

Introduction:

"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." — **C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory**

Many of us who grew up with a practice of fasting, tend to think of the practice as primarily about self-denial. For me (Pastor Eric), growing up at first in a Jewish home, Yom Kippur was the day of fasting that meant I could not enjoy my favorite snacks. When my mother transitioned us to the Roman Catholic Church it meant six-weeks without candy or sweets for my family. This experience left a sour taste in my mouth until I was challenged that the primary aim of fasting was not self-denial but spiritual reformation.

As we prepare to engage in the Lenten season, the end we have in mind is not to suffer the loss of our desires, but rather to have our desires changed to more wonderful things. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, the purpose of Lenten fasting and preparation is to expose our desires as weak, and to develop a longing and imagination for the holiday of resurrection life in God's Kingdom. Our hope in writing this Lenten devotional is for you to journey through the gospel of John with a growing longing for the coming Kingdom of Jesus and to see those things that we have chosen to fast as mud pies in a slum, incomparable with the delight of the glory to come.

As I (Pastor Raef) reflect on the upward call towards God, that sweet inner life with Christ and the hunger to continue pressing further in, I think of the words of one of my favorite authors, Octavius Winslow. "What prompts a constant traveling to the atoning blood? What endears the Savior who shed that blood? What is it that makes his flesh meat indeed, and his blood drink indeed? What is it that keeps the conscience tender and clean? What enables the believer to walk with God as a dear child? O, it is the secret contrition of the lowly spirit, springing from a view of the cross of Jesus, and through the cross leading to the heart of God."

Lent is an opportunity for reorientation. It is a season to pull back from the regular rhythms of life, and to develop some new intentionality that aims to strengthen our resolve in Christ, to focus our vision, and renew Christ's work on the cross. What better way to accomplish such heavenly ends, then slowly working our way through the Gospel of John. John, the Son of Thunder who became the Apostle of Love, beckons us to behold Christ in all of His glory.

We pray that you have a blessed and reflective Lenten season,
Pastor Raef Chenery, *Park South Loop*
Pastor Eric Targe, *Park Near North*

Day 1: A Magnificent Prologue

Read John 1:1-18

In the opening few verses of the narrative of the life of Jesus as told through the Apostle John, we encounter the introduction to his story, John's magnificent prologue. These eighteen verses serve as much more than simply an introduction to the book. At its heart, this passage is poetry that weaves together a tapestry of rich theology and biblical history.

The opening words draw us back in time, deep into the pages of Scripture. John's message of hope, his good news, did not begin at the birth of Christ, but rather had beginnings far more ancient. "In the beginning," leads us to Genesis 1:1 where we read in the first sentence of the Bible, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth." It is right there in the creation narrative where the roots of the good news of our salvation story begins.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1)." What a strange yet magnificent reality. It is almost as if John is concealing the heart of his entire narrative here in these first few words. What is the identity of this "Word" who is both God and with-God simultaneously? What is the identity of this Word through whom all things were made (John 1:3)? What is the identity of this Word who is both the life and the light of men (John 1:4)?

It is not until verse 14 where we receive our answer. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14)" We must not move into John's account of the life of Christ without soaking in the precious treasure of this prologue. Right here in these verses we have insight into the very trinitarian nature of God. The ancient Church fathers developed the word Trinity to describe God's ontological reality revealed to us in passages like these. Jesus is the Word who is God and is with-God simultaneously. As the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God is eternal and equal with the Father, yet he willingly chose to enter into the human story experiencing all of the frailty associated with human life, yet without sin.

The life of Christ is no ordinary life. The life of Christ is worthy of our time and our effort to read and reflect upon because in so doing we are reflecting on God himself. But we must do more than just reflect, we must also receive. In the center of this passage we read, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12)." To engage with the life of Christ is to be forced to make a decision. We can choose to receive Christ by faith, or we can choose to reject Christ by faith, there is no middle ground.

Day 2: A Stunning Proclamation

Read John 1:29-34

John the Baptist was a mighty prophet in the same line as great prophets of the Old Testament like Elijah and Isaiah. God ordained John the Baptist for a particular ministry, to prepare the way of the Lord. Much like a red carpet might be laid down before those of high honor, John was sent to prepare the hearts of Israel for the coming of their King.

On one occasion John the Baptist was baptizing men and women at the Jordan River in Israel. Faithful men and women had come from all over the nation having heard of his ministry. The crowds swelled and the air was thick with anticipation when John had his breath taken away. There amidst the crowd appeared Jesus who had come to be baptized by John. John had known Jesus as a result of the familial relationship of their mothers. But John did not yet understand Jesus' true identity. He had been told by God however that one day he would see the Spirit of God descend on the Christ (John 1:33). And so when the Spirit of God descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, John immediately made a declaration that struck the hearts of every man, woman, and child present, "Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

The imagery of a lamb being slain was important imagery for Israel and carried grave connotations. For the Israelite these words hearkened back to the ancient sacrificial system given to them by Moses in the book of Exodus where lambs were slain regularly as an offering to stand between a Holy God and a sinful people. Particularly however the lamb imagery would have reminded them of the Passover celebration in which God's people remembered how while slaves in Egypt, God spared the Israelites when they took shelter underneath a home marked by the blood of a lamb.

While these sacrifices of blood are not the most appealing images for us to dwell upon, they are indeed the key to unlocking the great mystery of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Here at the Baptism of Jesus, John the Baptist makes a stunning proclamation. Jesus would become the final sacrificial lamb whose blood shed would take away the sins of the world. Jesus' death on the cross would not just function as a martyr's death for a religious belief, but Jesus would offer his own life to God as a substitute for our life, thereby becoming the sacrifice himself.

It is good for us as we prepare our hearts through this Lenten season to reflect on the fullness of what Christ came to do. His was a life like no other, as John the Baptist so clearly declared when he said, "After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me (John 1:30)." But more importantly, this was a death like no other. All men die, but only Christ's death could take away the sins of the world.

Day 3: Sign #1 ~ An Abundance of Wine

Read John 2:1-12

John's gospel account of the life of Christ contains seven signs. This miracle at a wedding in Cana is the first of those signs of which the primary purpose is to point us to the true identity of Jesus. Thus far Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist and has already gathered about half of the men who would become his twelve disciples. He has not yet performed any miracles that would reveal his identity to the public.

The story opens with Jesus and his family in attendance at a wedding in Cana. We're not told what association Mary and Jesus had with the family, but Mary's concern over the lack of wine reveals that she was likely more involved with the planning of the wedding than a simple attendee. She wanted the wedding to be a success and so when the wine ran out, she turned to the one person she knew who could possibly solve the problem, her son.

Jesus initially seems as if he does not intend to perform a miracle saying, "My hour has not yet come." This peculiar phrase is found a handful of other times in the Gospel of John: John 7:30, John 8:20, John 12:23, 27, John 13:1, and John 17:1. Jesus' response could be a correction to the motivation of his mother who may have seen this lack of wine as an opportunity to launch Jesus' ministry career. Jesus' firm rebuke is less a word against performing such an act, and more a loving correction to his mother's misguided intentions.

What happens in this miracle? Jesus commands six large purification jars to be filled with water. Purification jars like these, likely held between eight and nine gallons of water. This miracle involves a lot of wine, fifty-four gallons worth. This might seem a bit much, but Jesus was intentional with every detail of his ministry. Here in this moment, the abundance of wine was a clear sign that the messiah was among them. The prophet Amos speaking of the Messianic Age said, "Behold, the days are coming when...the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it (Amos 9:12-15)." The age of the savior would be marked by a deep and abiding joy, symbolized by an age of abundant wine.

But there is another layer that we must reflect on before this story ends. Jesus has taken six large jars used for ritualistic purposes under the Old Covenant, and he has converted them into jars teeming with a symbol of abundance and joy. Jesus Christ came, not to do away with the law but to bring its full meaning and full potential into our reality. The old ceremonies and rituals are being fulfilled by Christ, at a wedding feast of all places, for Jesus himself is the truer and greater groom who has come for his bride. In Christ, every true believer is united in a covenant, like that of marriage, that cannot be broken. The groom has arrived. Let Christ's abundance flow!

Day 4: You Must Be Born Again

Read John 3:1-15

Nicodemus literally means “victor of the people,” or “conquerer” or “superior one.” This man was a Pharisee, a particular group of religious leaders in the day of Jesus that specialized in attempted perfect outward obedience to the Old Testament law. They were the religious elite in Israel in the days of Jesus. A man like Nicodemus likely would have fasted twice a week. He would have likely spent two hours a day in prayer at the temple. He would have tithed on all of his income. He was a model of good religion. He had a good reputation as a good man with good moral principles. True to his name, he would have been considered by many a “superior one.”

Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night. He has been a religious leader in Jerusalem for many years, but he has never met a man like Jesus. He has become a leader of religion, yet from what has seen and heard of Jesus, he cannot help but find some way to get to this man. The reality is that for many who honestly take the time to study the life of Jesus, this inner burning of soul that cannot rest until it finds its fullness in Christ will manifest.

Jesus looks at Nicodemus and says, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3).” These words clearly troubled this “superior one” for he immediately began to ask how such an action could be possible. Could it be that all of his religious effort, and all of his previous gains, had truly amounted to nothing, and that the true key to relationship with God, to divine joy, could only be found through a new birth in Christ? “Yes,” cries the Christian!

We must not move beyond Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus before we ask ourselves the question of utmost importance. Have I truly been born again? It is upon this question that each person’s entire eternity depends. The new birth described by Jesus is not simply a matter of *resetting one’s life* or *finding religion*. It is not simply an intellectual ascent to a religious belief. Indeed there are many, like Nicodemus, who are religiously affiliated, who call themselves Christians, and yet have not received the new birth.

Jesus completed his words to Nicodemus by bringing utmost clarity to his meaning. He said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14:15).” The reference to Moses in Numbers 21 is significant. A plague had overcome the people of Israel and Moses lifted up a golden serpent on a pole in the wilderness. To all who would simply lift their eyes and behold the serpent, their illness would be removed. So it is with Christ, our final sacrificial lamb. To be born again is to look to Christ on the cross and receive his free gift of grace offered to you by the shedding of his own blood. It is to come to the utter end of oneself, and to know one’s only hope is found in Christ their redeemer. Outside of beholding Christ, there is no forgiveness of sin.

Day 5: Jesus and the Woman of Samaria

Read John 4:1-29

Held within this precious passage are hidden keys to unlock many of the troubles of our own day. In the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans were essentially bitter enemies. The Jews of Israel considered the Samaritans, their northern neighbors, to be half-breeds as a result of centuries of conflict. Over 700 years prior, the Assyrians had conquered the Northern half of Israel which included Samaria. As part of an international resettlement policy, the Assyrians left a remnant of Israelites in the land but then repopulated the rest with people from many different conquered nations. This intermingling of people eventually resulted in the people of Samaria being considered Jewish half-breeds by the Israelites of the Southern Kingdom. The tension between the Jews and the Samaritans was so high that many faithful Jews of Jesus' time would refuse to walk through Samaria, rather choosing the longer route around Samaria.

“And he had to pass through Samaria (John 4:4).” Jesus had a habit of rejecting the idea that we simply ought to walk around our issues, rather Jesus confronted division and tension head on. He entered Samaria and began a conversation with a Samaritan woman. This unnamed woman responded with sheer shock that this Jewish man would speak to her. She says, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria (John 4:9)?” This would not be the greatest shock of her day.

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:13-14).” The woman recognized something powerful was taking place and begged for the water spoken of by Christ. This eternal water of life that Jesus offers could be gathered with a bucket, but must be received by faith. It was offered to her, and it is offered to you. Take. Drink. Receive. Live!

This story's interplay of Jews and Samaritans, adulterous women and the messiah, demonstrates that it does not matter who we are, where we're from, or what sins we have committed in our past. The adulterous woman at the well from Samaria proves this once and for all. The promise of divine water welling up inside, is for each of us. May we never forsake it. Like a raging river, our walk with Christ is to produce a steady flow of godliness flowing both inside our souls, and outside into the lives of others around us. This water cannot be controlled and it cannot be tamed, for its source is Christ himself. The best way to show Christ our fervent love is by continually drawing from his inexhaustible resources. The reserve will never run low for he is eternal. We cannot come too frequently or ask for too much, for he delights in our asking. There is no excuse in a Christian's life for an empty well or a sluggish soul. Pray for greater depth of indwelling grace.

Day 6: Sign #2 ~ A Child Healed

Read: John 4:46-54

Jesus' second sign begins with a distraught father. This father was a prominent official from Capernaum, who served the rule of Herod Antipas. In the eyes of the world, he was successful, holding both authority and prestige. Yet this man had a problem that all the money and all the prestige in the world could not solve, his son lay sick and dying. It does not require one to be a parent to understand the inner aching of this man's heart and the late night tears of helplessness.

"When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him (John 4:47)." The desperate father had heard about Jesus from the rumors circulating the region. Knowing that his son did not have long, and that by making the trip to Cana he would risk missing the moment of his precious child's death, he determined to make the twenty mile journey to find the rumored miracle worker.

Finding Jesus in Cana the father asks if Jesus will accompany him back to Galilee to come heal his son. He had an expectation that if Jesus truly was a miracle worker, as the rumors had suggested, then his miracle working power had to be tied to a nearness of proximity. In his wildest imagination, he would not have dreamed that anyone would have the power to heal a dying child from a distance of twenty miles.

"Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.'" The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way (John 4:50)." I wonder what that man's journey was like heading back to his child. Did he doubt the words of Jesus? Did he fear that perhaps his son had died and the glimmer of hope in his heart would fail him? Did he sprint the twenty mile distance with a child like anticipation? Did he stop every so often, fall to his knees in awe, and praise God?

On the way home, his servants meet him on the road, and confirm that his son has been healed at the exact hour that Jesus had said, "Your son will live." "And he himself believed, and all his household (John 4:53)." Whatever doubt was lingering in his heart over the identity of Christ and the authority Jesus held was removed as he and his entire household rejoiced though not just for the healing, but for the healer.

Through this second sign of Jesus, we are introduced to a dimension of faith that may guide us through many seasons of life. Believing in the promises of Christ will often mean clinging to a glimmer of hope, while walking the long journey home to see how God answered your prayers. We cling to the very words of Jesus, knowing that if he said it, it will certainly come to pass. What unanswered prayers are you hopefully clinging to God for today? Do not stop clinging. Do not stop praying. He who knows your soul delights in pouring unmerited favor upon his beloved children. Wait on God with a faith filled wonder.

Day 7: Sign #3 ~ Take Up Your Bed and Walk

Read John 5:1-18

We are told it was a “feast of the Jews.” We don’t know exactly what feast was being celebrated, but we do know it was the Sabbath, and it is that fact that made Jesus’ actions so controversial on this particular day. The Bible teaches in the Fourth Commandment that we are to keep the Sabbath Day holy. While we are given some direct instruction Biblically on how to do this, the details are not overly prescribed. By the time of Jesus, the Jewish Leaders had become so obsessed with maintaining the *letter of the law* that they had developed an overwhelming and intricate set of additional rules that defined what a person could and could not do on the Sabbath.

On this particular Sabbath day, Jesus approached a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. For nearly four decades that man had not only lived with an incapacitating weakness, but he had succumbed to an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. He spent his days among the forgotten of society lying beside a pool of water hoping that the legends people told of miraculous healings might come true. This was a place where respectable people might avoid in order to not associate with such a motley crew. Yet, into that pit of despair Jesus marched.

When Jesus asked the man whether he wanted to be healed, the invalid could not even find it in himself to say, “Yes.” He simply reiterated his hopeless situation as one who had explained himself many times before. Into that relentless cycle of hopelessness, Jesus—the Word of God made flesh—speaks. Then, a miraculous healing occurs, and the man’s body is restored in full.

At this point we ought to expect the people to be celebrating. A healing of this magnitude could only be of God. But the Jewish leaders are enraged that Jesus had broken one of their rabbinic traditions by healing on a Sabbath. Even the man who was healed seems to show very little appreciation for Jesus as he repeatedly informs the authorities of what Jesus had done. Jesus, succinctly cuts through the fog of Rabbinic tradition and the lack of gratefulness of the invalid and simply says, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

We are prone to make the same mistakes as both the religious leaders and the man who was healed. So often, God does the extraordinary before our very eyes and we never pause to appreciate it. He orchestrates our lives in ways that bring about His glory and our good, yet so often, we never take a moment to appreciate God's hand in it all. We fly through life at breakneck speed, wondering why God is not doing more. We often complain that our trials are too long, that his presence feels too distant. Like the blind man, sometimes we even turn to false measures to get our prayers answered. All the while, God has been sustaining our every breath, guarding our souls, interceding for us, and so much more. We must not be so careless as to miss the hand of God. We must learn to slow down, reflect, see God at work, and offer God true thanksgiving.

Day 8: Sign #4 ~ Jesus Feeds 5,000

Read John 6:1-15

This fourth sign of Christ's has become a familiar story to many who have some history with the Bible. Jesus feeds a crowd of at least 5,000 people with only five loaves and two fish. On the one hand this is an amazing story of Christ, the God-man's authority over nature. He physically multiplied the food in order to feed the crowd. While that miracle is worth reflecting upon, there is more to this story than meets the eye.

The text informs us that it was now the time of the Passover. The Passover was a ceremony that Jesus, along with every faithful Jewish man or woman in Israel would have celebrated annually commemorating and retelling the story of their miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, as told in the book of Exodus. This new section of the Gospel of John begins by informing us that the Passover is at hand and Jesus has gone out to a dry arid desert region. The text begs us to consider how Jesus is connected with the Passover. Interestingly, the first two scenes of chapter 6 involve a miraculous provision of food, and a taming of the seas, two vital components of the original Passover story (the Red Sea and the manna in the desert) that was rehearsed and recited every year during the Passover celebration.

Jesus asks a rather honest and practical question to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" Philip responds as most of us would have in that situation, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." You can almost hear the exasperation in Philip's voice. A denarii was the equivalent of a day's wage. Philip is scratching his head in bewilderment that Jesus would suggest that they attempt to feed the crowd. Philip saw a need far greater than his own ability to meet, and his first impulse was hopelessness.

Andrew takes a slightly different approach and searches for food. This approach also brings him to hopelessness as all he discovers is a few fish and few loaves. But in the midst of this seemingly hopeless and overwhelming task assigned by Christ, there is yet a way forward that none of the disciples considered. They were busy looking at the problem with their practical minds and considering only what their eyes could see, forgetting that Jesus was in the habit of doing far more than anyone could imagine.

We must never forget that the problems we face every day are not only to be tackled with practical solutions. We must apply our faith, and trust that God often has ways of providing well beyond our wildest imaginations. God will often call us to pursue some good that is far beyond our means, to care for some person that will stretch us, to give in some way that feels impossible. It is in these moments that our faith is often most stretched, and the abiding joy that is ours in Christ is most often experienced.

Day 9: Sign #5 ~ Jesus Walks on Water

Read John 6:16-21

The fifth sign of Jesus in the Gospel of John is layered with theological depth. While all twelve disciples set out across the sea on a small boat, Jesus had stayed behind and, “withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” It was not uncommon for Jesus to withdraw from the chaos of daily life and ministry in order to commune with his heavenly Father. But while Jesus was in the solitude of prayer, the disciples were struggling mightily against a storm that had come down upon them.

In the midst of the winds, and the storm, and the men’s fear, an event occurred that must have changed the perspective of the disciples entirely. Jesus calmly approached them walking on the water. Up until this point the disciples each must have had some sense of the nature of Jesus. They had seen God perform the miraculous through his ministry through healings, provision, and teaching. Yet I suppose that to see him calmly walking on water in the midst of rough seas provided an entire new dynamic to their understanding. The text says, “they were frightened,” upon seeing Jesus, as we all would be. Jesus has authority over the winds and the waves.

When Jesus comes within hearing distance he speaks the words, “It is I; do not be afraid.” While this is a fine translation, it misses the deeper layers of what Jesus actually said. The phrase, “It is I,” is an English translation that is more literally translated, “I am; do not be afraid.” To a faithful Jewish man, the phrase ‘I am’ would not be lost in translation. ‘I Am’ is the name of God that was given to Moses thousands of years prior on Mount Sinai. When Moses had questioned God about what to say to the people of Israel, God had instructed Moses to say, “I AM has sent me to you.” Jesus is with no uncertainty taking the name of God upon Himself. This would be blasphemy if it were not true.

The disciples understood what Jesus had said, and gladly took him into the boat. We too must gladly take Christ into the boat. In the moment, the winds and the waves of the storms we pass through, will certainly cause us to fear. Like the disciples we will find ourselves at times miles from shore, in the thick of night, frantically attempting to make some kind of headway. In those moments we must remember two vital truths. First, God is not worried as we are worried. This is not to say that Christ does not have compassion towards our frailties, but it is to say that God is in control of our storms as Christ was when he walked on the water. Second, the great I Am does not stand at a distance as we toil. He draws near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18). No matter the storm, no matter the darkness, no matter the pain, if you are a Christian, Christ is in the boat with you. Do not be afraid.

Day 10: I AM Statement #1 ~ I Am the Bread of Life

Read John 6:22-59

Just as John's Gospel contains seven signs of Jesus, so does it contain seven "I am" statements. These statements reveal nuances about Christ's identity, who he is, and what he came to accomplish.

When the crowds come to Jesus, they immediately ask, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" (v. 28). This question strikes at the heart of the impulse of the natural man, the man who has never truly been born again. Every religion ever created has attempted to find a way to please God. The religions of the world provide laws, that if a person is holy enough and diligent enough, they will be able to follow, and as a result earn favor with God. The problem these inquisitors do not understand is that the natural man and the born-again man are of two fundamentally different states. The natural man no matter how many good works he musters will never please God, for his heart is corrupt and he has not realized what he truly needs.

Christ responds to this question, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (v. 29)." Faith in Jesus Christ is the prerequisite to pleasing God. Until one has gazed upon the wonder of the gospel, the free gift of salvation by grace through faith, and received a new heart capable of true motivations and true love of God, they cannot please God. Jesus exhorts us in this text to flee man-made religion, and to place our faith in Jesus, on his terms.

The crowd, feeling unsettled from Christ's response, demanded a sign similar to the bread—or manna—that was provided for Israel when they wandered in the wilderness. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Bread is a symbol of sustenance and nutrients. To eat bread is to fill the body with the fuel it needs to survive and flourish. To be alive however, is more than to simply be a body with an engine that needs constant feeding. Humans are both body and soul. Just as one dies if they fail to feed their body, so does one die if they fail to feed their soul.

Just as a child in its mother's womb is fed through an umbilical cord that passes the necessary nutrients of life forward, so it is when we believe in Christ. At that point, a union is forged between our souls and Christ, whereby the soul is made alive and kept alive by God's covenantal grace. The soul that has been made alive by faith in Christ becomes filled with new desires, new motivations, new understandings of God and His law. So many Christians walk with atrophied souls starving themselves of the nutrients they need, while all the while Christ offers a divine buffet for free. The feast is ours for the taking. Open His Word, learn of His majesty, reflect on His omnipotence, pray in the Spirit, live in His strength, feast on the wonders of God.

Day 11: Rivers of Living Water

Read John 7:37-39

Our passage begins with, “On the last day of the feast.” Early Hebrew readers of the New Testament would have seen the important contextual elements that were required to understand the phrase of Jesus regarding “rivers of living water.” The feast being celebrated during this section of John’s Gospel is the Feast of Tabernacles.

The last day of that feast contained the most memorable portion of the entire event, and it all had to do with water. For the previous seven days of the ceremony, temple priests would collect from the Pool of Siloam. Carrying the water in a golden pitcher, the priests would march to the temple and around the altar. There was a particular entrance in the temple known as the ‘water gate.’ As the priests approached the water gate, a shofar would be blown, and the congregation would be called to worship. The priests would then lead the way in reciting psalms of praise together with the congregation. They would further pray to God for rain to fall for their crops to grow. This rhythm occurred each of the first six days of the Feast of Tabernacles, and then on the seventh day it was repeated seven times. It was there, on that last official day of the feast, when Christ stood in the middle and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me.”

What a scene this must have been. The priests marching with their water. The congregation singing their songs of praise. The memories of the crossing of the Red Sea and all of God’s promises of abundance in the back of their minds. In that spiritual fervor, Christ made this declaration.

Just as the ground needs water to produce vegetation, so does the soul need God to bear fruit. Apart from God, we wither and wilt like a fading flower cut off from its roots. God is the source of nutrients the soul needs to survive and thrive. And the mechanism whereby the human soul is tethered to the nourishing grace of God, is belief in Jesus (v. 38). There is no other way to bear fruit. Apart from Christ we can do no good, we are enemies of God, cut off from his promises, guilty not only of our original sin inherited from Adam which is revealed in our corrupt and polluted hearts, but guilty for our own sins of commission and omission. We are by nature children of wrath, dead flowers fading under the hot summer sun.

But, Jesus grants life to those who truly believe in him. He resurrects their dead souls and grants them a new connection to the lifegiver himself. The Holy Spirit indwells that soul and functions like a mighty river flowing through his being, granting life and fruit in every direction. He who believes in Jesus is alive in the truest sense. They have been born again. O may those mighty rivers of living water flow through us again.

Day 12: I AM Statement #2 ~ I am the Light of the World

Read John 8:12-20

This story records Jesus' second I Am statement. The setting of the Feast of Tabernacles provides rich cultural context for understanding the significance of Christ's words. During this annual celebration, Jewish families would construct small tents to sleep in at night as a commemoration of their own wandering years in the desert after their miraculous escape from Egypt. The feast celebrated God's faithfulness, provision, and protection of His people.

Each evening at this particular festival a special moment occurred that Jews refer to as the "Illumination of the Temple." It was at this moment that the four seventy-five foot tall golden menorahs, that stood in the corners of the Court of the Women within the temple, were lit. The significance of this moment was to remind God's people how God himself had led them through the wilderness by a pillar of fire by night for forty years (Exodus 13:21). Standing in the temple, under the dark night sky, while these four massive lamps were lit, must have been a soul stirring experience. While these lights were still burning, while God's people were still joyfully reflecting on God's goodness, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

The significance of his words would not have been lost on any of his hearers. The light of the four pillars was to represent nothing less than God himself, the very God who had saved them from slavery in Egypt. The very God that had promised to send a messiah to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6). Jesus' claim to be the light of the world meant not only that he was the long awaited messiah foretold in Scriptures, but that he was also God himself. As the writer of Hebrews states, "He is the radiance of the glory of God" (Hebrews 1:3).

Christ goes further though by coupling this claim with a divine promise. "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). A contrast is established between those who walk in darkness and those who have the light of life. To walk in darkness, is to have no real understanding of God, of purpose, of salvation, of identity, of eternity. To walk in darkness is to be void of the love of God, the very thing that our souls were designed for. Outside of Christ there is only darkness both now and forevermore (Matthew 8:12).

But in Christ, the divine light blazes forward a path through the darkness of this fallen world we inhabit. Like the Israelites, there is indeed a pillar of light to guide through the night. God has not left us aimless, neither has he left us hopeless. God sent Christ to rescue our souls from the domain of darkness and to transfer them to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Ephesians 1:13). Christ's resurrection has taken away the darkness of the sting of death, and the gift of His Spirit guides us to the truly fruitful life (Galatians 5:22-23). Truly, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Day 13: Who does Jesus think He is?

Read John 8:48-59

Who do you think you are? It's a question that often escapes our lips in moments of intense frustration and anger. When someone crosses a line or challenges our beliefs, this question becomes a battlefield where pride and identity collide. In John 8:48-59, we find the Pharisees asking this very question, Jesus has previously called them the devil's children and said that they were disregarding the truth, his previous claims assume he knows who they really are, and so this question is in part about the authority on which he makes these claims.

The Pharisees believe that they know who he is; Jesus is a 'demonized samaritan', this double accusation was tantamount to calling him an outsider and a heretic, it was to say "he is not one of us, and he is not to be trusted."

In response to their accusations and disbelief, Jesus unveils a profound revelation about *who he thinks he is*. He declares, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Now we need to note, Abraham lived just about as long before Jesus as Jesus did before us. Speaking of them as contemporaries would cause most people to pause and ponder time travel, perhaps remembering scenes from *Back To The Future*. But Jesus isn't saying that Abraham somehow traveled forwards in time or that he traveled backward, what he is saying in this powerful statement is that not only did he preexisted Abraham, but also that he preexisted everything!

In using the divine title "I am," echoing the name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14), Jesus is asserting His divinity, revealing that He is the eternal God who transcends time and space. The Pharisees, in their self-righteousness, failed to recognize the very presence of God standing before them. Jesus wasn't just a wise teacher or a charismatic leader; He was the embodiment of the great I Am.

This revelation of Jesus as the great I Am validates everything He says about life and death. When Jesus speaks of eternal life for those who believe in Him and eternal separation for those who reject Him, He does so as the one who holds the keys to life and death.

In our lives, we often wrestle with the question of identity, purpose, and truth. Jesus, by revealing Himself as the great I Am, assures us that He is the source of all truth, the author of life, and the only way to the Father (John 14:6). Just as the Pharisees had to confront the reality of Jesus' identity, we too must grapple with who Jesus truly is and what that means for our lives.

Day 14: What do you see?

Read John 9:1-41

I *see* what he means. She can't *see* herself living there. It was good to *see* you. In each of these sentences the word *see* carries a different meaning; to understand, to imagine, and to perceive with your eyes (*respectively*). Being able to see is incredibly important, and when we look at this passage we can be tempted to only see (understand) the ability to see or not as a physical disability rather than cognitive or imaginative. In this passage we actually see all three of these types of seeing at play, and the cost of inability and/or unwillingness.

The passage begins with Jesus seeing a man who was blind from birth, a man who was likely a beggar and a social outcast due to his disability. Though Jesus is the first in the passage that is noted as seeing him, it's interesting that one of his disciples decides to speak first to describe what he sees. This disciple can only see sin and shame, the man's or his parents. This is the first failure to see, as Jesus makes everyone aware that this man is not blind because of sin, but rather so that God's glory might be revealed. After Jesus heals the man, a series of events unfold demonstrating that our greatest need is not physical sight, as this ex-blind man is able to see Jesus even though he has yet to see Jesus. The Pharisees and temple priests are unable to *see* Jesus, though he has been in front of them numerous times. Jesus' disciples cannot *see* him, though they travel with him on a daily basis. But it is the ex-blind man who has yet to see Jesus with his eyes that is able to tell the temple authorities what he has *seen*, declaring Jesus to be a prophet (9:17) sent from God (9:33). This man can *see* that Jesus is worthy to be followed (9:27) and invites others to follow who he has not seen, but who he has *seen*.

Can you see yourself in the account of this blind man? As a follower of Jesus you *see* without seeing, and are surrounded by a world that sees nothing and so *sees* nothing. In many ways this passage is a metaphor for our lives as followers of Christ now, calling others to follow the one who saw us when we were blind and made us *see*. Perhaps the greatest difference between this ex-blind man and us is that we believe we have something to lose in boldly declaring what Jesus has done for us. Let's not dismiss the passionate proclamation of this man in the temple as simple "new believer's zeal", this man knows what he is without Jesus, and understands the worth of being with Him. Do you still see yourself in this report?

Either way, rest in this truth, just as the ex-blind man's *seeing* became seeing when confronted by Jesus outside the temple, when we depart from this world our *faith* will be sight. And like the ex-blind man, our proclamation will be vindicated.

Day 15: I AM Statement #4 ~ I Am The Door

Read John 10:1-10

Up to this point in the Gospel of John we have been focused on the questions of if Jesus is from God or not? Is he a prophet or not? Is he the Messiah or not? And so chapter 10 might seem a bit strange to us as we shift into a parable about doors, shepherds, and sheep. But we would be mistaken if we began to whistle the tune of Sesame Street's *One Of These Things (Is Not Like the Other)*. For us it seems strange to move from God, prophet, and messiah, to shepherd but is likely because we don't have an accurate view of how the Bible paints shepherds.

Despite the claims of some, there is no evidence during the time of Jesus' life and ministry that shepherds were social outcasts or considered to be unclean. Rather, the Bible seems to paint a quite positive picture of shepherds, King David was once a shepherd, and there is even a song in Israel's hymnbook beginning with the phrase "The Lord is My Shepherd" (Psalm 23). Shepherding was even used as a metaphor by the prophets Ezekiel (34) and Jeremiah (23) to describe the role of national leaders.

But when we think of leaders today we tend not to think of blue collar workers like shepherds, we think of CEOs and Presidents, people behind desks or leading board meetings, removed from the day-to-day work and the entry-level employees. However, in the Bible the ideal king is a shepherd who intimately knows his sheep. As Jesus discusses "thieves and robbers" he's likely thinking of these CEO types, revolutionary leaders and warlords, of which there were many. The question Jesus is setting up is, how will you know when God's true King has arrived? The answer is that you will know the true king in the same way that you will know a true shepherd, by how he cares for his sheep. The first way we see this is that Jesus is the door.

In this time, shepherds would often lie down at night in the gateway, to stop the sheep getting out and to stop predators getting in. Just like God in Psalm 121:8 watches over our "going out and coming in"; Jesus serves as the door to the sheep. He is the safety of the sheep, they are his priority, and if they trust him they will find life, free from predators.

Where are you looking for your safety today? What serves as the door to your life? For some it is our bank accounts, our positions of authority, or simply our youth and charm. For all of these things there is a limit to how much we can actually control. But Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8) is a door worth trusting in. He will watch over his people to keep them safe. Do you trust him today?

Day 16: I AM Statement #5 ~ I Am The Good Shepherd

Read John 10:11-21

“It’s hard to find good help these days.” You have heard people say that, haven’t you? We heard this when we were young children and we hear it now as adults; which might make us wonder, if it’s hard to find good help “these days” in what “days” was it easy. At least from this parable we can see that those days were not two millennia ago, as Jesus recognizes that an employee will likely never care for a business the way an owner will.

When a hired hand, entrusted with the care of sheep, a task merely contractual, devoid of personal investment, is confronted by a wolf, he will flee, leaving the defenseless sheep to the mercy of the predator. But Jesus is not bemoaning the labor market of his day, he’s not pointing out flaws in the average shepherd-for-hire, rather he is saying that the hired-hands response makes good sense. The employee is getting a wage from the owner of the sheep, if the sheep disappear he can simply find a new shepherd to work for in another town. For the shepherd, if his sheep disappear, so does his livelihood and all of his investment.

What Jesus is seeking to illuminate for his listeners is that he is not a passive observer or a mere employee clocking in and out. He is the Good Shepherd, and his commitment to the sheep surpasses the transactional nature of hired help. His ownership of the flock is marked by an unparalleled level of care, a care so profound that he declares, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." With these words, Jesus unveils the depth of his love for his followers. It's a love that transcends self-interest and extends to the point of self-sacrifice. The imagery of laying down his life for the sheep is not a metaphorical flourish but a profound truth that will find its fulfillment on the cross.

In a world characterized by skepticism and uncertainties, trust often proves elusive. Scandals in the corporate world, political deceit, fake-news and alternative facts, all challenge our ability to rely on others. Even in personal relationships, betrayals and broken promises cast shadows on the concept of trust. But despite this uncertainty, Jesus stands as the epitome of reliability. His willingness to lay down his life speaks volumes about his trustworthiness and offers a stark contrast to trust issues plaguing our world.

Let this passage be an antidote to doubt today. As we journey toward Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday, remember that we have a Shepherd who goes to these lengths for us. Jesus isn't merely a hired hand concerned with a paycheck; he is the Shepherd who willingly sacrifices for the well-being of his flock. Inviting us into a relationship of deep trust and gratitude.

Day 17: Will He Be The Hammer?

Read John 10:22-42

Of all the times for people to ask if Jesus was “the Christ” the Feast of Dedication (Chanukah) made the most sense. You see Chanukah was the celebration of the recapture and rededication of the temple after it had been defiled and occupied by the Greeks almost 200 years earlier. This temple siege was led by someone who many of the Jewish people believed was a messianic figure, named Judas “Maccabeus”, a nickname meaning *The Hammer*. The people saw the signs and wonders of Jesus and they wanted him to be their new “Hammer”, leading them into deliverance from the Romans.

But deliverance would not come through targeted violent judgment, because no one would be exempt, “none are righteous, no not one” (Rom. 3:10). Jesus has already made it clear to those who listened that he would not be *the hammer*, rather he would be *the nail*. He would not conquer through the strike of a sword, but by being pierced with one. He would not slaughter his enemies, but be slaughtered by them. The Messiah’s deliverance will be a deliverance of the heart, the redemption of the soul.

Amidst this great anticipation, Jesus makes a bold declaration, saying, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). This is not at all what they had in mind for a military leader or a political liberator. It is a claim of divine unity and purpose. According to Jesus, the true enemy is not a political regime; it is spiritual darkness and separation from God. The deliverance he offers is a restoration of that divine relationship. In saying, “I and the Father are one”, Jesus reveals that his mission is not a solo act; it is a harmonious partnership and unity with the Father; a spiritual deliverance that surpasses earthly expectations. With this historical context of liberation, the Feast of Dedication becomes a backdrop for a deeper understanding of the Messiah’s role. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls us to hear his voice, follow him, and experience a deliverance that transcends the temporal challenges of this world.

Where are you seeking to find deliverance? In the temporal or the eternal? Are you hoping for the right congressman, senator, or president to be “The Hammer” and restore some kind of “former glory”? Or are your eyes fixed on the one who will bring eternal glory, the one who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2). As you seek deliverance through the various challenges of life, find solace in the harmonious partnership between the Good Shepherd and the Father, securing a deliverance that echoes through eternity.

Day 18: If only... Jesus

Read John 11:1-27

“If only...” Have you said those words before? If only I would have bought that stock ... If only I had asked that person out on a date... If only I had taken that job... Sometimes our *if onlys* are more remorseful... If only we had prioritized our health earlier... If only they knew how much I loved them... it's with this great remorse that Martha, the sister of Lazarus, cries out to Jesus “if only you had been here.”

The words “if only” are always an attempt to rewrite the past. We might think of *Back To The Future*, *Meet The Robinsons*, or Disney's *The Kid*, where Bruce Willis plays a character who is confronted by a younger version of himself and seeks to guide his young past-self toward a better experience in what is now his present.

But, Jesus, instead of looking at the past and dreaming of what could have been, calls Martha to look to the future. Perhaps this is the problem with most of our questions in the midst of suffering today; we regularly spend most of our time asking how God could have allowed something bad to happen, when the more important question we should be asking is ‘what will God do in response to these bad things?’

Jesus points Martha to the future saying “your brother will rise again.” At this time in Israel's history the majority of the Jewish people (besides some like the Sadducees) believed in the resurrection of the dead and in the eventual new heavens and new earth. Martha believed this, but it wasn't very comforting, the resurrection is in the future but she has to live in the present. However, what Jesus says next explodes all of these categories, “I am the resurrection and the life.” The resurrection is not merely then, it is now! It's no longer “if only” but “if Jesus!

If Jesus is the resurrection then nothing is impossible, then death is not a period but a comma. “If Jesus” halts our attempts at rewriting the past and fills with anticipation what will happen in the future. “If Jesus” then all will be as it should.

We all have our “if only” dreams and frustrations, perhaps there are a few “if onlys” on your minds as you are reading this devotional. Do not dismiss them, but run with Martha to meet Jesus, tell him your ache, ask him why he did not act as you now wish he would have, and trust that *if Jesus* is the one you're going to that God's future can and will enter the present into your pain and sorrow with hope and possibility. *If Jesus* then all will be as it should.

Day 19: It is Right To Cry

Read John 11:28-37

In 1972, Rosey Grier, a singer and former professional football player, wrote and sung a song that would become popular on children's television, "*It's Alright To Cry*." In the song, Grier tells children that it's alright to cry, but in John 11 Jesus goes a step further to show that it's not just *alright*, it is right to cry!

John 11:35 is a verse that many cling to in times of sorrow, "Jesus wept." Though it is the shortest verse in the Bible, it's also one of the most profound and eloquent. In the original language the verb "wept" would be incompatible with an image of a single tear streaming down Jesus' cheek, and so it might be better to say 'Jesus burst into tears.' The truth of this verse brings solace in knowing that our Lord experienced what it meant to be human. Jesus was not unaffected by the pains of this world, rather he was moved and cried. Jesus is not remote from the sufferings of his fellow humans; he is one with us in our humanity and so he is one with us in our agony. Jesus lived our experience from the inside and so he was not a detached spectator to Mary and Martha's pain, rather his weeping was a demonstration of his heart.

But why did Jesus cry? Did he not know what was going to happen next? (Spoiler alert: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead) Certainly Jesus knew what he was going to do, it was because of this foreknowledge that he told his disciples he was glad that he was not there to heal Lazarus, so that they might believe (John 11:14). Still, these were not crocodile tears, Jesus was authentically weeping because he was authentically "moved."

The same word that is "deeply moved" here is translated as a warning (Matthew 9:30; Mark 1:43) or scolding (Mark 14:5) in other passages. "In extra-biblical Greek, it can refer to the snorting of horses; as applied to human beings, it invariably suggests anger, outrage or emotional indignation" (D.A. Carson, John, 415). In being "greatly troubled," Jesus is unsettled as he faces his enemy, death. The enemy he knows he has come to conquer. This enemy has taken a friend (Lazarus), and brought great pain to his friends (Martha, Mary, and others), and in the face of death he is angry, troubled, and weeps.

Yes, because of Jesus, for the dying and for those facing it, death has lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:55), but for those of us who remain the pain is real. When Jesus weeps he tells us that it is right to cry. Death is not right. Death is not natural. God's design was not death. So we rejoice as Christians that the day will come when he will wipe every tear from our eyes and death will be no more (Rev. 21:4). Until then, with Jesus, we weep, knowing that we do not weep alone.

Day 20: Jesus' Power Over Death

Read John 11:38-44

"Jesus called Lazarus by name, for otherwise every other dead body would have risen from the dead at his word! Such is the power of Christ that by a simple word Lazarus comes back to life." – Charles Spurgeon

The power of Christ's words cannot be underestimated. In a single utterance, the Son of God shattered the chains of death that held Lazarus captive. It was not a complex incantation or an elaborate ritual; it was a simple command, spoken with authority and love. Jesus knew Lazarus by name, and His voice penetrated the darkness of the tomb, calling forth life from the lifeless.

As we reflect on this passage, we are invited to consider the profound implications of those three words: "Lazarus, come out." It speaks not only to the physical resurrection of Lazarus but also to the spiritual reality that we, too, experience through Christ.

In our lives, we may find ourselves in situations that seem bleak and lifeless, much like the tomb that held Lazarus. It could be the death of a dream, the loss of hope, or the grip of sin and sorrow. Yet, just as Jesus called Lazarus by name, He knows each of us intimately. He calls us individually, addressing the specific circumstances that bind us.

The resurrection power present in those words extends beyond the physical realm. It reaches into the depths of our souls, breathing life into areas that may seem beyond redemption. The call of Jesus is personal and powerful, capable of bringing forth life where there was once only darkness.

Even the simplicity of Christ's command has power packed into it, as it reminds us that salvation is not earned through elaborate rituals or complex formulas. It is a gift freely given by a Savior who conquered death on our behalf, as the raising of Lazarus is a mere preview of the ultimate victory of Jesus over sin and death, paving the way for our redemption.

As we meditate on the phrase "Lazarus, come out," it's important for us to remember that at a certain point Lazarus did die again. Lazarus rose from the grave, but he would eventually go back to it, and so Lazarus was in need of the same hope that we are needing. The raising of Lazarus was a preview for him and us that the day will come when we will emerge in freedom, we will be joyfully unbound from earthly sorrows, and every dead and broken aspect of our lives will be no more.

Day 21: Undignified Worship

Read John 12:1-8

Does your dignity limit your adoration of Jesus? In today's reading we find an undignified moment that encapsulates the essence of devotion and the clash between appearances and true worship. Whenever Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is in the spotlight in the gospels, she seems to emerge in some way that the dominant culture would have considered undignified; whether it was sitting at Jesus' feet to learn when her sister Martha was working hard at entertaining guests (Luke 10:38-42) or here as she anoints Jesus' feet with oil and wipes his feet with her hair. Whether she faces criticism from her sister or the betrayer, Judas, it's a tale of contrasting perspectives on duty, appearances, and the profound beauty of undignified worship.

In this passage Judas, critiques the perceived waste of expensive perfume, suggesting it could have been sold for the benefit of the poor. In the criticism, we're faced with the tension between societal expectations and the heart of worship. However, Mary, undeterred by societal expectations, understands the beauty of being undignified before the Lord. In this action she embodies the spirit of King David, who declared in 2 Samuel 6:22, "I will become even more undignified than this." David, dancing with abandon before the Ark of the Covenant, faced the disapproval of Michal, his wife, who scorned him for his lack of royal decorum. Similarly, Mary disregards the judgment of those around her, choosing instead to express her love for Jesus in a way that transcends social norms.

Mary's act of anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume goes beyond the physical; it is a symbolic pouring out of her heart, an undignified expression of deep love and gratitude. Her willingness to be undignified before the Lord mirrors David's understanding that true worship often requires stepping beyond set expectations. In anointing Jesus and washing his feet with her hair she foreshadows Jesus' undignified actions at the upcoming Last Supper when He washes the disciples' feet and teaches them how to love one another through sacrificial, humble service (John 13:1-20).

Undoubtedly, Mary's act of devotion challenges us to examine our own worship. Are we constrained by the expectations of others or driven by a desire to be seen as responsible and pragmatic? Or do we, like Mary, understand the beauty of being undignified before the Lord, expressing our love and devotion in ways that may seem extravagant to the world?

Undignified worship requires authenticity, a willingness to lay aside societal norms, and a boldness to express our love for God with abandon. Mary's example teaches us that true worship is not concerned with appearances or societal approval but is an intimate, personal connection with regard for Jesus alone.

Day 22: The King's Way Up Is Down

Read John 12:9-19

They cried “Hosanna!” In doing so, they were quoting Psalm 118:25, which literally translates “Give salvation now!” This psalm was sung daily during the Jewish feast of tabernacles and when the congregation got to the point of the “Hosanna” every male worshiper would wave a ‘lulav’ (some willow and myrtle tied with palm).

“Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.” (Ps. 118:25-26)

The psalm was widely understood as a reference to the coming messiah, the king of Israel. But as the Jewish people gathered around to prepare for Jesus’ entry into the city of Jerusalem the scene was very different from a typical king’s installation. Almost two hundred years earlier, a man named Judas Maccabeus rode into the city of Jerusalem on a war-horse when he rallied the Israelites troops to go to war with the Greeks and reinstate a Jewish kingdom. Judas Maccabeus fit the typical standard of a king who comes in power, like Solomon with his 40,000 stalls of horses and 12,000 horsemen (1 Kings 4:26). However, Jesus is not a king like Judas or Solomon, he is the king from Zechariah’s God-given vision who is “righteous and brings salvation, humble and mounted on a donkey” (Zech. 9:9).

Our world tends to view triumph and victory solely through the lens of battle, but Jesus intentionally de-militarizes their vision and announces his rule as one of peace and gentleness. Victory and liberation will not be accomplished through force but through death. To quote the opening prayer of *The Valley of Vision*:

*Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.*

Jesus invites us to embrace a counterintuitive reality where victory emerges from vulnerability, and true strength is found in humility.

To bear the cross becomes synonymous with wearing the crown, and the valley transforms into the place of profound vision. Jesus teaches us that possessing nothing grants us everything, giving is receiving, and the path of self-denial leads to the ultimate victory. As the crowd hailed

him with "Hosanna," they unwittingly heralded the arrival of a King whose kingdom would redefine the very essence of triumph— a triumph that transcends worldly expectations and triumphs through the transformative power of humility and sacrificial love.

Day 23: The Time Has Come To Love

Read John 12:20-43

What do you love? It's an important question for Christians to ponder, because whatever it is that you love will form you. Your loves have the potential to bring great joy when they are realized and great bitterness when they are denied to you. But simply chasing after our loves, whether they are realized or not, without examining them, can destroy you. They will destroy you because what we love masters us, it drives us to worship. The novelist David Foster Wallace recognized this truth when he famously said in a commencement address that,

“If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.”

Many of the people in the crowds that surrounded Jesus believe themselves to be committed to him. Our text even says that many of the authorities believed him, but at the end of the day their fear of the Pharisees outweighed their love of Jesus. As the puritan theologian William Gurnall wrote, “We fear man so much because we fear God so little.”

John 12:43 tells us that the root cause of this was a greater love that was forming them, “they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” With this in mind we might ask, how can we form a greater love for God's glory than man's. The philosopher James K.A. Smith says that the answer is worship: “worship is essentially a counter-formation to those rival liturgies we are often immersed in, cultural practices that covertly capture our loves and longings, miscalibrating them, orienting us to rival versions of the good life. Your love is a kind of automaticity” (Smith, *You Are What You Love*).

The crowds who were listening to and watching Jesus saw miraculous signs (12:37) and even heard a voice from heaven (12:28-29), but still they did not believe in him. When you were a teenager, perhaps a parent said to you, “Don't tell me you love me. Show me you love me.” What we see in this text is that neither showing nor telling brought about belief in the hearts of these people, what they needed was to love. So again, what do you love? If you are someone who struggles with faithfulness or doubt, perhaps your greatest need is not to read a new book or seek more evidence (though, it might be a help), perhaps your greatest need is to grow in love.

Consider beginning or ending your day with this prayer today:

*O God, when my faith gets overlaid with dust, blow it clean with the wind of your Spirit.
When my habits of obedience get stiff and rusty, anoint them with the oil of your Spirit.
Restore the enthusiasm of my first love for you.* (Eugene Peterson)

Day 24: Is He Judge Of The World?

Read John 12:44-50

We often hear people say things like “God wouldn’t judge me, he accepts me as I am.” Phrases like this are often meant to give license for all types of wickedness and unrepentance; and for those with some knowledge of the Bible they might turn to John 12:47 as a defense for this logic, as Jesus said, “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.” However, this would be taking that verse dangerously out of context.

Jesus has told those listening that he has “come into the world as light” and that he is “shining in the darkness.” The problem is not the light, there is more than enough light, the problem is that not everyone wants to see. The purpose of the light was not to judge, it was to save! God came to save his people; he did not drop pamphlets from heaven or send a heavenly servant, in the person of his son he came to save us.

When Jesus says that he “did not come to judge the world but to save the world,” he is telling us of his patience with the world. As God of the universe he could easily destroy those who refuse his first offer of grace, but instead in grace he waits... In the words of Matthew Henry, “He did not strike those dumb or dead who contradicted him, never made intercession against Israel, as Elijah did; though he had authority to judge, he suspended the execution of it, because he had work of another nature to do first, and that was to *save the world*.”

While this is very good news to those who will walk in the light of Jesus’ words, for those who ultimately reject those words, the words that they reject will become their judgment. As we are now more than halfway through the lenten season, these words mark the last words that Jesus speaks to the crowds in Jerusalem before his earthly freedom is stripped away. The next time that the people of Jerusalem will see him it will be as a prisoner, standing before Pilate. He will be on trial, and anything he says can and will be used against him in a court of law. Nevertheless, there is a trial already under way; Jesus, the light of the world, is staring into darkness, and darkness is staring right back.

All of us, as we read this passage, are likewise on trial as we read these words of Jesus and must choose a side. What if Jesus really is the light? What if seeing him really did mean seeing the father? What if hearing his words and not believing them really does mean that those words will judge him in the end? The light is shining, will you come or remain in darkness?

Day 25: Jesus Washes His Disciples Feet

Read John 13:1-20

Servanthood is among the great markers of the Christian life. The deeper one travels with Christ, the more profound their sense of service runs. The true Christian delights in serving others for they know that as they serve others they are in fact serving Christ (Matthew 25:40). What greater joy could a Christian experience than tending to the Savior himself. But the depth of our servanthood runs deeper still. As we serve others, and as we take the lowest role, the most unwanted positions, and fulfill the least enjoyable tasks, we are in fact behaving like Christ himself. In a sense, it is in our greatest service of others, that we most identify with our Savior.

On the night of his betrayal and arrest, Jesus performed an act of service that would not easily be forgotten by his disciples. He washed their feet. In the days of Christ, men typically wore open toed sandals. So, at the end of a day, one's feet were particularly dirty from the day's travels. What's more, because of the presence of many animals and the lack of systems for cleaning up waste alongside paths and roads, the role of cleaning feet was particularly unsanitary. According to the norms of their day, touching another person's feet was work only suitable for Gentile slaves. There was a particular aspect of shame associated with being responsible for cleaning another person's feet. It was the lowest a person could go. It is there where we find Jesus.

While there are numerous examples of the shame associated with washing feet in Jesus day, there are no other examples in all of ancient literature of a foot washing performed by a leader. Jesus is the first leader in all history to dare serve his followers in this way. Peter is so shocked by the audacity of Jesus that he initially cries out, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" In a culture like Peter's that was built on particular codes of honor and shame, Peter did not have a category to describe how unsettling it must have felt to have the man whom he believed to be the messiah, dare to lower himself in such a way. Peter was yet to learn the lesson of the moment. Jesus was not just washing the dirt from the feet of his disciples, but he was teaching them a new way of life. He was bathing them in a new perspective of humble sacrificial love and service towards others.

When Christ completed this act of love, he said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you (John 13:14-15)." During Lent we must pause and ask ourselves whether we are truly following in the footsteps of our Savior. Christ's love was sacrificial, and so ought our love be. Christ did not just use washing feet as a symbol or an illustration of the kind of love we ought to exhibit. He commanded that we do likewise.

There is a hidden joy in following Christ downwards. It runs contrary to the fast-paced hunger for the top so often exhibited by our secular age. May we remember the example set by Christ.

Day 26: Betrayal and Glory

Read John 13:21-30

When Jesus washes the feet of his disciples he already takes on a position of shame, with betrayal added into the mix that shame only increases. What must the apostles of Jesus be thinking when he says “one of you will betray me.” They joined Jesus for freedom, not servitude. To rule not to be reigned over, for grandeur not vulgarity, for victory not for disappointment. Where is the glory in betrayal?

To paraphrase the late-great preacher Dr. E.K. Bailey: Where is the glory in having a pure teacher clean the dirty feet of his followers? Where is the glory in the coming together of filthy flesh with the divine? Where is the glory when the sacred intersects with the secular? Where is the glory when the vertical meets the horizontal? Where is the glory when righteousness is betrayed by wretchedness?

The disciples, at this passover meal, did not understand who Jesus could be speaking about. The usual arrangement of a Passover meal at this time was to have a series of couches arranged in a U around the table. The most important person reclined in the center at what we might consider the bottom of the U. The place of honor was to the left of this person, and the second place was to his right. We know that John was to Jesus’ right because of v23 and that Peter was too far to whisper to Jesus (24). We also know that it seems Judas Iscariot was close enough to receive a piece of food from Jesus (26). For this reason, some scholars have argued that Judas likely was given that place of honor, perhaps as a final subtle appeal by Jesus.

Despite the proximity, Judas saw no glory as he identified with the crowds of John 12:43 who “loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”

In this way, Judas is a parable and a warning; too often we read this story as “insiders”, thinking it depicts someone else. But Judas should be more disturbing than Pilate or Caiaphas or any member of the Sanhedrin. He saw the light and understood it, but chose the darkness anyway. As D.L. Bartlett once said:

“Judas is the reminder that every day is judgment day and that on any day some faithful follower, like Judas—or like you and me—might turn tail on the light and stumble out into darkness, caught up in evil or caught up by evil’s prince.

With the disciples, we might ask, ‘why Lord?’ Why would you wash the feet of someone you knew would betray you? And why should we ‘do likewise’ for potential traitors like this? Washing feet? Scrubbing toilets? Changing bedpans? Cleaning dishes? Wiping drool?

It is because here is the glory. The King of the universe lays down his rights for the care of those who are his enemies (Rom. 5:10), “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Even though we betrayed his kingdom, denying him, and suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18), he still came for us and made an appeal of love to us.

Day 27: A New Commandment

Read John 13:21-35

The life of a Christian is one that ought to be marked overwhelmingly by an ethic of love. Jesus taught us in John 13:35 that the watching world would discover the evidence of our faith in Jesus primarily by our love for one another. In other words, our love ought to be so compelling, that even the hardest atheist, and the stubborn hearts, would look at our life and see the mark of Christ upon us.

While Jesus accurately calls this a “new commandment,” for this commandment had not been given with this kind of specificity before, the idea is actually woven throughout the entire Old Testament. God’s people were always intended to be set apart and marked as a people of love. In Deuteronomy, just before Moses gave the laws to Israel he spoke of the purpose of the laws in this way, “Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’” The national laws of ancient Israel were of such high moral fiber, that were Israel to live by them, the surrounding nations would be overwhelmed by the power of the people governed by such rule and living by such love.

At our best, the Church is a people of love. Throughout history, when the Church has been boldly guided by the Spirit into Christ-like sacrificial love of others, the world has indeed taken notice. In early Christian history, Christians became famous for adopting children who had been cast away from their families and left on the streets to perish. In other centuries when plagues came upon cities, it was Christians who boldly stayed behind to care for the afflicted. Christians built hospitals, managed orphanages, dug wells, constructed schools, and loved the least of these, not for a pay check or a plaque, but because Christ had commissioned them to do so.

In one famous letter of Church history it was written of Christians who were so grossly persecuted for their faith, “They love all men, and are persecuted by all... They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.”

In a world marked by a great confusion over the definition of love, it is time for Christians to demonstrate by their lives what love really means. The time is ripe for bold, selfless, Spirit-filled Christians to serve others in such a way that they take notice. The watching world is looking for an example to follow. The world may disagree with our doctrine, but may they never say we did not love daringly.

Day 28: An Exclusive Jesus

Read John 14:1-14

If you were to ask the average person today, in our pluralist society, what the greatest evil was, a common answer you would receive is ‘exclusivity.’ Exclusivism is thought to be narrow-minded, intolerant, arrogant, and unloving. Popular voices in our culture will argue that there is not one way, or one truth, or even one way of life that is better than another as long as we don’t hurt anyone and are inclusive of all ways, truths, and lives. Interestingly, those who do not agree with this doctrine of inclusivism are often excluded for their ‘bigotry’ in not conforming to the way, truth, and life of inclusivism.

While many inclusivists appreciate snippets of Jesus’ teachings that promote the virtues they regard as loving, John 14:6-7 is not likely to be among them. When Jesus proclaims that he is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and adds that “No one comes to the Father except through me,” it is difficult to interpret the statement as anything but exclusive. But what does Jesus mean by this trifold statement? It appears to be in response to the question Genesis 2-3 poses, ‘how will this world and humanity be made right?’

In Genesis 3, after God banished the man and woman from the garden, verse 24 says he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard **the way** to the tree of life. From this point on humanity has been seeking for the way to be cleared. When Eve gives birth, it seems that she is holding out this hope when she says ““I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” But the baby she had received would only add to their sorrows, as he would not grow to be the man that crushed death and the devil, but would be a purveyor of death, killing his own brother.

In Genesis 5, a man named Lamech holds out this hope when his son is born, as he gives him the name Noah saying “Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.” But Noah was not the one either, even with humanity starting over and descending from this new man, the way was still not cleared.

In the book of Exodus the Israelites are told to build a tabernacle with symbols of eden embossed into the curtains, and chiseled as instruments to be placed inside; like the lampstand of pure gold (Exod. 25:31) which was to be crafted with flowerlike cups, buds, and blossoms, to symbolize the tree of life. But the way to this symbol was blocked to most, except for certain priests, and the way to the innermost part of the temple, the holy of holies where the Lord was uniquely present, was blocked to all except one priest each year. That most holy place was separated from the rest of the temple by a woven curtain three and a half inches thick. When Jesus says he is the way, the truth, and the life, he is claiming that he *is* exclusive access to it all. He is the way through that curtain, he is the truth that undoes the lie of Satan that cast them out, and he is the tree of life that they must be nourished by. There is no other way. It’s exclusive, as all claims are, but it is also the truth and the life.

Day 29: Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit

Read John 14:15-31

Throughout this passage there is an interplay between a believer's requirement to follow Christ's commandments (v. 15) and the coming of the promised Holy Spirit (v. 16). These two ideas are often pitted against each other, as if they were in opposition. But the way Jesus interlaces them, seems to communicate that both are essential and related.

In verses 16 and 26 Christ promises that when the Holy Spirit comes, he will be our "helper." In the original Greek, the term is "paraclete." Translators have struggled to find a word that adequately describes the weight and meaning of the word paraclete. Other English translations have opted for words like: comforter, counselor, or advocate to convey the idea. Paraclete communicates something more than passive assistance only in times of trial, as our translation of "helper" is at risk of conveying.

The Spirit is the continuation of the ministry of Christ remaining with His Church forever. The Spirit is our "teacher" (John 14:26) who instructs us in the ways of Christ and illuminates our minds to understand and receive the Word of God. The Spirit always prompts the soul to magnify Christ, to see Christ in all things, and submit one's whole self unto Christ (John 15:26). The Spirit works through a believer's prayer life even when they don't have the words to pray (Romans 8:26). Were we ever to stand trial and be forced to give an account for our faith, it is promised the Holy Spirit would strengthen us and speak through us of the magnificence of Christ (Mark 13:11). Yes indeed, the Spirit is our helper, but not in some passive sense of weakness, but rather as an all empowering leader of our soul.

The descriptor of this promised helper in verse 16 is qualified in verse 17 as "the Spirit of truth." The Spirit serves as an interpreter, discerning truth from error, not just in facts and figures, but more importantly in the ethical life of man. Jesus promised, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (John 14:21). Jesus knew the sin filled condition of our human hearts. Jesus knew that no one was able to keep his commandments on their own. In his perfect plan he has sent us a helper to enable us to honor God by living according to His commandments.

A person is not justified by their obedience. They are justified by faith in Christ's obedience, and Christ's sacrifice on their behalf. Yet, when a person believes in Christ and is filled by the Spirit, they are empowered to obey His commands. Obedience is therefore not an effort to justify ourselves before God, but is rather a joy filled response of love by one who has already been justified freely by God's grace. Praise God for our paraclete who empowers us for such a life!

Day 30: Friends Of God

Read John 15:1-17

In the grand drama of life, choosing friends is like casting characters in the narrative of our existence. The world offers a plethora of advice on this subject, with books and axioms attempting to guide us through the complex process of befriending the right people. Growing up, our parents would caution us to be selective, emphasizing the importance of surrounding ourselves with those of strong moral character. Yet, in the divine play orchestrated by Jesus, we find an unexpected twist – a lowering of standards to embrace lost and broken sinners like us. "You are my friends," declares Jesus, "if you do what I command you."

At first glance, this statement might raise eyebrows. We're accustomed to friendships being free from strings and conditions. The notion of someone saying, "you can be my friend if..." may trigger skepticism about the authenticity of the friendship. It evokes memories of Orwellian dystopias, where rulers impose love through oppression, harassment, and terror. However, Jesus' command isn't a sinister ultimatum; it's an invitation to a liberating friendship.

Unlike Big Brother in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, Jesus doesn't seek mindless servants. Instead, he extends a hand of friendship, inviting us into a purposeful connection. Love, in Jesus' realm, is not a cold command devoid of context. It is a warm embrace rooted in his sacrificial demonstration – as He first laid down His life for His friends. In return, he asks that we reciprocate this love by embracing one another.

Mark Twain once remarked, "The trouble is not in dying for a friend, but in finding a friend worth dying for." Jesus, however, found friends who were unworthy of dying for and still died for them anyway. It's this type of love that is meant to be mirrored by his followers.

Consider for a moment the audacity of Jesus – befriending those who are flawed, lost, and broken. In doing so, he redefines the very essence of friendship. It's not about perfection but about a journey of redemption. We, the flawed antagonists of this divine narrative, are not coerced into blind obedience, but remade as protagonists and are invited to co-author the story. This is love.

The command to love one another echoes through the ages, resonating with profound simplicity. It encapsulates the essence of true friendship – a selfless, sacrificial bond that stands the test of time. Jesus, the ultimate friend, challenges us to find worth in one another, not because of anyone's inherent worthiness, but because of His worthiness.

So embrace the liberating friendship offered by Jesus. Let us love one another not out of compulsion, but as a joyful response to the love we have received. In this divine camaraderie, we

discover a friendship with purpose – a bond that transcends the ordinary, inviting us into the extraordinary story of grace, redemption, and everlasting love.

Day 31: Your Sorrow Will Turn into Joy

Read John 16:16-24

At the heart of this passage is a message of hope that was intended by Jesus to breathe confidence and spiritual fortitude into his disciples. Their sorrow would transform into rejoicing. Those two ideas are entwined throughout this passage in a way that communicates that the former will necessarily lead to the latter. Their suffering will not be forever. Their hardships will pass. Their angst will and grief will be fully and finally satisfied. But we must ask ourselves, what grief and what suffering is Jesus referring to?

In the most obvious and immediate understanding of Christ's words, our vision is cast upon the cross and resurrection of Christ. "You will see me no longer" is certainly a reference to Christ's death upon a cross where he was crucified for our sins. "And again in a little while, you will see me," is certainly a reference to Easter Sunday when the disciples discovered the empty tomb and saw their master face to face. O how their grief and sorrow must have been transformed upon seeing their crucified savior resurrected in the flesh! Surely, their sorrow was turned into joy that Easter morning.

And yet, there are undertones throughout this passage that hint to us of a second meaning. Augustine wrote of this passage, "At present the Church is in travail with the longing for this fruit of all her labor, but then she shall bring to the birth in its actual contemplation; now she travails in birth with groaning, then shall she bring forth in joy; now she travails in birth through her prayers, then shall she bring forth in her praises."¹ Augustine believed Christ was speaking of the joy that all believers will experience at Christ's second coming, when death and grief are done away with forever.

Perhaps we are wise to lean into both interpretations. There is a true joy that is available for every faithful follower of Jesus today, because of Christ's resurrection. This is a joy that surpasses understanding and that no amount of suffering can steal. This joy is the firm foundation of the Christian faith, the declaration that Christ has defeated sin, Satan, and death and sits enthroned in the present. His love for us is unshakeable and unrelenting. In our deepest trials, we must see the resurrection as the core source of navigating this life well.

And yet, "the little while" of verse 16 certainly can feel like quite a long while at times. Extended trials tend to deplete our endurance and test our patience. The Christian must continually ask for the faith to fix our eyes backwards upon Christ's death and resurrection, and simultaneously forwards upon his certain return. These two events function like twin spotlights paving the road from beginning to end on this perilous pilgrimage that is the Christian life.

¹ Augustine of Hippo, "Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John,"

Day 32: Ask Your Father

Read John 16:25-33

You can typically tell how ‘high up’ a person is on the corporate ladder by determining how many people you need to talk to before you can speak to them. Depending on the person you wish to speak with, you may have to go through lower level employees, junior managers, regional managers, and even a personal secretary before you can speak with them. The bigwigs will often have you jump through a variety of hoops prior to getting on their calendar. But no matter how impressive your title, or the number of letters after your name, there are certain people who don’t even need an appointment to show up at your door.

There is a famous picture from 1963 of John F. Kennedy Jr, playing at his father’s feet under the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office of the White House. Surely anyone who wanted an appointment with President Kennedy would have needed to go through all sorts of people and procedures prior to having his ear, but not his son. No matter which President of the United States, they might have been thought of as one of the most powerful people in the world, but to their children, they have simply been ‘Dad.’ This is the type of relationship that Jesus is inviting us into:

“In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God” (John 16:26-27).

Jesus, addressing His disciples, unveils a paradigm-shifting reality about prayer and access to the Father. Unlike the convoluted processes of approaching worldly figures, Jesus declares that a day is coming when we can ask the Father directly, in His name. There will be no need for intermediaries or secretaries because, in the divine hierarchy, we are not staff or lobbyists; we are beloved children.

Our appointment with The Father is unaffected by our status or achievements. We are always welcome because of our love for and allegiance to Jesus. And the invitation Jesus extends is not one of formality and distance; it is an invitation into the inner sanctum of a familial bond where we can approach the Father with the familiarity of a child running into the arms of a loving parent. It is an invitation to play at his feet.

The triumphant declaration, "I have overcome the world," resonates with the assurance that the trials of this life are conquered by Jesus. It is a call to anchor our trust in Him, recognizing that our prayers are heard in the context of a conquered reality. Our direct access to the Father is secured by Jesus’ victory and our position as beloved children should give us assurance that, no matter the challenges, we stand on the side of the Overcomer.

Day 33: The High Priestly Prayer

Read John 17:1-26

This chapter has historically been called the High Priestly Prayer. In it Christ prays powerfully over His Church, and lays his heart and desire bare for us to understand His desires for who we are to be and what He aims to form in us. When the Christian meditates on John 17, it is as if they are a child with their ear pressed against the door of the den, listening to Christ in the next room praying fervently for them.

We notice first in this prayer how Christ's glory is center. "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me" (John 17:24). The human soul was made to behold God's glory. His glory is the sun underneath which the Christian longs to bask, and the shade underneath which the Christian takes shelter. This is the great trajectory of the life that has submitted unto God, to increasingly desire His glory over and through our lives. We must pray for the faith to pray with joyful hearts, "Oh God, may you get the glory through my career, through my marriage, through my singleness, through my suffering, through my Church, through my conversations, through my thoughts." Through the filling of the Holy Spirit, the simplest of Christians is empowered to behold His glory even in the mundane exercises of life (1 Cor 3:18).

Yet, how we ought to lament at the lackluster effort so many make to keep the glory of Christ as the centerpiece of their day to day lives. We are so easily consumed by godless dispositions. We often, like Moses, ascend the mountain in prayer and behold the glory of God, only to exit our prayers and fail to see God in the rest of our moments. We must train ourselves for godliness. We must discipline ourselves to keep the glory of Christ at the forefront of our minds. As it will be in heaven, we must labor by faith to experience now.

Intricately connected to Christ's glory is the Church's unity. Jesus prayed, "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:22-23). When the true Church is divided among themselves, we fail to showcase the glory of God among us. A divided Church is likened to Joshua's first battle against the forces of Ai where Israel was forced to flee, which caused God's enemies to gloat and God's people to fear (Josh 7:4). The cause of Israel's defeat was not a weak God, but sin in the camp, divided hearts among God's people. The rot needed to be expunged. Unity needed to be restored, before victory was secured. The true Church of Christ must strive for brotherly love and unity. If our unity showcases Christ's glory, then may a humble quest for unity be ever before us, as a driving factor in every Christian relationship.

Day 34: Should He Not Drink The Cup?

Read John 18:1-14

What if Jesus did not die? What if there was a way to avoid brutal execution? A way to keep Jesus from ending up in the hands of the soldiers? Some have asked this question, wondering what might be different if Jesus was “successful” by earthly standards and was able to establish his kingdom on earth without suffering. This was surely the hope of Simon Peter as he drew his dagger and amputated the ear of Malchus.

No one would have expected Jesus or his followers to be carrying weapons, as it was against the law during feasts. However, a dagger would be small enough to be concealed, telling us that Peter was apparently feeling frightened and revolutionary enough to flout the rules. In the other retellings of Jesus’ life and ministry different aspects of Jesus’ rebuke are highlighted, but only John records Jesus’ use of the language of ‘cup.’ “*Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me*” (John 18:11).

Jesus told his followers numerous times that he must suffer and die. He told Nicodemus that he must be raised like the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14). He told the crowds that he must die to produce many seeds, and that it would be wrong to ask the Father to save him from what was to come (12:23-27). He regularly told his disciples that a time was soon coming that he would no longer be with them (13:33; 14:25). Nevertheless, the attack on Malchus was as clumsy and pointless as Peter’s misunderstanding was great. Jesus needed to die, not simply because he foreknew that he would, but because of what his death would accomplish.

If Jesus of Nazareth had not died, all that we do would be meaningless. The redemptive purpose of Christ's death on the cross would be nullified. The very essence of salvation through the shedding of his blood would be absent, leaving humanity without the means to reconcile with God. The significance of the resurrection, a triumph over death, would be lost, as would the profound symbolism of the cup that Jesus willingly drank to fulfill the Father's plan.

Peter should be grateful that Jesus drank the cup, as it paved the way for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Without the crucifixion, humanity would remain in the grip of sin, separated from God's mercy. It is through the cross, and his singular sacrifice that Jesus was able to lose none of those that the Father gave him (18:9).

The misguided zeal of Peter underscores the profound gratitude believers should have for Christ's obedience to the Father's will. The Kingdom of Jesus will not come into effect through violence and coercion. The cross, though seemingly a brutal end, is the cup and the gateway to salvation in Christ’s eternal kingdom.

Day 35: Peter Denies Jesus

Read John 18:15-25

Courage is a virtue most of us imagine we might have given particular circumstances. We tend to envision ourselves as heroes with whom the world would be far worse off without. Peter was no different. Only shortly before the account of Peter's denial in this passage, he swore that he would follow Jesus to the point of giving his life for him (John 13:37-38). What courage he imagined he had. And what painful lament he must have experienced at the reality of his cowardice. The Gospel of Matthew adds the detail that Peter, upon realizing the fullness of his own weakness, immediately "went out and wept bitterly" (Matthew 26:75).

To make matters far heavier, we must see the contrast that the writer John develops for us in this passage. Jesus was being questioned by the most prominent religious leaders of the day who had the power to take his life should they so determine. Against these forces, Jesus held firm, unwavering, and resolute. Meanwhile, Peter was in the courtyard failing to exhibit boldness at the slightest questioning of a mere servant girl.

Courage comes in many forms. In its more extreme forms around the globe, Christians will truly have their lives and livelihoods threatened due to their faith in Christ. Jesus promised this would be the case (Matthew 10:17). Yet, in the modern Western world that we inhabit, Christian courage begins with a simple bold willingness to be associated with Jesus before others who deem that association foolish or worse. The sad reality is that many of us have failed dramatically just as Peter did. We have had opportunities to speak in support of our King, and have chosen the path of silence, or perhaps the path of acquiescence, rather than the path of courage. In Peter's failure, we see a part of ourselves. Yet, Peter's story did not end in the courtyard of cowardice. Neither does ours. Christ met Peter in his weakness, and offered him not only forgiveness for his failures, but strength for his future (John 21:15-17).

There is an old hymn that goes, "If we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing. Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing." We, like Peter, must learn to come to the end of ourselves in order to be filled and led by Christ. Spiritual courage does not mean that we must be strong *for* the Lord, but that we must be strong *in* the Lord. Christ does not call us to a vain courage showcasing our own vanity, but invites us to a humble meekness desperately depending on God's strength. The deeper we push into Christ through faith, and the more we soak in the treasures of the gospel, the greater our convictions will grow, and the greater his spiritual strength and conviction will flow through us. No man is weak, who walks in the strength of the Lord.

Day 36: Jesus Delivered to Be Crucified

Read John 19:1-16

Perhaps there are no more haunting words than the cry of the chief priests and the officers when they chanted, “Crucify him, crucify him.” One must read these words through the lens of the entire Gospel of John in order to feel their weight. The one to whom this chant of death was recited was not just an innocent man, he was the innocent man. John has gone out of his way to demonstrate not only the holiness and spiritual vitality of Jesus, but much more the greatness of his nature, the Word become flesh, Emmanuel—God with us.

What do we do with the barbaric words of the chief priests that led to the death of our messiah? Are we to pass them off as some great mistake of history, some foolish error made by some religious zealots back then?

The Christian testimony of faith begins with a deep acknowledgment of one's own sinfulness. Most Christians very rarely take the time to consider the depth of their depravity. This is evidenced by the ongoing absence of real confession in many Christian's lives. The Biblical picture of our condition before saving faith in Christ, is that of spiritual slavery and death. We were rebels to God, through and through. Every thought was tainted by rebellion. Every deed was tarnished by treason. Every prayer was harnessed in treachery.

The Puritan author Thomas Boston offers a doleful description of our condition outside of Christ. "As in a dunghill every part contributes to the corruption of the whole, so the natural man, while in this state, grows still worse and worse... every faculty of the soul serves to corrupt another more and more." We are far more sinful than we ever dared imagine.

As we consider the cry of these chief priests to crucify the one innocent one who came to set the captives free, we must hear our own treason in their voice. They are easy to condemn because they are so far removed from us. It is always simpler to cast evil upon some villain who stands at a distance. It is far more difficult to see the villainy in ourselves. But this is the true starting point of Christianity. It is only when we, not only accept this truth in an intellectual sense, but much more importantly feel this truth at an emotional sense, that the full beauty of the Gospel begins to penetrate our souls.

Christ died for enemies like us. Before Christ empowers us to love our enemies, he demonstrates enemy-love through the cross. It is through the cross that the enemy is adopted as a son and daughter and the rebel is made an honored knight. We must see ourselves, standing among the chief priests chanting, “crucify him,” if we are to experience the full weight of God's love. We must feel the agony of those words, in order to feel the weight of Christ's love of us.

Day 37: Related By Blood

Read: John 19:17-27

Crucifixion was a bloody ordeal. Prior to being nailed to the cross which would have drawn blood from someone's hands and feet, those being executed in this manner would be scourged (viciously beaten with a Roman whip that was designed to rip most of the flesh off of a person). In Jesus' case, he was given the addition of having a crown of thorns pierce his scalp. While some might occasionally lose consciousness from the severe pain and loss of blood, crucifixion was not designed to kill you from blood loss but by asphyxiation as a person's whole body weight was supported by their stretched out arms.

Crucifixion was not simply a death penalty; it was a lynching, a symbol of terror and an instrument of torture. Being crucified was the greatest shame you could place on your family, as you stood as a sign to all who passed by, 'don't let this happen to you.' Parents would shield the eyes of their young children when passing a crucifixion and think to themselves, 'where did that person's mother or father go wrong?' And so, when Pilate orders that they write "The King of the Jews" above Jesus' cross, the chief priests immediately want to reject the shame by association. Who would want to be associated with or related to a bloody monster, like one who hung on a roman cross?

Four women, and one of Jesus' apostles (John) chose to associate. They stood by Jesus' cross, close enough to where they could hear his voice, and he said to his mom "Woman, behold, your son!" What must have gone through her mind when she heard those words? Jesus, with his hands bound and stretched out, had no ability to gesture as he said those words, "behold, your son!" Perhaps she thought of the prophecy of Simeon, when he foretold that "a sword [would] pierce through [her] own soul" (Luke 2:35). The son she labored with and delivered, who she fed and taught, laughed and cried with, was now dripping with blood and gasping for air. Beholding her son in this state would surely have been its own form of torture.

But then the meaning of his words to his mother were transformed as he looked to John, saying, "Behold, your mother!" We know from other places in scripture that Jesus had other siblings (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), one of whom was James who would later become a follower of Jesus and write a letter to the church that we have in our Bibles today. Jesus' statement is not meant to nullify or minimize the relationships Mary had with her other children. Rather, these words from the cross are meant to elevate and magnify the relationship that Jesus purchased with his blood. We often misquote an old proverb that says, "blood is thicker than water," to highlight the importance of our biological and genetic relations, but the original proverb fits more exactly with these words from Jesus, "the blood of the covenant is thicker than the waters of the womb."

It is this relation, by His blood, that was purchased for us, that we should hold dear and ponder as we reflect on this cry from the cross.

Day 38: It is Finished

Read: John 19:28-30

Death by crucifixion was ugly. Christ's crucifixion was made even more offensive by the flogging and taunting at the hand of a Roman guard that took place beforehand. As the last breaths of life slowly slipped out of him, we are told that he looked up to heaven and cried out, "It is finished." In the original Greek manuscripts, this phrase is one word, tetelestai. It is a word that would be used by a potter after molding a new pot of clay on his spinning wheel, or by an artist when he stood back and admired his new masterpiece. But when Jesus spoke these words, one is forced to ask 'what was finished?'

On the one hand, we might say that the "it" was a reference to the entirety of his life. His was a worthy life. Christ perfectly magnified the Father at all times. Though he was fully God, he willingly submitted himself to all that it meant to be fully human. He experienced the full range of human life and emotion. He knew what it was to be a son, to be a brother, and a friend. He experienced what it was to live in the midst of a sin-filled and often godless world. He experienced the death of friends, the hatred of enemies, the slander of persecutors, and the general brokenness of the human experience. On more than one occasion we read of his weeping over the circumstances. He experienced the heartache of those who would abandon him and the dismay of those who would betray him. But he also experienced the wonder of intimate prayer with his Heavenly Father, the joy of friendship, the sweetness of the pursuit of God in the midst of community. Yes, his indeed was the perfect life. A life with no error, nor proneness to error. His was a mind totally set towards pleasing the Father. His was a heart without deceit in any way. Jesus upon knowing his final breath was upon him, stood back and looked at his life as an artist might his artwork, and saw the masterpiece in its entirety, and said, "It is complete."

And yet, I suspect that there is another layer in this peculiar phrase of Christ's. For while certainly, his life was drawing to a close, so was the work he had to accomplish. Jesus came that he might be crucified. The prophet Isaiah writing over 700 years prior said of the Messiah, "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Christ's death was an offering, not unlike the animal offerings that were made daily and annually by the Jews of the Old Covenant. Christ the lamb, was placed upon the altar of the crucifix, and his life was given as a ransom for many. The wrath of God was poured out on that single offering, in order that the love of God might be poured out on the redeemed.

As we reflect on these final words of Christ, "It is finished" may we join with the master artist himself. May we stand back and gaze upon the beauty of his life and death as one that is perfect and complete.

Day 39: Jesus was Buried

Read John 19:31-42

Though it is not commonly observed in the American Church, Holy Saturday, the day commemorating Jesus' burial and full 24-hours in the tomb, has been an important part of the theological tradition of the church for two millenia. Jesus' time in the tomb, his descent to the dead, has even been historically regarded as a test of Christian orthodoxy as it is reflected in the historic statement of the church that we call *The Apostle's Creed*. And so as we come to the end of this Lenten season, with great hope and excitement for celebrating the resurrection of Jesus this Sunday, let's take a moment to pause with the historic church and ponder that he was buried and descended to the dead.

Perhaps the question that most people think to ask is, *what was he doing?* We know that he had not yet ascended and taken a seat at the right hand of God the Father almighty (that is still to come, post-resurrection; Luke 24:50-53), but scripture does not leave us guessing: One of the key passages for understanding Holy Saturday is 1 Peter 3:18-20—

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

When Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus and put it in his own tomb, and while the Nicodemus came with myrrh and aloes to prepare the body, Jesus was not doing *nothing*. 1 Peter tells us that he was harrowing hell; though silent to the living, Jesus was proclaiming to the dead. “For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead” (1 Peter 4:6). The good news of God's victory was preached to the saints of the old covenant.

Jesus' day in the tomb matters, because his proclamation of victory matters to saints today and the saint of old. Jesus truly died and in his death proclaimed his victory over it. Jesus's day in the tomb matters, because if Jesus truly died and was victorious then we have no reason to fear death. *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:5).*

St. Athanasius once said, “If you see children playing with a lion, don't you know the lion must either be dead or completely powerless? In the same way... when you see Christians playing with death and despising it, there can be no doubt that death has been destroyed by Christ and that its corruption has been dissolved and brought to an end.”

Holy Saturday matters, because it marks the defanging of the lion of Death and the proclamation of victory!

Day 40: The Resurrection

Read John 20:1-18

At the center of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:13-14, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."

The resurrection is not a tack-on intended to be read as allegory or mythology. Rather it is a central thread that holds all of Scripture together. Our resurrected king has conquered death, and as a result life can never be the same. We must fight any temptation to allow Christ's resurrection to become commonplace, unimportant, or of secondary principle in our lives.

Further, we must fight the temptation that Mary exemplifies in this passage. When Christ first encounters Mary, she is weeping. She is overwhelmed by the distress of her circumstances. She believes Jesus to be dead. But upon hearing that familiar call out her name, "Mary," she is suddenly transformed. Her demeanor, her outlook, her perspective, her understanding, all changed in a moment.

We are tempted to live practically as if Christ has not risen from the grave. We are tempted to categorize the resurrection of Christ as a doctrine to know in our mind, while never truly living experientially in the power and the hope of our resurrected king. How was Mary's life transformed upon seeing the resurrected Christ? I wonder how that moment in the garden shaped every future trial she would endure. In later years, as persecutions upon Christians broke out across the Roman Empire, as others among her close friends were tortured and killed, I wonder how she clung to Christ's resurrection.

We must permit regular reflection on Christ's defeat of death that first Easter Sunday to shape our perspective upon every decision and every moment of our life. When we are low, and experience all the hardship of a world inundated with sin and sorrow, we must train ourselves to fix our gaze upon Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father. When we are anxious and fearful, we must tell ourselves again the story of Easter Sunday, for in it we are reminded that he who conquered death has all things under his control. And on that day, when our breath begins to fade, when our eyes begin to dim, and we sense that our time has come to depart from this world, we can have a certainty that He who stands on the other side, who will welcome us into His eternal kingdom of love, is none other than that resurrected King, that crucified Savior, that Son of God, that friend of sinners.

Yes Christian, he went to death and back again to save you from Hell, and to secure your eternity with Him. Magnify his name this Easter. Join the choirs of angels in celebration of our resurrected King. He who was killed, is alive! "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen" (Revelation 7:12).