



LENTEN DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

—2026—

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Greetings, Brothers and Sisters,

As people of faith, we believe that the Bible is our one rule of faith and practice. This means that our engagement with scripture is the foundation for everything that we do. As we enter the 2026 Lenten season, we return to scripture to let it guide our fasting, prayer, and reflection. This devotional is based on scripture reading from the gospel of Mark. This is not a line-by-line reading and reflection on Mark; however, it draws on significant passages in the gospel that lead us from Jesus' early ministry to his resurrection. During the Holy Week, the focus will be on prayer and reflection on the activities of each day in the last week of Jesus' earthly life. I encourage you to dive deeply into those readings, pray the prayers of Holy Week, and respond to the prompts each day. Find strength knowing that your brothers and sisters at Saint James are walking with you during this season and that I am praying for God's deep transformation and revelation in your life.

Blessings on the journey,

Pastor B

Mark 9:2

After six days, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

The Goal of the Lenten Season

For many Christians, the season of Lent is nothing new. We generally think about it as a kind of ramp that leads up to Good Friday and Easter, and we associate it with fasting, prayer, and Jesus' death on the cross. While all these things are a part of the season, they are not the point. We can fast at any time of the year; we should pray every day, and pondering the death of Jesus should be a regular practice for any believer. They are all pathways and tools for the inner transformation of the believer, which is the true goal of the Lenten season. As Jesus scaled the mountain with Peter, James, and John and was transformed into something new and beautiful, we, as a church family, travel together during Lent and join believers around the world in scaling the mountain of our hearts, our souls, and our minds.

Mark 1:9

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

It's Not About You

Many Christians don't remember their baptism. If they were raised as Presbyterians, Catholics, or a version of Methodism, then they were probably baptized as an infant and literally don't remember it all. Pentecostals and Baptists, who don't baptize infants, may remember their baptism; however, even for them, there is no guarantee. Luckily, baptism is not about the person being baptized. Baptism is our affirmation of what God has already done. John baptized Jesus, and when he came from underneath the water, the Spirit descended on him. John and the Spirit do all the work, while Jesus is simply receiving from them. As was the case with Jesus, so it is with us, that in baptism the church affirms what God has already said about us: that God loves us, that God cares for us, and that before we can give anything to God, God has already done everything for us. Those presenting the child for baptism, along with the church, stand and make public commitments to tell the child what God has done for them over and over and over again until the child understands. Get pretty dresses, wear the little white suits, and cook the big meal because it is a day worth celebrating. Just make sure you celebrate God. Because in baptism, God does all the work.

Mark 1:12-13

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

In Mark's version of Jesus' temptation, the account differs slightly from those in Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke provide more detail on the dynamics of the temptation, while Mark simply states that Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by Satan. Mark, however, introduces a twist to the story by stating that angels and animals were with Jesus. Matthew states that angels appeared at the end of the battle, whereas Luke mentions no angels. The one thing consistent across all three versions is that no one fights for Jesus. No one stands between Jesus and his enemy; no one offers him food; no one tells him to hold on. He has to fight this battle on his own. He has the words of scripture and his faith in God, of course, but it's up to him to use those things and resist the offers of the devil. We are reminded here that there are some battles we must fight alone.

When my father's liver began to fail, they transported him from the hospital in Jackson, MS, to Memphis, TN, for a liver transplant. I was living in Memphis at the time, and of course, Mom stayed with me. In time, they found a liver for him; however, during the transplant, he had a heart attack and never woke up. On the day that he died, my mom decided that she was going to drive back home to Mississippi. I was against that for both her sake and mine, but she insisted. Mom is a little shorter than I am, and after I made my case for her to stay, she looked up at me over her glasses and said, "Brian, this is a battle that I have to face on my own." I had no choice but to yield because she was right. That day, Mom was the preacher, and her sermon was that some battles must be fought with faith in God and the word of God alone. It was enough for Jesus, it was enough for her, and it has been enough for me to this day. Thanks mom. 

Pray for strength to trust God's word and your faith in God today.

Mark 1:23-26

Just then, a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

Jesus is in the synagogue teaching (v 21). Among the crowd was a man with an “unclean” spirit. Upon seeing Jesus, the man became disruptive, called Jesus by name, and questioned Jesus’ motives, “Have you come to destroy us?” Jesus responds to the disruption by telling the man to be quiet, which makes sense because the yelling was the source of the disruption. If the man could be quiet, Jesus could continue his teaching and good works. However, Jesus was not satisfied with the man’s silence. He wanted the man to be set free. In classic fashion, Jesus says, “Come out of him!” and the impure spirit leaves. Jesus wanted the spirit gone. He refused to give the man a few breathing techniques to help him cope with this unwelcome spirit. He didn’t try to strike a deal with the spirit so he could finish his preaching and move on. Jesus wanted the man to be free. Jesus teaches us here that the total eradication of evil is the goal at all times. No compromise is acceptable when it comes to the lives of God’s people. If we see something, we have to say something and not rest until God’s justice is accomplished. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Gracious God, do not let me rest until your justice is accomplished for all people. In the name of Jesus, I pray, AMEN.

Mark 2:40-42

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.

As straightforward as this account may look, it's really quite complicated. Jesus sees the leper, who, because of this condition, is isolated from the community. Longing to be healed from the physical and emotional trauma that has come from his condition, he approaches Jesus and asks to be healed, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” This is where it gets complicated. The scripture says that Jesus became indignant. The Greek word used for indignant is *orgizō*, and while some versions translate the word as “compassion,” the best translation is “indignant” or having a “righteous anger.” So why would the man’s request anger Jesus?

Once, my wife and I decided we wanted chicken wings for dinner, so I went to our favorite place here in Charleston to get them. My daughter had not expressed a desire for any wings, but I bought a few extras just in case. As my wife and I were eating, my daughter walked up to me and said, “Dad, may I have some wings?” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “May I have some of the wings you brought home?” I said, “Of course you can! You can eat anything you want in this house!” She is a very mannerable child, but if she, for one moment, thought that I would have said no to her request for food, I would have been bothered and perhaps indignant that she would have questioned my love for her.

Maybe that is what is going on with Jesus. Maybe the fact that this man questioned Jesus’ love, compassion, and willingness to make him well broke his heart and sent him into righteous anger. May we never doubt his love and care for us in every moment of every day. For if he watches over the sparrow, then surely, he watches over you and me.

God help me to be confident in your love and care for me in every moment and in every station of my life. In the name of Jesus, I pray, AMEN.

Mark 2:3-5

Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.

Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Sometimes love is disruptive. Sometimes love ignores the roof. Here we have a group of friends who are so determined to get this paralyzed man in front of Jesus that they literally opened the roof and lowered him down into Jesus' lap. Love does what it has to do to get the job done. Sometimes love is disruptive.

- Love takes the keys from a friend who has been drinking too much to drive.
- Love makes a parent tell the child that they are going in the wrong direction and that things need to change.
- Love makes a friend tell another friend to stop the affair.
- Love sends us to city council meetings and pushes us to protest about things that may not even affect us.
- Sometimes love is disruptive.

It should be noted also that there was no assurance that Jesus would receive their friend and heal him. But love doesn't require proof of victory. Like these friends, love does what it can and puts the results in God's hands. And it just so happens those hands work all things well.

God never let me be afraid to be disruptive for the sake of love. In the name of Jesus, I pray, AMEN.

Mark 2:27

Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

It amazes me how the Pharisees were following Jesus and his disciples around, watching their every move. In today's text, it's the Sabbath, and as they walked through the grain fields, they plucked the heads of the grain as they went along. The snooping Pharisees saw them and seized the chance to catch them in a clear breach of the law. Plucking that grain is work, and it's the sabbath. “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus responds by saying essentially that the sabbath is so much more than a day of no work and intentional worship. It is a gift from God.

Recently, it snowed in Charleston, and we decided to live-stream the service so that no one would be on the roads trying to get to worship. It is quite unusual for me to be home on a Sunday with my family, so I felt out of place. Then something happened as the fireplace warmed the room. I looked at my daughter sitting in front of her computer on the couch, and I saw my wife watching television, smiling at what she saw. I looked out the window into the backyard and saw how the sunlight bouncing off the white snow made the outside brighter. Mark 2:27 became more real to me in that moment than it had ever been before, and I began to thank God for that day. We were not in the sanctuary, but it was indeed a beautiful sabbath that God had given.

God help me remember the beautiful gift of the Sabbath and honor it with rest and thanksgiving. In the name of Jesus, I pray AMEN.

Mark 3:10-12

For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.” But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.

We know that Jesus' ministry culminated in his death on the cross. In fact, we believe that his purpose for coming to the world was to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin. Therefore, he really didn't have to heal anyone, teach in the temple, or feed the thousands that he fed. He could have come to earth, died on the cross, been buried, and been resurrected. However, he decides to perform miracles and share the love of God along the way. Even though he could have come days before the Passover to become the sacrifice for sin, Jesus leaves eternity early so he can have time to talk to people along the way, heal a few, feed a few thousand, and do good. Let this be a reminder to us. We all have places to go and people to see, but how about we leave a little early with the intention of doing good on the way to our final destination? Leave early enough to stop by the nursing home to see someone on the way. Leave early enough to pick up some pancakes and syrup for the church outreach. Leave early enough to pick someone up for church who has trouble driving. If we do, we will look back and see a world made better because we came through, and I pray this is the goal for us all.

God help me not to be so wrapped up in my daily tasks that I forget to do good along the way. In the name of Jesus, I pray AMEN.

Mark 3:16-19

He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Depending on the denomination you are part of, the 12 apostles are seen from different perspectives. Some denominations regard them as saints to whom Jesus gave a specific role in the life of the church. At the same time, other denominations simply see them as the first devoted followers of Jesus Christ. No matter how you view them in the life of the church, they are an interesting group. Matthew was a tax collector and, therefore, was despised by everyone. Four of them were fishermen who earned a good living but had no connection to religion. Andrew had been a follower of John the Baptist. Thomas would doubt the resurrection, Peter would deny Jesus, and James and John would ask to be ranked first and second in the kingdom. It is an interesting bunch, and yet they are all called to serve. Perfection is not a prerequisite for serving God. The only thing that God requires is a heart that will say yes.

This year, for Valentine's Day, I got up early to make a cake for the ladies in my family. I purchased the ingredients, downloaded the instructions online, and found a video that walked me through the steps. Even though I followed the instructions, the cake turned out hard, and there was nothing to shout home about. This was no surprise to me, as I am not a baker, but the cake served its purpose. My wife still gave me a hug and a kiss, my daughter thanked me (but I'm not sure if she ate any), my mom just shook her head, and we all had a laugh. It was not about perfection; it was about the heart. So it was with Jesus and his disciples then and now: give him your heart, and he will take care of the rest.

17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

Psalm 51:17 New International Version

Mark 3:31-35

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

It's easy to read this text and assume that Jesus is dismissing his family. He is told they are outside looking for him, but he doesn't run to his mother like a good boy would or tend to his brothers as a good brother would. Instead, he looks at those sitting with him and identifies them as his brothers and sisters and his mothers. So I can see why someone reading this text could get the impression that Jesus is dismissing his family.

Jesus does not dismiss his family at all. What he does is remind us that blood relationships are not the only thing that constitutes family. That common interest, ideas, hopes for the world, and a common faith can also constitute a family. In my church, I am notorious for calling everyone "brother" and "sister." I see this as a way to model the type of relationship God calls us to have with one another. No, we are not related biologically, but we are related by blood...the blood of Jesus.

God give me a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood with all people. In the name of Jesus, I pray, AMEN.

Mark 4:8

Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.

Reading the Parable of the Sower reveals a difficult truth about ministry: the work is hard, there are many obstacles, and not all of our efforts will be successful. According to the parable, only one out of four seeds falls on good soil and grows. The rest of the seed falls prey to thorns, dry or rocky ground, and birds waiting to swoop in and snatch it up. After more than 20 years of ministry, I have to say that Jesus is correct. I have had many conversations with people and prayed with many of them, hoping they would make the adjustments they needed in their lives and connect with the God who loves them so. Sadly, I have watched many of them return to the same ways of living and the world's traps. At the same time, I have also seen seeds sprout and grow. I have seen forgiveness heal families. I have seen prodigals return. I have seen families come to church together that were once fractured and broken, and I have seen victory in our work for justice in the world. Yes, the work is hard, but there is victory along the way. May we be sustained by those victories as we sow.

Gracious God, when the work becomes difficult, remind us of the joy that comes when one life is touched by the message we share and the love we give. In the name of Jesus, we pray, AMEN.

Mark 4:26-27

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."

It's almost as if Mark can read our minds. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus tells us that the work is hard and that only one of the four seeds he tosses to the ground will take root and grow. In basketball, if a person makes only one out of every four shots, they won't get much playing time. However, after telling us how hard the work will be, Jesus suggests that the work does not depend on our efforts alone. He says that the Kingdom of heaven is like a man who scatters seed on the ground. The seed grows day and night, whether the man is awake or asleep at night. Jesus suggests that our work for God is the same. We do the work, we preach the gospel, and we stand for justice. However, we must never think that it depends on us alone. God is at work even when we are not.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform:
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

**Gracious God. Help us to remember that it's not about us. In the name of Jesus, I pray,
AMEN.**

Mark 4:30-34

Again, he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

Reading this parable brings to my mind the story of St. James Presbyterian Church. Our ancestors were denied the privilege of worshipping where they had previously worshipped, and so they walked down the street and created a space under an oak tree, and we've been here worshiping ever since. The charter date of our church is in 1866; however, our ancestors started worshipping under an oak tree on the property many years before that. From their mustard-seed faith, this church grew into one of the largest in the denomination, and we continue to grow to this day. With all its glory, however, this parable does not let us off the hook. Whether you are a pastor in a small church, sitting in your law office downtown, a parent raising your children, a college student trying to graduate, or someone who just started an entry level job in a place that you never thought you would be, this parable reminds us that no matter how small you start or how difficult it looks, with faith little can become much.

Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.

Mother Teresa

Mark 4:38-40

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down, and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

I have never been one to pass judgment on the disciples for their lapses of faith, because I have been there. I know that it may be against the rules for a reverend doctor to say he has had moments when their faith began to dwindle, but I was always taught that honesty is the best policy, so yes, I have had my moments. The truth of the matter is that I can be very much like these disciples who are so focused on the storms and the rocky waters that they forget who is with them in the boat. The beautiful thing about this parable is that Jesus implies that they were never in danger. After he wakes and calms the storms, he asks them why they were so afraid and if they still have little faith. Apparently, in that moment, they did not need his supernatural power; they just needed not to be afraid and to have faith in the one who was with them. This is easier said than done, especially when the waves are rocking your life. But if we can shift our gaze from the water to the SON, we will hear his voice of peace over our lives, and we will discover that we were never in danger at all.

**Jesus who on the cross did die,
Jesus who lives and reigns on high,
He alone can justify;
Fix your eyes upon Jesus.**

Mark 5:1-9

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills, he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

There are many things in this passage of scripture that are worth our attention. The healing of the man and Jesus' divine power over demons always gain a lot of attention. This time, however, what caught my attention was that as soon as Jesus got off the boat, someone in need approached him, and, in true Jesus fashion, he addressed their need.

Have you ever arrived home and, as soon as you got out of the car, been met by someone who needed you, or before you could get to your desk in the morning, a supervisor had waved you into their office to have a conversation? I wonder if Jesus said, "Can I just get out of the boat before you bring your issue to me? And yet Jesus displays no weariness. He doesn't ask for a break, and he doesn't pass this brother along to his disciples and say, "You deal with him." On the contrary, he sees the need, the bondage, and the years of pain, and Jesus ministers to him. We are not Jesus, of course. We do get weary, and in those moments, we need to take a break. However, one of the great lessons this healing teaches us is that though when we grow weary, Jesus never grows weary of us.

³He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
⁴indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

Psalm 121:3-4 New International Version

Mark 5:37

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.

If Jesus kept a tight circle at times, then maybe we should as well. As he goes into the home of the leader of the synagogue to raise his daughter from the dead, he does not take all of his disciples with him. According to Mark, only Peter, James, and John are allowed to enter the room where the miracle takes place. Does this mean that Jesus did not like Andrew, Bartholomew, or Matthew? We don't know. Does this mean Peter, James, and John were wavering in their faith and needed to see him perform a supernatural act? We don't know. We know that Peter, James, and John would become key leaders in the church after Jesus returns to heaven, so maybe he's preparing them. But still, we don't know. What we do know is that Jesus did not take everyone with him on every journey of his life, and neither should we. Sometimes a tight circle is the best circle for the work that you have to do. Give attention to your work, take those you need, and trust that God will take care of those who need to stay behind.

Give attention to your work, take those you need, and trust that God will take care of those who need to stay behind.

Mark 6:4-6

Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

It's a hard truth, but it is true nonetheless, that sometimes those who are closest to us may not see our value. Maybe it is because they have known us for a long time, or maybe because of secret jealousy, but it is not uncommon for those closest to us to resist our leadership, guidance, and help. When those we expect to welcome us reject us, it leaves us confused and often in pain. However, it also aligns us with Jesus, as Mark says it happened to him as well. After healing the daughter of a synagogue leader at the end of chapter five, Mark tells us that Jesus heads home. As he entered the synagogue in his hometown, I'm sure his mind ran back to his childhood times reading from the Torah in worship, and other times with family in that familiar place. Maybe he saw cousins, aunts, uncles, or people with whom he had attended Hebrew school. His comfort there may have been why he felt his teaching would be well received. Instead of being celebrated, the hometown boy who made it good was questioned and treated as a stranger. They even aimed their inquisition at his family, saying, “Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.”

In the face of this inquisition and suspicion, Jesus does what he can, heals who he can, and moves on. He spends no time trying to justify his calling, establish his authority, or defend his family from the jaundiced eye of those around him. He does what he can, heals who he can, and their lack of hospitality becomes their loss, not his, for he could not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” — John Wesley

Mark 6:7

Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

The time has come for the watchers to become workers. Jesus had deemed in his divine mind that they had been working and walking in his shadow long enough, and it was time for them to go out on their own. While doing ministry without Jesus was new to the disciples, Jesus prepared them well. He paired them two by two, he shared his divine authority with them, and he told them what to do if they were not received well. Jesus gave them everything that they needed for the work and sent them out into the world.

In people's lives, the church functions as Jesus did. The church prepares, the church empowers, and the church sends. We don't look for the best and brightest talent to do ministry, and neither did Jesus. Rather, we prepare and equip all for ministry and help them find what ministry best fits their gifts, talents, and abilities. Sometimes that ministry is as an Officer in the church, sometimes as a leader in your homeowner association, sometimes through a nonprofit created to support those with breast cancer, and always that ministry begins in our homes and with our families. However, our ministries will never look the same. Jesus, through the church, is sending us all out to do the work.

Mark 6:16

But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

As Jesus's popularity grew, theories emerged about who he was and how he had acquired his powers. Some said he was Elijah, and others, of course, said John the Baptist. As the wicked leader Herod watched, his mind could not help but wonder whether his wrongs would catch up with him. God's messenger before Jesus was John the Baptist, whom Herod had killed. As his guilt eats at him, fear grows in his heart, and his anxiety rises as this carpenter from Nazareth gains popularity, Herod can't shake his past. He joins the camp of people who believe that Jesus is, in fact, John the Baptist, returned from the dead.

There are two very important reminders that come out of this passage. First, the work of God will not be stopped by wickedness. Herod cut off the head of John the Baptist, only to hear another voice sent by God to share the testimony of the coming Kingdom. God's work will not be stopped. This is what the apostle Paul means when he says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" The second thing we learn from this text is that our past mistakes haunt us. John the Baptist is dead, but the sin of Herod is still haunting him. Herod's anxiety is a reminder that we must make good choices because the choices we make don't die with the setting of the sun. They linger on.

Gracious God, I pray for your forgiving grace regarding my past failures, and I pray that you help me to never make those same mistakes again. In the name of Jesus I pray, AMEN.

Mark 6:35-37

By this time, it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

The disciples had a valid point. The people who had been following Jesus probably did not pack dinner. They came looking for healing, wisdom, and hope, but, hope does not fill the belly and hydrate the body. The disciples, still unable to grasp who Jesus was or what he was capable of, saw their own inability to meet the need and brought it to Jesus. Jesus, seeing an opportunity to teach his disciples about the supernatural power that rested in him and in them, and to feed some hungry people, refused to entertain those being sent away. Instead, he places the burden on the disciples and says, “You give them something to eat.” The story unfolds beautifully with everyone having enough.

I hear Jesus saying the same thing to the church today. That the church should never send people away, and that the burden of the world’s wholeness, healing, feeding, and moral clarity is indeed the church’s burden. In the same way that Jesus took on the sins and burdens of the world for its salvation, so the church has been given the ministry of reconciliation and must see the world as having its burden and responsibility.

Mark 6:47-50

Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn, he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately, he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

The disciples had been here before. In the previous passage, Mark tells us that the disciples were in a boat with Jesus when a storm arose on the water. In that instance, they were frantic and feared for their lives. This time, however, you don't get the same feeling from the disciples. They don't seem frantic; they don't seem anxious for their lives. Mark simply says that they are straining at the oars against the wind and the water. Maybe their faith has deepened, and maybe they remember that if Jesus brought them through the storm the first time, he would come through for them again. The beauty of Jesus in this moment, is that even though they may have grown in their faith, he still stays close enough to them to catch them if they fail. He's walking on the water, coming alongside them, keeping watch over his friends. Let us never forget that, no matter how far we go in faith, God is always close to us. The skies may be dark, and the water and winds may push back at us, but in the fog and in the mist, he is there.

**No, never alone,
No, never alone,
He promised never to leave me,
Never to leave me alone.**

Mark 6:53-54

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

Jesus drew people to him because his ministry was relevant. The people were sick; he was known as a healer, so they brought their real needs to him, and he ministered to them. While this text may not seem earth-shattering or revelatory, it offers a clear roadmap for evangelism and ministry for any church. We remember the days when people ran to the church as they ran to Jesus, and we wonder what happened. Some say that it was COVID; however, if we are honest, the church in the United States was declining before the COVID 19 pandemic. Some say the music needs to be better, and others suggest that the decline of the church in America is the result of too many churches and too many choices.

I won't try to unpack the theories, but I will offer what worked for Jesus. Jesus did relevant, life-changing, need-based ministry. People came to him, and when they left them, their lives were better on several levels. This must be the church's goal. If the American church is willing to minister to people in need, no matter their political position or gender orientation, the Spirit of God will draw them close. It worked for Jesus.

Mark 7:6-7

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

I must be honest: I am a fan of traditions. Traditions are helpful because they are often repeated; things that are repeated over and over tend to stick. For example, when we talk about the Lenten season, we know that fasting, prayer, and Ash Wednesday are part of it because we do those things traditionally. Traditions only become problematic when we forget that they are practices that lead us to deeper things, and it's easy to elevate the traditions above the things they lead us to. This was the case for the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They kept their eyes keenly focused on their traditions and believed that, when rightly practiced, those traditions honor God. But if they had known God, they would have known that God never puts tradition before those who practice it, and that their God is more concerned with the heart than with clean hands.

My parents had us in church every Sunday, every Wednesday. It was more of a tradition at that point; I didn't have a personal relationship with the Lord until I went to the altar call one Sunday, and the youth pastor told us to make a decision for ourselves.

Stephen Curry

Mark 7:29-30

“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

“Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Let's be clear at the onset, there's no way of getting around the fact that Jesus calls this lady a dog. In fact, the Greek word used for dog is even more inappropriate than the word dog itself. Fateful commentators and preachers have tried to get Jesus off the hook for a long time, but there's no way around it. Jesus refers to this lady as a dog. She does break a few customs. For example, she was a gentile and Jews and gentiles did not mix, and she was a woman, and women didn't generally approach men and strike up conversations. But even with that, the dog reference is a little much.

Jesus still helps her, and maybe that is what we should gain from this. Despite our cultural differences, racial friction, and political positions, we should still push ourselves to help those we can. Jesus reminds us here that our ministry is not subject to our feelings about the person who needs it. Our commitment to following God does not erase past pains and present emotions. However, what determines our choices and actions is our commitment to God. Yes, we get frustrated; yes, things happen, but we push through it all for God's sake. Because after all, we are not followers of our emotions, prisoners of our perspectives, or victims of our dark history; we are followers of Christ.

Mark 7:33-35

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak plainly.

It has been my experience that God does a lot of work on us when we are alone. In moments of solitude, God tends to speak to me most clearly. Such is the case with the deaf person in the text above. Jesus, knowing that what he was doing may not have been received well by the crowds, pulled the man aside away from the crowds and went to work on him. Why Jesus chose the spit, I do not know. God moves in mysterious ways. But what I do know is that when the deaf man left the isolation and alone time with Jesus, he was better.

When was the last time you spent some intentional alone time with God and God's word?

Mark 8:1-3

During those days, another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”

What we have to remember is that every word Mark writes serves a purpose. When we read the stories of Jesus, his miracles and works, let nothing slip our attention. For example, on the surface, this feeding looks like the previous one, the only difference being the number of people. While Jesus says few things in the previous feeding narrative, here he speaks more. And his words communicate his heart and commitment to those that follow him, “I have compassion for these people, they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat.” What we hear in Jesus' words is his personal commitment to those who follow him. This is not to say that Jesus does not love all people, because we know that Jesus Christ's death opened the door for the entire world to come to know. But the Bible is clear that there are fuller and more meaningful and rich blessings for those who offer themselves, even in our humanity, to the work of God. It's not that Jesus loves his followers more; it's just that when we follow him, as these people did, we put ourselves in a position to receive from him when our hunger outweighs our resources.

**When we walk with the Lord
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his goodwill,
he abides with us still,
and with all who will trust and obey.
Trust and obey, for there's no other
way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.**

Mark:8:17-19

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

“Twelve,” they replied.

While there is no way to know Jesus’ state of mind as he speaks with his disciples in this text, I hear frustration in his voice. Here are the disciples, worried that they don’t have enough bread, even though Jesus has just fed 5,000 in one setting and 4,000 in another. He’s worked miracle after miracle right in front of them, and yet they still don’t get it. If he was frustrated with them, I can understand why. However, we can’t say for sure whether he is or is not. What we do know is that he doesn’t give up on them. Even though at times it seems like they are regressing and will never understand who he is, Jesus never once hints at trading them in for a new set. He hangs in there with them even when it means saying the same thing over and over again. We call that grace.

Thank you, God, for your grace. In the name of Jesus, I pray, AMEN.

Mark 8:22-26

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

This is not the first person Jesus has healed; however, this healing is unique for two reasons. This healing is recorded only in the Gospel of Mark, and it is the only time Jesus heals a person in stages. Most of the time, it only takes one touch, one word, or one action to bring about the healing that Jesus does. However, Jesus does this to teach us that not all transformations happen in an instant. Even though God can do what God wants when God wants, sometimes God moves in stages, and we have to be patient. Jesus also reminds us here that even though we can't see, we may still not fully understand all that's going on around us. As you may recall from yesterday's reading, Jesus asked the disciples whether they had eyes but failed to see. After his first encounter with Jesus, his sight had improved, but he still couldn't see as he should. But after the second touch, and after spending a little more time with Jesus, he can see clearly. Jesus is reminding us here to be patient, be kind to ourselves, and trust the process. ***Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6***

Mark 8:29-30

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

In recent days, the President of the United States posted a racist picture of former President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama. After facing significant backlash, he took it down but refused to apologize. The official response from the White House was that a staffer posted the images. While we are accustomed to the current President using social media as a platform to make questionable and inappropriate statements, this statement seemed particularly offensive to African Americans. Many have responded by coming out publicly against the president and condemning his actions as racist. The Obamas, however, chose a different response: silence. I gather that they refused to dignify the racist post with a response, and this is consistent with how they have responded to the numerous racist remarks aimed at them during President Obama's campaign. They know who they are. Therefore, what everyone else said did not matter.

I believe that Jesus' self-knowledge drove this very intimate conversation he had with his disciples in today's reading. The twelve disciples had been walking with Jesus for approximately three years, and while the Pharisees and teachers of the law had their perspective on him, Jesus longed to know what those closest and dearest to him thought of him. “But you, Peter, who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” He then tells Peter not to tell anyone, probably because there's no need. As long as Peter knew that, that was all that mattered to Jesus. Besides, when resurrection comes, the whole world will know.

Mark 8:31

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

There are some things that I expect when I'm driving to church in the mornings. I expect to be stopped by red lights, to have someone drive slowly for no reason, and to encounter traffic backups along the way. That is what it means to travel in morning traffic, especially in Charleston, South Carolina. Life is the same way. In life, there will be both clear and smooth pathways, as well as dense and slow back-ups. There will be days when we feel accomplished, alive, and energetic, and there will also be days when we feel defeated, lost, and weighed down by life's cares and people's sensitivities. As believers, we know that God has calculated all the slow moments into our journey, and faith tells us that when it's all said and done, we will reach our destination.

This is what Jesus was telling his disciples. As he prepares them for his trial and death on the cross, he reminds them that the rejection of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law are all a part of the plan, and that even his death is a part of the plan. But the plan does not end with death because resurrection is also on God's agenda. God did it for Jesus, and we believe that God will do it for us as well.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:2-4 New International Version

Mark 9:2-4

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. 3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. 4 And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

This moment in the ministry of Jesus is often called the transfiguration. Transfiguration is a fancy word that essentially means changed. Jesus' clothes become dazzling white, and he also appears with Elijah and Moses on the mountain. Peter and the disciples are so amazed at the moment that they want to stay, but of course, Jesus says no. The task is not to stay here. The task before them is to go out into the world having been changed.

Looking at this text, we learn two lessons about the change that happens in our lives when we are in a relationship with God. The first change is physical. Jesus looks differently to the disciples, and while our relationship with God will not make us taller or change the complexion of our skin, the change that God makes in us should, in fact, be one that the world can identify. The second aspect of change associated with God in our lives is that our conversation partners become different. Whereas Jesus was initially with Peter, James, and John only, now, Elijah and Moses have shown up to discuss the deeper things of God. These are two aspects of the change that takes place in us as our relationship with God deepens. Have you seen these changes in your life?

Have you seen these changes in your life as you have grown closer to God?

Mark 9:17

A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.

I can't help but identify with this father and the lengths he was willing to go to for his son. I'm sure he came looking for Jesus; however, when he didn't find Jesus, he engaged Jesus's disciples to help him with his child. Then, when the disciples could not help the child, the man went directly to Jesus, and of course, Jesus was able to do what his disciples could not. Parenting in our world is complicated. As parents, we stand between our children and social media, between our children and politically driven school boards, and between our children and a culture that is often violent, racist, and rude. As we face these forces, this father reminds us that Jesus and his words spoken over our children are always the best option for their present and their future if we would only bring them and lay them at his feet.

Jesus and his words spoken over our children are always the best option for their present and their future if we would only bring them and lay them at his feet.

Mark 10:13-14

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

The sad reality is that in our world, children are often used as platforms for political and financial gain. On the one hand, doctors rage about how children are becoming more and more unhealthy and less and less physically active. At the same time, companies spend billions of dollars marketing high-sugar cereals and snacks to the youngest among us, with little to no regulation. Local communities are banning books from public libraries because they say they are trying to protect children, when in fact many of those books tell the story of great African Americans who are part of the history and culture of those very same students. These are just two examples of who children are tossed in the middle of the political and financial systems of our world.

Jesus reminds us here that this should not be the case in the church. As parents bring their children to Jesus, the disciples try to stop them. Jesus becomes angry, telling his disciples that the Kingdom of God belongs to the children. Not only that, but Jesus tells his disciples that if they do not accept God with the innocence, hope, and love of a child, they will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. According to Jesus, not only do children have a place in the kingdom, but their way of seeing God is also the doorway to the kingdom.

It may shock some parents to learn that we don't own our children. God has given them to us in trust...

Billy Graham

Mark 10:26-27

The disciples were even more amazed and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

When it comes to money, it's easy for us to have a “fallen face” like the wealthy man who comes to Jesus. What we tend to forget, as this brother had forgotten, is that the management of money is truly a spiritual matter. Jesus is by no means anti-money; he is very clear that it must be put in its proper place. Following him comes before all things, even our money. Our world's focus on money means that we must always make our financial health a topic of our prayer life. In our power and with our own wisdom, concerns about money will overtake us, but with God, all things are possible.

How often do you pray for God's guidance in your financial life?

Mark 10:41–45

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

While James and John often get criticized for their desire to have positions of power with Jesus in his coming kingdom, the other disciples' indignant response also reveals something about their hopes and desires. Apparently, they wanted those seats of authority for themselves because if they did not, they wouldn't have been so upset with James and John. Often, it's hard to see what's in people's hearts by just looking at them. When power and authority are in play, the truth of a person's character is often revealed. While James and John were bold enough to make the request, all the disciples needed a reminder that the Kingdom is not about power or position; it is about the privilege of serving, and serving can be done from anywhere.

Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.

Muhammad Ali

Mark 10:46-49

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

The blind man in our text is an example of doing what you can and letting God do the rest. The road between Jericho and Jerusalem is a high-traffic road, and by being there, he put himself in a good position to receive benevolence from travelers. While he could not get up and chase Jesus, when he heard that Jesus was passing by, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” And when the people around him tried to quiet him, he shouted all the more, asking for Jesus to have mercy on him. Bartimaeus couldn’t do much, but he did what he could, and Jesus did the rest. He refused to let his deficiencies deter him from the deliverance he wanted, so he positioned himself for blessing.

Eternal God, you alone have all power. However, you call me to do what I can to improve my life and the lives of those around me. Position me for the fullness of your blessing for my life. And as those blessings flow, help me to share them with others. In the name of Jesus, I pray AMEN

Palm Sunday Reading: Mark 11:1-11

Prayer for Palm Sunday

God of highest heaven, in Christ Jesus, you entered the city of Jerusalem on a Sunday, knowing that you would be crucified in the days to come. Help us to follow your lead, going where you call us even when difficulty is certain. Keep us in your service until the very stones cry out at the coming of your new creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What emotions do you think Jesus was feeling, knowing that the people praising him now would shout crucify in a few days?

Knowing what you know about the last week of Jesus' life, what prayer would you pray for him?

Holy Monday Reading: Mark 11:12-19

Holy Monday Prayer

Living God, we acknowledge our tendency to worship you on Sunday only to forget your claim on our lives come Monday. Yesterday, we praised you, shouted with joy, and got caught up in the excitement of the crowds. Today, we question whether your entry into Jerusalem matters. Nudge us from complacency and do not let us neglect your call.

As you cleansed the temple, cleanse our hearts of anything that is not of you. Keep us aware of your presence among us and show us how to stay close to you all week long. In the name of Jesus, we pray, AMEN.

What emotions do you think Jesus felt as he entered the temple?

Knowing what you know about the last week of Jesus' life, what prayer would you pray for him?

Holy Tuesday Reading: Mark 11:20-13:37

Holy Tuesday Prayer

Lord Christ, even as you prepare to face your death, you continue your God-given work. We marvel at your teaching and patience. You continued to eat with sinners and welcome those who needed to be close to you.

When we fail to understand, forget what you have told us, and refuse to do as you do, you forgive us. We marvel at your abundant mercy. As the week moves toward its inevitable end, we marvel at your willingness to do the work God set before you, even now and even to the cross. AMEN.

Jesus spent much of Holy Tuesday teaching and preaching. Which of his teachings on Holy Tuesday stood out to you and why?

Knowing what you know about the last week of Jesus' life, what prayer would you pray for him?

Holy Wednesday Reading: Mark 14:1-11

Holy Wednesday Prayer

Gracious God, as we look at Jesus on Holy Wednesday, we recognize that he experienced both anointing and betrayal on the same day. Help us not to be shaken by the highs and lows of life. We can't know the day and the hour when the Son of Man will come, but we can trust your word that God's plans will not be overcome, and that you will come again. This week of all weeks, may we heed your instruction to keep awake, to watch, and to be ready for whatever comes our way. In the name of Jesus, we pray, AMEN.

What emotions do you think Jesus felt knowing what was coming?

Knowing what you know about the last week of Jesus' life, what prayer would you pray for him?

Maundy Thursday Reading: Mark 14:12-42

Maundy Thursday Prayer

Gracious God, as Jesus fed his disciples, we pray that you feed us with your goodness and love until we want no more. In the name of Jesus, we pray,
AMEN.

What emotions do you think Jesus felt as he sat around the table with his disciples for their last meal together?

Knowing what you know about the last week of Jesus' life, what prayer would you pray for him?

Good Friday Reading: Mark 15:1-41

Good Friday Prayer

Dear God, we remember today the pain and suffering of the cross, and all that Jesus was willing to endure so we could be set free. He paid the price, such a great sacrifice, to offer us the gift of eternal life. Help us never to take for granted this huge gift of love.

Thank you, Lord, that by your wounds we are healed. Thank you that sin and death have been conquered and that your power and love are everlasting. In the name of Jesus, we pray, AMEN.

Imagine that you are in a conversation with Jesus. What would you ask him about this Good Friday experience?

APRIL 4 | HOLY SATURDAY | READING: MARK 15:42-47

Holy Saturday Reading: Mark 15:16:1-8 42-47

Holy Saturday Prayer

On this Saturday, as Jesus sat silently alone in the tomb, everyone is asked to come to the sanctuary, sit silently for 10 minutes, and leave a letter of gratitude for Jesus.

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

HE LIVES