliability.

Where did Jesus come from? Where did I come from? Inside me is the deposit of generations, my DNA stamp, the shape of my face, knobby knees. The family tree on which I find myself is lovely but gnarled, with saints and horse thieves, the pretty and the prickly. Am I free? In control? Aren’t the most decisive facts about me simply givens? Am I here by accident? Or was there some destiny? If so who am I? What do I do next?

Jesus’ family tree was a mixed bag like mine. We are begotten by God’s love – and to such mortal, noble, flawed, hopeful people Jesus can, and comes.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus!

Scriptures and Swaddling Clothes - February 16th

Read John 5:39

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me.

Each name in Matthew's genealogy represents a life, the miracle of birth, loves, losses, labor, and death' on every page of his Gospel, Matthew refers to Old Testament times. He is like a librarian, walking us through the stacks, directing us to older books as he tells his story, Matthew expects us to know the rest of the story's we can discover ourselves in the Bible's story.

Until recently, believers were thoroughly familiar with the Bible. Can we be better students of Scripture? Martin Luther called the Bible 'the swaddling clothes in which Jesus is laid.'" To get near Jesus, to think his thoughts, and love what he loves, we immerse ourselves in the Bible's stories, songs, laws, and prayers.

Do we want God on the cheap without reading God's Word? Do we think we'll find Jesus without the Old Testament he treasured?

Prayer: Lord, I commit myself to more frequent, passionate reading of the Scriptures that bear witness to you and to finding my place in your story.

David: Boy or King - February 17th

Read Matthew 1:1-6

Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

Jesus is hailed as the "Son of David." Nearly 1,000 years has passed since David was king and Israel had never stopped longing for another king like him. They should have longed, not for a king like David, but for a *boy* like David. When he was young, his heart was full of love for the Lord; with no armor but his trust in God, David courageously ventured out and toppled the gigantic warrior Goliath.

But once ensconced in his palace in Jerusalem, his childlike dependence upon God shrank as his stature soared. Am I like David? If all is swell, if I have plenty, do I pat myself on the back and forget to pray? But when times are rough, when the road is dark, do I not live into my faith more fully? What are the perils of success and possessions?

David flexed his power, fighting violent battles not of God; lusting after Bathsheba, he greedily took her. Jesus was the David who might have been; with childlike devotion to God, he shed his might so he could see us "David's" as forgiven.

Prayer: Lord you are our King; we are yours.

Abraham and the Impossible – February 18th

Read Genesis 18:1-14

Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.

Jesus is also the “Son of Abraham.” Abraham almost didn’t have a son. He and Sarah were old, long past childbearing; the idea of a child was laughable. But God had promised.

Abraham is a great hero of faith. He didn’t expect or receive quick answers to his prayers; decades marched by. “Those who wait on the LORD/shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31) just as the angel assured Mary, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37)

Abraham was “chosen people”; his descendants are the “chosen people.” They weren’t chose so that they could bask in God’s pleasure. God chose them to use them to save everybody else. God chose Jesus and used him to save everybody else. Now God chooses us. Isn’t this what we all want – for our lives to matter, to be part of a group that transforms the world?

Prayer: Lord, give me the faith of Abraham.

Jacob and the Angles- February 19th

Read Genesis 28:10-22

There was a ladder... the angles of God were ascending and descending.

Jacob is flawed, blessed, troubled, sleeping outside, a stone for a pillow. A dream dance in his head: a ladder spanning from earth to heaven, angels ascending and descending. God spoke: “I will be with you; I will not stop until I’ve done what I promised.” Jacob woke up, startled but moved: “surely the LORD is in this place’ (Genesis 28:16).

Wherever you are, God is in this place. Have you noticed? Do you feel like Jacob not the kind of superb person you think God would deploy? You wrestle with your faith. At times you run headlong from God. Can you see your future is in God’s hands?

Angels are popular in our culture, but are they real?? If so, what is their mission? The Bible’s angels do not pamper people. Instead they announce that God is about to invade our comfortable places and rock our world. “If an angel ever says ‘Be bit afraid’ you’d better watch out: a big assignment is on the way” (Elie Wiesel).

Prayer: Lord, send angels: I am ready for a big assignment.

Forgiven, Not Perfect – February 20th

Read Genesis 45:1-8

Do not be distressed or angry...for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Of Jacob's sons, Joseph seems the most likely ancestor of Jesus: wise, holy, successful. But Jesus' genealogy runs through Judah, the leader of the brothers who sold Joseph into slavery, broke their father's heart, and never got their act together but stumbled into astonishingly good luck when Joseph not only fed them but declined to have them executed.

Do we think God is like Santa Claus: *'He's makin' a list, checkin' it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice'*? No presents for bad boy Judah. Yet Judah is the tribe into which Jesus is born; his hometown Bethlehem becomes the point where God touched down in the womb of Mary.

Judah's qualification? He was forgiven, not perfect. I may grieve my lack of perfection: "How could God love me?" Or I may think "I'm a pretty good person," assuming God grades on the curve. But all Judah can say for himself is "I have been forgiven," no leg to stand on – except the mercy of God, which is the only place to stand.

Prayer: Lord, I am not perfect, but forgiven.

Four or Five Women – February 21st

Read Galatians 3:28

There is neither male nor female; for you are all on in Christ Jesus.

Ancient genealogies were the domain of males. How odd that Matthew mentions four women and such strange women! Tamar (Genesis 38) seduced her father-in-law. Rahab was a foreigner and prostitute (Joshua 2). Ruth (another foreigner) dressed up to lure Boaz into marriage. Bathsheba slept with David (2 Samuel II). Notice a fifth, Mary. Did she not seem as suspect as the other four?

Weren't there holy women over the generations? While these women had checkered pasts, remember that a man was involved each time! All four women suffered disadvantage at the hands of men; in the end, each was treated justly, believed, and was saved. But why not whitewash Jesus' genealogy? Why mention these women? Perhaps they remind us that all of the people to whom Jesus came were sinful outsiders. Jesus came to forgive, find, include. They remind us that Jesus is about justice, treating the disadvantaged charitably. Perhaps the genealogy is just the way it was – which is good news for you and me.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for coming and forgiving.

The Lord Looks at the Heart – February 22nd

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

A stained glass window in the cathedral of Chartres features “the Jesse tree,” Jesus’ family branches growing from the stump of Jesse, the father of David

Samuel came to Jesse’s home, having been told by God that Israel’s new king was among Jesse’s sons. Surveying the lineup, Samuel assumed the tallest, strongest warrior Eliab would be the one. But no... The next largest? No... But who? Little David, so scrawny that he wasn’t even summoned into the house to stand with his stalwart brothers.

The Lord whispered to Samuel: “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). We fall for the lie that bigger is better; the world is like a shop window into which some mischievous person has sneaked and switched all the price tags around (William Temple).

But what is in the heart? Jesus said ‘Blessed are the meek,...the pure in heart’ (Matthew 5:5, 8) What is in your heart?

Prayer: Lord, my heart is a whirl of conflict. Create in me a heart for you.

Religion and Politics – February 23rd

Read Isaiah 7:1-17

The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

Political giants appear in Jesus’ family tree, including the impressive yet foolish Ahaz, who let the nation into disaster. God never said, “Religion and politics don’t mix.” Isaiah spoke God’s word to the nation’s leaders whose vain ambitions were not holy. When Isaiah said, “the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son,” he wasn’t gazing into a crystal ball, forecasting the birth of Jesus 700 years in the future. He was trying to persuade Ahaz not to go to war, but to be a man of peace, to trust in the Lord instead of his army. Children are victims of wars, and their birth is a sign that life is worth treasuring; Jesus’ birth fulfills God’s vision of peace (Matthew 12:3).

Isaiah voiced profound words of hope and judgment. As God’s brilliant spokesman, he comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.

Prayer: Lord, comfort us in our afflictions but afflict us out of our comforts. We pray for peace and for innocent children, in the name of the Prince of Peace.

Morn in Lonely Exile Here – February 24th

Read Matthew 1:18-19

Josiah the father of Jechoniah... at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon.

In 587 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. The nation was shattered the city reduced to rubble, the temple in ruins, most of the population killed, the survivors hauled off the population killed, the survivors hauled in disgrace to Babylon, far from home, wondering whether their God had ever been real, sort of 9/11 times a thousand.

For a generation Israel lived in exile. We may know exile: unspeakable loss, longing for home even when we're in the house, feeling alienated in a culture not of God. We "mourn in lonely exile here," and pray: "O come, O come, Emmanuel."

"How shall we sing the LORD's song/In a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4). How do we live in a world that does not know our Lord? Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were pressed to bow down to Babylon's gods, but refused, preferring death to caving in (Daniel 3:6). They were saved! The Lord's songs were sung, and ultimately God's people returned and rebuilt their lives.

Prayer: Lord, help us sing your praise in our exile.

Betrothed to Joseph – February 25th

Read Matthew 1:20-23

His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph.

To us, getting engaged is romantic, a ring is purchased, and the round of wedding planning begins. But in Israel, betrothal was a legal bond. To break an engagement was called "divorce," and immense shame was implied as adultery was the common rationale for a breakup. Today movie stars marry already pregnant and break up the way you select a vacation destination on a whim.

Joseph had every good reason to cast Mary aside and retain what dignity he had left. But he loved. He believed her story and put a lot of stock in a dream he had one night (Matthew 1:20). His destiny? We see him in Christmas pageants. No acting ability is required. He just stands sheepishly to the side, holding the reins of the donkey, gazing.

But he was near Jesus. He did as he was commanded by the Lord. He stuck with what he was stuck with: he was committed. He saw the miracle; and just to be near the wonder of God's love taking on flesh is enough isn't it?

Prayer: Lord, I would be like Joseph: full of love, belief, doing as I am told by you.

Intersection of Heaven and Earth – February 26th

Read Luke 1:24-25

The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Mary had to wonder what she had gotten into. Until the angel showed up, her future had been comfortably settled. She risked everything by saying “Yes” to the angel who invited her to bear not just a child, but *this* child. Neighbors avoided eye contact. Joseph, mercifully, had stayed, but the birth to come? She might lose her life; she had seen other women die in childbirth.

The angel comforted her: “Do not fear.” Big assignment! What was asked of Mary was unprecedented, unfathomable: to be the intersection between earth and heaven, to let God take on flesh inside her, to care for this most precious of all children? And yet isn’t the same asked of us? To live at the intersection of earth and heaven? to let God take up residence in us? To help children? And it will cost us everything? Can you hear the angel whispering? How will you answer?

Prayer: “Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray; bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.”

Virgin Birth – February 27th

Read Matthew 2:1-15

[Joseph] took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son.

Matthew believed, even if modern people don’t, that Mary was a virgin. Our culture treats virginity as the sad fate of the unattractive, a status to get beyond in our quest for fulfillment. No wonder people don’t believe. When asked, “Why are you so holy?” Mother Teresa responded, “You talk as if holiness were abnormal. Holiness is normal. To be anything else is to be abnormal.” Mary’s virginity is about holiness, virtue, goodness. Virtue mattered back then. It matters now.

Jesus’ birth is the “fulfillment” of Scripture – not a crystal ball prediction coming true, but a cup overflowing, a catharsis, God’s labor of love reaching its climax. *Immanuel* means “God with us.” God is with us always, everywhere, but nowhere more clearly focused, more perfectly unveiled, or trumpeted more joyously than in the birth of Jesus. And if God is with us, how we live matters; being virtuous matters.

Prayer: God, let my body be the temple of your Spirit; may your goodness be mirrored in me.

No Crying He Makes - February 28th

Read Matthew 2:19-20

You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people.

“The cattle are lowing the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes”? Surely he cried! Jesus was fully human, crying not just as a child but as an adult: for Lazarus (John 11:35) and in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:38).

His very name is a cry. The Hebrew *Yeshua!* means “Lord, help!” Most mothers in the intense agony of childbirth would cry out *Yeshua!* Did Mary? Names in ancient times expressed a person’s character of destiny. So *Yeshua*, the plea to God for help, came to mean “Salvation.” Mary cried out; and once the baby was delivered, he cried out; and in that scream in the dark, salvation dawned. Jesus (*Yeshua, Lord help!*) is the answer to the cry of humanity across the ages. He alone can help, and he does help. In the lovely novel, *Mr. Ives’ Christmas*, Oscar Hijuelos calls Jesus “the most wanted child in the history of the world.” He is God’s reply to the deepest desire of our hearts, to the riddle of history.

Prayer: Yeshua! Lord, help! We cry to you whose very name means Salvation! You are all I want and need.

Jesus and Astrology – March 1st

Matthew 2:21-23

We have seen His star in the East and have come to worship.

“We three kings of orient are.” Matthew says they were not royalty, but magi astrologers! What did they see? A supernova? Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction that year; Halley’s Comet passed not long before. Medieval writer believed the magi was a bright angel, which they mistook for a star. How else could a star, hanging so high, point them to any particular town or house?

These magi (possibly from modern day Iraq!) charted the stars in their courses and discerned destinies. How did they find Jesus, when Herod’s masters of Scripture missed him entirely? Do we ever hold the truth in our hands but miss the living Lord? God is determined to be found and will use any measure to reach out to people who are open.

God is “the love that moves the stars” (Dante). By God’s grace you are not stuck with some star-crossed fate. You are free, and your destiny is to worship the Christ Child.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for making yourself known. I am determined not to miss you. Where you lead me, I will follow.

King Herod or King Jesus? – March 2nd

Read Matthew 3:1-6

Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?

Herod was history's most hysterical megalomaniac' he even murdered his own wife and brothers! The magi were lucky to get away after saying to his face "Where is the king of the Jews? We have come to worship him." The little boys of Bethlehem were not so fortunate, as Herod slaughtered the innocent.

The irony was rich when a grownup Jesus was asked by Pontius Pilate. "Are you the King of the Jews?" (John 18:33) When the first Christians declared "Jesus is Lord," the implication was "Caesar isn't" Jesus was not a military subversive trying to take over the empire. But he was king' and Herod, Pilate, and Caesar were exposed as mere pretenders.

We say this only because of Jesus' upside-down kingship. His court was band of poor fishermen, his regalia a cross, his rule not iron-fisted force but tender love. He washed feet and gave up his life instead of killing. We have to choose, don't we? Do we cast our lot with the powers of this world? Or with the humble child, the Savior crucified?

Prayer: Lord, you alone are Lord.

Home by Another Way – March 3rd

Read Matthew 3:7-12

They departed for their own country another way.

You wouldn't need to be warned in a dream not to revisit nasty king Herod! But God lovingly warns them and "they left for their own country by another road" (Matthew 2:12). They took a different road, but do you wonder if Matthew is mapping out what life is like once we've met Jesus? Nothing is the same; you find yourself going another way.

T.S. Eliot ended his poem imagining the thoughts of the magi: "We returned to our places... but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods." Jesus does not make my life more comfortable; Jesus doesn't help me fit in and succeed. Someone said "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd." We are no longer at ease in a world not committed to Jesus; we notice false gods all around. Nothing is the same; nothing comes easy. A strange, unfamiliar road is now our path – but the road is going somewhere.

Prayer: God of truth, the old road leads to death and hollowness; put me on a new path that leads to you and to life.

Repentance and Baptism – March 4th

Read Matthew 3:13-15

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

Thirty years have passed since Jesus' birth. Centuries have passed since the prophets envisioned the dawn of God's kingdom. The silence is shattered when John the Baptist roars onto the scene. He is fiercely unsettling, urgently hollering in your face: *REPENT!*

What is repentance: Not feeling guilty. The Hebrew, *'shub'*, means to make a 180-degree turn: you're going the wrong way! Turn back to God! The Greek, *metanoia*, means "change of mind." Your thinking is wrong-headed; see things from God's perspective. Repentance is something we do daily, constantly. John baptized, pouring water from the Jordan to symbolize spiritual cleansing. We have dirtied ourselves, grime has built up; we need to be washed. When we reflect on our baptism we invisibly get this desperately needed bath so we can again stand before God as clean.

Repentance prepares us to meet Jesus; John Wesley said repentance is the porch that leads us into the home of life with God.

Prayer: Lord, I have plunged off the wrong way. Turn me around; wash me so I can be clean.

Fruit or Fire – March 5th

Read Matthew 3:16-17

You brood of vipers!... Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

John never studied under Miss Manners. With unbridled rage he glared at very religious people and castigated them as "a brood of vipers." Outrageous, rude, John could be dismissed as a maniac. But he spoke the truth. A smug piety that is "right," priding itself in knowledge about God, misses the heart of a humble, compassionate faith and is down-right dangerous to the self-righteous and to those they ostracize. Mere descent from Abraham, or any earthly status, is nothing compared to a living, vital faith. "Bear fruit!" Fruit refreshes; fruit is what the planter intended. God intends for us to be fully of humble love, not rotten with arrogance or a judgmental spirit. Faith fruit is a change life.

How important is this fruitfulness? John, standing not far from Sodom and Gomorrah, threatens with fire. Yet, the Spirit's fire can refine and purify...So will I be consumed? Or be a torch for God?

Prayer: Lord let me hear John's brash words as if they were directed at me. Forgive my hard spirit; let me be fruitful for you.

Why Was Jesus Baptized? – March 6th

Read Matthew 4:1-4

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

John hated his bellowing when one unexpected man waded into the river. Jesus, never demanding his rightful place, “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7), asked to be baptized. John, knowing Jesus’ identity and purity, replies if anyone should do the baptizing, it is Jesus. But Jesus insists: “It is proper to fulfill all righteousness.”

Everything is upside-down with Jesus: he embraces the despised and blasts the pious. He disappoints those urging him to wield power and displays power by “the foolishness of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Karl Barth said Jesus *was* baptized for the forgiveness of sins: Jesus did not let our sins remain ours; as our brought he took our sins on himself. “No one came to the Jordan as laden and afflicted as He.”

What, after all, is “righteousness”? It is more than good behavior. At its heart, righteousness is enjoying a right relationship with God, which is all fit, all grace, empowered by God’s Spirit to be different.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for restoring us to you.

Beloved – March 7th

Read Matthew 4:5-7

This is My beloved Son.

Jesus emerges from the Jordan, very near the spot where Israel crossed centuries before to enter the Promised Land. Just as God created the waters, now God fashions a new world in Jesus. Just as a dove heralded the end of Noah’s flood, now a dove hovers over Jesus—a sign of hope, the Spirit’s life-giving force. Just as God spoke at Creation, “Let there be light,” now a word is heard from the heavens: “This is my Beloved Son.”

With Jesus we are in a whole new world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his [beloved] Son” (John 3:16). You, too, are beloved. Isn’t this the truth we miss (as in Kathy Mattea’s song, “Standin’ knee deep in a river, dyin’ of thirst”)? God is “pleased” with you not because of some pleasingness in you, but because of the gift of God’s grace. You are beloved, even in this cold, calculating world. Invisibly the Spirit descends with power—which you will need, just as much as Jesus needed it for what he had to face.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for sending your beloved Son, so I might know I am beloved. Send the Spirit on me with power.

Tempted by the Devil – March 8th

Read Matthew 4:8-17

[Jesus] fasted forty days and forty nights.

So Jesus is beloved, baptized, gifted with the Spirit and then let directly out into a barrowing, barren zone to be assaulted by the devil himself? We may bat around the question “Does God test us?” But God surely tested Jesus, and for anyone who would stick close the going is rough. Martin Luther believed that being wooed by evil was sign you were in sync with Jesus.

So, for forty days, Jesus chose not to eat when he *could* eat, refusing to turn rocks into bread? How strange to us who try to satisfy every desire! Jesus seemed to intuit that if you satisfy every earthly whim, your deeper craving for God grows numb, and you forget that your deepest hunger is not for “bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3). So Christians choose renunciation, periodic fasts – not to be miserable, but to discover our hunger for God, our dependence upon God.

Prayer: Lord, are you leading me into a difficult place? May you alone be my food, my sustenance; keep me hungry for you alone.

Sword of the Spirit – March 9th

Read Matthew 4:18-21

You shall not tempt the Lord your God.

Jesus’ combat with the devil mirrors Israel’s testing in the wilderness. They grumbled and plunged into idolatry. Fortunately for us all, Jesus passed the test they failed. Notice how Jesus responds to temptation, to evil, not with his own brains or muscle, but with Scripture. Ready with a verse for any occasion, Jesus was armed with “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17), knowing the Bible isn’t something “nice” or “spiritually neat.” It’s a matter of life and death, of having half a chance to fend off evil or the seductive lure of our culture. So we constantly read, reread, memorize, and make the Scripture the spectacles through which we see the world.

But how we use Scripture matters. The devil himself quotes from the Bible (Psalm 91:11-12) – but he is *using* the Bible for his selfish purpose, not letting himself be *used* by the Bible, letting it perform its corrective surgery.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the Bible. I promise you I will know it more thoroughly and rely on it in times of duress. Use your Word to press me into your service.

The Ring of Power – March 10th

Read Matthew 4:19-25

You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only you shall serve.

An intriguing plot twist in *The Lord of the Rings* is that not even the good (Frodo, Boromir, Gandalf) can wield power without being corrupted by it. America is all about being big more powerful than anybody else; but are we aware of the dark perils that inevitably accompany power?

Jesus himself refuses rule over the earth! Jesus “did not count equality with God and thing to be grasped, but emptied himself” (Philippians 2:6). Our downfall is when we try to be God instead of letting God be God (Genesis 3:5). The more stuff and personal clout we accumulate, the graver our spiritual danger.

Notice the devil “departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). Evil lurks, waiting for an opening. But Jesus’ ministry *can* now begin and he can call us to repent and be faithful, for he *did* maintain his focused obedience under severe assault.

Prayer: Lord, make us wary of power and shiny things. Thank you for Jesus’ refusal to succumb. We pray for him to live in us so we may turn 180 degrees from the devil.

Called by Jesus – March 11th

Read Matthew 8:1-17

Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.

Archeologists have discovered a first century fishing boat by the Sea of Galilee – one Peter, Andrew, James, and John probably passed or even boarded. They were fishermen by trade – until Jesus said “Follow me.”

Notice they did not ask, “Where?” or “What’s in it for us?” or “What will happen?” And notice Jesus did not tell, and neither did he say, “Great to meet you, have a great life fishing, see you later.” Sometimes

we miss where Jesus is leading us because we are too controlling, too calculating. Maggie Ross defined faith as “a willingness for whatever.” What these fishermen discover is their calling, which is different from career. Career is about climbing up, getting ahead, filling a resume, dollars, and position. But calling is doing what God wants you to do, asking how your work contributes to the common good; moral purpose is involved, and sacrifice is required.

Prayer: Lord, what are you calling me to do? Where do you want me to go? today? Or for the rest of my life? My only goal is to be sent by you, and so to be near you.

Immediately – March 12th

Read Matthew 8:18-27

Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

Peter and Andrew left their nets – their livelihood, schedule, security – *immediately*. James and John left not only their livelihood but their beloved father, Zebedee – *immediately*. But you and I? We wait, postpone, plot to do something for God some day when it’s convenient, when the kids are older, when work is less stressful, when the Daytime clears...Do you ever wonder if Jesus tried a few other fishermen along the shore before he got to these four? Were there others who clung to their nets, stuck with Dad, couldn’t fathom leaving all they had labored to build up?

Following Jesus is everything. To pursue him, the disciples had to put down their nets, which were too bulky to drag along. What do you need to put down? To follow Jesus, you have to drop something you’re clutching, mark something off your calendar, turn off TV, leave the office earlier, scratch a hobby, cancel some amusements – for the sake of joyful obedience.

Prayer: Lord, what do you want me to put down so I can follow you? Today, now?

He Healed All Their Diseases – March 13th

Read: Matthew 15:1-16

[Jesus] cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick.

Why would Jesus hush reports of his healing? Perhaps he sensed that people would pin their fantasies on him, that the unscrupulous would devise plans to capitalize on his wizardry.

Jesus performed miracles to reveal the truth about his mission- which wasn’t so everybody could be *healthy*, but so people might be *saved*. Each healing is a clue, an invitation to God’s future when death, not just illness, will be vanquished.

Does God heal? Yes, but apparently only on occasion. So why pray? Madeleine L'Engle, remembering her prayers for her husband who died of cancer, wrote, "Prayer is love, and love is never wasted. Surely the prayers have sustained me. Perhaps there will be unexpected answers to these prayers, answers I may not even be aware of for years. But they are not wasted. They are not lost. I do not know where they have gone, but I believe that God holds them, hands outstretched to receive them, like precious pearls."

Prayer: Lord, bring healing, bring salvation. Gather up these pearls into you love.

Perfect Storm – March 14th

Read Matthew 14:1-13

What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?

Following Jesus seems impossibly difficult. Apparently insensitive to family duties, Jesus owned nothing, had no place to lay his head. No wonder we hold back: we have a mortgage, even if he didn't. We love our families, Jesus asks for way too much.

Why should we follow Jesus? He was not just another teacher, or a superb person. "Even the winds and the sea obey him" (Matthew 8:27). Jesus channeled the power that created the world that drove the wind that brought calm out of chaos. "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10).

We not only *should* follow Jesus. We *can* follow Jesus. He is one with the Creator who hurled the universe into being, who cradles you beating heart in his hand, who will be after everything else is history. He sweeps us up into the adventure of the impossible. "Always aim for the impossible; if we lower our goal, we diminish our effort" (Dorothy Day). It's impossibly difficult- but not for Jesus.

Prayer: Save us, Lord' we are perishing. We will follow you wherever you go.

Sent into the World – March 15th

Read Matthew 14:14-21

[Jesus] called to him his disciples and gave them authority.

Jesus gave his disciples authority to do startling things – to continue what Jesus began. We are sent to be (literally) the body of Christ, his hands and feet on earth. We have authority when we stick close to what he was about' we fritter that authority away when we hatch plans of our own making.

The disciples, no possessions, no budget: they were totally dependent upon God. St. Francis took this literally, becoming poor to reach the poor, trusting God fully for whatever was needed. But most often the church has relied on buildings, playing it safe, being sure we have backup provisions; perhaps this is why we limp along as a pale imitation of what we could be.

Following Jesus is hard. But everything we've ever done in life that is meaningful was hard. Whatever is easy is trivial; when we struggled, when we didn't think we'd get there, when we had to count on each other, when we dared the impossible, deep meaning was discovered.

Prayer: Lord, send me. I won't squander authority but playing it safe. I know it will be hard and thank you for that.

John the Baptist Arrested – March 16th

Read Matthew 14:22-23

Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison.

There are six Herods in the Bible, all brutal, paranoid megalomaniacs. This Herod (Antipas) slept with his brother's wife; an immoral act that embroiled Palestine in was with his real wife's father, the king of Arabia. John the Baptist (who had already stirred Herod's jealousy) railed against this debauchery and was imprisoned and beheaded after a seductive dance by Herodias's daughter.

This gruesome scene reveals what can happen to those who speak the truth. Jesus will suffer the same fate as his kinsman John. Countless martyrs through history have faced murderous threats, embracing death with a stunning joyfulness, feeling one with Christ, sharing his destiny. In Robert Bolt's powerful drama about St. Thomas More being beheaded for denouncing Henry VIII's relationship with Anne Boleyn we read this question: "Dare we enter the kingdom with ease when our Lord entered with so much pain?"

Prayer: Lord, I know that suffering is involved when I follow you closely. Remind me of a holy fellowship with you, John, and martyrs.

Loaves and fishes – March 17th

Read Matthew 15:21-28

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

How do you view miracle stories? Divine intervention, explainable rationally, or symbolic metaphors of spiritual truth? Can't there be some intersection of these three? Something startling happened which is why Jesus drew awestruck mobs. We might evaluate what happened differently today; but whatever happened, it had symbolic importance or it wouldn't have been reported.

In John's version, Jesus calls himself "the bread of life, the bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:35-41). For John and Matthew, this miracle is a foretaste of how we are fed spiritually in the Lord's Supper.

Notice Jesus' reply to the disciples. The crowds are hungry? Then you give them something to eat! Doesn't Jesus say the same to us? People in our world are hungry. Give them something to eat! Even if we think we have limited resources, we can give something. The smallest gifts multiply by grace.

Prayer: Lord. You are our bread; we will give.

Peter and Water – March 18th

Read Matthew 16:13-17

O you of little faith, why did you doubt?

Even today, perilous storms descend swiftly on the Sea of Galilee' boats capsize, sailors scramble for cover. The disciples are caught in a life-threatening storm. Jesus calmly walks to them on the water; Peter joins him, understandably sinking for a few moments. Is this story real? Could Jesus (and Peter!) walk on water? The disciples shouted, "It's a ghost!"

Clearly, this story symbolizes the life of faith. We are invited to something risky; dangerous storms assail us. Who could blame us for sinking? But if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we move forward.

Jesus fusses at Peter for having "little faith." Isn't faith something you either have or don't have? But we can enlarge our faith, grow in faith. You may never have "massive faith," but you can have "more faith.": Jesus "went up the mountain by himself to pray." If Jesus needed regular solitude and conversation with God, don't we?

Prayer: Lord, come to us. Get us out of the boat looking toward you. Grow my faith.

Canaanite Woman – March 19th

Read Matthew 17:1-8

Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

After debating with some Pharisees, Jesus drifted away to Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite pleaded with Jesus to help her daughter. Notice her words: "Have mercy on *me*." If you've loved someone who is suffering, you understand that you bear in yourself a desperate need for mercy, not only for the loved one, but for yourself. Jesus shockingly ignores her, then, coldly announces his mission is only to the Jews, adding "the children's bread isn't just for the dogs." Jesus *did* focus on Jews, but not just for their benefit. Their mission was to save everybody else, so Jesus came to renew Israel in its mission to people like this woman.

She refuses to be denied; cleverly saying she'll accept crumbs off the table like a dog! Jesus admires her "great" faith (in contrast to Peter's "little" faith!) and heals her daughter. This is a real event, but haven't we all prayed earnestly for help, only to be met with silence, the odd feeling that God turns a cold shoulder? We press on, and our faith is enlarged.

Prayer: Lord, have mercy on me and those I love. Crumbs off your table will do just fine.

Who Do You Say that I Am? - March 20th

Read Matthew 26:6-13

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

On a retreat far north in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" The crowds had whispered fantasies that he was some prophet back from the grave. Peter answers correctly: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." "Christ" isn't Jesus' last name, but the Greek translation "Messiah", befuddling, since he turned out to be the opposite of what Scripture readers expected. Instead of crushing his foes, he washed their feet; instead of rounding up the holy, he befriended tax collectors and prostitutes; instead of ruling with an iron fist, he let his fists be nailed to a cross.

"Son of the living God": Jesus is not just Israel's Messiah; somehow he participates in the very being of God. Peter hadn't figured this out yet. The facts don't add up to the deep confession of the heart that Jesus is the ultimate One. To understand Jesus requires God's revelation, inspiration, and the hard lesson of experience, at which Peter will flounder in his new role.

Prayer: You are Christ, the Son of the living God.

Transfiguration – March 21st

Read Matthew 26:14-21

[Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.

The disciples were awestruck by a profound experience of Jesus' glory. Jesus was transfigured (the Greek is *metamorphosis!*); they were dazzled not merely by the sight of a glowing Jesus, but also Moses and Elijah, who'd been dead for centuries. "This is my beloved Son."

The story has symbolic power: Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). This transfiguration is God's answer to the gloomy announcement that Jesus would suffer and die. Yes, God enters into our mortality; we never suffer alone. But God doesn't embrace our mortality just to wallow around in it with us. God came down to do something about our suffering, to transform us into something glorious, shimmering, heavenly selves enjoying the company of saints long departed from earth.

And our metamorphosis is also for today. Everything hangs on whether we do as God's voice from heaven declared; "Listen to him!"

Prayer: Lord, we will listen to you.

Something Beautiful for God – March 22nd

Read Matthew 26:22-25

She has done a beautiful thing to me.

With throngs of pilgrims crowding Jerusalem for Passover, Jesus stayed with friends in a village nearby, Bethany. Typically for Jesus, he stayed in the home of a former leper: another outcast loved by Jesus! During dinner, Jesus is approached by a woman. An invited guest? An intruder? She pours oil from an alabaster flask onto his head, unsightly to us, shocking to them. This kind of oil was used to prepare a corpse for burial; and oil was also poured onto the head of each new king in Israel. Does she sense he will be killed soon? Is she symbolizing for everyone that he is the Messiah ("anointed one")?

The disciples are indignant: why this waste? The ointment could have been sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor!

Jesus recognizes her love, her extravagant gesture of devotion, pouring out what is immensely precious, nothing being too dear to withhold from Jesus. Such boundless devotion is called "beautiful" by Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for stingy devotion. I want to do something beautiful for you.

Judas's Betrayal – March 23rd

Read Matthew 26:31-35

They paid [Judas] thirty pieces of silver.

What a contrast Judas is to the woman who pours oil on Jesus! She unselfishly lavishes what is precious on Jesus; Judas wants to capitalize on Jesus, to use him to improve his lot in life, and betrays him into violent hands.

What would 30 pieces of silver buy? For one thing a slave! (Zechariah 11:12) Is Judas saying Jesus is worth no more than a slave? Or does the payoff ironically indicate that Judas is the one enslaved to his own greed?

Judas should haunt us. There is a dark side to discipleship. Even those closest to Jesus are capable of betrayal; friendship perverts itself into hatred. Over the Last Supper, they all ask, "Is it I?" Could be. In fact, it is I, it is you: we are all Judases who try to use Jesus for our own purposes. We all run when the going gets rough. We hand Jesus over to be crucified.

But notice that Jesus feeds Judas the Last Supper; Jesus washes his feet! Jesus dies, not just *because* of the sin of Judas, but *for* all of us who sin like Judas.

Prayer: Lord, forgive my self-destructive betrayals of you.

Gethsemane – March 24th

Read Matthew 26:36-46

My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, you will be done.

In the Garden of Eden, by their actions Adam and Eve foolishly told God "Not your will, but my will be done" (Genesis 3). Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, courageously and faithfully told God "Not my will, but your will be done."

How difficult was it for Jesus to pray this, knowing Judas was running reconnaissance from the Romans and that a squadron of soldiers was on their way to treat him cruelly? We should erase our fantasy image of a placid Jesus kneeling serenely, as if offering up bedtime prayers. Jesus prayed in knee-buckling, gut-wrenching agony. There was bodily heaving, intense perspiration, screaming, sobs (Luke 22:44).

That night on the Mount of Olives, Jesus was not resigning himself fatalistically. To say “Your will be done” is not passive. This prayer is harder: it says “Whatever you want me to do, I will embrace your will, I will go, I will do whatever you need me to do so I can be used by you.”

Prayer: Lord, not my will, but your will be done.

Jesus Is Arrested –March 25th

Read Matthew 26:47-56

[Judas] had given them a sign, saying, “The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him.”

The tragic irony of Judas’s kiss: a sign of friendship twisted into a signal for soldiers. Yet even in this ugly moment, Jesus is totally on message.

His disciples rather heroically wish to take up arms to defend him, but Jesus discourages not just their violence, but all violence: if you resort to armed force, you will be repaid with armed force. Hadn’t Jesus taught them (and us) not to resist one who is evil, but to turn the other cheek (Mathew 5:39).

Then, with calm command, Jesus quizzes the posse, implying “I was no threat; I have only been good, teaching about God. Why come at me violently? But Jesus understands that he was sent into the world to suffer for and redeem the very people who misunderstand him, who reject his peaceful love.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for Jesus’ immense calm in the face of evil and for his courageous commitment to be treated roughly so he could be the salvation of us who hurt others and are hurt by others.

Caiaphas – March 26th

Read Matthew 26:57-68

Those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest.

Archaeologists have unearthed an ossuary in which the bones of Caiaphas were buried. We may sympathize with Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin; delicate maneuvering was required to keep Judaism alive and the nation at peace under the shadow of Roman rule. Certainly some Jewish leaders, including Caiaphas, saw Jesus as dangerous politically, and much of what was said about Jesus struck them as blasphemous. But no Christian should harbor the slightest anti-Semitic feeling *today* because of what a few Jews were involved in 2,000 years ago.

What should make us feel awestruck today is how Jesus did not plunge into debate, refused to flee, nobly bearing what was doled out; he was “despised and rejected... Surely he has borne our griefs/and

carried our sorrows;/he was wounded for our transgressions. The LORD has laid on him/the iniquity of us all, yet he opened not his mouth; /like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:3-7)

Prayer: Lord, I hear the depth of your love in the silence of Jesus.

Pilate – March 27th

Read Matthew 27:11-26

The governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea for a decade, troubled times that featured not just the death of Jesus, but revolts against Rome, pagan atrocities and economic tumult. His job was to keep the peace, and he did so forcibly. Rome had to remove him from office, so cruel was his reign.

What an impossible spot he was in when pressed to get rid of Jesus. To let him go might provoke a revolt; Pilate’s own wife pleaded Jesus’ innocence; to execute him posed problems. Try as he might to wash his hands of responsibility, he is as enmeshed in humanity’s rejection of Jesus as the priests, the crowd, the Romans, and the disciples.

Have you found yourself in Pilate’s dilemma: whatever choice you make seems wrong? What is the tragic quirk in life that wedges us in impossible spots? But notice Jesus does not lash out at Pilate. God pities us in our dilemmas. He loves us, compromised as we are. We washed our hands, not of Jesus, but of our inevitable guilt.

Prayer: Lord, come to me in my decisions.

Mockery and Crucifixion – March 28th

Read Matthew 27:27-44

When they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, and put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him.

Who was responsible for Jesus’ death? The Jews? The Romans? You and me? The Jews hand him over to the Romans, the Romans hand him back to the Jews. No one wishes to be responsible. That is why they are all guilty. He rolls like a ball between the competitors, held by none” (Hans urs von Balthasar). Instead of “Who was responsible for Jesus’ death?” we might ask “Who was forgiven in Jesus’ death?”

Those who mocked him told the truth: he is the King, he saves others! When Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross, God enveloped us in a love that even death could not defeat. So let us pray with St. Francis:

Prayer: "My Lord Jesus Christ, Two graces I ask of you before I die: that I may feel, in my soul and body, as far as possible, that sorrow which you underwent in the hour of your most bitter passion; [and] that I may feel in my heart, as far as possible, the abundance of love with which you were inflamed willingly to undergo such a great passion for us sinners."

Maundy Thursday – March 29th

Read Matthew 26:17-30

Take, eat, this is my body.

The streets of Jerusalem were jammed with pilgrims from all over the world. Passover was the zenith of life, when Jews celebrated God's salvation; around a sacred meal they told the stories from Exodus and ate foods symbolic of God's deliverance and their freedom.

Remembering how lambs were slaughtered for the sacrifices, as the disciples sipped red wine and broke flesh colored bread. Jesus glimpsed in Israel's historic spiritual practice images of what would be his fate: his Holy, devoted body broken, his blood shed, the Lamb of God sacrificed.

In worship, we mimic Jesus' actions; we repeat his words, we believe that somehow, through an unexplainable spiritual miracle, Jesus is especially present when we share the Lord's Supper and most poignantly on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

Prayer: Lord, my deepest hunger is for you. Thank you for the Lord's Supper and all it signifies. Use bread and wine to transform me and your children into your Body on Earth; and together we long for that heavenly banquet when we will enjoy your fellowship.

Good Friday - Torn Curtain and Earthquake – March 30th

Read Matthew 27:51-54

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

Jesus had cried. "My God, why have you forsaken me?" The executioners had mocked Jesus. The moment Jesus breathed his last, God finally answered with public, deafening power.

The curtain of the Temple, visible to the crowds, was woven in Babylon, embroidered with blue, scarlet, and purple linen thread, a tapestry beautifully picturing heaven. This treasured fabric 80 feet high! Miraculously ripped. A symbol of heaven being opened to us because of Jesus' death? Or judgment on a temple no longer needed?

Then there was an earthquake and people long in the grave were up and about! Jesus hadn't been raised himself just yet! We may recall Lazarus (John 11), a hint in advance of the Resurrection to come, a startling sign that when he was crucified, Jesus was not merely suffering tragically, but was engaged in combat against the powers of death itself.

Prayer: Lord, I am speechless when I think of the curtain and the earthquake. I want to be as powerfully affected by the death of Jesus.

Holy Saturday - Burial of Jesus – March 31st

Read Mathew 27:55-56

Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can."

Late in the day, the sun sinking below the horizon as if in sorrow, Jesus is granted a dignified burial. Who is there?

Ironically, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, who earlier (and foolishly) asked if her sons could sit at Jesus' right and left hand in glory (Matthew 20:20-23). Now she understands what proximity to Jesus means and her sons are no where to be found.

More irony: the stone-fisted Pilate, whose work was law, directed a detachment of soldiers to make Jesus' tomb "as secure as you can." Of course, all the combined military forces of history couldn't keep Jesus in that tomb outside Jerusalem.

But for now, Holy Saturday, Jesus is dead. "Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?" In our imaginations we are there: we weep with the women over the death of one so pure, noble, beautiful. And we wait, we hope.

Prayer: Lord, we grieve the suffering of your Son, but blink back the tears. Knowing nothing could contain your Son for long.

Easter Sunday – Easter – April 1st

Read Matthew 28:11-10

He is not here; for he has risen.

For Matthew, Easter morning was not placid. An earthquake, a blindingly white angel, a massive stone rolling, armed soldiers paralyzed with fright.

“He is not here. He is risen.” Never in history has anyone been so happy *not* to find the person being looked for! They expected him to do what all dead people do. But this one got loose and didn’t venture all that far. They see him and hear him. What could they do but worship him?

What can we do but worship him? “You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up, spit at him or kill him; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great Human teacher. He has not left that open to us” (C. S. Lewis).

Prayer: Lord, you were on the loose for 2,000 years ago and you are still on the loose, where we least expect you, where we need you the most. We worship you, follow you, belong to you.



