

Renewal

A Lenten reflection on the Baptismal Covenant

EARTH & ALTAR

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Ash Wednesday

BAILEY PICKENS

The readings given in the lectionary for Ash Wednesday offer a portrait of tensions in scripture and consequently in faith: God's judgment is to be feared and, also, God's mercy trusted and called upon. Suffering may be judgment or, conversely, an opportunity to commend oneself to God and to people. Humility and repentance are to be done publicly and communally but, at the same time, not performed for social approbation. Today we might add more: sin as structure or as personal wickedness, the toll of repentance on one's sense of self-worth, the recognition of wrong and the weight of the word "sinner."

Yet Ash Wednesday, even with its calls to mortification of pride, examination of conscience, beating of the breast, and trembling before the wrath of God, is good for us: and because salutary, a mercy. Even Joel, the prophet whose words selected today are most acutely aware of the mortal danger set to swallow Israel if God's people do not repent, urges his people to change by reminding them of God's goodness and tender disposition toward people. Justice and mercy are fundamentally the same, grounded in the goodness of God. In facing justice (easier said than done!), we see mercy. In admitting the illness, we can open our hands for the cure.

There are harmful ways to treat a wound, and it's true that many have "suffered many things of many physicians... and [been] nothing bettered" (Mark 5:26, KJV). A real question to raise is whether the repentance being suggested by the church, or the world, is turning toward the fast Almighty God chooses or bowing the head like a bulrush because a posture of misery is supposed to be holy. The invitation and exhortation of Ash Wednesday, the leap into Lent, is to come not before an earthly physician or curate of souls but rather before the true Healer, willing to try, begin, take just one step toward telling the truth of hurt and illness of the soul.

This journey is good, if potentially painful. It is an opportunity to bring up the broken bits we carefully avoid or even cherish so that they can be washed and mended, to speak of how evil in the world and evil in our hearts share a root. Error of all kinds (selfishness, pride, ignorance, lack of attention, avoidance, the desire not to rock a boat), like a wound or an illness, festers if it is not exposed to light and air and medicine. It will sicken us and others.

Like those who fast for praise or seek righteous judgments while oppressing workers, if we do not take the vertiginous look down into the reality of ourselves, we're neither relating rightly to God nor living honestly in the world. Better, then, harder but much better, to submit these forty days to the mortifying ordeal of being known, by God and by ourselves. Because what comes after the terrible honesty is "treasure in heaven": the health to receive the rewards of being loved—really truly, eternally.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

NOAH STANSBURY

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” We begin our journey through the Baptismal Covenant with these words shared by millions of Christians every day as we gather for prayer. It’s a simple, straightforward statement, and not a bad place for a Christian to start a summary of their faith. I believe in God. Sure. Of course. The question of belief itself, though, is less straightforward. More and more people are finding reasons not to believe in God, and every day it seems there are more and more reasons to question just what we think God is up to. I often encounter people who want to discuss the intellectual basis for belief. What is the evidence for a supernatural entity who is pulling the strings of human affairs? In the face of the evil we see thriving all around us, why should such a being be considered good? What do spirituality and science have to do with each other?

Those are all worthy questions, but I’m not sure that they are the kind that the Apostles’ Creed is trying to answer. In our own day, when belief has been popularly reduced to what we find reasonable based on evidence and emotions, the “I believe” statements of the creed might be better rendered as “I trust.” As Christians, what do we fundamentally trust in when deciding how to order our lives? How have the generations of faithful before us answered that question?

I trust in God, the Father Almighty;

I trust in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord;

I trust in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, and the communion of saints.

Rather than framing the creed as a statement of intellectual proposals, how does it sound as a statement of what we are building our lives around? We will spend the next several weeks reflecting on the Episcopal Church’s core summary of what Christian living means, and we begin with a statement of trust. The promises that follow provide a pattern of how we, with God’s help, let that trust play out in concrete ways. Seeing the creed this way emphasizes the dynamic, relational nature of Christian faith. Now and then we will need to check in and see how we are letting that trust shape our

lives, and where that trust needs to be healed. In her memoir *Still*, Lauren Winner relates the story of a friend who was approaching the end of her confirmation class and feeling unsure about publicly affirming her belief in the words of the creed. Her father assured her, “What you promise when you are confirmed... is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise when you are confirmed is that that is the story you will wrestle with forever.” Let this Lenten season be one of holy wrestling, a close encounter with the Creator of heaven and earth who desires to earn your trust.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

MORGAN BELL

On Wednesday, we gathered before God and had dust smeared across our brows. It's a jarring practice, admittedly, but it cuts to the core of what the human is: transient, contingent *dust*. This is our stature before God, "for he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). But we didn't simply reacquaint ourselves with the facts of mortality and frailty. These truths, important though they are, are nevertheless generic. In fear and trembling, Christians soberly acknowledged our heritage as Adam's offspring—children of inspired earth: bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, dust of his dust. We are tethered to a genealogy of sin and destruction. Our lungs are choked with dust from the ruin and debris of our primal parent's doing. How, then, can it be that Adam's children cough out their creedal confession: *I believe in God the Father?*

The Father knows well our frame of dust, our Adamic lineage. But the psalmist presents this fact against a deeper reality: that "as a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). Looking upon us, creatures of dust, the Father claims us as the Father's own. The Father looks upon us with deep compassion, moved with pity for the wounded children of Adam. The Father sends upon us that matchless grace: the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people" (1 Peter 2:10).

By that Spirit who forgives sinners unto saintly communion through the church, we are freely given a share in Jesus' unique sonship. Christ alone is the Father's true Son. Christ alone can call upon God as "Father" by rights. On our own, Adam's children—born of the dust—can claim no such right. But like Jacob, we receive the firstborn's rightful blessing; having been clothed with the Lamb, we are reckoned as true children of God. For according to the Father's great mercy, "he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1 Peter 1:3–4).

This is the power of our new life in Christ: that we children of Adam are liberated from bondage to decay to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:21). We join the Ascended Son's eternal prayer to "our Father" as we await Jesus' return at Power's right hand. We

gratefully receive our new inheritance in Christ—the Father’s gift of judgment and forgiveness, Spirit and water, bread and wine, life and hope. Adam’s hurting children dare to claim all this because “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). Just so, we children of dust are bold to cry and confess our faith in God the Father because even from debris and dust, the Holy Spirit is able to raise up children to the Father in Jesus Christ.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

ROBERT MACSWAIN

Creeds are controversial. I mean that in two senses: first, that they emerge out of various past controversies (often intense and sometimes even violent) and seek to settle them in some decisive manner; and second, that their historic, controversial origins make some people wary of them even now. This wariness is especially acute in cultures (such as our own) that are inherently suspicious of the past and/or anxious about maintaining individual integrity against collective conformity.

Because of this twin sense of “controversial,” some Christians have eschewed creeds altogether, such as the Baptists in their many varieties. This is why when Austin Farrer (1904–68) moved from the Baptist faith of his childhood to membership in the Church of England, his Baptist minister-theologian father Augustine argued against this shift in allegiance by telling him that creeds (such as the Nicene and Apostles’) “merely divide.” This is indeed a common view. But Austin replied: “To your statement that creeds merely divide, I should reply that nothing else can conceivably unite. My creed is really the only precious thing I possess and certainly the only thing it is worth anyone’s while to borrow from me.”

The young Farrer’s creative reframing of the issue is most helpful. Creeds divide, yes, but they also unite, and Austin asks his father, What could meaningfully unite humans aside from shared belief? This was a theme to which he returned much later in his brilliant work of devotional doctrine, *Lord I Believe: Suggestions for Turning the Creed into Prayer*. “No dogma deserves its place unless it is prayable,” he begins, “and no Christian deserves [their] dogmas who does not pray them.” The baptismal creed is thus necessary not just to shape our belief but to guide our prayers, for “the creed defines the contours of that world on which faith trains her eyes.”

But in Lent we focus not just on belief and prayer but on repentance, and Farrer sees the creed as a resource here as well. We are like trees, he says, and the life of God flows like sap through us, “but the tree has grown so crooked and is so deformed and cankered in its parts, that I should be at a loss to distinguish the divine power among the misuses of the powers given.” So “I take refuge in that image of God which we have described as branded from outside upon the bark. Here is a token I can trust, for he branded it

there himself; he branded it upon the stock of man when he stretched out his hands and feet and shed his precious blood. The pattern of the brand was traced on me by those who gave the creed to me; God will deepen it and burn it into me, as I submit my thoughts to him in meditation.”

This Lent, may we therefore meditate deeply on the doctrines of the creed, and may they burn themselves into our hearts and minds, conforming us to the pattern of Christ.

First Sunday in Lent

EMILY MELLOTT

The offering of first fruits described in the book of Deuteronomy is a ritual of identity. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor,” each person says, offering a basket of fruit and grains at God’s altar. It’s a way of embedding one’s own self in the whole story of the people of Israel: *I am one whom God led through strange lands and strange times, who experienced the awe and terror and miracles of the exodus from Egypt, the experience of God’s fulfilled promises in a homeland of abundance.*

This is who I am.

We practice that same ritual, that same basic narrative, when we are baptized or renew our baptismal covenant.

“I believe in God...” we each say.

Reciting the creed, we tell the story of our creation, of experiencing the coming of God into the world as Jesus, of the awe and terror and joy of passion and resurrection, and the fulfillment of God’s promises in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. We tell this story in the first person, saying “I believe” not as a statement of intellectual acceptance, but as a recognition of our own self, my story, in these truths.

Through the story we tell, we participate in the experience of God through the ages, and that shapes who we are. It’s our identity, and that identity leads us to the behaviors, and the sense of self and community, that sustain us in the time of testing .

Like Jesus, whose imperviousness to the devil’s suggestions in the wilderness is rooted in the identity revealed at his own baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus does not need to prove his self-saving power with loaves of bread, or gain the recognition of the world, or test his relationship with God by leaping from the temple into a safety net of angels. He already knows who he is; whose he is. Jesus’ habit of finding his purpose, his self, in the word and worship and trust of God gives the devil no leverage.

Our baptismal commitments to community and sacrament and tradition, to repentance, proclamation, serving Christ and shaping the world, are the habits that both express and reinforce our identity as God’s. And

they are our answer to the devil's and the world's suggestions that we use our power for self-serving ends.

“The church is changing / dying / political / boring,” the devil says to me or to you. “You can do better for yourself! Make your own bread!” And we respond “I’ll continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers...”

Monday in the First Week of Lent

KARA SLADE

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers? *I will, with God's help.*

Every time we witness a baptism in our churches, and every time we renew our Baptismal Covenant at occasions throughout the year, we are asked this question. Our response, as it is to each question of the Baptismal Covenant, is "I will, with God's help." As I've recently reflected on what it means to do this, and what it means to do it with God's help, I've been struck by the two senses in which the word continue works in this question.

1. We continue in the apostolic faith and the sacraments in the sense that we are taking part in something that has been here for thousands of years, and that will continue long after we have left this mortal life. Tradition, as Jaroslav Pelikan writes, is the living faith of the dead. It is the blessing of knowing that we are not burdened with making it all up for ourselves, having instead been given a gift that began with the apostles and continues to this day. We continue in the life of prayer and sacrament that stretches across both time and geography, as we live in that space between our baptism and the communion that is always yet to come.

2. With God's help, we continue in the breaking of bread and in the prayers when continuing seems too hard to countenance. Sometimes we feel distant from God, sometimes we fall out of the habits of worship, sometimes doubt or despair wraps its tentacles around us and won't let go. But with God's help, we continue. My former Duke colleague Lauren Winner writes about a time after her marriage ended, when all she could do was sit in church and let the prayers of others carry her. I think perhaps we have all had those times of hard-won continuing—because they are perfectly normal.

In the end, this practice of continuing in the teaching, life, prayers, and sacraments of the church is a matter of mutual carrying and being carried. We carry each other when we can't do it alone, we carry the faith to those around us, and we are sustained above all by the grace of God and by the examples of that great cloud of witnesses who have gone before.

Tuesday in the First Week of Lent

BENJAMIN CROSBY

If someone asked you to share a Bible verse that describes the Christian way of life, and the Anglican way of life in particular, what would you tell them? For myself, I'd point them to Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." This text forms the basis of the question from the Baptismal Covenant we're looking at this week.

So let's unpack it! First, in our promise to continue in the apostles' teaching, we are making a promise about what we believe. We promise to follow the teaching of the apostles, which we find contained in the Bible, the Word of God. As Anglicans, we read the Bible alongside the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, reading the Bible with the whole community of Christians who have found God there. Might God be calling you to deeper engagement with scripture in this season, inside and outside of worship?

We are asked to continue not just in the apostles' teaching but also in the apostles' fellowship: that is, the church, the Body of Christ. In answering "yes" when asked this question, we promise to gather together for worship, service, and community with other redeemed sinners, trusting that the Spirit will use each of us to smooth each other's edges like rocks in a tumbler. Where might God be challenging you to participate more fully in the apostles' fellowship?

Together, in the church, we redeemed sinners come together to break bread. Since the time of the apostles, Christians have ritually eaten bread and drunk wine in thanksgiving, as a participation in Christ's Body and Blood, and in memory of his saving death. Every time we celebrate the eucharist, we are continuing in that breaking of bread. This Lent, prayerfully consider taking some time the night before receiving communion to repent of your sins, commit to amend your life, and thank God for all his gifts. You might find it enriches your appreciation and understanding of the gift of Jesus given to you in the bread and wine.

And, finally, we come together in the church to offer prayers: not just individually, but in common. This, perhaps, is where Anglican distinctiveness comes in. If there is any Anglican charism, I'm convinced it is in returning the daily prayer of the church to all people, rather than making it

the preserve of clergy or monastics. Whether together in the church or alone in a prayer corner, you too can open up your Book of Common Prayer, or download the Venite app, and live into this promise.

Dear friends in Christ, as you walk through Lent, how can you more deeply engage with these basics of Christian practice? I've tried to offer a few suggestions; feel free to add your own. And how can you invite others into that pattern of life—and above all into the incredible reality to which this pattern points, life with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

Wednesday in the First Week of Lent

JULIET RICHARDSON

You are yourselves what you receive. (St. Augustine¹)

I open my eyes.

And survey across the chancel my fellow sojourners here on earth. Do we all not know what we have just professed, that we were baptized in Christ, and were buried with Him, and with Him, have been given new life?

Perhaps. But that was once, and for many of us a long time ago. But what about now? What sustains us every day until we breathe our last, and come into the lap of God?

The Celebrant breaks the consecrated Bread.

Do we know what awaits us? What we are about to do?

That hand in hand as members of the Body of Christ, each uniquely and wonderfully made, we are, as One Body, together, about to join hands and jump into God?

I open my palms.

And in them, I behold Christ's body. It has been broken for me. Or should I say, it has been, is now, and will forever be opened for us? Is it not an invitation to enter, and behold, as did Julian of Norwich, "the joys of heaven"?

We open our lips.

He so graciously receives us, as we, His redeemed, so thankfully receive Him. And become Him, His Body, the Holy Church, in the world.

We pray, "Grant us gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us."

It is time. We eat. We leap.

I open my heart.

There is a hymn inscribed on it. I wish I knew the melody. It was written some one thousand years ago by a fellow sojourner with God.

But I will sing it as best I can, as my gift to my fellow companions, and as always to give praise and glory to God.

*We awaken in Christ's body,
As Christ awakens our bodies.
There I look down and my poor hand is Christ,
He enters my foot, and is infinitely me.
I move my hand and wonderfully
My hand becomes Christ,
Becomes all of Him.
I move my foot and at once
He appears in a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous to you?
— Then open your heart to Him.
And let yourself receive the one
Who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him,
We wake up inside Christ's body
Where all our body all over,
Every most hidden part of it,
Is realized in joy as Him,
And he makes us utterly real.
And everything that is hurt, everything
That seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
Maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged
Is in Him transformed.
And in Him, recognized as whole, as lovely,
And radiant in His light,
We awaken as the beloved
In every last part of our body.
—Saint Symeon the New Theologian²*

¹Sermon 227, preached on the Holy Day of Easter to the Infantes (i.e. the newly baptized), on the Sacraments, from the collection of Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons (PL 38:1099-2001; trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* 3/6 (Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 254.

²Paraphrase by Stephen Mitchell, *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 38-39, of Symeon's *Erotas*, or Hymns of Divine Eros 15:141-159 based on an unpublished translation by Donald Sheehan, further revised and popularized by Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008), 219-220.

Thursday in the First Week of Lent

CAROLINE CARSON

The “breaking of the bread and the prayers” are both part of the rhythm of the church and of our lives. We are “taken, blessed, broken, and given.” Not only the pulse of the eucharist, it is also a discernable part of our cycle of metaphysical existence and the sequence itself an act of prayer. Haven’t we all felt blessed and broken at various points in our lives? Perhaps exceedingly blessed when we feel secure and happy, and perhaps especially broken when we feel isolated or our body and spirit injured. In the last two years of ongoing pandemic, feeling broken has risen rapidly to the top of the pile of struggles in many places around the world. “Breaking bread and the prayers”—these are the portions that are given and things we actively do. We make a promise to continue in these actions with our words “I will with God’s help.” Breaking bread leads to sharing. Our prayers to God are often for others.

Just as the disciples on the road to Emmaus didn’t recognize Jesus at first and knew him as he was revealed in the breaking of the bread, we too recognize Jesus in ourselves and others as we share our bread, working together for the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ act of breaking bread feeds us spiritually. While our stomachs may be filled with bread and our hearts growing together in community, spiritual nourishment also involves the prayers. Praying involves the process of being emptied of self and leaving room for the richly filling movement of the Holy Spirit. It is in the risks of being genuine in prayer and in breaking bread in community that we become more tightly bound in love. Take a moment to meditate on being a vessel for the Holy Spirit’s love, both through community and in self-emptying.

When we “break bread together on our knees,” as the hymn sings, we fortify our connection with God and with each other. What a privilege! Take a moment and consider how you can break bread together and, by so doing, recognize Jesus in everything you do in community.

What about the times when we break bread and it produces crumbs, or periods when our personal or corporate prayer life lies fallow? There are dusty particles of prayers and fragments of bread. And what of these crumbs and dust? Just as the size of each crumb or how many wafers are on the paten changes neither the presence of Christ nor the essence of the Body

of Christ, the scattered soil of our distracted prayers is still swept together, heard, and treasured by God. We are dust and to dust we shall return. Perhaps we are also precious crumbs as well and will rise into new bread. In Christ, we are made worthy to gather ourselves up from under the table. And by so doing, we experience revival and refreshment.

Friday in the First Week of Lent

BENJAMIN WYATT

Prayer, especially private prayer, is one of the most intensely social of Christian activities.

Perhaps that sentence surprises you; it certainly surprised me. Yet when I was studying the works of the great spiritual masters, I was surprised to find that when they talked about how to pray, they didn't talk about what techniques to use, or what words to say, or how to carve time out of one's day. They talked about avoiding petty feuds and jealousies, living in peace with our neighbors, and about our inward dispositions towards ourselves and others. This is where we begin in prayer—with our social lives.

Our Lord tells us that we should reconcile with each other before approaching the sacramental altar (Matthew 5:23–24). After all, if we are unwilling to reconcile with our neighbor, who is God's image, then we are at some level unwilling to be reconciled to God, and even our most beautiful prayers will not find the grace they seek—because we have already rejected that grace in the form of our neighbor.

Our goal is not to achieve perfect reconciliation in the way that one can achieve one hundred percent on a test. Because reconciliation is about relationship, there is no one right way to reconcile. What's more, because you only have to reconcile when a relationship is strained, reconciliation often doesn't feel very good. It is usually an awkward, uncomfortable process, prone to misunderstandings and false starts. Reconciliation, like prayer and like love, is a way of fumbling in the dark toward another whom, by definition, you cannot fully know.

There is no way out of the fumbling. For as long as we continue in the breaking of bread and the prayers, we shall be unable to avoid the awkwardness and finitude of our social natures. Our relationships with God and others will shape our lives in the pews, in our schools and offices, and even in the innermost depths of our hearts. But take heart. If you can become comfortable with your inevitable fumbblings, you might stumble upon the joy of prayer. After all, it is in our imperfect attempts to find the other we do not yet know that all real intimacy is born. Just as a reconciliation can make a friendship or marriage stronger than it ever was before, so all of our struggles in prayer sow the seeds of true intimacy with God.

Prayer, especially private prayer, is one of the most intensely social activities Christians engage in. It will reveal to us our secret irritations with our neighbors and the unfinished business we had long ago forgotten. It will send us out into the world to reconcile until it is only our bread, and not our hearts, that is broken. In all this, it will train us for the true intimacy with God that Jesus Christ has won for us. May we all come to know its joys.

Saturday in the First Week of Lent

THOM BOYER

We can go it alone. Surely, if the scraggly man we've been watching with the paint-bristle beard can survive seventy-four days above the Arctic Circle by himself, so can we. And the video store clerk with the eyes that seem to look just past us, who absorbed every shimmering frame of every movie contained in that fluorescent den on that rundown street—that clerk just won an Oscar. With enough time and determination, maybe we could too. And did you hear about the self-made tech magnate? They were working out of their garage not that long ago, and look at them now! Maybe someday, that could also be us. These oft-told story fragments entice us; they also lie by omission. The billionaire received a generous loan from their family and would have squandered it without dedicated partners and employees; the wunderkind film director surrounded himself with talented actors, technicians, and writers; the survivalist heeded the words and advice of teachers and instructors, without which they could very well have died. The narrative of rugged individualism persists at the expense of the community, nurturing, and fellowship behind it.

There is no such erasure when it comes to our Baptismal Covenant. We are asked to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers.” The words are lifted from the culmination of the day of Pentecost as recounted in Acts, when three thousand were said to have been baptized and received into the community of the nascent church. The idea must seem alien to us, of committing ourselves as radically as these apostles did, of sharing “all things in common... selling their possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–45). We are called just as they were, to give of ourselves for the betterment of our neighbors—neither self-aggrandizement nor self-effacement, but self-submission. This is our communion, our breaking of bread among one another. The truth of the Baptismal Covenant is that of a fuller picture than we are accustomed to, one that embraces our neighbors and ourselves—because ultimately, we cannot go it alone.

Second Sunday of Lent

TONI ÁLVAREZ

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior... ” These are unexpected words from a man who was said to be a citizen of Rome, the greatest city of the known world at the time, whose Empire was arguably at its height. But Paul was not any Roman citizen but Jewish Christian and one commissioned to preach the good news of that expected Savior, Jesus the Christ. Many of us who will be reading these words on this Sunday are citizens of a world power also and privileged beyond the imagining of the richest Roman. And yet even as the Christians in Philippi, our hope is not in the world that humans make for ourselves. Perhaps we are beginning to see inklings of this as the illusion of security that we used to enjoy is receding. This pandemic has been our companion for the last two years and we cannot say that sickness and death are strangers to us. The words at the imposition of ashes we cannot dismiss as quaint old and symbolic words; rather, they are truths we have had to re-acquaint ourselves with. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Political leaders have failed to bring a coherent and reasonable response, and even if they did so, it would amount to no more than managing sickness and death. Our healing can only come from outside ourselves, and our true belonging is to that reality from which our wholeness proceeds. The good news is that we await a Savior that we already know, one who loved us to the very end, to death and beyond. Jesus, our salvation, is no stranger to our finitude and limitations but embraces us as one of us. Our very dust dwells in the heart of God.

Monday in the Second Week of Lent

JENNIFER REDDALL

Since I am doing confirmations and receptions most Sundays, I get to lead the Baptismal Covenant almost once a week. I already thought it was a central part of my theology when I did it four or five times per year in a congregation, but thirty times a year drops it even deeper in my soul.

I think that in many Episcopal congregations (particularly those that are mostly White, financially secure, and well-educated), despite the actual words of the covenant, what people hear is something more like this:

“Will you do your best to avoid bad things, and if, occasionally, you should happen to accidentally hurt someone’s feelings or do something a little wrong, say you are sorry and move on?”

The genius of this question is that it assumes the reality of evil; it assumes that sin is normative and not reserved for special occasions.

I see sin and evil in our world.

I see sin and evil in our church.

I see sin and evil in myself.

Some Sundays I want to yell “*simul justus et peccator!*”—“at the same time justified and sinner!”—from the pulpit. Admitting to our sin does not make us ineligible for the salvific work of Christ. Admitting our sin and naming evil are critical to our repentance, our amendment of life, and our faith.

Ignoring our sin or, even worse, denying it is what fractures our relationship not just with God, but with our neighbor.

If I did not believe that our sins, that my sins, were powerless in the face of Christ’s sacrifice, I might not want to admit them either. Better to cover them up, hide them, and deny them, than to admit the unforgivable.

But how can we repent and turn away from our major corporate sins of racism or greed or violence without acknowledging their reality? How can we repent and turn away from our major personal sins of selfishness, betrayal, and hard-heartedness if we cannot know that we are all of those things and the beloved and saved child of God?

So this Lent, before we ask ourselves this question from the Baptismal Covenant, there is an even more basic one: do we believe in Christ's power to forgive?

If the answer is no, then there is no need to make this promise. But if the answer is yes—then with God's help, we will repent and return to the Lord.

Tuesday in the Second Week of Lent

ALLIE GRAHAM

Earlier this year I was asked, along with several others, to define “sin” on an index card. At first it seemed like an easy question, but as I wrote, it was like grasping at water. Every definition was too small or too big, limited God’s ability, or put too much ability into the hands of humans. I recall writing something like “a separation from the glory of God”—a deeply insufficient rendering.

We are sinful creatures living in a sinful world. A hopeful, beautiful world that was created by God, through the Word of God, for us.

Each Sunday we repent for things we have done, and we repent for things we have left undone. We repent for those hurts we have caused directly, and we repent for those we have caused through the sinful, harmful structures in which we, and all of humanity, are caught. If we live in the West, we are caught in a cycle in which almost everything we need for our lives is purchased on the lives of those in the Global South. Affordable clothing, produce, seafood, and even flowers are created, raised, or harvested by those living in painful, abusive conditions. Yet the structures in the West do not allow many the resources to shop in places that do not get their wares from these sources. We are stuck in a vicious cycle in which capital is hoarded at the tip-top, with ever-decreasing amounts dripping to the rest of humanity.

This cycle of evil permeates creation, polluting the earth and impoverishing God’s children. Yet we somehow ignore this systemic greed and focus on not using plastic straws.

We can resist being cruel to each other, which is hard enough. Resisting evil, though—resisting a true force which permeates creation—is harder. We must persevere in resisting evil. And it is outside our ability to always succeed.

But what we can do is repent and return to the Lord. As we are called to forgive those who sin against us not seven times but seven times seven times (Matthew 18:22), so can we repent and return to the Lord as often as we sin, knowing that God is there and waiting for us, as a parent with open arms.

Wednesday in the Second Week of Lent

HEATH DEWRELL

One of the most difficult aspects of “resisting evil” is the fact that there are so many sources of “evil” out there—a reality amply attested in the Hebrew Bible. In Hebrew, a single word—*raʿ*—is used both for ordinary things that we would call “bad” and for the human moral state that we typically refer to as “evil.” Unlike in English, there is no distinction in terminology between the two concepts. Thus, unfruitful land (Numbers 13:19), non-potable water (2 Kings 2:19), and rotten figs (Jeremiah 24:2) are all *raʿ*, but so are “wicked” human beings and “evildoers” (Proverbs 11:21; Ezekiel 30:12). Especially problematic for those of us who are committed to resisting evil is that, according to the Hebrew Bible, “badness/evil” is built into our human nature. Both our “heart/mind” (Hebrew *lēb*; Jeremiah 3:17; 7:24; 11:8; 16:12; 19:12) and its “inclination” (Hebrew *yēser*; Genesis 6:5; 8:21) are *raʿ*—“bad/evil.” The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel acknowledge this reality, and both present our “evil inclination” as a problem that is beyond our own ability to fix. Instead, they declare that God will write God’s law on our heart/mind (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and give us a new heart/mind (Ezekiel 36:26). This truth concerning the human condition and its need for a divine remedy is often associated with Paul, Augustine, or Calvin, but it was already expressed centuries before any of them in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is thus fitting that the Christian vow to “persevere in resisting evil” appears in the context of the Baptismal Covenant as part of the sacrament of rebirth. It is also fitting that the Book of Common Prayer phrases this affirmation “I will, with God’s help,” since our ability to resist evil is only due to the gracious act of a God who refused to give up on us, despite our “bad inclination.”

Thursday in the Second Week of Lent

NURYA LOVE PARISH

Years ago, when I was not yet a Christian, I stumbled across a small magazine called *Weavings*. It held essays on the Christian life. I remember reading it with some curiosity. Who were these people that believed these strange, totally irrational things about life and death and God? How did they think?

More than two decades later, one essay stands out to me. I believe it was by Wendy Wright. It focused on the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert, told in the Gospel of Luke, chapter four. I was bowled over by her main point: that the temptations Jesus faced were those of power, prestige, and possession.

I was bowled over because I recognized those temptations. They didn't just live in the Bible. They lived inside of me. I wanted to control that which was beyond my control. I wanted to be respected by my community. I wanted to own things that were not mine to own. It was one of the first times I realized that the Bible wasn't about dusty hypothetical possibilities from a long time ago. It was a story that included me too, here and now.

A few years later, I became a Christian and sought to be baptized. I was still a Unitarian Universalist, but at my request, my service of baptism included the threefold renunciation of the devil. By then I had realized that to resist evil is the work of day-by-day faith. I have been trying to live into those promises every day since.

Now, I am one of those people that believes strange and totally irrational things about life and death and God: I believe that God in Christ has conquered all evil, yet also that I am called to resist evil daily. I believe hell is eternal death in separation from God, and I believe God desires life and health for all Creation. I am still trying to understand what it means to be a Christian. Thanks be to God, this is a well worn path, and I am not alone. Jesus said "no" in the desert, and through his grace, we can too.

Friday in the Second Week of Lent

BEN HICKS

I grew up in a very different Christian tradition: a Mennonite church planted in the South and very assimilated to its Southern Baptist neighbors. A feature of most services was the “altar call,” when the wayward sinner or the person in need of prayer was encouraged to come up in front of the entire congregation and pray with the pastor. In theory, it was a moment of support and community.

In practice, it often became a test of wills between the pastor, the number of verses in the accompanying hymn, and someone being willing to “take one for the team” to make it end. Repentance in the early church was also a public act when one had been separated from the body for notorious sins as a liturgical act. It had a structure, and indeed grew and changed with the church, becoming the act of confession before a priest, and in our tradition, also part of our corporate worship, a statement made to another lay person, or just to God.

In our confession we say that “we are truly sorry and we humbly repent.” Too often we think of this as a general feeling of sorrow and contrition, like a child who ate the cookie and is caught red-handed. As a recovering academic and classics professor, I always hesitate to reach to the meaning of Greek words used in the New Testament, but it is hard not to think about the components of *metanoēō*, the word from the Christian scriptures we translate as “repent.”

It literally means to “perceive afterwards,” and by extension to change one’s mind. Like other counterparts that gained religious significance, the word’s base meaning is ordinary. Centuries of tradition give it the weight we feel toward the act when we say of the penitential rite that “all may, some should, none must.”

The etymology points to a deeper point, though. It is not enough to “say sorry,” not even enough to simply avoid the act in the future. We must change our hearts and minds. We must re-evaluate our prejudices and ways of viewing the world that draw us away from God’s love and the love we ought to show to God’s people—to the whole of humanity. The path of Lent reminds us of this as we walk through it, giving up or taking on things that force us to look at the world a bit differently: like Peter, to discover that good news is for those we thought outside it; like Saul, to find a new name and new life among the people whom we have harmed. In other words: to repent and return to the Lord.

Feast of Saint Joseph

K.D. JOYCE

Once I knew a priest who made a habit of including Saint Joseph's name at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. She would pray that we would enter the everlasting heritage of God's children, "with the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary, Joseph, Guardian of the Incarnate Word, and all [God's] saints." I don't know where she got the phrase "Guardian of the Incarnate Word," but it has stuck with me all these years.

There's something of an irony to this title for Joseph, who himself never speaks a word anywhere in the Bible. In the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Joseph is spoken to ("don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife") and spoken about ("Joseph was a righteous man"), but he, for his part, is silent.

What he does do, unfailingly, is act to guard others. He takes action to protect the vulnerable. Even before God sends a messenger to confirm that Mary's pregnancy is of the Holy Spirit, Joseph was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." He is more concerned with protecting her than with the prosecution of his legal rights, even when he has every reason to believe that she's betrayed him. And when he learns that the baby is not a sign that Mary has rejected him, but a sign that God has chosen them both, he acts again—he marries her and willingly takes on the task of serving as the human father to God's own child. He acts again, after Jesus is born, to protect him from the soldiers sent to follow King Herod's murderous orders. He leaves his home and becomes a stranger in a foreign country because that is what it takes to protect his son, Mary's son, God's Son.

This Lent, I am spending time reflecting on how I might be quicker to listen and slower to speak. I'm thinking about how I might be less ready to demand my own rights, and readier to act for the sake of protecting the wellbeing of others, especially those more vulnerable than me. I'm praying for some small piece of Joseph's quiet, righteous, unfailing courage, and of his love for Jesus.

O Blessed Joseph, unto whose faithful guardianship was committed Christ Jesus, whom I have now received in this mighty Sacrament: pray for me that I may guard, cherish, and love him who now abides in all intimacy in my heart. Amen. - A post-communion intercession to Saint Joseph, taken from *Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*

Third Sunday of Lent

ELIS LUI

A man said to his gardener, "Look, I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I've never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil's nutrients?" The gardener responded, "Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down." (Luke 13:7-9)

I grew up watching my parents garden over their shoulders. I watched them coax almost anything out of the sandy Florida soil. Our backyard was always full of fruit trees, vegetable beds, and flowers. An old loquat tree stood at the center, flanked by calamansi and starfruit trees. Beds of mustard greens lay beside hanging luffa vines. One year, I counted twenty papaya trees, later replaced by sugar apples. Whenever I stepped outside, it seemed like there was something new.

After college, I spent a year in the Appalachian Mountains as an intern at St. Mary's Convent in Sewanee, Tennessee. There, my daily duties were split between the chapel and the garden. Slowly and all at once, I learned firsthand that growing things is a tricky business.

It starts out easy enough: You pick the things you want to grow. You put things into soil, nursed with compost, sun, and rain. You watch, in hope, as things begin to sprout. But sometimes, the frost comes early. The kale and gourds we planted in the fall never made it through the winter.

But as a friend recently reminded me, gardening is one of those things you learn by doing. You don't learn to garden by reading about it, or by watching your parents, or with wishful thinking. In today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us to dig in deep and to use fertilizer.

When our winter crops didn't make it through, we had to give our spring choices some extra thought and care. When we worry about pests, we plant companion plants together so they can protect each other. When we worry about bearing fruit, like the gardener in Jesus' parable, we add fertilizer.

This time of year, I begin to yearn again for those spring days: for hands covered in Southern sunshine, searching for earthworms in rich compost; for lengthening days and Easter flowers. Year by year, my hunger for Jesus'

Resurrection grows. I think of the first Christians, who lived in expectation of Christ's Second Coming, just around the corner, even unto their last breaths.

There are many things that the world tells us will not come in "one more year," in "three years," or even "this lifetime." But the work of justice and peace, of forgiveness and reconciliation, these things are no less urgent for it. The immediacy of Christ's Passion has not lessened these two thousand years.

Instead, Jesus enters again and again into our suffering, into our world. When the world demands to see the fruit from the least among us, Christ is walking with us in the garden of our circumstances. God—our gentle, patient and faithful gardener—waters us, clears our weeds, feeds our roots, and tends to our every need.

What does your fertilizer look like this Lent? What are your missing nutrients? Which fruits does your soul bear?

Monday in the Third Week of Lent

CHRIS CORBIN

When Episcopalians recite the Baptismal Covenant, many people seem to want to rush past the commitment to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” Given that “Good News” is just the English for the “evangel,” proclaiming the Good News in any fashion implies evangelism. But “evangelism” is still a word that elicits some negative emotions in many Episcopalians. Yet proclaiming the Good News of God’s reconciling the world to Godself in Jesus Christ is an essential Christian practice, and we are the more spiritually impoverished the less we engage in it.

Sharing with others that “if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” is so much more than peddling fire insurance. Contrary to the view held by many who have engaged in the lion’s share of evangelism in the contemporary United States, the vision of salvation through Christ offered by the earliest Christians had little to do with avoiding an eternity of torment in Hell by mentally assenting to the idea that Jesus is your Lord and Savior.

If Jesus is Lord, the economy is not. If Jesus is Lord, some political party and its agenda are not. If Jesus is Lord, our country is not. If Jesus is Lord, even our own material comfort and safety are not. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord means very little if we do not strive against these forces when they demand that we give them the ultimate allegiance that belongs to Christ alone. Saying Jesus has triumphed over Death rings hollow if we do not unmask death’s impotence by dismantling its perduring effects in the forms of life- and dignity-denying forces like poverty, hunger, racism, homophobia, and misogyny.

Still, we must be on guard against understanding the Good News such that it dissolves into a kind of generic humanism or philanthropism. Christ’s Lordship may entail improving people’s material, social, and political conditions, but such work hardly exhausts the new life offered through Christ, nor indeed does it even capture its primary character. Union with God both as individuals and as communities, the goal for which God created us, is our salvation. And union with God comes for us through relationship with Christ—and a relationship with Christ, no less than our relationships with any other people, means getting to know Christ. Indeed, we cannot hope to

become more like Christ, to follow his teaching and example, if we do not actually know that teaching and example. Nor can we expect others to enter into this relationship without their hearing about his life and teaching.

Proclaiming the Good News to others both by word and example seems to me essential for the Christian life. This recognition does not negate the fact that a desire, even a sincere one, to share the Good News has rationalized all manner of ethnocentric, colonialist, coercive, manipulative, and abusive behavior. Any attempt to proclaim the Good News going forward, if it is to truly evince love and respect for the other, must strive to avoid such mistakes of the past. Given human fallibility, no method will ever be foolproof, but there are certain postures that we can assume to minimize the potential for replicating the harms that accompanied the proclamation of the Good News in other times and places.

First, we must strive to be invitational rather than intrusive or argumentative. We won't argue or badger people into a relationship with Christ. We may, however, invite people into such a relationship if we can testify to the new, joy-filled, abundant life we ourselves have experienced in Christ.

Second, invitation has to come from a posture of vulnerability. God's foundationally gifting us with free will shows that a true relationship can only come about if others can enter into it freely. We must always leave people room to reject the offer of a relationship with Christ—and we must accept the possibility of the pain such a rejection can engender. It is far better for us to cultivate an openness to graciously receiving rejections, even violent ones, to our proclamation of the Good News.

Proclaiming the Good News may be essential to our faith, but that hardly makes it easy. In fact, it is something that, left to our own power, would be impossible for us. Happily, we are not left to our own power. We make the promise to engage in such proclamation, as with everything else in the Baptismal Covenant, "with God's help." Jesus goes even further, making clear that the Spirit will give his disciples the words to say when arrested for doing the work of proclamation (Matthew 10:19–20). Rather than a burden or an embarrassment, we are gifted, through the opportunity to proclaim the Good News, with the ability to carry life and hope into a world largely devoid of these things.

Tuesday in the Third Week of Lent

KIRA AUSTIN-YOUNG

As a preacher, one of the guiding questions I use when considering my sermon each week is, “Where is the good news in this?” Asking and endeavoring to answer this question focuses the message that I hope my congregation will take with them. It also ensures that I am actually preaching the gospel and not either giving a lecture on scripture or diagnosing the myriad problems that surround us in the world without offering a reason for hope. In the Christian context, the good news is not false comfort or shallow positivity, but the very reality that God is redeeming all things through Christ.

While part of my vocation is quite literally to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ in the particular form of a sermon given from a pulpit, the vocation we were baptized into calls all of us to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” For people like me who grew up in a more conservative religious context, these words can invoke discomfort and memories of billboards or of people holding signs proclaiming God’s impending judgment with very little information about why God’s judgment might be good news. These methods felt like they were conveying a threat rather than good news: “Either be a Christian or burn in hell.”

In my own life, I have not experienced the Good News of God in Christ as a threat at all but as a loving and hopeful promise, and it is this that I strive to convey both in my words and my actions. I hope and pray for the grace to communicate in what I say and in the way that I live that there is nothing to fear, not even death, because Christ has overcome death and the grave, and nothing I can do or say or be has made me worthy of that gift. To proclaim the Good News in our lives is more than an attempt to be a “good person,” but asking for the grace to undertake a qualitatively different way of living, a way of living our world desperately needs examples of.

Wednesday in the Third Week of Lent

BEN MADDISON

Nothing says “everything is commodified, nothing is sacred” like the late-stage capitalist profession “influencer.” A brand, that wants to sell a product, hires a person to hock that product in direct relation to that person’s influence or personal brand. Buy a person, who is a product, to sell said product to other people, without making them think they’re engaging in traditional commerce. It’s a brilliant, nihilistic exchange.

The beauty and brilliance of influence is the way it marshals “word and deed” to its (mostly boring, sometimes horrific) end. This influencer represents cool, hip, try-nothing aloofness. That influencer is edgy, artistic, authentic. Their photos from the skate park, or a concert, or the islands of Fiji—the way they visit this cultural site, do that Cool New Thing™—are “word and deed” directed to a very specific (often lucrative) end.

Words and actions pointed at a specific terminus not good, not entirely bad, seemingly morally neutral, but subsequently ethically and spiritually deadening. A Gospel of No News for people afraid of or hiding from bad news.

“How beautiful is the sight of feet that bring good news.”

There’s a friendly, innocuous saying—attributed to Saint Francis in more liturgical traditions—that goes, “reach the Gospel always, use words if necessary.” In my evangelical past, I heard its saintliness reduced and instead attributed to Christ himself: “o let your light shine among men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your father in heaven.” Christians as “influencers” for Christ. Deed, specifically, and word—rarely but specifically and neutrally—used to accomplish an end. To shine a light. To reflect God’s goodness. To rebrand and repackage “being a nice person” to include “saving others.” A self-righteous hit for the ever fleeting self-justification high.

Our Baptismal Covenant asks, “will you proclaim... good news?” Obviously the church is going to say we have to do this. Of course the system needs to self-perpetuate. Of course one more brand needs many more influencers to get its message out into the world.

But here’s the problem with all of this: No one actually believes that what they are selling, hocking, proclaiming, influencing is GOOD NEWS.

Good news doesn't need sales representatives and influencers.

Good news engenders more than just niceness and congeniality.

Good News does not need to be repackaged, rebranded, softened.

Good news is, well, self-explanatory. It is information that transforms, makes new, changes everything, and is coupled with an inescapable immediacy.

Either the revelation of Jesus Christ—and his life, death, and resurrection—changes, has changed and will change everything, OR it's just one more product to be sold.

This is not something I can convince you of or “influence” you into believing. It's something you know or will know, eventually.

But here's one thing I can say: no influencer has ever offered me a product that would be present with me in a depression that accompanies a diagnosis of infertility. No kind gesture or unspoken act gave me worth when I had none. No unspoken gospel met me in the darkest days and hours of my life and reminded me of the light.

The Good News needs to be proclaimed. Because it's actually, functionally, REALLY good news.

Thursday in the Third Week of Lent

CAITLYN DARNELL

Come thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise. Teach me some melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above. Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it. Mount of Thy unchanging love.

I only have a couple of hymns memorized. I can pluck phrases out of my memory for many others, especially if I'm trying to sing along while fumbling for the right page, but there are only a couple that I can sing outright, in total, without the book. "Come Thou Fount" is one of them. It's also one of those hymns I can't make it through without crying. Inevitably, a sob will get stuck in my throat and I try to choke it back in the E-flat.

Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I've come. And I hope by Thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home. Jesus sought me when a stranger wand'rin' from the fold of God. He, to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood.

I've been an Episcopalian long enough, and renewed my baptismal vows so many times over the years, that my brain has started to gloss over each of the questions of the Baptismal Covenant. We speak the words, "Proclaim the Good News of God in Christ," but my brain hears, "Will you seek to invite people to your church?" I will, with God's help. "Will you share your faith with someone you know?" God help me. This is the first question in the Covenant that starts to take us outside ourselves and involve our relationships with others. But I've found that I've spent far more time worrying about how the other person will react, and I haven't always thought about what it is I would even want to proclaim about any of this.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be. Let Thy goodness like a fetter bind my wand'rin' heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart, oh take and seal it; seal it for Thy courts above.

I ended up memorizing this hymn the summer I served as a hospital chaplain. I worked on floors that saw a lot of trauma. All of my patients bore

physical and spiritual scars. I was knee deep in the world's brokenness and trying to share God's love, while myself struggling with my own brokenness.

The hippie coffee-shop church I was going to that summer had an off-season skeleton-crew of musicians who played this song nearly every week during communion. Its words etched onto my heart as I was nourished by the sacramental sign of God's grace every week. The hymn became my prayer. It gave me the words to take what hurt, what's broken, what makes me want to shrink away... it gave me the words to take my whole heart and ask for God's seal on it. To say that Jesus is out seeking me even when my insides were wandering, limping away. To celebrate the Grace which bound me together. It taught me how to sing God's love. It taught me how to proclaim specifically where that grace has taken a desartous place and filled it with blooms.

Lent is a season of self-examination, a season to find where in us is sore and what in us tries to wander away. Lent is the time for us to figure out if this is actually good news for us or not, to clean the wounds and make ready to receive the balm, the healing, the grace, the Blood of Jesus. Lent is a time for us to figure out what exactly in our lives needs that refreshing good news.

What has been good news to you? What in you needs Jesus the most? To what is your heart tuned?

God's mercy comes to you in streams that never stop flowing. That's something good to sing about.

The Feast of the Annunciation

CODY MAYNUS

Given the particular shape of our Lenten journey, an ashy season of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer, it perhaps seems odd to focus on the Incarnation—on God taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary—but that’s exactly what the Feast of the Annunciation bids us do.

It is in the Incarnation that the first fruits of the Fall are reclaimed, Adam’s sin is recovered, and God’s will is restored. It is the Incarnation which unites all of humanity—the good, the bad, and the otherwise—into one sacred human family.

God promises through the Archangel Gabriel that God will take up residence in a particular way in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. God expresses God’s desire to take on flesh and blood, bone and muscle, doubt and despair, and the whole range of human emotions and experiences in the womb of a pregnant virgin, a decision which will revolutionize the world and change everything.

Claiming her own full agency as a human being and as a woman, Mary questions the angel and gains clarity on God’s invitation. Meek and mild images of Mary with folded hands and eyes cast up to heaven are anything but biblical. We are given in the Annunciation an image of a young woman who is able to withstand an angelic encounter and is confident enough in her own self to question even God’s angel minister. A young woman who is an advocate of the oppressed, the mother of a renewed humanity, a dwelling place for God’s own presence, the queen of the saints, a friend of God, and a prophet.

While Mary’s resounding “Yes!” enabled God really and truly to be born among humanity—to set up God’s house in a particular way among us—the same invitation is made to each and every single one of us every day: Come and let me be born in you. Come let me take form in you. Come let me grow in you. Come let me become flesh and blood, muscles and tendons, emotions and feelings in you.

We participate anew in the Annunciation whenever we assume Mary’s posture of risk and vulnerability. Whenever we say “Yes!” to God’s invitation, whenever we offer our own bodies in the service of the marginalized,

whenever our voices are lifted for justice, whenever we honor the beauty of our own bodies, whenever we recognize the blessedness of all humanity, whenever we ponder God's word deeply in our hearts.

This holy season of Lent is a time of penance, a season of stripping away the excessive to make room for the necessary. As we together make our journey toward Holy Week and Easter, the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Gabriel Archangel stand ready to ask us: Will you be ready? Will your heart be ready? Will your soul? Will your body? Are you prepared to be a house of flesh for the King of Kings, a temple for the Paraclete?

Their questions echo those found in the baptismal liturgy which is the culmination of the Lenten journey: Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God? Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

God bless you and keep you as you progress deeper and deeper into the heart of God's love this Lent.

Saturday in the Third Week of Lent

BRANDON SMEE

“For it is out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45)

One of the baptismal promises in the Book of Common Prayer is to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” (Book of Common Prayer 1979, 293). But for most of us, gospel proclamation does not bubble up on its own. How do we go from silence to declaring the Good News to others? We may try to muscle through, working up the courage to invite our coworkers to church or to speak an encouraging word to another. Other times, perhaps, we have felt guilty for not sharing the Good News. But grace doesn’t give way to works when it comes to evangelism; we are not called to guilt. It may simply be that, despite our desire to proclaim the Good News, we haven’t yet uncovered the power to speak.

In Luke 6:45, as Jesus taught the people, he said, “It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” Jesus was saying that there is a direct connection between what overflows our hearts and what flows out of our mouths. Whatever happens in our hearts will soon be upon our tongues. This has everything to do with proclaiming the Good News to other people. Sharing the gospel does not begin with our mouths, but with our hearts. Our first work is heart work: the first place we must proclaim the gospel is to our own hearts.

It may seem counterintuitive to go inward when working toward proclaiming the gospel outward. But following Jesus’ words, if we want the Good News on our lips, we need the Good News in the “abundance of our hearts.” So we are called to proclaim to our own hearts. In the morning when we wake, when we go about our daily work, when we sit to eat, when we relax and play, and at last when we lay down to sleep: at all times we proclaim to ourselves the Good News of God in Christ. We speak the words that make our hearts come alive.

The Good News enlivens our hearts because we are proclaiming that Christ is in us through the Holy Spirit, that the life he lived and still lives for God is our life, and that the love shared between the Father and the Son is now the love we share with God and one another. In Christ, we receive

every spiritual blessing from the Father (Ephesians 1:3). When our hearts become aware of the blessedness we have in Jesus, they will burst forth in shouting, singing, going, doing, and in all ways proclaiming the good news of God in Christ. For the Good News is as much for us as for others, and when we abide in it we cannot help but make our lives a proclamation.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

LESLIE VIRNELSON

“For it is out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45)

2 Corinthians 5:16–21 plays with the ways that understanding Christ’s reconciling work can change our vision, creating a new way of seeing ourselves and other people. This type of seeing might be illustrated by the way we read Psalm 32:11–12, which seemingly finishes the poem with a striking dichotomy between two groups: “the wicked” and “the righteous.”

Great are the tribulations of the wicked;

but mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.

Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord;

shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

What if these are not separate groups? Throughout the psalm, the writer celebrates forgiveness for their own sins. Those who acknowledge sin and do not conceal guilt receive forgiveness, while a refusal to admit sins causes pain. The psalmist invites readers not to be too stubborn to receive mercy and to trust in the Lord, then finishes with a celebration of the righteous.

This reading might also change how we understand the parable of the prodigal son, which responds to the accusation that the “tax collectors and sinners” with whom Jesus associates might contaminate his reputation. The story celebrates ways that a “lost son” can become reintegrated into the family—both the one who ran away and the one who refused to come to the party. Reading it can stir our desire to choose which son is really righteous, or to label the father as either wise or naïve. And yet, the elder son is both proud and faithful, the younger son is foolish and repentant, and the father is loving and forgetful—he apparently neglects to invite the older son to the party! When we give up trying to categorize the characters unilaterally, it foregrounds the sweetness of the possibility that a messy family all ends up in the house together after the end of the parable. When Jesus tells this story that focuses on the joy of reconciliation, it becomes an open invitation for the Pharisees to join Jesus, and the sinners, and anyone else willing to come.

May we see this Lenten season with eyes to recognize that Christ’s work simultaneously reveals each one of us to be sinners and makes each of us righteous.

Monday in the Fourth Week of Lent

MICAH CRONIN

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

(Matthew 22:37–38, NRSV)

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:3, NRSV)

We might think of the Christian life as a reorientation of ourselves around our Savior. The world we are born into is disoriented away from Christ—therefore our desires, our money, our use of creation, our (mis)understandings of race, sex, and gender, and our relationships to our neighbors must be turned toward God, with God’s help.

Our Baptismal Covenant asks us to promise, with God at our aid, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, thus loving our neighbors as ourselves. The true spirit of this promise is humbling. It disallows any attitude of *noblesse oblige*—the presumption that we, as privileged members of Christ’s body, ought to love those who, unlike us, are not privileged and enlightened.

Rather, we are asked to promise to seek and serve Christ in our fellow sinners. We are to seek and serve Christ in those whose behavior during the current pandemic concerns or irritates us. We are to seek and serve Christ in those whose political attitudes appear repugnant, even dangerous, to us. We are to seek and serve Christ in those who are bigoted, prudish, homophobic, anti-transgender, uncaringly promiscuous, self-centered, and in those who would never seek and serve Christ in us. We promise to do this, not to affirm bad behavior, but because it is only by our cooperation with the cleansing love of God that evil is overcome.

We are asked to actively seek out the fingerprint of our creator and Savior in all our neighbors, and then love and serve them as God’s beloved creation. Lent is a time in which we are asked to do all sorts of impossible things that we cannot do—and yet, we will, with God’s help.

Tuesday in the Fourth Week of Lent

PAUL JEANES

After over twenty years of ordained ministry, I made a discovery. I had been blind to an essential reality of the Baptismal Covenant. A reality that was so blatantly obvious, yet somehow I could not see it. I had always read and internalized the Covenant as a litany of imperative statements, but it's not that at all. It is not a litany of commands but rather a litany of questions. The Baptismal Covenant is a holy and sacred invitation to intimacy with the Triune God and an invitation to join in the sacred and holy work of healing and restoring our broken world.

The church is not commanding us to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving [our] neighbor as [ourselves],” but rather asking us if we will. God does not demand and command our obedience but lovingly and longingly invites us to a life of obedience.

Every moment of every day, life presents us with opportunities and possibilities. How we respond is the key. The choice is always ours.

“Will you seek?”

“Will you serve?”

“Will you love?”

It is one thing to do something because we are commanded to do so. It is very different to do something in response to an invitation, in response to a situation, in response to the realities of our world, and in response to the realities of our neighbors.

Every day, we are invited to a life of awareness. What do we see? What do we hear? What do we feel? What do we experience? Perhaps more importantly, we are invited to a life of focused awareness—empathetic awareness. What does my neighbor see, hear, feel, and experience? And then we are asked, “How will I respond?” Will I respond? Will I seek? Will I serve? Will I love? That's where the rubber hits the road.

As we live more fully into our Lenten journey, how will you respond? God is continually inviting us into a closer relationship, into service, into obedience, and into love. May our answer be, “I will with God's help.”

Wednesday in the Fourth Week of Lent

CURTIS HOBERMAN

I will, with God's help."

That is the response of the people to the inquiry of the celebrant in the Baptismal Covenant: "Will you seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?"

The response is not, "Sure. I've got this!" The response is an affirmation, as well as a declaration, of a dependence on God to serve others by God's strength and aid.

It is so easy for me to be on autopilot as I serve in the community—whether it be setting up for Sunday Holy Eucharist, cleaning dishes after a One Table Café meal outreach, organizing readers and readings for Sunday services, or putting together a bootcamp workout for my F3 Princeton brothers. I easily forget the motivation for why I am doing what I am doing. The response "I will, with God's help" makes me ask: What is my motivation for my efforts in serving? Am I motivated to glorify God? Am I trying to make a name for myself? Do I just want to have good feelings on what I have done?

The apostle Paul states: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3–4). My motivation to serve Christ in all persons must be love—love that springs up out of the depth of love for humankind that Jesus Christ has for us now, which he showed in his care for people as told in the Gospels. May it be so! I will, with God's help.

Thursday in the Fourth Week of Lent

EMILY PRUSZINSKI

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

We all know the answer to this question. “I will, with God’s help.” It trips easily off the tongue. But it is not as easy to practice what this question asks us to do. There are many reasons for this, but one of the things that most prevents us from following through is that we forget to look at other people. We are surrounded by people, and by images of people. We see them. We might even stare at them. But we do not really look at who we are seeing.

Perhaps, even if we have not curated the perfect aesthetic (the perfect look, if you will), we can still declare with the psalmist, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). But can we turn to another human being with wonder? Can we see the *imago dei* in the face of the Other? To look at another person, to behold them truly, is to gaze into the infinite, to come face to face with a mystery.

It is far easier to see others as bit players wandering on and off the stages of our lives, or worse, as mere objects to be manipulated for our own gratification. And yet each and every human being on the earth is just as real as I am. Every single human being has hopes, fears, sorrows, and dreams that are just as important—just as real as mine. And yet, our society refuses—we refuse—to count certain people. The structures of our society work diligently to make other people invisible, and we cooperate. But this does not change the fundamental truth that every human being alive today is God’s miraculous creation.

Each day we must resist the forces that make others invisible and engage in the holy task of noticing. We must wake up and ask ourselves, “In whose face will I see the face of God today?” We have to expect it—to plan it, even. Otherwise, it is too easy to reach the end of the day never having noticed anyone. A plan need not be highly contrived. It can be as simple as working to remember that every interaction offers us the chance to notice the face of another person. Truly noticing someone else, someone beyond ourselves, is when we come into contact with the divine.

Emmanuel Levinas wrote about “the summons that comes... from the face of the neighbor,” calling us irresistibly out of ourselves and into the service of another. He likens this summons to waking up. Upon awakening, I come to know, unavoidably, that I am responsible for my neighbor. Cain might have been able to walk away, but we cannot. Stammering, we find our voice with the prophet Isaiah, and all we can say is, “Here I am” (Isaiah 6:8).

Friday in the Fourth Week of Lent

ALLEN WAKABAYASHI

To seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.

As we look into the eyes of another human being, in a mysterious way, Christ is present in that other person. Christ, as Sustainer of all creation, is graciously enabling our ongoing existence. Christ, as the Logos, is the divine blueprint that is woven into creation. Christ is the perfect image of God, the same image that all human beings have been created in. And so, as we look into the eyes of another human being, Christ is mysteriously present there. And what's more, every person we see is a person Christ loves and for whom he died, that they might gain life and fulfillment in God's love and embrace.

As followers of Christ, therefore, we are called to love and serve all persons, not simply for their sake but for the sake of Christ who loves them, died for them, and is present in and around them. In loving and serving them, we love and serve Christ.

As strife, enmity, and division continue to rip apart the fabric of our world, we are called to stand amidst it all in countercultural love: a love that cuts across all barriers of race, politics, status, ideology, religion... across every barrier that divides, a love that builds bridges of reconciliation rather than walls of hatred and animosity.

The challenge is that sin—both our own sin and that of others—obscures and muddles our perception of Christ in other people. And it becomes hard to see clearly that Christ is present in others. So we must lean into God's grace to enable us to see through the obscurity and see others as God sees them. For as we look into another person's eyes, we are to see Christ there and seek to serve Him, loving that person as we love ourselves.

Saturday in the Fourth Week of Lent

WESLEY ROWELL

Seeking and serving Christ in all people seems like such a good idea. Who could argue with that?
Oh, you really mean *all* people.

I heard a story about a pastor of a large, wealthy church in a large urban city. Every day on his way to work, this pastor walked by the same homeless woman aggressively pleading for money, and more often than not, he would give her whatever spare change he had, without receiving so much as a “thank you.” One day, he was in no mood to be harassed by this woman, so he crossed the street well ahead of where she was, and when he was sufficiently past her, he crossed back to the other side. But he did not go undetected. In his words:

“All of a sudden I heard this loud piercing wail: ‘You bastard!’ And I looked back to see if it was Jesus.”

In our Baptismal Covenant we ask, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

Jesus, in Matthew 25:35–40, announces what he will say to righteous people before welcoming them into his kingdom: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

He goes on to describe how the righteous will answer him: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And Jesus answers them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

If you are at all like me, it is relatively easy to seek and serve Christ in all people when “all people” means people who look like me, live like me, love like me, vote like me, pray like me. But that’s not what it says. And that’s not what Jesus says.

The absolute beauty of the Baptismal Covenant is the answer we give to the question, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” All that we humbly answer is “I will, with God’s help.”

“With God’s help” assures us that we are not in this alone. It is a promise that however falteringly we attempt to seek Christ in everyone, God is with us. With us in every missed pronoun, every insensitive outburst, every awkward moment, whispering, “It’s okay; keep going, keep learning, keep praying.”

Fifth Sunday of Lent

JORDAN TRUMBLE

Any time Jesus shows up at the home of Lazarus of Bethany, we know something noteworthy is about to take place. The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C, is no different. In the gospel appointed, we find ourselves at the home of Lazarus six days before Passover, just a few days before Jesus' coming betrayal and death. In the course of the dinner, Lazarus's sister Mary takes a pound of costly perfume and begins to anoint the feet of Jesus.

This is an extraordinary act of faith and devotion on Mary's part. It is also, at least to one person in the crowd, wastefully extravagant. Judas, whom we know will eventually betray Christ, seems outraged that a pound of such an expensive perfume would be used instead of selling it and giving the money to the poor (although we hear as an aside that it's because he was in the habit of skimming off the top of the offerings to the treasury!).

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," Jesus responds.

This seems like such a puzzling statement to come out of the mouth of the one who urges people to sell all they have to give money to the poor, the one who is compassionate to widows and beggars despite social taboos, the one who says it is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven.

But Jesus hasn't had a late-in-life change of heart and decided that the poor don't matter. Instead, let's imagine that Jesus is sending a different message: a message about opening one's eyes to what is right in front of them. And for Mary, what's in front of her is her teacher, friend, and Lord. She's opened her eyes and what she sees is Jesus, God Incarnate, the object of adoration and praise, and so she sits at his feet, offers a sacrifice of praise and of sweet-smelling perfume.

This story is an invitation to holy noticing, an invitation to see and address the needs of the world that are right in front of us, the needs of the world that are right at our feet. Sometimes these needs are easy to overlook because they don't seem profound enough or exciting enough. Sometimes these needs are easy to overlook because the tasks required to address them are things we don't want to do. Sometimes these needs are easy to over-

look because they don't fit our idea of what a need is. How often have you brushed something off, only to realize later that there was an opportunity right in front of you? Yet, when we serve these needs of the world, we are also serving Christ.

We are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons—the rich, the poor, and everything in between. People of all races, faiths, genders, sexual orientations. And when we are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons—that includes the person of Christ himself.

Monday in the Fifth Week of Lent

RICHARD PRYOR, III

A friend and I were once discussing our spiritual lives. She asked me when I last read the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John, and I replied that I didn't know. The seventeenth chapter is the fourth and final portion of Jesus's "Farewell Discourse," given right after the Last Supper. We tend to think of the discourse in terms of pithy, memorable quotes, whether you're inclined to think of John 14 through George Herbert's poem "The Call" or the Anglican classic "If Ye Love Me," or if you think of John 15 through the allegory of the true vine. But in John 17, Jesus prays for the church and the world that he is about to leave. You may know it from the "that they all may be one" quote that gets thrown around every so often. But taken as a whole, the chapter, sometimes referred to as Jesus's "High Priestly Prayer," is a powerful reminder about Jesus' love for all humanity.

The lections appointed for the fifth Sunday of Lent really drive home the sacramental truth of the internal change we undergo in Christ, a change that is reflected (or contrasted) by outward signs. Consider the passage from John: Jesus comes to Bethany, to the home of his friends, Mary, Martha, and the resurrected Lazarus. Mary kneels before Jesus and anoints his feet with perfumed oil, and wipes them with her hair. This outward gesture signifies her inward devotion to Jesus but is also proleptic of Holy Saturday, suggestive of an interplay between the raising of Lazarus and Jesus' own resurrection. And of course, there is the provocative juxtaposition of Judas Iscariot's criticism of Mary's gesture and his own betrayal of Jesus, not to mention his fiduciary responsibilities to the disciples.

This inward/outward interplay is evident in the other lections: In Isaiah, a way is formed in the wilderness so that the chosen people might praise the One God, and in the psalm, the people are filled with joy because God has restored Zion (and her fortunes).

But this sacramental interplay of interior/exterior is most evident in Paul, for whom we have reason to be suspicious of exterior illusions (or "rubbish") that mask an interior that hasn't been touched by God's righteousness. It's not that Paul denies the significance of outward appearances;

rather, he reorients all things, even to the point of forgetting them, for the sake of striving for the true goal, Jesus Christ.

We, too, are invited to consider the exterior appearances and inward dispositions of our lives and to ask, in light of those things: What goal are we striving toward? Is it money, as it was for Judas? Or is it adoration of the Incarnate Christ, as it was for Mary of Bethany? Is it righteousness under the Law or in the eyes of society? Or is it the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord?

Tuesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

JOANNE EPPLY-SCHMIDT

Included among the book of prayers by and for children published by the Children's Defense Fund is the prayer of a young boy uttered just before setting out on a road race. He looked down at his feet before he started up the rugged way so many had run before him, and which so many who would run after him. Looking at his feet, he prayed, "Lord, you pick 'em up, and I'll put 'em down. You pick 'em up, and I'll put 'em down."

A plain statement of faith, trust, expectation, and resolve I keep in mind as I confront again and again the urgent call to take up my place on the path toward justice, peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being—past, present, and yet to come.

My diocese stands on the unceded ancestral lands of the Lennai-Lenape nation—holy ground, stolen by settlers, scarred by slavers, lorded over, appropriated, partitioned, and redlined into oppressions that abide to this day. There is a sacred necessity to make amends for a past that has constructed our present.

Confronting the perpetration of the gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity, first on indigenous nations and then on African slaves and their descendants, is a moral imperative.

Do our baptismal vows to God embolden us to repair the darkness of our brutal past which shadows the brilliance of our shared futures? Does our Baptismal Covenant with one another charge us to persevere, with determination, with courage, with conviction, with hope, and with one another's companionship on this rugged road to justice?

When seeking deliverance from oppression, the prophet Isaiah said to his people, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good news, who publishes peace, who proclaims glad tidings of good things..." (Isaiah 52:7).

Let us rise to our feet and strive to repair the pain perpetrated. Let us rise to our feet and stride toward justice and genuine equity. No, it is not an easy road, yet how beautiful are the feet of those who publish peace! Lord, you pick 'em up, and we'll out 'em down. You pick 'em up, and we'll put 'em down.

Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Lent

ELAINE JAMES

In a hard hat and closed-toed shoes, I walk into the blackened building. Water drips off the half-suspended ceiling tiles. Above the stairs, the roof gapes open. A turkey vulture sits in the bare tree branch. I step into what was yesterday a hallway, now crowded with splintered beams, pieces of metal framing, shriveled, illegible signage, the floor thick with ash. Everything is wet. Later I would find that what wasn't burned by fire, or drowned by saving waters, would bear the permanent smell of smoke.

King Nebuchadnezzar's rage for power shows up in fire. It is the vastness of his capacity for narrow-minded injustice that stands out here. The story evokes the experience of Jewish exiles in Babylon and is also a cryptic tale of the brutal repression of the later Seleucid empire. This story of the pious refusal of three Jews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—celebrates resistance to the totalizing agendas of any empire. Nebuchadnezzar would have them bow to worship his massive statue. When these Jews refuse, he throws them to the fire.

The fire is already stoked. The king prepared it in advance, a threat to any resistance to his program of uniformity. He is a tyrant, after all. But the three men refuse. And they do not plan to be saved:

If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up. (Daniel 3:17–18, NRSV)

Notice that their faith is not that God will save. Their faith is that God is God, and Nebuchadnezzar, who is not God, will kill them. Is it their refusal to obey that so enrages the king? Or is it their refusal to fear? His anger rampages like the sevenfold heat of the oven he stokes.

The story takes a haunting turn when suddenly we are made to see with the tyrant's eyes: "I see four men, unbound." What do we see when we—little tyrants—look on the works of our own destruction? May our own anger be thwarted; may our enemies be saved from us; may we be

turned in that moment toward truth, toward justice; may we utter, like the king, a profession of wonder: “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego!”

As for the three men, what does it feel like when the flames overtake the guards who brought them in? Lick at their bodies and coats? Burn through the cords that had them bound? Suddenly they find they are free, and in that hour of orange heat, they walk in perfect peace; they are not alone. In the fire of the tyrant’s stupid rage, they are not even singed. They do not smell of smoke.

Thursday in the Fifth Week of Lent

CAROLINE HAYDEN

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. Light holds a certain importance to Christians, especially when relating to the influence of Jesus. We learn “This Little Light of Mine” in Sunday school, we see acolytes carry and station lit candles in church, and we bring the light home when we craft our Advent wreaths. But these forms of light are all tangible—we can hear and sing the song, we can see the flame and touch the brass, we can smell the evergreens. When we see light, we feel safe and reassured, reminded of Jesus’ triumph over evil and death. But how do we take this light home? How does light pertain to the rest of society, expanding beyond just those who share the Christian faith? How can we embed this light into our hearts and apply it to our own lives? In these past two years, it’s been difficult to share our light and, for quite a few, maintain it. Many members of our global community have felt unheard, abandoned, and misrepresented. We have been left to deal with the turmoil of the lack of education and understanding, desperately trying to unite the people we hold close to our hearts. In these times, our light has been dampened and extinguished. Our vow made to respect the dignity of others has been violated, lost in the crossfire of the exchange of harsh words, but also in the harsh reality that we face. When it starts to feel like humanity is unsalvageable, we must remember our shared fellowship, what brings not only Christians, but also all of humanity together—light. While it seems we have been kept in the dark these past two years, the light of the day will come. Justice will come. Peace will come. Unity will come. Light will come, as long as we keep it alive within ourselves.

Friday in the Fifth Week of Lent

ISABEL WONG

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, hospitals overflowed with patients, and healthcare workers were in high demand. Doctors and nurses braved this unknown disease to treat patients with compassion amid surrounding fear, anxiety, and deathly illness. In this time of solitude and uncertainty, I took to the kitchen. I had lots of spare time to be in the kitchen, and so I mastered making French macarons, key lime pie, and many other confections.

Most importantly, I enjoyed baking. I realized baking was my gift—a gift worthy to share. Joyful Bakes, which I started as a ministry of the Youth Group of Trinity Church, Princeton, became my mission. There is nothing better than a fresh baked cookie or treat after a long, hard day of work. Through Joyful Bakes, I bake and assemble twenty fresh boxes of homemade cookies for the night shift ER workers at St. Francis Hospital in Trenton each month. And these aren't just regular cookies; they are exquisite, specialty cookies not to be found in stores. Some personal favorites from the year have been the cardamom poppy seed cookies and the chocolate thumbelina flight.

Baking brings me a lot of joy and always brightens my day. Sharing a perfectly golden brown and warm cookie with a loved one fills my heart with warmth. I bake for the night shift ER workers to bring them joy in these bleak times. And when they are in “désespoir,” as the French say, the gift of a small box of cookies can put a smile on their faces. While these kind souls toil day in and day out and witness immense suffering, I bring them a little joy through something that also brings me happiness.

Recognizing the works of every human being and respecting their dignity are the first step toward justice and peace. The little actions, the meaningful ones, like baking specialty cookies for people who need a pick-me-up, are what lead us further toward peace and harmony. If something brings you joy, share it with the world to show your compassion and respect for the dignity of all.

Saturday in the Fifth Week of Lent

ABIGAIL EDWARDS

The story of Trinity Church began in the nineteenth century when Princeton community members banded together to raise the necessary funds to build a magnificent church. Money was collected, and several years later, a building was constructed. The original communicants and vestrymen worked hard to build the community, providing necessary funds to help sustain the church. Thanks to their work, we have an active and engaged congregation today.

Yet the foundation of our church is quite literally built on the fortunes amassed by slaveholders. Thousands of dollars were given by slaveholders with massive plantations in the South. The fortunes that were given to construct Trinity were sourced through the systematic dehumanization of individuals for personal gain.

The past, present, and future of Trinity Church are all inextricably linked to the institution of slavery. The past, present, and future of the church as a whole are all inextricably linked to the institution of slavery.

It is persistently evident in the history of the church, not just Trinity, that time and time again we have failed to recognize the dignity of every human being and fight for a just world. Until recently, many have been entirely resistant to confronting the church's history and relationship with the past. Yet this task is something absolutely essential in our mission to create a just world and to truly respect the dignity of all, including those of the past.

By continuing to ignore our relationship to slavery and the injustices of the past, we are refusing to acknowledge the dignity of human beings. By stopping our search of the past before we have even identified the names of enslaved people, we are refusing to acknowledge the dignity of human beings. The very human beings whose labor helped fund the fortunes of nineteenth-century men who used those fortunes to build churches like Trinity.

Thus, in this time of Lent when we are returning to look at our Baptismal Covenant, I urge us to consider not just injustices and inequities in the status quo, but to return back to take a closer look at history. To search a bit deeper into how our churches, both individually and collectively, are deeply intertwined with the institution of slavery. Only once we have begun this search can we even begin to understand how difficult it is to truly "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being."

Palm Sunday

KARA SLADE

The past two years have disrupted our experience of time. What day is it? What week is it? How long have we been doing this? It seems like forever, and yet it's not. Holy Week—and the Sunday of the Passion (or Palm Sunday) in particular—also upends our perception of and location in time. This week, we are caught up in the pivotal events of time and history in ways that are wondrous and jarring. Like no other day in the church year, Palm Sunday is jarring. It reminds us how hard it is to think the whole story of Jesus at the same time. On this day, we hear the paradox that echoes in the chasm between the shouts of “Hosanna” and the cries of “Crucify him!” in our two Gospel readings. It's a paradox that reminds us that the people who greet Jesus as he comes in triumph and the people who call for his death are the same people. And that those people, quite alarmingly, are us.

Each year, we come to Palm Sunday to be confronted by Jesus in ways that leave us reeling from liturgical whiplash. Each year, we are faced with the question that Jesus asks each of us in the silence of the human heart, that silence that looms between the shouts of “Hosanna” and the cries of “Crucify him!” Each year, we look within ourselves and look around, desperately looking for someone else to blame, someone else to take the fault.

We want a scapegoat for what's about to happen, and indeed this is the root of so much Christian antisemitism that has been so deadly throughout the centuries. But this day says to us, don't look around, don't look at the person next to you, don't look at that out-group over there. Look at yourself. Look inside yourself. Look honestly at what you find there. When I look, I see my own fickleness, my own worst habits, my own capacity for casual betrayal. I see all the ways that, like Pilate, I want to wash my hands of it all and walk away.

The sickening turn from triumph to betrayal isn't the only paradox of this day. It's no accident that Paul's words from Philippians come just before the reading of the Passion Gospel. This week, we hear again the story of Christ's saving work. But before we do so, we need to hear who this Jesus is, because otherwise the story of Holy Week risks incoherence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it succinctly when he says that when it comes to Jesus, the

person interprets the work. That is to say, who Jesus is gives us the meaning of what Jesus does.

In just a few short verses, Paul sweeps from Christmas to Good Friday, from the manger to the cross, from the descent of the Word made flesh to the vision of that same Word as he is lifted up and, as we read in John's Gospel, as he draws the whole world to himself. Here is the one whom God highly exalts, the one to whom God gives "the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." Here is the one before whom every knee will bend one day, "in heaven and on earth and under the earth," and every tongue will join in confessing together that he is Lord.

Even now, we are being lifted up with him and drawn into unity with God in a way that will one day be complete when we see face to face, though in the meantime we see it only all too dimly. In the meantime, we follow with faltering steps and failing hearts on this side of the last day. We do this not for our sake, but for his—not for our glory, but for his. We do it in the hope of things not seen, the truest things, the most real things.

Monday of Holy Week

BENJAMIN WYATT

*A bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching. (Isaiah 42:3–4)*

On Monday in Holy Week, we begin three days of waiting. Unlike the three days that end Holy Week, marked by dramatic action, these three days are a time of silence, reflection, and patience. The raucous clamorings and secret plots of Palm Sunday are behind us; the mysteries of the Last Supper and Crucifixion lie ahead.

I have often imagined that Jesus spent the first half of Holy Week feeling agonizing dread, knowing everything that was to occur and able to do nothing to delay or hasten it. He simply had to wait.

Yet even the most horrible kind of anticipation does not shake his character or resolve. Isaiah prophesies that the Suffering Servant will be completely gentle, breaking not even a damaged reed. He also says the Servant will not be deterred until his mission is complete. And so it is with Christ.

In spite of all that lies ahead, Jesus spends his last days caring and nurturing his disciples— even Judas, who is soon to betray him. He not only walks the long road to the cross, he endures the agonized waiting along the way.

And so we wait with him— not in despair, but in quiet confidence that the gentleness of God can overcome even the most horrendous brutalities that humanity can invent. With such resolve, even the way to the cross can be the way of life and peace.

Tuesday of Holy Week

AMY CORNELL

Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.”

When I was a teenager I had the honor of attending youth retreats held in the Calvin Coolidge State Park in Vermont. We would spend the week camping, building community, and deepening our own spiritual growth. One of the most powerful metaphors we learned was the effects of light and darkness. We were always encouraged to bring flashlights wherever we went after sunset, and were shown why that very first night. The group of us stood in the center of the camp, and were instructed to turn off those lights. For a Jersey girl who grew up in suburban streets, it was impossible to imagine how dark that night became. It felt as if my eyes were squeezed tight, no vision at all! After a moment or two of panic, we were told to wait a bit, see if our eyes adjusted, because there was no absolute darkness. It wasn't long before we could see edges of trees against the sky, and begin to make out different shades of dark on the path, although even with that limited vision, none of us wanted to move and remained rooted to the spot. It was in these moments of reflection that Jesus' words became real—darkness cannot overtake you if you believe in the light. We learned the importance of keeping that flashlight on hand, walking in the illumination of its beam, sharing with each other if one didn't have their own light.

When have there been times in your life that you feel overwhelmed by the dark? When hopelessness seems to creep in and you feel defenseless to push it away? How do you find the light you need to walk in that darkness? Take a moment to list the people in your life whom you know will always share their flashlight when you cannot see the path before you.

Jesus calls to us through time and space: I am with you, believe in me, and you will never move in darkness. It is a good teaching to cling to as we move into the solemn, frightening time of recalling his death. Remember that even the smallest of lights breaks that darkness, and no amount of darkness can ever extinguish the light of Christ.

Wednesday of Holy Week

J. MATTHEW TUCKER

It's on the Wednesday of Holy Week when we find out what a life is worth. It's on that day also that Judas Iscariot stands in for all of us.

We know the price Judas accepted, of course: thirty pieces of silver for the life of a good but potentially dangerous man. The same price, as it turned out, for the life of a great and fearsome God.

Judas left the chief priests, blood money in hand, seeking the best moment to betray his friend and teacher. One wonders what must have been going through Judas's mind when not a day had passed since his bargain and Jesus was on the floor in front of him, washing his feet. Or when Jesus declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." Or what he was thinking when the disciples looked at one another, looked straight into his eyes, all but one still wondering if it might be them who would betray.

"Do quickly what you are going to do." Both Jesus and Judas knew what the other knew, and so Judas goes off quickly into the night.

That was Judas's night, written down for the ages, but the sad truth is that there was nothing particularly special about that night or about his betrayal. We are all Judas; we all skulk off into the darkness, seeking the best moment to betray. From all our hearts come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander, all that defiles. We all take the sop-dipped bread from Jesus' hand and then do quickly what we are going to do.

And yet, it is at these very moments that the Son of Man is glorified, glorified by a love so profound as to be disconcerting: "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

The church, in her wisdom, unfurls the events of Holy Week in real time. If we are paying attention at all, by the time we get to Wednesday the story becomes difficult to hear. Holy Week forces us to calculate the price at which we will betray, and then to gaze upon our Savior, who gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spat upon. And then, if we can bear it, to let Jesus love us anyway.

Maundy Thursday

KATHERINE APOSTOLACUS

Even in the frigid cold can our hearts burn. But if not tended, we may lose ourselves along the way. The only way to tend such a flame—that is, the flame which lives in the heart—is with love, both given and received. Hence, Jesus commands the disciples: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Love is our blood, our bones, our very being. Even when this is understood, to say “peace I leave with you” is a daring thing to say to a room full of friends who have some inkling of Jesus’ impending demise (John 14:27). Death looms. The disciples know it and Jesus reminds them constantly: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

Maundy Thursday is the day of the Last Supper. What Scripture intimates is not only that God’s glory will shine in Christ’s sacrifice, but also that the disciples are tasked with living like Jesus, by giving themselves in service, even unto death. Maundy Thursday’s message rests in the middle of the anticipation of a friend’s martyrdom. The anticipation of this moment is also a mystery that beckons us to become little eucharists, as the mystical Body of Christ.

Along the way, moreover, we must care for those little things which carry us, for if grace abounds anywhere, it abounds in our feet too. It is, for many, elation to have one’s feet washed, but we should also ask: Who are my feet? Who helps to bear my burdens? Who carries me along the way? How do I tend the flame beneath my feet and in my heart? Washing is evermore efficacious when the water is warmed with a flame. Do these things in the face of death. Love loudly, quietly, and unashamedly, for “love is as strong as death” (Song of Solomon 8:6). Christ’s command to love one another is not without root in reality. On the contrary, it is a command to tend closely to all that so intimately sustains us and helps us to be. Death has no claim over us because it has no claim over Him. And yet, it is at these very moments that the Son of Man is glorified, glorified by a love so profound as to be disconcerting: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Good Friday

KARA SLADE

Today, we find ourselves at the end of words. Today, God says *No* to everything that separates us from him, but only because God also says *Yes* to everything that reconciles us *to* him. This is something we can't do for ourselves, regardless of how much we wish we could. As Karl Barth writes, "That God has intervened in person is the Good News of Good Friday. What he has done, He has done without us. He has done it entirely in his Word which became flesh." He has done it once for all. In him, the world is converted to God. In him, we are made friends of God. In him, the covenant is renewed and restored. In him, in Jesus, God is for us, irreversibly and absolutely.

As we walk to the foot of the cross, we find that we're not alone there. Near the end of Saint John's Passion narrative, we hear what seems to be an odd interruption to the flow of the story: "Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

Far from being an insignificant detail, this is a crucial part of what happens at the Cross. The faith that we find at the foot of the Cross brings us together, where Christ gives us to each other as mothers and sons and brothers and sisters. On a God-forsaken hill outside the city gates, in a place where it might seem that all hope is gone, we are given a family that we didn't know we had and never expected to find. Three days later, when we walk with broken hearts to the tomb, we will find out the extent to which we've been given much more.

Holy Saturday

ERIN JEAN WARDE

I believe one of the greatest challenges of human life is the experience of sitting inside pain and grief. I find that when I am entombed in my suffering, my prayers take the form of questions as I ask God to offer me the compassion, tenderness, and deliverance I thought I could count on when I first believed. There is something about that middle place, the place where my faith and my reality feel deeply at odds, where I am forced to wrestle with doubt knowing that the tussle won't tear me from my belief, but instead that it will somehow join me to a God who can survive the fight. The remembrance that my love for God and God's love for me can survive the conflict is, in and of itself, a form of belief, as it means that instead of disappearing from God entirely, I stay connected, because even when my prayers are questions, they are passionate, as they are born out of my desire to be connected to God, to feel the love of God, not to leave God and my faith.

Inside this tussle I always experience during my suffering, one of the great comforts to me is my belief that Jesus Christ himself experienced the same doubt, the same questions of God, the same big ask that God would spare him suffering and instead offer him the compassion, tenderness, and deliverance he thought he could count on when he dipped toes into the river Jordan. My grief over the entombed Jesus calls to mind his prayer: My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want (Matthew 26:39b). Even Jesus knew the tussle, the conflict of desiring to follow in belief and also escape suffering. And yet today, we behold him in the tomb, his prayer in the garden only delivering him into another garden, this time the garden where his body is laid in death.

Holy Saturday invites us to be honest about the reality of our suffering, the prayers we pray out of conflict, the ways we tussle with the tension between our faith and the reality of life before us. The gift of Holy Saturday is that we are able to behold the dead body of Jesus and know that, against all odds, there is a way out of the tomb. When we are in our own sufferings, feeling so covered in the reality of death and suffering that we can almost smell the spices that promise we are given into decay, we can remember that this day is not the last day. There is a tomorrow that will greet us at dawn with the compassion, tenderness, and deliverance of God.

Easter Sunday

FRANK LOGUE

*Alleluia. Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.*

We are an Easter people who even at the grave proclaim, Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. Yet we have never been an Easter people in any but a Good Friday world. Our faith is grounded in the crushing reality of Jesus' death on the cross. The proclamation of Easter is that Jesus, the Christ, is truly risen from the dead.

This Holy Week, we have through our daily devotions and worship with others entered anew into the Paschal Mystery in which we see the self-emptying of the second person of the Trinity in its fullness with the passion and death of Jesus. This is where we experience how far the love of God extends, as Jesus would not give up on loving all creation even when the cost of that love was death. The shock of Good Friday and the grief of Holy Saturday are central to our faith, for only when we contemplate Jesus' death is the joy of the resurrection and the promise of the Ascension and a Second Advent made real.

Jesus truly died. Empires know how to kill, steal, and destroy. Pontius Pilate's detachment in Jerusalem had gotten far too much experience in crucifixion before Jesus of Nazareth entered the city with the crowds shouting Hosanna. Yet, we know that the cross is far from the end of the story of God's love for us.

Jesus was truly raised never to die again. Just as real as the grave is fact of Jesus' bodily resurrection. The frightened disciples became bold apostles through their post-resurrection experiences with Jesus. This is also our story, as Jesus is with us through the same Holy Spirit who was with his first followers. Our baptisms are the connection.

In the words of the Easter Vigil liturgy, "Through the Paschal mystery, dear friends, we are buried with Christ by Baptism into his death, and raised with him to newness of life" (BCP p. 292). As Jesus died and was resurrected, so we too are called to die to ourselves to be raised to new life. The journey through Lent in this devotional has been steeped in the Baptismal Covenant, in which we affirm our faith in the Holy Trinity and name the ways we will live into our faith within the church and in every aspect of our lives.

As far as observing the church year goes, we tend to do a better job of observing the forty days of Lent than we do celebrating the Great Fifty Days of Eastertide. If we don't examine it, Lent can be law, a rigid observance. We know that the actions we do to become more Christlike, such as the observances of Lent, are not done to earn God's love, but are done in thankfulness to a God who already loves us. In these great fifty days, we rejoice in knowing that Easter was not a long-ago event. The same Jesus raised at Easter remains with us in our hearts and lives. The Covenant describes the ways in which grace flows through us as we die to ourselves to make room for Christ to come more fully into our lives as we serve others.

Continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers is how we make room for God to feed us spiritually. Then we are empowered with God's help to persevere in resisting evil, to proclaim the Good News by word and example, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to strive for justice and peace among all people. These five questions that follow the Apostles' Creed in the Baptismal Covenant name the ways we live into that love God has already graciously poured into our lives. This is the pattern of life through which we are strengthened in our faith by letting the Holy Trinity work through us as we serve others.

As I write these words, I pray for those of you who will read them using a prayer from the confirmation liturgy (BCP p. 418), "Renew in these your servants the covenant you have made with them at their Baptism. Send them forth in the power of that Spirit to perform the service you set before them; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord... Amen."

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