



Through
the Night
of Doubt
and Sorrow

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2018

Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow

ELW 327

**Through the night of doubt and sorrow,
onward goes the pilgrim band,
singing songs of expectation,
marching to the promised land.
Clear before us through the darkness
gleams and burns the guiding light;
pilgrim clasps the hand of pilgrim
stepping fearless through the night.**

**One the light of God's own presence
on the ransomed people shed,
chasing far the gloom and terror,
bright'ning all the path we tread.
One the object of our journey,
one the faith which never tires,
one the earnest looking forward,
one the hope our God inspires.**

Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow

**One the strain that lips of thousands
lift as from the heart of one;
one the conflict, one the peril,
one the march in God begun.
One the gladness of rejoicing
on the far eternal shore,
where the one almighty Father
reigns in love forevermore.**

**Onward, therefore, sisters, brothers;
onward, with the cross our aid.
Bear its shame, and fight its battle
till we rest beneath its shade.
Soon shall come the great awak'ning;
soon the rending of the tomb!
Then the scatt'ring of all shadows,
and the end of toil and gloom.**

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Ash Wednesday, February 14

Isaiah 58:1-12

According to author Ta Nehisi Coates, the four million slaves once living in the United States were worth three billion dollars to the US economy. With the institution of slavery so pervasive and lucrative it became easy for churchgoers to justify their ownership of other human beings. Imagine fasting for God in the morning, and beating a slave in the afternoon. This was the life of many US Christians in the 1800's. There were some people of faith, however, who knew that God was calling them to "loose the bonds of injustice." There were people like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass who heard God's call to "let the oppressed go free."

There are some of us who hear this call today. We know that a God who has broken every yoke elicits a different kind of worship. In light of the promise of the resurrection in Christ, our form of worship is participating in God's enterprise of liberation for the entire cosmos. Will you answer this call?

God of liberation, you are the source of freedom for all. We thank you for our ancestors who have partnered with you in your dream for the world. We thank you for the prophet Isaiah, for Harriet Tubman, for Fannie Lou Hamer, for Maya Angelou and all the saints who have come before us. We also thank you in advance for those saints who will come after us to continue this work. Mobilize us so that our acts of worship may bring flourishing to your planet and be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

Thursday, February 15

1 Peter 3:18-22

Gods don't suffer. And they definitely don't die! They intervene capriciously with human affairs and are usually impervious to our pleas for justice. The notion that God would participate in the depths of suffering—six feet deep to be precise—is completely absurd. Unless, of course, that God had a passionate love for humanity that could only be expressed by joining fully in the human experience. Knowing that God has stood with us and for us for the sake of love and freedom, we too are called to proclaim love to others knowing that we are freed to do so.

The passionate love of Jesus in the flesh is now released into the world as we are made alive in our baptism. The suffering that comes from standing with and for others is now redeemed in Christ. We can now face the toughest challenges that our world faces knowing that we belong to God. As James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Jesus, teach us how to die before we die. Show us that true power is in vulnerability. Help us put down our weapons and pick up our cross. Amen.

Friday, February 16

Mark 1:9-15

As the only white kid in an African-American history course, from time to time I would be questioned as to whether I had “street cred.” This term was used for someone who had spent time enduring the harsh realities of life, particularly in communities of color. After all, it is difficult to relate to a situation that you have never experienced. These experiences of hardship are what give you your “street cred.”

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is our God’s “street cred.” Through Christ’s experience in the wilderness, we see a God who is tempted and who can help us when we’re tempted (Hebrews 2:8). Jesus experiences poverty, homelessness, hunger, pain, sadness, anger, betrayal and the full range of human suffering so that it all might be redeemed. And you can’t get more “street cred” than that!

God of suffering, we thank you that you are a God with “street cred” who shows up in our struggles. Where there is suffering, bring your redemption. Where there is fear, bring your courage. Where there is pain, bring your presence. Where there is death, bring your new life. Amen.

Saturday, February 17

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327)

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King gave a speech at the Church of God in Christ headquarters in Memphis entitled, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” In spite of numerous threats to his life, King talked passionately about the plight of sanitation workers with confidence and clarity. In the speech, he framed history as an ongoing march to the promised land. It is almost as if King believed that God’s promised future and humanity’s difficult past were marching toward each other and getting ready to embrace. King died the day after his speech on April 4, 1968.

How could King sing “songs of expectation” amidst his night of “doubt and sorrow?” He possessed “the hope our God inspires.” He was marching to the Promised Land, clasping the hands of his brother knowing that he was not alone. Do you need to be reminded of God’s future of peace and justice for all? Rest in the promises of the One who is our guiding light. Clasp the hands of your brother Jesus as you journey toward “the far eternal shore.”

God of Promise, we see dimly, you see clearly. Give us your eyes. We listen poorly, you listen attentively. Give us your ears. We love selfishly, you love richly. Give us your heart. Amen.

Sunday, February 18

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327)

My friend Andrew had a smile that could light up a room. His joy was contagious. It was precisely because of this that we all found it inconceivable that he could have taken his own life on a tragic night in August. That was a night of “doubt and sorrow” for me that I thought I would never escape. I sat weeping in my wife’s arms. On that night, none of my theological training felt useful. None of my orthodox Christian teachings were adequate to comfort me in my bone-deep grief.

I let God have it that night. I cursed. I shouted. I cried out. Somewhere in the middle of my despair I began to imagine God’s arms extending farther and farther out to ensure that every emotion would be held with love. God didn’t need a censored prayer. God needed my whole heart. God needed my real emotion. So I gave it. During Lent, we are invited to “let God have it,” knowing that God’s arms are big enough to carry all of it, and knowing that the “great awaking” shall come soon.

*“Oh God, I don’t love you, I don’t even want to love you, but I want to want to love you”
-St. Teresa of Avila*

Monday, February 19

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

In the Bible, when someone’s name is changed, it marks a change in their life story, usually instigated by an encounter with God. After wrestling with God, Jacob becomes Israel (Gen 32). After encountering Jesus, Saul becomes Paul (Acts 9). In this story, God makes a covenant with Abram and Sarai and renames them Abraham and Sarah. And the covenant is this: that in their old age, they will have a son; that they will be the ancestors to a great nation; and that God will “be God to you and to your offspring after you” (17:7).

It is an astounding promise, and indeed, Abraham falls on his face with laughter at the thought that he and Sarah could have a child. But the God who makes that promise is, as Paul later says, one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17).

In this Lenten season, we remember that it is that same God who gives us life and calls us into existence through baptism. In that gracious encounter, God has claimed us and named us, too, with a new name: Christian.

God of new beginnings, be with us on our journeys as you were with Abraham and Sarah and all our ancestors in the faith. Amen.

Tuesday, February 20

Psalm 22:23-31

The last half of Psalm 22 reads like a “Hallelujah Chorus” of praise. The psalmist calls on everyone to praise God, from the “great congregation” to “future generations.” It is striking, then, that the psalm begins on a very different note: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The psalmist (and Jesus after) cries out in anguish to a God who seems silent. The turning point comes when the psalmist knows that God has heard: “From the horns of the wild oxen you have answered me” (Ps. 22:21). The NRSV translates, “you have rescued me” but the original Hebrew does not go that far. The psalmist may still be in grave peril, but the fact that God has answered is enough to move the psalmist to praise.

In our lives, as in this psalm, we lament and we praise. In lament, we express to God honest emotions of fear, anger and grief and we call on God to hear us. Then, eventually, we turn to praise. Both lament and praise are faithful forms of prayer. Both lament and praise are based on the knowledge that God hears and that God will answer.

Gracious God, we know that you hear us when we pray. Give us grace to pray boldly, trusting that you will answer. Amen.

Wednesday, February 21

Romans 4:13-25

When we say something is “too good to be true,” we are expressing skepticism about an offer. When I get a postcard in the mail that promises that I “may have already won” something big, I tell my children that it is “too good to be true.” No, we didn’t win a cruise. No, we didn’t win a new car.

Paul writes about something that seems too good to be true: the grace of God that justifies us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And yet, miracle of miracles, it is true! This is the God who promised a son to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, when they were “already as good as dead,” the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” Abraham and Sarah trusted God, though the promise seemed too good to be true, and they received a son whom they named Laughter. We trust that same God whose promise is good and true and we receive life abundant in God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of life, we give thanks that your promises are trustworthy and true. Give us the faith of Abraham and Sarah as we wait and hope for the fulfillment of your promises. Amen.

Thursday, February 22

Mark 8:31-38

Like Abraham and Sarah before him, Simon gets a name change. Jesus calls Simon to follow him (Mark 1:17) and then changes his name to Peter, which means “rock” (Mark 3:16). And Peter is indeed a rock—thick-headed and stubborn. But sometimes he gets it right. Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter responds, “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:29). Peter is right, but he doesn’t understand what being the Messiah means. This Messiah, the promised Son of David, tells them that he will die a criminal’s death, and then will rise again. In response, rock-headed Peter rebukes Jesus, and then Jesus gives him another name, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Yet, thankfully, that is not the end of the story. It’s not the end of the story for Jesus and it’s not the end of the story for Peter. The angels at the empty tomb single him out for a special message: “He has been raised; he is not here . . . Go, tell his disciples and Peter” (Mark 16:6-7). And Peter for the rest of his life proclaims this crucified-and-risen Messiah, the bedrock on which the church is built.

Lord Jesus, forgive us when we are thick-headed. Correct us when we are wrong and enlighten us with your truth, so we might proclaim you to a world in need. Amen.

Friday, February 23

Mark 8:31-38

Like Peter the rock, we are made uncomfortable by Jesus’ call: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In a world where the “self” has become, arguably, an idol of our own making (witness the untold number of “selfies” posted online every day in a quest for “likes”), this is a radical call indeed.

But what if this life to which Jesus calls us—the life of Christian discipleship—is actually the only life worth living? What if losing our life for the sake of Christ and our neighbor is to find our best life? What if taking up our cross and following Jesus is the only way to become truly human at last? Well, if that is true (and countless people through the centuries have bet their lives on it), then may God give us grace to follow Jesus—this Lenten season and always—in the way of the cross.

Lord Jesus, give us grace to follow you in the way of the cross and to find in you our true life. Amen.

Saturday, February 24

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 1)

Last summer, my family and I were hiking in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state, headed to a mountain lake called Hart Lake. A nine-mile round trip, the hike was beautiful but also challenging, especially for our 12-year-old son Isaac who got easily discouraged by the annoyances of hiking—mosquitoes, flies and dust. Isaac complained and dragged his feet most of the hike until we got to the point where we could see the mountain stream whose source was Hart Lake, and we knew that we were getting close to our goal. And then he suddenly got his second wind and exclaimed, “I’ve come this far; I’m not going back now!”

The first verse of our hymn speaks of such a journey—the journey of the life of faith, which sometimes leads us “through the night of doubt and sorrow.” It would be easy to get discouraged but for the “guiding light” of “God’s own presence” (verse 2), which encourages us and gives us the strength to keep going: “I’ve come this far! I’m not going back now!”

Lord Jesus, when the journey is hard, give us eyes to see the light of your presence with us and give us the strength to keep walking. Amen.

Sunday, February 25

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 1)

My friends and I were only a mile or two from base camp, but night had fallen. I proposed that we spend the night in the meadow we had reached, rather than try to negotiate a rocky, sloping trail in pitch darkness. I was afraid—afraid of falling, of the unknown. My friends said, “No, come on. We’ll be all right.” And one of my friends, Soren, put his hand on my cheek in a gesture of comfort and reassurance. And with that reassuring touch, suddenly I knew that they were right. We would make it. We should keep going.

“Pilgrim clasps the hand of pilgrim” says the hymn. Often, that’s what keeps us going—a hand holding ours, a touch on the cheek, a comforting embrace, a tater-tot casserole. God gives us fellow pilgrims—family, friends, church members—companions for the journey to lift us up when we fall, to encourage us when we doubt. And we do the same for them. Through the night of doubt and sorrow, surrounded by that communion of saints we keep on keeping on.

Jesus, thank you for the companions you’ve given us on our journeys. Make us, for each other, signs of your gracious presence with us. Amen.

Monday, February 26

Exodus 20: 1-17

On the journey of Lent, a season in the life of the church when the focus is on reflection and sacrifice, we visit a reading that occasions a pause for many—the 10 Commandments. The idea of being commanded to do anything is not very attractive in an era of self-determination and suspicion of authority. But what if these were not heard first as commandments, but descriptions of the relationship offered to us by God? What if these “commands” were God’s parameters for our most meaningful engagement with the divine and with one another? Just suppose we were to adjust our view of God as being one who is pure love and goodness with only the best intent for us. How might we then approach these commandments? Could we possibly make a conscious decision this Lent to embrace these “commands” as a spiritual discipline to follow?

Lord, help me embrace your commandments as invitations for my spiritual growth and maturity. Amen.

Tuesday, February 27

Psalms 19

Psalms 19 calls us to look at the Law of the Lord through the lens of the created order. The suggestion here is that there is a Creator behind the created order who has built into creation order, structure, principles and laws. The Law of the Lord has assigned the heavens and the firmament the task of speaking of God’s glory. For example, limits were given to the sun on how to operate in creation’s economy.

What about humanity? How does the Law of the Lord apply to us? The Law is described as perfect, sure, right, clear, true and desirable. Its effect revives the soul, rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes. The psalmist then declares that there is reward in keeping the law, even as it is warning against ignoring the created order.

Lord, help me to hold to your law. Amen.

Wednesday, February 28

I Corinthians 1:18-25

In today's reading we come across an interesting comparison between the foolishness of God and the wisdom of the wise. At first glance the reading might appear to be anti-intellectual, suggesting the destruction of the wise and prudent. On closer reflection, however, the words are an encouragement to trust the ability of God to work on our behalf. Who would have thought that salvation would come through the death of Jesus on a cross? If the authorities had known or understood, they would not have killed Jesus. Instead, they might have just locked him up forever. But as Isaiah 55:8 reminds us, God's thoughts and ways are different from ours. The Apostle Paul's words invite us to remain open for the power of God to be shown in our circumstances as we believe in the finished work of Calvary. When we choose simple faith, the possibilities are endless.

Lord, I believe, help my unbelief! Amen.

Thursday, March 1

John 2:13-22

What comes to mind when you read the story of Jesus cleansing the temple? Maybe a better question would be "What does not come to mind when this story is read?" The notion of a "gentle Jesus meek and mild" seems damaged by Jesus' display of brute force and hostility. Yet beyond the display of anger, there is a message here for us during this Lenten season. We realize that there are things that occasion the righteous indignation of Jesus. God is not a benevolent grandparent who simply smiles at indiscretion. God is affected by humanity's actions. In this case, it appears that Jesus was displeased with how the temple of God had been transformed to accommodate the agenda of human desires rather than serving the agenda of God. Jesus acted to restore the integrity of the temple as a place of worship.

Lord, help me to seek you first. Amen.

Friday, March 2

John 2:13-22

Further reflection on this week's gospel reading suggests that there are standards or principles by which God operates. When these principles or standards are violated, God acts. Why else would Jesus act so harshly? As Jesus disrupts the marketing in the temple, might Jesus be saying to us that some of the disruptions in our lives, in the nation and in the church are acts of God to redirect our paths? It is hard to know one way or the other. What we can affirm is that Jesus can be a disruptive force.

After he cleansed the temple, Jesus was asked about his authority for taking this drastic action. His response did not directly answer their questions, and their interpretation of his response was also amiss. This drives home a point that all who wish to follow Jesus must continue to seek to understand his word, and strive to walk in obedience.

Lord, help me to understand your word to me. Amen.

Saturday, March 3

Hymn: "Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow" (ELW 327, verse 1)

This hymn is not immediately inviting. It appears gloomy, speaking of a night of dark and sorrow. But before we dismiss it, a closer look reveals that it speaks of places and experiences where most people live. Our days are filled with trouble, trials, uncertainty and joys. So the hymn writer fittingly reminds us that the journey of faith brings its own share of doubt that God will deliver on God's promises. Uncertainty about God's word to us and God's presence with us is real. In the face of doubt, the writer calls every pilgrim to march on fearlessly in faith, looking ahead in hope for God's guiding light. The journey is not private, but undertaken in community; each step is taken holding the hand of another sojourner.

Lord as I live out my faith, help me to step fearlessly through the night while holding another's hand. Amen.

Sunday, March 4

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 2)

In eight lines the writer uses the word “one” five times. There is a strong echo of Deuteronomy 6 and its assertion of the oneness of God. With all our many competing interests and commitments, Lent comes to remind us of the one God who reveals the divine self in Jesus through the Holy Spirit and invites us into a deep personal relationship. The religious plurality of the world may call us to divide our devotion. But God calls us to remember that the Light is One.

The words of the hymn also suggest a strong echo of Luke 10:41 in which Jesus says one thing is needed, calling Martha to realign her priorities. Martha was worried about many things to be done. Jesus pointed her to the one thing needed—sit with me, learn of me, entertain me—and let the other things fall into place.

Lord, forgive me for my misplaced priorities. Help me to make you the one thing needful. Amen.

Monday, March 5

Numbers 21:4-9

In last Sunday’s reading from Exodus, the people of Israel heard a wondrous reminder: “I AM the Lord who brought you out of Egypt.” In the first verse of this week’s reading we are twice reminded that they are now “on the way”—on a journey. Yet, are we really so surprised when these people are hardly out the door before they are impatient and dissatisfied, complaining about the pace, the food and the accommodations? When a plague of poisonous serpents brings them to their senses, in repentance they plead for mercy. Fortunately, they have not forgotten where their salvation has come from—from this merciful God who now delivers them once again. The surprising irony of this story is that their salvation comes in exactly the shape they would least expect it. In God’s merciful way of forgiveness, the poisonous serpent of death becomes the agent and sign of God’s deliverance and salvation.

On this Lenten journey we are invited to relive that surprising irony. We keep our eyes focused ahead to the end of our journey—to the cross of Jesus. For we know that there, precisely in the agent and sign of death, we will be given to see God’s forgiveness and salvation.

God of mercy, as we journey toward the cross, keep us ever mindful of your mercy and forgiveness that are able to sustain us with hope in the midst of our impatience and distrust that so threaten to occupy our attention. Amen.

Tuesday, March 6

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.” As a youngster child I used to resent—dare I say even hate—these words. In our home no one left the table before we had prayed those words of thanksgiving together. In later years I am thankful that those oft-repeated words are a kind of mantra—almost unconsciously drawn upon at just the right time to remind me in a more contemporary version that “God is good; all the time!”

It is clear, then, that the psalmist’s intention has met success. At least five times (1, 8, 15, 21, 31) we hear the call to thankfulness for God’s steadfast love. And right alongside (6, 13, 19, 28) stands the recital of the “proof in the pudding” so to speak: “they cried to the Lord, and he saved them in their distress.” Not a bad double mantra for us too, on this our Lenten journey: Give thanks to the Lord for his steadfast love endures forever; when we cry in distress, the Lord will deliver us.”

God of steadfast love, give us the right words to chant on our daily journey, that they may remind us of your goodness and mercy, and that you will be present to deliver us in any distress. Amen.

Wednesday, March 7

Ephesians 2:1-10

Yesterday, the psalmist reminded us of God’s goodness and steadfast love. In today’s reading we hear one of the most focused recitals of God’s rich grace and mercy in the whole of scriptures. In fact the writer essentially says that “Rich in Mercy and Love” is God’s other name (4). Then come four key assertions about that mercy and love. We were dead but now God has made us alive together with Christ (5). We have been saved by grace through faith (5, 8). This salvation does not depend on us; it is a gift from God (8). And, finally, we are God’s poetry—a better capture of the original Greek than “workmanship”—in which God’s creative hand is at work in writing the good works that now can mark our life stories (10).

On this, our Lenten journey, we need not travel blindly or without a sense of the ending. In the cross and resurrection, in rich mercy and love, God has already prepared for us a finish line that is already transforming each step along the way.

God of mercy and love, make us ever thankful that by your grace you have brought us from death to life, and that our lives are now bound together with our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Continue to create in us the good works that are the signs of your salvation. Amen.

Thursday, March 8

John 3:14-21

The gospel reading for this week can be divided into two key parts, verses 14-16 and verses 17-21—the first with its familiar “John 3:16” often overshadowing and stealing our attention away from the equally important second. Today, in part one, Jesus tells Nicodemus that the surprising irony of the serpent lifted up in the wilderness—that through an agent and sign of death God’s salvation is being worked—is a prelude to the story of Jesus’ journey to the cross. And then comes this amazing answer to the perennial human question “Why?”— answered in John 3:16! Because God “so loved,” that’s why.

Furthermore, this way of the John 3:16 love, which inspires faith in us, is no accident. “So must the Son of Man be lifted up” (14). It is about a divine necessity. Because of God’s deep love it had to be this way. Two times this love is repeated (15, 16)—so as to inspire that faith and trust that has the power to snatch us out of death into life.

God of love and mercy, may the power of your love for us in Christ Jesus inspire us to believe and trust that you desire nothing more than your children being rescued from death, and walking in the new life that is ours in Jesus our Risen Lord. Amen.

Friday, March 9

John 3:14-21

In part two of this week’s gospel reading (17-21) our “Why?” meets another “Because” (17) that balances and reinforces part one. It is an answer every bit as powerful as that of John 3:16: God did not send the Son into the world in order to sit in judgment, but in order to save the world. The purpose of Jesus’ journey to the cross, and of our Lenten journey, is for us to discover this truth about the necessity and purpose of God’s love. Our Lenten journey is not about punishment, but about so great a love that it can inspire us to believe God’s promise of life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is hard for us to believe that promise, because we are programmed to expect the worst. The reading speaks of it as the “crisis” of faith (deciding or turning point, NRSV reads “judgment,” verse 19). Even when the light has come, we seem so often to want to remain in darkness. But as we follow Christ on this Lenten journey, we are given the experience that believing and life belong together. To believe becomes an event, a happening, by which a new relationship of life can be wrought by the love of God.

O God of Love, grant us to believe your promise of life in Christ Jesus our Lord. May our journey to the cross inspire us with hope to see that your desire for us is not death, but life. Amen.

Saturday, March 10

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 2)

Each morning I set out for my daily walk, often just before the dawn. At first the path ahead is dark and gloomy, my steps careful and uncertain. But then as sunrise approaches, the light begins to “chase the gloom away” and “brightens the path I tread.” As our Lenten theme hymn suggests we are like pilgrims on a journey, walking from darkness toward the light. That journey is like a parable of our lives, so often seeking light that will chase away the darkness and gloom that too often press in on us. It is comforting to join in singing our hymn’s reminder: like the dawn of each morning that chases away the darkness, the “light of God’s presence” travels with us each step of our journey toward the dawn of Easter’s light.

God of Presence and Light, may we journey this Lenten Season, confident that in the midst of the gloom that shadows our days, there is a light that dawns with the promise of your presence to guide us each step of our journey. Amen.

Sunday, March 11

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 2)

I’m a map person—whether it’s the traditional multi-fold highway map, or now the more new-fangled navigation screens. I like to keep track of where I am and where I am heading. The same might be true of us pilgrims who share our Lenten hymn. Though yesterday we pondered our move from gloom toward the light grounded in the promise of God’s presence, today, the last portion of verse two suggests there is still something more to be desired. Our journey wants a destination, an “object.” Having a destination grants us to journey with our eyes constantly focused not toward what lies behind, but toward what lies ahead. With our attention focused on the object that lies at the end of our journey—the promise in the cross and resurrection of our Lord—we journey with a “faith that never tires” because of the “hope” that is inspired in us by the light of God’s presence.

God of Hope, inspire us by your presence to journey each day in faith; guide us toward the light of our future grounded always in your promises. Amen.

Monday, March 12

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jeremiah delivers to his community the Lord's judgement. In pronouncement after pronouncement, he warns of the dire consequences of forgetting God's covenant, calling out the community's active rejection of the relationship that shapes and sustains them. We stand in this valley of shadows as well, not just because the church year says we are deep into a season of repentance, but because our own amnesia of God's sovereignty dooms us to be anxious for security and survival. We tip toward fragility when we could be sure and certain that the God of the universe intends for us to thrive. So, it is grace to us to hear Jeremiah's promise that all, including warring factions, exiles and we who have forgotten God's covenant in so many ways, will be gathered into a new covenant marked by a God who will remember our sin no more. We shall all know and live fully forgiven.

Open our eyes to the ways we stray from you, our timidity and overcompensation with things that will not sustain us in the end. Help us to know you as you have promised. Amen.

Tuesday, March 13

Psalms 51:1-12

We heard the words of this psalm just a few weeks ago on Ash Wednesday when we began our Lenten journey. Out of fear we tend to gloss over our mortality, the importance of our lives, our work, our loves crowding out the "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" truth that is our temporal reality. Then by extension, we also gloss over our shortcomings, the damage we have done to others and our world, often without intention. Our limited time means limited vision. We have polluted, discriminated, hoarded, degraded and abandoned because our own survival demanded it—or so we tell ourselves. Lent invites us to stop and see with God's eyes. The psalmist's words could be spoken from our hearts, gloss banished, reality fully lit. We are invited to stand, revealed in God's presence and along with the psalmist, believe that God is there to hear our confession, merciful and forgiving.

Create in us a clean heart, O God. Restore to us the joy of your salvation. Amen.

Wednesday, March 14

Hebrews 5:5-10

What shape will the new covenant take? Who is this God who is present for us, full of mercy and eager to welcome us back into relationship? Our forebears in faith imagined the Messiah. Our Christian progenitors, in faith, saw Jesus as the One who had opened his heart to others and had the courage to engage fully in his context, even when it cost him his life. Their legacy of faith is our inheritance. In him they saw the pre-eminent high priest, who intercedes on our behalf, the begotten one whose claim on us makes us also children of God. In him we can enter God's house as ones who belong. Like Jesus, we do not come into this relational home triumphant and boasting, but as ones who are embraced with a full-knowing love. In humility we come home, shame upended by the light of grace.

Jesus, your pedigree reaches back deep into the long history of faith. Your faithfulness is a fertile blessing, even now as we prepare again to tell the story of your passion and resurrection. We are awed to be descendants of your grace. Amen.

Thursday, March 15

John 12:20-33

"We wish to see Jesus." Do we? Or are we, like so many in the crowd, just dazzled by the signs Jesus has done, including recently in John's story raising his friend Lazarus from the grave? Dazzled? Life is complicated! It would be a gift to find a super hero, a magic maker who could eradicate the power of evil and make it all right again. We need not be surprised that our affections drift toward those whose ability to transcend a "normal" life makes them seem larger than life—the strong, the assertive, the attractive, the brilliant, the lucky. Our stories are full of heroes who had the courage and might to change the course of life for the better. But Jesus, this Jesus, was not such a hero. The hour had come when he was about to be revealed in all his complexity. Life springs from death. Not simple, but true.

Jesus, we want to see you. Make us ready. Invite us into the paradox of your truth. Amen.

Friday, March 16

John 12:20-33

John's Jesus knows what he is up against. He chooses not to be saved from this hour. In fact, he understands that this, precisely, is his purpose. A voice from heaven confirms it for the crowd. Jesus will glorify God's intent, that the powers of this world—the ego, the avarice, the greed, the justifying, the fear, the despair, the neglect—will be diminished by one who was willing to walk straight into the heart of it all and bear the cost. Jesus offers a word to those of us who recall his undeserved death: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." Does this include those of us who see in ourselves those same powers? Can we acknowledge that we inflict damage that we sometimes cannot even see? He invites us to become children of light, trusting that what we will see will not destroy us.

Jesus, you are our light. Illumine us so that we might see ourselves as redeemed by your life, and all that is to come. Amen.

Saturday, March 17

Hymn: "Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow" (ELW 327, verse 3)

How do we travel together to the cross and grave in these days of Lent? As community, a "band of pilgrims," as the hymn proposes. Some of our Christian sisters and brothers do undertake a pilgrimage, either through town or across the world, seeking the places and moments that make faith more alive. Our Lenten discipline may be quieter, something given up or a faith practice adopted for the duration of this season. But this metaphor of pilgrimage is apt for even our more spiritualized path. The self-reflection we are invited to do might also be right for communities of faith. For all of us, there is comfort in hearts-gathered as one- to seek the truth in these days, in the painful and awe-full story we revisit on our journey. What does it mean for us, in our time and place? How is it a witness to the mercy that reaches beyond us to the whole world?

God, your light leads us. Strengthen us for the journey borne up by each other, and the promise of the good news we share of Jesus, whose story we share. Amen.

Sunday, March 18

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 3)

The readings for this Sunday carry sobering words, as well as promise. The hymn speaks of conflict and peril. Certainly, we know these things in our lives. In Lent we are invited to face them squarely, to own our part and to come to the table of God’s mercy with hearts open to the feast that awaits us. How is it that God can both call us to account and make a place for us? It is through love that surpasses our understanding, a love that Jesus shared with all and paid for with his life. Yearning for the far eternal shore, we may rejoice, but the reign of love is anything but simple happiness. The love we remember in this season is powerful and complex, wide-eyed but not fuzzy in the least. It demands things from us and promises forgiveness when we miss the mark. Humbly, we rejoice and tell the story again.

Your faithfulness, O God, is beyond our capacity. We honor you and pray for the reign of your love in our time and place. Amen.

Monday, March 19

Mark 11:1-11

Mark’s narration of the Procession with Palms begins our week. Though charming with children and accompanying adults in our worship spaces, Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem in Mark’s telling is full of subtle signs. Jesus arrives from the east, where the Mount of Olives dominates the horizon, a natural bulwark, which protected Jerusalem. Power arrived from this direction. Was this a triumphal entry? Bethany was the location of Jesus’ most arresting miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead. It would be the site of his anointing by the woman with nard (Mark 14:3-9), which he framed as a preparation for burial. He rode an unbroken colt. People shouted “Hosanna” or “Save now!” as he made his way to the temple, the holiest of places. Yet, instead of conquering or pronouncing victory, when Jesus arrived he merely looked around and then went back to Bethany with his friends. Mark holds us in suspense. What is Jesus up to?

Jesus, as your mother sang before your birth, your life was about reversals and surprise. What will you teach us this year? Help us see you anew. Amen.

Tuesday, March 20

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The prophet/teacher in today's reading is eloquent in poetry and firm in faith. If the original hearers were rejecting the individual's prediction of freedom from bondage in Babylon—a release to be facilitated by the Persian king, Cyrus—we aren't surprised that the preacher leans on trust in God as solace. From a distance, we can wonder at the hearers' resistance to this promise, which we know from hind sight came to fruition. But think about it. How often have we resisted an invitation that implies change from what we know? Our embedded, established lives may not be perfect, but they are familiar. We can hear in our own hearts the complaints of the people of Israel generations earlier—take us back to bondage in Egypt! At least we understood it! Yet now we stand on the cusp of Holy Week. What liberation is being offered us? How will challenge and blessing walk hand in hand?

Jesus, your liberation is not easy. We will lose and we will gain. Enable our trust in you, that we may live in hope. Amen.

Wednesday, March 21

Psalms 31:9-16

The words of Psalm 31 could be projected into Jesus' life experience and so they have often been. In so doing, we can sense the level of shame and scorn that accompanied the events of his last days. But the psalmist wrote as one who clings to God and seeks to be faithful, not simply as a projection onto some future Messiah. What does it mean to be faithful in our own time and place, when the privileged position of the church is receding into the past? How long will it be before our memories of the glory days "pass out of mind like one who is dead?" The story of faithfulness does not end with Jesus. He asks us to carry on. We are often sent forth from worship, blessed with the words mirrored in verse 16: "May the Lord's face shine on you and be gracious to you." What would it look like to believe this will happen?

God, as we prepare for Holy Week, help us to trust that you will bring life out of death for us, and also for the church. Our memories of the past are not our god, you are. We are in your hands. Amen.

Thursday, March 22

Philippians 2:5-11

The events of Holy Week reveal the truth of these powerful hymn verses. Hear the surprising reversal: Jesus did not exploit his divinity. He did not consolidate his power to conquer, but released it, emptied himself and took on the form of a slave. We will hear again what it cost him: shame, public humiliation, rejection by his own people, excruciating death—even death on a cross. He humbled himself in order to be born in human likeness, to be one of us. This is the God who walks with us on our journey. In this season we remember that death was not the end. In his resurrection and ascension, Jesus Christ is Lord. To walk such a journey is not the way humans are normally wired, and yet we are invited to follow, to choose servanthood rather than lordship, humility rather than dominion. We are invited to believe that love is a better way.

We bend our knees at your name, Jesus. Give us the courage to confess you as Lord. Amen.

Friday, March 23

Mark 14:1–15:47

We now walk into the thick of the passion narrative. The Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover were the most important festivals of the year. This was a week of remembrance, inviting people to rehearse again the escape from Egypt and the rescue from slavery. Even so, we are on the brink of Holy Week, a time to recall God's saving acts for us in Jesus. We walk with him through the agony of those last days and hours, his trials and betrayals, his cruel death. We hear, briefly, of the women who had supported him in life and now stood with him in death. God's love was too much of an irritant to both civic and religious empires, but he would not abandon the path that took him to the cross. He offers his body and blood as the sign of the covenant between us, the nourishment we need to follow in his way.

Wrap us in the mystery of this love, O God. As we partake in the communion you began, fill us with the courage and wisdom we will need to follow you. Amen.

Saturday, March 24

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 4)

These words were likely first written in 1825 by a Dane, Bernhardt S. Ingemann. At the time, nationalistic zeal was stirring people up, and friction in Northern Europe and Scandinavia caused borders to be politically fluid. In the midst of this civic strife, Ingemann, Professor of Danish Language and Literature, penned this hymn. He saw the affront of the cross, a tool of humiliation and torture used by the Roman Empire, and the shame it intended for Jesus and his followers. With the eyes of faith, however, we can see redemption inherent in it, for we know the next chapter of the story, a resurrection that means death, especially this death, was not the last word. Ingemann beautifully sees us resting in the shade of the cross, an image hardly fitting the intention of those who murdered Jesus! Yet, this is our story too. For in the cross, we see that God is all in all for us.

Gracious God, help us resist the temptations of idolatry, whatever shape, and turn to you as the one who can save and redeem. You are our standard bearer. Amen.

Palm Sunday, March 25

Hymn: “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow” (ELW 327, verse 4)

What, finally, is the point of the Passion? The Gospel of Mark is less interested in doctrinal clarity than it is in pointing to the way of love and new life. As the hymn implies, we sleep but will be awakened. The grave stands closed as we end the reading for this Sunday of the Passion. But the story is not at an end. We will dare to look ahead and remember again the rending of the tomb. We must get to Easter, or Jesus' death was simply inspiring, his fidelity to a commitment to love merely honorable. We need salvation. Today, as we begin the holiest of weeks, we begin in the shadows, but they will be scattered. We toil in gloom, but soon the glory of a new day, a new way, a new hope will be ours. We see only a foreshadowing today. The curtain in the temple is torn in two. The holiest of holies opens, even as Jesus' death is sealed.

God of new life, are you set loose from the Holy of Holies to walk among us? Is your mercy and justice present, not distant and beyond us? Open our eyes to see you. Open our hearts to your way. Amen.

Monday, March 26

Acts 10:34-43

What's in a name? A person, an identity, a specific individual? Certainly all these things, and yet, in the case of Christ Jesus so much more! Our God is not a faceless deity, but has a name and a title and has come to live among us. Those who belong to this God, to this name, are given blessings beyond what we could ever hope for, forgiveness of sins and a restored relationship with God and with all of God's creation. Christians bear the name of Christ, the stamp of God indelibly etched into us, because it is through this name (and only through this name) that we are granted such treasure. We are called to trust in this name above all others.

Lord, make us worthy of belonging to your name! Amen.

Tuesday, March 27

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

"How was your day?" "Oh, it was nothing special. Kind of boring and ordinary, just like the rest." How often have you come home and said such a thing to your loved ones? But this day, just like all the other days, was created by God for our use and our enjoyment. So how can we treat it in such an off-hand manner? Every day is a new creation, made fresh by God. In it we have the chance to praise God and to relish the company of our family, friends and neighbors. This day we have the chance to be about God's work, to witness to the glory of God and to be little Christs to one another. This is a day to rejoice—rejoice in the goodness and the glory of God—and to be glad for yet another day to live for the God who has made us.

Lord, create in us a joyful heart that we may rejoice in all the days you give us. Amen.

Wednesday, March 28

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Paul knew himself—he knew exactly what he was and he had no illusions. But he also knew that in Christ, God had made him Paul, a new being, a new creation. God knew him, and loved him anyway. God took a man who persecuted the first Christians, an enemy of God, and turned him into the best witness the Christian gospel has ever had. Isn't it amazing what God's grace can do when it grabs ahold of a person? What happened to Paul can happen to you too. God can work in you with God's grace, and God can make you a new creation. As Paul puts it, "God's grace to me has not been in vain." Christians pray every day, "God, make me an instrument of your peace."

Help us, Lord, to mold our will to yours, so that we too, may be transformed. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, March 29

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

On this holy day, when Christ washed his disciples' feet and gave them bread and wine to remember himself, we pause to remember in awe, both for what Christ has done for us and for the charge he has given us. We have been washed clean, through and through, by our Lord and Master, who took on the role of a servant that we might be freed from all that would keep us away from God. Such a gift beyond all understanding! What does this gift, this washing, mean to us? That as his followers we might put aside our ambitions, our strivings, all that we think brings us glory and become servants to those who need us. Not out of obligation or striving do we do this, but solely in gratitude for the one who loved us so much. We are freed to serve.

Oh Lord, give us the heart of a servant, and wash us through and through. Amen.

Good Friday, March 30

Psalm 22

Of all things—to be forsaken! To be abandoned, left alone and without anyone caring for us. To be forsaken is to believe that no one cares whether we live or die. This is what makes this cry of Christ from the cross so heartrending. Jesus knows first-hand what it means to be forsaken. This is a cry of utter hopelessness, of complete despair, of a person who believes that no one does, or could care. But there is some solace in this cry from the cross. When we find ourselves utterly forsaken (as we think) what we can know is this: God knows. God in Christ Jesus knows what it means to be forsaken, for he has been forsaken for our sake. And because of this, we can never be truly forsaken, for the forsaken One is always with us.

We can only pray, Lord, that you will be ever with us and give us always a sense of your presence with us. Amen.

Holy Saturday, March 31

Hymn: “Through the Night of Dark and Sorrow”
(ELW 327, verse 4)

Holy Saturday is a singular day. The raw emotions of Good Friday give way to a kind of numbness and depression. Although the grief of the crucifixion is still there beneath the surface, our lives slowly return to some semblance of normal, or as close to normal as we can manage. This day is a metaphor for our Christian life between the cross and Christ’s final, triumphant return in glory. What shall we do as we wait God’s consummation of creations, old and new? The hymn writer urges us not to scorn or forget the cross. Rather we are to “bear its shame” in this world, fighting against all enemies of God and all the false gods until we lay down from this struggle, and rest in the shadow of the cross of Christ.

Until you return in glory, Oh Lord, be with us and help us to do your will on earth. Amen.

Easter Sunday, April 1

Hymn: “Through the Night of Dark and Sorrow”
(ELW 327, verse 4)

The tomb where Christ was laid was hewn into solid rock, and a huge boulder sealed its entrance. The symbolism is clear; death is massive and permanent, as unyielding as solid rock. Rage against death as we might, it is as futile as pounding your bare hands against solid rock. But what is mere rock against the force of the will of God, the will that says that God must triumph over death in victory? On Easter this rock was rent, obliterated and blown to tiny pieces, because as solid as rock is, it cannot compare to the might of God. Christ Jesus our Lord has burst out of the rock that was meant to entomb him, and because nothing can hold him, with him we too are champions over all that would imprison us. Hallelujah! Christ has risen indeed!

We give you thanks and rejoice that you are our living God and that you have triumphed over all the forces of this world. Amen.

Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow

Contributing Writers:

Dave Scherer, '15, *Christian Public Leader Coordinator and Multicultural Engagement Specialist, Luther Seminary*
February 14-18

Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Associate Professor of Old Testament; Bible Division Chair, Luther Seminary*
February 19-25

Algie Lewis '18, *M.A. in Leadership and Innovation for Ministry student, Luther Seminary*
February 26-March 4

James L. Boyce '72, *Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Greek, Luther Seminary*
March 5-11

Catherine Malotky '86, *Grant and Project Manager for the Center for Stewardship Leaders, Luther Seminary*
March 12-25

Mark Granquist, *Associate Professor of Church History, Luther Seminary*
March 26-April 1

Theological Editor:

James L. Boyce '72, *Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Greek, Luther Seminary*

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LUTHER SEMINARY

2481 Como Ave.

St. Paul, Minn 55108

651-641-3456 | 888-358-8437

www.luthersem.edu