

LENTEN
DEVOTIONS
2016

Love's GREATEST SACRIFICE



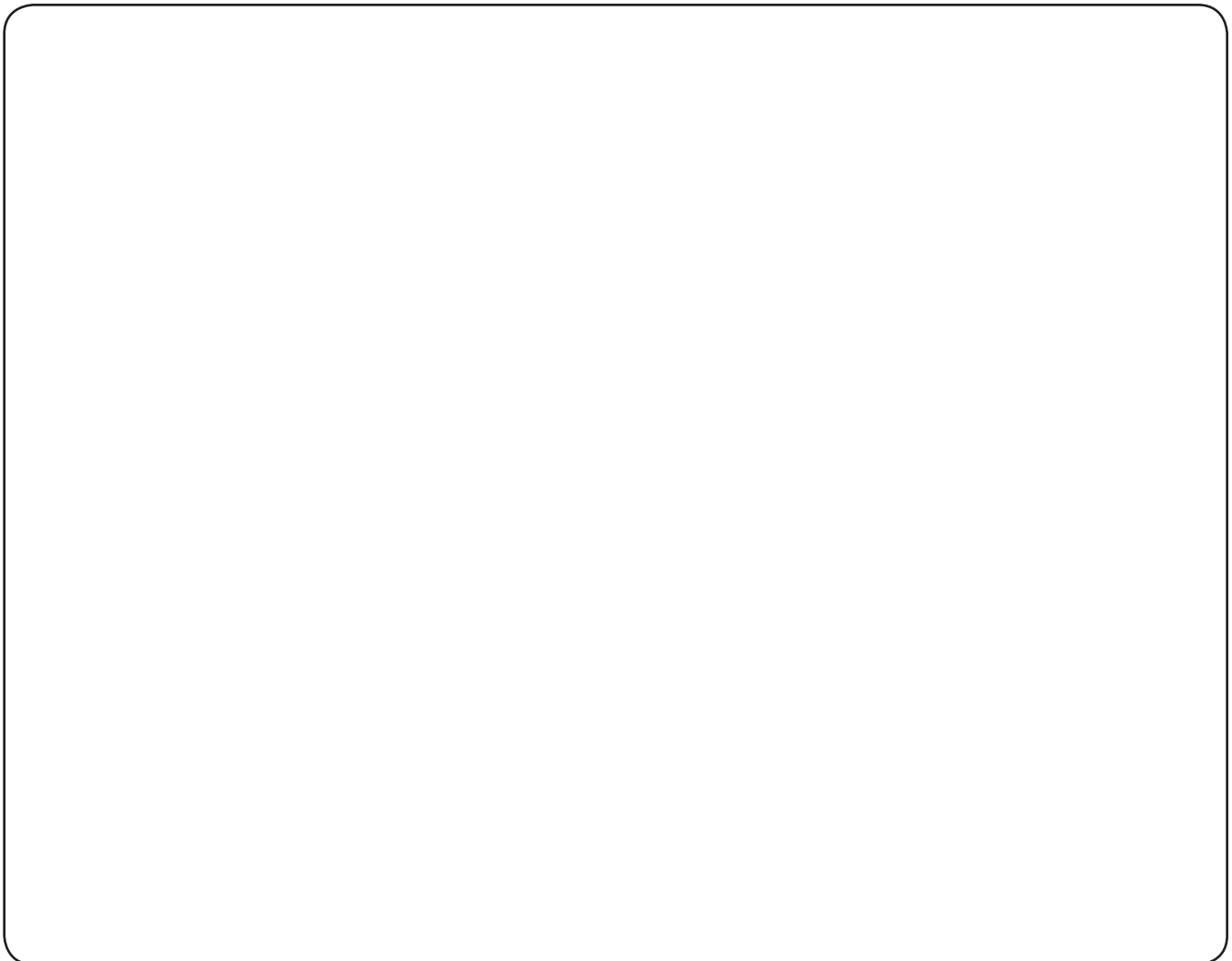
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LOVE'S GREATEST SACRIFICE

In this year's Lenten devotions we travel back 2,000 years to follow the last days of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish carpenter turned teacher. He helped countless people by healing diseases and sharing the good news of God's grace. But the Jewish religious leaders opposed Him in every way they could, and plotted to take His life. If He was demonstrating God's love in everything He did and said, why did they respond with murderous hatred?

Along the way we will explore the true meaning of love. Is genuine love the same as complete tolerance—accepting people as they are and encouraging them to live life on their own terms? Or is love something greater, something deeper?

As we work through Luke's account of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, we will see into the very heart of Jesus. We'll notice that He always focused on others, and never Himself, teaching where we must look if we want to find the only true—and genuine—love and acceptance that really matters.



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A NEW PASSOVER

Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016

Read Exodus 12:21-24.

TEXT: Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover (Luke 22:1).

The backdrop for our Lenten journey is the Jewish Passover. Long before Jesus' day this Jewish festival enjoyed a rich, long history, dating back to the time of the Exodus when God delivered His people Israel from slavery in Egypt.

The Passover was the tenth and final plague God brought upon Egypt. Since Egypt's leader, Pharaoh, had stubbornly refused to obey His command to free the Israelites, at midnight God would send a destroying angel to pass throughout the land of Egypt and kill all the firstborn children, including Pharaoh's own heir.

But in love, God provided a way to escape this devastating plague. A lamb could be slain in place of the firstborn and its blood spread over the door frame of the house. When the angel of death reached a blood-marked house, God would command it to pass over and leave the firstborn unharmed.

Now we join Jesus as He prepares to celebrate His last Passover festival. While reminding His followers of that first great deliverance, He prepares to accomplish an even greater deliverance by sacrificing Himself and shedding His own blood on the cross of Calvary. All who believe on Him are marked by His blood.

Then on the Last Day when Jesus Christ returns to raise the dead, He will command the angel of death to pass over all believers who are marked in His blood by faith.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, Passover Lamb of God, thank You for offering Your own body and blood to deliver us from the angel of death. During this Lenten season deepen my appreciation for Your great sacrifice that I may be so thankful I won't be able keep the glorious news to myself. Amen.

HARD BUT LOVING WORDS

Thursday, February 11, 2016

Read John 12:12-19.

TEXT: And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put Him to death, for they feared the people (Luke 22:2).

People don't take too kindly to being told they are wrong—not today and not in Jesus' day either. When someone questions our decisions—or even worse, challenges the way we have chosen to live our lives—we are tempted to write him off as narrow-minded and intolerant. It's fine for him to believe what he thinks is right, but he should leave me free to believe and live the way I think is right. The only trouble with that is we don't get to decide what's right and wrong; God does.

For many months Jesus has been confronting the Jewish religious authorities. They cling to a religion of works: human rules and traditions by which they believe they earn blessings in this life and eternal life with God afterward.

But Jesus knows better. He knows His Father in heaven is holy and perfect. God cannot simply overlook the wrongs we do. That would make Him unjust. But even though the Father is just and holy, He is also filled with grace, love and mercy. That is why He sent His own Son, Jesus, to save us.

But the Jewish leaders have rejected Jesus—and they are pushing back hard against Him. Even so, Jesus won't go away. He keeps coming back again and again when all they want is to be left alone.

So now this huge confrontation is looming. Jesus cares too much to leave the Jewish authorities in darkness. So He shows them their error by teaching them God's truth. But His words don't sit well with them. They reach the conclusion that He must be silenced.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for caring enough about me to show me my failings and how to be right with my God by confessing my sins and trusting in You as my Savior. Amen.

FULLY AWARE

Friday, February 12, 2016

Read Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16.

TEXT: Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them (Luke 22:3-4).

The religious authorities desperately want to get rid of Jesus, but the huge swell of Passover pilgrims that fill the temple courts are hanging on His every word. If they take any action against Jesus, the crowds will rally to His defense. So they concede they will have to wait until the Passover is finished and the crowds return to their homes (see Matthew 26:5).

For the chief priests this is extremely frustrating—and dangerous. Jesus is completely beyond their control. If He steps forward during the Passover, claims Himself King, and begins a rebellion, they will be powerless to stop it, or to control the Roman military response to it.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, a possible solution appears. One member of Jesus' inner circle of disciples, Judas, comes to them offering to deliver Jesus to them. Judas' faith and love for Jesus has dried up, choked out by his lust for money (see John 12:4-6).

The Jewish leaders are overjoyed, but cautious. They describe the conditions they are looking for: a time when Jesus is in the city, yet separated from the crowds.

But even while they conspire together behind closed doors, Judas and the chief priests have no idea that Jesus is well aware of everything; He knew it from the start. We might expect Jesus to be furious and vindictive; instead, He loves Judas. He prepares to reach out to this lost disciple in every way He can, trying to touch his heart, prick his conscience, and bring him back to faith.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, Your love is amazing. Where most of us would have been furious at Judas' plotting, Your chief concern was bringing him back. Give me a heart that loves my enemy and seeks to share Your salvation. Amen.

WAITING FOR THE PERFECT MOMENT

Saturday, February 13, 2016

Read Mark 14:1-11.

TEXT: And (the chief priests and officers) were glad, and agreed to give (Judas) money. So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray Him to them in the absence of a crowd (Luke 22:5-6).

The priests were glad to have the possibility of eliminating Jesus before the Passover—before He could start a revolt against Rome. Who better than an insider to spy on Jesus and find the perfect opportunity to spring their trap? They agreed to the price of 30 pieces of silver and considered it a bargain. The Jewish leaders would no doubt have been willing to spend far more to remove Jesus from the picture.

So Judas began watching and waiting. He needed an opportunity to betray Jesus when He was separated from the crowd, and thus vulnerable. Judas held his secret close in his heart. None of the other disciples had a clue. He went on acting the part of a friend—and none were the wiser.

But Jesus knew. He'd known it from the day He first chose Judas. He'd even dropped hints here and there (see John 6:63-64, 70-71), along the way. He could easily use this knowledge to avoid the situation for which Judas was watching. He could even use it against Judas, turn the tables, and betray him to the other 11. But Jesus will only use it for Judas' benefit. He is waiting for that moment when He can make the biggest impact, reveal the devilish nature of this sin, and hopefully turn Judas back and save him.

In the meantime, He lets Judas keep watching for his opportunity. The betrayer quickly learns it is not as easy to hand Jesus over as he had first thought.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, nothing takes You by surprise. Thank You for working so hard to call us to repentance and salvation. Amen.

A PIVOTAL DAY

Sunday, February 14, 2016

Read Hebrews 9:1-15.

TEXT: Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. (Luke 22:7).

The day has come. The Jewish leaders and all the people see this as just another remembrance, pointing back to that first great Passover in Egypt. But Jesus is aware that all human history hangs on this pivotal day. For this is the day when God's own Passover Lamb will be sacrificed. His blood will not save the Israelites from slavery, or the firstborn from physical death. His death will deliver every man, woman and child who has ever lived, or will ever live, from slavery to sin, and from everlasting death in hell.

He makes that sacrifice for all people—freely offering forgiveness to all people, to you and to me. But on Judgment Day the angel of death will only pass over those of us who, by faith, are marked in the blood of God's Son. Jesus' holy angels will separate believers from unbelievers, and cast all unbelievers into the eternal fire of hell.

Our reading from Hebrews today speaks about what Jesus will accomplish through His suffering and death on the cross. Jesus will bring His own blood into His Father's presence in heaven, and by that blood cleanse us from all our sins.

That is the depth of Jesus' love for you and me. That is why He was willing to become human, to be born in Bethlehem's lowly manger. It's why He will allow Himself to be betrayed, beaten, slapped, punched, flogged and crucified. By His sacrifice and His shed blood we are forever forgiven and we are free.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You came to take our sins upon Yourself and bear the punishment of God in our place. Thank You for that great sacrifice. Now give us courage and true concern for those dying around us so that we may share Your victory with everyone You bring into our lives. Amen.

NO DETAIL TOO SMALL

Monday, February 15, 2016

Read Luke 22:8-10.

TEXT: He (Jesus) said to them, “Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters ...” (Luke 22:10).

This momentous day begins with a meal that will be remembered and rehearsed until the day Jesus returns. It will be Jesus’ last Passover, a beautiful legacy He will leave for His church. So He sends two disciples to prepare the meal. Their first task will be to secure a space large enough to accommodate Jesus, the 12 followers He called, and any others who are with them.

He instructs Peter and John to follow the man carrying a jar of water. Maybe this sounds like a rather odd direction. We might expect them to see a large number of men carrying jars of water. But these two disciples know women normally carried the water. It is extremely unusual to see a man carrying one, so he will be really easy to spot.

But even so, Jesus has to know exactly when that one male servant will be at that place, and coordinate His disciples’ arrival so they will be passing into the city gates exactly when he walks by. For the Son of God, no detail is too small as He makes sure everything will be on hand for His disciples to complete the preparations for this great feast.

In the same way no detail is too small as Jesus coordinates all the events in your life to best serve His loving purpose for you. Don’t ignore those little details—the seemingly unimportant situations or people He brings near. Those are opportunities to experience His loving care, and to share the love of Christ in your attitude, your humility and kindness, your words and your deeds.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for taking note of every detail of my life. Give me confidence that You will guide all things for my eternal good. Amen.

BORROWED THINGS

Tuesday, February 16, 2016

Read Luke 22:11-12.

TEXT: “He will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there” (Luke 22:12).

As Jesus directed, the two disciples enter the city gate and find the man carrying the water jar. He will guide Peter and John to the house where they will prepare the Passover for Jesus. But for these disciples the strangest thing may not be the man carrying water.

The strangest thing may well be that a room large enough to accommodate at least 13 men is still available in Jerusalem. The city is bursting with Jewish pilgrims gathered together from all over the Roman Empire to celebrate the Passover. But as Jesus predicts, they won't just find a large empty room, it will be fully furnished, with all the furniture and utensils they will need.

Thirty-some years ago a Jewish carpenter diligently searched for just such a room in the little town of Bethlehem, a few miles southwest of here. In fact, Luke uses the exact same Greek word for “guest room” here as he uses for “inn” there (see Luke 2:7). But no such room was available that first Christmas, so Jesus had been born in a humble shelter for cattle.

But this time it is different. A room has been held back and reserved. In this space Jesus will celebrate His Last Supper and institute Holy Communion. The owner of this house knows the Teacher, and will be deeply honored to lend Him this room. He is the second man in recent days who has been privileged to loan his property to the Savior of mankind. Just the previous Sunday a man had loaned Him his young donkey, which had never been ridden before. And before the sun sets again, a prominent Jewish ruler will lend Jesus his unused tomb.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for choosing to honor us with Your presence. Use our time, treasure, talents and lives to spread Your Kingdom and glorify Your Holy Name. Amen.

CRYPTIC INSTRUCTIONS

Wednesday, February 17, 2016

Read Deuteronomy 16:1-8.

TEXT: And they went and found it just as He had told them, and they prepared the Passover (Luke 22:13).

Jesus' instructions must surely have challenged the faith of Peter and John. What were the odds they would see a man carrying a jar of water? That he would lead them to a house with a large guest room, furnished and available? Yet this is exactly what they experienced. Surely, it strengthened their faith when one by one, Jesus' strange instructions worked out for them.

But was there another reason Jesus gave such cryptic instructions? He was well aware that one of His 12 disciples was carefully watching for an opportunity to betray Him in the absence of the crowds. When Peter and John asked Jesus where they were to prepare the Passover, it is the moment Judas was waiting for. What better occasion to find Jesus away from the crowd, in a house that can be surrounded, with no way of escape?

If Jesus had identified the house He had in mind, Judas could have found a way to sneak out and inform the Jewish leaders. Then there would have been no time to eat with His disciples, to institute Holy Communion, or to prepare Himself through prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Each of these things is essential, and Jesus won't permit Judas to gain that knowledge—until the time is right.

In a similar way, as Jesus guides us through life, He keeps our enemies in check and thwarts their plans to harm us—unless it suits His loving, divine purposes for us and for them.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, we are surrounded by spiritual enemies who wish to destroy our faith and do us eternal harm. As You watch over us and limit what they can do, give us loving hearts to share Your Word so that You may bring them to repentance and faith. Amen.

TREASURING TIME TOGETHER

Thursday, February 18, 2016

Read Luke 22:14-15.

TEXT: And He (Jesus) said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15).

According to the Bible’s reckoning, the day began at sunset rather than midnight. So as Jesus sits down in the upper room to eat, He is well aware the final day of His earthly life has begun. Much lies before Him: three grueling hours of prayer; His arrest, three trials, mistreatment and mockery, bitter suffering, abuse, torture, six hours of agony on the cross and, finally, His death.

These great Passion events could easily dominate His thoughts, but instead He pushes them aside and focuses on the moment. He wants His disciples to know how important they are to Him. His literal words make that clear: “With great desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you.”

What was so important about this meal for Jesus? It was the people who surrounded Him—the people He loved and for whom He would soon lay down His life. Jesus feels the same about you and me. He treasures the time we spend reading His Word, gathering with our brothers and sisters in worship, praying to Him. He promises, “For where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20).

Here in the upper room they will soon eat the Passover lamb and remember how God had delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. But they don’t realize that among them sits the Passover Lamb. It is He who will this very day go to the cross to deliver them from the slavery of sin, death, Satan and hell—and open wide for all of us the gates of Paradise.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for living in my heart. Deliver me from all evil and lead me to Your eternal home. Amen.

FULFILLING THE PASSOVER

Friday, February 19, 2016

Read Luke 22:16-18.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:16).

First, Jesus shocks His disciples by saying He will soon suffer. Then He tells them He will not eat the Passover again until it is fulfilled in God’s kingdom. They knew that the first Passover occurred long ago when the angel of death had struck down the firstborn in Egypt, passing over all those houses marked with the blood of the Passover lamb. The act was completed more than 1,400 years before, but Jesus tells them it still isn’t fulfilled.

In the original Passover only the firstborn were in danger. But all of us are slaves of sin and under the curse of hell. Not even the blood of all those Passover lambs could save us from eternal death. Only the blood of the Lamb of God, shed on the cross, can do that. Whoever is shielded by Christ’s blood on Judgment Day, will watch the angel of death pass over and will spend eternity with Him in heaven.

The next time Jesus will eat the Passover it will be a memorial feast in heaven, looking back on His completed sacrifice. Each time we receive Holy Communion, we partake of that meal, celebrating the new Passover, remembering His sacrifice for us, and eating the body and blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, keep me firm in this faith until You bring me to heaven to share Your great Passover feast. And throughout my days on this earth, work through me to bring many others to saving faith that they too may share this eternal feast with You in heaven. Amen.

GIVING US HIS VERY SELF

Saturday, February 20, 2016

Read Matthew 26:26-29.

TEXT: And He (Jesus) took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me. And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:19-20).

During this Passover feast, Jesus and His disciples ate the lamb’s meat. In doing so they remembered those lambs whose blood had been spread on the doorposts and lintels in Egypt to cause the angel of death to pass over the houses of Israel’s firstborn.

Now Jesus takes unleavened bread from the Passover table, and makes it a *new* memorial. The Son of God—God’s own Passover Lamb—miraculously joins His own body to the bread and His own blood to the wine. As we eat the bread and wine we receive that same body and blood that was nailed to the cross and poured out of His wounds. Jesus Christ gives us a vivid reminder that He has taken away the sins of the world through His suffering and death. Sealed by His body and blood, we are safe and secure, assured the angel of death will pass over us on Judgment Day.

It is a new covenant, a new binding agreement by which God our Father promises to accept Christ’s sacrifice in our place, and to give us full forgiveness and peace for Jesus’ sake. And it is Jesus’ *new testament*—His will which is in full force ever since His death—giving to us forgiveness, peace and everlasting life in God’s presence.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, in the wondrous meal of Holy Communion, You give us Your very body and blood to forgive our sins, and reassure us of Your complete and free forgiveness. Help me treasure this precious meal always, and to remember Your death until You come again. Amen.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Sunday, February 21, 2016

Read Matthew 26:20-25.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “But behold, the hand of him who betrays Me is with Me on the table” (Luke 22:21).

From the beginning Jesus knew Judas would choose to betray Him. For long months He has tried to break through the betrayer’s selfish greed, speaking of the dangers of the overpowering love of money, and teaching the need to seek first the kingdom of heaven. But Judas’ love for money has been too strong; Jesus’ words have fallen on deaf ears.

So Jesus chooses this very moment, while He sits in the upper room surrounded by faithful disciples, to reveal His knowledge. He chooses words which strike hard at Judas’ conscience. They are stark and chilling because they are so intensely personal: at the very table where Jesus dined was His betrayer. And even more He says, his hand “is with Me on the table.”

Jesus appeals to this friendship even while exposing the hideous nature of this act. Perhaps the shock of the moment will break through and stir Judas to repentance and faith. After all, he has shared Jesus’ food, His ministry, His prayers, and His confession of faith. How can he be plotting to commit this—the greatest of hypocrisies?

It is shocking that this man who had spent so much time eating, drinking, travelling and sleeping with Jesus could turn against Him so completely—and for such a small price. Even more shocking is the fact that Judas is unmoved by Jesus’ words. Absorbed in his own selfish greed, he continues in his reckless course.

How often do we ignore Jesus’ loving warnings and follow our own twisted, self-destructive desires?

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, when I travel along paths of disobedience and defiance, turn my heart to repentance and faith that I may return and glorify You, rather than follow Satan’s road to eternal destruction. Amen.

REACHING OUT TO A HARDENED HEART

Monday, February 22, 2016

Read Mark 15:17-21.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22).

The sin Judas is planning is not unforgiveable, but he has spent days plotting his betrayal. With each passing hour he pushes Jesus further and further out of his heart.

But Jesus clings to Judas. He strives now, before the act, to stir Judas’ conscience: to help him see the horror of what he is about to do. Better to bring him to repentance here and now, where Jesus can assure him that he is forgiven and at peace, than wait until after the fact when the chief priests turn a deaf ear to him (see Matthew 27:3-4).

If Judas repents and turns from this sin, he will in no way jeopardize God’s plan of salvation. Once Jesus has prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, He will be willing to turn Himself over to those who seek His life. Jesus will go to the cross and death as the Father has determined.

The Lord can give no stronger warning than His words, “Woe to that man by whom He is betrayed.” Woe is a word that foreshadows the agony and desolation of hell. Jesus clearly points out Judas’ guilt in choosing this course—and reveals the end of this sad road if Judas will not repent and seek his Lord’s forgiveness.

Our Savior’s unfailing love is incredible. Even at the moment of the betrayal in the garden, He will try once more to bring Judas to repentance and faith. But in love God never forces us to repent and believe. He holds out the free offer of grace, forgiveness and eternal life, but He gives Judas, you and me the freedom to walk away, even to our own eternal destruction.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, forgive my stubborn waywardness, and bring me to repentance, faith and salvation. Amen.

TURNING THE TABLES

Tuesday, February 23, 2016

Read John 13:21-30.

TEXT: And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this (Luke 22:23).

Jesus isn't done with Judas yet. He's going to use the reaction of the other disciples to help Judas understand the full nature of the act he is plotting.

The disciples clearly understand Jesus' prediction that one of them will betray Him, but they are utterly dumbfounded. The thought had never crossed their minds that one of their number could be capable of such a hideous act. So they begin to question each other and ask who it is.

It is hard to imagine Judas being completely unaffected as the reactions spread around him. He has to be asking himself, "How does Jesus know? What is He going to do?" He can't possibly fail to realize the great danger he now faces. Jesus has completely turned the tables, and Judas is completely at His mercy. What if Jesus chooses to save Himself by betraying Judas to the other 11?

Jesus wants His traitorous disciple to know how it feels to be betrayed. He walks Judas right to the brink of betrayal. It should be enough to send a shudder through Judas, and a stab of remorse and regret to his heart.

But tragically, Judas refuses to allow the Holy Spirit to bring repentance; instead, he opens his heart wide for Satan. He quickly takes the morsel of bread, and goes off into the night to perform his foul deed. Every Gospel makes it clear that during the meal none of the disciples realized Judas was the one. Jesus was careful to shield and protect him from them, just as Judas should have protected Jesus.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, guard my heart from such cold indifference and unbelief. Move me to sincere repentance and faith that I may always cling to You, my only Savior. Amen.

THE SERVING KING

Wednesday, February 24, 2016

Read John 13:1-19.

TEXT: A dispute arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest (Luke 22:24).

Here in the upper room is an amazing contrast. Jesus is totally focused on His followers, but all they can think about is themselves. While He is busy reaching out to Judas, teaching each of them about His coming suffering and death for our salvation, and giving them His own body and blood in a new and wonderful testament, all they can think about is their own honor, and which of them should be considered greatest by others.

How often are we so preoccupied with our own honor and glory, our reputation and well-being that we pass by hurting people all around us?

In tomorrow's devotion we will read what Jesus said about this dispute. But today we focus on the action He took in response. As we just read in John's Gospel, Jesus rose from the table without a word. He silently removed His outer garment, wrapped Himself in a towel, then stooped down and began to wash each of their feet like the lowliest household servant. Peter almost prevented Jesus from washing His feet because it seemed so beneath Him.

But Jesus insists. And He teaches them this is not the time for quarreling and arguing about our importance and our fame. It's time to focus on the people around us who need our encouragement, support and attention. More importantly, it's time to focus on Jesus: to contemplate His astonishing love and the tremendous sacrifice He is freely making for us and all people.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, whenever I start to compare myself to others and promote my own recognition and glory, please stop me in my tracks. Remind me that You came as our Servant, submitting like a slave, and now that You have saved me, may I truly serve others in Your Name. Amen.

TRUE GREATNESS

Thursday, February 25, 2016

Read Luke 22:24-27.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “Who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the One who serves” (Luke 22:27).

With infinite patience Jesus responds to His disciples' strife about which of them will be considered the greatest. He reminds them they are thinking the way worldly people do—striving for recognition and self-promotion. His followers, however, must take a different path.

The greatest among His people will regard themselves as though they were the youngest, the lowest people who have absolutely no claim over anyone else. Christian leaders will be humble people who pour themselves out in lowly service. And these apostles, when they go out to share the good news about what Jesus accomplished for all people, will go out as equals, serving the same cause, sharing the same Gospel.

That is why pastors are called ministers. That title reminds us of Jesus' humble, lowly service to us. Like Him, pastors don't do their work for their own glory or recognition, but for the benefit of those around them, and for the glory of their Savior Jesus Christ.

As He lays aside the water basin and towel and resumes His place at the table, He brings their focus back to Himself. He is the glorious Son of God, yet He set aside that glory and became human. He reminds them that He has come to serve, and not to be served. He will soon show them the greatest example of lowly, self-sacrifice as He offers Himself unto death to remove our guilt and sin.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, my world seeks fame, honor, glory and distinction. But You alone deserve this attention. Give me joy in humbly serving, just as You stooped down to serve each of us. Amen.

A GLORIOUS PROMISE

Friday, February 26, 2016

Read Luke 22:28-30.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “You are those who have stayed with Me in My trials, and I assign to you, as My Father assigned to Me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:28-30).

Though Jesus was generally well received by the crowds throughout His ministry, He faced ever stiffening opposition and hostility from the Jewish religious leaders. But the disciples faithfully stood by Him through it all. Peter said it well: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68b-69).

Jesus looks around the table at them. A moment ago they disputed which of them was greatest, but He knows in the future they will suffer as He will—beatings, imprisonment, exile, even death. So Jesus points them beyond those sufferings to the glorious reward that waits for them at the end. When their earthly lives are completed, they will receive a greater honor, privilege and glory than anything they could have sought on earth. Here they will serve in humility and suffering, but in heaven they will find true glory and honor. The promise is true for you and me as well.

Though our daily work for the Lord often seems to go unappreciated and unrecognized, Jesus assures us that God marks it well and will faithfully reward it in eternity.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for teaching us a new way to think about ourselves and our place in Your world. Help me grasp the beauty and grandeur of it all, that I may live as You did, in humble service and self-sacrifice. Amen.

POWERFUL PRAYER

Saturday, February 27, 2016

Read Luke 22:31-32.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. . . .” (Luke 22:31-32a).

Already in this meal Jesus has foretold His coming suffering and death, established a new Sacrament to give us His own body and blood in bread and wine, and exposed the betrayer who will set it all into motion. Now He turns to the leader of His disciples, bold and impetuous Peter. His words seem totally at odds with the Peter we meet in the Gospels—confident, strong, impulsive. But Jesus knows.

With deep concern and tender care He speaks Peter’s given name twice, “Simon, Simon.” Back when this disciple expressed his faith that Jesus was God’s Son, the promised Savior, the Lord had given him the name Peter, which means “rock.” But this night Peter will be the furthest thing from a rock as he crumbles before servant girls and soldiers.

Confident in his foolish pride, Peter will put himself in great danger. Satan will seek to use that bitter moment of denial to shake Peter with deep guilt and regret in an attempt to crush his faith. Peter’s leadership will be severely hampered as he asks how he could possibly remain one of Jesus’ chosen apostles.

But Jesus steps in to reassure Peter. “I have prayed for you.” The gracious voice of God’s Son will overpower the tempter’s foul accusation. By Jesus’ power, Peter will turn from his denial, and follow his Savior yet again. Then a restored Peter will strengthen his brothers and sisters. As we recall the depth of Peter’s fall and see Jesus’ gracious restoration, Peter’s experience encourages us to leave behind our guilt and regret and boldly trust in Jesus’ full and complete forgiveness for all our sins and failings.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You plead for me before Your Father in heaven. Reassure me of Your complete and free forgiveness every time I fall. Amen.

A SURE PREDICTION

Sunday, February 28, 2016

Read Luke 22:33-34.

TEXT: Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know Me” (Luke 22:34).

Jesus’ warning should humble Peter, but the proud disciple will hear none of it. With characteristic boldness and overbearing self-reliance he protests his loyalty to his Lord, and promises to stay by His side—even if it costs his freedom and his life. He doesn’t say, “With God’s help,” or “With Your help.” He is confident he can stand on the ardor of his own adoration and commitment to Jesus.

But Jesus knows precisely what Peter will do in a few short hours. That’s when this quiet upper room will be exchanged for a threatening courtyard filled with menacing soldiers. The Lord gives a simple, assured answer. Echoing Peter’s misplaced self-confidence, Jesus shifts from “Simon” to “Peter”—the rock. His words are poignant: the rooster will not crow to mark the coming of the sunrise before the rock has crumbled and denied knowing Jesus three times.

From that next morning on, Peter would never hear a rooster again without being reminded of that dreadful, shameful sunrise. But at the same time, the sound of that crowing will be a daily reminder of Jesus’ gracious salvation. It was that fateful hour when the rooster’s crow recalled Jesus’ words to Peter, and that brief glance from Jesus’ eyes called Peter back, rescuing him from Satan’s grasp, and springing forth the tears of godly repentance that poured from his eyes and led to his restoration.

We all stumble and fall, disowning our Savior in our silence and in our disobedience. Yet Jesus prays for us, strengthens us, and restores us by His constant grace.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, in Your still small voice, humble my pride and foolish self-confidence. Guard and protect me as I flee to You, the Rock of my salvation. Amen.

THE WORLD IS CHANGING

Monday, February 29, 2016

Read Luke 22:35-38.

TEXT: (Jesus said) "... Let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in Me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.'..." (Luke 22:36b-37a).

The meal is complete and Jesus prepares to leave the guest room. But first He wants to make His disciples aware that their world will change drastically this day. It will become a much more violent and dangerous place.

Up to now Jesus has been quite popular. Everywhere He went with His disciples throughout Galilee they found friends who welcomed them into their homes and fed them. And it was that popularity that was frustrating Jewish leaders, making it impossible for them to lay their hands on Jesus. But today that will end.

When Jesus is crucified, many Jews will misjudge the evidence. They will falsely assume the cross proves the carpenter from Nazareth is a fake and a fraud.

The coming situation will become desperate. The disciples will need a cloak because they will no longer be welcomed into peoples' houses. But the danger of physical violence is so great they would be wise to sell their cloaks for swords, and shiver through the night. For Jesus' sake they will soon face opposition, arrest, mistreatment and martyrdom.

When the disciples report they have two swords, Jesus tells them it is enough. He doesn't intend to make them a defensive fighting force; instead, He wants to make them aware of the deadly hostility the Gospel message will bring. When these apostles tell Jews and Gentiles that a man crucified as a criminal is their Savior—they will face great persecution.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, our brother and sister Christians throughout the world face great opposition and danger, even death. Shield and defend all those who are being attacked for their faith, and give them courage and faith to boldly stand and declare Your Name. And move their persecutors to repentance and faith. Amen.

PREPARE YOURSELVES BY PRAYER

Tuesday, March 1, 2016

Read Luke 22:39-40.

TEXT: And when He (Jesus) came to the place, He said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:40).

Having left the upper room behind, Jesus leads His disciples to the Mount of Olives, which rises opposite Jerusalem. During this Passover Week Jesus has spent the nights out in the open, sleeping under the stars (see Luke 21:37). John tells us Judas was familiar with this place (see John 18:2). Of course, Jesus could easily foil his betrayal plot by choosing a different, unknown place this night. But He returns to this familiar ground, voluntarily yielding Himself up to His Father’s plan.

On this mountain is a garden into which Jesus now leads His disciples. He is greatly troubled, telling them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with Me” (Matthew 26:38b). He has every reason to think first of Himself and the heavy burden He is already beginning to carry, but first He urges His disciples to pray. He feels for them, knowing the pain and heartache they will soon suffer.

He knows Satan will use the coming events to press them sorely, to try to pulverize their faith. Already with the Lord’s Supper, the prediction of Judas’s betrayal and Peter’s denial this very night should have made it clear to the disciples that a difficult trial was looming before them. They should have been on their knees in prayer; instead, the doom and gloom left them weary, and soon they all drifted off to sleep.

In the hour of His greatest need Jesus is left alone by His friends. Like them, we frequently sleep when moments of great danger and temptation are coming toward us. Our Lord also urges us to stay alert and pray.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Amen.

CRYING OUT

Wednesday, March 2, 2016

Read Luke 22:41-42.

TEXT: And He (Jesus) withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:41-42).

Jesus doesn't go far from His disciples, about as far as one can throw a stone. Matthew and Mark tell us He brings along three disciples: Peter, James and John. After strongly encouraging them to keep watch with Him and pray, He withdraws a few paces. This is a burden they cannot share. He has to face it alone with His Father, but still it comforts Him to know they are listening and praying for Him.

Jews normally stood in prayer, but Jesus kneels down, showing tremendous humility, coupled with the weight of the grief bearing down on Him. Immediately, He cries out in pain and distress. Surely, His three closest disciples hear and join in fervent prayer. He pleads with His Father to remove the cup—the physical suffering, the abuse, the pain—but more than anything, the prospect of coming under the wrath of God for the sins of the world. Yet He immediately surrenders His will to His Father, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done."

He isn't afraid of death—but dreads the thought of being cut off, forsaken by His Father, and suffering the terrible wrath of God. Yet He casts aside His own desire, His own will, and in genuine love for His Father, accepts God's perfect plan as His own.

In our hours of greatest need our prayers often focus on ourselves—but notice how Jesus focuses instead on His Father and what He wants. Again, Jesus casts His own needs and interests aside, embracing His Father's will—and our desperate need.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, in awe and holy fear we listen as You lay Your heart bare before Your Father. Teach us so to pray. Amen.

POURED OUT IN PRAYER

Thursday, March 3, 2016

Read Luke 22:43-44.

TEXT: And there appeared to Him (Jesus) an angel from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:43-44).

At some point in our lives, many of us will face a moment when the doctor says, "There's nothing more I can do." You get word that a loved one has died unexpectedly. As the realization sinks in so does hopelessness, shock and the unrelenting pain of reality. Like Jesus, all we can do is come to our Father on our knees, and pour out our hearts.

The Father has laid a burden on His Son that no human can bear, and even Jesus' perfect human nature becomes faint under the weight. In tender love and compassion the Father sends an angel from heaven to His dear Son. Through that angel He provides the strength Jesus' body requires to fulfill its part in accomplishing God's gracious plan of salvation. Later we will see Jesus' physical strength give out again as He attempts to carry the cross and collapses under its weight. But for now, strengthened by the angel, Jesus can fully face the dread welling up inside Him.

In agony, He prays even more earnestly, deeply, emotionally than before, and the inner turmoil in His soul pours itself out through His body. Doctors tell us severe mental stress can cause small blood vessels in the skin to burst, mingling blood into the sweat. The physician Luke tells us, "His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." This was the intense struggle our Savior wrestled through, working to accept as His own His Father's will to suffer and die for our salvation.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, help me never to shrink back from life's troubles, but to always bring them to You in prayer, as You brought Your needs to Your Father in heaven. Amen.

LAST-MINUTE ENCOURAGEMENT

Friday, March 4, 2016

Read Luke 22:45-46.

TEXT: And when He (Jesus) rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and He said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:45-46).

Matthew and Mark’s Gospels tell us Jesus’ prayer lasted about an hour—and He repeated it two more times. And each time He went to check on His disciples. He longed for their prayers, their presence, their support. How disheartening it must have been to find them asleep. Instead of rising up in prayer to meet the sorrow that weighed heavy on their spirits, they sunk beneath it in defeated sleep.

Jesus’ exhausting struggle in prayer had prepared Him for the grueling trial to come. Yet in their sleep His disciples left themselves unprepared and vulnerable. He awakens them, urging them to pray so they can overcome the temptation to doubt and fall away from faith when they see Him condemned and executed. They will need to continue to pray in the hours and days to come until they see Jesus’ standing alive before them on Sunday. Though they had failed to be there for Jesus, He is there for them.

When we face difficult trials in life—especially trials of faith—it is easy to grow weary and fatigued. Like the angel He sent to Jesus, God strengthens us through His Word and His gifts of Baptism and Holy Communion. We are empowered to bear up under those burdens, and wrestle our fears, struggles and heartaches. Through prayer God prepares our hearts to embrace His perfect, fatherly will, and to accomplish the amazing things He has planned for our lives here on earth.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, strengthen my faith through the trials I face, and teach me to persistently pray as You did. Then by Your mighty power, glorify Your Name through all I do and say. Amen.

CONFRONTING HYPOCRISY WITH LOVE

Saturday, March 5, 2016

Read Luke 22:47-48.

TEXT: While He (Jesus) was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss Him, but Jesus said to him, “Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:47-48).

As Jesus wakens His disciples, a large company of soldiers with torches, lanterns and weapons draws near. The Jewish leaders intend to take no chances, so they bring enough guards and soldiers to prevent any interference when they take Jesus into custody. At their lead is Judas. He has arranged a sign with the soldiers so there will be no confusing Jesus with any of His disciples in the shadows of the garden. “The one I will kiss is the man; seize Him” (Matthew 26:48b).

Jesus points out the betrayer’s heartbreaking hypocrisy, “Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?” Judas could have chosen any impersonal way to single out Jesus. Instead, he chooses a kiss, a gesture intended to show affection, kindness and love. Jesus’ gently pricks at Judas’ conscience, trying to lead him to see his horrendous sin.

Judas should melt in tears, but he feels no guilt, no regret—at least not at this moment when Jesus is present to forgive, restore and comfort him. Yet none of us should conclude that Jesus didn’t try hard enough to reach Judas. He washed his feet in the upper room, He shared his meal, and here in the garden He gently called him by name, Judas, and then even called him “friend” (see Matthew 26:50). Jesus was still holding out peace and forgiveness for Judas. It wasn’t too late for Judas; it’s not too late for you and me.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, Your deep love for Judas is simply amazing, especially when we see how deeply he hurt You. Give me grace to forgive those who cut me to the heart. Amen.

THE PEACEMAKER

Sunday, March 6, 2016

Read Luke 22:49-51.

TEXT: And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And He touched his ear and healed him (Luke 22:50-51).

The sleepy disciples quickly awaken at the soldiers' approach. Even though Jesus has stepped forward to shield them (see John 18:4, 8), they ask their Master if He wants them to strike with the sword and defend Him. One doesn't wait for His answer. Peter attacks the servant of the high priest.

Jesus is deeply concerned about the safety of His disciples and those who have come out to arrest Him. Peter's rash act threatens to escalate the tense situation into violence and bloodshed, forcing the soldiers to rush in with drawn weapons to put down the violence. Jesus immediately steps in and defuses it. He commands His disciples to put away their swords (see Matthew 26:52).

Then He demonstrates incredible care for the high priest's servant whose ear Peter has severed. Jesus immediately restores his ear and heals him. He brings peace and calm out of impending chaos.

His actions perfectly display the love He feels for His Father and for each of us. It's a love that will prompt His first words from the cross in a few hours: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34b). And whether that servant ever comes to faith in Jesus or not, for the remainder of his life he will bear the evidence in his body of the last miracle Jesus performed in His earthly life.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You protected Your disciples while demonstrating Your concern for a wounded soldier, who had come out against You. Give me such love toward my enemies that I may treat them kindly and You may bring them to faith. Amen.

ADDRESSING HIS ENEMIES

Monday, March 7, 2016

Read Luke 22:52-53.

TEXT: ... (Jesus said) “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Luke 22:52b-53).

Jesus now turns to the Jewish leaders. He protests the way they are going about arresting Him. Like Judas a moment ago, He wants them to realize the true nature of their deeds. They think they are serving God, but in reality they are serving the prince of darkness.

First, He points out the large armed guard they assembled. Jesus is neither a lawbreaker, nor a violent man. He has never preached armed rebellion or insurrection. He has only preached repentance and the coming of the kingdom of Heaven. His deeds have all been good and kind, benefiting the sick, the hurting, and the dying.

He then reminds them of all the times He preached and taught before them in the temple courts. If they really had grounds to lay their hands on Him, they should have done it then. But Jesus had given them no cause to arrest Him—and the fact they came out at night is proof of that.

Like cowards they emerge under cover of darkness when the crowds are far away. This late hour of the night is their hour—when the power of darkness reigns.

This may be the hour when they seem to have the upper hand, but Jesus implies another hour is coming—an hour when God’s truth will be manifest, when Jesus will burst through the gates of death at the resurrection.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You exposed the evil intentions of Your enemies in order to bring them to repentance and faith. Turn me from my evil ways that I may live to Your glory. Amen.

INTO HARM'S WAY

Tuesday, March 8, 2016

Read Luke 22:54-60a.

TEXT: Then they seized Him (Jesus) and led Him away, bringing Him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance (Luke 22:54).

Simon Peter shouldn't be anywhere near here. Over and over Jesus told His disciples what will happen. He will be condemned and crucified, and on the third day rise again. But Peter wants to see for himself. So he follows at a distance.

Peter enters the enclosed courtyard of the high priest and stands among the guards waiting there. It is extremely dangerous for him to be here—and extremely foolhardy. But he doesn't seem to realize it until he is trapped in the courtyard. When a servant girl questions him, he cowers in fear—even though her testimony would not be considered dependable in a Jewish court.

Just a few hours ago he boldly promised he would go to prison and to death with Jesus. A few minutes ago he initiated a defensive attack by striking the high priest's servant with his sword. Yet now, when his life is on the line, he goes into a panic.

After two initial questions and his quick denials, Simon is able to escape attention for another hour. But as the sky brightens with the approaching dawn, another man studies him closely. This accusation is far more dangerous than the earlier two: Simon's northern dialect is giving him away. It is plain to hear he is from Galilee, like Jesus. What was a Galilean doing here in the high priest's courtyard in the middle of the night when all the guards were Judeans from the south? Simon Peter is exposed and desperate. He has nowhere left to hide.

We often thoughtlessly put ourselves in harm's way too. But Jesus is already on His way to rescue him, and you and me as well.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, forgive the times I put myself in danger for no good reason. Come quickly to rescue, forgive and restore me. Amen.

A POWERFUL GLANCE

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

Read Luke 22:60b-62.

TEXT: ... And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. ... (Luke 22:60b-61a).

While Peter is still uttering his third denial, the rooster crows. And immediately the Lord Jesus turns and looks at Peter.

How does Jesus happen to be here right at this very moment? He was first tried before the high priest and Jewish high court in the middle of the night (see Matthew 26:57-68). It is likely He has been held in a place of confinement and now is being brought back before the court so it can render a legal verdict.

Despite all He has suffered and all the agony that still awaits Him, Jesus' greatest concern is for Peter. He has already prayed for him, and now He looks upon him. Not with anger, judgment and retribution, but with loving concern for His disciple's salvation. With a look He brings Peter back to repentance and faith.

Peter sees the haunting face of Jesus, and hears the rooster's crow. Suddenly, the Lord's words come flooding into his mind: "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times" (Matthew 26:75b).

Peter is cut to the heart and dissolves into tears. Not just tears, Luke's word describes loud, audible sobbing. It may seem strange that the guards don't close in, but they are busy moving Jesus. Once again, Jesus offers Himself to protect His disciple, providing Peter the opportunity to escape to safety. But He didn't just save Peter from the soldiers—He saved him from Satan's trap, and through His suffering and death He will save Peter and all of us from God's wrath.

If Jesus can forgive Peter's denial, be assured He can forgive your worst sins.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, with Your glance You brought about Peter's repentance. Look upon me, that I may turn from my sins with repentant tears—and follow You. Amen.

BEARING THE PUNISHMENT WE DESERVE

Thursday, March 10, 2016

Read Luke 22:63-65.

TEXT: Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking Him as they beat Him. They also blindfolded Him and kept asking Him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck You?” And they said many other things against Him, blaspheming Him (Luke 22:63-65).

For months the Jewish authorities have held a deepening grudge against Jesus. Now they unleash their pent up frustration and hatred. Luke the physician tells us their blows bruised and tore Jesus’ skin. Matthew and Mark add that they struck Jesus with their fists and spat in His face. All the Gospels point out that this abuse—both physical and verbal—went on and on. These were the dignified, high officials of Judah lashing out against a bound man.

But the abuse takes on a mocking tone which we will see repeated many times this day. They blindfold Jesus and take turns striking Him, asking the Prophet which of them had struck Him. They condemn Jesus for blasphemy because He claimed to be God’s Son, but they are unaware they are the guilty ones, blaspheming the Son of God who stands meekly before them.

Jesus knows full well who is hitting Him, yet He remains silent. He is suffering exactly what each of them—and each of us—deserves to suffer for our disobedience to God and our mistreatment of one another. Yet Jesus patiently bears it all in our place. He does not retaliate or curse; instead, He remains silent. We wonder what He is thinking. He’ll show us shortly when He cries out from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34b).

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You endured the abuse and mistreatment I deserve. Forgive my sins against You, and give me patience when I suffer wrongly for Your sake. Amen.

REACHING THOSE WHO REFUSE TO LISTEN

Friday, March 11, 2016

Read Luke 22:66-71.

TEXT: ... And they led Him away to their council, and they said, "If You are the Christ, tell us."
... (Luke 22:66b-67a).

When Jesus stands before the Jewish high court they ask if He is the Christ. His answer sounds elusive, but He is laying bare their dark hearts and forcing them to look at their motives. If He utters the truth that He is God's Son, they will not believe. If He asks what more He can do to prove He is the promised Messiah, they will refuse to answer. They've already closed their minds and aren't interested in searching for the truth.

So He points past the cross. After His suffering and death are complete He will be enthroned at the right hand of God. That is the kind of Christ He is: a saving Christ—a Heavenly King, not an earthly king. It is a powerful confession and testimony—and a dire warning of their future. Today, they sit in judgment on Him, but on the last day He will be their judge—and their eternal destiny will rest in His hands.

Ignoring His warning they demand, "Are You the Son of God, then?" (Luke 22:70b). Again, His answer might sound evasive to us, but not to the Jewish leaders. He calls their own words as witnesses against them; they are confessing the truth: He is indeed the Christ, the Son of God. Without giving it another thought, they pounce on His words and condemn Jesus to death.

He has done all He can at this time. He has made the great confession. After His death and resurrection, Jesus will send strong men of faith to once again share the story of His salvation and offer them His complete and free forgiveness.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, in love You persistently reached out to stubborn men who hated You for no valid reason. Break through my stubbornness and lead me to repentance and faith. Amen.

REACHING OUT TO A ROMAN GOVERNOR

Saturday, March 12, 2016

Read Luke 23:1-4.

TEXT: Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no guilt in this Man" (Luke 23:4).

Even though the Jewish high court condemned Jesus to death, it has no authority to execute criminals. Their decision must be ratified by Pontius Pilate, the Roman military governor. Perhaps worried that Pilate is unlikely to condemn Jesus for a religious matter, they bring three political charges against Him.

The governor quickly dismisses the first two: Jesus is no insurrectionist inciting the crowds to rise up against Rome. Nor is He teaching the Jews to stop paying taxes to Caesar: "He said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'" (Luke 20:25).

The only charge worth investigating is Jesus' claim to be the Christ. If Jesus were to exploit the Jewish desire for their Christ to come and drive out the Romans, He would be a threat to Caesar's empire and Pilate would have to act.

Jesus' answer again may sound elusive, but He knows Pilate's biggest interest is ending this trial with as little fuss as possible. The governor is ignoring his Savior who stands before him. Jesus answers, "You have said so" (Matthew 26:64b). This deflects the question back to Pilate, inviting him to think about what those words really mean. Pilate isn't interested. He returns to the Jewish leaders and reveals his findings. He finds no threat, no guilt in Jesus.

But that's when he makes a fatal flaw: he doesn't enforce his verdict. He should rule the case closed and disburse the crowds—even with his troops, if necessary. Instead, he leaves an opening which the Jewish leaders will be quick to exploit.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You graciously reached out to the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Give me the concern and the words to share my faith with people who do not yet know You. Amen.

CHANGE OF VENUE

Sunday, March 13, 2016

Read Luke 23:5-7.

TEXT: And when he (Pilate) learned that He (Jesus) belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time (Luke 23:7).

The judge pronounced his verdict, yet permits the prosecution to challenge that verdict and continue raising objections. Clearly, Pilate is intimidated.

The Jewish high priest is urgent. He has brought along the full high court and a large company of guards and servants. But not even their sheer number is enough to convince Pilate of the seriousness of this matter. Perhaps Pilate thinks Jesus only has a local following that his Roman squads can easily put down. So they report the wide scope of Jesus' ministry to convince the governor that Jesus is a greater danger. They claim Jesus has been stirring up people all over Judea, from Galilee, even here to Jerusalem.

Suddenly, Pilate sees an opening, an opportunity to get rid of this whole sorry affair. If Jesus is a Galilean, the trial can be switched to Herod, the Roman governor over Galilee. Fortunately, he is staying in Jerusalem for the feast. Let Herod deal with the Jewish high priest and Jesus.

Pilate watches the procession head over to Herod's palace. As the footsteps die away in the distance and silence descends over his courts, Pilate may well breathe a sigh of relief. But by taking this action he has completely undercut his own verdict. He declared Jesus not guilty, so why is He still on trial? Why is His life still in jeopardy?

And one more thing Pilate fails to consider: if somehow Jesus is returned to him, it will be clear to the Jewish leaders that all they have to do is keep pressing, and Pilate will eventually give in.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You suffered such injustice to fulfill God's righteous plan and set free sinners like me. Give me a grateful heart, and genuine love for the people around me that need to hear of Your love. Amen.

AN AUDIENCE WITH GOD'S SON

Monday, March 14, 2016

Read Luke 23:8-9.

TEXT: When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see Him ... (Luke 23:8a).

Herod Antipas has no interest in religion. His sole ambition is to reacquire the former kingdom of his deceased father, Herod the Great. At this time he is ruling a quarter of it: Galilee and Samaria. His sights are set south on Jerusalem and Judea. To add that territory to his rule he needs to ingratiate himself to the Jewish leadership, which is why we find him in Jerusalem at this feast.

But Herod has a special interest in Jesus. When the stories about Jesus' miracles first came to his ear, he thought his executed criminal John the Baptist had been raised from the dead (see Matthew 14:2). Since then reports have kept spreading, Herod is anxious to see Jesus for himself (see Luke 9:9).

The ruler questions Jesus at length, but Jesus remains silent. When Herod had gone to speak with John in prison, John spoke at length about sin and righteousness, and God's kingdom (see Mark 6:20). But Herod has no interest in discussing these issues with Jesus. He wants to be wowed. It was this same love of spectacle that led him to behead John the Baptist (see Matthew 14:1-12). Now it leads him to squander his one chance to talk face-to-face with the Son of God.

Not a single question is judicial. He isn't interested in making a fair ruling. He only sees Jesus' value as an entertainer who could impress other dignitaries and help Herod achieve his political goals. Not a single question was spiritual, or about how to be right with God.

How sad that Herod squandered this great opportunity to listen and learn from his Lord, his God, and his Savior.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, forgive me for the times I ignore Your precious Word for me. Open my ears that I may hear and believe. Amen.

SILENCE THAT SPEAKS VOLUMES

Tuesday, March 15, 2016

Read Luke 23:10-11.

TEXT: The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing Him. And Herod with his soldiers treated Him with contempt and mocked Him. Then, arraying Him in splendid clothing, he sent Him back to Pilate (Luke 23:10-11).

The Jewish leaders are not happy with Herod. They want him to condemn Jesus, but he's not interested in a trial. He's holding an audition for a court magician. The scribes are vehement, trying to force his attention back to the trial at hand, but he totally ignores them.

Jesus' silence speaks volumes. He won't even dignify Herod's childish fascination with an answer. But the governor is deaf to Jesus' silent message. He doesn't take a moment to think about his behavior, his guilt in having John the Baptist beheaded. He doesn't think of what he owes this Man who stands trial before him—or what he owes the God to whom he will one day have to answer.

Finally, Herod gives up on Jesus. Since Jesus is giving him the silent treatment, he will return the favor. He begins mocking Him and treating Him with contempt, and his soldiers quickly join in. Since Jesus claims to be King of the Jews, He needs royal robes. So Herod dresses Him in splendid clothing.

Why didn't Herod reach a verdict? He could certainly have scored points with the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem if he condemned Jesus. But he'd been down that road before. Back when he had John the Baptist executed, he took a huge hit with his subjects up in Galilee who held John to be a prophet (see Matthew 14:5). There was no way he was going to order Jesus' execution, too. Instead, Herod sends Jesus back to Pilate.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You didn't come for my entertainment, but for my eternal salvation. When I enter Your house for worship, give me a heart that seeks Your grace, not my own selfish enjoyment. Amen.

BRINGING ENEMIES TOGETHER

Wednesday, March 16, 2016

Read Luke 23:12.

TEXT: And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other (Luke 23:12).

Jesus came to be the great Reconciler. In His death He restores the relationship between God and sinner. But His sacrifice also works to bring human enemies together. We see this in the case of Pilate and Herod, whose enmity toward each other ended with Jesus' trials.

Before this time they hated each another. For Herod it was probably nothing personal. He wanted the territory that Pilate ruled, seeking to add that jurisdiction to his own. But an incident Luke relates in 13:1 might have had some bearing on it. The verse references something that took place at an earlier event. "There were some present at that very time who told Him (Jesus) about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Some Galileans evidently started an insurrection that Pilate had efficiently put down with force and bloodshed. Since these were Herod's subjects, he could have seen it as a grievous offense.

On Pilate's side, his hatred for Herod may well have stemmed from Herod's plotting and scheming to drive him out and take his jurisdiction. But in Jesus the two rulers find common ground. Herod buries the hatchet with Pilate because Pilate grants his wish to see Jesus. And Pilate is reconciled because Herod did him the honor of returning the case to Pilate's court. It was no small thing for a ruler to entrust the fate of one of his subjects into someone else's hands.

Pilate was probably not happy to see the return of Jesus and His accusers, but at least Herod would no longer be a nuisance and a threat.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, in Your suffering and death You reunited us with Your Heavenly Father. Unite us to one another through forgiveness, peace and love. Amen.

HE DOESN'T DESERVE DEATH

Thursday, March 17, 2016

Read Luke 23:13-16.

TEXT: (Pilate said) "... Look, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. I will therefore punish and release Him" (Luke 23:15b-16).

In the first trial Pilate declared Jesus not guilty but failed to enforce his ruling. Now he has a second chance. Pilate reports that he examined Jesus in open court proceedings, not in secret, and found that Jesus was not guilty of any of the charges against Him. Moreover, Herod had tried Jesus and did not condemn Him.

Herod had a better understanding of the Jewish religion than the Roman Pilate. Yet even on religious grounds Herod had not found Jesus guilty, and he certainly would have punished Him if he had. Besides that, most of Jesus' preaching and miracles had been done in Herod's jurisdiction, yet not once over all those months had Herod found a reason to arrest and try Jesus.

Two courts had reached the same verdict. He concludes, "Look, nothing deserving death has been done by Him." Again at this point, Pilate should use his full authority as Roman ruler to protect the innocent. But instead of freeing Jesus, Pilate offers a compromise: he orders Jesus scourged—a savage, crippling whipping. Surely, the Jewish leaders will be satisfied that Jesus is no longer a threat, and accept it in place of Jesus' death.

What a strange decision when you have declared a man innocent of all the charges leveled against Him. It is also odd that Pilate shrinks from killing a Man he knows is innocent, but can justify crippling Him. Jesus yields Himself to such suffering and injustice to pay for your sins and mine. But He knows God will not be satisfied with mere earthly punishment and suffering; the Son of God will have to die to save us from our sins.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, I marvel at Your loving sacrifice. Fill me with such love and gratitude to You that I will sacrifice myself for others. Amen.

THEIR VOICES PREVAILED

Friday, March 18, 2016

Read Luke 23:18-23.

TEXT: A third time he (Pilate) said to them, “Why, what evil has He done? I have found in Him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release Him.” But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that He should be crucified. And their voices prevailed (Luke 23:22-23).

Pilate offers his compromise. Instead of condemning Jesus to death, he will have Him scourged. But Jesus’ bloody, battered body isn’t enough for the Jewish leaders. They demand His death.

So Pilate tries another tactic; he offers the Jewish people the choice of one of two prisoners he will release in honor of the Passover: Jesus or Barabbas—the worst criminal he has in custody. Matthew, Mark and John record that Barabbas was a notorious prisoner who was guilty of murder in an insurrection. To Pilate’s astonishment the Jewish leaders convince the crowds to call for Barabbas’ release and Jesus’ execution. Ironically, Barabbas’ crime was insurrection and leading the people in revolt against Rome—the very charge these Jewish leaders had falsely leveled against Jesus. But now they demand the release of the true insurrectionist, and the execution of the Innocent One.

Desperately, Pilate addresses the crowd two more times, demanding they give a valid reason Jesus should die. They ignore him and keep shouting for Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and had said it over and over again. Still, he let the crowds drown it out. Luke ends today’s reading with the chilling words, “And their voices prevailed.”

And what was Jesus doing this whole time? He was standing by silently, accepting His Father’s will that He be crucified so that by His death He could give us life, pardon and forgiveness.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You willingly suffered such injustice and hate from the creatures You came to save. Thank You for bearing the punishment for my disobedience. Amen.

TAKING THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR US

Saturday, March 19, 2016

Read Luke 23:24-25.

TEXT: So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will (Luke 23:24-25).

Pilate weighs out his options. He could defy the Jewish leaders and the crowd, which grows more and more agitated every moment. He could bring in his Roman troops to quell the rising protest, but what would that mean for his career?

Then he looks at Jesus, standing silently by his side. No one steps forward to defend Him and Jesus doesn't do anything to defend Himself. If Pilate wants to save his career, he has to sacrifice Jesus.

Luke tells us that Pilate "delivered Jesus over," using the exact words he used of Judas' action. Both betrayed Jesus to those Jewish authorities who sought His life. According to Matthew 27:24, Pilate takes water, and in the sight of all the court washes his hands and says, "I am innocent of this Man's blood. See to it yourselves."

But Pilate can't simply hand over his responsibility and shift the blame for this miscarriage of justice. He will go down in history as the one under whose authority God's innocent Son was crucified.

But Jesus was no helpless victim in this whole process. He didn't need Pilate's troops to protect Him. If He wanted, He could have called upon His Father and He would have had vast angel armies at His disposal (see Matthew 26:53). But He permitted this to happen—even taking Pilate's guilt upon Himself and suffering God's wrath in His place—as well as yours and mine.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, like Pilate I often try to shift the blame for my sins to someone else, or find excuses for what I've done. Through Your sacrifice I can stop and confess my guilt—knowing You already paid the full price in my place. Receive my heartfelt thanks. Amen.

COMFORTING HIS MOURNERS

Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016

Read Luke 23:26-31.

TEXT: And there followed Him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for Him (Luke 23:27).

Today is Palm Sunday. We remember the great crowds of Jewish pilgrims who filled the streets of Jerusalem and cheered Jesus as their victorious King. Now, barely five days later, they line the streets to jeer and heckle Him on His way to execution.

Jesus is too weak and weary to carry the crossbeam to the place of execution. He tries with all His might, but keeps falling beneath it. The flogging and the beatings have taken their toll. Finally, the Roman soldiers enlist a man named Simon to carry it for Him.

But not everyone in the crowd taunts Jesus. Many still believe in Him, and are greatly perplexed and grief-stricken to see Him going to His death. In shock and horror they mourn and lament for Him.

Jesus could have joined them in self-pity, but instead He turns aside their weeping and lamenting. He warns of the future when they and their children will suffer at the hands of the Romans because the Jewish leaders will not humble themselves, confess their sins, and believe He is their Savior.

As we enter this Holy Week and remember Jesus' sufferings and passion, He doesn't want us weeping for Him. He wants us to weep for ourselves—for our sins—just as Peter did when the rooster crowed, and he saw Jesus' face. We are to weep for our sins that deserve God's judgment, then look in faith to Jesus' cross where that payment was made in full. There we see God's mercy and forgiveness.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You carried my sins to that place of execution, a load I could never carry. At the foot of Your cross help me see my sin rightly, and turn from it in bitter tears, that I may find in You full forgiveness and peace. Amen.

A PLEA FOR FORGIVENESS

Holy Monday, March 21, 2016

Read Luke 23:32-34.

TEXT: Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” ... (Luke 23:34a).

In a procession with two condemned criminals, Jesus is led to the place of execution. The locals know it as “The Skull” (see Luke 23:33)—possibly because of its shape, possibly because it is the grisly place of execution and death.

And right away Jesus utters His first words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Of all the people who should be pleading for forgiveness—Judas, the high priest, Pontius Pilate, his soldiers—the one who asks on their behalf is Jesus, the sinless Son of God.

How amazing that even in this hour where His agony reaches its climax Jesus doesn't turn inside Himself. He could pray for justice—for vindication—for punishment on those who have done this to Him. Instead, He pleads with His Father to forgive them.

Jesus' prayer is not restricted to Pontius Pilate and the Roman soldiers who abused and nailed Him to the cross, nor to the Jewish high priest and high court, or even to Judas, Peter and the other disciples, who abandoned Him. He prays for you and me, for all people of all time whose sins He has carried to this dismal place.

But forgiveness isn't easy, or cheap. God the Father can't set aside His holiness and justice—not when humans are doing this to His pure and innocent Son. For the Father to be able to forgive us, Jesus must step into our place and bear the divine punishment we all deserve. That makes this one of the most incredible prayers ever uttered in human history. “Father, forgive them”—by punishing Me instead.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, break through our ignorance and give us knowledge of our sin. That we may repent of that sin and receive full and free forgiveness for Your sake. Amen.

SAVING OTHERS, NOT HIMSELF

Holy Tuesday, March 22, 2016

Read Luke 23:35.

TEXT: And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at Him, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!” (Luke 23:35).

Luke shows us two groups of Jews who have gathered around the cross—the people and the rulers. The Jewish people stand by curiously watching the gruesome spectacle. Luke lets them fade into the background as he turns our attention to the Jewish rulers.

The second group, the rulers, includes the entire Jewish court. During their trials they had thrown all honor, integrity, dignity and decorum to the wind as they called for false witnesses against Jesus (see Matthew 26:59), personally abused and tormented Him (see Matthew 26:66-68). Then they hounded Him to Pilate’s court, over to Herod’s court, and back to Pilate again. They had stirred up the crowds to demand Jesus’ crucifixion, and when Pilate surrendered Him to their desires, they had gleefully followed His procession to this place to celebrate their victory.

Now at the place of execution they put on an air of superiority, and scoff at Him. They play on His Name, Jesus, which means “The Lord saves.” Speaking of Jesus’ many healing miracles, they mock, “He saved others, let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!”

They mistake Jesus’ choice *not* to save Himself as proof that He *cannot* save Himself. But Jesus is not here to save Himself: He is here to save each of us—and these Jewish rulers as well. To do that He must remain on the cross until every last sin is paid and God’s justice is completely satisfied. His death is their only hope of salvation—and ours.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You endured mockery and shame to save me and all people. Let me gladly bear mockery and shame for Your Name. Amen.

THE TRUE KING

Holy Wednesday, March 23, 2016

Read Luke 23:36-38.

TEXT: The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up and offering Him sour wine and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!” There was also an inscription over Him, “This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:36-38).

The Roman Empire used crucifixion as a powerful warning and deterrent to crime. So an inscription was written to identify the criminal and the crime for which he or she was dying. Jesus’ inscription read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (see Matthew 27:37).

This was the mocking theme the Roman soldiers had picked up during Jesus’ trial before Pilate. When they scourged Him, they wove a crown out of thorns and put it on His head. They put a purple robe over His torn shoulders, and a reed as His royal scepter. They knelt before Him, then snatched the reed from His hand and beat Him over the head with it (see Matthew 27:27-31).

Now, at the cross, they pick up the theme again. Knowing He is suffering from agonizing thirst, they come up and offer Him sour wine—knowing full well He cannot reach it with His hands and feet nailed to the cross. Then they take up the chant of the Jewish rulers and add their own little twist: “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!”

But they don’t understand true kingship. They assume a king rules for his own welfare and benefit. But a true King rules for the benefit of His subjects—even if that means sacrificing His life to save theirs. It’s what a true King does for His people.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, my King and my Lord. Thank You for sacrificing Yourself for the benefit of all of us, Your subjects. In Your goodness and love, rule over all my life. Amen.

REMEMBER ME

Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

Read Luke 23:39-43.

TEXT: And he (the criminal) said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom." And He said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

From every direction Jesus hears mockery and ridicule. Even the criminals hanging on either side join in with the Jewish rulers and Roman soldiers (see Matthew 27:44).

But after a while one falls silent. When the other criminal takes up his taunt again, the first speaks out, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:40b-41a). Clearly, he has been thinking back over his life, considering the deeds that led to this torturous end, and of the fearful judgment that soon awaits.

Then he jumps to Jesus' defense, revealing the faith that now fills his heart: "But this Man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41b). With firm confidence and faith that Jesus truly is the King of the Jews, the Chosen One, the promised Christ, he turns to Him and prays, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

This night we honor our crucified Lord by gathering in His house and rehearsing His Last Supper with His disciples. Like the criminal, we will confess our sins and ask Jesus to remember us when He comes into His kingdom. And through Holy Communion He will give us His body nailed to the cross and His blood poured out for us. We will remember His suffering and death as we eat His body given for us, and drink His blood shed for the remission of all our sins.

And like the criminal, we will hear the dying Savior assure us, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, remember us when You come into Your kingdom as this night we remember Your great sacrifice of Your body and blood on the cross for us. Amen.

FINISHED

Good Friday, March 25, 2016

Read Luke 23:44-49.

TEXT: Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!" And having said this He breathed His last (Luke 23:46).

An unnatural darkness fell upon the land from noon to three in the afternoon. Luke explains, "The sun's light failed" (Luke 23:45a). This profound darkness marked the judgment of mankind's sins, the bitter darkness of hell.

At Jesus' death at the end of those three hours, the curtain of the temple was torn in two: a powerful sign for the Jewish rulers. Throughout the Old Testament this curtain symbolized the separation sin had caused between God and humanity. In Jesus' perfect sacrifice, that boundary of sin is completely removed, and we have direct access to God through Jesus (see Hebrews 9:11-12).

With His Heavenly Father's anger stilled, our salvation secured, and His work completed, Jesus cries out in a loud voice, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!" and He breathes His last.

The centurion, seeing how Jesus suffered and died, and the signs that accompanied His death (see Matthew 27:51-53), praises God, and proclaims Jesus' innocence. Clearly, Jesus was no criminal, and He didn't deserve to be executed with them.

Luke next points us to the crowds standing nearby. Having seen the darkness and the other signs accompanying Jesus' death, they return home beating their breasts. This Jewish sign of regret and sorrow shows they knew a guiltless man had been put to death. They cease to be spectators and become repentant Jews, ripe for Peter's wondrous sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22-24).

Finally, at a distance, stand some of Jesus' acquaintances and faithful women who had followed Him from Galilee. In the coming days they will play an important role in our story.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, the miracles that accompanied Your death proved that You are indeed the Son of God, Savior of the world. Strengthen my faith that I may always trust in Your all-sufficient ransom for my sins. Amen.

THE FATHER'S TENDER CARE

Holy Saturday, March 26, 2016

Read Luke 23:50-56.

TEXT: ... Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. ... This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. (Luke 23:50b, 52).

While the crowd returns to Jerusalem beating their breasts, Jesus' faithful followers stand at a distance, staring in shocked grief. Jesus' body will soon be cast into a common grave along with the two criminals. They stand helpless to stop it, clueless what to do.

Then an amazing sight meets their eyes. One of the prominent rulers of the Jewish high court steps up to the centurion in charge of the crucifixions. He carries orders from Pilate giving him custody of Jesus' body. As the women follow, Joseph removes Him from the cross, wraps His body in a linen shroud with spices, and lays Him in a new tomb.

This Joseph is a prominent member of the Jewish high court, a good and righteous man who had not consented to their plan to condemn and crucify Jesus. Formerly, he had been a secret disciple of Jesus; now he takes courage to openly display his loyalty.

Oh, the tender care of our loving Heavenly Father! At Jesus' birth, God the Father provided a Joseph to wrap His infant body in swaddling bands and lay Him in a manger. In His death God provides another Joseph to wrap His body in linen and lay it to rest in a new tomb.

The women follow behind so they can note where Jesus is laid. Then they return home to prepare spices and ointments to give the body a more proper burial after the Sabbath ends.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for the faithful men and women who came forward at Your crucifixion and death—the repentant criminal, the centurion, Joseph, and the believing women. Give me courage and loyalty to come forward and honor You through the days of my life, until I rest in Your Paradise. Amen.

OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Resurrection Sunday, March 27, 2016

Read Luke 24:1-35.

TEXT: Then they (two of the disciples) told what had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in the breaking of the bread. (Luke 24:35).

It is Sunday afternoon. Two grieving disciples are leaving Jerusalem and slowly making their way home. Along the way they talk about recent events. In time a stranger joins them in their travels, a stranger who is oddly unaware of the recent happenings in Jerusalem. They tell him about Jesus, about the crucifixion, and the strange tale their women told about angels and the empty tomb. But it is clear their dreams died along with Jesus, and still remain buried in the borrowed tomb.

The Stranger calls them foolish, a word always used in the Bible to describe people who view this world as if God didn't exist. He patiently leads them through the Old Testament writings that foretold the suffering, death and resurrection of God's promised Messiah. As He speaks their hearts burn within them, filled with astonishment and excitement, as it finally dawns on them the cross is not a sign of failure and shame, but God's glorious plan to save humanity.

This day when we celebrate our Lord's resurrection our hearts burn anew—filled with wonder and holy joy. Our Lord has conquered sin and Satan. He has risen victorious over death and hell. We no longer grieve the death of believing loved ones because we know they are with Jesus Christ in Paradise, and on the Last Day He will raise them as He Himself was raised. And we ourselves no longer fear death because it lies crushed and vanquished beneath His feet. On the Last Day He will return, and we will live with Him in triumph forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus Christ, Victor over sin and death, stay with us, for it is evening and the day is almost over. Comfort us through life and death until You raise us to live with You in glory forever. Amen.

PREPARING HIS WITNESSES

Resurrection Monday, March 28, 2016

Read Luke 24:36-49.

TEXT: As they (the disciples) were talking about these things, Jesus Himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” (Luke 24:36).

The two Emmaus disciples are back with the disciples in Jerusalem sharing their experience. Suddenly, Jesus is standing right there in their midst. He immediately says, “Peace to you!”

But the disciples are gripped with fear. Had Jesus knocked on the door and walked into their midst, instead of suddenly appearing, no one would be suspecting it was a ghost standing among them. He immediately invites them to touch His flesh and bones so they can be convinced He is no ghost or spirit. He adds visual proof by eating a piece of broiled fish.

Once they are convinced He is risen, Jesus explains why He had to suffer, die and rise again. He not only appeals to Moses and the Old Testament prophets, He reminds them of the times He had foretold these things before His death. Then He opens their minds so they can understand what He accomplished by His cross and empty grave.

These are the witnesses He will send out into the world, but their eyewitness testimony alone will not be enough. The Holy Spirit will empower them and open the hearts of those who hear and read their words. Through these weeks of Lent we have read their eyewitness testimony. Through their eyes we have seen Jesus crucified and buried for us, and risen again in glory. May Christ’s forgiveness, peace and eternal joy be yours until we see Him with our own eyes and touch Him with our own hands in Paradise.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for the testimony of Your eyewitness disciples, and for sending Your Spirit to create and strengthen my faith through their words. Now send me as Your witness, that I may share Your suffering, death and resurrection—wherever You lead me. Amen.

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Love's GREATEST SACRIFICE

LENTEN DEVOTIONS 2016

Using Luke's account in chapters 22 and 23, Lutheran Hour Ministries' Lenten devotions for 2016, *Love's Greatest Sacrifice*, follow closely the final events of Jesus' life. Written by Rev. Wayne Palmer, these meditations chart the difficult people and circumstances (corrupt high priests, sham Roman authorities, hard-headed and self-absorbed disciples, Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial) that Jesus encountered on His way to the biggest debacle of all: His crucifixion at the hands of sinners.

Still, the Savior saw through the grotesque travesty before Him and kept His eyes trained on the Father, all the while showing love to those who would either desert or execute Him. It was His unwavering commitment on our behalf, shining through even in His words on the cross. As Palmer writes, "For the Father to be able to forgive us, Jesus must step into our place and bear the divine punishment we all deserve. That makes this one of the most incredible prayers ever uttered in human history: 'Father, forgive them'—by punishing Me instead."

Love's Greatest Sacrifice: made once—and for all people—on a hill outside Jerusalem.



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