



JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

A NARRATIVE LECTIONARY
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2021

Flossmoor Community Church

Written by members of the Narrative Lectionary Facebook Group.

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Please consider posting in the Narrative Lectionary Facebook Group if you use this and providing feedback on the work. We welcome that.

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Dear FCC Family & Friends,

It is hard to believe that our time apart began last year during Lent! It almost seems like we have had a year-long season of Lent, as we have walked through wilderness time since March 2020.

For Lent this year, we have created several opportunities for study and reflection from home. This booklet is our Lenten Devotional, to go along with the Narrative Lectionary. It was written by members of the Narrative Lectionary Facebook Group and adapted for our use. Beginning on Ash Wednesday February 17, there are daily scripture readings, reflections and images for you to engage with at your own pace. **The readings can be done alone, or with others, and are appropriate for all ages!**

We encourage you set a space each day, light a candle and enter a time of reflection to walk your own Lenten wilderness journey through stories from the Gospel of Luke and poetry from the Psalms. We have included, on the next page, opening and closing prayers for you to use each day if you wish. Please begin by reading the Scripture as indicated.

You may like to follow a routine each day, or perhaps you may enjoy adding creative reflection into your time.

- Gather a journal or other paper and write your own prayer or reflection based on the text.
- Gather paper, markers, pencils, crayons and draw an image that comes to mind as you explore.
- Choose a scented candle to light, so each day you will relate that smell to your time of reflection.
- Underline words that resonate or pop out for you as you read.
- Search for images or songs online that match the scripture or other words or phrases from the reflection that resonate with you.
- Read the scripture out loud! Perhaps record your reading on your phone or computer, and listen back to your voice reading the story.
- Share the reading and reflection with a friend and discuss together what arises from the reading. This is a good way to connect with someone outside your home!

Other opportunities in Lent:

Ash Wednesday – Distribution of Ashes, drive-thru in the Community House Parking lot, from 7:30 – 8 am, and from 4:30 – 5 pm.

Weekly prayer practices will be shared online, on Facebook and at www.fccfaithful.org.

Lent Reflections - Wednesdays, February 24 to March 31 at 7 pm via Zoom

As we walk through the Season of Lent this year, our Narrative Lectionary shares some familiar stories in Luke's Gospel as Jesus begins his journey towards Jerusalem. Pastor Julie Van Til and Betsy Hanzelin will lead us in study and creative reflection of these sacred stories, as we are invited to walk with Jesus towards the events of Holy Week. The texts will be shared prior to the sessions so you may prepare your heart and mind each week to enter the unfolding story of God as shared in the Narrative Lectionary.

Maundy Thursday Worship – Thursday, April 1 at 7 pm, via Zoom

May your journey in the wilderness during Lent challenge and inspire you and bring you closer to the divine ... the Creator, our Redeemer and the Spirit that flows among and around us all. Amen.

Opening Prayer

We break from the doings of our day
and make space to notice you.
You are always with us
in surprising guises.

Jesus of the flesh, we meet you in
worker and friend,
stranger and pilgrim,
the needy and the needed,
the questioner and the questioned.

So when we meet you,
may we deepen trust,
deepen life, deepen justice
and deepen joy.

And when you meet us,
help us approach our activities
with presence and power,
with love and humility,
with courage and dignity.
Amen.

By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Closing Prayer

Journey with us, O holy God
As we continue our way to the cross.
Sharpen our focus, that our attention
May center more on you than
ourselves.

Lead us through the shadows of
darkness and prepare our hearts,
That we might be a people of prayer,
Ready to perceive and respond to your
Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

February 17 - Toward Jerusalem

Amy Fetterman

Luke 9:51-56

"Jesus' face was set towards Jerusalem."

What does that look like? Do his eyes take on a visible resolve? Does his smile become strained? How do the Samaritans, who only see his messengers, know to be wary of this wandering prophet and his path? How do they know to reject him?

They reject him not because of where he is from but because of where he is going. To Jerusalem. To be betrayed, denied, rejected, and killed. To engage the powers of his day and their cycle of violence. To show James and John how heavenly fire is not his holy way.

Rejected, Jesus lives what he has so recently preached to the disciples. He shakes the dust off his feet and moves on to another village. He continues to Jerusalem.

Village by village he goes.

Goes and commands peace to the spectres of violence.

Goes and proclaims release to those held captive by the forces of sin.

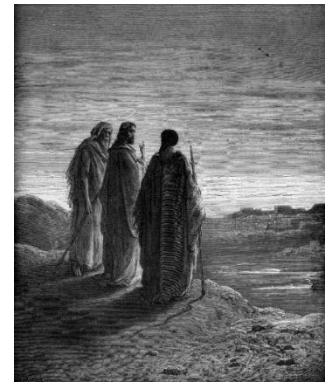
Goes and offers healing love in word and deed.

Goes and lives the Way, knowing what it will cost him.

In the prayers and rituals of Ash Wednesday, we who would follow the Way, who would live in the Truth, and would discover the Life, join with Jesus on this journey. We resolve to follow our Lord as he teaches and heals, as he is rejected and denied. We strive to resist the temptation to reject this hard path, the yearning for holy fire rather than the holy way. With ashes on our forehead, we turn to the cross.

We set our faces toward Jerusalem.

Amy Fetterman is a Virginia-based transitional pastor in the PC(USA) and co-author of Who's Got Time: Spirituality for a Busy Generation from Chalice Press.



February 18 - Where are you from?

Matthew March

Luke 9:57-62

Where are you from? It's a question that gets asked, almost as a throw-away.

People seem to want to know where other people are from. When one lives in a rural area, the question becomes even more important. It highlights the line between those who have deep roots and those who have more recently found their home in a given area. It's a question that becomes more and more complicated as our society has become so mobile. If you ask my children where they are from, you will get two different answers. If you ask my wife and me, we will say Michigan but, since we married, we've lived in five different states and haven't set foot in Michigan in several years.

As I think about those people who told Jesus they would follow him, I imagine they were people who had deep roots in their community. I imagine them farming the land that had been in their family for generations. I imagine them living in a household with multiple generations. And I imagine they had no idea of the disruptive nature of the in-breaking of the Reign of God that Jesus was bringing near.

The Reign of God disrupts the way we make our identity. No longer is our identity about where we are from or to whose earthly family we belong. Our identity is in Jesus Christ. It is not about who we are but whose we are.

Matthew March is the pastor of St John's Lutheran Church in Chehalis, Washington.



February 19 - Shake it Off

Jo Mead

Luke 10:1-12

Who knew? I mean that. Who knew that the seventy others sent out represented all of humanity? I only knew it from reading Elaine A. Heath's commentary on this scripture. She writes "The number seventy implies all of humanity, as Genesis 10 provides a list of all the nations of the world, numbering seventy."* So Jesus sends out seventy people into the world to spread the news. Seventy people who are to go (notice not take) into the world without a purse, bag, or sandals. Offer people peace when you enter a home. Accept what people offer to you in hospitality. I read this as a grand adventure of stepping out today to our neighbors all around the world. A neighbor offers me enmoladas (enchiladas with mole) or the other neighbor offers tabbouleh salad. I am to accept what is offered to me. Why? It is acceptance of hospitality. It is trying to live within a community standard instead of setting your own as the only culture of community.



We live in a time when the fear of anyone different is driving to build walls of exclusion instead of finding the place of offering peace (or in Hebrew *shalom*) to all people. *Shalom* is a Hebrew word meaning peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility. A stranger is to go into a community to share the good news of the kingdom of God. If people do not accept this relationship, no need to grow angry or hostile. Move on and shake the dust off your feet. Maybe this is what we need today. Shake it off. Shake it off.

**Elaine A. Heath's essay from Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010. Page 214.*

Rev. Jo Mead is an ordained elder in the Great Plains Conference serving University United Methodist Church in Wichita, Kansas.

February 20 - Worthy of Love?

Andrea Allan

Psalms 36:5-10

Today's Psalm reminds us God's love is bigger than anything in this world, God loves us more than we can even imagine. It is a beautiful feeling to be loved so much. But many of struggle with being loved so fully because sometimes we do not think we are worthy of being so loved. We make mistakes, we are not perfect, we are sinners; how can God love us as much as the Psalmist tells us when we have so many limitations?



Do you believe that you are worthy of love and belonging? Do you believe that right now, just as you are, that you are worthy of being touched by God in love? Or in the back of your mind are you thinking to yourself: "Perhaps, I will be worthy – as soon as I catch up on my Bible reading, or as soon as I get better at praying."

Most of us are not sure if we truly are worthy of love and belonging from the world let alone from God. If we were, we wouldn't struggle with sharing our gifts openly and freely, we wouldn't judge those around us, we wouldn't hurt one another and ourselves.

Are we worthy? This is a question we ask of ourselves or perhaps we ask of others – but God never asks if we are worthy; God freely gives, and God freely loves us; in God we belong no matter what. Today we are reminded that even though we may not always believe it, we are worthy, we are deserving of love that is bigger than the whole world. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Andrea Allan ministers in a rural charge in Embro, Ontario at Knox United Church of Canada. She lives with her husband and daughter in Stratford Ontario.

First Sunday of Lent

February 21 - Your Neighbor as Yourself

Gabrielle Martone

Luke 10:25-28

The last 12 years I have attended and led a week-long mission trip to this place I love so much. When you're working in the poorest county in America, almost everyone you encounter is struggling deeply financially, and evidence of that is everywhere you look. One year I was leading a crew in a woman's home- we were replacing the flooring in her bedroom, kitchen, and hallway. We spent a lot of time talking with our homeowner and she told us a lot about her struggles, but that she always took people in who needed it, that she was caring for her ailing husband, her grandkids, and any other kin that would pop in. This woman grew a garden in her backyard to help feed her family. One day when we were working she went out to her garden and cut a bunch of cucumbers, took them inside, washed, peeled and salted them and gave them to us- a crew that brought lunch with us every day. She told us it was her favorite snack and the only way she could thank us.

We were strangers and she welcomed us as neighbors, and she loved us as she loved herself and her family. It wasn't about her; it was about showing love to us. That is what the greatest commandments are about- not me, but God, and the other.

Rev. Gabrielle Martone is the senior pastor of Broadway and Port Colden UMC's in Washington NJ.



First Sunday of Lent

February 21 - Fire of Self-Righteousness

Rachel Wrenn

Luke 10:29-37

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?..."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "Will it really hurt, Jesus? Will it really do so much damage if I give mercy just to those I think deserve it?"

But wanting to justify herself, she asked Jesus, "Do I really have to, Jesus? Those people, they're just so WRONG; you don't really want me to listen to them, right?"

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "How far do I have to go, Jesus? How much mercy is good enough?"

Limits. Boundaries. Reasonable expectations. These are a few of my favorite things...and yet, Jesus consistently blows them out of the water. A friend of mine recently shared this quote, attributed to Augustin Craig White, from "The Dark Tower," a pamphlet of the American Abolitionist Society, 1911: "It is a strange kind of fire, the fire of self-righteousness, which gives us such pleasure by its warmth, but does so little to banish the darkness." When I am really, truly honest with myself, my favorite fires to set do much more to warm me than they do lighten the darkness of others. May we all be given the gift of grace, which both reveals our fires for the ash that they truly are and gives us in their place the flame of the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Rachel Wrenn served her first call in southwest Minnesota, "on the edge of the prairie." She is currently pursuing her PhD in Hebrew Bible at Emory University in Atlanta, GA.

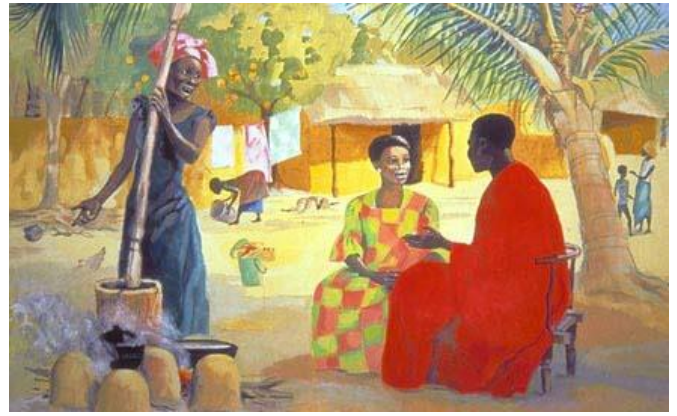


February 22 – Sisters

Betsy Hoium

Luke 10:38-42

Have you ever noticed how different two siblings can be? My sister and I have a lot in common but many differences as well. When we were young, my sister climbed out of her crib when she was 1 year old. I'm the older sister and so my mom felt that it was time I learned this skill as well. When she went to show me how, she discovered that I knew how, I was just waiting for permission!



Sisters Mary and Martha have differing reactions to Jesus' visit. Martha was doing all she could to make her guest feel welcome, probably preparing good food for the visit. Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet listening. Both are reasonable responses until Martha gets frustrated. Rather than empathizing, however, Jesus says, "you are worried and distracted by many things..."

Jesus invites not only Martha but all of us to stop what we are doing and just be. To reflect and dwell in God's love and grace for us. It's like Jesus is saying you are enough without doing anything else.

In our crazy busy world, it is hard to comprehend that you are enough just the way you are.

Let us pray...God of understanding, give us the courage to slow down, to focus on the people who are important in our lives and to dwell in your love for us. Amen.

Pastor Betsy Hoium serves at Living Waters Lutheran Church in Lino Lakes, Minnesota.

February 23 - Teach Us How to Pray

Patti Axel

Luke 11:1-12

I had a parishioner ask me the other day for a class on how to pray. While I think that is a legitimate request, I asked her if she was looking for something specific? There are as many ways to pray as there are pray-ers and there is no "right" or "wrong" way to pray. Prayer is two-way communication with the One who loves us beyond all words and understanding.

God is Holy and receptive to our needs and wants us to be receptive in return. Just like a conversation with a dear friend, prayer works well when we listen as much if not more than we speak. God has much to say if we take the time to pay attention. Jesus didn't teach his disciples a long and wordy prayer - the Lord's Prayer is rather short and to the point but it does call us to trust that God knows what God is doing and calls us to participate in the kingdom work - sharing the good news of God's grace and extravagant love in a world desperate to hear it.

God, you hear our prayers - call us into the silence to hear what you have to say in return. Amen.

Patti Axel is the pastor of Nativity Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, GA.



February 24 - What Power?

Scott Simmons

Luke 11:14-26

Jesus casts out a demon and, as one would imagine, causes quite a stir among the locals. Some were amazed. Some wanted another sign from heaven as additional proof. Still others charged that Jesus used demonic powers to cast it away. Each response, however, begs the same question: 'what power is at work here?'



In this day and age, we still wonder about who, or what, is the power behind many of the extraordinary occurrences that disrupt our normalcy. And when this happens, some are amazed, some want more proof, and still others are quick to blame evils both real and imagined.

Today, as then, we need to hear Jesus' blunt reminder that even when it seems as if other powers - the world, the devil, our own sinful selves - are striving for our allegiance and attention, the "Kingdom of God has (and will) come." (20)

Through Jesus and by the Holy Spirit, God has this unpredictable habit of breaking into our world to wield the only power that truly matters: the power of God's forgiving, renewing, resurrecting love. Let us be amazed.

Scott Simmons is the pastor/mission developer of Lydia Place Collaborative Communities in Saint Paul, MN.

February 25 - Too Many Shoes

Allison Byerley

Luke 12:13-21

A few years ago, our church participated in a Lenten exercise to "Count Our Blessings." Each day we consciously counted something that most of us take for granted. One day we counted the light bulbs in our houses. One participant, who had an exquisitely landscaped yard, asked, "Do the ones outside count too?" I told her that if she had to ask, she probably knew the answer!

One day, we had to count how many shoes we owned. One woman came to me to express her horror. "I put all my shoes in the middle of my bedroom and counted. I had SEVENTY PAIRS of shoes!!" she exclaimed. Even I was impressed by that. "Do you still have seventy pairs of shoes?" I asked her. "No! I bagged up most of them and took them to Helping Hand (our local ministry assistance agency that operates a resale shop)."



She looked at her super-abundance, realized that her life's priorities had become skewed, and acted to share her blessings with others. The rich man in Jesus' parable looks at his super-abundance and is filled with pride and plans for more.

When was the last time you counted your blessings, especially the ones we take for granted? Like light bulbs, shoes, water faucets that bring clean water into our homes, pillows and beds, friends, and the freedom to worship God? Jesus invites us to focus less on ourselves and our possessions and more on our relationship with God. Take stock of what you have and how you can share with others.

Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Hawkins, TX. She is one of the editors of this volume.

February 26 – Abide

Ann Bassett

Psalm 15

In school, we were taught that if you're not sure what a word means, it may be possible to determine the meaning by taking a close look at the context. Psalm 15 begins by asking, "O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" According to the context ABIDE seems to mean "live with". The Psalmist is asking, "God, who gets to live with you in your holy home?"



Lucky for us, our psalmist provides the answer. Walk the talk and talk the walk. If you say you're a God follower than act like it in everything you do. And speak the truth; our human messy, vulnerable truth. In all that you do and say, always talk about all your neighbors in the best possible way. Never put others down to make yourself look better. Treat others justly. Help each other going so far as to lend others money without interest. Regardless of the cost to yourself, keep your word. Don't glorify those who treat others badly. Don't, in any way, make life harder for those who are hurting. Above all, honor the LORD.

It turns out ABIDE also has another meaning; obey, observe, follow or to act in accordance with. Abiding (living with) God is all about abiding (obeying) God. Those who abide by God's laws day and night with all their heart, mind, body and soul will abide in God's holy house. And, as the Psalmist concludes, they shall never be moved.

Ann Bassett is the Pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Spring Hill, TN. Peace Lutheran Church is sharing almost a third of their building with The Unchained Movement which is dedicated to eradicating human sex trafficking.

February 27 - Blame and Mercy

Jeremy Marshall

Luke 13:1-9

Two days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when 3000 innocent American citizens were killed and the Twin Towers fell, a pair of well-known televangelists appeared on a syndicated show. These prominent pastors pointed the finger of blame at some of their fellow citizens, saying the attacks were God's judgment on America for tolerating sinfulness.



Jesus was mid-sermon and had just warned of a coming judgment from God (Luke 12:47-59) when some in his audience asked for his opinion on a recent attack on some of his neighbors. Local jefe Pilate had "mingled their blood with their sacrifices" in what can only be described as an act of terrorism. Was that the kind of divine judgment Jesus was warning them about—a judgment aimed at those (bad) people (not us)?

Jesus replied that those murdered by Pilate were not particularly wicked. Nor were those killed recently when the tower of Siloam had collapsed on them. The justice of God was not subtly lurking behind those senseless tragedies. He warned his hearers to turn their judgments inward, to examine their own hearts and lives.

"Repent or perish!" isn't a call "those people" need to hear. It's a word for each of us. Jesus goes on to tell a parable about an unfruitful tree saved from destruction by a compassionate gardener, who begs the vineyard owner to give the tree another year. Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming a "year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4.19). The time of God's patient mercy is now. And according to Jesus, a better use of this time is making peace, rather than accusing others (Luke 12.57-59).

Jeremy Marshall is preaching minister for the Central Church of Christ in Stockton, CA.

Second Sunday of Lent

February 28 – Healed

Anne Knighten

Luke 13:10-17

She did not cry out for healing or seek to touch the hem of his garment. He did not tell her that her sins were forgiven. Instead, he called out to her, telling her that she was set free from her infirmity. He touched her and healed her even though it was the Sabbath. She stood up straight, her dignity restored. For the first time in 18 years, she was able to look someone in the eye. The eyes she saw were the eyes of Jesus, and she began praising God. But the religious leaders, charged with reading and faithfully teaching the law, told the crowd that the Sabbath was not a time for healing, that they should go away and not seek miracles on this day. Jesus rebuked them, pointing out the hypocrisy of their interpretation of the law, which allowed animals release from their restraints but not people from their bondage. The religious leaders were put to shame, and the crowd rejoiced at the wonders Jesus was doing.



Are we any different from the religious leaders of Jesus' time? Do we allow our interpretation of scripture to stand in the way of people's desire for God to act in their lives? Do we look deeply into our hearts and weed out hypocrisy based on a too rigid belief regarding how God is to act in the world?

Are our faith communities places where dignity is restored and people are set free from bondage?

Anne Knighten is a junior in the MDiv-DL program at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. She lives in Redlands, CA

March 1 - The Narrow Door

Allison Byerley

Luke 13:22-30

In a church that I served was a man about my age in years, but whose mental and emotional age had never grown much beyond a child's. He had a hunger and yearning for God that I have rarely encountered and spent much of his time going to church. All kinds of churches. Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal. He was at some church every day of the week.

Not surprisingly, he became confused by the different interpretations of Scripture and tradition he encountered. He found great comfort in the rituals and practices of traditional liturgy, especially as practiced in the Catholic church he attended. But when he went to some of the "low church" congregations, they condemned those rituals and practices, even condemning him for participating.

Every Sunday, we had time for silent prayer at the altar during worship. He would come forward, bringing his rosary with him. One Sunday, after worship, he came to me in distress. One of our members had come to him and told him, in no uncertain terms, that he was going to hell because he prayed the rosary. He was frightened and confused.

Jesus reminds us today that the way to him is narrow and that many who called on him will be disappointed to find the door closed. However, the criteria will not be whether we engaged in the right practices or attended the right worship. It will be if we followed Jesus, imitating him in our words and deeds with one another.

I assured this man that God would not condemn him for praying with his rosary. In fact, the one who had no mercy for him may find himself surprised.

Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Hawkins, TX. She is one of the editors of this volume.



March 2 - Seating at the Banquet

Chris Deacon

Luke 14:7-11

When my wife and I were preparing for our wedding, one of the most stressful things we did was trying to arrange seating at our rehearsal dinner. With her family and my family mixing like oil and water, we had to be very deliberate where to place everyone and who could sit next to whom. It makes perfect sense why most weddings have a groom's side and a brides' side! It is no wonder that Jesus gives advice on where to sit at wedding banquets!



Before we take Luke 14:7-11 as merely etiquette advice, we should remember that this is a parable. Jesus notices the guest seating themselves, some in places of honor and others in lower places. These people have no idea how the host values them, they are sitting based on where they think they should sit. He is saying more than "be humble and don't exalt yourselves." He is continuing the theme of reversal that runs so prominently through Luke. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled", "some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last," and "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus is warning us not to exalt ourselves too much, because when we start getting too full of ourselves, we begin to think we don't need God. We, instead, should humble ourselves, we should realize that we cannot do it on our own, we should realize that we depend on God. Then we will be exalted when we inherit the Kingdom of God.

Rev. Chris Deacon is a pastor in the PC(USA). He is currently serving the United Parish of Bowie in Bowie, Md, outside of Washington D.C.

March 3 - To Sup with Jesus

Heather Hunnicutt

Luke 14:12-24

In my tradition, we celebrate the Lord's Supper every time we gather as a community; the table is the central, unifying feature of my denomination. Yet, I sometimes fear my welcome is grudging and my heart inhospitable. In today's reading, Jesus tells a story about what it means to truly welcome others.



In the parable of the great banquet, we find that those invited to supper feel no compunction to attend. Their excuses are flimsy, though ostensibly reasonable to themselves. Imagine the scene: a table full to overflowing with food that would be left to rot; an angry, embarrassed host; and a squandered opportunity to commune. The host wisely decides that the hall should be filled by whoever wants to partake and sends his servant out to proclaim such. "Come to our feast!" we can almost hear him cry. "Come to the table where all shall have their fill and none be turned away!"

Is this not what the beloved community promises in its fullness? Is this not the clarion call of the Lord, who invites us all to the table, no matter one's place in society? The last shall be first, indeed! As we progress through this Lenten season together, may we welcome the stranger, that they may know the kindness of God. May we feed the hungry, that they may know the goodness of God. May we house those without homes, that they may know the shelter of God. May we cultivate hearts disposed toward those who need God's message of hope the most, that we might be utterly changed.

Heather Hunnicutt is a seminarian attending Phillips Theological Seminary and under care for ordination in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Georgia. She attends First Christian Church of Marietta, GA.

March 4 – Together

Jennifer Dyer Boyd

Luke 14:25-35

Did you ever have one of those days when you wanted to be a kid again – with no responsibilities to overwhelm you, no expectations to live up to, no schedules to keep? As a kid, we couldn't wait to grow up, but we didn't realize then the price that maturity would exact.

I will admit that there are even times when I wish that I wasn't a Christian. Sometimes the weight of caring for and about others, the longing for justice, the drive for peace can be overwhelming and never-ending. It can cost my heart a great deal to live this faith daily.

And yet...and yet...while these feelings do exist, there is a greater hope to which we are called. I can't imagine not caring, not having the ability to love and be loved. It is then that I take a step back and remember that it is because of what Christ Jesus has already done, that I am blessed and strengthened to live this life of faith. While there is a cost to following Jesus, what I receive is boundless.

We don't do this "faith thing" on our own. This is not a solitary path that we follow, but one in which we journey together. We support and encourage one another. We share our own faith joys and struggles. We share the love of Christ that we have received with others and it is not lessened but multiplied.

The cost of discipleship may seem great, but the love of Christ is priceless.

Rev. Jennifer Boyd is the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Brewster, NY



March 5 – Within

Tom O'Brien

Psalms 122

Psalms 122 is a beautiful prayer for safety within community. For the psalmist, the gates of Jerusalem frame the house of God. The author writes a song of peace and security for relatives and friends who live within the walls.

This community had many reasons to be afraid. Enemies were all around. The battles for power and land were constantly raging, and it seemed as if the world outside the gates wanted nothing less than the destruction of their nation.

Survival instincts draw us towards protecting our own community – others who look and act like us. Fear is real. We're each afraid of life outside our walls, never knowing where our enemies might dwell. We divide the world into "good" and "bad" with full confidence that we're on the "good" side. It's often difficult to believe that the folks on the other side of the wall feel the same as we do.

We pray for peace within our walls and security within our own towers. What if we prayed for those on the outside, too? How might prayers of safety and security for everyone widen our community and change the world?

Rev. Tom O'Brien is Senior Pastor of Memorial Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Sudbury, MA.



March 6 – Lost

Tina Walker-Morin

Luke 15:1-10

Have you ever driven somewhere and felt you were heading in the wrong direction? You begin looking around trying to recognize a building or a street sign -- something confirming you are on the correct path. Yet, the road seems unfamiliar. Your heart starts racing, your eyes look all around, you turn down the radio so you can focus...am I lost?



Jesus shares the parable of the lost sheep and coin. Both the sheep and coin did not intentionally move away from their owners, yet they are lost. The owners go searching for them and upon finding the sheep/coin they gather friends and neighbors to rejoice.

The sheep and the coin were found; they did not repent. So why, then, are we told “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents”? Must we first be found in order to repent?

We do not need to wait for God to find us, for we are already found. God has never stopped searching for us and is waiting to rejoice with us. *Repent* in the Greek New Testament means to “turn around”. We, unlike sheep/coins, have the ability to turn around to God. God follows and searches for us when we go astray.

Driving in the wrong direction can feel like an eternity. Yet once you turn around and head in a familiar direction, you realize you were not that far off course.

May you always be alert to when you need to turn around.

Rev. Tina Walker-Morin is pastor at Pilgrim Congregational Church in North Weymouth, MA and is a chaplain for Chaplains on the Way in Waltham, MA.

Third Sunday of Lent

March 7 - Welcomed Back

Catherine Malotky

Luke 15:13-21

By stopping the story midway, we are left pondering the response of the father to his returning son. “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion...” Could that have been your response? A disrespectful young buck demands his inheritance early and takes off for a distant city, subtracting his labor from that of the household economy and abandoning his family. This downsizing was no one’s desire but his, yet his family had to carry the extra work required because of his absence.



Of course, this perspective is from the economy of work. There is another economy—an economy of the heart. What kind of pain did his father bear because his younger son seemed to consider the family wealth merely a ticket out, a funding source for his wild(est) dreams? There was no acknowledgment of the father’s support and care; no sense of gratitude; no consideration of the father’s need for support as he aged. The boy/man was not capable of seeing a bigger picture.

We could label him a scoundrel until we realize that his short-sightedness is not unlike our own limited vision of the world. We have fixed our sights on our wildest dreams—wealth, security, power, prestige. We are rarely so obvious about it, but our determination has commodified the earth and our neighbors. We neglect to count long-term costs, lest we experience short-term loss.

Will we come to our senses? When we do, will the creator of the universe, seeing us return, be filled with compassion? In Jesus, God’s compassion is palpable. Nourished by his body and blood, we are welcomed back.

Rev. Catherine Malotky is an ELCA pastor serving as Director of Development at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

March 8 – Return

Mary Barnes Iverson

Luke 15:20b-24

A teenager was recently invited to a party. She confessed to a parent, “I know that there will be drinking going on. The boy who invited me was already drunk.” It prompted the parent to repeat a lecture they had given before, to both the teen and her older brother. “If you find yourself in a situation where you or your driver have been drinking, call me for a ride. There will be no scolding and no punishment. All you will get from me is a smile, a word of thanks and a safe and sober ride home for all who need it.”

Certainly, the son who had wandered far from home was expecting a lecture from his father. He was met, not with a reprimand and not with scolding, but with hugs, kisses, and a promised party.

The teenager, who decided not to go to the party after all, asked, “Won’t you be disappointed if I have been drinking?” Of course, they will be disappointed. But to get a call from your child rather than the hospital or the funeral home doesn’t compare!

Certainly, the father’s heart had been broken. Yet he had been hoping for nothing more than the return of his son. And seeing his son, far off in the distance, hiked up his robe and took off running, to welcome the boy home. He threw his arms around the boy, kissed him, and called for a celebration party.

This, Jesus tells us, this is what God is like. Yes, God may be broken-hearted by our behavior, but God is not cold or callous. God runs to us and sweeps us up and celebrates our return.

Rev. Mary Iverson is the pastor of an ELCA Lutheran Church in the farm country of south-central Minnesota.



March 9 - Prodigal Brother

Susie Webster-Toleno

Luke 15:25-32

On the outside, looking in. Seething with judgment, whose source is actually hurt feelings. That’s where the older brother found himself. And inside? A feast.

Have you ever been there? In that space where righteous pride swells to the point that it squeezes all of the oxygen out of your soul and the joy out of your spirit?

I like to think I don’t live there, but that’s a country I visit now and then, for sure. In my most spiritually evolved seasons, I let even the big offenses go, feeling their wounds but not falling in love with every bruise. But I have to admit that there are times when I wallow in my own hurts, becoming attached to how right I have been – and how wronged.

I see the older brother in this most beautiful parable thinking that he’s forcing his loving father into a choice: “Which will it be? Him? or Me?” But the parental heart of this father doesn’t work that way. Love isn’t a zero-sum game. The heart is an expansive muscle, and if this father had many sons and daughters, his heart would expand to love them all ... in their profligacy or their rigidity.

I know the pained righteousness of the older brother, and I know his awareness that it’s cold outside, and he’s hungry. And I know the parent’s prodigal love, saying, “Won’t you come in and let yourself be loved?”

How much more so with God.

Susie Webster-Toleno is the minister of a wee UCC congregation in a hilly village in southern Vermont, as well as a hospice chaplain.



March 10 - Good?

Barbara Hedges-Goettl

Luke 16:1-9

This parable is sometimes viewed as the most challenging of all due to the lord's commendation of the steward. Is he commended by Jesus Christ the Lord or by the lord/master of the household? And why? Note that the steward is not accused of taking the master's money for himself, but of *diaskorpizo** the master's wealth: scattering it abroad; dispersing, squandering, wasting it. Tellingly, the steward does not dispute the charges. Instead, he responds with further *diaskorpizo*, reducing the debts in the collections book.

Interestingly, the root word of the verb for scatter is a word used for the liberal distribution of blessings. So what if the steward is commended because of his generosity and liberality, his ability to build relationships through gifts and mercy? What if he is not only commended by the Lord, but represents the Lord? Christ Jesus was accused by the powers-that-be of squandering what should have been theirs, of sharing mercy with the unrighteous instead of with the chosen people. He disrupted their ideas of good. How could a Samaritan be "Good"? How could the beggar Lazarus be better than the rich guy? What if what matters is how as stewards we spread abroad what is entrusted to us to share? To build relationships based in giving and mercy instead of who owes how much to whom? Perhaps these are the "unjust" actions that grant residency in eternal homes.

*the Greek verb "diaskorpizo" meant "disperse," "scatter," "waste."

For more, see Dieter H. Reinstorf, "The parable of the shrewd manager," *HTS*, 69 (1), 2013.

Barb Hedges-Goettl is a PC(USA) pastor with a special passion for liturgy who teaches emotionally disturbed middle school kids in Philadelphia.



March 12 – Faithful

Kate West

Luke 16:10-13

These words of Jesus come at the end of a parable Jesus uses to teach his disciples and those following him about the Kingdom of God and who God is. The end of the story has these words to help the hearer better understand the metaphor Jesus uses. God is a God who desires to be in full relationship with us. But like any relationship, it is hard to navigate and to figure out how to be our best selves in the relationship. It's made harder because others judge how faithful we are based on their experiences and understanding of God. These words, in Luke, hit many hard during these trying times we find ourselves in American society.

Who or what is our master and how do those things reflect our daily living are questions we are being called to answer on daily basis. As people of faith, we are called to be devoted to God, but it is hard when we all have different ways of expressing that devotion.

Regardless of the expression, it is important to remember who we are to serve and that we are asked to live our faith carefully and not be distracted by other things around us. God desires a relationship with us; will we fully enter that relationship with God or allow distractions?

Rev. Kate West is the Pastor of First Congregational UCC, Belle Plaine, Iowa.



March 13 - Gone Astray

Tricia Stuart Jacobs

Psalm 119:167-176

I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.

I've lost count of how many times I've been lost during my life. Lost, both literally and figuratively, as even in my childhood I would wander away from my parents when shopping. I would hear "would the parents of the lost little girl please report to the customer service desk." My Mom would remind me of how important it is to stay with her at all times, a commandment.

During Lent of 2016, I found myself very lost as I had a deadline looming to defend my doctoral dissertation. I would wake up at 3 am with visions of my thesis blowing away with the wind and I felt lost. One day I met with my field advisor, Mike, and of course, shared my feeling of sheer panic. In a kind, but directive voice he said, "Tricia, the best dissertation is a finished dissertation, get it done." I heard his commandment, and I left our meeting that day with a determination I hadn't known before.

The commandment to "get it done" would carry me to my defense date and will always be proof to me that God's faithful commandments form and shape us to be our strongest and most alive. Now, I'm not elevating my advisor to God status, but just like a student needs the advisor, we as the lost sheep need God's voice to call us back to the path of abundant life.

Rev. Dr. Tricia Jacobs is the Senior Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Waterloo, Iowa.



Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 14 – Lazarus

Amy Fetterman

Luke 16:19-31

A passage about torment and mercy withheld may not seem like an uplifting story. But here, hellfire is hope.

If you have experienced the images of flames licking at your feet or little devils complete with pitchforks tormenting used as a threat to keep you in line, it might be hard to see hope in the fire.

For the rich man in Jesus' story, the hellfire is not particularly hopeful either.

He, who ignored Lazarus at his gate, knows in eternal life the torment the poor man knew in his mortal life. He cries out for mercy but no mercy comes his way. He pleads on behalf of his brothers who still live and might turn towards God. Father Abraham remains unmoved.

The rich man has no hope.

But we do.

We are the ones who might benefit from the lessons of the rich man. We are the ones who read the story and can say "but someone did rise from the dead!" Not the rich man but Jesus.

Jesus shares this parable in order that we might have an end of The Christmas Carol kind of moment, one where we realize it's not too late. The rich man's hellfire leads us to our hope that in the Lord Jesus Christ, his fate is not our own. We can change! We can still reach out to the Lazaruses at our gate. We can still offer care and compassion to those in need. We can seek justice. We can hope in the One who defeats the powers of sin and death, who bridges the chasm between heaven and Hades.

Amy Fetterman is a Virginia-based transitional pastor in the PC(USA) and co-author of Who's Got Time: Spirituality for a Busy Generation from Chalice Press.



March 15 - Do Not Let Them Stumble

Matthew March

Luke 17:1-10

I remember when I turned 16. I really wanted a car of my own, but my family couldn't afford another car. So I had to share the one car we had with my dad. Being 16, and a bit of a hothead, I went to church one day with a big chip on my shoulder.

I grumbled to my older, wiser friend Mike, "My parents won't buy me a car, but I bet they will buy one for my spoiled little sister when she turns 16."

Now Mike could have grumbled along with me. But Mike, being older and wiser, knew that would get me in trouble. "Don't you think your parents would get you a car if they could afford one?"

Mike was right and he did the right thing. He did not let me, in my immature teenage temper tantrum, stumble. He was a witness to being content. I had a lot that other teenagers didn't have, parents who loved and cared for me and who made sure I had the things I absolutely needed, even if I didn't have a car to call my own.

It's so easy to stumble in life, there are many opportunities all around. It is even easier to trip someone else up. Imagine how Mike would have felt if he would not have snapped me back to reality.

The thing is, Mike probably doesn't remember the incident as vividly as I do. He did what the adults in teenager's lives are supposed to do. He was just doing his job.

Matthew March is the pastor of St John's Lutheran Church in Chehalis, Washington.



March 16 -The 10th Leper

Jo Mead

Luke 17:11-19

Jesus had been traveling and walked into the village and the ten lepers approached him. After he had healed the lepers he sent them to their priests where they were once again accepted into community. One of the ten, a foreigner, came back to give praise for the healing.

Were the other nine lepers community members? We don't know. We do know that the mention of the one giving thanks was pointed out as a foreigner. Why? Is there something about when we become comfortable in our families, in our occupations, in our communities that we no longer turn to give thanks to God?

Have we lost the acceptance of healing as a gift and instead it became an entitlement? Could my thought process include: I am entitled to be healed because I go to church? Or, I am entitled to be healed because I am a good citizen?

We have no entitlements. What we have is a loving God who looks past our human need for self-reliance and allows us to go about our lives when we fail to give thanks for God's presence. We are in the place to offer thanks at least a hundred times a day, however pious we feel, if we remember to give thanks instead of asking for more in our prayers. But might it be that we are all still lepers going about our business of living instead of returning to give thanks. May we find the words this day to offer our thanks. May we find the space this day to live into the kingdom here and now. Thank you, Gracious Love. Thank you.

Rev. Jo Mead is an ordained elder in the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church. She serves the kingdom at University United Methodist Church, Wichita, Kansas.



March 17 – Tenacity

Andrea Allan

Luke 18:1-8

We live in a world that is full of injustice – millions of people live in war-torn countries, children die from lack of nutrition, the homeless population is full of people suffering from mental illness, and the list goes on. Dwelling on the injustices in the world can become exhausting and defeating. It is easy to wonder if the work and prayer we do makes any difference.

Luckily, we have stories like the one Jesus shared today to remind us that indeed our work and prayer does matter! The parable we read today helps to give those of us who pray, work, and fight for justice, hope and strength for our work. It is easy to feel like we are alone in our struggle for justice, to feel like we are not making the world any better, but in our reading today Jesus reminds us that while the fight for justice might feel long and hopeless, the long struggle is worth the fight! The widow had no one and no money, but she did have hope and strength to continue to fight for what was right. It took time, it took prayer, it took persistence, but she managed to get justice in the end! In times of despair, when we wonder if anything we do matters, let us remember the widow who persisted in what was right and finally saw justice.

Thanks be to God for the strength and tenacity we all have.

Rev. Andrea Allan ministers in a rural charge in Embro, Ontario at Knox United Church of Canada. She lives with her husband and daughter in Stratford Ontario.



March 18 - “Look at Me! Look at Me!”

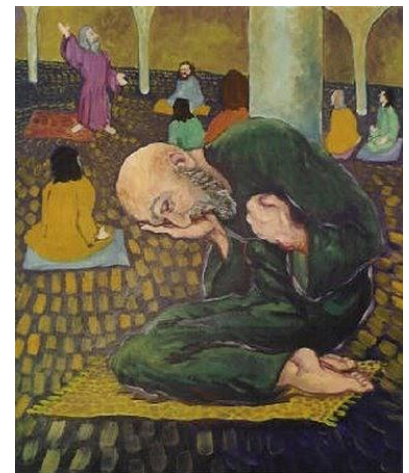
Gabrielle Martone

Luke 18:9-14

In a world that is more concerned about what kind of car you drive, what phone you have, the shoes you wear, the handbag you carry- how do we ever learn that God does not desire what is on the outside, but what is on the inside? It does not matter what you look like, how loud you pray or how perfect you set yourself out to be in the world, God cares about what is in your heart. Who are you at your core?

In this passage, we learn that we are enough for who we are, not who we think the world wants us to be. The Pharisee is concerned about how the world perceives him; his focus is on how others might view him. The tax collector is focused on how God sees, hears and forgives him. For the Pharisee, the relationship between the Pharisee and God was about a transaction- look at what I did, so do good things for me. For the tax collector, his relationship with God is about mercy, forgiveness and humility. This Lenten season, let us all practice being the tax collector- admitting our brokenness, coming before God and asking for mercy, and humbling ourselves before our Creator. Let us remember that we are nothing without the grace and love of God Almighty. Let our words and actions not be “Look at Me! Look at Me! But; Look at God! Look at God!”

Rev. Gabrielle Martone is the senior pastor of Broadway and Port Colden UMC's in Washington NJ.



March 19 - Like a Child

Rachel Wrenn

Luke 18:15-17

So I'm going to let you in on a little secret: well-known Bible passages are the bane of the preacher's existence. It's not because we don't love them—often they're some of our most favorite texts. But with well-known texts, we run into one very simple problem: everything (it feels) has already been said. What more could we say about the Jesus and the Little Children text?



Accept Jesus with childlike faith; be innocent in your life; hold fast to Jesus the way a toddler holds your hand when you're going down the staircase—as if her entire balance depends on you, because let's face it, it does. However, it is rare that everything really already has been said—or even if it has been, some things are well worth saying again. In today's political climate—angry at best, vicious at worst—it might be good for all of us to pause for a moment on one particular quality of being a child: their vulnerability. They cannot help but be vulnerable with the people around them. It is both their greatest strength and also the thing which leaves them the most open to being hurt. When was the last time you were vulnerable with someone who thinks the politically opposite of you? When was the last time you respected their vulnerability and really tried to hear them? In some way, Jesus says, it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

Rev. Rachel Wrenn served her first call in southwest Minnesota, "on the edge of the prairie." She is currently pursuing her PhD in Hebrew Bible at Emory University in Atlanta, GA.

March 20 – Healing

Betsy Hoium

Psalm 41:1-3

In our congregation, we have been dwelling in the themes in Luke, one of which is healing. Recently we had a panel discussion of people who work in health care. The panelists talked about their role in healing as a physician, a pediatric nurse and a marriage and family therapist, and how faith shapes what they do. We also asked the question, "Do miracles still happen?" and got a resounding "Yes!" from all three of them. Miracles happen all the time, often in small, subtle ways. The birth of a baby. A rare smile from a troubled youth who had considered suicide. One person shared how a child who was not expected to walk or talk had overcome the odds and was now entering college.



These stories of how God is at work in the world help sustain us in times when we feel overwhelmed, discouraged, depressed or hurting. These are the times that our faith may waiver or we may not be able to pray. So being part of a faith community that can pray for you is one of the many ways that the Lord sustains and heals us.

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord 's face shine upon you with grace and mercy

May the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen

God of understanding, give us the courage to slow down, focus on the people who are important in our lives and to dwell in your love for us. Amen.

Pastor Betsy Hoium serves at Living Waters Lutheran Church in Lino Lakes, Minnesota.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 21 - They Didn't Get It

Bart Roush

Luke 18:31-34

“They did not know what he was talking about,” or “They didn’t grasp what he was saying,” “But they didn’t get it...” Several different translations of the ancient words all point to the fact that the twelve disciples just didn’t comprehend what Jesus was saying about himself. They fail to understand. And this isn’t the first time (see 2:50, 9:45, and 24:13-35).

Jesus tells them plainly and clearly what is going to happen – and it’s the third time he has done so. He would be insulted, flogged, and killed. He would rise again on the third day. How could the disciples not understand such a clear statement? Maybe we would rather not think about it, and what it may cost us.

How much do we as followers of Jesus want to ignore the hard truths of our faith? How much do we want to bypass Good Friday to get to Easter? How much do we want to ignore the possibility of arrest, beatings, and lynching? How much do we refuse to ignore that our faith may come into conflict with religious or political authorities? Where are we blind to the hard truths our faith may call us to when we act for justice and reconciliation? Where are we unwilling to see the costs of discipleship and following the one who overturns power structures?

We cannot pass the peace of Christ on Sundays if we are not willing to do the difficult, and sometimes dangerous, work of justice on the other days of the week. Where are your blind spots to the hard truths of your faith?

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush serves Madison Square Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, TX.



March 22 – Vision

Katy Stenta

Luke 18:35-43

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Shush, says the crowd, be quiet, do not talk. This blind man, who couldn’t see Jesus, yet knew he was there. Jesus is on his way to certain death, making the final journey to Jerusalem. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on ME!” Louder, this time, and Jesus hears it. (Part of me thinks of course Jesus hears him, Jesus always hears him). The ignored one, the incomplete, imperfect one, the no-doubt-annoying-one. The fussy child who can’t sit still, the family that can never get to church on time, the elder who has a lot of trouble hearing, the one in pain, the one alone, the one who for whatever reason cannot see Jesus today.

In a time where still people are ignored, erased or shunted to the side, in an age of constant chatter, still so many need to try out to be heard.

And then, Jesus stops. He stands still and says not only “receive sight” but also “your faith has saved you.” We are given not only the vision but also the salvation we need. What has been granted is so much more than “Be Thou my Vision.” We are given the time and notice and love we need—those things we need to have faith and be saved. Praise God.

Pastor Katy Stenta is the Solo at a Bigger-on-the-inside & Revitalized New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Albany, NY



March 23 - Acting Big

Kelley Jepsen

Luke 19:1-10

As Zacchaeus goes out into the crowd that is surrounding Jesus, we can tell that he is not well-liked. There aren't people around to take pity on him – to let him slip in front of them so he can see. There are no friends saving a spot for him near the front because they know he's going to have trouble looking over the crowds. Zacchaeus is alone. And he is faced with a choice – stay small and blend into the crowd or do something big. How often do we feel small and alone like Zacchaeus? Sometimes blending in feels easy, safe, and we can't help but want to hold back.

But Zacchaeus quickly realizes that if he is going to see Jesus, he needs to take action. Acting small isn't going to get Zacchaeus anywhere. So he looks around, sees a tall sycamore tree and risks being laughed at or shamed while climbing the tree in front of everyone. It's a bold move, but he knows there is no glory in acting small.

And not only does Zacchaeus get to see Jesus, but Jesus sees him and makes a point to call him, by name, into action. God does the same for us, calling us into action – to think bigger and to act bolder. And like Zacchaeus, we too know that we do no glory to God when we act small. So when you feel overwhelmed or worried about being too small, remember that God calls us regardless of our size. God sees that we are capable of big things and we must remember to look for those traits in ourselves too.

Kelley Jepsen is a second-year MDiv. Student at Luther Seminary. She is currently pursuing ordination through the Presbyterian Church (USA) and is discerning a call to prison chaplaincy.



March 24 - Risk-taker

Daphne Urban

Luke 19:11-19

This parable speaks to me. These scriptures speak to me. I relate it to risk takers in our current day. Some people are huge risk-takers. They jump out of airplanes and trust that their parachute will open before they hit the ground. These people risk their lives. When they take huge risks and they come out okay, then they are rewarded with continued life, and they are willing to risk it again. Some people risk their money, by gambling or putting it in the stock market. With a few chance decisions on what the dice will roll or how much diversity they decided upon, depends on if their money amount grows or shrinks in size. Some people are very conservative and don't take any unnecessary risks with any part of their lives. I would consider myself a modest risk-taker.

I took a risk this year by beginning seminary. It's exciting, but scary because I haven't been in college in over ten years. But I'm ready to answer God's call and turn my life more to him, so here I am.

Dear Jesus, help me to trust in you, and you will give me guidance. Help me to turn my fears of life risks over to you, and you will give me peace. Help me remember that I get my strength from you, and you will reward me with your love. My faith is in you. Amen.



Daphne Urban is a distributive learning Master of Divinity seminary student at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and attends church at New Salem Lutheran Church in Turtle River, MN.

March 25 – Fear

John Renze

Luke 19:20-27

Why are you afraid?

The recipient of the one pound was afraid. He was the slave of a lord who took what he did not deposit and reaped where he had not sown. His boss kept slaves and killed political prisoners. The consequence of his fear was inaction. He was unable to realize the fruit of the gifts he had been given.

Why are you afraid?

We, too, have each been given a pound. A pound of grace. A pound of the Word made flesh. A pound that, when planted in good soil, will yield a hundredfold. And yet, many of us are like the servant with the one pound, inactive because of fear.

Why are you afraid?

Perhaps you fear failure or rejection. Perhaps you are too busy or tired or broken to try again. Or is it perhaps because you fear that the Lord who gave you the pound is like the lord in the story. You fear that God is cruel and arbitrary, quick to punish and slow to reward.

Fear not!

The reign of God is like nothing from this world. You have been created as God's image and likeness. God desires a relationship with us, not fear of punishment. God cares for us as children, not as resources to be exploited. God is invested in us. How do we know? God proved it by becoming one of us and dying at our hands. Now, about that pound. What are you going to do with it?

John Renze is a student at Luther Seminary and a member of St. James Lutheran Church in Crystal, Minnesota.



March 26 - Do Joy

Chris Deacon

Psalms 84:1-4

A few months ago, I came across a television series that grabbed my interest. "Impastor" is about a con-man, who through some incredibly unrealistic events, takes the place of a Lutheran pastor who was hired for a new church, sight unseen. The show is about the situations he finds himself in, imitating a pastor and interacting with church folk. In one scene, two church members are talking about him. One says, "Oh, Alden, wasn't it nice to see some joy in there for once?" Alden replies, "We're Lutheran. We don't do joy. We top out at quiet contentment."

I laughed out loud at that line. I'm not Lutheran, but often our churches don't "do joy". How many times have you been in worship and the responsive reading of the call to worship or the united praying of the Lord's Prayer sounds almost robotic, devoid of any joy? Too often worship becomes routine and we find ourselves just going through the motions.

Psalms 84:1-4 reminds us that we should be joyful to worship God. The psalmist writes, "my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." We should be filled with joy and thanksgiving when we worship God. After all, the God who created the heavens and the earth, all that we can see and can't see, also created us and entered into relationship with us! It is an honor and privilege to worship God. Psalm 84 reminds us that we should never just go through the motions, but instead engage with God through joyful worship! Happy are those who live in God's house, forever singing the Lord's praise!

Rev. Chris Deacon is a pastor in the PC(USA). He is currently serving the United Parish of Bowie in Bowie, Md, outside of Washington D.C.



March 27 – Lovelight

Patti Axel

Psalm 84:10-12

What blessed news to hear as we approach Holy Week and I couldn't agree more - what a treat to open the door to God for all to enter, day in and day out - being a herald to the joy of God's presence!

What an interesting Psalm to read as we consider that the space the disciples inhabited was about to be turned upside-down as their friend and Master was tried, convicted and killed for loving the world.

How often do we lean into that love? Is it too good to be true? How do we trust God's extravagant love in a world that seems to be short on trust? But God as sun and shield is a provider of warmth and protection - God wraps us in a cloak of righteousness and peace and then sends us back out as bearers of news worthy to be trusted!

LORD of hosts, shine the light of your love on this gloomy world of sin and pain, giving us strength to shine through the pain to bear that love with joy and gladness, ushering in the glow of your abundant grace! Amen.

Patti Axel is the pastor of Nativity Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, GA.



Palm Sunday

March 28 – Hosanna

Scott Simmons

Luke 19:29-40

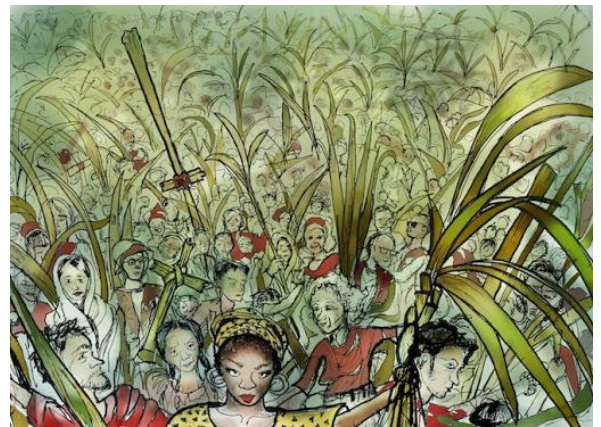
Have you ever attended a big college football rivalry game? At some point, the visiting team's band enters the stadium with horns blowing and flags waving to the steady beat of the drum. At best, the home fans politely endure the disruption. Quite often, they boo and jeer.

As Luke tells it, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is no triumphant homecoming, with scores of locals welcoming a conquering messiah to the city. There's no mention of palm branches or shouts of "hosanna" in Luke. Rather, Jesus and his followers seem to be the only ones in the parade. They are the ones proclaiming and shouting and letting the city know that "the King who comes in the name of the Lord" has entered the gates.

And, predictably, the home team asks Jesus to quiet his followers.

But Jesus knows something the Pharisees don't: the coming of God's reign cannot be muted, it cannot be stopped. "If these were silent, the stones would shout out."

It can seem like the world isn't paying attention to the church, or its proclamation, these days either. Take heart. It's not up to us alone. All creation sings God's glory. So thanks be to God.



Scott Simmons is the pastor/mission developer of Lydia Place Collaborative Communities in Saint Paul, MN, a ministry of the ELCA exploring the intersection of faith, work, and daily life through collaboration, relationships and the practice of radically accepting the hospitality of others. www.lydiaplace.com

March 29 – Peace

Julie King

Luke 19:41-48

“If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

The city of Jerusalem is one of the most fought-over bits of geography on the planet. Jews, Christians and Muslims all revere it as one of the most holy places on earth. Throughout its history, the city has been bought, sold, fought over, conquered, resettled, conquered again, rebuilt, conquered again, etc. Which makes the meaning of the name “Jerusalem” as the “City of Peace” all the more ironic.



Sometimes, when all you do is fight, it's hard to recognize peace, even when it's right in front of you.

We live in a world fiercely divided—by politics, economics, education, sports teams, for crying out loud! We fight and bicker and post/repost insulting messages and “unfriend” people who see the world differently than we do. It makes me wonder: can we recognize the things that make for peace?

Luke's gospel makes clear that Jesus had priorities in his ministry, most significantly ministry to the poor. He also prioritized those who were held captive in some way—physical (the lame, the blind, the sick), political (the imprisoned or condemned), demonic possession, or by sin.

On this day, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, people recognized him and cheered for him. But they didn't recognize what he stood for, what he prioritized. And Jesus saw that they never would, not until it was too late. Jesus wept for a city of peace that was unjust and unsustainable.

Does Jesus weep for us?

Lord Jesus, help us to bring your peace to the corners of the world where we have influence. Help us make your priorities our priorities, so that in the kingdom of God, we may see true peace. Amen.

Rev. Julie King is pastor of Macon Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church in Brookfield, both in Northern Missouri.

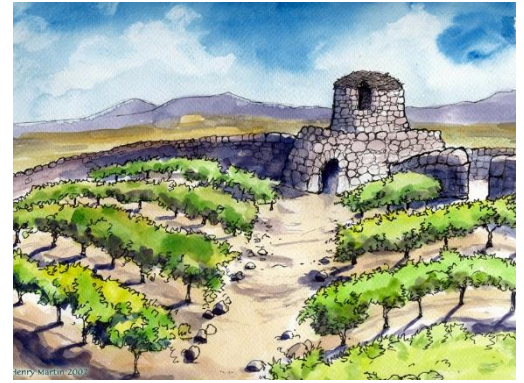
March 30 - Trouble in the Vineyard

Joe Genau

Luke 20:9-19

It seems there's always trouble in the vineyard.

This time, there is bloodshed in the vineyard. And if we've been listening to Jesus, we're not surprised. He's been cleansing the temple and lamenting. He's been sharing some heavy parables. He's been causing trouble. And now, he's giving us a bleak vineyard. Fruit grows, wine is pressed, but it's blood that stains the ground of this vineyard.



It'd be a hard image to swallow if we didn't know this story so well in our own vineyard. Our world is one in which the kind of violence Jesus describes barely registers in our brains anymore. We see: hungry people, vulnerable cast aside, children killed for being the kind of kid who lives in a vineyard.

There is bloodshed in the vineyard. The tenants have turned on the landowner. The tenants have killed prophets. We know this parable. We live this parable.

I wonder when we look at the troubles in the vineyard, do we ever suspect that God may just stop showing up? What will God do with our brokenness? What will God do with our persistent rejection, and violence, and turning away?

It seems God does not abandon. It seems God won't be satisfied picking up the pieces we reject and going home to feel sorry for us. God takes our brokenness and makes a new thing. A new promise. A new covenant. And the parts we reject – the violence and bad fruit we choose instead -- well, they become the cornerstone.

Rev. Joe Genau is the Pastor of Edgewood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

March 31 – Practice

Tom O'Brien

Luke 21:29-36

When I was younger, I gave things up for Lent. Lately, I find it more helpful to take on new things instead. Now, I take on new spiritual practices, trying to focus on my spiritual life. I seek God's Kingdom through labyrinth walks, centering prayer, or some other action. There's a part of myself that actually believes that Lenten practices will help me find the Kingdom.



Jesus was always telling those around him that the Kingdom of God was near. He used sermons and poetry and stories to try and explain what he meant. In the Parable of the Fig Tree, Jesus reminds us of the hope we can find in the changing of the seasons. The trees around us may still be bare but we know that they'll sprout leaves soon. Our world may seem bleak but the Kingdom – the world of peace and justice and equality that our Creator intended for us – is near. We may not reach it in our lifetimes but, if we follow Jesus' example, our actions will bring it just a bit closer.

My Lenten practices won't change the world. They won't even change my own life as much as I'd hope. I can't let that weigh me down. If we let ourselves get burdened by doubt and worry, the Kingdom will keep slipping away. Instead, we can focus on the Kingdom, remember that the trees will bloom again, and seek solace in the peace of Christ.

Rev. Tom O'Brien is Senior Pastor of Memorial Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Sudbury, MA.

Maundy Thursday

April 1 - In This Very Room

Julie Holm

Luke 22:1-27

Ron Harris wrote his well-known hymn in a hotel room at the Fairmont Hotel in New Orleans, during a long business trip. After talking to his wife and children in Los Angeles on the phone, he found himself filled with deep longing to be with his family, and feeling exceptionally lonely. Out of the dark, and out of nowhere, he reports, the words “in this very room” came to him, along with the ideas. His loneliness was gone and he felt “powerful and healed.”

For the disciples, it's backwards. They don't yet know what is ahead – the fear, the loneliness, the guilt of abandoning their Lord, their inability to stay awake in Gethsemane is all ahead, and for a short moment all of the twelve sit together at table fellowship, which has been a regular part of Jesus' ministry. They must feel warm and collegial, after three long years, together with those closest to them, those they have been doing ministry with, celebrating one of their holy times, a festival of freedom, the Passover.

But today is different. Today God's love pours out even more as Jesus takes bread and the cup, blesses it, breaks it, shares it with those who will deny him, those who will fall asleep on him, those who will abandon him, even the one who will betray him. In this room is all the Love in the world. In this world, in the calm before the storm, is the Reign of God.

*In this very room there's quite enough love for all the world,
And in this very room there's quite enough joy for all the world,
And there's quite enough hope and quite enough power
to chase away any gloom,
For Jesus, Lord Jesus ... is in this very room.*

(“In This Very Room,” Words and music by Ron and Carol Harris, 1979, as printed in *Chalice Hymnal*, ©1995 Chalice Press #295)

Rev. Julie Holm pastors the Brush Valley Fusion of Faith in Rebersburg and Madisonburg, PA: St. Peter's United Church of Christ, St. Peter's Lutheran (ELCA) and Christ United Church of Christ. She is one of the editors of this volume.



Good Friday

April 2 - Facing Change

Allison Byerley

Luke 23:32-47

The journey to the cross is complete. I am struck anew by the different responses of the crowd and Jesus. The crowd is silent or mocking, scoffing, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah!” The soldiers join in and cast lots for his clothes. The inscription above him is intended as a mockery. Even one of the thieves joins in, adding, “Save yourself and us!”

Have you ever been in a situation where everyone around you was hostile, laughing at you, mocking you? It makes you cringe and want to be as small as possible. As the derision continues, anger flairs up and burns hot. The fight-or-flight instinct is strong, though for Jesus, neither option is possible.

See how Jesus responds. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do.” Jesus continues to show us the way of love, even on the cross. Forgiving those who nailed him there. Forgiving those who mock him. Forgiving those who remain silent. And when the other thief rebukes the one who mocked Jesus and begs to be remembered, Jesus offers mercy and grace – “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Responding with forgiveness and mercy when people intend you grave bodily and mental harm is against human nature, but it is the heart of God’s nature. As Christians (little Christs), we see how we should respond and confess that we often (well, mostly) fall short. Only through the grace of God can we hope to be Christ-like in our response to those who wish us ill. Ask, and you shall receive. Jesus promised.

Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Hawkins, TX. She is one of the editors of this volume.



April 3 - Aftermath and Hope

Julie Holm

Luke 23:50-56

There is something very empty and barren about the day we call Holy Saturday. All scripture tells us is that the disciples kept the Sabbath. What would it have been like to be a disciple that day? You thought Jesus was a great Prophet maybe the Messiah, you thought he could do anything, but now? It’s all gone. Unlike us, who are not able to view the events of Holy Week without knowing about the resurrection, they had no idea what God had in mind.

I grew up Roman Catholic and every year went to the Easter Vigil. One year, as a young woman, I attended one at Catholic University in Washington DC. At midnight, in the woods, after a quiet day, we walked in the cold and dark, silently grieving, before that moment when light broke the darkness and a bonfire broke the cold. It was a dramatic moment.

No Gospel includes this moment in the dark, in the night before dawn. The moment we can’t know or understand, when the time of grieving and terror was suddenly, wondrously, transformed into life and joy and hope. Every year I try to get to a Vigil, because it feeds me with that moment. The service relies on symbols of light, of water, of word, and of the table to bring us from our bereft state to the most glorious celebration we have been given by God. There is probably a vigil in your area, too. Try it.

Rev. Julie Holm pastors the Brush Valley Fusion of Faith in Rebersburg and Madisonburg, PA: St. Peter’s United Church of Christ, St. Peter’s Lutheran (ELCA) and Christ United Church of Christ. She is one of the editors of this volume.



Easter Sunday

April 4 - Empty Tomb

Catherine Malotky

Luke 24:1-12

When circumstances don't make sense, what do we do? The women went to Jesus' tomb, no doubt still reeling from his trial, torture and public death. They could at least make some sense of it by anointing his body after a hasty burial. But then surprise after surprise, each shocking, each unexpected... the tomb open, the stone rolled aside, the body missing, and then the two men suddenly there, in dazzling clothes. No wonder they were terrified!

And yet, when reminded, the women could recall the promise and suddenly things fell into place. Can we blame them for their confusion and terror? Can we blame the apostles who could not believe the fantastical story the women told, an idle tale? In spite of the promise, can we believe it? Jesus, raised from the dead?

When our faith seems powerless because death is too close; when we have lost track of our holiness, the promise that we are made in the image of God; when we can no longer see in our neighbor the face of Jesus; when we despair over the damage done to us or that which we have done to others; then we must stand in the tomb with the women, and later, with Peter.

Today, Easter, we see that he is gone, the linen cloths without the body. Today, we gather at the Eucharist, to taste and see the risen Christ, given and shed for you. Recall the promise. In Jesus, from every death, life will rise again. New life is yours.

Rev. Catherine Malotky is an ELCA pastor serving as Director of Development at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, 94

