



Our Faith Journeys

2024 Lenten Daily Devotional

Welcome to our Lenten Journey!

Lent is a poignant time in the life of a Christian, where our relationship with Jesus and the path of life we walk come into focus. We call the places where life and Jesus overlap *discipleship*. Spoiler alert, Jesus came to Earth and died on the cross so that we know God's love every day; so, every day, we take steps down this crazy and amazing journey we call discipleship. This is our great joy and our great challenge. We revel in the joy that God has walked our path first. God has stepped into the great unknown and shown us that nothing in this world is more powerful than his love. Not death, not illness, not missteps, not even our greatest failings can separate us from the love of God. It is also our great challenge because the world does not see itself with the eyes of God. It wants to destroy, hoard, and put itself up on a pedestal of its own vanity. The love of God is incompatible with our world and so our journeys of faith are filled with tremendous highs and crushing lows.

This booklet is a daily devotional that will accompany you on your Lenten journey. Whether you are in a place of joy and celebration, a place of challenge, or a time of transformation, this book is your reminder that you are not alone. While no one has been on your exact journey, others have been on similar journeys, and through them, they found faith and love.

In the book, you will find daily reflections and journeys from people who have been on various journeys of faith. There are seven journeys that people wrote about in the devotional. This is not an all-encompassing list of the places where God calls, but these are frameworks that you can use to ponder your journey of faith. With each journey, you will find a scripture reference to read and a suggested prayer.

If you never make it past this introduction, I want you to know that God loves you. Jesus came to earth so that we could know God and know how much he loves us. From our baptismal promise, where God declares us God's beloved to the thief on the cross begging for mercy, God has walked every path and continues to walk each of us. You are not alone in your journey of faith. May the love of God surround you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May God look upon you with favor and give you peace.

The Seven Journeys

Journeys of Joy and Celebration



Pages: 34, 60, 54, 56

These are the journeys we want to go down, and yet these are the most difficult places and times to spot God, because we tend to see them as journeys we initiated; not as a journey we travel with God. Also, joy can look different at different times. What does joy look like to you?

Journeys of Personal Change



Pages: 12, 27, 23, 46

In Baptism, God claims and loves us before we have done anything. Like a potter molding clay, God takes the clay he loves and fashions it into his tool. Sometimes this is gentle and sometimes this is radical. What does our potter God's hands feel like to you?

Journeys We Don't Want to Go on



Pages: 8, 13, 17, 36, 48, 52

Sometimes God takes us to and through places we don't want to go. Sometimes we know why, and sometimes we don't. So, we put our trust in God hoping our shepherd will lead us to greener pastures.

Journeys of Family

Pages: 9, 21, 56, 64, 67



Whether it is the family we are born with or the family we find, family plays a huge part in our lives. When family and faith intersect this can be joyful or the most challenging moments. What is it like to talk about faith with family?

Journeys to People and Places Unknown

Pages: 16, 19, 31, 39, 57, 62



God likes to take us out of our comfort zones into places we have never been, sometimes with people we have not met. While a jarring experience, it can be one of the most poignant moments in our journey of faith. What is it like when your world turns upside down?

Journeys We Undertake for Others

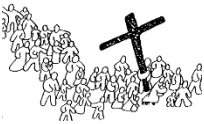
Pages: 5, 15, 26, 29, 32, 41, 50



The great commission sends us out to make disciples of all people and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This sends us out on a mission for others. Those journeys can be difficult to understand, requiring a great amount of discipline. Who is “the other” you would journey for?

Journey of Holy Week

Pages: 70, 72, 74, 76,78, 80, 82



Holy Week tells the foundation story of our faith. It tells the story of how Jesus traveled a road he didn't want to go on, for the sake of the world. This journey led to his death. His death led to his resurrection. His resurrection led to our great hope. A hope that nothing on this earth, including death, is stronger than. Nothing can separate us from His love. Where do you see yourself in the story of Holy Week?

Lectio Divina

Pages: 11, 25, 43, 59, 63, 66, 70



Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening to the text and noticing. It is best done with someone else, where one person reads the passage,

and then both of you reflect on the text. Then the other person reads the text again and reflects on what you heard this time.

Closing Prayer

At the end of each devotion, we encourage you to say a prayer. It could be a personal prayer or the Lord's Prayer, or the prayer printed below. Whatever your prayer, let this be your moment to speak to God.

Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,

You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.

You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Journeys We Undertake for Others

February 14, 2024

Suggested Text: Genesis 1:26-31

Our Lenten journey begins with a stark message of our ordinariness: “From dust you are and to dust you shall return.” Is there anything more banal, more inconsequential than dust? It is flimsy stuff that can be wiped away with one fell swoop of nothing more formidable than a paper cloth. I sometimes wish I could stand out more significantly, and I worry that without noticeable achievement, I will be as unwelcome as dust. Lent calls for repentance, a word which in the original biblical languages connotes turning back and changing our minds. Crushing news about the miraculous ordinary reminded me to do both.

“Memo,” a Colombian I had not seen or spoken to since I was on a six-month mission trip to Bogotá twenty-one years prior, died in a motorcycle accident. Memo and I were part of a mixed North American and Colombian group called MIJUCO (Youth Mission Columbia, in English), working in churches and schools. Memo, like my other Colombian teammates, knew me as “Samuel” since my middle name was easier to pronounce in Spanish.

I think about the fun exchanges we shared, including histrionic performances in a play we designed for children. When we weren’t overacting, Memo often wore a serious expression, which made his sudden and boisterous laugh that much more infectious. One of my memories is less pleasant.

We were on a two-week mission from Colombia to Peru when Memo and I were paired in a hot, stuffy room. I felt tired and cranky as I futilely searched for an angle of cool air from a stubbornly weak fan. We mumbled as we tossed and turned on our respective gym mats. I don’t remember what we talked about, but I recall wanting to be somewhere else. I wish now I would have considered how fleeting life is, how rare it is for two people born so far apart to connect over sleepy conversation in a country foreign to them both.

As a twenty-four-year-old in Bogota, I was frequently distracted by the uncertainty of the future. An advertisement in Tennis magazine exposed the perils of that restless gaze. To encourage wanderlust, the advertisers had offered a litany of far-fetched suggestions, which included a recommendation to “enjoy a hot cup of coffee today . . . in Bogotá, Colombia.” In the English-language context of the magazine, Colombia was meant to represent an exotic locale, but I was reading that passage in the very place I was supposed to imagine as a refuge from my mundane life. I realized I was failing to drink in my surroundings.

Now decades later, I still struggle with the feeling like there is something more exciting around the corner because what I do and who I am in the moment is not enough. That is why I need to turn back from time to time to the stunning news I received along with the tragic notice of Memo’s death. When Joan, one of the leaders of our mission in Colombia, told me Memo had died she also talked about a visit she had made to Bogotá two years before when she met Memo’s fourteen and sixteen-year-old sons. She found them both “gentle” and “kind.” The youngest, a “little more talkative” than his older brother, told Joan something about a man he had never met: “I was named Samuel after my dad’s friend in MIJUCO.” I was shocked to learn Memo had thought so much of our friendship that he named one of his sons after me.

If we can leave lasting marks on others, despite our manifold weaknesses and faults, I think that must have something to do with our universal human imprint—the imago Dei, the “image of God.” Maybe we contain heavenly stuff so potent it creates unseen sparks in every human encounter. Our seemingly insignificant, mundane exchanges can have imperceptibly deep and far-reaching impacts. During this Lenten journey, I’m sure I will struggle to be steady with those ordinary tasks that can remind me of our profound reality. But Memo made it much harder to forget, and so too has Samuel. We are dust. But we are God’s dust. And to God, we shall return.

Pastor



Journeys We Don't Want to Go Down

February 15, 2024

Suggested Text: Psalm 22

In September 2009, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. My first reaction was disbelief. No family history, no symptoms. Next came anger! "Why me, Lord?". How can I do this by myself? Who will take care of me? I was a recent widow and had moved, after living in Fort Worth for over 30 years. I didn't know anyone in my new town. I found a wonderful new church home and met new neighbors and friends.

The tumor was fast growing, so surgery and chemotherapy began right away. Radiation followed.

It's quite an emotional roller coaster. The journey lasted ten months. I survived! The cancer was gone and the journey back to a new normal began.

All through this journey, I was so very blessed. First and foremost, God wrapped his loving, healing arms around me and held my hand every step of the way. Just as in Matthew 28:20, the Lord says, "Lo, I am with you always".

My family was there after every treatment to see me through the difficult days. Church friends took me to every chemotherapy treatment. A neighbor called me every day, and others grocery-shopped, brought meals, and visited. I received many gifts, cards, notes, and postcards from friends and family.

So many blessings and much to be thankful for. I have been cancer-free for fifteen years. My journey has not ended. It continues to this day. The acts of kindness bestowed on me have inspired me to continue "paying it forward". I send cards, and messages, visit, and make fleece blankets for others going through their journeys. All this brings great joy to my life. And that's a big "Thank you, Lord".

Trinity Lutheran Church

Closing Prayer

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Journeys of Family

February 16, 2024

Suggested Text: Mark 4:4-42

Divorce was never in my life's game plan. I had been raised to believe, and still believe, that all moral questions could and should be judged as black and white, right or wrong, holy or sinful. Divorce was definitely sinful, and my guilt was palpable. I was hurt and embarrassed, ashamed to tell friends and acquaintances, not to mention my sons, that the mythical perfect marriage was over, that there would be no fiftieth anniversary mass, no family portraits of aged parents to display on the mantle. Even worse, I had to tell my mother, my mother who always saw me as one who did everything by the rules, the girl who never did anything that would "give scandal." That girl she was so proud of was no more. I had let everybody down and, in my deepest soul, I felt that I had let God and the church down, that there was no excuse, no wiggle room where I could explain my guilt, no going back to a state of grace, no forgiveness. I was a divorced woman, a failure, an outcast, truly a 'woman at the well.'

The Samaritan woman in Mark 4:4-42 who walked up to that well where Jesus sat resting was a pariah and Jesus broke all sorts of social and religious restrictions when he spoke to her, simply asking, "Will you give me a drink?" She was a woman, she was a Samaritan, she had been married five times, and she was living with a man who was not husband number six. Jesus should, by all customs and laws, never have even acknowledged her. But he did acknowledge her, engaging her in conversation. He knew her history, but he did not shun her. Rather, He declared His divinity to her, "I who speak to you am he," and he accepted her, even offering her living water, and eternal life in the Holy Spirit.

That Samaritan woman, that broken, imperfect woman, almost instantly recognized Jesus as her Messiah - in his words, in his understanding of who she really was, and in his unequivocal invitation to believe in him, to accept him and the blessing he offered. He

knew she had been a failure in life many times, but it didn't matter. Even an imperfect Samaritan woman could be included in his offer of a new life in him. She, that one individual flawed person, mattered to him.

Slowly, in light of this story, I began to question whether I too could still be worthy. I realized that my guilt and shame at failing to be perfect had become a barrier to my faith, and my life in Christ. Gradually, through his grace, I began to understand that, although I could not change what I had done, I was not to be forbidden from belief, from participation in his church, and from his many blessings. I could be forgiven; I could again, still, be accepted as a full member of the Body of Christ. He knew my history, but he did not shun me.

Not one of us is perfect, innocent, or sinless, yet each of us ever continues to be worthy. He speaks to us, offering us 'living water' each day to sustain us and uphold us in his love and understanding. And, just as the Samaritan woman did, we can then run back to our villages and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, so that we all can declare, "We know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.*

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Lectio Divina

Date February 17, 2024

Suggested Text: Genesis 32:22-32

What is Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening and noticing. It is best done with at least one other person, where one person reads the passage, and then everyone reflects using the questions and/or the reflection below. Then another person rereads the text. Then everyone reflects using the second set of questions.

First Set of Questions

- What did you notice?
- What was your favorite part?
- What was the most challenging part?

Reflection

Faith is sometimes described using words like trust and obedience, but here it is depicted as a wrestling match with God. Have you had times when you wrestled with God?

This wrestling match comes as Jacob is preparing to meet his brother Esau after Jacob had betrayed him. Jacob is preparing for the worst, and this is when God comes to him. Have you ever had God show up when you weren't expecting him or were distracted?

Who won the match and why?

Second Set of Questions

- What did you hear this time that you didn't hear the first time?
- Did your favorite and challenging parts change?
- Where did you hear God today?



Journeys of Personal Change

February 18, 2024

Suggested Text: Luke 15:11-32

The Prodigal Son has been a favorite for years. I was floundering in my faith and went to a Via de Christo weekend. My faith had turned cold. I felt I was doing all the “right” things. All the boxes are checked. Something was lacking. Although I didn’t travel far away and feed pigs, I had in a very real way found myself separate from the Lord. And it was my doing. During that weekend I heard “So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” I wept. Could it be that simple? Would God really come running? I believed.

Twenty-five years later, a lot of crust has built up in my soul. Beliefs change. The obvious becomes obscure. Simple things become hard. I once again found my faith lacking all the while performing the obligatory “Christian” routines. I felt I had to do something so I have started a journey of deconstructing my beliefs. That is a painful, exhausting process. When one challenges a long-held belief, are all the others challenged as well? Worse, is when one is found lacking, are all the other foundational beliefs wrecked?

Recently, I passed through a spell where I found saying the Apostles’ Creed difficult. I was pretty sure that I still believed in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. I questioned whether one must believe ALL/ANY of the words in the Creeds to believe in God. I had stopped hearing love and grace in their words. Without that love and grace, I become the stay-at-home son harping and sad.

I wish that I could end this devotion by telling you all that I found the key I was looking for. I have not. A piece of Good News is that faith does not equal belief. In this one thing, I have faith. “So, he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

Trinity Lutheran Church



Journeys We Don't Want to Go Down

February 19, 2024

Suggested Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Why Am I Still Alive? My father died in a plane he was piloting when I was 6. My mother worked as a clerk typist to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate me until I became an adult.

I grew up Lutheran. I once received a pin for 5 years of perfect attendance in Sunday School. There were no excuses for missing, not illness, family vacation, other organized children's activities, or anything else. I doubt any child could do that today. But it was a different time.

Confirmation was a two-year commitment, attendance was mandatory, and each class began with the confirmand writing the week's lesson from memory. Each lesson was about a full written page long and was required to be handwritten without error. Spelling and punctuation had to be correct. Most came from Luther's Small Catechism or bible verses. To pass confirmation, you were expected to be able to verbally quote from memory anything asked of you by a member of the church council. I doubt that any child could do that today. But it was a different time.

The thing that confirmation taught me was discipline and to never give up. After high school and college, I chose a career of service in the United States Air Force as a pilot. Pilot training was the hardest thing I had done in my life, and the life lessons learned in confirmation helped me through it. Many times, I was on the verge of washing out, but through prayer, discipline, and a never-give-up attitude, I became an Air Force Pilot.

To answer the question of why am I still alive, I will answer why I should be long dead. No matter what anyone says, the type of flying I did was risky business. Twice my airplane came within feet of hitting another airplane directly below mine. Neither of us knew the other was there. Both times, something easily missed, clued me into pulling up, rolling over, and seeing the other airplane. In 1967 during the war in Vietnam, our B-52 was fired at by four North Vietnamese surface-to-air guided missiles. We saw them

coming, maneuvered, and had one detonate off either wingtip, one above the tail, and one directly in front of us. In 1970, as co-pilot, our B-52 had an inflight emergency and crashed on landing. I was pinned in the flaming wreckage for 25 minutes until rescued by the fire department. My broken bones were minor compared to others on the crew, but we all lived. Many of my fellow aviators that I knew were better pilots than me were not so lucky.

But was it luck? The more I thought about it, maybe it was not luck, but God's plan for me. I never thought I would live to reach 30, then 40, and then my flying career was over. While in the Air Force, it was nearly impossible to have a normal church life, but now I could, and now I do. God has protected me, blessed me, loved me, and has given me opportunities to serve in so many ways. Everything I have, everything I am, are gifts from God, and at 80, I'm not done yet.

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.*

Amen



Journeys We Undertake for Others

February 20, 2024

Suggested Text: Genesis 12:1-5

On the morning of February 3, 2003, my life changed forever, and I began a journey I never wanted to take. My husband had a major stroke while I was at church, and an old friend came to the house to be with him until I returned home. My husband was a stubborn man and refused to let me call an ambulance, but he would ride with our friend to the hospital. He made the instant decision to retire, and his life changed forever, too. He went from walking unaided, to walking with a cane, to a walker, and finally to a wheelchair. He was a big man, and I finally reached the point that I could no longer care for him alone. I reluctantly put him in a nursing home, but he hated it. I found a home health agency and brought him home. About two years before his death, he went into hospice care. I do not know how we made it through this except for the grace of God. One day, for my own assurance, I asked him, "Do you believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again for our sins?" He said he did. I told him then that when I got to heaven, I would see him again.

On the morning of December 5, 2022, I knew he was fading rapidly. I leaned over him and said, "Do you know how much I love you?" He had a washcloth in his hand, and he threw it toward the end of the bed. I asked him what that was about, and replied, "Swat!" I could not imagine what he was swatting, and when I asked, he said, "Wings." I have no doubt that the angels were hovering about, waiting to escort him to heaven. He never spoke again and died the next morning at 12:03.

I promised God when I married my husband that I would love him in sickness and in health. I had now completed the journey I never wanted to take. I continued to participate in my church, and now have felt called to become a lay minister. So now I am beginning to take a journey I want to take, and with God's help will do so.

With Ruth and Naomi, with Mary and Joseph, and with Jesus himself, I began with a journey I did not want to take, and now I begin one with Abraham, into the unknown. I trust God to lead me and pray that I will serve God to the best of my ability with the help of those who have gone before.

Messiah Lutheran Church – Weatherford, Texas

Closing Prayer

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Journeys to People and Places Unknown

February 21, 2024

Suggested Text: Acts 27

I love the subject of journey. So often I don't think of the destination as much as the journey itself. This idea was enforced during my sabbatical to study Celtic Spirituality. While in Ireland one of the many stories I heard was about St. Brendan the Navigator. Upon further study, I am not sure the story I will relate to you is true, but the lesson I learned from the story has been a guiding light in my journey. After all, life is a journey, and we can miss much by focusing on a destination and instead of seeing the moments on our journey. To paraphrase an Irish History website, St. Brendan's voyages serve well as a metaphor for our journey through life. We face many uncharted waters filled with joys, sorrows, successes, and failures as St. Brendan did on his journey. Much of this lore centers on his attempt to find the Promised Land which implies the New World. It was a different lore that was told to me. The story given to me was less grandiose and more general in nature.

This story begins with Brendan and his crew of monks setting off in their boat made of wood and animal skins to spread the Good News of Jesus. They manned the oars and rowed getting nowhere because of the waves and wind that worked against them. This went on for days and little to no progress was made. Finally, Brendan gave up and said "strike the sail and let the wind of God take us to where God wants us to be." Again, I have never been able to verify this tale, but the story is insightful of being a disciple, a follower of the way. How often do we struggle with wanting to make the journey fit to our terms? Even when our goal is service to others, do we make the mission our mission, our way, or God's? I remember a former Archbishop of the Anglican Church said, "It is not the Church of God with a mission in the world, it is the God of mission with a Church in the world." There is something special about the wind-breath of God that blows through us. It is that Spirit that is a guide if we let it be. Flow with the breeze that is our guide. What a journey it will be.

Trinity Lutheran Church



Journeys We Don't Want to Go Down

February 22, 2024

Suggested Text: Ruth 1:1-17

The journey of Ruth is a tragic one. Her husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law died. At her mother-in-law, Naomi's invitation, her sister-in-law Orpah journeys back to her hometown to start her life over, but Ruth refuses to do so. It is in this context that Ruth responds to Naomi saying:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God..." -Ruth 1: 16

What Ruth said was born of mutual grief between two widowed women who shared a loss that would usually have meant a destitute life for them in that day and age- widowed with no children. By making an unconventional choice, the two would go on to redeem each other's tragic stories: some would say- in a very unique model of female self-sufficiency.

Ruth goes on to meet Boaz, a Judean, and after some convincing, he takes her- an immigrant foreigner widow- as his wife. Their son, Obed, becomes the father of Jesse who becomes the father of King David, whose line would eventually lead to Jesus.

Without Ruth's reckless devotion to Naomi, and without her willingness to risk going to this foreign land of Judea- Jesse and David would not exist... in theory, Jesus would not exist.

The book of Ruth is also one big political commentary responding to previous directives from God throughout the Torah which explicitly forbid Israelites from marrying Moabite wives.

Ruth opposes that quite bluntly: a foreign wife taken by Naomi and Boaz into the Israelite tribe of Judea and embraced not only as one of their own but as a key member of the Davidic line. This. Is. Radical.

It is a message of inclusivity and of questioning the traditional way of doing things while remaining deeply devoted to God...

The last time I preached on Ruth, my best friend Ashley was moving to Iowa and leaving Kyrie Pub Church. It was a point of intense grief for me. She was following her Iowan husband, Chris, who was ready to move back home after the traumatic and sudden death of his older brother. His parents and siblings were grieving, and he wanted to be near them. Ashley picked Ruth 1 as the text for her last Sunday at church. It was the same day we baptized her second son.

It's hard to make "best friends" as an adult, but I had the unique experience of being on maternity leave with Ashley with our first babies: both boys, born a month apart, and she had become one of my favorite people in the universe. I feel like she was the Ruth to my Naomi.

Sometimes those unique bonds come with shared struggles, like birthing and raising infants.

While I have stayed in close touch with Ashley, and visited Iowa on several occasions, it is not the same, and I grieve often. While I know people around the world have much bigger and more important problems than mine, still, my grief is real, and I do not know if I'll ever "get over" it. As a chaplain, I know grief does not work quite like that.

While I do not think everything happens for a reason, I do think some (perhaps most) things happen for a reason. I know that Chris needed to be with his family and Ashley needed to be with Chris. I also know that God sent me Ashley, even if only for a few years, perhaps at the exact time I needed her. I know in my bones that God redeems suffering, and I have faith that God is working in the lives of Chris's family, who have a painful hole forever in their heart, and that God is working in me, too, even if I cannot always see it.

Pastor

Closing Prayer

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Journeys to People and Places Unknown

February 23, 2024

Suggested Text: Acts 16:6-10

After being raised in the Episcopal Church in Dallas, I started attending an Eastern church in the Seattle area when I was in my 30s. During this time, the Episcopal parish where I attended had a leadership crisis. The priest who had served there for many years was fired to make room for a younger, more liberal-minded priest.

About this time, one Episcopal couple that I met, at a regional church gathering of concerned Christians, told me they were looking for a church with the kind of sacramental and liturgical worship that we all wanted. Days later, they invited me to join them for liturgy at an Antiochian Orthodox Church. We were amazed at the solemnity and beauty of the worship there, which was entirely in English. Before long, we all joined there. I got married there in 1994, and my wife and I had our oldest daughter baptized there.

My job moved us from the Northwest to Waco, Texas in the late 90s, when our daughter was two. We joined Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox church there. Its priest and most of the members were of Greek descent but were very kind and welcoming to us. Their worship was mostly in English. Our second daughter was born in Waco and baptized at Saint Nicholas.

We stayed in Waco for three years and returned to Seattle in 2000. My contract job was very demanding, which caused conflict at home, where we were raising our two daughters. My wife and I separated in 2002 and were finally divorced in 2007. My faith lapsed during this time, and I stopped attending church in 2005.

I met my second wife in 2009, in the Seattle suburb of Issaquah. She introduced me to Our Savior Lutheran Church there, an ELCA parish. It was just beautiful, and we got married there in 2011. Our jobs took us to Charleston, South Carolina in 2014. There we attended Saint Luke Lutheran Church, a large and established ELCA parish in downtown Summerville. They had a school and were active in the community.

My job moved me to Saint Louis in 2017. I found and joined Hope Lutheran Church in Saint Charles. My wife joined me there in 2018, after she found a job and we sold our home in Summerville. The congregation at Hope was active. They had a preschool and a vibrant men's ministry.

We moved to Palmdale, California in 2020, during the pandemic. The ELCA is not established in that small community in the southwest corner of the Mojave Desert. After visiting a few churches, we settled on Grace Lutheran, Missouri Synod. It was more established than any of the other churches we had visited. We missed the ELCA, though.

When work brought us at last to Fort Worth, we felt we were home at last. At Trinity, we have been reunited with the ELCA, and have been so happy with the church life offered freely to everyone there.

Trinity Lutheran Church

Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,

You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.

You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Journeys of Family

February 24, 2024

Suggested Text: The Book of Tobit

I learned to cook from my grandmother. Although she and I share a bond in cooking, that doesn't always mean we see eye-to-eye in the kitchen. She and I often find ourselves in the kitchen together, working in perfect synchronization and harmony. It's really the menu planning that is the problem. We often debated over the phone for weeks leading up to family trips and holidays about what would be the best meals to make together in our limited time together. Naturally, she likes the tried-and-true family favorites; I like to mix things up a bit. To onlookers, it may look like grandmother and grandson competing and bickering for culinary supremacy in the kitchen, to us, it is all part of the fun of us each honing the craft of cooking passed on from one generation to the next.

What I see in my own family's culinary legacy is the bickering, the give-and-take, of generational tradition and knowledge. We might like to think that our family traditions, values, and skills can just be passed down without changing from generation to generation. In some ways, it does, but each generation must carry their family's legacy out into a world that is not like the world of their ancestors. I like to think I've maintained the kernels of culinary wisdom my grandmother taught me, but I also like to think I am adding to it and updating our family's collective wisdom that I'll make my own and pass on to younger generations.

While I rarely meet folks who have read the apocryphal Book of Tobit, it is one of my favorite stories and one that reminds me well of the winding journeys of change that family traditions must endure. Tobit is a Jewish man in exile in Assyria. He holds tightly to his family's dream of a restored Jerusalem. He shares this vision with his son, Tobias, but it isn't clear Tobias shares his father's zeal for Jerusalem in the same way. Tobias goes on his own journey and establishes his own family in Ecbatana. While Tobias is still a faithful Jew, praying for the restoration of the Temple, Tobias, unlike his father, makes peace with and prosperity in his exiled home. The family dream is still there, but Tobias has adapted it to the reality of exile his father seemed unable to accept.

Family traditions – be it cooking or religious values – are important. They have shaped me immensely and I imagine they’ve shaped you too. And while it is never easy to see traditions change, I find myself excited to see how generational wisdom survives new realities by being adopted by younger generations. Our faith too is generational; It is enduring and yet never stagnant. How have the values, lessons, and wisdom of your ancestors guided you along your journey of life and faith? How have you begun making those values, lessons, and wisdom your own?

Pastor

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.
Amen*



Journeys of Personal Change

February 25, 2024

Suggested Text: Ruth 1:1-7

The story of Naomi and Ruth is a journey story that is twofold. It starts with Naomi journeying from Bethlehem to Moab with her husband and two sons. She didn't want to go, but because there was a famine in the area of Bethlehem, they ventured out hoping to find a better life. Unfortunately, tragedy after tragedy happens, and Naomi is left with her daughters-in-law. Realizing there was no reason to remain in Moab, she decided to journey back to Bethlehem. Pleading with her daughters-in-law for them to remain in Moab, as she has nothing to offer them anymore, one remains, but Ruth journeys with her back to Bethlehem.

How often in life do we leave a place of comfort to go someplace foreign hoping for a better life? Then, when we get there, situations arise that remind us that life wasn't so bad where we were. So, we go back home, with our heads hung low, feeling defeated because we have "failed" in what we set out to do. Did we really fail? I think we succeeded in learning what didn't work. When I was on active-duty, I was required to move to a new job and, in most cases, a new place, every three years. When we journey, we can approach it from a couple of ways. We can look at the journey as an opportunity to learn more about ourselves, or we can look at it as a setback. Often, when we move to a new job in a new place, we have to start at the bottom and work our way up. Our approach to this can help us succeed, or not. Naomi felt like she was definitely at the bottom when her husband and sons died. Ruth, however, lifted her up. Ruth let her know that she was very important and would never leave her for as long as she lived. We need people like Ruth in our lives.

The song of Ruth is a song that I sang in church in my youth. It was sung at both weddings and funerals. Both are journeys into the unknown. In both instances, we are hoping to end up in a place that is better than where we left off. Keeping God at the center of our lives, I believe we will. As I apply this logic to my call to ministry and journey into seminary, I am reminded that God put me on this road. God won't let me fail if I keep God as the focus and the center of my life.

Creator God, it is because of you that we go on this journey we call “life.” Help us to keep our focus on you, even when we stray from the path so that we can find our way back to you and return home. Thank you for the Ruths in our lives. Help us to be Ruth to others. In the name of your most loving Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Faith Lutheran Church

Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,

You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.

You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Lectio Divina

February 26, 2024

Suggested Text: Luke 10:1-11

What is Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening and noticing. It is best done with at least one other person, where one person reads the passage, and then everyone reflects using the questions and/or the reflection below. Then another person rereads the text. Then everyone reflects using the second set of questions.

First Set of Questions

- What did you notice?
- What was your favorite part?
- What was the most challenging part?

Reflection

Did you notice that Jesus sends people in twos (like the animals in the ark)? On your journey who did God send with you? Did you notice that the road is challenging and filled with wolves? Our God who loved us before we had names and claimed us in baptism sends us to challenging places. What does this mean about what God means when he says he loves us?

Second Set of Questions

- What did you hear this time that you didn't hear the first time?
- Did your favorite and challenging parts change?
- Where did you hear God today?



Journeys We Do for Others

February 27, 2024

Suggested Text: Mark 4:35-41

Jesus calms the storm. This is one of my favorite Gospel readings. I think all of us can relate to a time when we needed a storm to be calmed! Jesus had just spent an entire day preaching about the parables to a very large crowd on what could have been an extremely hot and lengthy day. No doubt Jesus was exhausted when He called His disciples to cross the lake with Him to the other side that evening. In fact, He was asleep when the storm began raging but He awoke anyway to calm the storm for the frightened disciples.

This scripture really does relate to Lent...what if we really don't have to give up anything? Like chocolate, coffee, movies, etc.

Maybe it means giving more of yourself than giving up anything at all. Like inviting your neighbor for coffee and chocolate. Or holding the baby for the mom struggling in the grocery store. Compliment the cashier at the check-out line.

Not all of us can foster children, house refugees, or donate large sums of money to charity but all of us can do countless other things to help others. Prepare a meal, run an errand, or lend an ear to someone struggling.

Those of us in the congregation can help with our Sunday services like assisting with the Readings and Holy Communion, or music, prayers, and welcoming each other. We can support the bereaved, check on the sick, and help our community.

Like the "Footprints in the Sand" poem we can be the hands and feet of Jesus helping others along life's journey.

Lent really is Giving Of, not Giving Up.

Let us continue to pray and support each other with the gifts God has so graciously given to each of us. We may find that ministering to another in their storm will quell the intensity of our own.



Closing Prayer

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Journeys of Personal Change

February 28, 2024

Suggested Text: Acts 9

One of the most underrated parts of the Bible are the section titles because the title shapes how we understand a story. I see that clearly when I look at Paul's Conversion. It's not Saul to Paul or Saul's Encounter on the road to Damascus or Paul's Miracle on the Road; it is Paul's Conversion. The name frames the story as Paul's self-being revealed through this conversion moment. Jesus has a way of doing that in weird places.

For me that was CPE. CPE is Clinical Pastoral Experience. It is intended to be an intense experience of providing pastoral care to others so that young seminarians can practice an integral skill of being a pastor. The side effect of CPE is that your own issues tend to surface. I was going to see a young woman who was recovering from surgery. She was in a lot of physical pain. It wasn't enough that she was crying out in pain, but it was enough that she didn't want anything to do with anyone who couldn't make the pain go away. So, when I, being young and stupid, walked into the room to chat, she lashed out in anger. That anger affected me greatly. I didn't cause the pain, so I couldn't apologize for it. I couldn't give her pain meds to make her feel better. I couldn't promise that the surgery to fix the pain would work. I could do nothing to fix the problem, but I was on the receiving end of a lot of anger and pain.

After a bit of processing and praying, I realized I am not Superman. I cannot fix every problem. God has given all of us gifts for the lifting up of our community. Together, we can love and support each other in a way that no single individual can. Sometimes that means connecting people to the right place to get the help and resources they need. Sometimes that means walking beside someone and saying "This really sucks. I'm sorry you must go through this. I'll be here every step of the way." I never knew how the surgery went. By the time I could check in on her again, she had checked out of the hospital. Whatever her journey took her on, I know that she was surrounded by people who loved her and walked with her on that journey.

If you are on that journey, know that you are not alone. God loves you. Your church loves you. Journeys of personal change are not easy. Paul had to lose his sight before he

gained it again and became Paul. May this journey of change invigorate you for the road ahead.

Pastor

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.
Amen*



Journeys We Undertake for Others

February 29, 2024

Suggested Text: Acts 19:1-7

One afternoon, I stopped by the office of a colleague and friend of mine only to discover his office door was open, but he was behind the door. “What are you doing?” I asked in confusion. Embarrassed, he quickly scurried from behind the office door. “I was...ummm...writing notes,” he said while showing the pad of sticky notes he held in his hand. He went on to explain that underneath a poster that hung on the inside of his door, he collected sticky notes – one for each of his close family members, friends, and coworkers. It was his practice that, for each person, he would notice their talents, passions, and unique quirks that made them who they are. He would write these down on sticky notes and would periodically reference the back of his door as a reminder of the gifts God had lavishly bestowed on the people around him.

Before I moved away, this friend left me a card. In it, he left the sticky note where he had kept his notes on me. My face grew hot, my heart warmed, and my eyes watery as I read about gifts that my friend had seen in me that I, in a million years, would never dare say of myself...and yet I knew they were true.

It is hard for me – and I suspect I’m not alone – to admit to and give thanks for the gifts that God has given me, and that’s why we are given companions for the journey that can remind us in seasons of doubt and shame that we are made in God’s image and bestowed with unique skills and a unique calling. This seems to have always been a work of the Church. In Acts, Paul encounters some disciples in Ephesus who exclaim: “We didn’t receive the Holy Spirit. In fact, we didn’t even know there was such a thing as the Holy Spirit!” And yet, we know from Genesis that the Holy Spirit has always been with us and is present whether we know it or not. And so, Paul lays his hands on these disciples, and they receive and rejoice in the gifts of the ever-present Holy Spirit.

Even when we cannot say for ourselves what it is that makes us precious in the eyes of God and equipped for ministry, we have companions who journey with us and who tell us what they see in us. Likewise, as we journey through life with family, friends, coworkers, and church members, what would it look like for us to take mental (or even

physical) notes of the God-given gifts we see in others? To take that journey one step further: what would happen if we regularly told one another about the gifts we see in one another or in our community? I suspect that the gifts of the ever-present Spirit will come into yet sharper focus in our lives and in our congregations.

Messiah Lutheran Church – Weatherford, Texas

Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,

You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.

You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Journeys to People and Places Unknown

March 1, 2024

Suggested Text: 1 Kings 17:2-16

During my twenties, I felt disconnected and lost. I didn't know what I should do or who I should be. My inner critics incessantly told me that I wasn't where I was supposed to be in life. And that warm, comforting flame of faith that I felt throughout my childhood had turned into a tiny ember somewhere deep inside. I could no longer feel its warmth. But something happened toward the end of my twenties, a friend said she was moving to Texas. Would I be her roommate? I had never been to Texas. I had no job lined up and would know no one other than my friend. And yet, the moment she asked, something inside of me said, "Yes." It wasn't loud, but it was clear, and my inner critics were stunned into silence. And before they could speak, I packed up my little car and drove the hundreds of miles south to the unknown. Now almost a quarter of a century later, I am still in Texas. Of course, the move didn't magically solve my problems. I was, after all, still me with my scars and baggage. (Amazing what one can pack in a small car and into their head.) However, when I reflect upon this path I accepted years ago, I can see how I was challenged, how I grew, and how hope returned. And with hope, I found my little ember of faith and began tending to it slowly. Over time, its glow grew stronger, and eventually, a warm, gentle flame of faith returned. And now at this stage of my journey, I can say I agree with the following words from the author, Rachel Held Evans: "Faith isn't about having everything figured out ahead of time; faith is about following the quiet voice of God without having everything figured out ahead of time."

Trinity Lutheran Church



Journeys We Undertake for Others

March 2, 2024

Suggested Text: John 6:16-21

When I was a kid, one of my favorite bible stories was about the time that Jesus surprised the disciples by walking to them on the water of the Sea of Galilee. I mean, surprised? I'll bet those disciples were completely freaked out! This was a real adventure. For one thing, it was a dark and stormy night - not as stormy as other times on the big lake, but the winds were against the men as they struggled to row across. It took all night for them to reach the opposite shore. Since they were exhausted, perhaps they were praying for God's help with the task. As they struggled in the darkness, the disciples saw Jesus coming to them, walking on the water!

The disciples loved Jesus, and they had seen him work wonders. Just that afternoon thousands of people had been fed with just a little bread and fish. But this was different - astonishing, possibly scary - What kind of power was this?

While I sympathized with Jesus' friends, they seemed puny to me. The eager child in me wanted to jump out of the boat and join Jesus out there in the wind and water. I thought about the water. What would it feel like beneath my feet? And Jesus would be pleased with my fearless trust and faith in him. I imagined his encouraging smile and his taking my hand. I was certain that I wouldn't start to sink the way Peter did.

But maybe God gave us Simon Peter for a reason. He shows us that it's tough to be a grownup. When we grow up, things get more complicated. God's holy mysteries are often harder to accept and understand. We don't always know how to row to the shore in high winds, even though we believe Jesus is with us. Or we just don't want to do it, to put the effort into a task or a relationship when we know it is our calling to do so.

Jesus made a journey across the water to help and comfort his disciples. Most of us can go a little way toward others - it's not a journey across the sea – to accompany those who are grieving or lonely, lacking self-confidence or social skills. Jesus always comes toward us, beckoning, encouraging, yes, and sending us to journey with others in his name.

Messiah Lutheran Church – Weatherford, Texas

Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,

You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.

You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Journeys of Joy and Celebration

March 3, 2024

Suggested Text: Judges 6:36-40

As much as I dislike defining myself by my career, when I ponder the notion of journeys, I return repeatedly to my vocational journey. I teach middle school science and robotics. People like to say, “Teaching is a calling,” and while I think this phrase gets thrown around too often to justify teachers’ low pay (because, seriously, who would want to do this job unless you really, really loved it?), I also cannot argue with it. Although I am sure the Holy Spirit has always been subtly in the background influencing me, there are not many times in my life when I have had the clear sense that the Spirit directly intervened with my decision-making process. With one exception.

My first year in the classroom challenged me more than I ever thought possible. I accepted a position teaching Physics (a topic I never studied) to approximately 130 students whose ages ranged from thirteen to seventeen. I was twenty-two and had a grand total of six weeks of student teaching experience, all of which occurred during summer school where my largest class had a dozen students. With two summers of camp counseling experience under my belt, I entered my classroom eager to transform lives. I was woefully unprepared.

I was told my classes would be “capped” at 28, yet 31 students walked through my door at the beginning of first period. Most of my students were behind grade level in reading and math, and the vast majority spoke English as a second language. At best, I was a week ahead of my students in my understanding of the content I was supposed to teach, and you could generously describe my classroom management as “mediocre.” I learned quickly that the relationship between camper and counselor does not mirror the relationship between student and teacher. My lack of experience translated into repeated frustration in the classroom as my tenuous control over the flow of class wavered day to day.

By early October, I felt certain I had made the worst mistake of my life. I was in too deep. I felt constantly on the verge of tears and did not think I could sustain the pace I was keeping. After a particularly disastrous lesson covering projectile motion, I sat

dejectedly in my classroom and resolved that the next day, I would put in my two-weeks notice. I just couldn't do it anymore.

As I trudged out to my car that afternoon, I saw a group of my eighth-grade students waiting for their parents to pick them up. I halfheartedly waved and continued my solitary, distracted walk out to my car, trying to compose in my head the difficult conversation I would need to have with my principal the next morning. One of the boys ran over to me, excitedly clutching a tennis ball in his hand. I paused to greet him, and he burst out, "Miss, check it out! When I throw the tennis ball, it's a projectile like we talked about in class, because after I let go, the only force acting on it is gravity!"

Immediately, hope surged through me - was teaching the right path for me after all? Hot on hope's heels followed confusion, anxiety, and even a little indignation - wait, now that I'd seen evidence that someone was actually listening and learning in my classroom, I guess I had to stick with it? All thoughts of putting in my two-week notice the next morning vanished.

I doubt this student (whose name, appropriately, was Christian) planned that conversation in advance. I would be willing to bet that he forgot the conversation ever happened within weeks. I am positive that he has no notion of how his words altered the trajectory of my life. I also feel certain that Christian's actions that day must have been prompted by the Holy Spirit. His bright smile and enthusiasm were the call I needed at that moment in time. Yes, this journey was for me. No, it would not be without struggle. There would be many more days filled with frustration, exacerbation, and tears. Any journey worth taking has hardships.

Jesus did not call the Disciples to an easy journey, but He did walk with them on their journeys. And after His death, resurrection, and ascension, He sent the Holy Spirit to travel alongside them. That same Holy Spirit (also called the Advocate or the Comforter) continues to accompany us on our journeys. Pay attention when you feel an urge to encourage someone else - you never know when that might be the Spirit working through you to change someone's life and help them along their journey.

Trinity Lutheran Church

Closing Prayer

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Journeys We Don't Want to Go On

March 4, 2024

Suggested Text: Psalm 46

“Journeys That We Don't Want to Go On” was an easy topic for me to pick from our list of options this year. In late December 2022, having gone in for a routine age-related screening-thinking I would be in and out and hear a quick “see you again in about 10 years” I had no reason, so I thought, to think otherwise -this did not however, turn out to be the case.

To my great surprise and frankly complete shock, what I heard instead was “we have found a mass, a 2 and ½ inch tumor.” After those words things became fuzzy but a barrage of “this test and that test, surgery, more doctors' visits, etc., etc. were spewed out by my doctor in very quick succession. Not being an expert on tumor size, I was quickly schooled on the fact that 2 ½ inches for a tumor is on the larger side with my nurse telling me in these exact words “I have turned the pictures backwards in your folder, you probably don't want to look at them right now.”

What people say about your whole world grinding to a complete and utter stop when you get this kind of news, as if the actual planet has stopped-at least temporarily - from spinning on its axis is 100% true. That is the exact feeling I had at that moment.

Being a lifelong Christian inevitably my thoughts turn to God. The usual suspects of questions race through my brain, one right after the other- “How could this happen?” “How or why has God let this happen?” “Will God save me?” I'm a person who has always prided myself on not only relying on God like the “good Christian girl” I was raised to be but also on being very specific on how and what I prayed for, almost always having my prayers answered usually to the tee. But now, with possible CANCER on the table?? Would my prayers and pleas to God come through in the same way?

A line from a song from my youth begins to play over and over in my head... “I haven't seen Barbados, so I must get out of this”. It is difficult but with all my might I replace the

line from the song with a bible verse that I can only credit the Lord with placing in my head instead “Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46:10.

This verse, although one of my lifelong favorites- a reminder and knowing that God is “ever present and NEVER leaves us” is still a challenge to always have at the forefront of my life and lean into it always 100%. Now, however I have no choice, this verse becomes my every day-sometimes every hour to every other minute mantra as I journey into the months ahead.

Tests are ran, a surgeon is seen, phone calls are answered with the words on the other end “literally as close to cancer as it can be without being actual cancer...however the story could be different when we get in there”. In other words, “don’t get your hopes up”. “Be still and know that I am God” continues to constantly replay in my head.

The end of January finally arrives, surgery is done and a “we’ll send in the complete pathology and hope that the lymph nodes are clear but be prepared to have chemotherapy” is given to me by the surgeon. “Be still and Know that I am God” One week later, as I sit in a dank hospital room in the middle of an ice storm, after having had to return due to a surgery complication my surgeon walks in with the news, “the tumor was partially cancerous but miraculously had not yet spread into my lymph nodes, surgery was the cure and no more action needs to be taken.”

I raise my head to the ceiling and say out loud “thank you Lord Jesus, thank you God.” As my surgeon got up to leave, I asked her if I could give her a hug and say, “thank you for saving me”. She looks at me and says, “you saved yourself by getting that screening”. I smile back at her but know this is not the truth. “Be still and know that I am God.”

One of the things that has surprised me since that journey, is the struggle I have had with the wondering of why I was saved. I have known so many, better humans than me, with younger children than my own who were not “saved” and taken away in the prime of their lives.

It’s a question that I may very well have until the Lord does choose to send me home one day, but a question that more than likely I will not have a clear and perfect answer to ever. All I can do is to continue to try, every single day, as we ALL must to be the very

best human, the best Christian, the best child of God that I can possibly be. Some days are easier than others, but I know this for sure...this may have started out as a journey that I did not want to go on but it is mine now, a journey that will live forever in my heart and in my soul, it's powerful and it never leaves me, mine to take with me forever wherever I go, wherever the Lord leads me, day in and day out, a journey that proved to me that If I can "Be still and know that he is God" he will never forsake me.

This devotional is dedicated to Misty Gardner Purner, a classmate who lost her life to colon cancer in January 2024 at the age of 52.

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.
Amen*



Journeys to People and Places Unknown

March 5, 2024

Suggested Text: Genesis 1:1-2:3

Physics of Faith

There was a boy who grew up in the 1960s and was interested in the early moon missions NASA was focused on as many boys of that certain age were. Naturally that included interests in math, science, and the mechanics of landing a man on Earth's nearest satellite. He had attended Sunday school and church with family, but spiritual faith just didn't fit in with the dynamic of these efforts.

The 1960's were a very controversial and tumultuous period in American history, especially the year 1968. The year presented Vietnam War Protests after the Tet Offensive in January of that year, Civil Rights protests and subsequent riots in Detroit and Los Angeles, Riots at the Democratic Party Presidential Convention in Chicago, two assassinations of political and religious leaders, yet NASA and the science of space exploration continued and so did the boy's interest in space exploration.

In December NASA had scheduled Apollo 8 with Astronauts Borman, Lovell, and Anders and the goal of orbiting the moon, the most ambitious mission to that date. This journey had to escape the Earth's pull of gravity, navigate 238,000 miles, orbit the moon and return safely. NASA made sure all the television channels would be covering the event. On Christmas Eve, after entering a stabilized orbit around Earth's satellite, the moon astronauts Borman, Lovell, and Anders read from the book of Genesis in the Bible on the creation. All of the people of Earth in all countries and media were captivated by the event as millions watched on TV with awe.

As the astronauts read something clicked in the boy's realization of the Physics of Faith. Here were NASA astronauts, selected from military engineering test pilots who were well schooled/trained on math and science, reading about the creation in the Bible. It all fits together. The mission could not have been accomplished if it weren't for the laws of math and physics. These laws, discovered by mathematicians and scientists through all

the years, were in place for centuries and long before they discovered them. These physical and mathematical laws were validated that night and enabled that mission's success. And now these astronauts were reading from the Bible of the creation. NASA scheduled the reading on Christmas Eve and the astronauts read. In the boy's mind this all substantiated their faith in physics and the Bible and brought all into the young man's perspective, the Physics of Faith. That evening, that Christmas Eve of 1968, the young man began his spiritual faith journey.

By the way, the media and journalists reported in all the news "Apollo 8 saved 1968".

Faith Lutheran Church

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You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Journeys We Undertake for Others

March 6, 2024

Suggested Text: Genesis 1:1-2:3

Have you ever said "Yes!", when you should have been honest and said, "Yes, but I'm afraid?". We all have a tendency toward shying away from new things or running toward them with reckless abandon. Our lives and personalities have shaped us for these reactions. We are fearful, but the hope we have allows us to continue.

In about 1998, I signed up for a class to become a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate). I love kids and always want the best for them. This somehow qualified me, in my mind, for the task. Through the 38 hrs of class, lectures, and videos, I found that not all people had the same goals for their children that I did. They did not feel the responsibility to instill the hope they would need for their future.

Some parents were uninterested, incarcerated, undereducated, or addicted. This made children dependent on very inadequate people.

I had no idea that this was such a pervasive issue. As I progressed, and selected a case with 3 children, I suddenly became aware that I had a big responsibility. Again, I wanted to say, "...yes, but I'm afraid".

I confess that I don't pray for everyone in my life every day, probably most of us don't. However, after meeting these children in chaos, and feeling like they needed every break life could provide for them, I prayed. I prayed for their nights to be peaceful. I prayed that they were warm and cared for in their Foster home. I prayed for their caregivers to have the time and patience to give them the hope for the future that they desperately needed.

I had no idea the impact it would have on me. I became more tolerant. I became much more grateful for the things that I had. My healthy children, my kitchen with food in the refrigerator, and the peaceful atmosphere when we played games together were all suddenly stunning and bright. God had given me so much peace and hope, I just needed

to see it, embrace it, and share it. That was my real job with my family and these three precious children.

Twenty-three years later John, my husband, and I went through the classes online (me for the second time) and became CASA volunteers together. We are currently assigned to two young boys that have known nothing but Foster care their entire lives. When John plays football and basketball with them in the park, when they sit by him and talk, or just see him drive up, I can see joy on their faces. He is "their guy". The one who loves them, plays with them, and listens to their hard questions. God is playing ball with John and the kids. He is giving him the strength to be there for them. This Journey with the boys will probably not end until they are 18 yrs old. We hope to stay in touch after that as well. My hope is that our hugs and time spent will bring them peace, courage, and hopefulness that they will need for their future.

Peace comes to each of us in a different way.

This is my prayer for everyone, that they can take a deep breath and feel God's peace.

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,

You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.

You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Lectio Divina

March 7, 2024

Suggested Text: Matthew 21:12-17

What is Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening and noticing. It is best done with at least one other person, where one person reads the passage, and then everyone reflects using the questions and/or the reflection below. Then another person rereads the text. Then everyone reflects using the second set of questions.

First Set of Questions

- What did you notice?
- What was your favorite part?
- What was the most challenging part?

Reflection

Jesus is well known for speaking against the powers and authorities of the world. Here he is speaking against the religious authorities, those who should be most on his side. God often challenges people right down to the core of their being. What is it like (or what would it be like) to be challenged to the core of your being?

Second Set of Questions

- What did you hear this time that you didn't hear the first time?
- Did your favorite and challenging parts change?
- Where did you hear God today?



Journeys We Undertake for Others

March 8, 2024

Suggested Text: Ezekiel 34:23-31

I can remember the first time I ever rode an upside-down roller coaster. I was not a huge roller coaster fan to begin with, so when my wife said, 'Let's go on an upside-down roller coaster' I was terrified. I remember standing in line waiting to get on and hearing the coaster launch with a loud rush of air, and all I could think is 'this is how I am going to die.' I know it is irrational. Even at the time I knew it was irrational, but I couldn't stop myself from thinking about it. I climbed into the car trembling. I reached up to pull down the restraint... and I couldn't do it. I panicked, freaked out and got off the coaster. My wife got off too and with tremendous patience, talked me down. She reminded me that no one has ever gotten hurt on the coaster and the restraint will more than keep me in place. The fact was I was more likely to get hurt getting into the ride, than on the ride itself.

This passage reminds us of our great protector. The prophet Ezekiel is reassuring the people who have been badly hurt, whose lives were destroyed during the exile, that God is here. God is going to send a great protector who will keep us safe. That protector will guide us like a shepherd through the unknowns of the wilderness. This protection is so great that even in the midst of the vast unknown, we can take refuge in our great protector.

My wife and I turned around and got back in line. I can still hear the loud rush of air. My body still trembled getting in the car, but I pulled down that safety bar... and never looked back. In life we face dangers that are all the more pressing and all the more visceral. Yet, no matter the dangers we face, we have a great protector shepherding us on our path.

Trinity Lutheran Church

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.
Amen*



Journeys of Personal Change

March 9, 2024

Suggested Text: Matthew 6:25-34

There are so many ways to communicate with one another today. However, this fall I discovered another way of communicating that had never crossed my mind. I was walking my dog Rose around the church property. I noticed an out of place rock. I went to pick it up and return it to the rock pile, when I saw writing on it.

The message was, “My name is Tiffany and I need prayers.” I was intrigued by this unique way of sharing a prayer request. I put the rock in a garden area close to the entrance of the church building. While I was doing that, I was praying for Tiffany that God, who knew her and called her Beloved, would care and provide for her. I thought nothing else about the rock.

A few days later, Rose and I, while on one of our daily walks, discovered another rock. This one indicated that she needed a job and a place to live. So again, as I moved the rock to what I was now calling our “Prayer Garden,” and I prayed that God would provide.

Again, a few days later, another rock appeared placed at the “Rock Garden.” The prayer requests this time were for help because she was in trouble. While I prayed for her, I also felt the need to communicate with her to offer at least a word of encouragement and in-person prayer. My card was taped to the rock with ways to contact me.

The last written communication with her was a rock that told me she tried to visit, but I was not here. Since that last written communication, she has left us works of art on pieces of concrete.

At times I feel helpless when it comes to Tiffany. I want to help, but I can't help her without her being present. Then I am reminded I can pray for her. I can lift her daily to God, asking God to care for and protect her, just as he promises to care for all of us.

Do you have people in your lives about which you feel helpless? You want to help, but they won't let you help for whatever reason. I have learned through my experience with Tiffany, we are not as powerless as it might seem, we can pray. Prayer is always the best course of action and perhaps even the only course of action to help.

May we all be reminded this season that we have a God who promises us that he will care for us and shows proof of that promise by sacrificing his only son so that we might have life and have it most abundantly.

My prayer for us all during those time of worry and helplessness is: "When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Psalm 61:2

Pastor

Closing Prayer

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Journeys We Don't Want to Go on

March 10, 2024

Suggested Text: Jeremiah 29:11

It is obvious we don't always understand what God asks of us or why certain things happen. Our job, however, is to remember that God is good all the time and we can trust in His ways. We had to do our share of trusting when our 21-year-old son was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He fought the battle against the disease for 10 months before it took his life. During that time, we were cared for in so many amazing ways by the members of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church. We knew support was there for our son and for our whole family from the day of diagnosis and into the days and months that followed.

We often as church members pray for peace and comfort for those going through difficult life circumstances and we pray prayers of thanksgiving for joyful occasions. Those prayers are very supportive. In our family's experience, we also experienced many other forms of support and care.

As we worked through our grief after our son's death, we realized how all church members needed to receive support if they desired it. From working with our pastor, we began to form a lay pastoral care committee. Our pastor trained the group of members willing to make a concerted effort to provide the support a person or family would welcome during an illness or change in life's circumstances. Training centered around a book, *The Caring Church*, a lay pastoral care guide. This book was written by a fellow church member.

The committee has been supporting the pastors of our church in their ministry for about 28 years. The committee makes sure the pastor is getting the care and support needed also. The committee has helped with providing communion to homebound and hospitalized when requested by the pastor. Meals are coordinated for feeding members physically and spiritually. We have shared in the joy of births and been available for needs in those exciting times. There has been lots of creativity used in this ministry. We hope most importantly that members feel cared for and that they know that the

congregation is present to walk with them through their journey. Not all journeys are the same, so it is important that we listen to their journey.

It's been spiritually helpful for us to see how good has come from what was to us a bad situation, a journey we did not want to go on. As we are told in Job 12:22, "He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings utter darkness into the light."

God has made it clear that He is with us always and stands with us through anything at any time. Like Footprints in the Sand, if we let Him, God will be a shelter for our heart and carry us in the journey. He can be a refuge where we can feel some peace. No matter where we are journeying, He promises to be with us. We are not alone and St. Matthew's community, as a very caring and loving congregation, is willing and wanting to lend support on the journey. We are so thankful that good can grow from bad situations.

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,

You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.

You protected me from wolves that circle me

You lead me to green pastures.

Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.

Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.

Give me the strength to follow where you lead.

I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.

Amen



Journeys We Undertake for Others

March 11, 2024

Suggested Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

“May I have your calendar?” asked my spiritual director. That seemed like a very odd request, but I was new to spiritual direction. When I entered seminary, it was recommended that I begin a practice of having someone (a spiritual director) accompany me on my faith journey. The purpose of that companion was to ask questions, listen to concerns and wonderings and help me see where God was present and active in my life and in the lives of those around me. (At least that’s what I was told when I signed up for a spiritual director.)

My spiritual director, a local pastor, was very good at reading me and responding not only to what I said, but what I didn’t say and what I did or didn’t do.

One of the first things my spiritual director asked was what spiritual discipline I wanted to work on during my first year of seminary. I told him I desired a more intentional prayer life. Up to my entering seminary, I had what I called a “Santa Claus” prayer life. My evening prayers most often were God, please take care of this, please provide this and the list of please fill in the blank went on. My prayers often seemed like my Christmas present list I sent to Santa each year as a kid.

I longed for a prayer life that was a conversation with God, time to listen, time to give thanks, time to make my requests, but primarily just an intentional time to be in the presence of God to let the Holy Spirit do the Holy Spirit’s work. I believed that for me an intentional prayer relationship with God needed to start with creating a habit of setting aside a time of the day for prayer. It seemed that no matter how hard I tried to do that, I could not get into that rhythm or habit.

Here’s where my amazing spiritual director helped. He had noticed that every time we met, my datebook was out and had lots of things written on it. He also noticed that whenever we set up our next time to meet, the first thing I did was write it in my

calendar. He also learned that if I made a commitment to an appointment and it was in my calendar there was a very high probability I would show up.

So, on that “fateful” day, when he asked me for my calendar and I reluctantly gave it to him, I began an intentional prayer time to be in God’s presence. You see what he did, when he asked for my calendar, was write an appointment with God every night at 10 pm for a month. He told me the appointment could be as long or as short as I needed it to be, but I had to show up and be open to being present to how God might use that time.

The practice of intentional time for God has been a consistent habit since that day. It is a cherished and peaceful time. It is a time to just be in the presence of God. I always spend time sharing with God my “Santa Clause” prayers, but most of all it is a time to be still and know that God is God.

In this season I invite you to consider adopting a new spiritual practice, perhaps it is the practice of intentional prayer. Whatever you decide, my prayer for you is that in that practice you grow closer to God, this God of unconditional love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, peace, hope and so much more.

Blessed Lenten Journey. May the journey feed your soul and deepen your relationship with our amazing God, who calls you his Beloved Child.

Pastor

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.*

*Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.*

Amen



Journeys We Don't Want to Go On

March 12, 2024

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:20b

Now that I'm older and wiser, I find it remarkable and at times fascinating to see how my life has played out, in all its joys and sorrows. I have grown through it all, and I know that God travels beside me in all situations.

In 2003, my husband Paul and I began a journey together living with Paul's Parkinson's Disease (PD). We didn't know what to expect; we didn't know anyone who had PD. We didn't know how long Paul would be able to work, drive, mow the lawn, usher, tinker with his car; we didn't know if he would develop tremors, or how well/long he would be able to walk on his own. And there were other things we didn't anticipate: prostate cancer, forced retirement in 2007 when our children were in or about to start college, hallucinations, significant balance and cognitive issues. We didn't want to go on this journey, but God was walking with us.

New experiences in our lives included joining the Parkinson's Support Group of Tarrant County where Paul attended their exercise group while he was able. I became a member of their Board of Directors and helped facilitate speakers and participation in several of the annual Parkinson's Walks. We went to the Parkinson's Voice Project in Richardson for voice therapy and attended area workshops on PD. We learned a lot about PD and about the resilience of the many people we met who had the disease or one of its many variants. We didn't want to go on this journey, but God gave us places to learn and people to grow with.

As time marched on and dementia took hold, Paul attended the Day Program at the James L. West Center for Dementia Care, and I found a caregiver's support group there. I highly recommend such a group for anyone in a caregiving role. It was at James L. West that Paul became a resident for 14 months, 2019-2020, and it was there that he died very unexpectedly . . . during COVID (but not from COVID) . . . when James L. West was in full lockdown . . . three weeks after our new pastor arrived, I worked in the church office. Needless to say, I experienced just a little bit of stress in 2020. We didn't want to go on this journey, but God guided Paul to a safe and caring place and guided him to his heavenly home.

We learned new medical vocabulary, were grateful for doctors who listened and explained things in helpful terms, and I was helped immensely by the caregiver's support group. I have since been supported by a grief support group led by a staff member at James L. West. We didn't want to go on this journey, but God provided caring and praying friends and pastors, family support, informed and compassionate counselors, and a firm belief in God's presence.

Rather than fret about lost abilities, the caregiver's support group leader often encouraged us to ask, "What can our loved one still do/understand?" One evening waiting for Paul's dinner to be served at James L. West, I asked Paul if he would scratch my back (that's what he would do most nights when we went to bed) . . . and he did! What a remarkable and wonderful moment for both of us! And of course, Paul being able to walk our daughter down the aisle at her wedding in 2018 was another quite amazing moment. Look for those moments and opportunities in the midst of trying times and treasure them. Know that God is always walking with you on your journey, even when (especially when) you didn't want to go.

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

Closing Prayer

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Journeys We Undertake for Others

March 13, 2024

Suggested Text: Isaiah 35:3-4

This is a reflection from my journal 12 days after having a stroke.

Isaiah 35 is one of my favorite chapters in the entire Hebrew scriptures. I've always used these verses as a metaphor for strengthening and supporting people during difficult times rather than a literal strengthening of feeble hands and steadying of unsteady knees. I'll never think of it that way again.

That's because I've seen the therapists make this verse come true time and time again during my short stay at Texas Rehabilitation. When a person can't move their arms or legs the therapist does it for them. They surround people with support, both physically and emotionally, and get frightened people to try things they thought they couldn't do. And through it all they show incredible compassion for the difficulties the patients are facing.

One woman had had all she could take yesterday during a PT session and just broke down sobbing. Someone went for Kleenex and two more therapists stepped up to put an arm around her shoulder. They spoke to her quietly and encouraged her and let her weep. Sometimes you just hit a wall, and you can't go any further and the only thing you can do is cry. In time she was ready to go again and continue trying to do what had been and still was, incredibly frustrating.

The group was in a good mood yesterday afternoon. There was a lot of conversation and laughter. Maybe because some of us are going home soon - I get discharged tomorrow at 11:00 AM, praise God! Or it might be because the weekend is almost here and we'll get a rest, or maybe it was just a day to laugh at our shared situation.

At some point OT Bob gave some advice for exercises at home. He finished his little talk by saying, "remember that stretching is really good for old people." One of the old people said, "who are you calling old?" Another one said, "Yeah, we're not old, we're

vintage!” The human spirit is remarkable. Here we were in a circle of wheelchairs with all manner of ailments and challenges and deficiencies and yet we all had a good laugh. It truly is the best medicine.

Last night I had a setback. It started sometime around dinner. I had had a full day of OT and PT and walked by myself to my room. One of the staff joked with me, “are you on staff or are you a patient?” I laughed. I was feeling good. Sometime around dinner my ankle started to feel sore, like it was sprained. It started slowly, just a twinge, but then it got very noticeable so that I had to use the walker again just to be safe. I'll tell you the truth. I felt a little deflated by it and wondered why it had happened, especially now at the end when things have gone so well. Not quite a “pity party”, but I was close.

But then I thought, wait a minute, it's my right ankle. I've not felt any pain in my right side since I had the stroke, so at least I feel something. I'll take the pain if it means I can feel something. When Amanda came this morning to take me for PT, I showed her my ankle. We had another therapist come in and then the doctor. It became clear that the pain was very localized, like about the size of a dime at best. At first, they thought it could be a stress fracture but didn't know how that could have happened. They were going to order X-rays and then the doctor asked the magic question. Have you ever had gout?

I have never been so happy to have gout.

Here's to vintage friends who make us laugh, and gout that makes us glad because it's not a stress fracture.

Pastor



Journeys of Joy and Celebration

March 14, 2024

Suggested Text: Exodus 14:19-31

Aren't joy and celebration sweeter after coming through a difficult time?

Can you think of a hard time in your life when your enemies surrounded you? It could be enemies like depression or illness or challenging circumstances. For me, one of the hardest 18 months of my life happened when I moved my elderly, wheelchair bound parents with dementia into my home and managed their caregiving until they both passed away at my house. One of the enemies for me was uncertainty. Often the scheduled caregiver wouldn't show up and I would have to juggle my full-time work schedule around taking over their care. I had to learn to be present in the daily moments of life with them as those are the only moments dementia sufferers know except the distant past. That was hard for me as a person who plans carefully and lives more easily in the future. Another enemy was the extended grief as I watched them fade away. Nevertheless, God sustained me as I walked through the valley. I can imagine the fear that the Israelites must have felt walking through the valley of water, even though Moses had told them, "Do not fear!" But like them, I was able to "stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish..." And though I was saddened by my parents passing, there was relief that I had survived the ordeal and no regrets for having taken on that burden. Like the Israelites in the next chapter of Exodus, I was able to say, "The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will extol Him."

Blessings to you if you are walking through the valley today. May God sustain you and bring you into joy and celebration.

Blessings to you if you are in a time of joy and celebration. May you use your fullness to encourage others in your community who are hurting.

Trinity Lutheran Church

Closing Prayer

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Journeys to People and Places Unknown

March 15, 2024

Suggested Text: Jonah

Journey and Lent seem to go together nicely. We find ourselves walking from Ash Wednesday to Easter reflecting on who we are, striving to grow our faith, and opening ourselves to God's direction. This Lent, I am revisiting the numerous journeys found in the Bible – Adam and Eve, Abraham, Noah, Moses and the Exodus, Mary and Joseph, The Magi, Paul's missionary trips, etc. – and I find myself resonating with Jonah. You remember him – the reluctant prophet who refused to heed God's call and go to Nineveh.

Jonah tried to run away from God by boarding a boat and sailing in the opposite direction of Nineveh. Jonah was thrown overboard and ended up spending time in the belly of a great fish where he prayed to God. He was literally thrown up onto dry land and given another chance to serve God. This time, Jonah faithfully went to Nineveh and proclaimed God's warning of destruction. But guess what? The people repented and God changed his mind and did not destroy Nineveh. Jonah should be happy but instead is angry with God, and once again turns away from God. At the end of the story, we find Jonah sulking under a bush and very disappointed with God. What a journey he endured!

Honestly, my journey of faith can sometimes resemble Jonah's experience. I may not always like the places God sends me to or be pleased with the tasks God asks me to do, so I turn away from God and refuse to serve. Other times, I am ready to serve but I want the serving to be on my terms. And so, I get angry when God doesn't respond the way I think God should in a particular circumstance.

But then I take a closer look at Jonah's journey, and I discover there is good news – grace abounds! Despite Jonah's actions and decisions, God does not give up on him. God gives Jonah multiple opportunities to respond as God wishes. God also provides for Jonah in his times of need - a big fish swallows Jonah and brings him to dry land instead of being drowned. And, when Jonah builds his shelter outside the city of Nineveh, God provides

big leaves to shade Jonah from the scorching heat. And talk about grace, how about God deciding not to destroy Nineveh because the people repented!

Believe it or not, there is even greater good news for us! Not only does God give us multiple opportunities to be close to him and to serve him. Not only does God take care of us by providing for us when life doesn't go the way we think it should. God saves us! In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God graces us with a blessed life today and an eternal life in God's Kingdom.

I have often wondered what happened to Jonah. The Bible story ends, and we don't hear any more about him. I wonder if that is because we are the ending to Jonah's journey – we are God's beloved. We try our best to not get in God's way, but we sometimes do. We strive to share with God's people on God's terms, but sometimes our agendas get in the way. But God does not give up on us! Instead, God made the greatest journey of all time - sending Jesus Christ to live among us and ultimately to sacrifice his son on a cross, to save us for today and for eternity. Grace abounds!

St Matthew's Lutheran Church

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.*

Amen



Lectio Divina

March 16, 2024

Suggested Text: Esther 1:1-12

What is Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening and noticing. It is best done with at least one other person, where one person reads the passage, and then everyone reflects using the questions and/or the reflection below. Then another person rereads the text. Then everyone reflects using the second set of questions.

First Set of Questions

- What did you notice?
- What was your favorite part?
- What was the most challenging part?

Reflection

The story of Queen Vashti is hidden in the biblical language because we desire to make it less offensive. The down and dirty version is the King was drunk and he wanted to show off his possessions which included Queen Vashti. He commanded her to appear before the king and his court naked. The Queen refused and she was deposed, clearing the way for Esther to be queen. It takes great strength to stand up for yourself especially when no one else seems to care and opposes you doing it. What does it look like to you to do as Vashti did?

Second Set of Questions

- What did you hear this time that you didn't hear the first time?
- Did your favorite and challenging parts change?
- Where did you hear God today?



Closing Prayer

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Journeys of Joy and Celebration

March 17, 2024

Suggested Text: Exodus 14: 19-31

Exodus reveals the Lord as Redeemer. Because of His love for His children, He takes the initiative to save His people from bondage. Until Christ's coming and His death on the cross, the exodus was the greatest divine redemptive act. A journey of joy!

As God delivered the Israelites from their captors, so God has delivered me and many others from the bondage of sorrow and doubt. As a caretaker for aging, sick parents and especially for the despair of years of a dementia stricken individual, I often struggled with the faith to carry on. In those dark moments, as I prayed, the small quiet assurance of "Do not be afraid, I am with you" resonated in my heart. How do people without God manage through these difficult times? My faith is grounded through Godly parents, wonderful friends, and church family.

When we came to Faith Lutheran Church 50 years ago, we were welcomed by some remarkable new friends. The support of the Christian community through prayer and caring was immeasurable. As a result, my family heard God's word, saw examples of His love and our faith grew.

In our lives we go on many journeys, but none is as important to our faith as the journey to the cross and our assurance of life with Christ. Our Lenten quest is about preparing for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, in which God delivers us from our sins. The cycle of Lent makes a space for us to yearn for Easter and welcome the resurrected light that is continually reaching out and drawing us into a relationship with God. No matter who you are or where you are in life, you are never alone.

And so, with the death of Christ on the cross, God's redemptive act of saving all sinners was complete and the scriptures fulfilled. This is a journey of joy! Death is not the end! Christ's death and resurrection is just the beginning! HE IS RISEN!!

Faith Lutheran Church

**Journeys of Family**

March 18, 2024

Suggested Text: Jonah

In the story of Jonah, God calls Jonah to deliver a message to Nineveh. Throughout the story, Jonah is pushed beyond his comfort zone, running from God and God's plan for him. However, Jonah turns back to God after three days in the belly of a fish and cries out to God in prayer.

While I have never spent three days in the belly of a big fish, there was a point in my life when I ran from God and refused to listen to God's words for me. In 2004, my marriage was failing. Believing 100% in the vows I had pledged on our wedding day, I prayed to God to help me, to give me the words, the courage, the whatever it would take to save my marriage. I yelled and screamed and cried in an endless repetitive cycle. Unsure of God's presence, I did not want to face the inevitable and I ran from what God was telling me: my marriage was over.

Yet, God, in all of God's infinite wisdom, placed people in my path to help me and to guide me to return to God. My mom, who was divorced, talked to me many times about the fact that she believed that God does not want us to be in a broken marriage. A dear friend, Sandy, walked miles with me, physically and spiritually, through this time. Laughter and tears and deep conversation were prayers.

My women's Bible study group prayed for me. My church family prayed for me. My neighbors prayed for me. Slowly, I returned to listening to God. What was God's plan for me? As I began to feel those prayers, I again heard what God was saying. I made the painful decision to leave my marriage. It was a rough and rocky road, and the journey was long. However, I know that I came out of this experience, stronger in my faith, in my belief in God, and in my trust that God has a plan for me. It was not the journey that I had hoped for, but by surrendering and listening to God speak through friends and family, I'm on a different path and I'm thankful for that.

St Matthew's Lutheran Church



Closing Prayer

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Journeys of People and Places Unknown

March 19, 2024

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

(John 20:29)

It is difficult to believe in something without being able to see the end result. Upon graduating from high school many years ago, my decision to attend Texas Lutheran University, located 1,285 miles from home, was made by totally trusting God to guide me. I had a loving family and lots of friends, therefore I had no reason to leave home. I was the 5th of 6th children, none of which had a history of attending college, much less a college across the country. I sold my parents on the idea of going off to college, not knowing what the end result might be. I “bought” TLU sight-unseen; it was a leap of faith. I trusted God to lead me and guide me through the process. I did not know how this would all end, but I knew God was with me on this journey and would make it work.

My college baseball coach preached to us to visualize winning, to visualize hitting the ball into the gaps, and to visualize making the important defensive plays to secure the victory. One of my favorite quotes from Earl Nightingale is, “you are the product of your most dominant thought . . . even if it is wrong.” So, in other words, you become what you think of the most!

I think God is telling us to keep our mind on the present journey and enjoy His presence. If we “Walk by faith, not by sight,” (2 Corinthians 5: 7) trusting God to put us right where we need to be, we will prevail! My life’s journey involved a leap of faith to attend TLU and became a turning point in my life. It opened my eyes to the many amazing and rewarding blessings God showers on us.

Trinity Lutheran Church



Lectio Divina

Date March 20, 2024

Suggested Text: Exodus 3

What is Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening and noticing. It is best done with at least one other person, where one person reads the passage, and then everyone reflects using the questions and/or the reflection below. Then another person rereads the text. Then everyone reflects using the second set of questions.

First Set of Questions

- What did you notice?
- What was your favorite part?
- What was the most challenging part?

Reflection

God has a habit of choosing odd people at odd times. God appears to Moses in the burning bush after he murdered the guard and fled to the wilderness. Why would God wait, instead of appearing when Moses lived in the palace? What does that say about God?

Names are powerful. They carry the intellect, power, and majesty of the thing they name. They also become a box which encapsulates our entire understanding of the thing. For example, granite is the name of a strong and beautiful rock that resists weathering. The name has become synonymous with ageless beauty and strength. Can granite be something else? God's name 'I AM WHO I AM' carries our understanding of God; yet it defies limitation. When have you experienced God breaking the limits you put on God?

Second Set of Questions

- What did you hear this time that you didn't hear the first time?
- Did your favorite and challenging parts change?



Journeys of Family

March 21, 2024

Suggested Text: Ruth

The book of Ruth is one of my favorite stories in the Bible because of Ruth's strength and unwavering faithfulness. Her story unfolds against the backdrop of loss and hardship. I am struck by her devotion to Naomi when she says, "Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." She just committed to Naomi to follow her, move to a new country, and convert religions. Is that not blind faith or what?!

My move to Fort Worth in the fall of 2020, while it was a journey I asked for, was not the one I expected. This was the first time my family and friends were not a car ride away. Between a new, demanding job, the ongoing public health crisis, and not being able to physically see loved ones, I felt truly alone. But, perhaps like Ruth after committing to travel with Naomi at the beginning of her journey, I was optimistic that I could figure it out and find happiness. I am grateful I did not have to toil in the fields to find someone to take me in – all it took was finding my church home. After a recent Sunday, I had to reflect on the community that took me in. I have a community of young adults in the same season of life, "adoptive parents" who check up on me every week just to see how I'm doing, and young kids who I'm still working to convince that I'm cool. The supportive nature of this community has done so much in my spiritual life. Much like how Ruth was taken in by Boaz and the Jewish community in Bethlehem, I felt adopted into the faith community in Fort Worth, Texas.

What I love about the book of Ruth is that there are two sides of this story – Ruth's journey and God working through Boaz. Ruth had to remain faithful through extreme hardship. Just thinking about the trials and tribulations of losing loved ones and immigrating makes my daily struggles look like a walk in the park. From Boaz's perspective, he saw a woman give up everything to support her mother-in-law. He showed kindness to her by protecting her and placing her in a preferred spot among the women working in the fields. Why would he do that? Ruth was a woman and a foreigner, why would he give her special treatment? He responds that he was kind to her because

of her humble kindness – kindness begets kindness. I think this is the hand of God at play. Has there been a time recently where someone showed compassion towards you unexpectedly and you wondered why? I have. That’s God working through ordinary moments. God saw Ruth’s faithfulness and Boaz’s heart and enacted his will – their ultimate union was part of the lineage of Jesus. The story ends with Ruth getting what Naomi originally wanted for her – to remarry and have sons. We don’t always get to pick our journeys, but through our own faithfulness and God’s promise of redemption, God orchestrates His divine purpose. May our lives echo the faithfulness of Ruth and the kindness of Boaz, pointing others to the enduring love and grace of our heavenly Father.

Trinity Lutheran Church

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.
Amen*



Lectio Divina

March 22, 2024

Suggested Text: Philippians 2:1-11

What is Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening and noticing. It is best done with at least one other person, where one person reads the passage, and then everyone reflects using the questions and/or the reflection below. Then another person rereads the text. Then everyone reflects using the second set of questions.

First Set of Questions

- What did you notice?
- What was your favorite part?
- What was the most challenging part?

Reflection

The Christ Hymn is thought to be the oldest confession of Christian church. It implicitly compares Greco-Roman understanding of a God with Christ. In it, Christ rejects power for the sake of power (the Roman understanding of power). Instead, Christ embraces power for service. While we cannot be Christ, discipleship is the practice of modeling ourselves on Christ.

What does it look like to embrace power for service today?

The journey of Lent ends with the cross, where the authorities of the day (both political and religious) found Christ and his teachings a threat. What is threatening about Christ?

What does this mean in your discipleship journey?

Second Set of Questions

- What did you hear this time that you didn't hear the first time?
- Did your favorite and challenging parts change?
- Where did you see God today



Journeys of Family

March 23, 2024

Suggested Text: Genesis 18:1-15

**Small kids warning* I talk about IVF, pregnancy, and birth in this devotion*

The birth of our first child didn't go as planned. To be fair, the road to pregnancy didn't go as planned. We knew that we wanted to be parents before we were married, and so when it came to that stage we began trying to conceive. For two years, we tried all the methods and none of them worked. We went to a fertility specialist in California which didn't work. We took a pause before going to a fertility specialist in Pennsylvania. Tried other methods before beginning the road called IVF.

IVF is not for the faint of heart. It requires extra medical procedures where they take all the fun out of conception, shots that are specifically timed and leave numb spots that linger for years and let's not forget the money. While it has gotten cheaper to go through IVF, it is nowhere near the word cheap. All done in the hope of getting pregnant, which not everyone does. So, when we began the journey, we knew it would be long and full of tense moments. The last step of IVF is called transfer, when my wife becomes pregnant (google for more specifics). The catch is it takes time to know if it worked. For seven days we had to wait with Schrödinger's uterus (because she could be pregnant and not pregnant at the same time). That waiting is the hardest part.

There is nothing more that we could do to affect the outcome; it was in God's hands now. Waiting on God is hard. Pastor Mohn talked in one of her sermons about how Mark is the gospel for those who are done waiting. In Mark, God takes immediate action a lot. Mark skips the story of Jesus' birth so that we can get to the ministry of Jesus faster. After his baptism, he is immediately rushed into the wilderness; and any time the disciples get complacent during the ministry and want to build houses on mountain tops, Jesus says it's time to move on. I like Jesus in Mark's gospel. I don't like this waiting, but like Abraham and Sarah, if it is my time to wait, then I will wait.

The transfer took place and she became pregnant. The pregnancy went fine until the 3rd trimester, when she developed gestational diabetes (which is diabetes that only occurs during pregnancy). So, we changed our diet and our habits. Learned to cook different foods. Learned there are only so many ways to make an egg and that making it different ways does not change the fact that you're eating eggs EVERY morning. Eventually the big day comes! Well, it came early, and while my wife's body was ready to not be pregnant anymore, our baby girl was very comfortable and didn't want to come out. So, after 24hrs she had a C-section.

There I am sitting in a VERY specific spot, while a team of doctors and nurses perform the operation. I was tired emotionally and physically trying to be supportive but feeling like I was operating on autopilot. And then she cried. My baby girl made her first noise. I was happier than I had ever been. My baby girl that I had hoped, prayed, and waited for was here. The journey of pregnancy is over, and a new journey is beginning. Joy comes in many forms and rarely comes on its own. I pray that this day the joy of waiting fills your heart.

Pastor

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.*

Amen



Journey of Holy Week (Lectio Divina)

March 24, 2024

Suggested Text: Luke 19:28-44

What is Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a reflective practice of listening and noticing. It is best done with at least one other person, where one person reads the passage, and then everyone reflects using the questions and/or the reflection below. Then another person rereads the text. Then everyone reflects using the second set of questions.

First Set of Questions

- What did you notice?
- What was your favorite part?
- What was the most challenging part?

Reflection

Palm Sunday is a day of promise and hope. Throughout Jesus' journey people would whisper, hope, and exclaim that he is the Messiah, the now and future king of Israel that would bring peace to the land and restore God's kingdom. This hope had sustained Israel through the centuries and today it might come true. What does it mean to you to be a person of hope? Where do you see hope around you? What do you hope for?

Second Set of Questions

- What did you hear this time that you didn't hear the first time?
- Did your favorite and challenging parts change?
- Where did you hear God today?

Closing Prayer

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Journey of Holy Week

March 25, 2024

Suggested Text: Mark 11:12-19

Yesterday we saw the Prince of Peace riding in on a humble donkey. He was beloved by the people. Today he curses a fig tree because it had no figs to give even though it was not the season to bear figs. Next, he overturns the tables of the merchants and money changers in the temple. He declares that this place is supposed to be a house of prayer, but they have turned this into a den of robbers. In Amos, the prophet proclaims the word of God saying, “I hate, I despise your religious festivals... I will not accept your burnt offerings... But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” The temple itself was not despised by the prince of peace, but the people had lost sight of what was important. Without justice, without mercy, without love, when people are going through the actions of worship, God is being mocked.

An old saying I grew up hearing is, “He is all hat and no cattle!” The person being described talks a big game but is full of hot air. He has no substance to himself, or he brags and boasts but in reality, he has no actions to back up what he talks about. Sometimes I have found myself looking at my other siblings in faith who think that all they have to do is “get saved”! Then they are good to go because they do not have to worry anymore about going to hell. When their last breath on this side of life is done, they will be with Jesus. All is good in their thinking. I can get so wrapped up in shaking my head at the absurdity of their theology that I have tended to think that at least I have good theology and know better. I know that God has always loved me and that I have never had to worry about what happens after this life is over. In the smugness of my “superior theology”, I would tell myself that I would never focus my attention on wondering if all faith was about was determining if I went to heaven or hell! But then I tend to stop there. Where are the cattle? It does not matter what our personal theology is if we do not act because of it. Yes, I know we are saved by grace through faith and that the Holy Spirit creates that faith in us, and we do nothing to contribute to that salvation, but aren’t we all that if it stops there! What and who are we saved for? Does our theology cause us to look around to our neighbors? Do we see that they are

created in the same image of God that we are created in? How do we love them, do justice, and have mercy to help them?

What good is our worship if it is only prayers, songs, and praise, but it does not carry us out into the world to serve our neighbors? Has the prince of peace entered into your life and turned over the tables, so you can see what is really important? Even those people whom we may not like, are created in the image of God. “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

Unlike that fig tree, the fruits of justice, mercy, and love are never out of season!

Synod Staff and Officers

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.
Amen*



Journeys of Holy Week

March 8, 2024

Suggested Text: John 13:1-17

What kind of devotional quotes are the Pet Shop Boys and John Ylvisaker? Madness! I know I am going to date myself by quoting the Pet Shop Boys but there's a song that starts "When I look back upon my life, it's always with a sense of shame". I have one of those faith journeys that's, well, full of peaks and valleys and I'm talking deep valleys. The chaos of life if you're not disciplined and dedicated will, to quote the movie *Poltergeist*, "jam your frequencies". I try to be both of those disciplines but always seem to fall short. I allow those shortcomings to derail my faith and question why I can't stay the course. I see football players offer up their latest touchdowns to God or someone posting on social media their thankfulness that God saved them a parking space at the local mega church. I roll my judgmental eyes. But in rare, quiet moments of clarity, I remind myself that we all walk our own paths of spirituality. Who am I to say what is right and wrong. What a delight it must be to revel in a choice parking space. But then the noise of life comes back, and I find myself bogged down. Music has always been my medium to right myself and sometimes I turn to a mostly forgotten John Ylvisaker song, *Always Remember Me*. The chorus is as follows:

Lord on the night of betrayal,
there in the heart of the town,
you took the bread from the
table,
broke it and passed it around.
'This is my body I'm giving for you;
eat, and remember the one you
love.
This is the way I restore you;
this is a gift from above.'

Then, with a word of thanksgiving,
slowly you lifted the cup.
Now there's a reason for living,
now we will know it's enough.
This is the blood of a holy promise,
drink, and remember the one you
love.
Know that my mercy is boundless;
this is a gift from above.

Isn't that what Lent is about. The sacrifice Jesus made out of love for all of us. Powerful words that make my sense of shame disappear. A Lenten reminder to know that God's mercy is boundless. Regardless of your path, you are loved and forgiven.

Trinity Lutheran Church

*Heavenly Father, our shepherd, and our redeemer,
You journeyed long to find me, a lost sheep.
You protected me from wolves that circle me
You lead me to green pastures.
Through the waters of baptism, you claim me.
Keep and preserve me in the waters of your grace.
Give me the strength to follow where you lead.
I entrust myself fully to your care, grace, love, and truth.
Amen*



Journey of Holy Week

March 27, 2024

Suggested Text: Isaiah 50:4-9

We have now made our way to the middle of Holy Week. The excitement of the choruses of Hosanna that rang out on Sunday have faded. Monday and Tuesday seem to have passed with little incident or excitement (except perhaps for those praying over copiers preparing bulletins for the Triduum). So now, on Wednesday we could be excused perhaps for getting a little weary, or sleepy, as the rhythms of daily life continue even in the midst of this Holy Week.

But the prophet will have none of that. Isaiah proclaims that the Lord God has given him the tongue of a teacher, to sustain us and even to awaken us. To encourage us to listen, to pay attention to what God is doing in these Holy Days. To listen closely to the rumblings that are coming of the journey ahead. That neither Jesus, nor us, can turn backward from what is to come.

And what is coming is going to be difficult for Jesus. His suffering is going to be real. There will be “insult and spitting,” false accusation and physical pain. Jesus is going to experience the full measure of human suffering. His family, particularly his mother, is going to have to watch in horror and grief as he becomes the one who will vindicate us. Who will take on the reality of our sin and death, our human condition, so that we can stand before God with the righteousness he has given to us.

While perhaps we will not, in our journey this year, know the physical pain that Jesus will know, across our world and in our communities today there are many who know deep suffering. Some of this suffering we know and see daily. Places like Ukraine and Gaza still make the regular news. But much human suffering, grief, and loss takes place out of our sight or mind. In places the news does not regularly cover and even happens in our local communities. And then we also choose to hide our eyes and ears from it because it all seems too much to bear.

The prophet today invites us again to waken our ears to hear what God is doing. To awaken ourselves to see the pain and grief of this world and recognize God’s solidarity with humanity. And because of what God is doing in Christ for us we then have

hope. That our sin and death will not be the last word. To know our life is secure, that our guilt is remitted, that we shall not be put to shame. Then recognizing that hope, we can renew our energy to work for justice and peace in the world. To be renewed in our journey this Holy Week and set our faces towards the cross.

God, you invite us to open our ears to hear and be taught.

Teach us again the story of our love poured out in Jesus.

Help us to see clearly our neighbor in need

and serve them knowing our life is secured in you.

Give us strength for the days ahead.

In Christ our righteousness. Amen.

Synod Staff and Officers



Journey of Holy Week

March 28, 2024

Suggested Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

I am number eight out of 10 children my parents had. Several times the twelve of us sat at the table. We didn't have much to eat, nevertheless we were together having more than one discussion at the table. Mom's demand was to eat without fighting. Her encouragement was to love each other and to help each other, to serve one another, and take care of each other.

Every Lent season I remember my childhood and the Journey I have lived with my nine siblings.

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples and gave them a new commandment to love one another as he loved them (John 13:34). This meal has many names. When we call it the Last Supper, we are describing the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his betrayal, arrest, and execution. When we call it the Lord's Supper, we are emphasizing that Jesus is the host, and we are the guests. when we call it Eucharist. We are reminding ourselves that it is an act of Thanksgiving for God's gracious gift, and when we call it communion, we are naming the way in which this meal unites us with Jesus and with our fellow believers.

Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with a towel that was wrapped around him. Do you know what I have done for you?

After he finished washing the disciples' feet, Jesus returned to his seat. He explained that this was an example for all of them. As he had washed their feet, they should wash one another's feet.

Mom and Dad didn't know how to interpret the bible, but they were raised to be humble, to love and to serve one another. We have been blessed by coming to live in the United States.

The question Jesus asked to his disciples; Do you know what I have done for you?

I can answer by helping, assisting new immigrants. Now as a preacher, as a pastor, as a child of God I claim the authority God has given me to share the Gospel in communion with all nations.

“Humility is the mother of all virtues, purity, charity and obedience. It is in being humble that our love becomes real, devoted and ardent.” Mother Teresa.

How will you follow his example, wash feet, and serve as he served?

If you had been among the 12 disciples, how would you have reacted to Jesus washing your feet?

Lord Jesus,

As you served, help me to serve others.

As you loved, help me to love others.

As you lead, help me to follow.

In Your holy name I pray.

Amen.

Synod Staff and Officers



Journey of Holy Week

March 29, 2024

Suggested Text: John 19:28-30

Sometimes it's just really easy to know when something is over. Remember when you were a child listening to fairy tales? You could always tell when you got to the end of the story when you heard the words, "And they lived happily ever after." That was it. Story over. Everything was resolved and you could rest easy.

I can remember some fairy tales in those old Grimm Brothers' books that ended with the words, "... And if they are not dead yet, then they are still alive." Now how do you wrap your simple child mind around that one? If they're not dead, then they're alive. How do you know? Maybe there was a part of the world where all fairy tale characters go to live, and they never die. Could happen in childhood fantasies. But as we get older, we learn that's all that is – fantasy.

No matter what the final words, you could tell the story was over. Finished. So, to the people who were still around the cross to hear Jesus say, "It is finished," it would have seemed obvious. Finished. End of story. But it wasn't. Jesus didn't mean that at all. To think the story was over here would imply that Jesus was simply a victim. If this is the end of the story, it would appear that death was the winner. But Jesus was not a victim. Death had not won.

"It is finished" meant everything was accomplished. He had completed what he came here to do. Death was not going to have the final word and what seemed obvious to those watching this scene, was not obvious at all. Even though it would appear that death had won, that was not the case. "It is finished!" was a cry of victory, not defeat.

This was the culmination of why Jesus came to be among us, fully divine and yet fully human. He suffered thirst like we do. He felt pain like we do. He endured humiliation and suffering more than any of us could even imagine. But he did so to remind us that the pain and suffering and death is not the end of the story. This does not mean we will all "live happily ever after" and have fairy tale lives. I have walked alongside far too many people in grief and pain to ever believe in fairy tales. Mortality is very real,

whether we are talking about our own or the mortality of congregations and institutions. But that is not the end of the story.

Jesus suffers alongside us. He walks with us in those dark places. He thirsts for justice and peace for all of us. And He is the fulfillment of hope and new life to come. "It is finished."

O Lord,

we thank you for what you suffered on the cross to replace it with newness of life.

Remind us always that this story is not over and that your love for us never ends.

Strengthen us with the assurance of your never-ending victory over death.

Amen

Synod Staff and Officers



Journey of Holy Week

March 30, 2024

Suggested Text: Job 14:7-14

The winter storms of February 2021 did great damage to several of our small ornamental trees at our house in Fort Worth. The ice broke branches and killed the leaves. Then the days of perpetual cold, followed by storms in 2022 and 2023, resulted in many of the branches and even entire trees dying. Dried up by the cold, unable to sustain life. The summer came and no new leaves were found. The remaining branches crack and break off in each windstorm.

So, what to do but cut them down. Reduce them to stumps. A heart-breaking task because they added so much green and life to our small yard. But they were gone, dead, the journey of their lives over, seemingly without hope. So, I cut them down, chopped up the branches and put them out for the Fort Worth waste management team to come and collect. To turn it into mulch for parks. The end of the trees it seemed.

But as Job writes “there is hope for a tree.” Freed of their dead branches and extra weight, several of the stumps in 2023 began to bear new shoots. The “scent of the water” of spring brought forth small green branches emerging from what I, in my infinite wisdom, had judged to be dead. And now, months later a shrub has emerged, greener and fuller than that which had been before. The pruning brings density of branches and leaves of a deeper green than their neighbors that weathered the storm.

There is hope for a tree that its journey doesn’t end with what seems to be death. That new life can come and spring anew. But as Job recounts, this hope is not for us. When our journey ends, “mortals lie down and do not rise again.” The journey is over.

And that is what it seems to be on Holy Saturday. Christ lies in the tomb. Sin and death have won. The power of the Empire, the occupying force of Rome, has won. Snuffing out the life of the one who came to give life. Like those stumps that I judged dead, so he has been judged dead. And on this day of quiet (except for those preparing

the church for worshippers) we are good to sit with that for a time. Jesus dead. Buried. Gone...

Yet, the scent of the water is growing stronger. Water that can revive us on our journey. Water THAT John used to baptize Jesus in the Jordan, water given to the woman at the well, water through which the Israelites passed from bondage into freedom. Water used to baptize us into Christ's death and, we wait with expectant hope, resurrection. The scent of the water revives us. New sprouts are coming. It is growing stronger. But for today we wait. Our journey on pause.

God of hope, God of life.

Help us this day to be perceptive to the scent of your water of life.

To wait with expectation, meditating on the reality of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Turn our hearts toward you. Trusting that with your death never has the last word.

In the expectation of faith. Amen.

Synod Staff and Officers



Journey of Holy Week

March 31, 2024

Suggested Text: Mark 16:1-8

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!!! Amen!

Across the world this proclamation has been proclaimed. The journey of the Easter Feast began at vigils, gathered in the Saturday darkness awaiting midnight, to proclaim the good news. In our modern world it is on Kiritimati, a South Pacific Island some 7,100 miles to our west in the Republic of Kiribati in Oceania, that midnight of Easter morn came first. From there the proclamation of Christ's triumph over the grave journeys west with the rising sun. A journey of light and life that will ultimately encompass the globe.

We have been awaiting this journey of light, of resurrection for the 40 days of Lent. We have been waiting expectantly for the proclamation that Christ's victory over the grave is complete. To hear again as we have now for two millennia that God's Word is the last word. We have, each year, heard the proclamation of the faithful women who were the first preachers of the good news.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome are sent forth now on a new journey. The angel at the tomb makes it clear. They, the faithful women, are to be the proclaimers of resurrection. They are, in the midst of imperial hegemonic power and domination, to be the people to tell the world that God has something else in mind. That the power of empire to kill and destroy is not the last word. The grave doesn't win. God, and God's Word, is alive. And that this truth is sending them and us on a new journey.

"Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee." The resurrection story tells of a new journey. That of proclamation and hope. One also filled with justifiable fear. Mark's gospel ends this story with the words "for they were afraid." And they had good reason to be afraid. Christ's victory over the cross didn't end the Roman occupation. The powers and principalities of this world continue to dominate our daily lives as they did theirs. But we know of this good news because despite their fear they told others. And others told others.

On this Easter Day I wish that we all might have holy fear at the immensity of what we are proclaiming to be true. That this world is not the end of the story. That power and privilege here is not God's final answer. But instead, a few faithful women, who showed up that day, became the proclaimers of the resurrection and in so doing got sent on a new journey. To tell others that God is not done with this world. So now, as we enter the 50 days of the Easter festival, I pray that we also might be people of resurrection and proclamation. Sent ahead on a new journey to proclaim that God's story cannot be contained by a tomb but instead brings life and hope and sends us forth...In Mission Together.

God of Easter,

inspire in us always the joy of your promise.

Send us forth in our new journey to proclaim your good news

and tell others of all that you have done.

We give you thanks for the resurrection of Jesus

and the hope and life with have in your love.

In Christ's name. Amen.

Thank you!

Special thanks to everyone who wrote for our devotional.

Ann H	Irma B	Larry K	Nancy C	Sheree W
Barry J	Jamie R	Lesley R	Pam B	Stella H
David B	Janice B	Lisa R	Patricia E	Susan A
Don H	Karin D	Mark V	Rick VN	Trent OH
Doug W	Kelly R	Mary N	Sandy H	Will F
Erik G	Kelsey E	Michael R	Sean O	Win H
Gary C	Kris T	Mike M	Sharon V	

Special thanks to Greta Gronberg for drawing our cover.

Thank you for journeying with us through Lent. If you remember nothing from this devotion, I want you to remember this:

God loves you! Nothing on this earth or any earth to come can ever separate you from God's love. So go with courage in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit