

The Ascent

FEBRUARY 2024

Lent: I AM the Good Shepherd



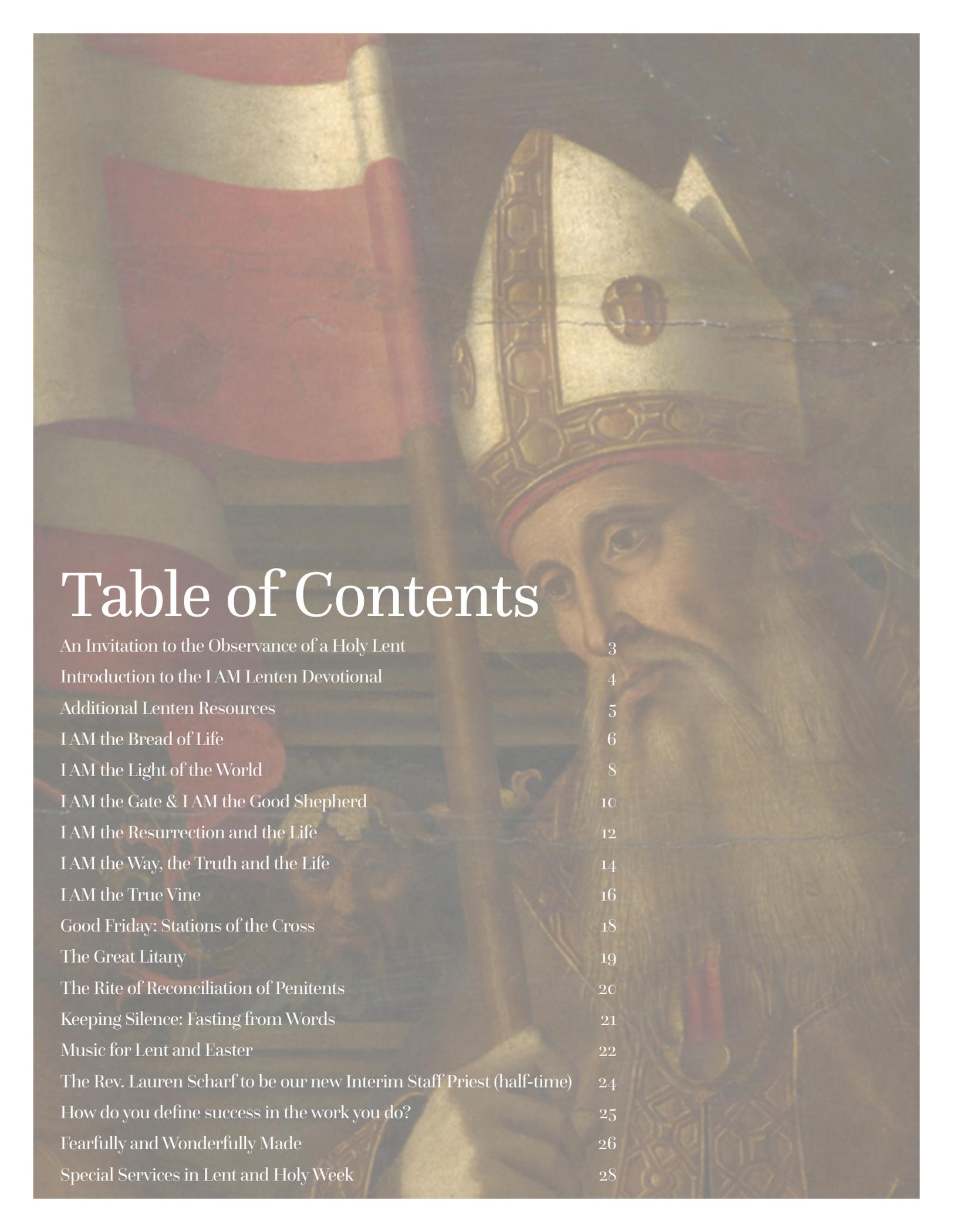


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Letter from the Rector

An Invitation to the Observance of a Holy Lent



By Jonathan Millard, Rector

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On Ash Wednesday, the Church is given this invitation by the celebrant of the liturgy, “I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and alms-giving; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” (BCP 2019, p.542)

Three invitations - three ways to observe a holy Lent:

- Self-examination and repentance
- Prayer, fasting, and alms-giving
- Reading and meditating on God’s holy Word

Each of these ways has one thing in common: intentionality. I don’t believe any of these things make us holy and they certainly don’t make us any more or less loved by God. However, these practices, these spiritual disciplines, may help us to receive what God longs to give us. They require us to exercise restraint and be good stewards of our time.

I have found that when I make time for these practices and do them, however falteringly or incompletely, something happens. Invariably, I experience a fresh sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world, the church, and in my own life. These practices are also a very practical way to allow God to recharge our spiritual batteries. These practices help prepare us for whatever may come – not just in Lent, but in life.

Every time I conduct an honest self-examination, I am convicted of something that reminds me of my need to repent. Usually, it has something to do with my pride, my

thinking of myself as better than others, and my selfishness. If you don’t know where to start in making an honest self-examination, I commend to you the Confession and Litany of Penitence we will use at our Ash Wednesday services (which you can find on p. 547-549 of the BCP 2019.)

When I pray, fast, and give to the poor, I am reminded of God’s abundant grace and provision in my life. I assure you I don’t like fasting. Yet, oddly, it is something I never regret doing. I am so glad that Jesus commends these practices to those who follow him. He knows what we’re like. He knows our weaknesses and temptations. We are invited to practice these disciplines because they are helpful. They help reset and refocus our distracted minds, and disordered wills.

Reading and meditating on God’s Word has been a lifelong practice that my parents and grandparents practiced, modeled, and encouraged me to do likewise. I find the reading part easier than the meditating part. Meditating on God’s Word takes a little extra time, it cannot be hurried, and it requires me to be silent. Yet, what a gift – when we take that time, and we are still before the Lord and his Word. He’s always waiting for us.

Finally, whatever you think of Lent, and however you may have walked through Lent in previous years, I invite you, this year in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent. I am confident if you take up this invitation you won’t regret it.

Jonathan +
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Introduction to the I AM Lenten Devotional



By Josh Bennett, Director of Youth Ministry, and Jess Bennett, Curate

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“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 just 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 enslaved in Egypt. Freshly commissioned to deliver his people, Moses asks,

*“Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I AM who I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—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)*

“I AM.” He is...what? Well, maybe that’s just it. He is. This God is life himself; eternal, unchanging, holding all things together. He was, He is, He forever will be. There is no other god, no competition for the I AM, 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 very 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 Bible teacher puts 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 retells the narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry, the reader first 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 foreshadowing’s in the Old Testament.

Additional Lenten Resources



By Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector
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In addition to the Bennett's devotional on the I AM sayings of Jesus as well our regular Prayer Guide, there are three Lenten resources I recommend:

The Word in the Wilderness by Malcolm Guite

This includes a poem for every day from Ash Wednesday to Easter with thoughtful commentary for each poem.

The Art of Lent by Sister Wendy Beckett

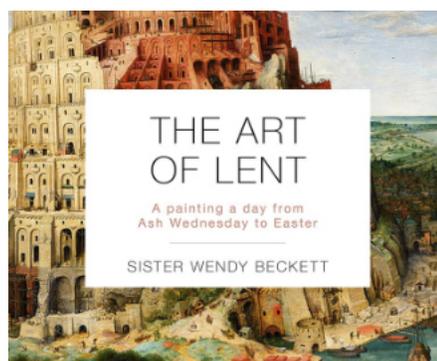
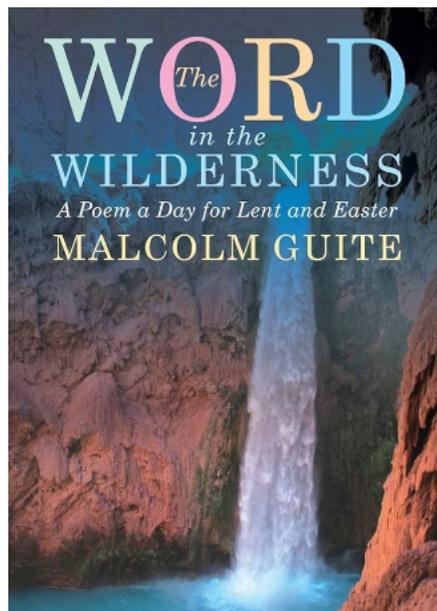
This book includes a painting for every day from Ash Wednesday to Easter. Each painting is accompanied by a short reflection.

The Biola Online Lent Project

For those who prefer a free resource sent to their Inbox every day, Biola University's Center for Christianity, Culture, & the Arts offers a great devotional comprised of Scripture and works of art, which includes painting, poetry, and music.

Lenten Soul Care

Lenten Soul Care is designed to help us engage in the disciplines of prayer, reading and meditating on God's holy Word. We begin and end our gathering in silence, and throughout the morning we leave space for silence – we fast from words. If you have not been to a Soul Care morning, Lent could be a great time to check it out. Join us on Saturday, February 24 from 9:30 - 11:00am in the Hunt Rooms. To register, check out the announcements page on our website or register directly on the app.



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 to 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 (or at least alluding to) the Eucharist, the sacrament by which we receive him *in faith*. We are given a beautiful promise in verse 56: “*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains 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 to simply 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 Communion?

Practice

- Make a loaf of bread from scratch, and if you have children in your life, 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? Jesus doesn't teach us that physical "stuff" is meaningless 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?
- **Image:** Loaf of bread baked for Shavuot, celebrated 7 weeks after Passover, commemorating the first fruits of the harvest and associated with the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai (used with permission photozion.com); What feelings and impressions arise as you contemplate the image?

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 will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” (John. 8:12)



Go Bigger: The Feast of Tabernacles

John 7:1 – 8:20

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 lamplight. 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 is 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 huts 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 overcomes the darkness. How things hidden are revealed. How we can see one another face-to-face.

Light is an utterly prominent theme throughout John’s Gospel. We read in the opening paragraph of the book, “*In him [the Word] was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness*

has 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: The Pillar of Fire

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

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 (Exodus 13). 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, and hidden 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? What place has he brought you out of? What place has he brought you into?
- Light, when shining in darkness, has a keen ability to reveal *everything* hidden, both what is good, and what is broken. 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 into?

- 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, that they may see your good deeds and glorify 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 (or last thing before bed) 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 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).
- **Image:** Candles lit by pilgrims in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, traditionally regarded as the site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (used with permission); What feelings and impressions arise as you contemplate the image?

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 do you do 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 the Good Shepherd*. 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 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 and through their legalism, made entrance into the fold burdensome.

In contrast, Jesus has come *"that they may have life, and have it to the full."* [10:10]

Go Older: Shepherds in the Old Testament

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 shall not want." 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. Hear 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! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool...but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. 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 am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock...I myself will search for my sheep and look after them...I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered...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 exactly this work. But it came at great cost. Indeed, he states in John 10:15, *"I lay down my life for the sheep."* This is where the logic of the shepherd seems to burst at the seams - a shepherd who would give up his very life to rescue the flock? Good hardly seems strong enough a word.

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?
- 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 amid 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 and the lives of your loved ones. How has Jesus proven himself to be your Shepherd and done these things for you?
- **Image:** Sheep grazing on the Mt. of Olives with Jerusalem's temple mount and the Golden Gate or "Gate of Mercy" (sealed since 1541) in the background. What feelings and impressions arise as you look at the image of sheep in this location where so much of Jesus' story took place? (used with permission photozion.com)

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, the one you love is sick.*” 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 I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.*” To which Jesus promises her, “*Your brother will rise again.*” With astonishing faith, Martha replies, “*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*” But Jesus, looking deeply into her tear-filled eyes proclaims,

"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?"

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: The Life and the Resurrection

Read Ezekiel 37, Genesis 1-2, John 1

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. 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?"* Do we believe that Jesus is the life, that he is the resurrection? Is he the one in whom we place our hope and faith? During this time of penitence leading up to Easter, to the Resurrection, ask the Lord to expose your doubt in him as our ultimate hope, and to renew your faith. Let us honestly pray, like the man who brings his son to be healed by Jesus, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* (Mark 9:24).

Practice

- Spend time remembering loved ones who have died and are now with Christ. If you have children, 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. Remind your children of the hope that Christ gives us, even when death seems so final.
- 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 children, do it together as a family. 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.
- **Image:** Ancient tomb similar to those in the 1st century located in the vicinity of Tel Megiddo, Israel (used with permission). What feelings and impressions arise in you as you contemplate the image?

The Fifth Week of Lent

I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life

‘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 Mt. Olivet.

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, 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: *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. 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, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to 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.*"

Go Older: The Exodus and the Wilderness

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 of oppression, 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, his 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 the 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

- Perhaps, like the disciples or the Israelites, you are feeling untethered or hopeless. This feeling propels us to seek satisfaction, purpose, and hope in our relationships, careers, education, hobbies, television, politics, etc. How are you looking for those things to fulfill what only Christ can? How might your life look different if you looked to Christ to be your way, truth, and life?
- Like the disciples, we all long for the future where we are *where Jesus is*: our future hope of restoration, healing, and rest. How have the tumultuous events of recent years made this longing even more real?

Practice

- Think about some of the physical roads you have traveled. 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?
- **Image:** Ancient pathway with view of St. Peter's Church in Jaffa, traditionally known as Joppa where Peter had his vision before going to Caesarea to meet Cornelius and where Jonah set out to Tarshish to flee from the Lord (used with permission); What feelings and impressions arise as you contemplate the image?

The Sixth Week of Lent

I AM the True Vine

“**I AM the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. (John. 15:1)**



Go Bigger: John 13-18

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

This statement comes only 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 vinedresser... Abide in me, and I in you. 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 fruit. 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 of Trinity School for Ministry often says, "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, each 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 or the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden, and pay special attention to the vines growing there. Are any of them flowering or do they have fruit?
- **Image:** Flowering vine in Qatzrin, north of the Sea of Galilee (used with permission); What feelings and impressions arise as you contemplate the image?

Good Friday: Stations of the Cross



By Wes Williams, Curate

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The Stations of the Cross is an historic Christian practice through which the Church has meditated on Christ's condemnation, crucifixion, and death. The final hours of Christ's earthly life are broken into several "stations" at which worshipers are asked to stop, meditate, and pray on the moment in Christ's life being represented to them.

In the Catholic church, there are fourteen stations, beginning with Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and ending with Jesus

being laid in the tomb. Some of these stations borrow from extra-biblical sources, but most are pulled directly from Scripture. The *Via Dolorosa* is a processional route in the Old City of Jerusalem with 14 stations. It represents the path that Jesus took, forced by the Roman soldiers, on the way to his crucifixion.

As an ongoing Good Friday practice, Church of the Ascension has kept eight stations as part of our worship, including Scripture readings with our prayers. The Stations, in order, are:

- Jesus Condemned to Death
- Jesus Takes Up His Cross
- The Cross is Laid on Simon of Cyrene
- Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem
- Jesus is Stripped of His Garments
- Jesus is Nailed to the Cross
- Jesus Dies on the Cross
- Jesus is Laid in the Tomb

At Ascension, we are blessed to have many artists in our worshiping community. On Good Friday we invite some of our artists to create pieces that represent each station using their own interpretive style. This year we have recruited



eight artists and are excited to see the work that comes from their personal meditations on their respective stations.

The Stations of the Cross will be presented during our Good Friday service on March 29 and will remain displayed for some weeks thereafter. All are welcome to join us in our meditations and prayers on Good Friday.



The Great Litany



By Mark Stevenson, Parish Deacon

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Join clergy and staff each Tuesday at Noon, throughout Lent, to say the Great Litany together.

“O God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, Have mercy upon us.”

The Great Litany. It is every bit as impressive as it sounds. And when used in Lent, the season of penance, prayer, and contemplation, it takes on an even greater solemnity. What is The Great Litany? Its origins are an important part of our heritage as Anglicans.

In 1534, King Henry VIII of England persuaded Parliament to pass The Act of Supremacy, by which the King was made head of the church in England. This was the major turning point for the English church, which for 1,000 years had been synonymous with the Church of Rome, but which now became for the first time, The Church of England

“From all false doctrine, heresy, and schism; from hardness of heart and contempt of your Word and commandments, Good Lord. Deliver us.”

Enter Thomas Cranmer, the author of the great treasure of all Anglicans, the *Book of Common Prayer*. Cranmer was also Henry VIII’s Archbishop of Canterbury, the leading prelate in England. Cranmer had over time become an ardent reformer in the new Protestantism sweeping western Christendom. His goal was to have a liturgy in English for the Church of England. This was a daunting task as the liturgy had been a Roman-Latin liturgy for centuries. Moving too slowly would anger the Protestants eager for reform; moving too quickly would outrage the many Roman Catholics still clinging to the old ways. And he had to deal with a volatile and unpredictable king.

Cranmer was an inveterate collector and compiler of ancient texts, including Latin liturgies, some dating from the late Middle Ages. He also understood the depth, beauty, and linguistic possibilities of a still emerging “modern” English language.

“By your agony and bloody sweat; by your passion; by your precious death and burial, Good Lord, deliver us.”

But where was Cranmer to start with the immense task of writing and compiling a complete liturgy in English? It’s not

The Great Litany Pray with us

Tuesdays in Lent
Start @ Noon
Meet in the Nave
All are welcome



certain why, but he decided to begin with a Litany. A Litany consists of a series of petitions to God by the priest, followed by set refrain from the people. The very first petition in The Great Litany is, “O God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth,” and the people respond, “Have mercy on us.”

The Great Litany is indeed great in many ways, not the least of which is in the breadth and depth of its many petitions. Very few transgressions are excluded. But what might seem overwhelming comes into focus when we think of the simpler Confession we make in our weekly service when we are reminded of our “manifold sins and wickedness”.

The Great Litany was published in 1544. What is significant is that The Great Litany served as the cornerstone for Cranmer’s first *Book of Common Prayer*, published in 1549. In his highly recommended book, *The Book of Common Prayer, A Biography*, author Alan Jacobs writes: “That single rite would be the first installment of a book (BCP) that would transform the religious lives of countless English (and every nation) men, women, and children...” (Jacobs, p 5).

This Lent you are invited to experience The Great Litany. You are welcome to gather with Ascension staff in the choir stalls at noon each Tuesday.

“To have mercy upon all people, we beseech you to hear us good Lord!”

The Rite of Reconciliation of Penitents

“Penitent” is a churchy type of word. It refers to one who feels or shows regret and sorrow for those things done wrong. It’s a good Lenten word. Penitents are invited to bring their regrets and sorrows to the Lord, through the Church, using The Rite of Reconciliation (otherwise known as Confession).

Confession is an important part of Anglican spirituality. It is something we do each week as we gather for corporate worship. It is a daily spiritual practice for those who pray the Daily Office – Morning and Evening Prayer.

Confession is particularly suited for Lent. In our Ash Wednesday liturgy, we are called “to the observance of a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and almsgiving; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word” (BCP 544). Lent is a season for repentance and reconciliation.

There is a helpful Anglican saying about this Rite: “All may, none must, some should.” There is no obligation to participate in Confession, yet many experience freedom and healing in this Sacramental Rite. There is something sacred in having another bear witness to our true repentance and commitment to amendment of life. There is healing when those things that block relationship with God, neighbor and self are confessed and forgiven. There is healing in hearing the words of absolution and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, following Jesus’ command to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11).

What to Expect: The Rite of Reconciliation is an individual, one-on-one time with a priest who will listen, counsel, direct, comfort, and pray for the penitent. We use the 2019 Book of Common Prayer’s liturgy for this appointment. It is typically scheduled as a brief (15-20-minute appointment) at Ascension, typically in the Gordon Chapel.

Preparation: Come as you are. Some people know precisely what they need to confess. Others have more of a vague notion. There is no prescribed process for preparing for the Rite of Reconciliation, however, if you want ideas for preparing, you might consider the following:



- Pray through the “Confession and Litany of Penitence” found in the Ash Wednesday liturgy (547-549) before your appointment; prayerfully pause on those petitions that speak to matters in your life; ask the Lord to grant you a new and contrite heart.
- Ask the Lord to bring to your mind those sins that are interfering with your relationship with God and others (things that have offended against God’s love and holiness); express sorrow for those sins (contrition); and, by God’s grace, resolve to change, to make “amendment of life.”
- Pray “The Great Litany” (91-99), prayerfully pausing on those petitions that feel like invitations to greater examination of conscience.

If you have other questions about this Rite or to make an appointment, feel free to reach out to any of our staff priests:

- Jonathan Millard: jonathan.millard@ascensionpittsburgh.org
- Kevin Antlitz: kevin.antlitz@ascensionpittsburgh.org
- Andrea Millard: andrea.millard@ascensionpittsburgh.org
- Lauren Scharf: lwscharf@gmail.com
- Jess Bennett: jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org
- Josh Bennett: josh.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org
- Daniel Behrens: behrensdg1@gmail.com
- Jack Gabig: jgabig@gmail.com

Keeping Silence: Fasting from Words



By Andrea Millard, Director of Prayer Ministry & Leadership Development
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Fasting is a spiritual practice common in Lent. Many choose to fast from food, skipping one or more meals a week. During Lent's forty days, others intentionally abstain from alcohol, chocolate, media, technology, or things/activities that might be identified as unproductive or unhealthy attachments. Fasting in these ways can be an outward expression of an inward commitment to intentionally pursuing God.

A type of fasting that I have found helpful in my pursuit of God is fasting from words. While I could do (and have done) this type of fasting on my own, I find keeping silence with others to be an enriching spiritual practice that helps me listen more attentively to the Lord. The community of others keeping silence helps me focus. That's one of the reasons I so appreciate our *Soul Care* gatherings. Each month we incorporate a rhythm of silence in community. My soul benefits from the unhurried pace of silence.

We can meet God in silence. In the Old Testament we read how Elijah encountered God in silence (1 Kings 19:1-21). God revealed himself to his prophet, not in the great and strong wind that tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks, not in the wind, earthquake, or fire; rather, he showed himself to his servant in the sound of a low whisper, or as more literally translated, in sheer silence.

This year we are offering a Lenten silent retreat. Silent retreats can take lots of different forms. The one we will be hosting (March 8-9) will be a 24-hour overnight, Friday-Saturday from 4:00pm - 4:00pm. The group will gather for orientation, then prayerfully move into silence, creating space to listen to the Lord. In the



KEEPING SILENCE: Fasting from Words

silence, participants will seek to respond to the Spirit's invitation, which could include times for praying, resting (naps are allowed!), reading scripture or devotionals, walking, journaling, coloring, or whatever else would be spiritually nourishing. (Speaking of nourishing, we will eat our meals in silence, which can be a new experience for folks.)

During the 24-hours, we will offer optional opportunities to pray the Daily Offices together (compline, morning prayer, noonday prayer), ending with Holy Communion. As we fast from words, and seek God together, we look forward to the sense of community that so often develops wordlessly among retreatants. (To register, check out our Church Center app.)

Music for Lent and Easter



By Gary Harger, Traditional Worship Music Coordinator

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Worship, rooted in the rhythm of the liturgical calendar, is at the center of our common life together. As we join in worship to hear scripture, pray, and sing we join in a glorious throng of saints who have gone before us.

As part of our Lenten tradition, and as part of both services, the doxology will be “Glory Be to Jesus.” Jeanne Kohn, past Director of Music Ministry and organist at Ascension, shares how that tradition came to be and the implications for us as a community of believers.

Glory Be to Jesus

Glory be to Jesus, who in bitter pains
poured for me the lifeblood from his sacred veins!

Grace and life eternal in that blood I find,
blest be his compassion infinitely kind!

Blest through endless ages be the precious stream
which from sin and sorrow doth the world redeem!

Oft as earth exulting wafts its praise on high,
angel hosts, rejoicing, make their glad reply.

Lift ye then your voices; swell the mighty flood;
louder still and louder, praise the precious blood.

Singing “Glory be to Jesus”: Jesus Manifest as Vine (Jeanne Kohn)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches. Although many of us have heard this so many times that the statement is too easily taken for granted, it has mysterious and profound implications for how we live, and how we understand what happens as we worship. What does this have to do with singing “Glory be to Jesus”?

Back in the mid 1980’s, before some of you were born, a well-respected church musician named George Mims came to give a worship conference at a parish I was worship leader for in Baltimore MD. His first evening he worked with the choir on singing “Glory be to Jesus”. He worked for a particularly long time on the first verse, coaching us to sing it very quietly, with great devotion, adoration, awe. To this day I remember the wonder and delight that fell on us as we worked together, and how he coaxed us to sing with a fuller and richer and stronger sound as we went through the verses.

Ten years later, at Ascension, we began a tradition of singing that hymn as our doxology during the season of Lent. This well-loved tradition continues 30 years later. We begin in quiet devotion, wondering at the sacrifice of Jesus, who in bitter pains poured for us the life blood from his



sacred veins – and move, verse by verse, to swell the mighty flood of praise in heaven. Part of what enables this is that the words of the hymn link verse to verse in a way unusual in hymnody: v.1 poured for me the life blood becomes grace and life eternal in that BLOOD I find in v. 2, and blessed be his compassion becomes blest through endless ages in v.3. Link after link, verse to verse is established until a great wide vision of heaven comes to us and we find ourselves caught up in the heavenly realms with the angel hosts.

By his sweet grace Jesus has come among us reminding us that we are not individuals standing separate one by one in our pews, but rather a great vine, full of the rich gifts of heaven, bound to him and therefore to each other and empowered to take those gifts into the world – simply because we have chosen to come together in worship, and to open our mouths and take deep breaths and sing out our love for him

Join the Choir for Holy Week

The choir sings as a part of the 11am service throughout Lent and will also sing for special services on Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil, as well as the 11am Easter Service. If you would like to join the choir for Holy Week or for a season, please contact our Choir Director, jenn.miller@ascensionpittsburgh.org. Rehearsals for Holy Week will be held on Thursday evenings from 7-9pm in Room 104 on March 7, 14 and 21.

Brass players needed

Perhaps you noticed the addition of some brass instrumentalists at our Service of Lessons and Carols in December. This small group is ready to expand. Consider dusting off your instrument and joining them in playing for services and special occasions. Email me for more information.

The Rev. Lauren Scharf to be our new Interim Staff Priest (half-time)



By Jonathan Millard, Rector

jonathan.millard@ascensionpittsburgh.org

Two years ago, we welcomed The Rev. Lauren Scharf onto our team of liturgical assistants*. At this year's Annual Meeting I had the pleasure of announcing that Mother Lauren has (*finally*) accepted my invitation to join the staff team beginning in mid-March. I say finally as I have been trying to hire Lauren for the past ten years! Until now, however, the timing has never been quite right. This new appointment is necessarily an interim appointment, given the transition we are in as we await the appointment of the next rector.

Like Mother Andrea's position, this new position of interim staff priest is a half-time position. Much of the ministry that Andrea currently oversees as Director of Prayer Ministry and Leadership Development will transition to Lauren's oversight. It is particularly helpful, therefore, that Lauren and Andrea will have a few months to overlap.

Lauren is currently completing her Doctor of Ministry degree (with a focus on practical discipleship in the local church) through Trinity School for Ministry. Lauren brings a wealth of valuable experience to the staff team, gained from some twenty years of ministry experience in Western PA, and is known to many of us at Ascension as an excellent preacher. Before coming to Ascension, Lauren served as the part-time Assistant Rector of All Saints, Cranberry. Before that Lauren served St. Stephen's Church, Sewickley for many years as Director of Community Life, Women's Director, and, later, as a deacon.

As adjunct faculty for the Pittsburgh Fellows Program for four years, Lauren has developed and taught a year-long curriculum that focuses on spiritual health, discernment, imaginative prayer, and practical uses of the spiritual disciplines.

Lauren is married to her college sweetheart, Chris, and together they have two children: Caleb (9) and Madelyn "Maddie" (7). They love hiking, playing in the creek by their house, doing puzzles, and snuggling with their dog, Snowflake. I am delighted to welcome Lauren to her new role among us.

* Liturgical Assistants at Ascension are clergy who are not on staff but make Ascension their church home and are invited by the rector to assist in leading worship and/or preaching from time to time.



How do you define success in the work you do?



By Daniel Behrens, Ascension Missionary in Residence (Refugee Ministry)

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This is a question I think about a lot with the new Refugee Ministry at Ascension. We are now approaching a year with our first two Welcome Circle families and are past the first three months with our third. As we prepare to welcome other families this year, I have been reflecting on how we define success with our first families.

It is helpful to compare our mission to that of a resettlement agency like Hello Neighbor. A resettlement agency tackles the critical task of getting people out of an unsustainable situation and setting them up for a new life in the U.S. They must budget limited time and money and are cautious about personal involvement with the families. Once one family is resettled, the agency moves forward to receive more families, unless there is unusual need that merits enrollment in another program. Resettlement agencies do essential, God-honoring work, but our calling as a church is different. Success for us includes forming an enduring connection with each family.

I want the flurry of social work and material help in the first six months to prepare the way for an ongoing personal relationship with at least one person from our team. We are calling this person a liaison. Everyone on the team has some kind of relationship with the family, some of a more practical nature and others more personal. Every role matters! At the end of six months, we want to establish an official liaison, someone who has formed a personal connection and commits to keep reaching out. Even as other relationships will have a natural ebb and flow, this person will be an enduring connection between the family, the Welcome Circle, and the church.



Think about how the church supports someone being baptized. The whole congregation commits to support them in their new life in Christ! But from the congregation a few people become Sponsors or Godparents and commit to pursue an ongoing relationship, whether that person remains at Ascension or moves to the other side of the world.

How do you define success in the work you do? For the Refugee Ministry at Ascension, success includes establishing an ongoing personal relationship, through which many other good things can flow!

Would you like to help with a Welcome Circle in 2024? I would love to talk with you! Just send me an email.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

By James Scannell

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For this issue James, a young adult at Ascension who has non-speaking autism and communicates via a spelling board, interviews Eva Ruth Scandrett. We include Part 1 of the interview in this Ascent with Part 2 following in the next Ascent.

James: I am pleased to be interviewing Eva Ruth for this issue. Disability can be present in many forms: I think of it as any physical or neurological challenge that makes it difficult for a person to navigate in our current societal structures. To my mind, mental health challenges, which have often been seen by Christians as spiritual or character issues, fit in this category. Recently, medical models have shown us the biochemical imbalances that can play a part in these difficulties. I hope that you enjoy and learn from Eva Ruth as I did. She kindly agreed to share with us her insights and struggles.

James: I am so happy we are here, Eva Ruth. It's hard to have anxiety. I'd like to know how it affects your life and your relationship with God.

Eva Ruth: It's hard. Sometimes it can feel as if God doesn't care. When you're just so stressed about everything all the time, it feels as if things are always going to be hard, as if it's not going to get better. But I think what I see by having anxiety for over 10 years, I see that He is there. Even when I can't tell, He is with me, and honestly that is the easiest way for me to overcome my anxiety when I am in throes of it because I can tell that God is there and that He is going to stay with me and that everything is going to be OK even if it doesn't feel that way in the moment.

James: Wow, that is so beautiful. How does He help you know He's there?

Eva Ruth: That one is a little more difficult to quantify. I see Him in a lot of different ways. First, we have the scriptures. I turn to scripture when I'm feeling scared or down. The whole book is a message of love from Him to us. I think His love is ultimately what helps me. Love is stronger than fear as He says, perfect love casts out fear. But I think also I can see Him in the people around



me when they truly care about me and when they take the time to see if I'm okay. We're all made in God's image so that's a reflection of God to me. Because I can see Him in what he has created. I think beauty, love and beauty, help me to see God. The fact that we have creation, that we have each other, we have people who express themselves through art, helps me to remember God is the creator. That's where all of that comes from. So that's helpful.

James: I hear you saying the embodiment of God in his world and people is important. I love that. How do you think the church can help people with anxiety thrive?

Eva Ruth: I think church is the best example of community we can have, if the church is really doing well in seeking to follow God. It can be very helpful to have a group of people behind you who continually want to point you back to God and to remember that He is sovereign and that He is still caring for you, that they are caring for you even when you feel as if no one does. The thing about anxiety is that it makes you feel isolated, so the church is very important in helping because it is a community of believers that want you to feel safe and loved and to remember God's goodness.

James: I'm wondering if people have said things that are not helpful.

Eva Ruth: Yes definitely. There is a lot of talk about faith when it comes to anxiety. People tend to call your faith into question when you're suffering. They ask, "Have you prayed about it?" or "Just remember that you shouldn't be afraid because God is sovereign." That's not helpful because I'm not choosing to be afraid. Obviously, I do have faith, or I wouldn't be clinging to God like I do. It's like Job. Job's friends asked him, "What have you done to deserve this?" And he said, "Nothing. I haven't done anything to deserve it." It's just extremely unhelpful when someone you trust makes it sound as if your suffering is your own fault and not just the result of a broken world, especially things like anxiety. It's not a sin to have anxiety, it's an illness like anything else. It's not any more sinful than it is to break your leg or to have a cold. So, when people act as if it's a choice or it's just in your head or you need to be stronger, that can be really unhelpful.

James: You're amazing. So smart. I hope people learn from your words. I think people throw Bible verses out like "be anxious over nothing" and then treat anxiety as a character issue and not an illness, so I'm glad you said that. What advice would you give to others?

Eva Ruth: I always try to be careful when I try to give advice about anxiety because it's so different for everyone. It manifests itself in different ways, so general advice is hard. But I just think it's always helpful for me to read the Bible, especially the Psalms. I like to read the sad ones out loud so I can use them as my words to God, when I can't find the words myself. I can express my anger and my sadness that way and know I'm not crossing the line, that I'm not being sinful, because it's the word of God that I'm giving back to Him. I'd also say, it's very, very easy to start to get angry at God when you're suffering, so my advice would be to remember that this is not what God wants for you. It's not as if he wants you to be suffering because the reason he sent Jesus to die for us is so that we wouldn't have to suffer any longer. He doesn't want this for you. He wants to help, so

continually cling to Him and to the Scriptures and find good people who love Him and love you who will come alongside you and help you with your struggles.

James: It can be hard to find your people. How have you done that?

Eva Ruth: I've had the blessing of having a wonderful family. We've almost all struggled with different things. I have many cousins, aunts and uncles who all have the same struggles and many of them are very strong Christians. I've been lucky enough to grow up in a family where I know my parents understand it's not a character issue, that I still love God and God still loves me, and who want to help me instead of just throw Bible verses at me and withdraw. It's wonderful.

I also go to a Christian school which is nice. Even though a lot of the kids are, um... not very nice people, and don't understand how hard it is to have mental health issues, a lot of the teachers do understand. And even if they don't understand what it's like, they are still kind enough and open-minded enough to try to work with you. So, I've been able to email teachers and to ask them to have grace with me and I've never had any of them say, "No." I've never had one who didn't understand or refused to try to understand, which is always nice.

I think finding friends and peers has been harder. Youth group at church has been great for that - it's a community of people who love God and want to be there and want to spend time with me. As I said, a lot of the kids at my school are not super great - it has been a little bit harder day-to-day to find people I can count on as friends, who I can count on as my people. But I tend to think I need more people who are my people, and then I remind myself I have plenty - family, friends from church. So, I just try to be thankful for what I have even when it can be hard in some situations when I don't have "my people".

Part 2 of James' interview with Eva Ruth will follow in the Easter Ascent. James and Eva Ruth discuss invisible struggles and what disabilities might look like in eternity.

Special Services in Lent and Holy Week

Ash Wednesday

February 14 at 12:00 pm & 7:00 pm

Tuesdays in Lent: The Great Litany

12:00 pm

Palm Sunday

March 24 at 9:00 am & 11:00 am

Maundy Thursday

March 28 at 7:00 p.m.

Good Friday

March 29 at 12:00 pm

Worship Services **Sunday 9:00 am, 11:00 am Nave Services** with [YouTube](#) live stream.

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A Worshipping Community;
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