

Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2020

"Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross"

ELW 335

1 Jesus, keep me near the cross,
there's a precious fountain;
free to all, a healing stream
flows from Calv'ry's mountain.

Refrain

In the cross, in the cross
be my glory ever;
till my ransomed soul shall find
rest beyond the river.

2 Near the cross, a trembling soul,
love and mercy found me;
there the bright and morning
star sheds its beams around me.

Refrain

3 Near the cross! O Lamb of God,
bring its scenes before me;
help me walk from day to day
with its shadow o'er me.

Refrain

4 Near the cross I'll watch and wait,
hoping, trusting ever,
till I reach the golden strand
just beyond the river.

Refrain

Text: Fanny J. Crosby, 1820–1915

Wednesday, February 26

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1–6; 16–21

It is Ash Wednesday, a day that marks the beginning of the traditional Lenten journey of following Jesus on the way to the cross. One tradition marking this journey with attention to self-reflection and the practice of denial is the question, “What will you give up for Lent?” But Jesus’ words in his Sermon on the Mount raise some cautions about the risk or danger of placing emphasis on outward show or practice, as if that were the basis of some spiritual paycheck.

Instead, Jesus teaches here about a gracious God who calls his followers to the way of steadfast love. He teaches them to pray, “Our Father, your kingdom come ... and rescue us from the evil one.” He invites them to see that the truly examined life rests in knowing what it means to have “treasure in heaven,” and to experience the truth that treasure and heart belong together—because you have been given a heart that perceives the rich mercy of a Father who knows what you need even before you ask.

Gracious God, teach us to examine our life and know that you stand ready to give the rich rewards of life in you even before we ask. Such are the riches of your promise to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Thursday, February 27

Romans 5:12–19

As we pick up today’s reading, the apostle Paul has just boldly stated for his Roman hearers what he clearly considers the very heart of the good news of the gospel: that God’s love for us has been shown in that, even while we were yet sinners, Jesus Christ died for us, so that we might be reconciled to God and receive life in his name (Romans 5:6–11). But good things bear repeating. As if to bring the message home and seal it in our hearts, no fewer than five times in the next eight verses Paul lays out a cosmic-reaching comparison and contrast: Just as through one man—Adam—came sin, disobedience, condemnation, and death for all people, so through one man—Jesus Christ—came obedience, justification, and life for all through God’s free gift of grace.

The argument may seem overly complex. But its intent is clear—that we might hear as clearly as possible the good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. Wow!

God of mercy, as we journey once again with Jesus on the way to the cross, may we hear so clearly the good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friday, February 28

Matthew 4:1–11

Not all goes well in wilderness places. Just as for the Israelites, so for God's Messiah, and so for us in our life journeys, wildernesses bring times of testing and risk. Jesus knows this in himself and about us. So in the familiar disciple prayer he teaches us, he invites us to pray, "Do not lead us into a time of testing, but deliver us from the evil one."

At each point of testing, Jesus fights off the temptation to grasp at personal power; he models the scriptural call to love God with one's whole being and to rely on the word and promise of God to be present and sustain us. And so as we journey with Jesus, we can confidently pray to "our Father" for God's kingdom to come among us, knowing that even before we pray, our loving God stands ready to hear and answer in affirmation of faithful and obedient children who come to their dear Father in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, give us confidence like Jesus to trust in your presence and to know that in all of our wildernesses you will be faithful to come to our aid. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Saturday, February 29

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 1)

The old saying goes, "One picture is worth a thousand words." And so it is with the rich and inviting imagery of this dear old favorite hymn. In its brief opening line, the plea for Jesus to "keep me near" breathes with a compelling warmth and comfort that has power to transform the stark imagery of the cross—ancient implement of death—that concludes the phrase. And whose senses are not drawn in by recollection of a flowing mountain stream as an occasion of joyful refreshment? Here Calvary the hill of crucifixion, in Fanny Crosby's poetic vision, has been transformed into a mountain from which flows a precious fountain, bringing the free gift of God's healing grace.

In fact, every word of this brief opening verse is carefully chosen, carefully placed, and artfully contributes to the image of the whole. It is no wonder that it has been such a beloved companion to so many on our Lenten journeys. May it be a companion for your meditation and wonder this Lenten season as well.

God of grace and comfort, on our daily journey of faith, keep us ever near the cross, that we might know more deeply the wondrous blessing of your free gift in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sunday, March 1

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, refrain)

The opening phrases of the refrain of this great hymn focus so well our meditation on the cross of Jesus. Aided by the music and poetry, we join the apostle Paul in his profession: "I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). In the second phrase we are brought face to face with the profound mystery of the cross of Jesus: that by God's grace, the instrument of death and defeat should stand as the very sign of the glory of God revealed in God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And then comes the concluding phrase, capturing well the whole of our salvation story: now ransomed and freed and given life through the cross of Jesus, we can confidently look forward to an eternal relationship with God in Christ Jesus our Lord. All of this is sealed by the closing final image of the river, which joins the initial image of the precious fountain flowing from the cross with a remembrance of God's gift for us in the waters of baptism.

O God, our Hope, keep us ever near the cross, that we may continue to behold your glory in the gift of life you have promised through your love for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday, March 2

Genesis 12:1–4a

Imagine having to leave your homeland, like the already elderly Abram. God asked him to give up all that he knew in order to engage in a relationship with God, to trust God's promise that Abram and Sarai would be the forebears of a great people. Abram was told to leave his land and go on a journey both physical and spiritual—one that would be disruptive and cause displacement, yet one that would be transformative.

This Lenten season, we are on a spiritual journey toward healing and wholeness, moving from what is comfortable to what might make us uncomfortable. But it is a journey that I believe will help us become the people God is calling us to be. We take this journey reflecting on the theme hymn, "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross." Like Abram, as part of God's people, we are blessed—that's a given. But what does it mean to be great? As we take part in this spiritual journey, may we reflect on the question of what it means to be great while staying near the cross.

God of wonder, God of awe, during this Lenten season, you challenge us to go on a transformative spiritual journey. Give us courage like Abram to trust your promise to lead us in relationship with you. Amen.

Tuesday, March 3

Psalm 121

Yesterday we read that Abram was asked to leave his homeland, traveling through dry, hot desert to an unknown land of God's promise. I have never traveled through an actual desert, but I have traveled through other desert-like spaces: grief, disappointment, financial hardship, and spiritual emptiness. These were not places of comfort. I wanted a place that was familiar. I wanted to go to a place where I was in control.

Such journeys might make us feel lonely. They might even lead us to question our faith. But they might also be an opportunity to be confronted with ourselves and to make communal and spiritual connections. God has created everything, including us; God knows our destiny and dwells with us on the journey.

God of the sun and moon, the hills and mountains, the oceans where the universe connects, even in our dry spaces: Thank you for your presence. Help us remember who you are, that our destiny is in you and that you are with us on this journey. Amen.

Wednesday, March 4

Romans 4:1–5, 12–17

Writing to the Roman Christians about the footsteps of the journey of faith, the apostle Paul calls to mind the faith of Abraham, who trusted God and believed God, and to whom God credited righteousness. He writes about a God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not—who continues to call us to a letting-go of old ways to engage in a new way of righteous living, founded in the cross of Christ. This journey might take us through tragic situations. It might even lead us to question why we cling to the cross. In the book "The Cross and the Lynching Tree," the late liberation theologian James Cone asserts that the cross is scandalous. But he also proclaims that in it, we see the very power of God.

On this continuing journey, we who believe and trust in God follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, including Abraham and Sarah. While the journey will surely take us to some disheartening places, it will ultimately lead us to a deeper relationship with God.

God of life beyond death, God who calls into being things that were not: Help us to turn to you and follow in the steps of our ancestors, as you keep us near the cross of Christ. Amen.

Thursday, March 5

John 3:1–17

Yesterday, the meditation was on the topic of footsteps on the journey of faith. Today, the topic is how that faith journey begins. John's Gospel is about transformation and our identity in Christ through the call to faith. Nicodemus asks about how one can enter the kingdom of God. Jesus' response about being born again seems to stump him with contradictions.

But Jesus makes clear that the issue of being born again has to do with a transformation grounded in water and Spirit. Such birth belongs to the cleansing activity of the Spirit and its effects on the new life of faith. Through water and by the power of the Holy Spirit, hearts are transformed. May we in this Lenten season find our hearts born anew each and every day, willing to change and grow as heirs of the kingdom of God.

God of Spirit and new birth, free us from our narrow understandings and help us to live as your born-again children with transformed hearts. Amen.

Friday, March 6

John 3:1–17

Here, the writer of the Gospel of John writes about God's love. We know the familiar words by heart: God so loved the world that God gave the Son so that those who believe might not perish but have eternal life.

Such love frees us from the fear of death. Such love has redemptive power. Love is a power that transforms individuals and communities, and even the trajectory of the whole world. As followers of Jesus—the one who points us to God, the one who created all that is for the pleasure of all God's children—we have been gifted with the bountifulness of God's blessings through the sacrifice of Jesus, the Christ. And as followers on the journey of faith, we have been left with a mandate: to live in God's transforming gift of love, and to live out that love in our interactions with others.

God of love, may we journey with confidence in the transforming power of the love you have shown us in the life and death of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, March 7

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 2)

"Love and mercy found me." In our daily lives, we often live in silence and fear, moving from hope to hopelessness. We often fear our neighbors, assuming the worst of them while God demands just the opposite of us. Imagine if, instead of trembling in fear, we trembled at the excitement of living in peace, justice, and harmony—welcoming the stranger and loving our neighbors! What if we remembered that once *we* were strangers, and that despite our many flaws, God showered love and mercy upon us? What if we remembered that God sheds light so that we may see the image of God in each of God's children?

God invites us to open our hearts to receive these words as a reminder and to act in courage, showing others the love and mercy God continuously shows us.

God of mercy, our bright and morning star: We often tremble in fear. Help us instead to tremble with excitement, walking in your love, mercy, and light as you guide us to live with peace, justice, and compassion. Amen.

Sunday March 8

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 3)

When I sing this hymn with its plea, "Jesus, keep me near the cross," I think also of the lyrics of a song from the Taizé community: "Stay with me; watch and pray. Stay awake and pray." In this particular verse of our theme hymn, we ask that the scenes and visions of the cross be brought before us.

The words of "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" request that Jesus would keep the shadow of the cross over us throughout our daily walk. The shadow of Jesus' death looming before us might lead us to question what the Christian walk is all about. Our spiritual journey may be threatened by fears of suffering or death as we hear the call to live lives of justice for others. But the good news is that God is a God of resurrecting power. Our spiritual journey then is to walk in that power.

God of love, your Son died for us. Help us to walk in the power of that love, knowing that we are called to act in the ways of righteousness toward all your children. Amen.

Monday, March 9

Exodus 17:1–7

We drown daily in a flood of water metaphors, even not counting the ones signifying our sacramental realities. Many of us may be tempted to read these devotions and go immediately metaphorical, drifting away from the materiality inextricably bound to the narrative reality of Exodus 17 and searching for the so-called deeper meanings of "wilderness" and "water" and "thirst."

It is quite tempting to ignore how preciously God created and creates water's terrestrial materiality. I know this temptation, especially because I am sitting here, privileged, in Minneapolis, the City of Lakes, looking out over our beloved Loring Pond, and living luckily in a state that often boasts of its 10,000 lakes.

Still, readers, know the basic truth. Earth's creatures across the globe increasingly, and inequitably, suffer the most pressing water crisis of our times. Does Lent's lament today—"Is the Lord among us or not?"—remain reasonable or even seem speakable?

Come, Holy Spirit, breathe life once more into your thirsting creatures in each and every nook and cranny of this good Earth. Amen.

Tuesday, March 10

Psalm 95

There is little wonder why generations upon generations of Western Christians have so heartily sung this psalmody morning after morning in their services of Matins. Walter Pater once put it well: "All art aspires to the condition of music." Or we may recall a comment often attributed to St. Augustine: "Those who sing, pray twice."

In no more flourishing or refreshing way can a person or community enter morning's light than with so much "joyful noise" after "joyful noise" rising to the Maker of all things, to the God who bestows beauty upon the depths and the heights, and upon the seas and the lands, and who caresses God's own beloved community with a voice both tender and fierce.

How troubling it is to listen to God's voice turned fierce when individually and collectively our hearts have turned hard, as the final verses note. How deeply can I, can we, ponder the stubborn materiality of our global water crisis?

Come, Holy Spirit, embolden us toward both "joyful noise" and attentive listening to your voice, whether tender or fierce. Amen.

Wednesday, March 11

Romans 5:1–11

"Oh, my!" my maternal Grandma Klemm would exclaim in her spontaneously breathy yet forceful near-whisper. She might have done exactly that having just read out loud—always out loud—this Romans 5 text as her nightly bedtime chapter of Scripture. Here the apostle Paul once again seems almost unable to hold himself back or corral his words. He piles up one rhetorical flourish after another so that readers are hardly given a moment to breathe in deeply the weight of each succeeding claim.

"For while we were still weak ... while we were still sinners ... while we were still enemies ..." "Oh, my!" No scarcity of strength, no travesty of trust, no ungodliness of life can prevent this God's abundance of love and wideness of mercy and depth of bodily communion with us.

"Oh, my!" Is it possible that we, too, stand with this Paul, flagrantly boasting of his situation of peace with this God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit?

Thank you for blessing us and calling us to be yours, Lord Jesus Christ. You have made us your beloved, no matter where we live. Amen.

Thursday, March 12

John 4:5–42

Australian New Testament scholar Leon Morris once compared the Gospel of John to a pool of water "in which a child may wade and an elephant can swim." Our gospel reading for this week confronts us, perhaps overwhelmingly, with such a "simple and profound" story, with all the intricate and elaborate earthiness and messiness interwoven throughout all of our individual and social hurts and healings and hungers and thirsts.

Here we encounter the Jew, Jesus, a man with a fledgling following, compelled geographically to travel through Samaria, tired, thirsty, seeking water from his own long-deceased ancestor Jacob's well. So he directly beseeches the woman, a Samaritan, an ancestor of Jacob's son Joseph. Ethnically of two peoples bearing mutually suspicious sentiments toward one another, they are suddenly in conversation uncomfortably fraught with various smatterings of anxiety, ambiguity, perplexity, contingency, conditionality, testimony, secrecy, discovery, disclosure, astonishment, offerings, beliefs, and still more.

Such a narrative onslaught—and blessing—of overlapping plurality and ambiguity discloses the intersectionality of our finite, impure, and truthful realities. And somehow, by way of all this messy intersectionality, both then and now, we get faith on earth, transforming lives and the world.

Come, Holy Spirit, be our dwelling place in the midst of all of our messy and risky and earthy interactions, and help us share trustingly our hurts and healings with one another. Amen.

Friday, March 13

John 4:5–42

Martin Luther—as shown in the opening paragraph of his Reformation treatise "The Freedom of the Christian" (1520)—cherished and celebrated Jesus' metaphor in verse 14 of today's reading—"a spring of water gushing up to eternal life"—as the very heart of the gospel. This water of eternal life, offered by Jesus and given witness by this Samaritan woman, is precisely faith in Jesus—that deep, quite mysterious, trusting relationality whereby this Messiah will not let her go, will not let her people go, and will not let the world itself go.

For Martin Luther, faith's abundance never stops at the threshold of our relation to Jesus, but rather enlarges always into love-seeking-justice with and for the neighbor and the neighborhood. "We are Christ(')s," Luther once exclaimed in a letter to his own Pastor Bugenhagen, "both with and without the apostrophe."

Thinking back through this week's reflection on the materiality of our global water crisis, may we now inquire of ourselves and of our communities how we are being called to be Christs in these crises.

Come, Holy Spirit, cheer us again this day as precious Christ's, and inspire us going forth as courageous Christs. Amen.

Saturday, March 14

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 1)

In our hymn verse today, we again meet the abundant generosity of our crucified God through the images of "a precious fountain" and "a healing stream" flowing freely to all without discrimination. Hymnist Fanny Crosby, often called the "Queen of Gospel Song Writers," wrote more than 9,000 hymns and hundreds of other lyrics and poems across many genres.

In this first verse, we speak personally to Jesus himself in prayer, beseeching him, "Keep me near the cross." For Fanny Crosby, to be "near the cross" of Jesus is simultaneously to be "near the cross" both hidden and manifest in the lived experience of the most vulnerable people within her own field of attention.

As you go about your day, how might you, with the eyes of Fanny Crosby, see the nearness of the cross of Jesus existing deeply in the crosses of your neighbors' lives?

Come, Holy Spirit, give us eyes to see that the cross of Jesus is likewise the cross of the most vulnerable among us, and of all of us in our vulnerabilities. Amen.

Sunday, March 15

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, refrain)

Like her contemporary, Emma Lazarus, Fanny Crosby had a tender heart, which she put to work daily among New York City's "homeless" and "tempest-tost" immigrants, the world's "tired ... poor ... huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Fanny Crosby credited her own compassionate communion with the most vulnerable to the fact that she had become completely blind within weeks of her birth due to an illness, and that her blindness had given her eyes to see the vulnerability of others.

Despite her remarkable fame as hymnist, lyricist, and poet, she desired her true "glory" to be rooted "in the cross, in the cross"—both her precious Ransomer's cross and the crosses of her vulnerable neighbors.

Come, Jesus, beloved of the world, draw us near to your cross and, thereby, also near to the crosses of the world's tired and poor and huddled masses. Amen.

Monday, March 16

1 Samuel 16:1–13

David was an unexpected choice for king. In today's reading, Samuel, still mourning over Saul, heads to the house of Jesse to anoint the next king. When Samuel sees the family, he repeatedly assumes incorrectly which son God has chosen to be king. If even Samuel, one of the great prophets, can be misled by outward appearance, it is not surprising when we are tempted to make the same error.

How often do we judge people by their stature, their job, their car, their clothing? It's easy to fall into the trap of judging others on a variety of frivolous external grounds. But we are reminded that the heart is what God sees. We are called to care more about furthering God's kingdom than about our own appearance or our own successes. So let us concentrate on the heart this Lent—both on our own heart and on recognizing what is in the hearts of others.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for seeing us for who we are and loving us unconditionally. We pray for help in resisting the temptation to judge others. Amen.

Tuesday, March 17

Psalm 23

A quick internet search and the countless images on T-shirts, posters, and computer wallpaper, as well as numerous songs and books reflecting on its meaning, all reveal that Psalm 23 is one of the best-known and best-loved of all the psalms.

It is no wonder that this psalm is incredibly meaningful to many people. It is full of beautiful reassurances of God's love and faithfulness. God is described as a shepherd who cares for us and comforts us. God guides and anoints us. God's endless mercy is emphasized in the concluding promise of our dwelling with the Lord forever.

During this busy Lenten season, it is especially affirming to read these words and reflect on all God has done. In the deeper spiritual reflection of Lent, we remember that Jesus is indeed our good shepherd who died for us, and who in love invites us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Gracious God, we thank you for being the good shepherd, for providing for us, guiding us, and comforting us in our times of need. Amen.

Wednesday, March 18

Ephesians 5:8–14

It seems that everywhere we turn, there are temptations to sin. Not only that, but our culture tells us sin isn't such a big deal—pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth (the classic big seven) often seem no longer such negative traits, but simply marks of enjoying the good things in life.

The fact of the matter is that sin harms us all both individually and collectively. Excessive consumption destroys our world. Some people are absurdly wealthy while others are dying of starvation. A contentious society finds even Christians struggling to see each other as neighbors. Human beings, made in the image of God, are oppressed, marginalized, and murdered every day.

Lent is a time for contemplation and repentance. It is a time to evaluate the sins we have committed and to take them to God. Through Jesus we are forgiven, but we are also called to become the light Scripture tells us we are.

Holy God, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. Amen.

Thursday, March 19

John 9:1–41

When questioned by his disciples about whose sins resulted in the man's blindness, Jesus responds with a surprising answer: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." It is easy to miss the human suffering and cost that lie behind this story—the sense of guilt for some unknown sin resting on his parents and on him. This man had lived as a beggar on the margins of society, relying on the generosity of others.

Once he meets Jesus, though, he learns something about the ways of God. Through the mystery of God's love, the man's suffering gains purpose; it becomes a way of proclaiming God's mercy, healing, and power of restoration.

Suffering is an unavoidable aspect of life. We may live our whole lives without understanding the purpose of our suffering, but through faith in God's work we can trust that it will not be in vain—that God has some purpose for us.

Lord God, we pray that we may have the perseverance to endure the inevitable sufferings of this life, and that we may grow and find comfort in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friday, March 20

John 9:1–41

In today's reading, we see an ironic contrast between this poor beggar and the educated religious leaders. The marginalized beggar becomes the object of God's mercy, while the religious elite, confident in their wisdom, cannot seem to comprehend the ways of God.

As the story unfolds, the Pharisees question the impudence of the once-blind beggar. Frustrated, but not to be intimidated, he bravely points out an obvious fact to the Pharisees: "If this man [Jesus] were not from God, he could do nothing."

Instead of seeing the truth, the Pharisees become defensive; they accuse him of being born entirely in sin and drive him out, rejecting the truth in front of them.

During this Lenten season, may we remember that God shows up in expected places. We cannot presume to know God's plan or where the Spirit might be moving.

Gracious God, use us to further your kingdom. Give us the ability to discern and accept your message, especially when it comes from places we are not expecting. Amen.

Saturday, March 21

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 2)

I came to faith as an adult. This verse reminded me of the shift in worldview that occurred with my conversion, particularly regarding the cross.

Before I became a Christian, I simply saw the cross for its brutal historical value. Jesus was by no means the only person crucified. It was a fairly normal, albeit gruesome, execution method of the time. How could anyone find love and mercy near the cross? How could the morning star shed beams around you near the cross?

After my conversion, I came to understand that it was at the cross that God poured out love and life for us. Sometimes I am still shocked by it all: God died for us! It is irrational! It is inconceivable! Yet, as Christians, we believe it. In Christ's suffering, we find salvation and peace. During these long days of Lent, we are all invited to move closer to the cross.

Gracious God, keep the cross on our hearts and our minds. May we balance the ugly and the sublime and find love and mercy near the cross. Amen.

Sunday, March 22

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 3)

This hymn reminds me that being a follower of Jesus does not guarantee comfort or ease in life. Jesus himself died on the cross. And according to tradition, all of Jesus' apostles, save one, met martyrdom. Many of the earliest Christians faced persecution and torment for their faith, and many other Christians, both historically and today, have faced or still face many hardships.

Many of us live so far removed from the suffering that Jesus and other marginalized Christians have faced; we seem to have developed an idea that God wants us to be comfortable and happy. Truth be told, Jesus does not promise us earthly pleasures. He offers us strength, courage, and hope in the face of hardship. He offers eternal life to those who love him. He offers us the cross. There we watch and wait, hoping and trusting in a God who came to live among us.

Thank you, God, for coming to live among us and dying for us. May we always find hope in the cross of Christ. Amen.

Monday, March 23

Ezekiel 37:1-14

It is always breath that breaks the silence. The hand of the Lord came upon Ezekiel and brought him, by the Spirit, to a valley full of bones. Ezekiel is led to know the landscape of the valley: It was full of many and very dry bones.

God calls Ezekiel to prophesy three times: to the bones, to the breath, and to the *beit*, the Hebrew word for "house". The bones are the whole house of Israel. Their bones were dried up. Their hope was lost. They were cut off completely. Exile tends to do that to a people.

In God, hope is found even in the valley. Like breath to bone, hope returns not because we have found our way out of the valley, but because God has found a way in. When all hope is cut off, it is breath—God's breath—that will break the silence and pull us up from our graves.

Open our graves, O God, and breathe your life into our death. Set us again on the ground where you have formed us. Tell us, again, that we shall live. Amen.

Tuesday, March 24

Psalm 130

Without the witness of Scripture, especially that of the psalmists, our culture would have us under the impression that religion is for those who are blameless and enjoy success, the so-called “blessed.” Not so, says the psalm. This psalm finds its location not in the heights of success, but in the depths where only God can hear and respond to our cries. The psalm finds us in our lives as we are: in the well-worn ruts of our daily routine, which return, for better or worse, with each sunrise.

Who could stand and face such constant judgment? Rather than call out our failures, this psalm calls us into God’s mercy and redemption, born out of the forgiveness of sins.

The psalm echoes for us our hope: When we have nothing left to hold on to, God holds on to us. In this space we wait and watch. But we do not wait alone, for God in Christ has entered into the depths with us.

O Lord, you are able to heal the wounds our sin has caused. We wait and hope for the forgiveness that is already at hand in Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, March 25

Romans 8:6–11

Our Christmas proclamation rings true even in the season of Lent: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Christ has come in our very flesh. “Flesh” is no longer a dirty word, for our flesh has been redeemed. The Spirit has come to dwell in our flesh, rattling through our tissue, being carried through blood vessels, entering the atmosphere through our breath.

For beings unable to escape our bodies, this is good news, rooting us in Jesus. Jesus, true God incarnate, carried this flesh and Spirit to the cross. He did not escape death, but stands now on the other side of it. Death cannot hold our bodies. We are alive in Christ. And we behold him, as Mary held him, full of grace and truth.

You, O God, have given us flesh and breathed your Spirit within us. Teach us to love our bodies and, in so doing, to love you. Amen.

Thursday, March 26

John 11:1–45

John 11 is the closing act of a three-act play that begins in John 9 when Jesus opens a blind man’s eyes. An investigation arises, and the man is removed from the community. Act Two centers on Jesus the good shepherd, the one who is able to judge just who belongs—namely all of his sheep.

Act Three now shows us what belonging means. For Jesus, his power to love will cost him his life. In the opening scenes of John 11, Jesus has been pushed out of town. There on the other side of the Jordan, in the middle of a riverbed, Jesus receives a message: “He whom you love is ill.”

For those who trust Jesus, belonging is life. To belong does not mean to escape danger. We can be loved by Jesus, and we can also face terminal illness. One does not prevent the other.

And this Act—and our lives—do not end in death.

We are your beloved, O God, and we also face the changes and chances of life. Help us to trust that we belong to you, even when you seem so far away. Amen.

Friday, March 27

John 11:1–45

Act Three of the story turns with Jesus as he returns to Bethany, near Jerusalem. There, he is met in turn by Martha and Mary, who are distraught by their brother's death and Jesus' absence. "If only you had been here," they say.

Jesus, too, is distraught. Love and grief are tangled up in one another. Jesus loved Lazarus. Knowing the end of the story does not prevent Jesus from weeping or from sharing grief together with Martha and Mary. Jesus stands with those who grieve, and offers a word of life even when death has come to call.

What does it mean to belong to Jesus? It means that not even death can separate us from his love. Jesus weeps and then stands at the mouth of the cave and tells the crowd, "I am the resurrection and the life." He calls Lazarus like he will call all of his flock, up from our graves and into his life.

"Teach us to live that we may dread the grave as little as our bed. Teach us to die so that we may rise glorious at the awesome day." Amen.

(From "All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night," ELW 565)

Saturday, March 28

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 1)

Gravity demands that water on the mountain will always flow down into the valley. In the desert of Jerusalem, this water is grace made visible by the vibrant wildflowers that come to life at this time of year.

So too is the way of Jesus' grace: It flows from heaven to the manger, from his cross into our lives, is planted and blooms where it will, where there is need. Grace comes to us where we are, as we are, a free gift, a healing flow. From this gift we have hope and beauty in the depths and valleys of our lives.

God of grace, you have turned the cross into a place of healing, streaming Jesus' precious grace into the world. Keep us mindful that you are ever near to us, that we are found where you have planted us. Amen.

Sunday, March 29

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, refrain)

In Jerusalem's Old City you can't help but run into crosses. The Stations of the Cross create traffic jams as pilgrims stream in and out of caves and back and forth among one another. The pilgrims come to trace the spiritual steps of Jesus.

Pilgrims come to Jesus' tomb with a diversity of pieties. Some come carrying rented crosses. Some come singing. Some come on their knees. Some come with no shoes. Some come like tourists to check off some sort of list documented with selfies. And some come, laden with things to rub and bless against the stone of preparation where Jesus' body lay—shopping bags, cotton soaked with oil, a scarf.

Why do pilgrims stream to the cross, to the place of Jesus' death? Because the cross, the place of death and defeat, is also the place of life and resurrection. The cross marks the place where brokenness and healing meet.

We seek, O God, the healing that meets our wounds, the life that meets our death. In Jesus, you have come to know our paths. Grant that in Jesus, we may know your way that leads to life. Amen.

Monday, March 30

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

We near the end of our Lenten journey, and the readings place us in the shadow of the cross. As Jesus triumphantly enters the city he loves, we who know the story anticipate that the crowd in praise will soon be a crowd in protest. The open gate gives entrance to the enemy. Those whom God loves will again respond with rejection. Yet, the psalmist challenges us to pause and give thanks.

Linger in this day to glimpse the presence of God. When we do not worry about tomorrow, we can marvel at the wondrous things God is doing today. The rejected remnant will become the cherished legacy. God is turning the stumbling blocks in our lives into stepping stones toward our future. Whatever struggles this season of fasting has revealed, remember: God's love is steadfast and endures.

God whose steadfast love endures, allow me to accept the victories of today without worrying about the battles of tomorrow. Amen.

Tuesday, March 31

Matthew 21:1–11

As I pause for devotions today, or maybe because of the preparations made in today's readings, I am drawn to all that needs to be completed this week and next. I am a worship leader, and the anticipation that energizes the preparations can be overshadowed by the many tasks required for the upcoming observance of Holy Week. In today's passage, it is in the mundane requirement of arranging the means of transportation that a single instruction is highlighted: "The Lord needs them."

What happens to our plans if we pause to confirm whether or not the Lord has need of all we are doing? From our worship to our work, do our preparations reflect what the Lord requires? In our fellowship and our festivities, are we responding to what God has asked of God's people? When we are obedient, the opportunity we are afforded brings others to join in the praise: Jesus is Lord!

Hosanna in the highest! Lord, remind me once more of what you require of me. Propel me to action with the anticipation to see your will done. Amen.

Wednesday, April 1

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Over the last few years, I have paid more attention to how often April Fool's Day arrives during Lent or Holy Week. Previously I had somehow missed that. This day might be accompanied by silly exchanges and jokes—especially if you share life with a child.

In light of how often oral and written exchanges in society can be injurious and insulting, maybe we can add our voices today to the kind of words that bring life. What's more, today's reading captures my playful imagination with the statement that a mere word can sustain the weary. The poet awakens each day listening for God's teaching, ready to face the adversary's insult and injury with confidence that God will provide help and vindication.

Recently, as a part of our devotions, my prayer partners and I have been sharing humorous photos or quotes. It has become a habit that means that no matter what is burdening us, we can expect a reminder that we do not walk this journey alone, and that it is possible to find something to smile about each day because God provides the help we need.

God whose words give life, use me to speak your wisdom so others will find strength to face each new day, confident that you give us the courage to stand. Amen.

Thursday, April 2

Psalm 31:9–16

Sometimes it feels as if the weight of the world is mine to carry. Not only do my thoughts undermine my confidence, but my body seems to have joined the attack also. The foes with whom we struggle can be mental and physical, and sometimes—as the psalmist bears witness—even neighbors and acquaintances scorn, ignore, or turn against us.

Indeed, the psalmist has given words to my grief. Yet the season of Lent turns our attention, like a tennis tournament on steroids, this way and that way, between conflict and confidence. In giving ourselves the space and time to pause, we join with followers of Christ who find permission to cry out to God who hears our whole heart—desire, doubt, despair, and trust.

Our reading ends with a statement of confidence before another request is made. It is appropriate. To cry out in desperation is a sign of our conviction that the One to whom we cry hears and cares.

God who hears the cries of the weary, thank you for letting me honestly speak my grief. Today, to say more might be more than I can do. So hear my cry and save me in your steadfast love. Amen.

Friday, April 3

Philippians 2:5–11

When we say we want to be like Jesus, it is sometimes easier to think of the healing teacher or the carpenter who confronted the legal experts. But to have the mind of Christ is an entirely different challenge. It turns our focus to our thoughts and motivations rather than calculating how many acts of kindness we've done or prayers we've said this week. In this moment we glimpse the mind of Christ.

Confronted by human arrogance, Jesus, like God, does not wave a celestial hand to match evil with evil. In the face of corruption, tragedy, illness, and disaster, God, in Jesus, moves into the neighborhood to journey with us. Jesus' life forever reminds us that he came as Emmanuel: a vulnerable God who put on human flesh. Whatever you are facing in this season of your life, hold to the thought that victory is not gained by vengeance. The greatest thing we do is to allow God to be glorified in every aspect of our lives.

Holy Spirit, empty my mind of all ambitions born of worldly competition, and fill me with the humility to let every step I take enable others to see the lordship of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, April 4

**Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross"
(ELW 335, verse 2)**

Tomorrow, many congregations will hear the entire Holy Week story: from Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem amid waving palms to his passion and death. It ends with hope appearing aborted, promises seeming dashed. Silence.

Linger near the cross this coming week, before the announcements of resurrection's triumph. Linger in the questions of the cross. Jesus did not wink from the cross, "No worries, I got this!" He suffered to the end, even to death. We wonder how this awful spectacle can possibly be necessary for our salvation. *We should* wonder. To linger in the silence is to prepare ourselves for the incredulity of Easter Sunday's announcement. Linger to wonder why God does not reject us after we reject God. Linger in the longing for love and mercy. Linger to feel the trembling that suggests this is not the end, even though you do not yet know for sure. Linger in the darkness so you can recognize when the dawn comes.

Cross-bearing God, allow me to linger in the silence until you turn my skepticism and questioning into awe-filled recognition. Amen.

Sunday, April 5

**Palm/Passion Sunday
Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross"
(ELW 335, verse 3)**

Each Sunday is an opportunity for the community to gather and remember we are among that Jerusalem crowd calling out the name of Jesus. Some seek healing, or at least the hope that what God has done in the past might happen again, now. Some question whether there is anything we can really believe about Jesus. Some sing hosannas to signal confidence in all that Jesus is doing in the world, even today. All of our worship occurs in the shadow of this crowd.

Shadows are produced when something comes between a ray of light and a surface. The crowd comes between the light of God's glory and the surface of our longing for God's love. The refrain of our hymn moves us from *near* the cross to the place where glory resides—in the cross. May the detour to Jerusalem reveal for us the scenes in our lives that bring us from the shadow of the crowds to the shadow of the cross.

God of the weary traveler, open my eyes that I might recognize the shadows as signs that your light shines in all the places of my life. Move me from skeptic and seeker to one who stands among the saints whose lives find rest in the cross. Amen.

Monday, April 6

Exodus 12:1–4, [5–10], 11–14

John the Baptizer bore witness to Jesus with the words, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The mysterious title "Lamb of God" recalled the merciful deliverance of the exodus, in which every household was to sacrifice a "whole lamb ... without blemish." With some of the blood of the lamb they were to mark each house, so that the angel of death might pass over that household. And they were to eat the lamb dressed for a journey, ready to escape—traveling clothes on, boots laced up, staff in hand.

John's words of witness also foretold Christ's sacrificial death—according to the Gospel of John, Jesus was crucified at noon on the day of preparation for the Passover celebration, the exact time when the lamb was sacrificed. The symbolism is clear: Jesus' death sets us free from the power of sin, death, and every force that defies God's love.

Near the cross! O Lamb of God, bring its scenes before me; help me walk from day to day with its shadow o'er me. Amen.

Tuesday, April 7

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

Psalm 116 is spoken from the lips of one who narrowly escaped death, with the Lord's merciful help. In Eugene Peterson's poignant translation, "The Message," "Death stared me in the face, Hell was hard on my heels." But the near-dead-one called out to God, who stretched out a saving hand. The now-rescued-one then asked, "What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation." The cup of salvation—what could this mean? For the psalmist, it was likely a feast prepared in God's honor, to give thanks for all of God's saving help—"a toast to God."

When I was a teenager, I was diagnosed with cancer and had both legs amputated. Since then, every 10 years, I gather my family and a few close friends for a feast of thanksgiving for all the Lord's bounty to me. This year will be 40 years—a biblical number. And every week I gather with other sinners and we lift up the cup of salvation, for all the Lord's forgiveness, grace, and bounty to all of us.

Lord, Death stares us in the face, Hell is on our heels, Sin wants to claim us. But we claim your power, your protection, and your forgiveness. God, here's to you! Amen.

Wednesday, April 8

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

My kids are fascinated by a certain type of movie scene: the reading of the last will and testament. The head of the household has died, and the quarrelsome heirs gather to hear what they've been bequeathed. I've assured my kids that in real life, this scene rarely occurs. But the apostle Paul has corrected me!

Paul says that every single time we eat the bread and drink the cup of Holy Communion, we are engaging in a reading of Christ's last will and testament. The Greek word *diatheke*, translated in the NRSV as "covenant," more properly means "testament"—as in a last will. A will doesn't go into effect until the individual dies. When Christ died, his last will and testament went into effect. And the dramatic good news of the reading of that will is this: You are forgiven, you are loved, and you are free. And "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Jesus, keep me near the cross. Let me hear in the proclamation of your death the good news of your last will for me—life, and abundance thereof. Amen.

Thursday, April 9

Maundy Thursday John 13:1–17, 31b–35

One of my favorite spirituals is "Jesus Is a Rock in a Weary Land." I love the verse that goes, "When Jesus was on earth, the flesh was very weak; he took a towel and girded himself and he washed the disciples' feet." The song gets at one of the mysteries of life and of God. The mystery of life is our human weakness: the weakness that led Judas to betray Christ, and led Peter to resist Christ's washing of his feet and then to deny Christ, the weakness that leads all of us to sin against God and neighbor by what we do and by what we leave undone.

The mystery of God, as God said to the apostle Paul, is that in our very weakness God's power is made real: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). When Peter was weak, Christ washed him with forgiveness and grace. That same grace flows to all of us from his death.

Jesus, keep me near the cross, there's a precious fountain; free to all, a healing stream flows from Calu'ry's mountain. Amen.

Friday, April 10

Good Friday

John 18:1–19:42

What is the very worst thing that we could imagine as God's people? That answer seems pretty simple: the death of God. And that happened on a Friday. And we call it good! Why? How? When the stock market crashed on a Thursday in 1929, the people called it "Black Thursday." When soldiers shot dozens of unarmed people in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, in 1972 on a Sunday, it was called "Bloody Sunday." Why would we call the day on which we mark the death of God "Good Friday"? Linger with that question for a while. Like, all day. Don't race to the Sunday school answer, or the catechism answer, or even the seminary answer. Just stay with the question. Even knowing the resurrection is coming, why would we call the day of the suffering and death of God "good"? Strip away the roses and gold from your image of the cross, and just linger on the question.

Near the cross! O Lamb of God, bring its scenes before me; help me walk from day to day with its shadow o'er me. Amen.

Saturday, April 11

Holy Saturday

Psalm 30:11–12; Psalm 40:1–3;

Hymn: "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (ELW 335, verse 4)

Life is Saturday. Not the Saturday of a summer picnic or of a fall college football game. Life is the Saturday between Good Friday (death) and Easter Sunday (resurrection)—the Saturday of "waiting for the Lord," as Psalm 40 has it. We live in between Friday and Sunday. We know that death's power has been undone in Christ's death—that its sting of death is gone and death has no victory. But we await the final victory when death itself will be no more.

As I write this devotion, I have just received an email with the obituary for one of my first cousins. His death came too soon. He was a dancer. I'll never see him dance again—not in this life. But I look forward to a Sunday when, as Psalm 30 has it, mourning will be turned to dancing again, and the clothing of mourning will be turned into joy.

Near the cross I'll watch and wait, hoping, trusting ever, till I reach the golden strand just beyond the river. Amen.

Sunday, April 12

Easter Sunday

John 20:1–18

One of the things that I love about John's telling of the Easter story is that the events unfold in a garden. In that garden, Mary Magdalene was weeping because, according to her belief, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She turned and saw the gardener and said to him, "Lord, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." And then the gardener said, "Mary!" And at the sound of her name, the scales fell from her eyes and she saw that it was him—the gardener, the lamb of God, Jesus the Christ.

The garden setting reminds us of the first garden, the garden of creation, in which the man and woman were placed to serve and protect the earth. In the garden of the new creation, Mary was the first to see the Lord and know that the resurrection means the promise of new creation for all and for all the earth.

Lord, near the cross (in a garden), a trembling soul, love and mercy found me; There the bright and morning star sheds its beams around me. Amen.

*Continue readings all year long with
God Pause by Luther Seminary.
Subscribe at luthersem.edu/godpause to
receive devotionals by email each morning.*

Contributing Writers

James L. Boyce '71 M.Div.
Professor Emeritus of New Testament
and Greek

Jeni Grangaard '09 M.Div.
Seminary Pastor

Rolf Jacobson '91 M.Div.
Professor of Old Testament and
Rogness Chair of Scripture, Theology,
and Ministry

Joy J. Moore
Associate Professor of Biblical
Preaching

Gary Simpson
Northwestern Lutheran Theological
Seminary Chair of Theology

Beverly Wallace
Associate Professor of Congregational
and Community Care

**Jennifer Hornyak
Wojciechowski '18 Ph.D.**
Affiliate Professor of Church History

Theological Editor

James L. Boyce '71 M.Div.
Professor Emeritus of New Testament
and Greek

Editorial Coordinator

Heidi Hyland Mann

Luther Seminary
2481 Como Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108
651-641-3456

luthersem.edu

Cover photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash.