

THERE IN GOD'S GARDEN



There in God's Garden (ELW 342)

- 1 There in God's garden
stands the Tree of Wisdom,
Whose leaves hold forth
the healing of the nations:
Tree of all knowledge,
Tree of all compassion,
Tree of all beauty.
- 2 Its name is Jesus,
name that says, "Our Savior!"
There on its branches see
the scars of suff'ring
See there the tendrils
of our human selfhood
feed on its lifeblood.
- 3 Thorns not its own
are tangled in its foliage;
Our greed has starved it,
our despite has choked it.
Yet, look! It lives!
Its grief has not destroyed it
nor fire consumed it.
- 4 See how its branches
reach to us in welcome;
Hear what the Voice says,
"Come to me, ye weary!
Give me your sickness,
give me all your sorrow,
I will give blessing."
- 5 This is my ending,
This my resurrection;
Into your hands,
Lord, I commit my spirit.
This have I searched for;
Now I can possess it.
This ground is holy.
- 6 All heav'n is singing,
"Thanks to Christ whose
passion offers in mercy
Healing, strength, and pardon.
Peoples and nations,
Take it, take it freely!"
Amen! My Master!

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Wednesday, March 5

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

On Ash Wednesday, we start our Lenten journey from darkness to light, from ashes to resurrection. The sign of the cross on our foreheads is a public reminder that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

In Matthew 6, Jesus is concerned more with what we do in private than in public. Jesus says, "Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." When we give alms, pray privately, and fast privately, these marks of discipleship shine brighter in the darkness than in the light. He doesn't want us to shine our own light on our almsgiving, or our times of prayer, or embellish our fasting for others to see. Instead, seek to do these things "in secret," with sincerity, humility, and positivity. As we give to others, pray for others, and utilize our spiritual exercise of fasting, remember that "your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Gracious God, help us to give, pray, and fast on our journey through Lent. Shift our motivations from selfish gain to selfless giving. Amen.

Thursday, March 6

Romans 10:8b-13

"The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." Forgetfulness is a part of human nature. Sometimes forgetfulness can be a blessing for the times we have experienced heartache and pain. But there is one thing that God never wants us to forget: God's Word. God desires that the Word remain near to us, to be forever upon our lips and within our hearts. The Word is comfort for those who need it most, for those who think God is far away, that help is nowhere to be found, and for those who have lost all hope. Here is a beautiful truth, namely that Jesus is the Word and is always with us. So, as we confess the Word in us that Jesus is Lord and believe the Word in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, then we inherit the promise of the Word that we are saved. This truly is good news for us all.

Gracious God, bless us with your Word on our journey through Lent. May everyone hear our confession and our profession of faith that leads to salvation. Amen.

Friday, March 7

Luke 4:1-13

Life is full of temptation. It started back in Genesis, chapter three, and continues today. We all face temptations, whether it be toys and attention as children or power and wealth as adults. The good news is that Jesus faced temptations as well, and we benefit from hearing his temptations, seeing how he responds, and judging how he did. The result is inspiration for all of us. Jesus uses God's Word to combat the temptations he faced. God's Word has power over our desires and the temptations we face. God's Word sustains us today, just as it sustained our Lord Jesus in the wilderness. Scripture teaches us to simply rely on God for all our heart's desires and for our every need.

Gracious God, sustain us with your Word on our journey through Lent. Strengthen us in times of weakness and lead us not into times of temptation. Amen.

Saturday, March 8

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342)

This traditional hymn is a theological retelling of the story of Jesus in six stanzas. Jesus is the Tree that is full of wisdom, healing, knowledge, compassion, and beauty. He bears the mark of suffering caused by us, and at the same time, he is our lifeblood. We bring death and destroy him with our greed and the sinfulness of all humanity, yet he lives! He welcomes us, takes our burdens and sickness, and makes in us a glorious transformation by blessing us instead of cursing us. Jesus then commits his spirit into God's hands. The place of his death is now considered holy ground. As he assumes the resurrection life, all of heaven sings. The hymn ends with thanksgiving to Jesus, who is now the Christ, offering mercy, healing, strength, and pardon. Christ gives resurrection life to all peoples and nations, bidding them to "Take it, take it freely!" Amen! My Master!

Gracious God, bless us with new life as we journey through Lent. Thank you for your mercy, healing, strength, and love. Amen.

Sunday, March 9

Introduction to the season of Lent

The term "Lent" originally comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "lencten" which means "spring," the time when the days are lengthening. The season began as a period of fasting leading up to the Vigil of Easter, when those preparing for baptism at Easter would fast and spend days in intense preparation. For those already baptized, Lent is a time for renewal in faith by study of the Bible, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

Initially a period of preparation for Holy Baptism, Lent has become a six-week or forty-day journey to the cross of Christ and then through the cross to life everlasting. Sundays are not counted in the forty days of Lent, since they are celebrated as feast days of the Resurrection. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, our current practice recalls Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness after his baptism (Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:1-2) as well as Moses' forty-day fast on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28), and other biblical references. Blessings to you as we journey forty days with Christ through the season of Lent.

Gracious God, fill us with peace and reverence throughout this season of Lent. May our almsgiving, prayer, study, fasting, and other spiritual practices draw us ever closer to you. Amen.

Monday, March 10

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Today's reading is one of those key stories of scripture. Its impact stretches from the earliest days of the nation of Israel to the Apostle Paul's post-Resurrection repeated assertion that the example of Abraham's trust in the promise of God is the basis for the righteousness that leads to salvation (Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6).

Viewed more closely, it also describes the essential journey of the heart of the believer: from fear to trust, guided by the promises of God. "He believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." (15:6)

The journey of the heart from fear to trust in God's promises is an integral part of faith. So Jesus' repeatedly calls his disciples: "Stop fearing, only believe." Martin Luther knew its key perspective in his Catechism: "We should fear, love, and trust..." For us, it is a key part of the journey of Lent: to surrender our fears of whatever sort and to rest our trust securely in the promises of God.

O God of Covenant Promise, continue to lead our hearts from fear to the heart of your promises, that in trust, we may find our rest in you. Amen.

Tuesday, March 11

Psalm 27

As in yesterday's story of Abraham, the psalmist takes us on a journey from fear to trust. The NRSVUE translation captions the psalmist's prayer as a "Triumphant Song of Confidence." Verse one's doubled poetic imagery poises the conversation between confidence and fear: the Lord as light, salvation, and stronghold has difficulty in gaining a hearing in the heart that is transfixed by fear—"Of whom shall I be afraid?"

The heart's fears will need to be taught. And so the psalmist teaches us in a journey of recollection of the ways of the goodness and salvation of the Lord. (27:2-12) Until finally the fear is overcome and faith can find its proper way into the light: "In the land of the living, I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord." (27:13) Against that confidence, the psalmist's final invitation seems almost too simple for the now courageous heart: "Wait for the Lord" (twice). "Be strong, take courage!"

O Lord, my light and my salvation, teach me to have confidence in your goodness, that I may know that daily I can find shelter in your presence and love. Amen.

Wednesday, March 12

Philippians 3:17-4:1

The Apostle Paul's love and devotion for his fledgling Philippian hearers is clear in our reading. "My dear brothers and sisters" frames his deep fondness for them as his "joy and crown" and calls them to stand firm in the Lord as loved and longed-for children of God.

But Paul somehow knows that, although the Lord promises life and salvation, we cannot go it on our own—as the examples of the painful people around them make clear. We need to be encouraged and instructed by the living examples of faith, who surround and encourage us in our journey. As Paul puts it, by following the living examples of faith, we are being trained to be citizens of heaven, and—can you believe it?—by the power of our Lord even being constantly transformed to imitate the glorious living body of our resurrected Lord!

O Lord, our Savior, help us by faith to imitate those who are models of what it means to live each day as children of God. Let us continue to be trained as citizens of your heavenly kingdom. Amen.

Thursday, March 13

Luke 13:31-35

In a number of ways, this week's gospel reading somberly reminds us that, in our Lenten journey, we are following Jesus on the way to the cross. The Pharisees—almost gleefully?—nag Jesus with the reminder of the specter of Herod, who is out to get him. But Jesus sidesteps their baiting, stirring the pot with a message to that "fox" that he's just going to keep on doing what he's doing—by the way, twice making a veiled reference to "three days" and to the likelihood of a prophet being "killed outside Jerusalem."

No wonder that the pressure of coming events should lead Jesus to a lament over Jerusalem and the failure of trust in the promises of God that will mark the unwillingness of God's children to be gathered under the wings of God's love.

Certainly, the question looms for us as to where our Lenten journey will take us with this Jesus. Will it lead us to join in the hoped-for benediction, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord?"

O God of Promise, as we journey toward the cross, help us to ponder the journey of our own hearts with this Jesus, and to have confidence that our Lord is leading us on a journey from fear to faith and trust in your promises. Amen.

Friday, March 14

Luke 13:31-35

Yesterday, we noted how the somberness of Luke's story almost painfully reminds us of Jesus' inexorable journey on the way to Jerusalem. Today we focus on another message, so mysteriously tucked away in the story that it is almost easy to miss it. Jesus says, "Today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." (13:33) The three-day reference surely points us to the sorrow and suffering of the cross. But when Jesus immediately follows with the assertion, "I must be on my way," his words point us to the mystery of the intentional ways of God's love and mercy. The cross is not an accident. It is part of the necessity of God's love that is to be revealed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Here we are being invited on this journey to be recipients of such great love and to its transforming power to move our hearts from fear to faith as we follow Jesus on his way to Jerusalem.

O God of mystery, teach us to see, imagine, and give thanks for the mystery of so great a love that would send your Son to travel this necessary journey to the cross for the sake of us, your beloved children. Amen.

Saturday, March 15

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342, Verse 1)

A wealth of metaphor invites our contemplation in the opening verse of our Lenten theme hymn. The "tree in God's garden," of course, leads us back to Genesis, to the story of creation and the sadness unleashed in by the disobedience of Adam and Eve. But quickly that "tree" stands in a different garden, and now has become a tree of wisdom, healing, knowledge, compassion, and beauty. We wonder, "How can this be?"

The Apostle Paul offers one answer as he writes to the Corinthians about the cross of Jesus as the demonstration of the mystery of God's wisdom, in which the power of God appears through the appearance of weakness. (1 Corinthians 1-2)

In this opening verse, our hymn invites us to enter into reflection on the mystery of this way of the cross as we follow on our Lenten journey. In its special way, the words and the music invite us to a mode of reflection that moves our heart beyond fear to the insights of faith and trust in the power of God that comes to us in mercy and compassion.

God of Wisdom and Compassion, you invite us to ponder the way of salvation as it moves on the way of the cross. May we behold with wonder and trust the beauty of your love in Jesus. Amen.

Sunday, March 16

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342, Verse 2)

In verse two, the rich imagery of our hymn continues to evolve, and along with it, our own reflection. What may have first led our imagination to the tree of the Garden of Eden and eventually to the cross now takes us suddenly in an even deeper direction. This tree, this cross, now has a Name, and its name is Jesus. Jesus and the tree-cross have merged into one. And his Name Jesus speaks "Savior." We are invited to look upon this tree, and now to see only Jesus, and in its branches to reflect upon the marks of Jesus' suffering.

And finally, in the branches and tendrils of Jesus' suffering, by the poet's lead, we cannot do anything else but also ponder the weight of our own sin, that through our own selfhood has led to Jesus suffering on the cross. We have been led to confession of the ways in which our own disobedience has led to our Lenten journey to the cross.

God of Love, as we ponder the tree of your Garden, may it lead us to marvel at the mystery of your love, that in Jesus would reach out its branches to enfold us as your beloved children. Amen.

Monday, March 17

Isaiah 55:1-9

Isaiah urges us to “seek the Lord while he may be found.” Why would the prophet need to urge this of us? Don't we want to have the Lord near to us? Most of the time, no, we really don't want God near us—that would be both inconvenient and more than a little scary. We want God around, but only when we want, like a genie that we summon, control, and dismiss when no longer needed. But that is not the way it is with our God, who is always with us, even when we don't want this. Why not? Because we know, only too well, how much our lives don't measure up to the life that our God wants for us, and we really don't want to change. But the life God offers us is so much better, if we would only trust and draw near.

God, be near me and uphold me, through all the days of my life. Amen.

Tuesday, March 18

Psalm 63:1-8

“My God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you.” It seems that weariness is so much a part of our daily existence that we hardly even recognize it, like a cloud that follows us day in and day out. And this weariness becomes normal, just the way things are. But it does not have to be this way for us, because God is present to us like a rich feast or a pool of clear water in the desert. The psalmist speaks our words of delight, as if finally lifting our eyes from our mundane and troubled world, to find in the ever-present God riches and joy and constant help. The psalmist cries out, “You have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings, I sing for joy.” May it be so, for us as well.

God, lift us up from our mundane and troubled world to see your riches and joy and constant help. Amen.

Wednesday, March 19

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

"God is faithful . . . with the testing, he will also provide the way out." This is not an easy thing for us to believe in and to trust, for in our hours of trouble, God seems so very far away. But in Christ Jesus, God is always near to us, in good times and bad times. Indeed, in Christ, God knows what it means to be a person in times of deepest sorrow, and this loving God will neither forsake us or reject us. Just as when Christ faced his times of deepest anguish, he could pray to God so that he would not be alone in times of trouble, so God is always with us, even more so when things get rough.

God, be close to me at all times, and closer still in times of trouble. Amen.

Thursday, March 20

Luke 13:1-9

"Unless you repent . . ." Repent—it sounds like such an old-fashioned, "churchy" kind of word, something that some backwoods preacher would hurl out in a "fire-and-brimstone" sermon. How quaint. But the call to repentance is, in fact, at the core of the Bible's message of hope and salvation. Repent means to "turn around," do a 180 degree turn, so that we do not continue on our current path, a path that will invariably mean harm and suffering for ourselves and those around us. To repent is to turn away from harm and suffering and back to God, who loves us and cares for us more deeply than we can ever know. God does not wish to see us harmed, which is why God calls out to us, "Repent." If only we can hear this loving Word of God, and turn to the source of our life.

Oh loving God, help us to turn away from the paths that would lead us into harm, and call us to return to you. Amen.

Friday, March 21

Luke 13:1-9

"Let it alone for one more year . . ." One of the most central aspects of God, and one that we often overlook or undervalue, is God's patience. We know that God is love; indeed, God is the essence of love. But equally important, God is patient, and indeed is the essence of patience itself. Put yourself in God's place for a minute; don't you think that God should grow frustrated with the ways we wander and fall into sin? It would only be natural for God to give up on us after those so many times we are a disappointment. But look at the Old Testament, where the people of Israel are constantly betraying God, and God continues to stay with them, regardless. We are so fortunate that God is patience itself, always with open arms, longing for us to return.

Dear God of patience, we give you thanks for your steadfast and constant love. Amen.

Saturday, March 22

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342)

"There in God's Garden stands the Tree of Wisdom." In the garden of Eden, there stood the tree of which Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat. The serpent said of this tree, "when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." Of all the lies and temptations of our human race, this one is truly the primal sin—that we want to be gods ourselves—idolatry. But only the One, True God, our Creator and Redeemer, can be for us the source of life, and when we seek to replace God with anything else, it is the source of all our sorrows and disasters. On another tree, this one at Golgotha, God once again and for all times sought to draw us back and save us from ourselves. Oh, if we could only draw near to God and nestle in the safety of God's care!

God of all love, remind us that we belong to you, our source of all life. Amen.

Sunday, March 23

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342, Verse 3)

"Its grief has not destroyed it, nor fire consumed it." When Moses encountered God at Sinai, it was in a burning bush, on fire but the fire did not consume it. Moses fell on his face, not daring even to look at the holiness of God, lest the fire consume him, too. Yet Moses was commanded to rise and hear what God had to say through the burning bush, a message of God's presence and God's love. This place was made holy, even as Moses, a mortal and often sinful person, stood in its midst. Sometimes we use the metaphor of fire for those deepest desires that draw us unto God, so that a fire for God is kindled in our hearts. This is a fire that purifies, but does not consume, the fire of God's love.

Kindle in our hearts, O Lord, the longing for your love that will draw us closer to you. Amen.

Monday, March 24

Joshua 5:9-12

In a time of journey, whether it be forty years of journey through the wilderness, forty days of journey through a crisis, or forty hours of anxiety or despair, God's promise holds us. God's promise is unconditional, which means it is always offered to us, no matter where we are, who we are, or in what situation we may be. Nothing will ever separate us from God's promise. It rolls away all those things that burden us. God's promise is an open embrace, an invitation to a feast with a fatted calf, to which all are welcome. God's promise feeds us every day in unknown ways—like manna in the desert—and then, when we are again "at home," on the land, reconciled with one another, within ourselves, with creation, God's good intention is made visible. We eat together and all have enough. We celebrate together and no one is left out. God's promise sustains us and our neighbor.

God of promise, you carried your people through the wilderness; carry us now through the complexities of life, the anxieties and despair, that we may again rejoice in you and in one another. Amen.

Tuesday, March 25

Psalm 32

God's promise is a hiding place for us. God's promise holds us and preserves us. God's promise is simple: God's steadfast love surrounds us, and nothing will ever separate us from that love. That is God's promise which sustains us in this life, on this journey of faith. The journey may take unexpected turns, encounter unsettling events, sudden illness, or other challenges, but God does not abandon us. In fact, God's steadfast love shapes our way. God gives instruction, as the psalmist sings. The way God teaches is also simple: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And this instruction is laid out for us in the Ten Commandments, that offer us a way to live on this earth and with one another in peace.

God of forgiveness, you shelter us in the midst of the storm. In times of distress, in these times of global conflict and political uncertainty, teach us to care for one another. Amen.

Wednesday, March 26

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

New creation. This phrase is perhaps familiar, or not. We hear it when a child or an adult is baptized. Maybe we hear it occasionally in a sermon. We certainly hear it in Paul's letters. But what is it? The last couple of days, God's promise has been the focal point of these devotions. God's promise opens up or introduces us into God's renewal of creation. Through the promise—God's steadfast love always offered—God invites us into new creation. God invites us into God's on-going activity, which is reconciling the world, reconciling all humanity, all creation to God's self. We are invited to participate in this work—to be ministers of reconciliation. Don't hide behind the walls created by society, whether they be boundaries of race, gender, class, etc. Living in those categories is old creation. God always invites us into the new beginnings of freedom, love of neighbor, and care of creation.

God of disruption, you break down the barriers that divide; your promise reconciles all peoples. Dismantle within us all those barriers we build, so that your good intent, your new creation, may be revealed. Amen.

Thursday, March 27

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

God's promise is the open arms of the father running towards his son. Who has not been moved by this parable? It is perhaps one of the best-known parables—to believers, to non-believers, to believers of other faiths, to many of our neighbors. God's arms are open in an embrace of joy, of pardon, of deliverance. At the Joint Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, celebrated in the Lund Cathedral in 2016, a prayer was held with leaders of the Lutheran World Federation and Pope Francis. There was an embrace, the sharing of the peace. Walls were broken down. A cross was created for this Reformation anniversary, painted by a refugee from El Salvador. It depicts Christ at the table, inviting all people to come and share. The table itself breaks down the barriers of separation we create. We are invited into this communion, the true significance of the sacrament, as Martin Luther wrote.

God of embrace, you come running towards us in the manger and on the cross. Send us out towards our neighbor, familiar and unfamiliar, with the same love. Amen.

Friday, March 28

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The older son could not understand the father's generosity. This situation is a present reality for many. We are suspicious. We prefer to remain in our own little world, thinking about ourselves rather than about serving the neighbor. This type of suspicion and self-centeredness takes on many forms in our society. It manifests itself in the belief that "rights" are for me and not for my neighbor. This debate has literally been in our face in recent years concerning the wearing of masks. We quickly forget that rights are not claimed but offered, that freedom is really for service. Isn't that the heart of Martin Luther's message: "The Christian individual is a completely free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian individual is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (in *The Freedom of a Christian*). In other words, "I" don't make myself the center of the world. I make my sister or brother my neighbor, the center, and act accordingly.

God of embrace, you free us from ourselves. You open a path to celebration. Turn us always towards our neighbor in service. Amen.

Saturday, March 29

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342)

This hymn text comes to us from the Reformation in Hungary, written by Király Imre von Pécselyi in the early 1600s. It captures the essence of the Good Friday liturgy. The cross is the tree of death, but it is also the tree of life. This liturgy is not a "funeral for Jesus," nor a re-enactment of the crucifixion, nor a reading and reflection on the seven last words of Jesus, but rather a prayer. Our worship doesn't take us back two thousand years to relive the crucifixion but rather, the tree and its branches, the cross, directs us to the many places in our neighborhood and world where Christ is being crucified today. The cross always points us to the suffering of Christ in our own society. The tree of wisdom—the tree in the garden (of Eden)—is also the cross, a sign of hope.

O God, through the cross, you place us once again in the garden. Open our hearts to see you in the suffering neighbor around us. Move us to act. Amen.

Sunday, March 30

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342, Verse 4)

I cannot write better than Martin Luther himself did on the theme of verse four that sings of Christ taking our burdens and in return giving us blessings. It is known as the "happy exchange" in Luther's theology. In the sacrament of Holy Communion, we hear the words: "Do this in remembrance of me." Luther explains, "It is as if [Christ] were saying, 'I will be the first to give himself for you. I will make your suffering and misfortune my own and will bear it for you, so that you in your turn may do the same for me and for one another, allowing all things to be common property, in me, and with me. And I leave you this sacrament as a sure sign.'" Christ takes all our burdens and calls us to do the same, one for another. This is the beauty of the garden, of a faith community nurtured in the sacrament.

God of mercy, in Christ you carry all our burdens, you free us from that which weighs us down. Kindle in us that love, and strengthen us to carry our neighbor's burden. Amen.

Monday, March 31

Isaiah 43:16-21

"Be prepared to be surprised" is one way to summarize today's text from Isaiah. It conveys God's promise to deliver Israel from its Babylonian captivity, which finds precedent in God's previous action of freeing God's people from bondage in Egypt. Clearly, God has a good track record of rescuing people from oppression and granting them new life. Yet, while we can trust that God's loving character never changes, we should not expect God to always act in the same way. "Do not remember the former things...I am about to do a new thing," declares the Lord (43:18-19). God is faithful to fulfill God's promises. And God continually brings new life out of various types of death. But God does so in ways we cannot imagine or control. In this scary and exciting place, we are called to trust in the God who claims us as God's own.

Merciful God, help us to trust you when we cannot let go of the past and cannot see a way forward. We pray in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, whom you raised from the dead. Amen.

Tuesday, April 1

Psalm 126

Psalm 126 invites us to praise God for helping us in the past while simultaneously asking God to restore us again in the present. Praise and petition coexist in a dynamic, life-giving relationship with God. As seen in yesterday's Isaiah 43 text, God's merciful salvation is not confined to a glorious past, but continues to meet us in our present needs.

Today, we know that God's greatest act of salvation has already occurred through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Praise God for having delivered us from sin and death! At the same time, Lent encourages us to acknowledge our ongoing need for God's salvation amidst all that seeks to rob us, our neighbors, and the creation of the fullness of life secured by Christ. Petitions motivated even by pain and disillusionment are signs of trust in the God who continues to save and restore.

Gracious God, turn our tears into shouts of joy. Refresh our hurting world with your rivers of love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, April 2

Philippians 3:4b-14

Previous readings this week have portrayed “remembering” as positive when it involves recalling God’s past deliverance to encourage trust in God now. But in today’s address to the Philippians, Paul is determined to “forget” the past so he can focus on the journey of faith that still lies ahead. Here, Paul’s “forgetting” means disregarding the privileges he previously enjoyed, so that his life might be grounded in nothing other than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as Christ willingly set aside his divine privileges to become a humble servant (2:5–11), Paul knows that having been claimed by Christ means serving Christ—a call that inevitably comes with sacrifice and suffering. Anything that seeks to define us or motivate our actions other than the self-giving love of Christ is to be continually crucified on the life-giving journey of faith. This message is both counter-cultural and freeing.

Humble Christ, thank you for giving your life for us, so that we can truly live in and through you. Help us to serve others with the love you have given us. Amen.

Thursday, April 3

John 12:1-8

John 12:1–8 shows the siblings Martha, Lazarus, and Mary engaging in a dangerous act of hospitality in Bethany. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from death to life (John 11). This miracle had convinced some leaders that Jesus was a threat and should be put to death. So, Jesus left town while the leaders ordered anyone who knew where he was to turn him in.

Amidst these threats, Jesus eventually returns to the home of Martha, Lazarus, and Mary (12:1). Knowing the risks they take in offering hospitality to a fugitive, the siblings receive Jesus and his disciples and serve them dinner. What may seem like an ordinary act is actually a bold expression of love for Jesus. May this embolden us to invite Jesus into the parts of our lives that seem scary or beyond redemption. And may we, too, offer hospitality to those whom others reject.

God of true life, give us courage to welcome you daily into our lives, as we also offer hospitality to those in need. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Friday, April 4

John 12:1-8

The risky hospitality extended to Jesus in Bethany includes not only the dinner Martha served, but also Mary lavishly anointing Jesus. This occurs during Passover week—the week in which Jesus will be crucified. Mary's anointing of Jesus, therefore, is a prophetic act that anticipates his death and proper care of his body, as Jesus himself explains (12:7). The anointing is also a tangible outpouring of Mary's love and devotion to Jesus. A pound of perfume to anoint someone's feet seems excessive. Yet, if love can be measured by what one is willing to sacrifice for another, spending this large amount of costly perfume on Jesus shows Mary's abundant love for him. Hers is a love that stands defiant in the face of criticism—in this case from Judas, whose own selfish motives are exposed by the extravagance of Mary's fragrant offering to Jesus.

Merciful Christ, may your sacrifice on the cross continue to ignite divine love in our hearts for you and others. Amen.

Saturday, April 5

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342, Verse 4)

In this hymn, Jesus is represented as a tree of wisdom, beauty, and compassion. The tree has suffered from harms inflicted upon it, yet it is not ultimately destroyed. In fact, through analogy to Jesus' death and resurrection, the "tree" grants forgiveness, healing, and life to all through its suffering. Verse four paints a warm image of the tree's branches reaching out like arms to welcome in all who need rest and its protective covering. The voice of Jesus broadcasts an invitation to surrender our sorrow and tiredness and receive instead the blessed mercy that Jesus' death and resurrection have secured for us. This offer makes space for us to acknowledge all that exhausts or afflicts us. It also comforts us with the fact that Christ has endured our suffering and promises that life has the last word.

Loving God, help us to lay our burdens down at the foot of Christ's cross. Renew us with your forgiveness and love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sunday, April 6

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342, Verse 5)

Verse five of our theme hymn invites reflection on the holy mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. It begins with Jesus' resurrection but then recalls Jesus' last words from the cross in Luke's Gospel: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46; cf. Psalm 31:5). There is no life-giving resurrection without the suffering of the cross. As an innocent person condemned to die by crucifixion, Jesus took the sin and suffering of all people upon himself. Yet even in the agony of impending death, Jesus entrusts himself to God. Amidst pain and death, God is faithful to bring new life—both for Jesus and all who trust in Jesus' self-giving love. In times of struggle and pain, we know that God is with us and is working to bring about resurrection life in ways we cannot comprehend.

Faithful God, help us to trust you when it is hard to do so. Give us hope amidst despair and strength to persevere. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, April 7

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Today we start looking towards Palm or Passion Sunday. Throughout Lent, we have been living with our brokenness—both here and now in our families and the world—and through time from the earliest days after leaving the Garden. As we look towards Holy Week, we begin by singing with joy and lifting our praises in the deep conviction that God's love endures forever. We know that God has sent Jesus to us, bringing a kin-dom we could not possibly imagine. Passion Sunday—which rehearses the entire story from hosannas to the crucifixion to Easter—offers us an overview, a summary, of what we will be walking through. On the first day of Holy Week, we are reminded that while love brings joy, it also brings deep grief. As this week goes forward, we will find ourselves moving through the valley of the shadow of death—both here and now in whatever ways we are inhabiting it—and through the deep story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Saving God, walk with us through this time. Protect our hearts from the despair that brokenness can bring; draw us into the light of your love and help us to sing your praise. Amen.

Tuesday, April 8

Luke 19:28-40

The crowds marveled at him, recounting the deeds of power they had seen, and no doubt looking forward to what they expected his kingdom would be. Crowds shouting in joy, crowds believing that what they want will come to pass. Sound familiar? Yet the promises God has made, the promises Jesus embodies for us, are so far beyond what we can imagine. Joy, grief, anger, wonder—this week we are living in all of this, crammed into the entire Passion story. Give yourself permission to take a beat, to take a pause, and hear the resonance in your own life to this momentous story we share each year.

Holy Spirit, breathe into us the courage to hear what the stones cry out, to listen for the whispers of a kin-dom far more thorough and loving than any we might imagine. Help us to inhabit the wonder of the coming of the Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, April 9

Isaiah 50:4-9a

This is an old, old story. Told first by the Hebrews, the Jewish community into which Mary birthed Jesus. This is the story he grew up with. And now for us as Christians, these words ring with deep resonance as we hear again the story of Jesus' passion. We hear in these words a profound obedience, a submission unto death—a death that reveals to us a love that sustains us even beyond death. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." This love calls us into a deep relationship that orders our lives and grasps our soul beyond anything that we can fathom. The world turns through the flames of war, through the isolation of famine, through genocide and ecocide; yet God calls us to love no matter the cost, no matter the suffering, holding us close in a promise larger than any we can comprehend.

God of Love, touch our ears that we might hear your voice, touch our hearts that we might live out your commands, touch our bodies that we might always follow you. Amen.

Thursday, April 10

Psalm 31:9-16

How often the psalms mirror for us the feelings in which we are immersed! The lament, the pain, the terror, the grief—and yet also, always, the conviction that God finds us in this brokenness and brings us into community, into love, into healing, into reconciliation. God draws us beyond what we can imagine, beyond what we can act upon, always reaching to us, always breathing into and through us.

God who grasps us in our sorrow, hold us tightly as we open ourselves to the pain in the world. Help our hearts to be broken open, rather than into shards. Help us to put one foot in front of the other, each day in every way, so that we can feel your steadfast love. Amen.

Friday, April 11

Philippians 2:5-11

Can we live into this paradox? Can we worship a God who pours Godself into the very finitude of human being? Can we find a way into the humility and faith and love that carries us beyond the plane of suffering and death? This God is not the God of any other faith tradition. This is the song that we sing when we can sing no more. This is the song that we sing when our hearts are breaking and we can see no path forward. This is the song that reminds us God so loved the world that God's only child entered into our midst, taking on our brokenness and bringing it into the light of God's overwhelming love.

God of paradox, guide us into the creative tensions of the lives we lead. Help us to hear your voice in the broken places, lead us into the spaces where human power crushes us, that we might lean into your love, a love which draws us through death to new life. Amen.

Saturday, April 12

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342, Verse 6)

And so we close this week's preparation for Holy Week, singing with our entire being the praise we cannot help but pour out. Some songs carry memories that go beyond our current moment, pulling through time the hopes, dreams, and anguish of previous communities. This hymn carries with it the whole sweep of our journey, and in this last stanza reminds us that Christ's passion is for us, given freely, that we might receive it freely.

Lord God, you came to us as one of us, showing us how the vulnerability and fragility of a human being could yet bear your light and your love. Hear our praise, help us to remember this free gift that you have given us, and draw us into sharing it out widely. Amen.

Sunday, April 13

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342)

Valarie Kaur has written, "Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And when we think we have reached our limit, wonder is the act that returns us to love." I think that's a perfect summation of our Lenten journey on this Passion Sunday, which is also reflected in this hymn. We start with the joy of a procession of palms into Jerusalem. Then comes the grief of the crucifixion. Maybe we are less able to voice our anger? But suffering, particularly suffering of the innocent, rightly provokes our anger and becomes a catalyst for our enacted love. We cannot, we must not, live only in anger. Just as the joy of Palm Sunday turns to the anguish of Good Friday and the profound silent absence of Holy Saturday, we come around again to the wonder of Easter Sunday. All of which are gifts from our God who is Love Incarnate.

Gracious God, loving God, creating God, suffering God, spirit God—hear our prayer as we walk alongside Jesus in this profound journey. Open our hearts, augment our hearing, deepen our perception, and draw us into your embodied love, that we might in turn share it into our families, our communities, those we fear, those we hate, and the entire Earth, which shouts for joy at your Creative goodness. Amen.

Monday, April 14

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

For whom was this mighty act of God? Was it merely for the people who stood at the Red Sea ready to escape enslavement? Or was it for all the successive generations of God's people? When the people were instructed to repeat this story around the table, perpetually, it was to tell each new generation, this was for you. You, too, were redeemed from slavery; this was for your freedom, too. It was to introduce to each generation the God who hears the cries of God's people, and in God's time, God acts. These words lead into a week in which we are reminded again and again, what you hear described was for you, too.

Gracious Redeemer, events in our world and in our lives try our faith. In times of trial, turn our minds to your promises and renew in us the gift of faith and trust. Help us believe that you do act, even as we wait to see it. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Tuesday, April 15

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

On a beautiful September day, on a trail heading to the top of a mountain, I was suddenly overcome with a massive heart attack. My prayer was, "Lord, I'm not done!" I was not afraid, but felt that my life was not finished. I was hiking with friends, including Terry, a retired cardiac nurse, who saved my life by convincing emergency responders to send a helicopter into the mountains for me. I know that same prayer has been on the lips of countless people, and not everyone gets another chance under such circumstances as these, but I got one. I am grateful for those people who helped give it to me—from the nurse on the trail to the surgeon who put a stent in my heart. Ultimately though, I know it was God who gave me more time on this earth. The psalmist is praising God for a prayer answered, for more days of life. Each day is a gift, and we join the psalmist to thank God for it.

Gracious Lord, for the gift of life, both today and in eternity, we give you thanks. Your loving gifts for us move us to praise and thank you. We are your servants. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Wednesday, April 16

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Many of us turn in the newspaper to obituaries, and more so the older we get. We read the official announcement of each death, looking to see if it's someone we know, a death that would have some particular meaning for us. Sometimes we are shocked; sometimes we have expected such an announcement. We might even find ourselves named in the will of one of these people. Paul tells us that we announce Jesus' death each time we come to the table, and we announce the significance of that death for each one who hears. He has written his will and testament in bread and wine, telling us what we are to receive when he dies, the gift of himself, of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Until the day he returns, we get to experience that will being opened again and again, and receive those gifts once more.

Loving God, we hunger for your love. Feed us once again with bread and wine and your powerful Word. Build a sturdy faith in our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Thursday, April 17

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Some people are easy to love, others a real challenge. When there are deep disagreements and painful tensions, it can be tempting to write someone off. Yet Jesus demonstrates loving people who were quite willing to tell him he was wrong, just as Peter does in this passage. He washes each person's feet, no matter what was in their head and their heart. Forgiving others means wanting what is best for them. It doesn't mean trusting the untrustworthy. But we are called to have an attitude of love, for even those we cannot trust, to want what is best for them. Jesus' attitude toward us sinners is always one of forgiving love and he comes down to our level, to give us the best, his very self.

Beloved Redeemer, we hear your call to love each other as you love us, and we struggle. Move in our hearts to have an attitude of love, even when we do not feel it, and root it in the love you have for us. In your name we pray, Amen

Friday, April 18 Good Friday

John 18:1-19:42, John 19:23-30

The writer of the Gospel of John introduces us to witnesses of the crucifixion: three women named Mary, two family members and one of his closest disciples, and a male disciple of Jesus with a home in Jerusalem. They are there so Jesus is not alone as his death approaches. We often do the same today when someone approaches their death. They are there for him, but they also are people who can share what they saw and heard as he gave his life. People being crucified had to hold themselves up by their pierced limbs in order to breathe, but Jesus, recognizing that his work is finished, lets go and breathes his last. Mary, Jesus' mother, goes home with the disciple who is entrusted with her care. Who is the last to stand and look at his body on the cross? Is it not Mary Magdalene?

Gracious God, we thank you for the courage of Mary Magdalene, for her witness to Jesus' death and resurrection. We thank you, too, for the gospel writer and for many who have carried that witness from generation to generation, and down to us, that we may believe. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Saturday, April 19

"There in God's Garden" (ELW 342)

The hymn writer describes an exchange: we hand over whatever makes us feel sick and sorrowful and God hands us the blessings of forgiveness, peace, and overwhelming love. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9) We have followed Jesus this week as he has given and given. He has fed his disciples and washed their feet. He has gone where he would be handed over to the authorities, endured trials and torture, even death. This was for people over the ages, for the people of the world, but make no mistake, this was for you.

Gracious Savior, your longing for us to have life and peace astounds us. Who are we that you should care so deeply? Yet you do. Engrave your love on our hearts that we may always remember. In your name we pray, Amen.

Sunday, April 20

Easter

John 20:1-18

John tells us that Mary just wanted to take care of the body. Tell me where! I will take him away! None of the love and respect she had for Jesus had dimmed. The trust she placed in him, though, had turned to grief. She was a disciple without a teacher. Then he called her name. She wanted to take hold of him and not let go again, but Jesus would not be present in the same way she was used to.

How many times have people felt like the ground below their feet had fallen away? Perhaps you can think of a time like that. Then, one way or another, Jesus calls our name. He is there. The scriptures are opened, and we encounter him. I've seen people moved to tears at communion, and I know they're hearing him call their name. At times, it's in unexpected places we're suddenly aware of the presence of the risen Savior.

Loving Savior, we thank you that we meet you in your word, that you call our name with water and speak to us with bread and wine, and that you reveal yourself to us when we do not anticipate it. Open our eyes and ears to know your presence as our Risen Lord. Amen.

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Contributing Writers

James L. Boyce '71 M.Div.

Emeritus Professor of New Testament and Greek, Luther Seminary

Ladd Bjorneby '85 M.Div.

Member of the Board of Trustees, Luther Seminary

Rev. Dr. Sean L. Forde '12 D.Min

Member of the Board of Trustees, Luther Seminary

Mark Granquist

Lloyd and Annelotte Svendsbye Professor of the History of Christianity, Luther Seminary

Mary E. Hess

Professor of Educational Leadership, Chair of the Leadership Division, Luther Seminary

Dirk Lange

Professor of Worship and Frederik A. Schiotz Chair of Christian Missions, Luther Seminary

Jennifer V. Pietz '13 M.Div.

Assistant Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary

Theological Editor

James L. Boyce '71 M.Div.

Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Greek, Luther Seminary

Editorial Coordinator

Bethany Riethmeier

Donor Engagement Manager

Luther Seminary

2481 Como Avenue

St. Paul, MN 55108

651-641-3456

luthersem.edu