A watercolor illustration of a stone path leading to a rainbow. The path is made of grey and brown stones, leading from the bottom towards a bright yellow and orange light at the top. A rainbow arches over the path, with colors transitioning from red to purple. The background is a mix of blue and green washes.

The Ascent

FEBRUARY 2021

Lent: The Gateway
to Easter

Letter from the Rector

Waiting and Hoping

By Jonathan Millard, Rector

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Waiting and hoping can be two sides of the same coin. For those who put their trust in the Lord, our waiting is never in vain. Our waiting is also an active waiting, as we seek God and look to him for our salvation.

As we prepare for Lent, we are called to observe a season of penitence and fasting. On Ash Wednesday we are invited, “in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent: by self-examination; by prayer, fasting, and alms giving; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” (BCP p. 544)

There is much for us to look forward to as we continue actively to wait on God. While none of us knows what tomorrow will bring, we continue to put our trust in God – even in the winter of this pandemic.

Lenten Devotional

I commend the I AM Lenten Devotional found in this month’s *Ascend* – one devotional for each of the six weeks of Lent. I hope you will use this throughout our Lenten journey.

New Assistant Rector

I am delighted to announce that **The Rev. Kevin Antlitz** has been called to serve as our new Assistant Rector. Kevin, with his wife Susan and their three children, Billy (6), Jack (4), and Marilynne (2) will be moving to Pittsburgh from Washington DC, where Kevin is currently serving as Assistant Pastor at the Church of the Advent.

Fr. Kevin will begin his ministry among us in early May. We will

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provide a much fuller introduction in a future *Ascent* article. For now, I ask you to pray for the Antlitz family as they say their goodbyes, prepare for their move to Pittsburgh, and begin their new ministry among us. Please pray for their search for a house, for decisions about schooling, and all the many other practical details of their move. Let us pray also, that God would prepare us to welcome and receive them into our church family.

Reopening 2021: A (tentative) Three-Phase Approach

While I cannot guarantee that we will be able to do all that we are hoping to do, I am excited to share our tentative plans. We will continue with our “accordion” approach of reopening dependent upon local health conditions. Precise details will be available via our website and through parish emails.

Phase 1 – Lent (Mid-February - March)

Beginning on Ash Wednesday (February 17) we hope to resume limited in-person attendance coupled with the weekly live stream and Walk-through Communion service on Sundays.

During Holy Week, we expect to have services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday culminating in the great celebration of Easter with three services including the Easter Vigil. God willing, all of these services will permit some in-person attendance.

Phase 2 – Easter Season (April - May)

We hope to have the tent repaired and readied in time for Easter Sunday. Going forward, this will enable us to have two services each Sunday. We are planning for a weekly outdoor “Tent Service” at 9:00 a.m. and a service in the Nave at 11:00 a.m.

Tent Service (9:00 a.m.) with space for at least 150 people. This will be an in-person service of Holy Eucharist including (masked) singing, and a Children’s Program (in additional smaller tents on the lawn outside the Parish Hall).

Service in the Nave (11:00 a.m.) with space for up to 100 people. This will be an in-person and live streamed service of Holy Eu-

charist, followed by Walk-through Communion.

Phase 3 – Pentecost to Christmas (June-December)

We hope to continue with the two services at 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. and will be looking at ways to increase capacity as needed and prudent. We will also have a contingency plan in place to deal with severe weather that may affect the ability to use the tent.

Extensive Refurbishing Work in the Nave

Much work in the Nave is expected to be undertaken in the next few months:

- The existing pews will be removed in February. After receiving helpful input on the architectural significance and overall good condition of the choir stalls, and reflecting on ministry needs, I am pleased to share that I and the vestry were of one mind that we should not replace the choir stalls as previously planned. New Gothic-style wooden pews for the Nave are ordered and should be ready for installation sometime in May.
- The Nave floor and platform area will be refinished sometime in March or April.
- The stained-glass windows will be removed for restoration, most likely in May. This will take several months to complete.

Finally, as we press into our life and work together in the year ahead, let us continue to wait for the Lord, expectantly and with hope.

Your’s in Christ,

Jonathan +
→

Introducing the I AM Lenten Devotional

“Before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58)

It’s a declaration clear and startling enough to send the Pharisees into a hate-filled frenzy — this carpenter from Nazareth claimed equality with the One True God, the God of their ancestors, the Creator-King whose name the people revered too much to speak aloud.

This is the name by which the LORD identified Himself from the burning bush to Moses while the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Freshly commissioned to deliver his people, Moses asks,

“If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

*“This is my name forever,
the name you shall call me
from generation to generation.”
(Exodus 3:13-15)*

“IAM.” He is...what? Well, maybe that’s just it. He is. God is life himself; eternal, unchanging, holding all things together. He is, He was, He forever will be. There is no other god, no competition for the IAM, because every other ruler or spiritual power, by definition, is not.

And, of course, we know how the story goes from there. The LORD God delivers His people with a mighty hand and establishes them as a

covenant community under His rule. The I AM is a rescuing God.

Now, here is this man, a teacher, making the same statement to the Pharisees: I AM. This reference was not lost on his listeners. The accusation had been that he was claiming to be greater than Abraham — he certainly was, and more than that. Jesus is the God of Abraham.

Throughout the book of John, we encounter several statements from Jesus that begin with the words, “I AM.” Each paints a unique picture; each reveals Jesus as the fulfillment of redemptive history, God-in-flesh: the rescuing God who walks the dirt streets of the Middle East. Each week of Lent, we’ll explore one of these statements. Use this resource as your own personal devotion, with your family, or alongside others.

The Key to Interpretation

As one minister put it, the key to understanding these statements is to “**go bigger**” and “**go older**” — broadening our perspective to look 1) at the immediate surrounding context in John’s Gospel, and 2) back to the Old Testament. As John tells the narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry, the reader witnesses a significant event or miracle, then receives the explanation — the meaning — from Jesus. These “I AM” statements are far from random! They are nestled into the drama of Jesus’ life, and are usually linked to something that just occurred or will occur. Likewise, they are situated in the greater drama of the Scriptures, as each has been foretold or used as an image somewhere before. Throughout Lent, we’ll see how Jesus fulfills significant redemptive prophecies, types, and foreshadows of the Old Testament.

A Word on How to Use this Devotional



Take Your Time

You are invited to linger on each of the “I AM” statements over the course of one week. Read the recommended scriptures. Read them again. And again. Meditate on the reflections. Engage in the recommended practices or come up with your own practice to make it real. Don’t be hurried. This I AM God has made Himself known in the person of Jesus. As you meditate on each of the I AM statements what does it mean for you here, now? The weekly devotionals will take you through most of John chapters 6 - 18. As you journey toward Easter, consider reading the entire gospel including those chapters prior to and after the I AM sayings.

Visio Divina

We are grateful to be able to use the artwork of Kathrin Burlison (www.kathrinburlison.com) who created an “I AM” series and has graciously given permission for us to use it this Lent. Elise Massa, in our Epiphany edition of the Ascent, proposed the prayer practice of visio divina (“divine seeing” or praying with the eyes). We commend the practice of visio divina to you again as a supplemental way to engage with the devotional each week. Similar to its cousin lectio divina, in which you pray with Scripture, visio divina is a way to pray with images and artwork. There are seven recommended steps to aid in this process (source: <https://biloxidiocese.org/visio-divina>):

Step 1: Ask God to speak clearly in a way that you can hear. Prepare to bring the whole of yourself – analytical, emotional, and intuitive – to the process. (Heb 4:1)

Step 2: Gaze at the image. Let your eyes rest on the characters and objects. Note your feelings as you examine the whole and parts of the work. If the image is specifically related to a scripture, scene, or story from the Bible, go and read it.

Step 3: Read or listen to accounts of the events. They might be scripture, insights into the work, or guided meditation. Remain receptive and open to surprises the Lord may be personally revealing to you. Keep an attitude of wonder in our Lord.

Step 4: Gaze at the work again. Imagine that you are in this scene, using all your senses. What is God asking you personally to experience with Him?

Step 5: Pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you into all truth. Bring all of what you’ve experienced before God. How do you feel God is calling you to respond?

Step 6: Application. How does this Visio Divina relate to your life now? How is Jesus trying to personally encounter you through your prayer today?

Step 7: Gratitude. Record your insights that you want to remember and the actions God has invited you to take. Spend some time thanking God for speaking to you.

The First Week of Lent

I AM the Bread of Life

“**T**hen Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’” (John 6:35, 51)



Go Bigger — Read John 6

When we start from the beginning of John 6, Jesus’ words begin to make much more sense. He has just performed two miraculous, supernatural signs — the famous feeding of the 5,000 with only a few loaves and fish, and immediately after this, walking across the lake as if on dry ground. The crowd quickly follows, and upon finding him, Jesus identifies their true intentions — they aren’t truly looking for *him*, what they desire is more miracles. Jesus tells them not to seek physical food, but rather, “food that endures for eternal life,” (v 27) and more specifically, the bread given by God that “comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (v 33). The crowd responds just as you or I might — “Give us this bread!” It is here that Jesus states, “I AM the bread of life.”

We watch Jesus give the crowd their fill of physical bread, then use that miracle to challenge our imaginations about what true life and fulfillment are. What’s striking is that the true, eternal bread is not a thing Jesus *gives* out, the way the disciples distributed the baskets of loaves and fish. In fact, it’s not a *thing* at all — Jesus himself is the bread. Eternal life, then, is not

about receiving something *from* Jesus, but receiving him. He himself *is* that which we need most.

How do we “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood”? By faith, and with thanksgiving. Many scholars believe Jesus is describing the Eucharist, the sacrament by which we receive him *in faith*. We are given a beautiful promise in verse 56: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” United to Jesus, the true Bread of Life, we will never go hungry again.

Go Older — Read Exodus 16 (The Manna)

When Jesus miraculously feeds the crowd, they pick up on the similarity between what just occurred and an old, well-known story about their ancestors — the miraculous provision of manna in the desert. For 40 years, the Israelites survived on food that came down from heaven, and the Jews in Jesus’ day wonder if there is a connection. Jesus confirms that there is! In fact, the bread in the desert — that temporarily sustained the Israelites’ life — was a foreshadowing of the true, *better* bread that would meet their eternal need. Like the Manna, Jesus was sent from heaven by the Father. Like the manna, Jesus is received by faith! And like the manna, better than the manna, receiving Jesus is a nourishment that “endures to eternal life.”

Reflection

In our hearts, we can often be quite like the crowd — seeking Jesus for the good “things” he gives, and missing that *he himself* is the true gift. How would your times of prayer or worship be different if your goal was simply to be with Christ?

What spiritual disciplines or acts of worship feel most nourishing to your soul? Have you made them a regular practice?

As we know well, Jesus made himself available for us to “feed on him” at his own great expense — “*This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*” The multiplication of loaves on the hillside happened in an instant, an effortless task for the Creator of all things! The giving of eternal bread came at a much greater cost, which we remember when we participate in the Eucharist. How does this week’s study shape your understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Communion?

Practice

Make a loaf of bread from scratch, and if you have kids, include them! As you do so, think or talk about the nature of food and nourishment. Why do we need it? What happens if we go too long without it? How does food (or a lack of it!) affect our minds and emotions?

Eat some bread – either what you made or a special loaf you purchase. Jesus doesn’t teach us that physical “stuff” doesn’t matter compared to spiritual realities (like we might expect) — instead, he reveals truth about who he is in and through the physical “stuff”. As you savor your freshly baked bread, thank God that He reveals who He is through physical things.

For older kids and individuals — try fasting from a meal and talking about the experience with another person or as a family. What do spiritual and physical hunger have in common? How are they different?

The Second Week of Lent

I AM the Light of the World

“**A**gain Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.’” (John. 8:12)



Go Bigger: Read John 7:1 – 8:20

(Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles)

It would not have been difficult for Jesus’ words to resonate tangibly; if it was evening when he spoke these words, the temple courts would have been flooded in lamp-light. For it was the *Feast of Tabernacles*, a week-long festival in Jerusalem, and per tradition, the Jewish people would participate in a lamp-lighting ceremony in the temple every evening of the week. The light was said to have filled every street and courtyard, magnificently chasing away the darkness as though it did not exist.

This festival took place every year, occurring just after the harvest season in September or early October, in celebration and thanksgiving for God’s provision for His People. The Jewish people would recall God’s provision in the wilderness to their ancestors, as well as how He continued to sustain them, even now. The people would construct temporary shelters to stay in for the week, to commemorate the years of desert pilgrimage of the Israelites out of Egypt into the wilderness. We read in John 7 that Jesus attends the festival in secret but, halfway through the week, goes into the temple to teach.

I AM the light of the world. Look around, see how the light over-

comes the darkness. How things hidden are revealed. How we can see one another face-to-face.

Light is a prominent theme throughout John's Gospel — we read in the opening paragraph of the book, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:4-5) Christ stepping into the world is light stepping into the darkness — the metaphor that aptly describes the world lost in brokenness and the pain of sin. To claim oneself as the *light* who contrasts — and indeed, overpowers — the darkness, is a claim to be wholly *other*. This is a divine claim. As broken people, in the dark, we cannot generate our own light. We need someone else, no one less than God Himself, to be our light.

Go Older: Read Exodus 12:31-42 and 13:17-22

(The Pillar of Fire)

The Feast of Tabernacles was rich with symbolism. The lamp-lighting tradition served as a remembrance of the means by which God led the Israelites out of Egypt and directed their steps — ahead of the people went a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. While both were surely magnificent, following the light of blazing fire must have been an experience nearly unspeakable. Delivered from the hand of the Egyptians, God's people were quite literally following His light from death to life.

And now, God's presence does not go before the people in the blazing sky. Instead, here stands a person, a man from Nazareth. Is it possible that all the blazing power and strength of the LORD God, Israel's Great Deliverer, could be enclosed in human flesh?

All of Jesus' life, he would prove that answer to be yes. It was as if the world lit up around him. The path to deliverance was made visible. Hid-

den thoughts and deeds, normally concealed, found themselves out in the open. "*Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.*"

Reflection

The motif of *light* in these passages connects to themes of guiding, leading, delivering. How does Jesus, the Light of the World, direct your steps? Out of what place has he brought you? Into what place has he brought you?

Light, when shining in darkness, has a keen ability to reveal *everything* hidden — both what is good, and what is ugly. Jesus desires to uncover and bring to light the things hidden in our minds and hearts — this process can be painful, but the light of Jesus is a healing light. What dark parts of your heart or life might you need to let the light shine?

In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus uses this motif with yet another angle — he tells the people listening, "*You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" The one who is the Light desires that we might shine as well and participate with him in the work of redeeming the world. Is the light of Christ visible in you to others? In what ways could you let the light of Christ shine more brightly in your life?

Practice

As a daily practice this week, light a candle first thing in the morning and sit for a moment. Look around at the effect the light has on the room around you. Reflect on the truth that Christ is the Light of the World, and as you think about the day to come, consider how you might mindfully participate in the great work of Christ's light shining in the darkness.

The Third Week of Lent

I AM the Gate & I AM the Good Shepherd

“**I AM the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...I AM the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:9, 14-15)**



Go Bigger: Read John 9-10

A shepherd: a leader and a caregiver wrapped up in one. Responsible to defend, protect, guide, nourish. Bravely standing between the flock and threats of danger, yet close enough to be attuned to their needs and know each member by name. Most of us are not shepherds — even so, construct the scene in your mind’s eye and imagine what the job might entail. What if the stream you normally bring the flock to visit has gone dry? What if you awaken in the night to a pregnant ewe in the pains of labor? What if one is injured, or wanders off?

Two “I AM” statements are placed together in Jesus’ discourse about sheep tending: *I AM the Gate* and *I AM the Good Shepherd* (see the front cover for artwork on *I AM the Gate*). Some scholars who understand the sheep fields of the ancient Middle East recall that it was common, when the sheep were gathered in the pen, for the shepherd himself to lay in the open doorway, acting like a *gate* — no entry in or out was possible except through the shepherd. This may have been the picture Jesus had in mind; either way, his message lacks no clarity: there is a single point of entry to the flock of God, and it is he, himself.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd stands in stark contrast to the Pharisees with whom he has just clashed in the previous chapter. The Pharisees were the spiritual leaders of the People of God, and as such they had a shepherding role — but they fulfilled this role poorly. They've looked out for themselves, they've left the sheep malnourished through their legalism, and they've made entrance into the fold burdensome. In contrast, Jesus has come *“that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* (10:10)

Go Older: Read Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34

The *Shepherd* motif is one of the most consistent images in the Scriptures that displays how God relates to His people. Many of us are familiar with the words of Psalm 23, *“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”* In this Psalm, the Lord is both a fierce defender and an intimate caregiver, attuned to the needs of His flock. Their fears, their desires, their well-being matter to Him.

God, as the True Shepherd, extended the responsibility of shepherding to Israel's leaders — especially spiritual leaders like priests — to guide and care for His people until He came for them. Read his scathing words in Ezekiel 34 for the leaders who have abused this role:

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves!...You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered...My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill...and no one searched or looked for them...I myself will search for my sheep and look after them...I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord.”

Jesus, God Himself in flesh-and-bone, came to complete this work. But it came at great cost — indeed, he states in John 10:15, *“I lay down my life for the sheep.”*

Reflection

When Jesus refers to those who would attempt to “climb in” the sheepfold another way than through the gate, he may well have been referring to the Pharisees, whose intent was to enter the sheepfold by way of purity and righteous works. Entry by the true gate, however, is through grace and grace alone. Have you found yourself trying to earn your entrance or pay for your keep?

Jesus declares in this passage that he has come to give abundant life. This phrase is tied to bringing the sheep *out to pasture* — in what ways is this true of your experience? Can one have the peace of a sheep *out to pasture* even in the midst of difficult circumstances?

Jesus states that his *knowing and being known* by the sheep is as intimate as his *knowing and being known* by his Father — how does this intimate language about relationship with God sit with you?

Practice

Read Ezekiel 34 in its entirety and write down every verb, every action of God on behalf of the sheep. (*Tend, search, rescue...*) Think through the various seasons of your life. How has Jesus proven himself to be your Shepherd and done these things for you?

The story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt lies behind many of the I AM statements. Jesus is the Shepherd and the Gate. He also became our Passover Lamb. Consider watching *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or, if you have kids or are young at heart, the animated *Prince of Egypt* (1998).

The Fourth Week of Lent

I AM the Resurrection and the Life

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John. 11:25-26)



Go Bigger — Read John 11

Our chapter begins with the desperate, hopeful plea from the sisters of Lazarus — “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Love is the emphasis here. Jesus’ love for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha runs deep. Surprisingly, it is this love that compels Christ to let his friend die. It is out of love for his friends that he waits. But why? How does this make sense? In Jesus’ own words, because “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” (v 4).

When Jesus finally arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. This is significant because the Jews of that day held a belief that for three days one’s spirit hovered around their body, but only for three days — in other words, Lazarus is now as dead as dead can be.

Grief fills the air. Martha runs out to meet Jesus. Sorrow, confusion and hope swirl about in her heart as she says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him” (vs 22-23). To which Jesus promises her, “Your brother will rise again” (v 23). With astonishing faith, Martha replies, “I know that he will rise again in the

resurrection on the last day” (v 24). But Jesus, looking deeply into her tear-filled eyes proclaims, “I AM the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? (vs 25-26).

He *is* her hope, he is the one in whom she is placing her faith, because *he is* the resurrection and the life. “Lazarus, come out!”

Go Older: Read Ezekiel 37, Genesis 1-2 & John 1

(The Resurrection & The Life)

When we look back to the beginning of John’s Gospel and the very beginning of our Bibles we see the Father speaking all things into existence by his very Word, the Word who “was with God, and the Word was God” and the Word who is now at the tomb of Lazarus (John 1:1). He through whom “all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. [For] In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” (John 1:3-4). The Word who can say, “I AM life.”

Yet here he is, as one of us, as one under the curse of sin and death — weeping at the tomb of a friend, knowing that he too will soon die. But the darkness will not overcome the light, and death will not overcome life. No, this is the very Word of God spoken over the dry bones by the Prophet Ezekiel, the Word that can restore life even after death has had its way. This is he who conquered the grave on the third day. How could he not conquer death? He is life himself! Or as Augustine so simply states, “[He is] The resurrection because [he is] the life.”

Reflection

It is important to remember that when Jesus says “I AM the resurrection and the life” he is promising our resurrection from the dead and

deliverance from a spiritual death (John 11:25-26). This twofold promise is what is guaranteed to all who put their faith in Christ. How have you already experienced Jesus’ resurrection life? What part of your spirit needs a touch of Jesus’ resurrection life right now?

The question Jesus asks Martha, he asks each of us: “Do you believe this?” During this time of penitence leading up to Easter and the celebration of Jesus’ Resurrection, ask the Lord to expose those particular areas where you doubt and lack trust, and to renew your faith. Let us honestly pray, like the man who brings his son to be healed by Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Practice

Spend time remembering loved ones who have died and are now with Christ. If you have kids, include them in your remembering. What are some favorite memories? Do you remember what their voice sounded like, or how they smelled? Imagine what you might feel when you see them again at the resurrection, when you again hear their voice, hold them in a hug, and laugh together. If you can, visit their burial site.

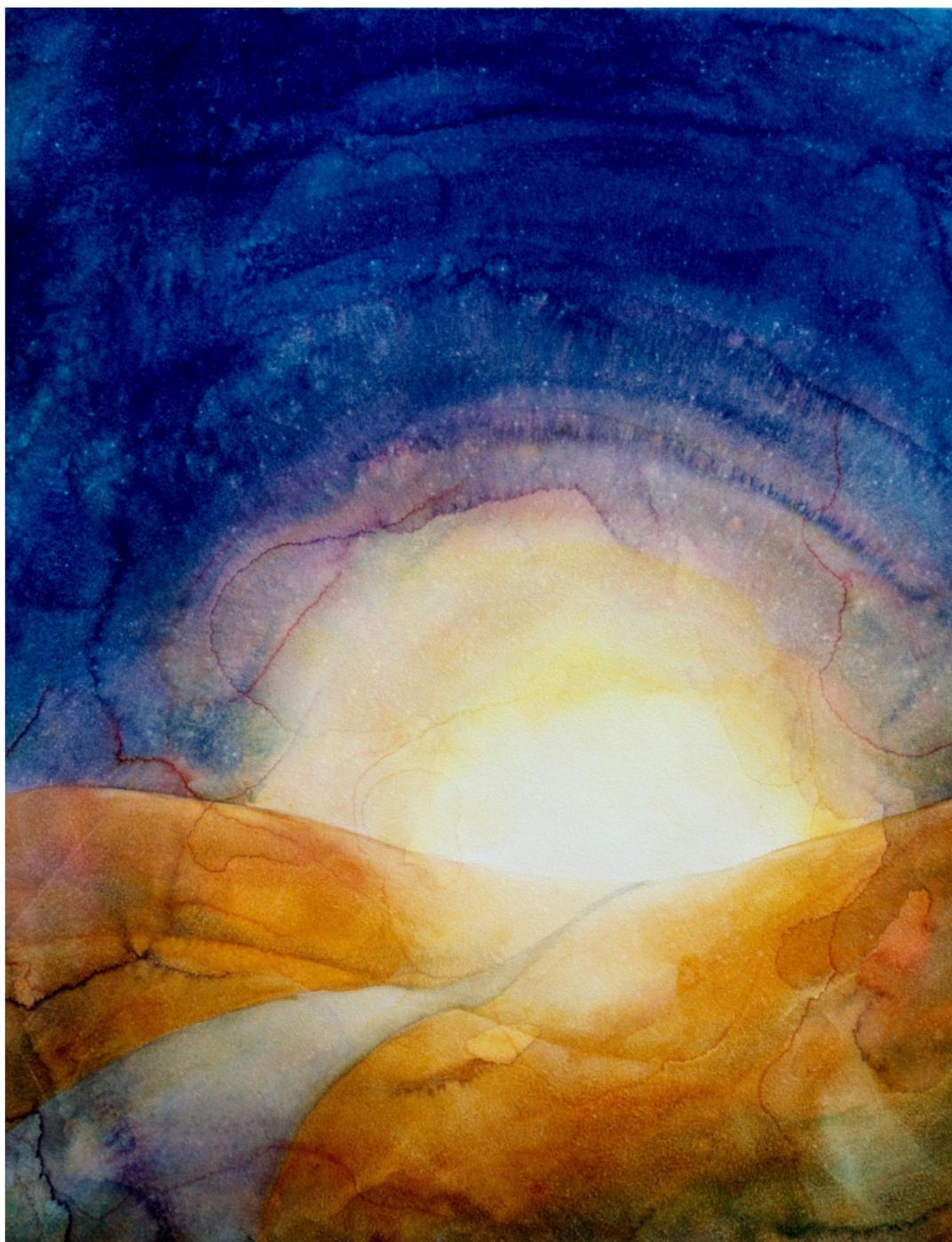
C.S. Lewis marvelously illustrates Christ being the resurrection and the life in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. As Aslan moves throughout the country, spring breaks the power of winter, life breaks the power of death. Consider reading this book and, if you have kids, do it together as a family. Or, watch the video! Allow the resurrection and the life to capture your imaginations.

If weather permits, take a walk outside and look for the first green shoots of spring.

The Fifth Week of Lent

I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John. 14:6)



Go Bigger: Read John 13-18

(Over the span of this week)

This was clearly no ordinary night and they all knew it. Peter was not the only one surprised by their teacher and Lord kneeling to wash their feet, nor was he the only one troubled by Jesus' tone. Everything Jesus said and did that night rang with the intentionality of one who knew his time was short — of a man facing death. After celebrating the Passover, after breaking the bread and sharing the wine, Jesus led them out of the house and they began to walk towards the Mt. of Olives.

Jesus knew that his disciples felt untethered. He was their hope, he was their future, he was everything, and he made clear that he was leaving them. All they knew, their way forward and their very lives, were crumbling before them. The fear and anxiety could be felt — not just by the disciples but by their Master too. Yet it was then that he spoke these words: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there*

you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going” (John 14:1-4). To which Thomas replied, *“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”* (John 14:5).

Jesus responded, *“I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:6)

Go Older: Read Exodus 3 and Psalm 105

Pharaoh was ruling with an iron grip, and the Israelites felt hopeless. God promised their forefather Abraham that they would be a great nation, that they would inherit the promised land, but after four hundred years as slaves, it is hard to believe that they did not feel hopeless. But just like in our Gospel reading, God spoke to a people untethered, a people without a future.

God’s appearance to Moses in the burning bush with the sharing of his name, was profound for many reasons: not least that it was he, the Great “I AM” who saw Israel’s plight, who heard their cries, and who conducted their rescue. It was he who began this rescue by speaking through Moses. Moses, who like all of the prophets after him, spoke truth in the midst of lies. Pharaoh declared that the Israelites were his people, but God said, “Let *my* people go.” *He is the truth.*

After forcing Pharaoh’s hand through signs and wonders, the people found themselves stuck between Egypt’s army and the Sea, and it was God who parted the waters, who led the people by the fire and cloud — who made a way where there was no way. *He is the way.*

And it was God who led them, and preserved them through the wilderness into the promised land. Who had them build the tabernacle that they may again, to an extent, dwell

in his presence. Who gave them the sacrificial system — who gave them a way out from under their sin and shame. *He is the life.*

Jesus’ words of comfort to his Disciples were far from baseless claims. He can say, *“I AM the way, the truth, and life”* because this is who he is, and this is who he has always been and always will be.

Reflection

Jesus IS the way. Perhaps, like the Disciples or the Israelites, you are feeling untethered or hopeless. This feeling propels us to seek satisfaction, purpose, and hope elsewhere. How might your life look different if you looked to Christ to be your way, truth, and life?

Jesus IS the truth. What does that mean? Is that hard for you to hear? Is that refreshing for you to hear?

Jesus IS the life. He is making a home for us and plans to take us to himself. Jesus’ disciples longed to be with him. In what ways has the past year with the pandemic coupled with social and political unrest made that longing all the more real for you?

Practice

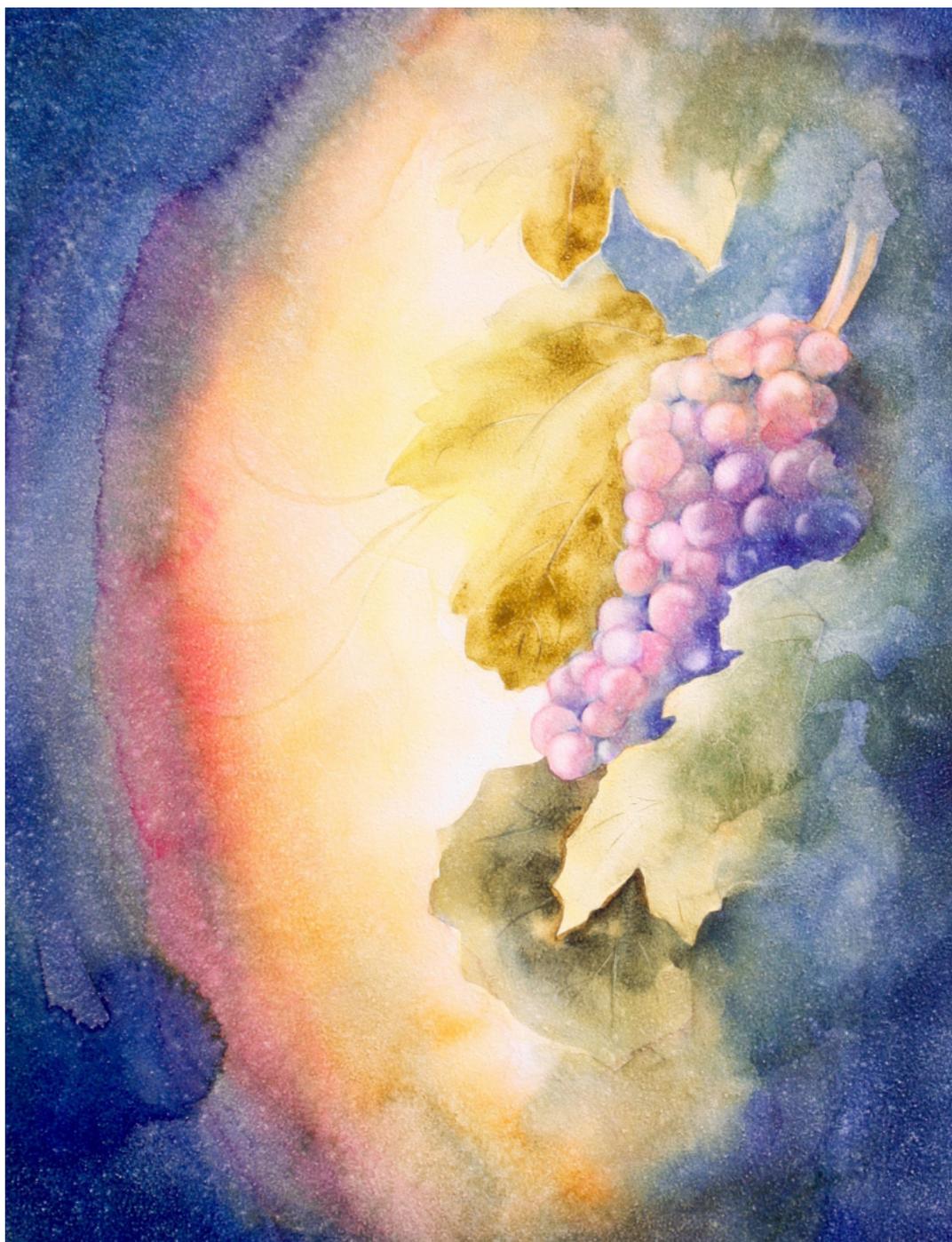
Look at the artwork for this week and think about some of the physical roads you have travelled. What makes them memorable? Where did they take you? Is there a particular journey that came to mind? Were you ever lost? Were there detours? Think about the roads taken on your spiritual journey. Jesus says he is the ‘Way’ and early Christians described themselves as ‘followers of the Way.’ How have you experienced Jesus as the Way?

Worship and pray to the Lord through song, finding ‘Way Maker’ on YouTube or Spotify.

The Sixth Week of Lent

I AM the True Vine

“**I** am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John. 15:1-2,5)



Go Bigger: John 13-18

(If you did not read it last week, read it this week)

This statement comes just 31 verses after Jesus said, “*I AM the way, the truth, and the life.*” There’s a chance that he and the eleven remaining disciples are still walking between the upper room and the Mt. of Olives. Jesus is mere hours away from being betrayed, from being murdered, and he knew it. He knew his Disciples needed words of clarity and comfort, and so, in his final “I AM” statement he declared: “*I AM the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me*” (John 15:1, 4).

“Abide” is a word we often hear in Church and almost never anywhere else. This is why one commentator, Fredrick Brunner, decided to translate the phrase “*abide in me*” as, “*make your home with me.*” What an incredible thought: Jesus is asking the eleven, and is asking each of us, to make our home with him — to live with him.

The Vine grows and sustains the branches, and the branches produce the grapes. The life of the

Vine is the life of the branches, it's the life that produces the goodness of the grapes. It is all a reminder of who he is, the *true vine*, the giver of life. It is a reminder of who the Father is — the God of all, pruning and growing each one of us. And it's a reminder of who we are — loved by him, fed by him, dependent upon him for life and fruitfulness.

This is what it means to abide, to make our home with Christ — to rely wholly on the vine, and in him to bear much fruit.

Go Older: Read Isaiah 5 and 27

John 15 is not the first time that we hear about the Father as the vinedresser, as the gardener of the vineyard. This imagery stems from the prophet Isaiah, but with one key difference. In Isaiah 5 and 27, Israel is the vine. Israel, the people of God, blessed to bless the Nations — a vine to bear much fruit. Yet despite the excellence of the vinedresser who chose a fertile hill, who prepared the soil, who even built a watchtower to protect his vine, the vine refused to bear good fruit — Israel, time and time again, rejected the way of life God called them to. And so, although God allowed the people to be taken into exile, he gave them this promise:

“In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit.”
(Isaiah 27:6)

It is only now, in light of Jesus' last words before his death, that this promise makes sense: Jesus is *the true Vine* — he is the true Israel. It is in him and through him that the people of God will blossom, and the whole world will be filled with fruit. It is only when we “make our homes with him” that the whole world will be filled with his fruit.

Reflection

We tend to “make our homes” in the wrong

things. We make our home in what we do, in what is fun, in politics, in television, in relationships, in work, and on and on we could go. Where do you abide? What changes might you make to your day-to-day practices to abide in Jesus more fully?

Where are you growing? Where are you seeing fruit in your life, in your family, in our community? Conversely, where might you need to be pruned?

The Rev. Geoff Mackey once said, “During this time of Lent, we remember who God is, who we are, and we try not to get the jobs confused.” There is great comfort in knowing that Christ is *the true* Israel, *the true* vine. There is comfort in realizing that you are not the vine — that you are not required to produce fruit on your own, but by abiding, fruit is produced in us by him. How does this bring comfort to your soul this week?

Practice

While we probably cannot start a vineyard in our homes, many of us own house plants. Consider purchasing a plant. Let your tending to it remind you of how the Father prunes and cares for us. Let each leaf and branch remind you of your own dependence on the vine, on the roots/trunk for life. Allow these small, simple plants to propel you into prayer.

If you want to be more adventurous, visit Phipps Conservatory, and pay special attention to the vines growing there. Are any of them flowering or do they have fruit?

We Bid Your Prayers

Call to Prayer for the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh

As Christians, we are part of Christ's Universal Church. As Anglican Christians, we are part of a larger community - a global Anglican Communion. Our connection with this worldwide fellowship is through our local Diocese, the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh. As many are aware, our Diocese is beginning the process of searching for our next bishop. This season of discernment will require much prayer. That's where we come in.

Throughout the search process, we will be holding the Diocese in prayer, regularly praying the following two prayers. We invite and encourage you to incorporate them into your personal prayer times too.

Prayer for the Leadership of the Diocese

O God, by your grace you have called us in this Diocese to be a good and godly fellowship of faith. Bless those who have been called to exercise leadership during this season, especially the members of the Standing Committee and the Diocesan Council, as they begin the search process for our next Bishop. Grant to them, and to each member of the diocese, a fresh outpouring of your Spirit, a renewed determination to seek your will, and the assurance of your presence; safeguard our unity and ignite in us a great passion for the mission of your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayer for the Selection of a Bishop

Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a bishop of the Diocese that we may receive a faithful pastor who will preach the Gospel, care for your people, equip us for ministry, and lead us forth in fulfillment of the Great Commission; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p. 648-9)

Lenten Prayer: Praying the Litany of Penance

Wednesday from February 24 - March 31, 7:00-7:15 p.m.

"Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of

Lent: a time of penitence, fasting, and prayer, in preparation for the great feast of the resurrection." (BCP) p. 542

For the six Wednesdays following Ash Wednesday you are invited to "observe a holy Lent" by joining us in a Lenten prayer experience as we pray together the Litany of Penance (BCP 547-549). We meet "live" via Zoom for about 15 minutes to pray a penitential psalm and prayers that facilitate self-examination and repentance. Our co-hosts are Denise Bozich and Josh Miser.

The call opens at 6:45 p.m. for fellowship and connection prior to our prompt start at 7:00 p.m. Feel free to join us for any or all of these times of prayer. Send an email to andrea.millard@ascensionpittsburgh.org to receive the Zoom link.

Youth Ministry: Would YOU Pray for me this Lent?

After Jesus' baptism, "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" [Mark 1:12-13]. Would you spend a moment of each day this Lent (forty days, not including Sundays) praying for one of our teens from Ascension's youth group? Text Alex (412-652-3137) and we can chat about who! Adopt a youth in your prayers this Lent!

Navigating middle and high school is challenging enough in normal times, so you can imagine how disruptive the COVID pandemic has been to learning, socializing and preparations for the future. It does very much feel like an isolating and disorientating wilderness. But Jesus joins us here, and I am inviting you to join him in prayer. Each week you can take a different 'I AM' saying to focus and structure your prayers. I will appreciate it, their parents will appreciate it, and we can prepare for Easter together!

International Ministry



If you want to follow the current events of the international ministry, contact LuAnn Pengidore at PittsburghEnglish4u@gmail.com.

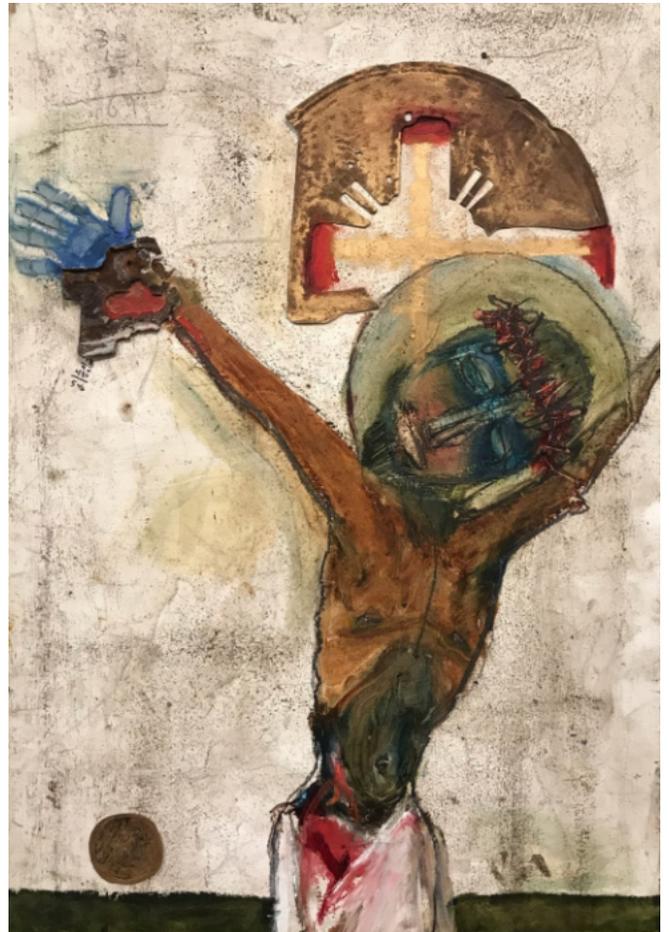
This semester, we have had weekly online English classes on Monday mornings, Wednesday evenings and Thursday evenings for levels 1 - 6. We have had 7 Bible studies, including 1 in Spanish. We launched a special 10-minute prayer gathering for our students on Monday afternoons. We have 14 adults who serve as conversation partners for 17 students (and we always have room for more!) Finally, students are still gathering safely outside for walks and field trips, such as admiring the view from Mount Washington, eating in Mellon Park, going to Phipps, and soon we'll be exploring the Natural History Museum.

Music & Worship Arts

For the past several years, visual artists at Church of the Ascension have created new works that have served as the Stations of the Cross. The result is a unique and unforgettable experience, and a key part of the Good Friday service. Please reach out to Elise Massa (elise.massa@ascension-pittsburgh.org) for more information and to participate this year. To the right is artwork from Carol Amidi from last year's Stations of the Cross.

As the weather gets warmer, the choir will transition from doing everything virtually to having some outdoor rehearsals and gatherings. Whether you are a tenured choir member or more of a shower singer, you are invited to explore this wonderful way of worshiping together. Please reach out to Chris Massa (chris.massa@ascensionpittsburgh.org) for more information.

The next season for the children's choir (for kids 5 and up) is shaping up to be an exciting one. Please reach out to Jane Banfield Hicks (jbanfield-hicks@gmail.com) for more information.



Jesus on the Cross by Carol Amidi

Lent and Holy Week Services

Please visit www.ascensionpittsburgh.org to register to attend in person

Ash Wednesday

February 17 at 12:00 p.m. Noon

Live stream with Walk-through Communion at 7:00 p.m.

Sundays in Lent

10:00 a.m.

Live stream with Walk-through Communion

Maundy Thursday

April 1 at 7:00 p.m.

Live stream with Walk-through Communion

Good Friday

April 2 at 12:00 p.m. Noon

Live stream (no Communion)

Worship Services Sunday 10:00 a.m. Live stream on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com) with walk-through Eucharist from 11:15 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.

Website www.ascensionpittsburgh.org

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A Worshipping Community;
Equipping God's People; Sharing
Christ's Healing with a Broken World