

An abstract painting of a cross, composed of various colored rectangular blocks and brushstrokes in shades of blue, orange, yellow, and brown. The cross is centered and slightly tilted. The background is a complex, layered composition of these colors, creating a sense of depth and texture.

WORDS FROM THE CROSS

LENT PRAYER GUIDE 2018
CITY CHURCH HOUSTON

WORDS FROM THE CROSS

LENT PRAYER GUIDE

The season of Lent is a time for deep and consistent reflection on the cross as we prepare for Easter. Traditionally, it is a 40 day observance, not including Sundays, that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter. During this season we contemplate how Jesus' journey to his cross included his call to take up ours. *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."* Luke 9:23

The cross is laid on every Christian... the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

We created this prayer guide in the hope that this season will be a time of spiritual renewal for you, where death gives way to life. *"Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."* John 12:24

WHAT LIES AHEAD

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 14. On the weekdays we will journey with Jesus to his cross through readings in the gospel of John. Each daily reading is followed by a few questions to help you process the passage, along with space for you to write a prayer in response. If there is not enough room for you to process and pray, consider using a journal. During Holy Week a prayer is provided for you, but you can certainly pray one of your own, too!

The Gospels record seven different things that Jesus said while giving up his life to give us life. Each Sunday we will consider one of these “words from the cross” in a short devotional. A prayer of confession follows the devotional each Sunday. These are taken from Walter Brueggemann’s book *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*. Feel free to return to the devotional and prayer throughout the week as supplemental material to the readings from the Gospel of John.

One idea for families to explore is to have a separate family journal that members of the family contribute to each day in response to the reading, the questions or prayer. On the following Sunday, you can share what you wrote with each other.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

- Ash Wednesday - **True Power**
followed by daily readings from John 13
- 1st Sunday - **A Heart Full of Others**
followed by daily readings from John 14
- 2nd Sunday - **Who Prays Like This?**
followed by daily readings from John 15
- 3rd Sunday - **The Prayer of Us All**
followed by daily readings from John 16
- 4th Sunday - **Silence in Heaven**
followed by daily readings from John 17
- 5th Sunday - **Anti-Sacrament?**
followed by daily readings from John 18
- Holy Week - **Faithful to the End**
followed by daily readings from John 19
- Easter Sunday - **The Nonsense of Easter**

FEBRUARY 14 - 17, 2018

ASH WEDNESDAY

Wednesday, February 14

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

John 13:1-5

True Power

Maya Angelou encourages us with this: "you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back." Jesus does the strangest thing with all the power the Father had given him. He takes off his outer clothing, wraps a towel around his waist and symbolically models for his disciples what the apostle Paul will later say about him in Philippians 2:6-11 - "he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage... he made himself nothing... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross." **Jesus makes himself nothing to make us something by sacrificing everything.** In other words, he didn't wear a catcher's mitt on either hand. Assuming the posture of a slave, he not only washes his disciples feet, but dries them off as well. And don't forget, Judas hasn't betrayed Jesus yet. He washes and dries his feet, too. This is scandalous, but it makes so much gospel sense.

Jesus reorients what it looks like to possess power, and in his case, not just some power, but all the power in the world - "the Father had put all things under his power." What this shows us is that his kingdom is not of this world. And what this means for us, adopted members of his upside down family, is that all bets are off. Everything gets radically reimagined in this kingdom. For example, Jesus shows his disciples what it means to be great, a question that seemed to occupy their minds quite a bit. He gathered them at least once and

told them - "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." (Matthew 20:26) But there are always slow learners in any community, those who learn by doing instead of hearing, so he not only teaches them, he shows them. **He puts his hands to their feet.**

The German monk, Martin Luther declared, "if there is anything in us, it is not our own; it is a gift of God. But if it is a gift of God, then it is entirely a debt one owes to love, that is, to the law of Christ. And if it is a debt owed to love, then I must serve others with it, not myself. Thus my learning is not my own; it belongs to the unlearned... my wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed..., my wealth belongs to the poor, my righteousness to the sinners."

Luther's namesake, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in notoriously quotable fashion, preached,

Everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

How do you get this heart full of grace, this soul generated by love? How do you take on this debt owed to love? If you have power, how do you gladly give it all away? You give your heart to the one whose heart was pierced for you, the one who, at the moment he knew he had been filled with all God's power, took off his outer clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, dropped to his knees, not only to wash your feet, but all your sins away.

Prayer of Confession

You are the giver of all good things.

All good things are sent from heaven above,
rain and sun,
day and night,
justice and righteousness,
bread to the eater and
seed to the sower,
peace to the old,
energy to the young,
joy to the babes.

We are takers, who take from you,
day by day, daily bread,
taking all we need and as you supply,
taking in gratitude and wonder and joy.

And then taking more,
taking more than we need,
taking more than you give us,
taking from our sisters and brothers,
taking from the poor and the weak,
taking because we are frightened, and so greedy,
taking because we are anxious, and so fearful
taking because we are driven, and so uncaring.

Give us peace beyond our fear, and so end our greed.
Give us well-being beyond our anxiety, and so end our fear.
Give us abundance beyond our drivenness,
and so end our uncaring.

Turn our taking into giving... since we are in your giving image:

Make us giving like you,
giving gladly and not taking,
giving in abundance, not taking,
giving in joy, not taking,
giving as he gave himself up for us all,
giving, never taking. Amen.

We are Takers by Walter Brueggemann

YOU'RE INVITED TO CITY CHURCH'S
ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14 AT 12 PM

LOCATION

HOUSTON'S FIRST BAPTIST DOWNTOWN
1730 JEFFERSON ST, HOUSTON, TX 77003

Thursday, February 15

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

John 13:6-17

Questions to Process

- Why do you think Peter refused Jesus' offer at first? What did Jesus say that changed his mind so quickly from refusal to acceptance?
- A good analogy for the disciples' relationship with Jesus is that of apprentice to master. What sorts of assumptions or givens do all apprentices make and live by in relationship to their master?
- What might it look like to follow Jesus' example in this story in your life?

SPACE TO PRAY



Friday, February 16

"I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: 'He who shared my bread has turned against me.' "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am. Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me." After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me." His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly." But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

John 13:18-30

Questions to Process

- If no one understood why Jesus said to Judas, "*what you are about to do, do quickly*," then who did Jesus tell, "*it is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread...*"? And how would it have felt to be the one who knew what was going to happen to Judas, especially when no one else knew?
- "*Satan entered him...*" is a chilling phrase as the bread of blessing turns into a curse in his belly. What does this teach us about the sacraments?
- John uses metaphors throughout his Gospel, in particular those of light and darkness, day and night. What is he doing by pointing out "*and it was night*"?

SPACE TO PRAY



Saturday, February 17

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

John 13:31-38

Questions to Process

- After Judas leaves to betray him - the moment his suffering begins - Jesus speaks of God being glorified in him. How are suffering and glory related?
- His command to "*love one another*" is as if Jesus is saying, "as I embrace my mission, you must embrace yours." How important should his command be to followers of Jesus today and what are some examples of how you can follow it?
- You have to love Peter's spirit, but clearly, he has not counted the cost of keeping the promise he is making. What promises are you making to Jesus? In what ways are you disowning Jesus because you haven't considered the cost of keeping the promises you are making?

SPACE TO PRAY



FEBRUARY 18 - 24, 2018

1st SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, February 18

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

John 19:25-27

A Heart Full of Others

Whenever I am hurting I do not think about the needs of other people. I just don't, but Jesus does. His heart was full of others to the very end - *"woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "here is your mother."* This disciple, whom Jesus loved, who is standing nearby, is also the author of this story. John had been Jesus' closest companion in life, an ear and eye witness to Jesus' command to him to take care of his mother, Mary.

At some point along the way, Joseph must have died, leaving Mary a widow. One of the themes you see consistently throughout the Bible is God's heart for widows, his particular concern for their perilous plight. That's why Jesus told John to do this, and it's why *"from that time on, this disciple took her into his home."* Mary could've well been sitting right beside John when he wrote this account in his Gospel.

Throughout the Gospels, and in various ways, Jesus says and shows he is God. Sometimes he's very up front about it, even in your face. For example, when he says to the religious leaders of his day, *"very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!"* (John 8:58) This crystal clear pronouncement of his deity (being co-equal with God) harkens back to when God told Moses his name in Exodus 3, *"I AM WHO I AM... I AM has sent me... the LORD, the God of of your fathers."*

But other times, like here, it's not nearly as clear, but it's still quite breathtaking. While suffering unspeakable pain, and not just physically, Jesus demonstrates his concern for his mother, a widow. Why? God is always concerned about

widows. If you let this short vignette sink in, it'll make you cry out with the centurion - *"surely, this man was the son of God"* (Mark 15:39). If any son would make sure that his momma is taken care of after he is gone, surely the son of God would!

John must have felt closer than a brother to Jesus. Jesus trusts him to provide, care for and support his mother as she grows older. He had plenty of siblings he could've called upon to step up and be responsible for her. Instead, he called on his closest friend. The sacrifice Jesus made upon the cross always leads his followers, his disciples, his friends, who are always standing nearby, to a life of sacrifice, a life of welcoming the widows of this world into our homes.

Prayer of Confession

We confess you to be the God who calls,
who wills,
who summons,
who has concrete intentions
for your creation,
and addresses human agents
who do your will.

We imagine ourselves called by you...

Yet a strange lot:
called but cowardly,
obedient but self-indulgent,
devoted to you, but otherwise preoccupied.

In our strange mix an answering and refusing,

We give thanks for your call.
We pray this day,
for ourselves, fresh vision;
for our friends, great courage,
for those who search for you
in places more dangerous than ours,
deep freedom.

As we seek to answer your call, may we be haunted

by your large purposes.

We pray in the name of the utterly called Jesus. Amen.

An Answering and Refusing by Walter Brueggemann

Monday, February 19

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

John 19:1-4

Questions to Process

- Jesus assumes their hearts are troubled, which means he knows when we are in trouble and he understands our trouble. Do you experience this? Can you hear him saying these words of comfort to you?
- Jesus knows you well enough to prepare a place for you. Imagine the room he is preparing - what will be in there, what will you enjoy doing in there, how might it provide the kind of rest that seems so illusive?
- The place Jesus prepares for you is indeed a place for **you**, but it's also a place where **he** is. What does it mean that **your** place is also a place **he** is present?

SPACE TO PRAY



Tuesday, February 20

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

John 19:5-7

Questions to Process

- Jesus had just told them that they know the way to the place where he is going and yet Thomas feels all the freedom in the world to say, "*Lord, we don't know where you are going...*" What does this teach you about how approachable Jesus is, especially when you doubt him or don't understand what he is saying?
- Jesus is very clear, he is the only way to the Father. This is concerning, but it's also comforting. How?
- What is the best and only way to get to know God, the Father?

SPACE TO PRAY



Wednesday, February 21

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

John 19:8-14

Questions to Process

- Philip does not realize that Jesus is the answer to his question. Do you ever ask God to show you something or do something for you because you believe that if he does it will finally be enough for you? Can you hear Jesus saying in response to your request, "*don't you know me?*"
- We have never experienced a relationship with another human being like the one Jesus has with his Father - to speak of one is to speak of the other. And yet we have deep longings for relationships like this. Do you sense this longing? How does this longing reveal itself in your life? How is a relationship with Jesus the only way to be fulfilled?
- This passage ends with two shocking statements: "*I will do whatever you ask in my name... you may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*" How do you make sense of this in light of the fact that we often pray for things we do not receive?

SPACE TO PRAY



Thursday, February 22

"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

John 19:15-21

Questions to Process

- This passage begins and ends with Jesus making a connection between loving him and doing what he commands - *"if you love me, keep my commands... whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me."* What are some of Jesus' commands that you will seek to do today because you love him?
- Do you ever feel like an orphan? Do you ever feel unloved, ignored, forgotten, uncared for? What might it look like for you trust that God is your Father and you are his beloved son or daughter?
- When Jesus says, *"I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you,"* how does this comfort you, give you hope, and bring you peace?

SPACE TO PRAY



Friday, February 23

Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, "But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?" Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

John 19:22-27

Questions to Process

- Jesus makes a straight line connection between loving him and obeying him. In what ways do you minimize this connection in your life? Are you ever guilty of treasuring his love for you while showing little if any desire to do what he says?

- Who is the Holy Spirit and what is his role in your life?

- What comforting assumption is Jesus making about us when he says, *"peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives."* How well does Jesus understand your heart? And how might Jesus' understanding of your heart foster within your heart a love for him and a desire to obey him?

SPACE TO PRAY



Saturday, February 24

"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me. Come now; let us leave."

John 19:28-31

Questions to Process

- Why should the disciples be glad that Jesus is going back to the Father?

- Who is *"the prince of this world,"* who had no hold over Jesus? Who has more hold over you - *"the prince of this world"* or *"the Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah 9:6)? How might the latter set you free from the former?

- Jesus never commands his followers to do something he is not first willing to do himself - *"I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me."* If his Holy Spirit resides within you are you willing and able to obey the Father the same way Jesus did? Are you willing and able to take up your cross?

SPACE TO PRAY



FEBRUARY 25 - MARCH 3, 2018

2nd SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, February 25

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Luke 23:32-34

Who Prays Like This?

I am aware of two stories in the Gospels where Jesus gets angry - one is in the temple, the other is in a synagogue. Back to both in a moment.

When I was a middle school teacher, I regularly did an exercise with my students. I would ask them, "what makes you angry?" Then, armed with a dry erase marker, I would write furiously as they peppered me with answers in story form. Once they had exhausted themselves and me with rapid fire complaints ad nauseam, I would stand back from the white board and ask, "do you see what ties all these examples together?" After a moment of silence, as they tried to figure it out, I would say, "**you** get angry whenever **you** get the raw end of the deal." And to be perfectly candid, so do you and so do I.

The two stories in the Gospels I alluded to earlier, the ones when Jesus gets angry, are directly related to his answer to the question, "*which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*" (Matthew 22:36) Jesus replies, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Matthew 22:37-39)

When does Jesus get angry? Jesus gets angry when either of these two commands are violated. Violation of the first occurs in the temple. When Jesus discovers that the outer courts of prayer, reserved for the Gentiles, had been turned into a marketplace, he is outraged. He cleanses the temple, likely days before his crucifixion, though John's early placement of the narrative in his Gospel creates questions. But John is also clearly not a fan of strict chronology.

The point all the Gospel writers agree on is this: **Jesus went off and cleaned house in his Father's house.** Also according to John, Jesus used a whip of cords that he had taken the time to make by hand to drive out all the animals and the people. Jesus is not impulsive but patient and rather methodical when he gets angry.

In a less familiar story, violation of the second command took place in a synagogue. Some of the Pharisees, looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, used a disabled man with a shriveled hand to bait Jesus into healing him on the Sabbath, which he did. Of course he did - Jesus was always quite fond of offending religious leaders, especially if they were mistreating the marginalized. But listen to what Mark writes before he actually heals him - "*he looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'stretch out your hand.'*" (Mark 3:5)

Jesus gets angry when people aren't loving God with everything they have - hearts, souls, minds and strength - and when people aren't loving their neighbors like they love themselves. Contrary to middle school students, you and me, **Jesus gets angry when other people get the raw end of the deal.**

All this brings us to his words from the cross above, which he utters precisely when he is getting the rawest raw end of the deal ever, the victim of the greatest miscarriage of justice in the history of mankind. He has every reason and right to get angry, but he doesn't. And he's not just stoic either. He has the audacity to pray, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" Frankly, had I been in Jesus' situation, I too would have prayed, but it would've sounded something like this, "Father, kick their..."

Who prays like this? Only Jesus, because only Jesus is fully human, but not just human. He's fully God, too. And only God can forgive those committing violence against his son because the violence being committed against his son is simultaneously the means through which he will forgive, not only those committing violence against his son, but also anyone and everyone who trusts in what his son is doing for them by absorbing all this violence that they in fact deserve. When we don't know what we are doing, even when we do, even when what we are doing is essentially the same as what those did who drove real nails through his real flesh, this is how he prays for us. He prays for us as he dies for us - "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing... BECAUSE I DO!*"

Prayer of Confession

Power turns and postures and exhibits.

It controls and manages and plots.

We participate in it,

we benefit from it,

we are dazzled by it... and more than a little afraid.

Just underneath, all the while...

Just underneath dazzling power

sits violence and brutality,

greed and fear and envy,

cunning and shamelessness.

In that too we participate.

Like the ancients, we also live double lives,

public in pageant and role and office,

hidden in meanness and thinness.

We do not do well at bringing this double together.

But we confess you to be Lord of all of our lives,

Give us new freedom about our public lives,

give us new candor about our hidden lives,

Correct what is brutal and greedy and fearful,

chasten what is hidden and mean.

Make us women and men of *shalom*,

the kind of welfare you will for our common life. Amen.

We Also Live Double Lives by Walter Brueggemann

Monday, February 26

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

John 15:1-4

Questions to Process

- In order to prune a branch you still have to cut it. You just don't cut it off completely at the root. In your experience, does the pruning Jesus promises ever feel like he is actually cutting you off? Reflect on seasons in your life when this has been the case. Perhaps you are going through this right now. What is God doing?
- Remaining in Jesus is crucial - *"remain in me, as I also remain in you."* Can you think of any practical examples of what it looks like for you to remain in Jesus?
- By ourselves and left to our own devices we are entirely fruitless. What is the difference between self-made fruit that may even look delicious and spirit-made fruit that actually tastes delicious?

SPACE TO PRAY



Tuesday, February 27

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

John 15:5-7

Questions to Process

- Why is Jesus being so repetitive?
- Do you believe "*apart from me you can do nothing*"? Are you courageous enough to ask Jesus to show you the truth of his statement?
- Jesus promises something astounding - "*ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*" But there's a crucial "*if*" before the promise. If you are actively engaged with Jesus ("*remain in me*") and his truth is truly precious to you ("*my words remain in you*") then what sorts of wishes will you be asking him to come true?

SPACE TO PRAY



Wednesday, February 28

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command."

John 15:8-14

Questions to Process

- Jesus gives us what he has already received from his Father - *"as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you."* How does this dynamic play itself out in our relationships, too?
- What is required for you to remain in Jesus' love, for your joy to be complete and for you to be his friend? Does this trouble you or inspire you?
- At first, Jesus uses the plural - *"keep my commands... I have kept my Father's commands,"* but then he gives us just one command - *"to love each other as I have loved you."* Are there more commands he's not telling us or is this really the only one? Regardless, what are some specific ways that you can lay down your life for someone else?

SPACE TO PRAY



Thursday, March 1

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit - fruit that will last - and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other."

John 15:15-17

Questions to Process

- Other than the obvious one that Jesus mentions - *"a servant does not know his master's business"* - what are other differences between servants and friends? What relational privileges do friends enjoy that servants do not?
- Reflect on Jesus' *"you did not choose me, but I chose you..."* Does this offend you or humble you?
- There are three themes Jesus repeats in this section, each one has been emphasized before? What are they? How significant are they?

SPACE TO PRAY



Friday, March 2

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.'

John 15:18-25

Questions to Process

- Whose love matters more to you - the world's or Jesus'? Are you willing and able to admit that your honest answer to this question has everything to do with who you most want to belong to?
- Jesus makes a promise in this passage. What is it? Have you experienced him keeping this promise? If so, even though it's a painful promise, has his keeping it drawn you closer to him?
- There are only two emotional response to Jesus - love and hate. Reflect on this and wrestle with him on how you genuinely feel about him. Do you love him with all your heart or do you just want him off your back?

SPACE TO PRAY



MARCH 4 - MARCH 10, 2018

3rd SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, March 4

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke 23:39-43

The Prayer of Us All

Have you ever felt forgotten, invisible? Have you ever screamed from the depths of your soul: does anyone see me? To borrow a phrase from singer songwriter, Andrew Peterson, have you ever experienced those moments "when the voices in your mind are anything but kind"? Take heart, Jesus always has eyes for the most broken, desperate and lonely people in the room. **He sees those no one else sees.** He not only loves to find people at the end of themselves, he's really good at finding them, too.

One criminal recognizes he's a goner; the other is already gone. Each give us a picture, a transparent picture of two possible responses to Jesus, and there really are only two - sarcastic mockery on the one hand, a desperate plea for mercy on the other. Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "most people don't understand mercy because they think they're too good to deserve any," a powerful turn of phrase.

The band 21 Pilots has a song called *Goner*. The lyrics help us peer into the criminal's heart, the one who understood his need for mercy. He understood his need for mercy because he knew he wasn't good enough to deserve any, since by definition mercy is always undeserved.

I'm a goner
Somebody catch my breath
I'm a goner

Somebody catch my breath
I wanna be known by you
I wanna be known by you

Though I'm weak
Beaten down
I'll slip away
Into the sound
The ghost of you
Is close to me
I'm inside out
You're underneath

I've got two faces
Blurry's the one I'm not
I've got two faces
Blurry's the one I'm not
I need your help to
Take him out
I need your help to
Take him out

Don't let me be gone
Don't let me be gone
Don't let me be gone
Don't let me be gone

Don't let me be!
Don't let me be!

The criminal's prayer is indeed the prayer of all of us - "*remember me...*" Please don't forget me... don't let me be gone... don't let me be! Jesus answered him and he answers us. Imagine what it must have felt like for this criminal, of all people, to hear Jesus say, "*today you will be with me in paradise.*" Jesus pours out his mercy on those who crucified him and those crucified beside him, but one thing is always required - a desperate plea for mercy born of a profound and deep need for him. As the hymn says, "let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; all the fitness he requires is to feel your need of him." If you need him you'll eventually find him, but after you've found him, you'll eventually realize he found you.

Prayer of Confession

You are the God from whom no secret can be hid,
and we are a people with many secrets,
 that we want to tell for the sake of our lives,
 that we dare not tell because they are deep and painful.

But they are our secrets... and they count for much;
 they are our truth... rooted deep in our lives.

You are the God of all truth,
and now we bid you heed our truth,
about which we will not bear false witness...

 The truth of grief unresolved,
 the truth of pain unacknowledged,
 the truth of fear too child-like,
 the truth of hate, as powerful as it is deep,
 the truth of being taken advantage of,
 and being used,
 and manipulated,
 and slandered.

We trust the great truth of your wondrous love,
 but we will not sit still for it,
 UNTIL you hear us.

Our truth - heard by you - will make us free.

So be the God of all truth, even ours,
 we pray in the name of Jesus,
 who is your best kept secret of hurt. Amen.

A People with Many Secrets by Walter Brueggemann

Monday, March 5

"All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them. I did not tell you this from the beginning because I was with you, but now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things. But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."

John 16:1-11

Questions to Process

- Jesus offers his disciples a heads up so that they *"will not fall away."* What does he warn them is about to happen? What does it mean to *"fall away"*?
- Was this warning only in effect for his first followers or does it remain in play for his followers today? Are you *"filled with grief"* like they were because Jesus said these things?
- Jesus places a great deal of emphasis on the Advocate. Who is the Advocate? What will he prove to the world? Have you ever experienced this?

SPACE TO PRAY



Tuesday, March 6

"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

John 16:12-15

Questions to Process

- What is the role of the Spirit in our lives?
- Jesus says the Spirit "*will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears.*" Who does the Spirit listen to? What does the Spirit relay to us?
- How does the Spirit glorify Jesus?
- John reveals some trinitarian (Father-Son-Holy Spirit) mysteries here. List them.

SPACE TO PRAY



Thursday, March 8

Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

John 16:19-24

Questions to Process

- What is going to happen that will cause them to weep while the world rejoices?
- What will then turn their grief into joy? Does this turn your grief into joy?
- What do you think it means to ask for something in Jesus' name? And what, if you asked for it, in Jesus' name would make your joy complete?

SPACE TO PRAY



Friday, March 9

"Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." Then Jesus' disciples said, "Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God."

John 16:25-30

Questions to Process

- It's interesting that Jesus says, *"a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language,"* but then just a few verses later, the disciples say, *"now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech."* What did Jesus say that cleared away their confusion?
- Have you ever experienced a moment of clarity like this? A light bulb moment for you in terms of your understanding of 1) who Jesus is and 2) what he came to accomplish. Who is Jesus? What did he come to accomplish?
- According to Jesus: 1) who does the Father love and 2) why does the Father love?

SPACE TO PRAY



Saturday, March 10

"Do you now believe?" Jesus replied. "A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

John 16:31-33

Questions to Process

- Jesus almost sounds shocked that they believe. What does he tell them will happen? If you were one of his first disciples, how would this prediction have hit you?
- In light of the cross, what does Jesus say about the Father that actually won't remain true once he is hanging on the cross? Reflect on this for a moment.
- How did Jesus overcome the world? And how might this give us peace and courage?

SPACE TO PRAY



MARCH 11 - MARCH 17, 2018

4th SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, March 11

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

Matthew 27:45-50

Silence in Heaven

No human being, no matter how relationally wired or connected, has ever experienced the kind of intimacy that Jesus shared with his Father, which is why no human being, no matter how relationally challenged or neglected, has ever experienced the kind of rejection that Jesus felt from his Father on the cross. The physical pain he endured as soldiers whipped him, spat on him, crowned him with thorns, nailed his hands and feet to a tree - which they also made him carry - then raised him up for all the world to see; this all paled in comparison to the emotional pain he suffered as his Father, whom he loved with all his heart, poured out his wrath against the sin of the world on him. *"Darkness came over all the land"* is a supernatural understatement.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's something all of us have experienced - the conspicuousness of God's absence - but none of us have ever felt it as deeply as Jesus did. Frederick Buechner captures this so much better than I ever could.

By the time he had been hanging there for a while, he had no tears left to weep with and no more sweat, his tongue so dry he could hardly wrap it around the words, which are among the few he ever spoke that people remembered in the language he spoke them in, probably because having once heard them, they could never forget them, no matter how hard they tried, and probably they

tried hard and often: "My God, my God, why have you..." and then the Aramaic verb from an Arabic root meaning to run out on, leave in the lurch, to be the Hell and gone. "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" My God, where the Hell are you, meaning if thou art our Father who art in heaven, be thou also our Father who art in Hell because Hell is where the action is, where I am and the cross is. It is where the pitiless storm is. It is where men labor and are heavy laden under the burden of their own lives without you. Where they cut themselves shaving and smoke three packs a day though they know the surgeon general's warning by heart.

Matthew notes that Jesus *"cried out again in a loud voice"* before he gave up his spirit. We don't know what he said. Did he repeat the same question? Or, as Luke records, is this where Jesus prayed, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,"* which is quite remarkable when you think about it - Jesus entrusts himself to his Father's care even as his Father curses him for something he didn't do. We know from John's Gospel that the Spirit only says what Jesus tells him to say, so maybe Jesus' cry is reminiscent of the *"wordless groans"* Paul says the Spirit grunts from deep within when he intercedes for us as we pray to the Father (Romans 8:26), proving once again that the Trinity is a matchless mystery.

What isn't a mystery - because Matthew tells us - is that some in the crowd had no idea what was happening to Jesus. They imagine he's calling Elijah. They offer him something to drink, to ease his pain, a sponge on a staff, soaked with wine vinegar. They wait to see what will happen to him. **They think he's the one that needs saving.** What they don't realize is he is saving them.

Prayer of Confession

We are your people and mostly we don't mind,
except that you do not fit any of our categories.

We keep pushing
and pulling
and twisting
and turning,
trying to make you fit the God we would rather have,
and every time we distort you that way
we end up with an idol more congenial to us.

In our more honest moments of grief and pain
we are very glad that you are who you are,
and that you are toward us in all your freedom
what you have been toward us.

So be your faithful self
and by your very engagement in the suffering of the world,
transform the world even as we are being changed.

We pray in the name of Jesus,
who is the sign of your suffering love. Amen.

The God We Would Rather Have by Walter Brueggemann

Monday, March 12

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

John 17:1-5

Questions to Process

- What is "*the hour*" that Jesus is referring to? This is also when Jesus will both glorify God and be glorified by God. How are glory and suffering related?
- What did Jesus do with the "*authority over all people*" that the Father gave him? What does this teach you about the right use of authority?
- According to Jesus, what is eternal life? Does this strike you as strange?
- What is the work that the Father gave Jesus to do?

SPACE TO PRAY



Tuesday, March 13

"I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours."

John 17:6-9

Questions to Process

- In this prayer, Jesus has already mentioned a number of times that the Father gives him those he will save - *"to all those you have given him... whom you gave me out of the world... they were yours and you gave them to me... those you have given me."* How does this sit with you? Did you give yourself to Jesus or did the Father give you to him?
- What do Jesus' followers know with certainty? Do you possess the same certainty? If not, what is standing in the way?
- Jesus prays for them. Do you believe Jesus prays for you? Reflect on what he might be praying for you since our default is to usually pray to him for ourselves and occasionally others.

SPACE TO PRAY



Wednesday, March 14

"All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled."

John 17:10-12

Questions to Process

- Can you think of any ways that glory came to Jesus through his disciples?
- Jesus prays for his followers' protection. He then gives the reason why he prays this prayer. What is it? How is the church doing in this regard?
- Why are names so significant in the Bible? What power is there in the Father's name and how does the name the Father gave Jesus protect us?
- Who was "*the one doomed to destruction*" and how does Jesus pointing this out in a prayer sit with you?

SPACE TO PRAY



Thursday, March 15

"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified."

John 17:13-19

Questions to Process

- How does Jesus make it possible to possess a full measure of joy even when the world hates you?
- According to Jesus, how should we see ourselves in relation to the world?
- How would you define sanctification? What does it look for you to be sanctified?
- What did Jesus do to sanctify himself? And how does this work in us - his work on our behalf - that we *"may be truly sanctified"*?

SPACE TO PRAY



Friday, March 16

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

John 17:20-23

Questions to Process

- Jesus is not just praying for his first disciples, but for us as well. We are *"those who will believe in me through their message."* Once again, he prays for something very specific that he has already prayed for before. What is it? Why is this so important to Jesus and why isn't it more important to us?
- When followers of Jesus - the church - are unified as one, what does Jesus say will be the outcome on the world? Once again, he repeats this for emphasis.
- Unity in the body of Christ is the result of our union with Christ. What practical steps can you take to pursue unity in the body of Christ because of your union with Christ?

SPACE TO PRAY



Saturday, March 17

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

John 17:24-26

Questions to Process

- Meditate upon this truth - if you belong to Jesus he wants you to be where he is, in order to see his glory. Where is Jesus to be found?

- It's very important to Jesus that we know the Father sent him to us. He has said this over and over again. Why is this particular truth so crucial?

- What is Jesus committed to doing in your life for the rest of your life? Why is he so committed to doing this?

SPACE TO PRAY



MARCH 18 - MARCH 24, 2018

5th SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, March 18

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:28-30

Anti-Sacrament?

All four Gospels record that Jesus was offered a drink of wine vinegar while he was on the cross (see Matthew 27:48-49, Mark 15:36 and Luke 23:36-37), but only John records that prior to this drink being offered to him, Jesus actually said, "*I am thirsty.*" And keep in mind that John was an eye witness to Jesus' crucifixion. He was literally at the foot of cross, the only male disciple who did not run away, flanked by at least four women, three of whom, oddly enough were named Mary (see John 19:25 - "*his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene*").

Prior to this, John notes something even more interesting - "*knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled...*" Why is this interesting? It's interesting because before Jesus said, "*it is finished,*" John says he knew it was already finished. Let's keep going as John continues, "*a jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "it is finished."*

Do you see it? There's something sacramental going on here, which is to say, something deeply mysterious. As John Calvin liked to say about the Lord's Supper, "I experience it more than I understand it." Knowing that his work on this earth was finished, but before he actually declared it was finished, Jesus "*received the drink.*" He drank down something visible and physical that was a sign of something invisible and spiritual. Whereas the Lord's Supper is a visible sign of an invisible grace, what Jesus partook was the opposite, an anti-sacrament if you will.

From the cross, between knowing it was finished and saying it was finished, Jesus took part in an anti-sacrament. Instead of his drink being a visible sign of an invisible **grace**, like the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are for us, the sour wine was a visible sign of an invisible **judgment**. Before Jesus declared what he already knew had happened - "*it is finished*" - he sacramentally experienced God's judgment on our behalf and in our place, drinking the cup of God's wrath, the sour wine of his judgement, all the way down, so that we can now sacramentally experience his cup of blessing, the sweet wine of salvation.

Tim Keller likes to say, "Jesus will do everything for you or nothing." What he means is that either it is finished, as Jesus said it was, or it is not. And if not, to whatever extent it is not, who else, what else could possibly fill the gap, but we ourselves and our meager attempts at what, goodness? This is the logic of religion, to which the church must declare, "no thank you!" The gospel is a much better way. The gospel declares, in Christ, it really is finished!

A friend of mine likes to say, whenever he is asked, "when did you become a Christian?" "I became a Christians roughly 2,000 years ago when Jesus declared, '*it is finished.*'" The hymn, *Rock of Ages*, is so fitting whenever we come to the Lord's table for communion:

Nothing in my hands I bring
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

The next time you approach the table for the Lord's Supper imagine coming to a fountain and as you come to the fountain, to drink deeply of his grace, to be washed of your sins, to get dressed in his righteousness... never forget, don't dare forget, that he also took a drink - a drink before your drink - and his drink was just as deep. **His cup of judgment is your cup of grace.**

Prayer of Confession

You who command,
You who are our commander,
You who are our commander-in-chief;

We intend obedience, without reserve.

As we ponder your commands, they often come at us
like more nagging from our mothers,
like more rules from our teachers,
like more expectations from our peers,
like more pressure from the church,
like more defeat from our guilty conscience.

Our obedience thins down to resentment,
tired of the nagging and pressure and rules and expectations.

Then we hear your wonderful words of life,
and know that in your command is our perfect freedom.

For your command,
for Jesus' glad obedience,
for Jesus' new command of neighbor,
we give you great thanks.
We vow full, glad compliance. Amen.

You Who Command by Walter Brueggemann

Monday, March 19

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it. Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

John 18:1-6

Questions to Process

- John notes that Jesus and his disciples went to this garden often. Imagine the times that Jesus shared with his disciples in this garden. What does this suggest about Judas' betrayal?
- Why would Judas bring soldiers armed with torches, lanterns and weapons? What is he anticipating? What does this reveal about his understanding of Jesus and his kingdom?
- What happens the moment Jesus says, "I am he." What could Jesus have easily done at this moment? And what does this teach us about his power and authority?

SPACE TO PRAY



Tuesday, March 20

Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they said. Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go." This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

John 18:7-14

Questions to Process

- It's rather comical that Jesus asks them the same question again. Imagine what they were feeling as they respond for the second time, "*Jesus of Nazareth.*" It's possible they were even still lying on the ground when he asked them.
- How does Jesus' initial response epitomize the gospel?
- What does Peter reveal about his understanding of Jesus and his kingdom? What else does Jesus do in response to Peter's violence? (see Luke 22:49-51)
- What does Jesus mean when he says, "*shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?*"
- What is so ironic about Caiaphas' counsel?

SPACE TO PRAY



Wednesday, March 21

Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in. "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" she asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.

John 18:15-18

Questions to Process

- Who must this other disciple be, the one *"who was known to the high priest"*?
- How is Peter a mixture of courage and cowardice in this scene? Does this give you hope?
- What does lying to a *"servant girl"* say about Peter's level of fear and anxiety? Can you relate?
- Did Peter go in or not?

SPACE TO PRAY



Thursday, March 22

Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said." When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded. "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

John 18:19-24

Questions to Process

- The last verse creates a conflict with the first: did this conversation happen with the high priest, Caiaphas, or with his father-in-law Annas?
- Jesus defends himself, but when slapped, he doesn't fight back, at least not in the same way. What do you learn about the person of Jesus during this altercation?
- John may have been witness to this conversation. If so and you were in his shoes, what would you have been thinking or planning to do in response? For example, would you have been thinking, "I have to get the heck out of here."

SPACE TO PRAY



Friday, March 23

Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, "You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?" He denied it, saying, "I am not." One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow. Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

John 18:25-32

Questions to Process

- If Peter is *"still standing there warming himself,"* then where hadn't he gone? Go back to John 18:15-18 if you need help.
- First, it's a servant girl who asks Peter if he was a disciple of Jesus. Then, it's some officials who stood there warming themselves. Finally, it's a relative of the man whose ear he had cut off in the garden where Jesus had been arrested. He denies Jesus each time. Why does John point this all out with such specificity?
- Put yourself in Peter's shoes when he hears the rooster crow? Do you ever experience a version of these denials in your own life? Reflect on that for a moment.
- If you were Pilate, what would you be feeling?

SPACE TO PRAY



Saturday, March 24

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

John 17:33-40

Questions to Process

- Is Jesus cryptic or clear with Pilate? Why?
- Once again, put yourself in Pilate's shoes. What sorts of things would you have been thinking during this conversation?
- When Pilate asks, "*what is truth?*" how does Jesus respond? Do we even know? What is John suggesting? See John 14:6 for the significance of the very likely scenario that Jesus just stood there without saying a word.
- Who is the first tangible recipient of the freedom Jesus came to give the world? What does this say about the gospel?

SPACE TO PRAY



MARCH 25 - APRIL 1, 2018

HOLY WEEK

Sunday, March 25

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Luke 23:44-46

Faithful to the End

After Jesus cleansed the temple, most likely just days before his crucifixion, John records the following conversation:

Jews: "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Jesus: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

Jews: "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?"

John then comments, "*but the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said.*" (John 2:21-22) When the curtain of the temple was torn in two, the most obvious thing this symbolized was the immediate and full access to God that all followers of Jesus now have. He is our great high priest, the only mediator between God and man. There's no need to go through anyone or anything else. But not only that! What happened to the curtain of the temple also happened to the temple itself, his body torn in two, only to be raised, just as he had promised. The sun may have stopped shining for three full hours, but the Son of God would shine again in only three days.

What's even more remarkable is the final words he utters - "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*" We have already mentioned this, but it deserves repeating and meditating upon - **Jesus entrusted himself to his Father's care even as his Father cursed him for something he did not do.** He breathed his last, but he would breathe again, not only after he rose, breathing in and out of his lungs in his resurrected body, but also after his ascension, when he sent his Holy Spirit to his spiritual body, the church. The Greek word for "spirit" means

"breath." Each day, the Holy Spirit, the breath of Jesus, is available to us - "*if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*" (Luke 11:13) So, ask him. Whatever you have grown accustomed to asking God for, always ask him for his breath, the breath of Christ, the Holy Spirit.

Prayer of Confession

The pushing and shoving of the world is endless.

We are pushed and shoved.

And we do our fair share of pushing and shoving
in our great anxiety.

And in the middle of that

you have set down your beloved suffering son
who like a sheep led to slaughterer
who opened not his mouth.

We seem not able,

so we ask you to create the spaces in our life
where we may ponder his suffering
and your summons for us to suffer with him,
suspecting that suffering is the only way to come to newness.

So we pray for your church in these Lenten days,

when we are driven to denial -

not to notice the suffering,
not to engage it,
not to acknowledge it.

So be that way of truth among us

that we should not deceive ourselves.

That we shall see that loss is indeed gain.

We give you thanks for that mystery from which we live.

Amen.

Loss is Indeed Our Gain by Walter Brueggemann

Monday, March 26

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face.

John 19:1-3

Questions to Process

- In the span of only three verses Jesus is humiliated five different ways. What are they?
- Reflect on the following quote from *The Art of Pastoring* by David Hansen:

Jesus' life has a general narrative direction. We call this general direction the Way of the Cross. Jesus understood from the beginning that his was a life of sacrifice. His life flowed toward the cross at all times. He never climbed any first-century ladders of success. The devil showed him plenty. People begged him to climb them. Jesus rejected ladders and consistently chose the downward road of sacrifice... Jesus specifically directed us to follow him in his life's general direction, the Way of the Cross.
- Can you think of any ways that you can embrace the Way of the Cross in your life?

Prayer of Confession

You, you giver!

You have given light and life to the world;

You have given freedom from Pharaoh to your people Israel;

You have given your only Son for the sake of the world;

You have given yourself to us;

You have given and forgiven,

and you remember our sin no more.

And we, in response, are takers;

We take eagerly what you give us;

we take from our neighbors near at hand as is acceptable;

we take from our unseen neighbors greedily and acquisitively;

we take from our weak neighbors thoughtlessly;

we take all that we can lay our hands on.

It dawns on us that our taking does not match your giving.

In this Lenten season revise our taking,

that it may be grateful and disciplined,

even as you give in ways generous and overwhelming.

Amen.

Revise Our Taking by Walter Brueggemann

Tuesday, March 27

Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"

John 19:4-5

Questions to Process

- Picture this scene as best as you can. Does Jesus appear to look anything like a king having been flogged, spat on, clothed in purple with a crown of thorns smashed onto his skull. Therefore, what does Pilate hope will happen when the crowd sees Jesus?

- What is the irony of what Pilate says to the crowd as he presents Jesus to them?

Prayer of Confession

The cadences of suffering love sound in the church in this Holy Week.
We ponder this coming Thursday and
this ready Friday.

Beating solemnly and formatively in the foreground is this...
"wounded for our transgressions,
bruised for our iniquities,
healed by his stripes."

We ponder how much self-giving could heal our lives,
and we cannot do better than to rest ourselves
in that awesome mystery.

You are the one who has spared,
who has pitied,
who has drawn the violence short in order to save.

Hold your church all this week
to the unbearable mystery of your self-giving, and
to the intolerable burden of our killing.

Move us from the grip of that deathly squeeze,
move by your innocence,
move by your weakness,
move by your passion.

Deliver us from our violence shaped-world
in the name of the bruised one. Amen.

In the Name of the Bruised One by Walter Brueggemann

Maundy Thursday, March 29

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

John 19:8-11

Questions to Process

- Imagine the emotion that Pilate experienced when he said to Jesus, "*where do you come from?*" Only to have him not give an answer. And then to demand, "*do you refuse to speak to me?*" Have you ever been in the presence of Jesus and felt this way?
- Pilate still thinks he is in control because he is a powerful man with a great deal of authority. What does Jesus want him to learn? Have you learned this?
- Who is the one who handed Jesus over, the one guilty of a greater sin? Do you think this comforted Pilate or convicted him? What about you?

A Prayer for Maundy Thursday

This day of dread and betrayal and denial
causes a pause in our busyness.
Who would have thought that you would take
this eighth son of Jesse
to become the pivot of hope in our ancient memory?
Who would have thought that you would take
this uncredentialed
Galilean rabbi
to become the pivot of newness in the world?
Who would have thought that you -
God of gods and Lord of lords -
would fasten on such small, innocuous agents
whom the world scorns
to turn creation toward your newness?

As we are dazzled,
give us the freedom to resituate our lives in modest,
uncredentialed, vulnerable places.

We ask for freedom and courage to move out from our nicely
arranged patterns of security
into dangerous places of newness where we fear to go.

Cross us by the cross, that we may be Easter marked. Amen.

The Pivot of Hope by Walter Brueggemann

Good Friday, March 30

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews.

John 19:12-14

Questions to Process

- Describe the impossibility of Pilate's situation - if he sets Jesus free he is... but if he crucifies Jesus he is...
- Pilate is quite perplexed by Jesus. Even if you have been a follower of Jesus for a very long time, does Jesus perplex you? Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
- "Here is your king" is a loaded statement. Why does he present Jesus to them like this?

A Prayer for Good Friday

Holy God who hovers daily round us in fidelity and compassion,
this day we are mindful of another, dread-filled hovering,
that of the power of death before which we stand
thin and needful.

All our days, we are mindful of the pieces of our lives
and the parts of your world
that are on the loose in destructive ways.

We notice that wildness midst our fear and our anger unresolved.
We mark it in a world of brutality and poverty and hunger
all around us.

We notice all our days.

But on this day of all days,
that great threat looms so large and powerful.

It is not for nothing
that we tremble at these three hours of darkness
and the raging earthquake.

It is not for nothing
that we have a sense of our helplessness
before the dread power of death that has broken loose
and that struts against our interest and even against our will.

Our whole life is not unlike the playground in the village,
lovely and delightful and filled with squeals unafraid,
and then we remember the silencing
of all those squeals in death
that are swept away in a riddle too deep for knowing.

Our whole life is like that playground
and on this dread-filled Friday we pause before
the terrible silencing we cannot master.

So we come in our helpless candor this day...
remembering, giving thanks, celebrating...
but not for one instant unmindful of dangers too ominous
and powers too sturdy and threats well beyond us.

We turn eventually from our hurt for children lost.
We turn finally from all our unresolved losses
to the cosmos grief at the loss of Jesus.

We recall and relive that wrenching Friday
when the hurt cut to your heart.
We see in that terrible hurt, our losses
and your full embrace of loss and defeat.

We dare pray while the darkness descends
and the earthquake trembles,
we dare pray for eyes to see fully
and mouths to speak fully the power of death all around,
we dare pray for a capacity to notice unflinching
that in our happy playgrounds other children die,
and grow silent,
we pray more for your notice and your promise
and your healing.

Our only urging on Friday is that you live this as we must
impacted but not destroyed,
dimmed but not quenched.

For your great staying power
and your promise of newness we praise you.

It is in your power
and your promise that we take our stand this day.

We dare trust that Friday is never the last day,
so we watch for the new day of life.

Hear our prayer and be your full self toward us.
Amen.

The Terrible Silencing We Cannot Master by Walter Brueggemann

YOU'RE INVITED TO CITY CHURCH'S
GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE

FRIDAY, MARCH 30 AT 6 PM

LOCATION

MIDTOWN ARTS AND THEATER CENTER HOUSTON
3400 S MAIN STREET

Holy Saturday, March 31

But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

John 19:15-16

Questions to Process

- Pilate is a very complex character. Do you think he is baiting them with his question?
- When God's people proclaim, "*we have no king but Caesar,*" what is this tantamount to them saying, believing, doing...?
- What are your "kings"? What are your "Caesar's"? How would you complete this sentence: I have no king but...

A Prayer for Holy Saturday

Christ is risen!

We give thanks for the gift of Easter
that runs beyond our explanations,
beyond our categories of reason,
even more, beyond the sinking sense of our own lives.

We know about the powers of death,
powers that persist among us,
powers that drive us from you, and
from our neighbor, and
from our best selves.

We know about the powers of fear and greed and anxiety,
and brutality and certitude.
powers before which we are helpless.

And then you... you at dawn, unquenched,
you in the darkness,
you on Saturday,
you who breaks the world to joy.

Yours is the kingdom... not the kingdom of death,
Yours is the power... not the power of death,
Yours is the glory... not the glory of death.

Yours... You... and we give thanks
for the newness beyond our achieving.

Amen.

Not the Kingdom of Death by Walter Brueggemann

APRIL 1, 2018

EASTER

Sunday, April 1

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Luke 24:1-12

The Nonsense of Easter

Modern people struggle to believe in the resurrection of Jesus for any number of reasons. Most of these, whether conscious or subconscious, are predicated on the assumption that the first followers of Jesus must have been so hamstrung by Jesus' crucifixion that they would've believed just about anything to get their hopes back up. So, of course, they welcomed the news of his resurrection. They believed without giving it much thought at all because they were naive, gullible, credulous. If the resurrection of Jesus requires a leap of faith then all these grief stricken disciples had to be told was, "jump!"

But the New Testament, which contains the actual historical record of the resurrection of Jesus, tells an entirely different story. When news of his empty tomb was first communicated to the first followers of Jesus by the women who were the original eyewitnesses, *"they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense."* If Luke was making this story up, he

would never have had women at the tomb in the first place, let alone given them the responsibility to share this shocking news. A woman's testimony would have been considered entirely unreliable in that culture.

Peter was curious enough to follow up on the news, but even when he encountered the empty tomb, *"he went away, wondering to himself what had happened."* All he could do was wonder... and perhaps that's all we can and should do. At the very least, this should be our posture at the beginning of our spiritual journey, and perhaps along the way, too, perhaps even as we near the end. Why? Because the ramifications of the resurrection of Jesus are so shocking. If true, what else can one say except, "unbelievable!" Isn't that ironic? With a heart full of faith what do we exclaim? "This is so unbelievable it has to be true!" Regardless of where you are in relation to Jesus, it only makes sense to explore the empty tomb, thoughtfully consider it's plausibility, and along with Peter, wonder about what happened, genuinely consider the significance of the story itself, never brush it off as nonsense. One day you just might find it wonderful!

A Prayer for Easter Sunday

Christ is Risen

He is risen indeed!

We are baffled by the very Easter we claim we voice.

Your new life fits none of our categories.

We wonder and stew and argue,

and add clarifying adjectives like "spiritual" and "physical."

But we remain baffled, seeking clarity and explanation,

we who are prosperous, and full and safe and tenured.

We are baffled and want explanations.

But there are those not baffled, but stunned by the news,

stunned while at minimum wage jobs;

stunned while the body wastes in cancer;

stunned while the fabric of life rots away in fatigue and despair;

stunned while unprosperous and unfull

and unsafe and untenured...

Waiting only for you in your Easter outfit,

waiting for you to say, "Fear not, it is I."

Deliver us from our bafflement and our many explanations.

Push us over into stunned need and show yourself to us lively.

Easter us in honesty;

Easter us in fear;

Easter us in joy.

and let us be Eastered. Amen.

We Are Baffled by Walter Brueggemann

YOU'RE INVITED TO CITY CHURCH'S
EASTER SERVICE

SUNDAY, APRIL 1 AT 10:30 AM

LOCATION

HOUSE OF BLUES HOUSTON

1204 CAROLINE STREET, HOUSTON, TX 77002