

Meditations on the Passion of Our Lord

Part 1
Ash Wednesday through the Third Week of Lent

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Preface

I love Lent.

Of all the seasons of the church year, it's my favorite. All of the seasons make marvelous proclamations about our Savior; but with thanks to God for being in a theology that keeps "Christ and Him crucified" front and center, Lent is the season in which the lectionary readings on Sunday declare the necessity of Christ's sacrifice, and lead us to a destination. They gradually follow the Lord until we go with Him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, to the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, and the darkness of the cross on Good Friday.

Without Good Friday, Easter has no great meaning. Why rejoice that "He is risen" if He has not died for our sins? But that Resurrection and life is the ultimate destination, once we've gone through the valley of the shadow of death.

The hymns of Lent give plenty of food for meditation, with lines like, "If His Son so loveth me, God must have compassion" (TLH 140:5); or "But the deepest stroke that pierced Him Was the stroke that Justice gave" (TLH 153:2); or "But the blood of Jesus for our Pardon cries" (TLH158:4). These hymns aptly describe the darkness of sin. But they rarely end on a note of death. Their destination is the life that Christ has for us.

Even the time in the calendar year contributes. We begin Lent with shorter days and frost as the killing season of winter is not yet ready to release its hold. By Easter, days are longer, light is brighter, the weather warmer and flowers in bloom. It's a movement from darkness to light, cold to warmth, death to life.

If all of Lent takes us from death to life via the cross, the account of the Passion of our Lord magnifies it all the more. An examination of the Passion accounts brings forth certain themes again and again. Within the Passion, one sees the terrible evil and hypocrisy that dwells within mankind—how far he will go to justify sin and malign God, and how his ideas of glory are completely upside-down from the Lord's. It is not that man is ignorant or misguided: the Passion accounts show that he wants Jesus dead *because* He is the sinless Son of God. Although our Old Adam resists mightily, it is salutary for us to examine ourselves in light of Christ's enemies there, because the same sinful nature still clings to us. Apart from Christ, we are no different than they.

In complete contrast to man's hypocrisy, weakness and wickedness, the Passion demonstrates the incomprehensible faithfulness of God. In every way, man demonstrates he has no love for the Savior; yet the Savior ceaselessly and willingly goes to the cross to die for sinful man. For you and me.

These themes of Law and Gospel throw sin and grace in sharp relief; and it is when we confess how wretchedly sinful we are that we also get a glimpse of how great is God's love for us.

There's one more reason I love Lent: we live in it all year round. We walk our way, enduring sorrow and trial as the Lord permits. We're penitents who witness the wages of sin but have not yet arrived at our Day of Resurrection. Death still lies ahead, should the Lord tarry. But you and I go our way with this comfort: Christ goes with us, present in Word and Sacrament; and He has already conquered sin, death and devil for us. This Lent will not last forever. The eternal Easter is coming.

25. Doing Evil

John 18:28-32

Saturday

It only gets worse. The Jews can declare Jesus guilty of death, but only their Roman occupiers can carry out the sentence. Since Pilate is in town, they lead Jesus to the Praetorium. They stop at the door, though: if they step in, they'll be ceremonially unclean and unable to participate in Passover observances.

Why? That's not especially clear. One speculation is that Gentiles will have leaven in the house, and the chief priests don't want to risk coming in contact with it. Another is that, since contact with a dead body made one unclean (Numbers 9:7), they thought it would be no different to enter a place where a man would be sentenced to death. The hypocrisy is astounding. They've arranged the betrayal of an innocent man, held trial at night (contrary to law), brought forth false witnesses, and finally condemned Jesus for telling the truth. They're anything but clean already.

When Pilate asks what charge they bring against Jesus, they respond, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you" (John 18:30). Generic "evildoing" is hardly specific enough for trial, and the Pharisees will need to come up with more precise charges. Even so, it's startling: for all their duplicity, these men have the nerve to call Jesus an evildoer. But then again, "He forgives people" isn't exactly a crime.

It's yet another example of a truth that Christians are reluctant to embrace, and that reluctance endangers their faith. Sin always wants to get rid of the Gospel. The Gospel is always the target. But since forgiving people doesn't draw much condemnation, the Church—the Bride of Christ redeemed by His blood—will always be accused falsely of evildoing. The Church, for instance, is accused of opposing medical breakthroughs, when in fact she has sought to protect embryos from "harvesting." She is slandered for robbing women of rights when she defends of the unborn. She's condemned for intolerance for defending the sanctity of marriage. She's charged with opposing science for confessing a Creator. The accusations don't have to be true. They just have to stick.

Christians face temptations when the accusations fly. One temptation is to cave into the world's demands and stop condemning sin; another is to change the subject, stop talking about sin and grace, and try to prove how relevant Christian living can be for the world—because "that's what people want to hear." Either way, the Gospel is no longer proclaimed. In this, evil delights. The devil isn't greatly concerned about "godly living," as long as those trying to live well are not forgiven. The Gospel is always the target. That's what evil does.

But the Gospel is why Jesus goes to the cross, suffering the slander along the way. The forgiveness of sins is what gives you life, and what is given to the Church to proclaim to the world. By God's grace, we do not adapt the message to placate the world's accusations. With Paul, we proclaim, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

24. An Undervalued Shepherd

Matthew 27:6-10

Friday

The prophetic story is told in Zechariah. The prophet is commanded to become a shepherd. The sheep are led by false shepherds, rebellious and doomed to slaughter. So the prophet becomes a shepherd, taking with him two staffs he calls “Beauty” and “Bonds” (NKJ).

It does not go well. The sheep do not want to be shepherded, and the shepherd finally lets them have their way. He breaks “Beauty” in half, goes to the sheep traders and asks for his pay if they see fit. They do: they give him thirty pieces of silver. Remember, that was the established worth of a slave (see devotion #3). It’s not appropriate wages for a shepherd. It’s as much an insult as recompense, that the shepherd is of no more worth than a dead slave.

At the Lord’s command, the shepherd takes the silver and throws it “to the potter;” apparently, this is a saying about throwing something away, for potters made inexpensive clay pots as opposed to bronze or precious metals. The shepherd throws the silver “to the potter” in the temple and breaks “Bonds” in half. That it happens at the temple is a clear testimony that the Lord serves as witness. He sees that the sheep have rejected the shepherd. He sees that their caretakers mock and reject the shepherd He has appointed. He sees Beauty and Bonds broken. And the Lord testifies that He will raise up a shepherd who devours the sheep—for if they reject His appointed shepherd, all that is left is destruction.

The rich text of Zechariah is played out in Judas’ final acts. Wooed by unfaithful shepherds and traders, he has sold out the Lord’s Shepherd for thirty pieces of silver. Rejected by them, he throws the thirty pieces of silver into the temple. God sees how the leaders consider His only-begotten Son. God sees their mockery and rejection. God sees the rebellion of the people who do not want His grace or His Law. Behold how deep the blindness: the chief priests, the stewards of the Scriptures, see no connection to Zechariah’s proclamation, even as they take the silver and buy the “Potter’s Field,” a burial place for unknown strangers.

But they, and all who reject Christ, are not known by God. They are strangers. Those who live another forty years will know the “shepherding” of Titus when Jerusalem falls and the flock is slaughtered.

The world places little worth on Jesus. At best, He is an ancient teacher, but nothing more. At worst, He is used as an excuse or a marketing ploy. But His worth is discounted, and the purpose is to make false gods and sins more valuable, more meaningful, more precious.

Your justifications and excuses for sin do the same.

But it is the Lord who decides value and meaning. By the bonds of His Law, He declares to you how sin seeks to reduce you to nothing, an unknown condemned for eternity. By the beauty of His Gospel, He declares your value: you are one redeemed by Christ’s blood and precious in His sight. That is why the precious Shepherd consents to such devaluation and death, so that He might give you His treasures of grace and life forever.

1. A Disconnect at Passover

Matthew 26:1-2

Ash Wednesday

“You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.”

“You know,” says Jesus. The disciples know. They know that the Passover is coming in two days’ time. All Judea is poised for the annual celebration reaching back to the Exodus. To deliver His people from Egypt, God commanded them to slaughter a lamb and feast on it after brushing its blood on the doorway. When the LORD swept through Egypt that night, He passed over those houses and spared life within. But within those not marked by blood, He took the life of every firstborn son. Thus the Exodus began with a supper instituted by the Lord; and their flight from Egypt would be secured when God washed away all of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea.

The disciples know that the Passover is coming.

They also know that the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Jesus has told them several times that He is bound for the cross. The first time (Matthew 16), Peter vowed that it would never happen, trying to prevent your salvation with the best of intentions. The second time (Matthew 17), the disciples were distressed. The third time (Matthew 20), the mother of James and John asked Jesus if her sons could sit at His right and left in His glory, leading the disciples to argue about which of them was the greatest. We’ll get back to that one at devotion #36.

So the disciples know. Whenever Jesus has told them of His upcoming crucifixion, He was effectively telling them the Gospel. He is to be the Passover Lamb, sacrificed to take away the sins of the world. Yet there is a disconnect among the disciples. They simply can’t put two and two together. Perhaps it is the distress at the thought of such a death for their Master. Perhaps it is dreams of greatness and delusions of grandeur. But for whatever reason, they are unprepared when Jesus is betrayed. As His Passion unfolds, they run away and hide. When told later of His resurrection, they doubt.

As a sinner, you’ll suffer disconnects, too. Apart from grace, you are but dust and ashes, and Old Adam is willfully blind to sin and grace. You’ll be tempted to believe that the sins which defile others are perfectly excusable for you, that your transgressions aren’t that bad: the “notion” that your mundane sins condemn you before God will seem ridiculous. The big disconnect is this: a failure to accept that your sins put the Son of God on the cross, put nails through His hands and feet. Little do we understand how terrible are the wages of sin.

Here is the Good News: although the disciples don’t comprehend, Jesus goes to the cross for them anyway. He has gone to the cross for you, too. He bears your sins there only because He does so willingly as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world—yours most certainly included.

2. Few Want Forgiveness

Matthew 26:3-5

Thursday

The chief priests and elders of the people gather. They're the upstanding citizens, the moral examples of the land who teach the Law and enforce it. They're entrusted with the temple and the Word. They function as go-betweens between the people and their Roman occupiers. They're important men.

And they have a problem: His name is Jesus. No respecter of persons, He's called them to repentance. He's declared that they can't save themselves by keeping God's Law—and they certainly can't save themselves where they've amended His Law or made up their own. Their attempts to discredit Jesus have backfired miserably, so they've decided to kill Him.

The upstanding leaders, who are all about integrity and transparency, are gathered secretly to plot the death of God's Son.

They have another problem: the people won't stand for it. They've been following Jesus around, proclaiming Him to be the Messiah. They're excited about the miracles that He performs, and they don't seem disappointed by His rebuke of the chief priests.

So if these leaders have Jesus killed while multitudes are in Jerusalem, it's going to cause an uproar that leaves them on the losing side.

So note the leaders and the people as the Passion of our Lord draws near. The leaders want Him dead for all the wrong reasons: they want a Messiah who agrees with their sinful ways, not one who calls them to repent and follow Him. I also humbly propose that nearly all the people want Jesus alive for all the wrong reasons: time and time again, they've shown that they love Him for the signs and wonders and miracles. A few have earnestly voiced a desire for forgiveness, but most follow Jesus around to see power. They won't be standing at the foot of the cross, claiming Him as their good friend.

We see these tragic trends in churches today. Many have abandoned the Word for human opinion, arguing that Jesus would approve of all sorts of sin and immorality: in other words, sinners much prefer a savior who advocates their sins. Many others affirm Jesus as the Son of God, but consider forgiveness of sins a “downer” of a message and focus on upbeat Christian living instead.

Those same temptations are at work in you. Some sins are enjoyable because they give you pleasure or comfort or power, so you'll try to refashion Jesus into a savior who gives you the green light for sin. You'll want to focus more on signs and wonders than grace—after all, aren't we more relieved when the Lord delivers us through a complicated surgery than when we hear we're forgiven? Our constant need for forgiveness makes it seem mundane, but sin is a far more eternal threat than any medical diagnosis.

Through all of this, the Lord remains the same. As chief priests plot and the people follow for wrong reasons, He is firmly focused on the cross. There is nothing stealthy or hidden about His agenda. He has come to die for the sins of the world. Take heart, dear Christian: He goes to that cross for you. And even though you vacillate between temptations, He remains faithful to call you to repentance and forgive all of your sins.

23. No Help for the Son of Perdition

Matthew 27:1-5

Thursday

When Judas sees Jesus condemned to death and led to Pilate, he feels remorse. He wants no part of this. Bringing back the silver to the chief priests and Pharisees, he speaks the truth: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But a traitor is never respected by his recruiters once he is of no more use to them. Their response is chilling: “What is that to us? See to it yourself.”

I'm not trying to rehabilitate Judas; he dies the lost despairing traitor. But I think we do well to frame it this way: a remorseful sinner goes to his priests and makes a confession. Whatever else is going on inside of Judas, his confession is absolutely true. He has sinned. He has betrayed the most innocent of blood.

His confession is not met with any sort of absolution. Keep in mind the office that these men hold. The priests stand as mediators between God and man. They're the ones who offer sacrifices for the people, who declare that God has accepted the offering and doesn't hold their sins against them. They're the ones who declare the Word of God to the people. They're the ones who enter the temple, who make intercession to God on behalf of man.

In other words, their office has been instituted by God to point to Jesus and His grace. But they do not speak His Word anymore. They do not honor the office they hold. They've been teaching far too long that people earn God's favor by following all the rules: effectively, that they save themselves by their own actions. These priests have nothing to give.

So instead of any sort of absolution, it makes tragic sense that they tell Judas to work it out for himself. They may just mean to tell him to “Get lost.” But if they were seriously advising a beloved friend, the answer would still be the same: you've got to work out your salvation.

Judas has nowhere to go. Not only has he betrayed innocent blood, but he's betrayed the innocent blood of God's only Son. Are there any laws in place for working your way back from that? No. Is there any wonder that he ends in despair and death?

Daily, you'll be tempted to believe that redemption is something you see to yourself. Except for Christianity, every other religion in the world is about achieving a prize by the work that you do—the works and the prize will vary, but it's all about your works. You know better, of course: you're saved by grace. But you'll still be tempted to believe that the way to escape sin is to do better; or that you'd better behave more decently for a while before you ask God to forgive you for some sin, as a gesture of good faith. But there is no way that you can see to it yourself—your sins and sinfulness make salvation by your own works impossible.

That's why, by the grace of God, you come before your High Priest. He's being led from Caiaphas to Pilate while Judas throws down the silver. Your High Priest says to you, “What is your sin to Me? It's why I've gone to the cross, why My innocent blood was shed. I've seen to your redemption, and it sure. Despair is not for you—only My forgiveness and life, now and forever.”

22. Denial

Luke 22:55-62

Wednesday

When asked if He is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed, Jesus doesn't hesitate. He speaks the truth, even though the truth is leading Him to Calvary.

During the trial, Peter waits outside. Three times, he's approached about his relationship to Jesus. Three times, he has the opportunity to declare that he follows the Lord and believes in Him. God gives Peter three chances to make the good confession; but three times, he claims he doesn't even know Him.

That's bad enough. It's even more galling for Peter because he made such a big show of vowing loyalty to Jesus, even if it meant prison or death (Luke 22:33). And it's even worse that Jesus told Peter that this would happen, right down to the rooster's crow (Luke 22:34). Forewarned should mean forearmed, but none of this has prevented Peter from denying Jesus three times. Put in terms of the First Commandment, he fears man more than he loves God. He loves his own life more than he trusts his Savior. He catches a glimpse of his Savior's face, then flees to bitter weeping.

In my experience, the lesson of Peter's threefold denial has been considered a good dose of Law: "Don't be like him." Easy to say, not so easy to do. There will be times when you fail to speak, fail to defend the truth, fear man more than God, perhaps deny Him altogether—if not by words, then by actions.

There's more to this lesson than that, though. Just before Peter vowed his loyalty, Jesus says to him, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). Peter fails that night, but his faith does not. If his faith were failed, he'd either go the way of Judas into complete despair, or he would persist in his denial. He does neither: we can safely conclude that his bitter weeping is God's gift of contrition. For as Jesus has predicted Peter's denial, He has also foretold that Peter will "turn again." And once he has turned again, he will be able to strengthen his brothers.

So Peter learns yet again (cf. Matthew 16:22; John 18:10; Matthew 26:41), of his weakness and sinfulness. And learning from his failure, he learns not to trust in himself—to confess his self-reliance and trust in the Lord, by His grace, instead. He will strengthen his brothers, and he will write to the Church, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Rejoice, for you share in Christ's sufferings. You will fail, sometimes spectacularly, at times; but there are lessons to be gained. By such failures, you learn not to put trust in yourself for righteousness; and thus humbled, you confess your sins. You give thanks all the more that you are not saved by your works, which your failures would surely negate. Rather, salvation is yours by the grace of Jesus Christ, who suffered on the cross for you—and who shares those sufferings with you, that you might have life forever.

3. The Price of a Slave

Matthew 26:6-16

Friday

The Law was perfectly clear in Exodus 21: if an ox gored a slave, the ox's owner was on the hook. He was to have the ox stoned.

He was also to pay the slave's owner thirty shekels of silver. It was the set worth of a slave.

Centuries later, Judas makes a deal to betray the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. There are all sorts of theories as to Judas' villainy. Given that he was a thief (John 12:6), some have suggested that the reason was simple greed. Others have tried to rehabilitate Judas, suggesting that he betrayed Jesus to provoke Him to action, overthrow the Romans and reign over Judea.

Whatever Judas' motivations, he's hardly a disciple who follows his Master. Instead, he's willing to profit from Jesus' misfortune. He considers his Savior to have no more than the worth of a slave, worth betraying into the hands of bulls who will gladly have Him gored (Psalm 22:12).

In a bitter irony, the one enslaved to sin is driven to betray the only One who can set him free.

For this betrayal, Judas goes down in history as one of the greatest sinners of all. Dante pens him into the lowest circle of hell, and his name is synonymous with "traitor." That may make it easy to reason, "I'm a sinner, but at least I'm no Judas."

Think again. While you may not have handed Judas over to the high priests, your old sinful flesh wants to do the same thing: have your own way and treat Jesus like a slave.

"I know I shouldn't gossip, but..."

"I really shouldn't be watching this, but..."

"This takes advantage of my neighbor, but..."

"This would hurt our marriage if my wife found out, but..."

All of these sentences can end with all sorts of self-justifications; but an honest end would be, "...but I want to brush Jesus aside and do what I want to do." That treats Jesus as a slave to be summoned and used, not the Christ who gives life and salvation. Contempt for the Word is contempt for the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14). Sins like these often only merit a cheap thrill, a blunted conscience, or heartbreak...far less than thirty crummy pieces of silver, and just as deserving of death.

The answer is not, "Don't be like Judas." If you try to conquer sins like these by your own strength, you'll end up like the Pharisees—trying to convince yourself that your heart is pure while conniving for ways to make these sins happen without having to accept the blame.

The answer is Jesus, and the forgiveness He gives. Always remember: He is not a slave who is forced to the cross. As your Lord, He goes willingly to save you from all of your sins. And where your sins imply that He has little value to you, He has placed this worth upon you: you are redeemed by His holy, precious blood.

4. Lord's Passover, Lord's Supper

Luke 22:14-20

Saturday

As Israel prepared for their flight from Egypt, they prepared the Passover meal. They were to sacrifice a lamb, shedding its blood to mark their doors and be delivered from death. And once the sacrifice was made, they were to roast the lamb and eat it for their meal. The Israelites had specific instructions about the first Passover, including clothes to wear and methods for cooking. Lives were at stake, and God made clear that His instructions were to be followed. He wasn't looking for innovation; rather, He gave His instructions and declared, "It is the LORD's Passover" (Exodus 12:11).

The meal was to be repeated annually as a reminder of deliverance. Centuries later, the Lord and His disciples sat down to celebrate the Lord's Passover, and the Lord told them He had earnestly desired to eat the meal with them. It is not just that this was the Last Supper before His betrayal. There was more: for hundreds of years, the people had celebrated the Passover and remembered deliverance from their enemies—but not just Pharaoh and his armies in the past. The Passover pointed to Jesus, the Passover Lamb. From the very beginning of His ministry where John was baptizing in the Jordan, He'd been named "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The Lamb was about to be sacrificed to deliver from death, to take away the sins of the world.

But there was more. The original Passover Lamb wasn't just to be sacrificed. It was also to be eaten.

So at this celebration of the Lord's Passover, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." He gave them the cup and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:19-20). The Passover Lamb, about to be sacrificed, also offered Himself as the meal.

While time finds you far from that Last Supper and your sins would leave you far from the Lord, rejoice. By His institution of this Holy Communion, Jesus comes to you. He earnestly desires to give you the forgiveness He has won, so that you might be delivered from sin, death and devil. Thus in the Lord's Supper, He gives you Himself—the Passover Lamb, sacrificed and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins.

This is no mere remembrance. By His body and blood, the Lord strengthens and preserves you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. Because of His death, death has no power over you. By His cross, you are delivered from your enemies.

21. True Confession

Mark 14:60-64

Tuesday

The false witnesses can't agree. It seems an easy straightforward accusation, but they can't get it right. Their disagreements demonstrate how unjust this trial-by-night really is.

If the witnesses won't agree, the chief priests can still salvage the sham trial if they can extract an incriminating confession from Jesus. So far, though, He hasn't responded to the accusations. He hasn't said a word.

So the high priest asks Him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus says, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61,62).

That's all they need for conviction in this ecclesiastical court. The high priest tears his robes and declares Him guilty of blasphemy, and the Council declares that Jesus deserves death.

Here we find yet another disturbing theme of the Passion: Jesus is condemned for speaking the truth. He is sentenced to death for telling them exactly who He is.

He is the Christ. He is the Messiah, the anointed One of God. He is God Himself in the flesh, and He's been fulfilling every last Old Testament prophecy that pointed to Him. The entire Scriptures support His claim.

He is the Son of the Blessed. He is the Son of God. More than once during His ministry, the Father has spoken from heaven to declare that Jesus is His beloved Son. That makes Him the Ruler of all, and the Refuge of all who trust in Him (Psalm 2).

He is "I am." As in devotion #15, He puts the intentional "I" with the "Am" and declares Himself to be God Himself.

He is the Son of God, and they will see Him seated in glory.

Everything that Jesus says is true. *That* is why these men want Him dead. They don't do this out of popularity: the arrest and trial take place at night, out of sight from the people. They don't do it out of expediency, though that's how they salve their consciences. Simply, they do it out of unbelief, because sin just can't stand to have righteousness around.

It hasn't changed. The world is largely willing to accept the existence of the *man* Jesus 2000 years ago; and as long as the Church just confesses Him as a great teacher—and nothing more—that's usually all right. But if the Church confesses Him as the Son of God, the problems start. If Jesus is the Son of God, then He has authority, His Law is binding, sin is sin and leads to condemnation. Furthermore: if Jesus is the Son of God, then He does offer righteousness by faith; and the sinful nature will react forcibly to silence that Good News.

Many "Christians" have already conceded, teaching that Jesus was simply a tragic hero and just one moralist among many. It's more agreeable to the world, but it's unbelief—and unbelief saves no one.

If you are to be condemned, then be condemned by the world for the truth of Jesus Christ, God made flesh; for He was, too, and put to death. But you've already died with Him in Holy Baptism—and His resurrection is yours as well.

20. The Temple

Mark 14:55-59

Monday

The Pharisees need evidence to condemn Jesus, either witness testimony or a confession by Jesus. For now, the witnesses step forward: “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’” (Mark 14:58).

It’s a false accusation, but it has two things going for it. For one, it’s inflammatory: the center of the nation of Israel is the temple—anyone who threatens to destroy it is going to have no public support. For another, the false accusation is based on a true saying of Jesus: when the Jews demanded a sign after He had cleared the money-changers from the temple, He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). But the temple He spoke of was His own body (John 2:21).

In these accusations, we see the wills of God and man collide once again. What has been the purpose of the temple? Quite simply, throughout the ages, it is where God has been present with His people. First built as the mobile tabernacle in the wilderness, it stood at the center of camp; and once constructed, the Lord descended into its Most Holy Place. God, present everywhere, declared that He was *findable* for His people. They didn’t have to wonder how they might happen upon Him. He located Himself, and it was there that they offered sacrifices and prayers. Likewise, once the temple was completed in Jerusalem, the Lord entered to dwell there.

The big thing about the temple was not the building, but God’s presence.

When Jesus was born, we’re told “the Word became flesh and dwelt (literally “tabernacled”) among us” (John 1:14). God was now present with His people—not in a building, but embodied in flesh to save.

For the chief priests and Pharisees, though, the temple had a wholly different meaning. It was a place for them to offer sacrifices, to make themselves pleasing to God by their works and piety. (With the focus off of God’s presence, it had also become a place of numbers, aiming to make a profit through sales and money-changing.)

Behold the sinful nature at work: it would rather keep the building than God. It will focus on man’s works and work to make the Lord absent in a tomb. So they destroy the Temple on the cross. But He rises again three days later.

The Lord is still just as present with His people—as really present as He was in the temple and in the flesh. Jesus remains present in His Word and His Sacraments; and because He is present, that is where we find forgiveness, life and salvation. Where these means of grace are ignored, Christ’s presence is overlooked, too; and the religion changes from God and His grace, to man’s works of living a God-pleasing life. And where the emphasis is on man’s efforts, the focus shifts more from God’s grace to numbers—to what man is achieving.

This joy of the Lord’s presence in Word and Sacrament is one of the greatest contributions we Lutherans can make to the Church around the world, for so many have forgotten: Christ, crucified and risen, is not far away. He is as near as His Word to save.

5. One Who Serves

Luke 22:24-30

The First Sunday in Lent

God’s measurement of glory is different from man’s. That’s one of the ongoing themes of the Passion of our Lord, and one that culminates at the cross. For now, we note that man’s idea of glory is all about power, authority and dominance. It’s all about climbing to the top so that other people are serving you. The Pharisees’ plot against Jesus, for instance, is largely about destroying Him so that they retain their glory as leaders of the people. Pilate is scrambling to hold onto his power, while Herod makes the most of his throne for self-gratification. As Jesus says, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors” (Luke 22:25). That is simply the way of the world.

The disciples live in that world; and although they’ve been listening to Jesus for three years, they’re still steeped in the world’s ways. So it’s not a real surprise that the twelve will get into a dispute about which of them is the greatest.

But it is not to be so among them, for among them is the very Son of God in human flesh. Were He to sit down on a throne and declare that He deserved all honor and glory, it would be no boast: He would only be telling the truth. Yet He doesn’t slap down His disciples by pointing out their infinitesimal lowliness while He is in the room: in other words, He doesn’t say, “Since all of you are really next to nothing compared to Me, you really shouldn’t be trying to be better than each other.” Instead, He completely re-defines for them what glory is. The Son of God is not there to order them around: instead, He says, “I am among you as the One who serves.” The all-powerful Son of God comes as the Servant of all. He is about to demonstrate that at the Supper in a most humble way. He will demonstrate it far more profoundly on a hill called Calvary, as He serves by giving His life as a ransom for many.

Ransomed by the Lord, you’ve been set free from sin to serve those around you—but you’ll always be tempted to the world’s ideas of power. It may be given to you to serve in a position of authority, like parent, teacher, supervisor, big sister, pastor, government official, etc.; such positions are given to serve, but you’ll be tempted to use that position to gather power, ease or benefits to yourself. It may be given to you to serve in a subordinate position, like child, student, employee, little brother, parishioner, taxpayer, etc.: in that case, you’re also in a position to serve those around you, but you’ll be tempted instead to resent those in authority as well as your own lack of worldly power. But to desire power for self-serving reasons is one that contradicts the Lord’s plans for you. Worse, it flies in the face of the Savior whose very nature is to serve.

Still, you have reason to rejoice. Even just hours before His death, Jesus is still at work to serve His errant disciples. Even now, the Lord still serves errant you. Still the all-powerful Son of God, He serves by speaking to you His grace in His Absolution. He visits to give you His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. He is still among you to serve, that you might have life in His name.

6. Slave's Work

John 13:1-11

Monday

Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into His hand (John 13:3). That's quite a lot of glory and power.

What did the Son of God do next? He took off His robe, tied a towel around His waist, and washed the disciples' feet. These were feet that had been walking through dust, dirt and whatever else. Foot-washing was a task normally left to slaves. In this case, it was the Servant who humbled Himself and washed the disciples' feet.

Of all the disciples, it's hardly a shocker that Peter was the one to raise a fuss. Back in Matthew 16:21-22, when Jesus first declared that He was going to be crucified, Peter responded by vowing that he'd do all that he could to prevent it—to prevent the salvation of the world.

This time around, Peter declares to Jesus, "You shall never wash my feet." Do you blame him? What sort of God goes around doing the menial work of the lowest slave? As far as we know, Peter is simply trying to rescue Jesus from the indignity of the work. To put it a little less charitably, perhaps he's ashamed that his Master is acting so.

But Jesus makes Peter's error plain: "If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me." For all of Peter's good intentions, he's saying to the Savior, "I don't want You to make me clean—not the way You've chosen to go about it."

Little wonder that Peter is so scandalized by the crucifixion the following day: if he thought Jesus to be too lowly washing feet, what is he to think when the Savior is nailed to a cross?

But the Lord is, by nature, a servant. So it is perfectly in keeping with His nature that He would save by the ultimate act of service.

The devilish temptation remains, because the Lord still works to save in ways that aren't particularly glorious in the eyes of the world. In Holy Baptism, He has washed you clean—not just feet or forehead, but all of you. Yet even many Christians look on Baptism as simple, lowly water and nothing more; and they look for God to be at work in far more magnificent ways. Likewise, a small portion of bread and wine seems terribly meager against sin, death and devil, and many see it as far too humble to be much more than a remembrance. By faith, you know better: by these lowly means of grace, the Lord gives you forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. He saves by humble service, not events that are glorious to the eyes—the cross is the ultimate proof of that. But plagued by sin, you'll be tempted to spurn these sacraments as far too humble to do any good. You'll be tempted to say, "You're my Savior, but I want You to save me a different way—not the way You've planned."

For such sins, you repent. And rather than look for God in what is glamorous to the eyes, you hear His Word and His promises of grace. There, in His Gospel, He makes you clean and gives you life.

19. Expediency

John 18:13-14

The Third Sunday in Lent

The Pharisees and chief priests convened the Council in John 11:47-53, just after Jesus raised Lazarus. Some expressed the fear that more and more people would believe in Jesus, causing the Romans to react by destroying the nation. In a way, I can understand their fear: if a non-approved messiah declared himself the new ruler of Israel outside the existing power structure, the Romans would surely respond with bloodshed. But Jesus had given no indications of being a political revolutionary; in fact, He taught obedience to Caesar.

But sin painted the worst-case scenario in their minds, because they wanted an excuse to hold onto their power. Thus they constructed the argument that was completely backwards: "Faith in Jesus leads to death and destruction."

Given this conclusion, Caiaphas made the politically-expedient statement that it was much better that one man die, rather than the whole nation. If they got rid of Jesus, the Romans would leave them alone. Problem solved.

Historically, this didn't work out. Forty years later, Roman armies laid siege to Jerusalem—because of zealots who—unlike Jesus—*did* advocate rebellion against Rome. According to Josephus, 1.1 million died. Once the city fell, the nation effectively ceased to exist.

But this night of Jesus' Passion, all of that is out of sight in the future. Jesus stands before Caiaphas, who carries through with the expedient decision to sacrifice the One and save the many.

Expediency is a dangerous temptation: it values self-interest over what is right. It normally focuses on short-sighted gain, not long-term consequence. The Old Adam loves expediency. It encourages self-serving sin over the truth of the Word. Its sinful blindness seduces to short-sighted decisions.

Thus, as Caiaphas chooses to sacrifice Jesus in favor of the nation, Christians will be tempted more and more to sacrifice His Word—about the sanctity of life, about sins of immorality, about the Gospel—in favor of societal approval. Congregations will be pressured with false dichotomies, like the argument that it is proper to sacrifice truth in order to evangelize. This is not proper or right, but expedient. Families will find that it is expedient to tolerate the sins of family members rather than call them to repentance: this is not right or loving, but it is expedient when a family celebration draws near. You'll be tempted to the false god of expediency, because self-service comes naturally. But this is the way of death, not life.

You have this hope: Caiaphas is far more profound than he knows. It is necessary to sacrifice the One for the nation. Not just for the nation, but for all of God's people scattered abroad. Jesus does not stand before him out of self-service, but service to all mankind. He is willingly sacrificed for the sins of the world, so that all who believe in Him might be saved. Even after Jerusalem falls, the people of God continue. You are numbered among the new Israel of God, because that One has redeemed you.

18. Evil at Work

Matthew 26:55-56

Saturday

The mob comes to Gethsemane armed with swords and clubs. One wonders exactly what sort of resistance they expect, but it doesn't really matter. Evil never fights fair. It picks on the weak. It bullies. It lays low until it's sure it has the upper hand, and it makes, breaks or changes the rules so that the playing field is never level. It baits and deceives and seduces until it enslaves

Why else would a mob show up armed in the middle of the night to capture one man surrounded by eleven disciples?

Jesus points this out to them: why didn't they just arrest Him in daylight at the temple, while He was teaching? The question accuses. They're sneaking around because this is evil work. They fear the crowds who follow Jesus, and they know their cause is unjust. It's fitting that this takes place at night, since it wouldn't stand the scrutiny of daylight.

They do it anyway. That's the enslavement to sin. Maybe it's that they fear their masters more than God. Maybe they love promised payoffs more than truth. Maybe they trust political expediency more than the Word. But they arrest Jesus and haul Him away.

And all the while, remember: Jesus goes willingly. Beneath the stinking layer of man's deceit and evil, God is at work. He is using their sin as part of His plan for the redemption of the world. This is truly an example of God working all things to the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Evil still doesn't fight fair, and never will. Pneumonia hits those who are already weakened by a broken hip and the inability to move. Temptations always grow stronger when you're emotionally exhausted and don't have much left to put up a fight. False teachers never announce that they're wrong, and rarely even admit they are going against Scripture. Instead, they try to appear better, more mature, shinier, whatever gets attention and respect. Churches rarely sacrifice the truth in one fell swoop: it happens over time, as dissenters within chip away at a confession and demand tolerance until they have enough power to get their way. Idols promise all sorts of rewards of happiness and pleasure, but they are the false promises of false gods that have no power to deliver.

The Lord plays it straight. You're sinful, so He goes to the cross. He dies your death. He offers you forgiveness freely. No tricks. No strings. No slavery.

Set free in Christ, you have His assurance that He does all things for your good. Disease is subject to Him, perhaps to teach patience or give you time for self-examination. Death is the last enemy to be destroyed, in the meantime under His foot and used to deliver you from this world to heaven. Even the division that false doctrine brings may be used for good (1 Corinthians 11:19), so that truth may be discerned from error.

Evil doesn't play fair, and you can't even trust yourself. But the Lord willingly goes to the cross, and now uses all things for your good.

7. The Betrayer

John 13:12-25

Tuesday

A servant is not greater than his master, nor is the messenger greater than the one who sent him. Jesus tells this to the disciples after He has finished the servant's task of washing their feet. Their Master has served them, and He will send them out with His message of salvation. As His servants, they are to serve others, and to do so in the most beautiful of ways: they are to tell people the Gospel. And when they proclaim that Word, the Word made flesh will be present with forgiveness: "whoever receives the one I send receives Me." This turns the world on its head. In successful corporations and governments, the "little people" serve the bosses who report to the big cheese. With the Lord, it's the other way around: He serves His disciples and sends them to serve all nations. To the world, the kingdom of heaven is inverted.

The kingdom of Judas is perverted. Whatever his motives, he believes that he has the right to betray Jesus into the hands of his enemies. In his plans to determine Jesus' fate, he believes that he is greater than his Master.

He isn't. He's just serving a different master. If it's greed, then he's willing to betray Jesus in service to that false god. If it's jealousy, he's willing to get rid of the Son of God in order to appease that idol. If it's zealotry, he's willing to get rid of the Word in service to his ideology. Whatever motivates Judas to betray Jesus is his true master. It's the false god whom Judas really serves; and it's far greater than Judas.

But false gods only demand worship and have no power to save. In a matter of hours, Judas will be confronted with the horrible truth that he has betrayed the true Son of God in service to false gods that have nothing to give; and that will lead him to eternal flight from grace and glory.

We sinners do well to remember. Except in Christ, we are never truly free. Gossip demands the denial of truth: loose lips serve lies. Lust is a denial of purity, a worship of faithlessness. Greed sacrifices contentment on the altar of personal gain. Sloth sacrifices serving others in service to self. It's only in Christ that we're truly free, for He is the only Master who truly serves His disciples.

Jesus knows about Judas. He declares that even now He is at His work as the Messiah, fulfilling prophecy: "But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.'" The prophecy is from Psalm 41:9, where David laments that his enemies close in against him. Despite the companion's betrayal, though, the Lord remains faithful and the next three verses are full of hope: "But you, O LORD, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them! By this I know that you delight in me: my enemy will not shout in triumph over me. But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever." All of this is true of Christ: He is raised up, and repays you—with grace, not wrath. His enemies do not triumph: He defeats sin, death and devil, and shares the victory with you. He remains the Lord with integrity and forgiveness: and by His grace, He sets you in His presence forever.

8. Quickly

John 13:26-30

Wednesday

It was to be an honored guest who received bread dipped in the sauce dish at Passover: even now, the Master is serving the disciple who will betray Him. With that morsel of bread, Jesus sends Judas on his way into the night, saying, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” There is no wish on the part of the Savior to stretch out His Passion any longer than it needs to be, but there’s more to it than that. The Lord is the willing Victim, not a helpless one. Judas must leave if the crucifixion is to take place, and Jesus will use his evil for the good of all; in control, He sends the traitor on his way.

Things will go quickly from here. Within twenty-four hours, the Son of God will be wrapped in cloths and laid in a tomb.

But while time will pass at a constant rate, “quickly” will be relative. Weariness stretches out the minutes, and the disciples will be unable to stay awake even for an hour while Jesus prays in Gethsemane. Pain and anguish slow time to a crawl, and one imagines that the scourging will seem to take forever. Likewise, so will the three hours that the Lord hangs on the cross; and, given that the Son entirely suffers Father-forsaken hell for all sin on the cross, perhaps that is more true than we think. In a world of sin, “quickly” often doesn’t happen quickly enough.

But twenty-four hours after Judas goes into the night, Jesus will be in a tomb. Three days later (one imagines three *long* days for the disciples), He is risen from the dead. The forty days between resurrection and ascension must fly by. In a sinful world, times of joy are fleeting.

You don’t need the Passion account to tell you this. A weeklong vacation can fly by, while a week in a hospital room goes on forever. Those who mourn will find that one day of grieving seems longer than the years together before death’s interruption. The Church prays for the Lord to come quickly in glory, because history reveals the hurt and horror that happens in a world turned against the Lord, against His Law and Gospel. Even the saints in heaven cry out, “How long?” (Revelation 6:10).

The great temptation is a tragic impatience. When deliverance does not come quickly, you will be tempted to grow angry that the Lord tarries. Worse, you may be tempted to think that the Lord isn’t coming to deliver at all.

We do well to listen to St. Paul: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. . . .” (2 Corinthians 4:16-17). The Lord still directs times and seasons (Daniel 2:21) and all things for your good. He will return in His time, and in the meantime He comes to you, as near as His Word and His Sacraments. He does not lose patience with you, and grants you His grace and strength to endure.

So you pray, “Come quickly, Lord.” He does, in His means of grace. At His Supper, He gives you life-saving morsels—His body, His blood. He will, in glory, to deliver you to everlasting life.

17. Peter Gets It Wrong. Again.

John 18:10-11

Friday

Peter is often portrayed as the most impetuous of the disciples, quick to act and speak without the benefit of thinking things through. I’d like to add to this description by saying that he is the perfect illustration of the danger of second-guessing the Gospel. He’s done this before: back in Matthew 16, he was the one who correctly identified Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus declared Peter correct; and since the disciples now had the right answer as to His *person*, He went on to tell them His *work*. He told them that He would be betrayed and crucified. If you remember, Peter immediately pulled Jesus aside and rebuked Him, saying this would never happen. Peter was speaking out of loyalty to the Savior, I do not doubt; but that day as he tried to forbid Jesus from going to the cross, he was also trying to prevent your salvation.

Now in John 18, the mob has arrived at the Garden in order to take Jesus away. They’ve come armed and ready for trouble, and they clearly outnumber one rabbi and his sleepy disciples. Violent resistance would be foolish, but that isn’t going to stop Peter: he’s determined that he’d rather go down fighting than let this betrayal go down unopposed. As long as he’s alive, he’s not going to let them haul the Savior away. So he draws his sword; and on his first swing, he manages to cut off the ear of Malchus, servant to the high priest.

We can deduce from this that Peter remains impetuous, and that he isn’t a very good swordsman.

We can also see that he’s still unintentionally at work to prevent the redemption of mankind. Jesus has told them again and again that He is to be betrayed, crucified and raised again—most recently He’s said so at the Supper! But when the betrayal takes place, Peter swings his sword and severs an ear.

Jesus doesn’t need Peter’s sword: remember, He’s still the almighty God who is submitting to His Father’s will voluntarily. This is the cup that His Father has given Him to drink, and He is going to drink it to the dregs for you.

Malchus needs his ear, so Jesus heals him (Luke 22:51). The High Priest heals the servant of the high priest behind this treachery. If the ear is restored, Malchus can hear the Word.

You need salvation. That is why Jesus rebukes Peter and continues on the way to the cross. He is not a king who adds to His subjects by force and violence and threats of death. Rather, He goes and dies for the people, so that He might *give* them the gift of eternal sonship in His kingdom!

Beware, then. You’ll want the Lord to work in forceful ways. You’d much rather have immediate healing than His patience in illness. You’d much rather have Him put your enemies in their place right now. Instead, He demonstrates His power in mercy and pity. His grace is sufficient for you, and His power is made perfect in weakness. His day of glory and power will come, but for now He works chiefly in mercy. But do not fear. He will deliver you. You’ve got His Word on it. You’ve got the cross on it. And after paying such a price to redeem you, how would He not deliver you?

16. Judas Kiss

Matthew 26:49

Thursday

The moment of betrayal sounds bad in English. It's even worse in Greek.

"Greetings, Rabbi," could also be translated, "Rejoice, Rabbi." Judas implies this is a joyful meeting, then kisses the Savior to tip off the rabble that they've found their Man.

Aside from an expression of close affection, a kiss could symbolize respect, reverence and subjection. Judas' kiss only makes the cruelty of the betrayal that much more poignant: whether he apes affection or subjection, he is there to hand over the Savior to His enemies. There is no reverence or respect to follow, only the brutality of sinful man given a free hand against holy God.

It calls to mind "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6). The rebuke of a friend is valuable, even when it cuts deeply, because the friend desires your deliverance. The kisses of an enemy are designed to flatter and deceive you until all is lost and the wounds won't heal.

The devil, the world and your sinful flesh will constantly ply their kisses. They'll voice affection, plying you with seductive temptations to make you believe you're loved, that the Lord's Law is what binds you to slavery. They'll whisper kisses of "respect," flattering you with the terrible lie that you're responsible enough to depart from the Word and follow your desires. They'll even offer worship to convince you that you're worthy of it, convince you that there's no need for Jesus because you have yourself. All of it is a Judas kiss, designed to consign you to slavery, death and hell. Buy into it, return the affection and worship, and how are you any different than Judas in the garden, greeting the Lord with a faux joy and false worship?

But faithful are the wounds of a friend, and Jesus calls you a friend (John 15:15). He faithfully speaks His Law to you, and that proclamation will hurt as He speaks the truth about your sin. His goal is not to wound you, though: it is to mortify your sinful nature so that you might have life. He faithfully speaks His Gospel to you, and here is the wonder: the faithful wounds of this Friend are not the ones that He inflicts upon you, but the ones that He has permitted to be inflicted upon Him for your sake.

"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:3-5)

Jesus accepts Judas' kiss in the garden, knowing full well that His betrayal is at hand, that this is the sinner's natural response to His holiness. That is why He has become flesh. That is why He goes to the cross.

9. Now?

John 13:31-32

Thursday

"Now is the Son of Man glorified, and the Father is glorified in Him," says the Lord after Judas departs. Really? *Now?*

This is a far cry from the glory of God in the cloud, leading the people of Israel out of Egypt or descending on Mount Sinai to speak with Moses. It's a long way away from the glory that shone around the shepherds when angels announced Christ's birth, or from the glorious Transfiguration of Jesus on another mountain. The Last Supper concluded, we see a condemned Man for whom the time is very short. It's dark and only getting darker. And *now* is the Son of Man glorified?

Absolutely. Remember from devotion #5 that Jesus announced that He was among the disciples as One who serves, and remember that God is by nature a servant. The ultimate service that Jesus performs is the redemption of the world by His crucifixion. Therefore, as the cross draws near, His glory grows.

Again, this is inverse to the conceptions of sinful man. A chapter ago, John records that even many of the authorities believed in Jesus, but refused to confess Him publicly. They were afraid of the Pharisees, afraid that they would be expelled from the temple, and they "loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:43).

The glory of man means the approval of others. It means being held in high esteem and garnering respect. Respect translates into power. Power enables you to exert pressure on others and subordinate them to yourself. That's glory in man's terms: it's to stand head and shoulders above the rest. In an athletic contest, the winning team gets the glory while the losing team is forgotten. Around the temple, those respected by the Pharisees have power to get stuff done; those expelled from the temple are outcasts. Therefore, many authorities believe in Jesus, but they want to keep their glory and influence more.

That is always the temptation for sinners. The bane of adolescence is peer pressure, because youth want to fit in and have the respect of their peers. Employees must sometimes choose between doing the right thing or bowing to the influence of co-workers. It's easier to be part of the gossip group than to keep the 8th Commandment. It's easier to be part of the vulgar locker room conversation than to keep the 6th. You will always be tempted to love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

This is why Jesus is glorified after Judas departs in the night. He hasn't kowtowed to the Pharisees, gaining their approval to avoid pain. He won't go with Peter's next plan, resorting to violence against His enemies—He could call down legions of angels, and the world would respect a show of force like that! Instead, He remains fixed on the cross. His glory is in His service. In service to you, He bears your infirmities and sins—including your love for the glory of man. He prepares to endure the scorn of all and to die...for you. That is the Son of God as the Servant of all.

That is the Lord in His glory.

10. Going It Alone

John 13:33-38

Friday

“Where I am going, you cannot come.”

What Jesus is about to do will be done alone. The disciples cannot follow Him. They know that hardship lies ahead, and their intentions are good. Peter even blusters a pledge to lay down his life for Jesus rather than let Him go alone. But by the time Jesus is led from Gethsemane by His enemies, the disciples have fled.

The disciples cannot come. They cannot come because their panic overrides their faithfulness. Confronted by threats of pain, mockery and death, they run away. The First Commandment bids us to fear, love and trust in God above all things; but their fear of persecution far outweighs their love for their Master. Perhaps this, in part, is why the Lord gives them a new commandment. It’s “new” because it’s connected to the cross: the disciples will love one another not to earn God’s favor, but because God’s favor has been earned for them. The love Jesus speaks of is selfless (agap ) love that looks for nothing in return: because they are loved by Him, they can now love one another.

Far beyond their panic, it is because of this love that the disciples cannot come. The cross is what the Savior does in love for them: because He does it for them, it is not for them to do.

They cannot come with Him to the trial, to be falsely accused of all sorts of sins. He goes to be accused for them, assuming their sin and guilt.

They cannot come with Him onto the cross, where He is forsaken by His Father. He is there to suffer hell for them, so that they don’t have to follow Him there.

They cannot come with Him into the tomb, where the grave has normally closed with finality. He goes there to break the chains of death and rise from the grave, so that He might raise them, too.

They’ll follow afterward. But when they are falsely accused, they will stand firm in the faith that God declares them innocent for Jesus’ sake. When they are sentenced to death, they’ll know that death is a conquered enemy—nothing but a sleep from which they’ll awake to everlasting life. They’ll know that their following does not go through hell, because the Lord has opened for them the gates of heaven.

You follow, too. You’re in this sinful world, and the wages of sin is death. Along the way, you’ll be accused—sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly—of all sorts of sins. But because Jesus has gone before you, you know that God declares you righteous. You’ll face death: but you’ve already died in Christ in Baptism, so the grave is just a sleep, not the end. Hell is not for you, because Jesus was forsaken by God on the cross so that you might never be forsaken. He has gone this way out of love for you, that you might follow to everlasting life.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God;

...and so we are” (1 John 3:1).

15. I Am

John 18:3-9

Wednesday

Many a catechetical series of sermons has been preached on the “I Am” sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John, and with good reason. With each description, the Lord gives us more insight into His person and work:

“I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35).

“I am the Light of the world” (John 8:12).

“I am the Door” (John 10:9).

“I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11).

“I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25).

“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6).

“I am the Vine” (John 15:5).

There’s more to it than that, though. In the Greek language, you don’t have to say “I am.” If you just say, “Am going to the store,” everybody just knows to put the “I” at the front of the sentence. If you say, “*I* am” in Greek, you’re trying to make a point.

This is never more true than with the Savior. When Jesus makes the point to say, “*I* am,” it’s not just for emphasis. He’s declaring that He’s God as well as man, because “I AM” is the name by which God identifies Himself to Moses at the burning bush: “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). In Hebrew, “I am” is “Yahweh,” and it’s Yahweh who delivers Israel from Egypt, who institutes the Passover. So when Jesus adds the subject “I” to “I am,” He speaks the astonishing truth, “I am Yahweh.”

When Judas and the mob arrive at Gethsemane, they clearly have enough power to overcome and drag away a single man, even if the disciples are armed. When they declare they are looking for Jesus, He knocks them flat with a two word answer in the Greek: “I am.” (English translations often add a “He” to the end so the sentence makes more sense, but it’s not in the Greek.) They don’t fall to the ground in astonishment because He effectively turns Himself in. They fall to the ground because Yahweh stands before them and speaks, His glory veiled in human flesh. They can’t lay a finger on Him without His permission.

It’s by Jesus’ Word that the disciples are permitted to leave unharmed, fulfilling more prophecy. Jesus Himself submits to arrest—why? To fulfill all those other “I am” statements of John. He cannot be the Bread of Life for you if He does not drink this cup of wrath. He cannot be the Light of the world unless He bears the darkness of unholy sin on the cross. He cannot be the Door to heaven for you unless He conquers hell. He cannot shepherd you through the valley of the shadow of death unless He goes that way Himself. He cannot be the Resurrection and the Life for you unless He dies your death, rises again and joins you to Him in your Baptism. The Way, the Truth and the Life cannot present you to His Father in heaven, holy and blameless, unless He takes your sins away.

So I AM submits to the mob, but only for you. Every last step, the Lamb of God goes willingly to redeem you from your sin.

14. Weak Flesh

Matthew 26:40-46

Tuesday

By evening, I was tired.

I'd been with our youth at a Higher Things conference in Seattle for three days, and the pace was catching up with me. We hiked another steep hill to the chapel for vespers, and it was good to sit down as the pre-service music played.

I'd love to tell you what the sermon was about, but I can't. I couldn't have right afterward, either. I was fighting the urge to fall asleep throughout the entire service.

This is not the example that I seek to set for youth or anyone else.

Exiting the chapel, my mind flashed to the disciples in Gethsemane. Judas and the band of thugs were nearly at the garden's entrance as the Lord prayed, his sweat like great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). And what were the disciples doing? Sleeping. However willing their spirits were, their flesh was weak and they fell asleep.

The thought certainly convicted me: they couldn't stay awake for one hour. I'd barely made it through 35 minutes.

But this flashed through my mind, too. Although the disciples slept in their weakness, the Lord still prayed for them. And although I fall prey to sickness and exhaustion, the Lord prays for me.

The Lord does not promise to help only the strong, only the energetic, only those who are righteous on their own (as if there were any)! He became flesh for the weak, the sick, sheep without shepherds and sinners in need of repentance. He does not promise to help you only when you're strong enough to return the favor. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

He promises, "Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4).

This is comfort from Gethsemane: the Lord stays awake and prays in the garden for you. Where you are too sick to think straight or too exhausted to string words into sentences, He who keeps you neither slumbers nor sleeps. Where you are vexed enough that you don't know what to pray, He prays for you and speaks His Word to you. You are His beloved child. You are part of the new Israel. By His grace, your spirit is willing; still in this sinful world, your flesh is weak. It will not always be this way. For you, He has given over His incorruptible flesh to scourge and nails, cross and death. Now, He is risen again. He watches over you night and day until the Day of Resurrection when He raises you up incorruptible.

Are you weary? Cast your cares upon the Lord, and He will sustain you (Psalm 55:22). And if you are so weak that the words do not form, be comforted in this: the Lord is your strength and your Deliverer. Even now, He prays for you (Romans 8:34; John 17:20-26).

11. A Hymn

Matthew 26:30-35

Saturday

Jesus and the disciples sing a hymn and depart for the Mount of Olives, and we've got a pretty good idea of what they sang. Part of the Passover celebration was the singing of the "Hallel," as in "*Hallelujah*," comprised of Psalms 113-118.

Jesus has told the disciples that the Passion is given for Him to undergo alone. The time draws near quickly, and we hear Peter vow to die at the Savior's side rather than abandon Him. But good intentions are fragile things, and these are no match for what lies ahead. As the disciples voice their pledges of loyalty, Jesus knows them for the empty promises that they are; and the last thing to comfort the condemned Man are the empty promises of sinners.

The Lord is not without comfort, though, because He has better promises. Assuming that they sing the Hallel at the end of the meal, He hears:

"Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free" (Psalm 118:5). Though He will cry out that God has forsaken Him, before His death He will commend His Spirit to His Father, confident of the resurrection.

"It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes" (Psalm 118:8-9). Man and princes will amply demonstrate their wickedness, deceit and cowardice as they send Jesus to the cross. But His refuge is in the Lord.

"All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!" (Psalm 118:10) Jews and Gentiles both will call for His death. He will defeat their wicked plans and then send the apostles to make disciples of those "all nations."

In the liturgy of the Passover, the Paschal Lamb is comforted by the Word.

It gets even better:

"I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death" (Psalm 118:17-18). Jesus goes to His death, but He is not given over to it. He will rise, live, and declare His saving Gospel.

And:

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:22-23).

Jesus goes to the cross with this purpose: to die and to live for you. Though He will be rejected by those who would build religion on their own works and good intentions, He rises up as the Cornerstone of the Church. This is your comfort—this hymn for Jesus is fulfilled for you. When you cry out in distress, the Lord will answer. Though all turn against you, the Lord is your refuge. Though you are among all nations that rejected Him, He has died and risen to call you out and make you His disciple.

And therefore, your end is not the grave. You will not die, but live, and recount the deeds of the Lord, the hymn of the saints in heaven forever (Revelation 5:12).

12. Water and Blood

John 18:1-2

The Second Sunday in Lent

Between the temple mount and the Mount of Olives runs the Kidron Valley, and this is the route to the Garden of Gethsemane. The Bible notes the “brook Kidron” several times, a stream that runs through the valley. Archaeologists have uncovered drains from the city into the brook Kidron, and historians note that the temple had a drain which emptied into it. This drain carried away the blood of the sacrifices made at the temple. Given that this was the Passover, thousands of lambs were brought to the altar for sacrifice; and thus it is maintained that, when Jesus and the disciples cross Kidron that night, the brook is red with blood.

Water and blood. It’s a recurring theme throughout God’s plan for salvation. When burnt offerings were sacrificed, the blood was presented to the Lord. Entrails and legs were washed with water before the fire was set, so that the sacrifice might be pleasing to the Lord (Leviticus 1:1-9).

Water and blood. On the Day of Atonement, the priest would wash with water as part of his cleansing. Then, robed in his priestly garments, he would carry the basin of blood into the Most Holy Place—into the presence of God!—and present the blood to Him, to make atonement (Leviticus 16).

Water and blood. Jesus’ public ministry begins with His Baptism in the Jordan River, where He identifies Himself with sinners and begins His journey to the cross. He is washed as the Priest going about His Father’s work and washed as the Sacrifice in preparation. It’s at the cross that the Passover Lamb is sacrificed, His blood shed to atone for the sins of the world.

Water and blood. Pilate washes his hands with water, seeking to be innocent of Jesus’ blood (Matthew 27:24). But sinners’ attempts at cleansing themselves of guilt are fruitless. That’s why the Savior willingly accepts the death sentence and walks to Calvary.

Water and blood. The spear will go into Jesus’ side, and blood and water flow (John 19:34). The Evangelist will later write, “This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6).

The Spirit testifies this truth to you. Though you were born sinful and unholy, the Lord Jesus went to the cross for you. He has washed you clean in the waters of Holy Baptism. He has clothed you in robes of righteousness, for He has clothed you in Christ (Galatians 3:27). Now, washed and brought into the royal priesthood, you come into the presence of God. You kneel at His altar and receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. This is often pictured marvelously in the floor plan of a church sanctuary, where communicants file past the font on the way to the altar, having been washed with water to come into His presence.

The sacrifice has been made. The blood has flowed. The Savior is risen, and salvation is yours by water and blood.

13. Will

Matthew 26:36-39

Monday

As I write these devotions, my family is watching the *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy, one per Friday. I’m drawn to these movies for a number of reasons, and one of the greatest is the willingness of those who are good to face and fight evil, even when there seems to be little hope. In the words of Gimli, the eagerly honorable dwarf, as a terribly pitched battle approaches: “Certainty of death, small chance of success...what are we waiting for?!”

Such courage is hard to come by because man is naturally weak-willed; and man is naturally weak-willed because sin has robbed him of a free will. Instead, his will is enslaved and he does not naturally do what is right and good. (Those who seem strong-willed in advocating sin are not; they’re simply slaves of sin with strong personalities.) It is far easier to be silent than to speak against the vocal opponent who advocates wrong. It is far easier to be silent and to go along with a sinful practice than it is to speak up and voice concern. It is far easier to run and hide than to confess a wrongdoing, far easier to pretend something wasn’t wrong than serve as an example of repentance. Even when faced clearly with wrong, it’s far easier to let somebody do the fighting: it natural not to want to “get involved.” And when opposed by great numbers, giving up is an inviting prospect.

Sound familiar? Too close for comfort?

This is not good or honorable. It bows to bullies. It sacrifices honor out of fear, exchanges freedom for restriction and eventually captivity. It is worse than weak-willed: it opposes God’s will. It is always a temptation, and doing great damage within the Church today. And it just comes so easy, because it’s exhausting and maddening to stand up and be counted: to do the right thing requires ongoing strength against attack from both within and without yourself.

That is the natural will of the sinner. But it is not the will of the One who lies prostrate in the garden and prays. His cross is not inevitably driven by the bullies in the Sanhedrin—no sinner is forcing His path. He willingly goes to the cross because it is the right thing to do: it is the Father’s plan for salvation. “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

The Son goes freely to the cross because it is the Father’s will to save you. Certain death awaits, and the Lamb willingly bears your sin.

What comfort this is for you: free from sin, Christ goes to the cross with the sin of the world—and with all of your weak-willed sins where you ran from the right and were silent about the wrong. Risen again, He pours out salvation upon you. He promises His strength against temptation. He gives you His Word to confess. He tells you that you are never outnumbered: for you are the Lord’s, allied with angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven. The fight remains fierce and the warfare long, but the victory is assured; because the One who prayed “not as I will, but as you will” in the garden still preserves you in His Word and faith unto your end, for this is His gracious and good will.