

Meditations on the Passion of Our Lord

Pastor Tim Pauls

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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.

1. A Disconnect at Passover

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 26:1-2

“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.

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.

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.

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.

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).

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.

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).

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.

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.

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?

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

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.

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).

26. The King of Truth

John 18:33-38

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Pontius Pilate rules Judea in the stead and by the command of Caesar. He's charged with keeping peace, collecting taxes and pronouncing judgment. It all fits together: any government's greatest concerns are revenue and rebellion: if the money's coming in and the citizens are at peace, stability follows. That's why, while the Roman Empire will put up with quite a lot from its conquered peoples, it will not tolerate a hint of revolt. Anyone who says, "Follow me and I'll deliver you from Caesar" invites a quick and violent response.

Pilate is summoned to his judgment seat this early Friday morning at the behest of the chief priests. They've refined the charge against their prisoner from "evildoing" to treason. He's declared Himself to be a king, they say; and if He's set Himself up as a rival to Caesar, then He deserves to die.

From previous encounters, Pilate is already weary and wary of these leaders; but it is still given to him to conduct the interrogation. He asks the question: "Are You the King of the Jews?" This goes to the heart of it. If Jesus says, "Yes," then he's guilty. If He says "No"—and He certainly doesn't look like much of a threat to the Roman Empire, then Pilate can be done with this case by breakfast. "Yes" or "No." Easy.

Not so easy. Jesus responds that His kingdom is not of this world, then goes on: "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37).

So that's it: Jesus is the King of Truth. He's come to tell people the truth. That's no threat to Caesar: many an emperor has proven that a sword is far more effective than the truth for governing. Furthermore, Pilate isn't ignorant; no doubt, he's been keeping tabs on Jesus. He knows at least the basics of what Jesus has been saying, perhaps that His truth includes paying taxes to Caesar.

Pilate shows cynicism next: "What is truth?" Indeed, it's a popular question. Politics sacrifices truth to power-hungry compromise and spin; in Pilate's world, truth is whatever serves Caesar. At the same time, the pious leaders of Judea—who declare truth a virtue—are lying through their teeth to have Jesus killed. What is truth? It's a victim to whatever the powerful want to accomplish. But Pilate knows this is true: Jesus isn't guilty, and he says so to His accusers.

The truth is this: all are sinful and all are liars (Psalm 116:11). All are willing to bend, shape, spin or deny the truth in order to gain desires or avoid punishment. Lies are easy to tell: and if you are relatively good at speaking the truth to others, it is still far too easy to lie to yourself as you seek to prove that your sinfulness is not that extensive. That's the truth, and that truth hurts. It identifies us for who we are: sinners who easily deny our condition.

Here's the truth that heals: Jesus speaks the truth before Pilate. He speaks it though it leads Him to the cross so that you might be forgiven for all sins, all lies, all deceptions. He tells you the truth about your sin so that He might also tell you the truth that He's died to save you from it. That's the truth. That's your life.

27. Silent to the Slaughter

Mark 15:3-5

Monday

The interrogation stalls. The chief priests hurl all sorts of accusations against Jesus. We don't know what they all are. From elsewhere in the Passion accounts, we can guess they include "traitor," "insurrectionist," "liar," "tax-cheat," "vandal" and more. But whatever they say, Jesus gives no response. No matter how ludicrous the charge, He stays silent.

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent—he's said as much. But the Accused shows no hint of righteous indignation. Those who are falsely accused are usually adamant about their innocence, especially when a guilty verdict leads to crucifixion. But the King of Truth has stopped speaking. He won't say a word to defend Himself. He just stands there and takes it.

This fulfills prophecy: "He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). The Savior is still demonstrating that He is the promised Messiah.

But why the silence? Why doesn't He refute the charges? Would it be wrong for Him to defend Himself against the lies? Has He given up?

The silence is for you. It's for all sinners.

Jesus just stands there and takes it because He's standing in the place of sinners. He takes it because He's taking the sin upon Himself.

If they call Him a traitor, He is not; but He's taking the sin of betrayal to the cross so that traitors can be forgiven.

If they call Him a liar, He is not; but He's going to die for the sake of liars, that they might hear the truth of forgiveness in Him.

If they call Him a tax-cheat, He is not; but He's bearing the guilt of all who defraud, so that they might be forgiven.

If they call Him a vandal, He is not; but He's going to the cross for all those who have vandalized and destroyed the property of others.

If they call Him a murderer, adulterer, thief, pornographer, author of genocide, or any other sin (no matter how repulsive), He does not defend Himself. He's not guilty, but He's not there to defend Himself from these accusations. He's there to bear the sins to the cross and destroy them. He's there to suffer God's judgment for all of these sinners.

There may well be a sin or two that specifically gnaws at you—that you have trouble forgiving yourself for. Because of the guilt you feel, it will seem that God is silent to your pleas for forgiveness. But the Lord is not silent to your confession. His time for silence about sin was before Pilate, testimony that He was accepting the accusation, the sin and the guilt upon Himself. Whether your sin was specifically named, it has been borne by Jesus to the cross (Isaiah 53:4-5). Now, the Lord says to you, "For Jesus' sake, I do not condemn you for your sin—because I've already condemned *Him* for your sin. Because He's already suffered My wrath, I've only got grace left for you. You are forgiven. Go in peace."

28. Strange Bedfellows, and Other Lessons

Luke 23:7-12

Tuesday

Jesus undergoes His third trial. The first was before the chief priests, who want Him dead. The second was before Pilate, who wants Him to go away. Thus the third trial: hearing that Jesus is a Galilean, Pilate carts Him off to the ruler of Galilee.

And what does Herod want? A performance. He's heard much about Jesus and the miracles He's performed, and Herod's hoping for a little wonder-working. He's disappointed, though: Jesus declines to speak and refuses to perform any miracles or signs. It's not that He can't do it: sometimes people get the idea that Jesus can only perform miracles because those around Him have enough faith—as if their belief or desire somehow makes Him more powerful. But Jesus doesn't grow more or less mighty because of the level of faith around Him. He remains always the all-powerful Son of God; and He performs miracles according to His will, not the will of others.

Thus Herod is disappointed. He was hoping for a trained God on a leash, but instead gets a silent Savior. This is not a day for Jesus to fulfill prophecies of healings, but prophecies of suffering instead. Finally, Herod dresses Jesus in a splendid robe and sends him back to Pilate. Scripture records that, from that day forward, the two of them are friends.

We learn several lessons from Jesus' trial before Herod.

First off, it is easier to unite against something than it is to unite for something. Pilate and Herod have little in common and different agendas, but they are united against Jesus that day. So it remains: the Church can expect to be opposed by some strange coalitions that boast of their diversity to prove the righteousness of their cause. They may have nothing else in common than their opposition to the Gospel, and would otherwise work against one another.

It is polarizing to proclaim the Gospel, the means of grace included. Christians must acknowledge this, as did Jesus (Matthew 10:34-39). Where offense is caused while speaking the Gospel, you must be sure that it is not your sins (anger, impatience, cynicism, etc.) that offend, but the Gospel itself. Where it is the former, repent. Where it is the latter, do not.

Second, Herod is happy to have Jesus around as long as Jesus does what he wants. The same sinful nature is inside of you. There will be times when you'll be displeased or grieved that the Lord did not see fit to do things your way; and there will be times when you'll wish He'd go away so you could indulge in your favorite sin unseen. It's no better than Herod: there will be times when you want God on a leash, too.

Third, Herod dresses Him in a splendid robe before sending Him back to Pilate. Jesus is meant to resemble a king, perhaps a priest. Either way, Herod mocks Jesus, for he considers Him clearly to be no one of importance. You know better, because you live by faith—not sight. Jesus is the King of kings, the Priest and Sacrifice for the sins of the world. To defeat the evil that leads to such scorn, He remains silent before Herod and continues His way to the cross.

29. Sons of the Father

Matthew 27:15-26

Wednesday

His name is Barabbas, described in Matthew as a notorious prisoner. In Mark 15:7, he is known as an insurrectionist and a murderer. If he's your neighbor, you might as well be living next to a ticking time-bomb.

Pilate sees him as the solution. Per tradition, he's going to release a prisoner during the Passover festival. This time, he's going to let the people decide: do they want the man who kills or the Man who raises people from the dead?

It's a calculated risk. Barabbas may also be a hero to many in the crowd outside of Pilate's court that day. Once upon a time, Pilate raided the temple treasury to pay for a new aqueduct for Jerusalem. The people reacted violently, and it's thought by some that Barabbas was a leader in the uprising; thus, it makes sense that they would be happy to see him set free.

The chief priests urge the crowd to shout for Barabbas, an ironic testimony to their hypocrisy. They've justified the death of Jesus on the *possibility* that He *might* cause a rebellion against Rome, leading to violence (see devotion #19). Now, to make sure that Jesus is crucified, they urge the release of a man who *has* caused a rebellion against Rome, leading to violence.

The irony gets sharper. "Barabbas" is a title sometimes given to respected rabbis. "Bar" + "Abba" means "Son of the Father."

At the urging of the chief priests, the people call for the release of Barabbas. No wonder Pilate tries to wash his hands of the whole deal. The murderer is spared and the Life-giver is condemned. The insurrectionist is pardoned while the respected Rabbi is rejected.

The sinful son of the father is preferred over the only-begotten Son of the Father. It's the ultimate injustice.

It is also your justification.

Jesus is going to the cross for sinners. That includes Barabbas, who deserves death for sins and crimes. It includes you and me as well. Jesus goes willingly to the cross to be condemned for Barabbas' sins so that Barabbas can be pardoned—not by a mob or Pilate, but by God Himself. Whether or not Barabbas believes, we don't know. But you rejoice in this: Jesus has gone to the cross to be condemned for your sin, so that you stand pardoned and guiltless before God.

A few years ago, I served as pastor to an accused murderer during his retrial. I would tell him about the cross, of Christ's suffering and death for him. Each time, his reaction was the same: "I guess it could be worse." He missed the point. Jesus' suffering is not so hideous in order to make us feel better about ours. His death takes the place of the eternal death we deserve. He suffers the judgment for our sin, then shares it with us in Holy Baptism (Romans 6:4). The righteous One dies in the place of the unrighteous—in place of you and me. For the sake of His beloved Son, crucified and risen, the Father now says to you, "You are My beloved son. For Jesus' sake, in you I am well-pleased."

30. Satisfaction

Mark 15:12-15

Thursday

Pilate passes a verdict on Jesus. In fact, he does so three times during the Passion. Each time, he declares that Jesus is not guilty of wrongdoing. He's innocent. He should be set free.

Pilate is absolutely right. Jesus isn't guilty of heresy, because He *is* the Messiah, the King of truth and the Son of God. He isn't guilty of all the other charges, because the accusations were all false. After his gambit with Barabbas fails, Pilate demands from the crowd, "What evil has He done?"

The question goes unanswered. The time of reasoning is ended, and a mob mentality has taken over. "Crucify Him!" they shout. They want Jesus dead.

Pilate is about to oblige. After declaring Jesus innocent three times, he's going to sentence the innocent Man to death. He'll try one more thing: first, he'll have the innocent Man scourged to try to sway the crowd to pity. It's a terribly low point in Roman rule and justice: a ruler has an innocent man scourged and crucified. What's his reason? Our text says it is to satisfy the crowd. Given past events like the riots that ensued after he raided the temple treasury, Pilate is skating on thin ice with Rome. Another uprising could cost him his position, perhaps his life. "It's Him or me" seems a driving force in his decision-making, and the selfish sinner looks to save his own skin.

The chief priests are the ones who have whipped the crowd into a frenzy. Remember: they've charged Jesus with claiming to be the Messiah and the Son of God. Pilate sentences Jesus to death for being innocent, and the chief priests demand it because He's the Christ. They won't be satisfied with anything less.

Clearly, Jesus isn't crucified because of some colossal misunderstanding or because He's just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's being put to death for being exactly who He is.

And the crowd? Who knows why the people do what they do? Motivated by the chief priests, perhaps they've bought the theory that Jesus could provoke a rebellion and a Roman crackdown. Maybe they've idolized Barabbas and are willing to trade Jesus for their "hero" because he's a man of action, no matter how foolhardy. Maybe they're just shouting "Crucify Him!" because everybody else is. It doesn't matter: sins of ignorance can be just as damning. Crowds are strange. They just want to exert power to be satisfied.

And you? The temptation to save your own skin is a powerful one. The urge to lie, deny and cover up a sin can be overwhelming when you're about to be found out. Pride entices you to consider yourself far better than you are, the first step to the chief priests in the text. Popular opinion—be it media broadcasts or delegates at convention—can make it hard to stand for what is right. Jesus has no defenders on His way to the cross. You and I would be foolish to think we'd be any better.

The malice and wickedness of this moment is appalling, and it's alarming but true that the same sinful nature clings to us. But faith sees what eyes don't: this Passion is not so sinners might be satisfied. It is so that God's wrath might be satisfied in the death of His Son, so that you might have life in His name.

31. The King

Mark 15:16-19

Friday

The entire guard gathers. They clothe the Man in a robe, place a crown upon His head and a scepter in His hand. They shout out "Hail, King!" (It's that "Hail/rejoice" word again, like Judas used in devotion #16.) With that much information, it could sound like a coronation. It could sound like worship.

It is anything but. It's a mockery. The soldiers aren't there to testify that Jesus is King. They're there to prove He is not. They've just scourged Him mercilessly, separating flesh and blood from bone. Now they wrap a purple robe across His flayed back. They put a stout reed in His hand as His scepter. They plait a crown out of sharp thorns and jam it on His brow. Then they mock Him. It's their goal to reduce Him to nothing, a man beaten to a pulp in every way possible. It's their purpose to demonstrate that He is no king. What sort of king would allow himself to be beaten with his own scepter? No, the soldiers are out to prove that this Jesus isn't very much of a king at all.

Jesus could, of course, speak a Word and destroy them. Although they've done damage to His human body, His divinity is still completely intact. But the Lord continues to accept the blows and the abuse. The symbolism of this moment is startling.

When Adam fell into sin, God declared that the ground would be cursed with thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18). From then on, Adam would labor and sweat and suffer pain as long as he worked the ground, until he returned to the dust in death. As Jesus draws closer to the cross, He bears the curse upon His brow; He is wearing thorns as He is about to suffer the death for sin, to reverse the curse brought about by the first Adam.

He wears a purple robe. Purple was a rare color, reserved for wealth and royalty because of its prohibitive cost; for purple dye was derived from the blood of certain worms, crushed to provide the color. This is the same worm of Psalm 22:6, a prophecy of the crucifixion: "But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people." The Son of God is about to be crushed, His blood shed for the sins of the world.

He is beaten with the reed used as His scepter. He could give these soldiers a sound beating easily enough, but He hasn't come to crack heads. No, in His work of salvation, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (Isaiah 42:2-3). He hasn't come to snuff the soldiers. He's come to die for them, too.

Behold your King. He will always be mocked by the unbelieving world. But He wears that crown for you—He goes to the cross to die for sin, to reverse the curse of sin. He shares that with you in Holy Baptism, drowning your Old Adam and raising you up enough. He permits His body to be beaten and blood shed for you; so that, risen again, He might give you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. He is beaten with the reed because He does not add to His kingdom by force, but by His own sacrifice for you.

He is about to be led to His throne atop Calvary.

Hail, Jesus. Hail, our King.

32. King of Kings and Procurators

John 19:1-11

Saturday

Pilate is running out of options. John 19 begins with his sympathy gambit: in a twisted logic, Pilate has just had Jesus scourged because he finds no guilt in Him whatsoever. His “Behold the man!” appears an attempt to make the crowd decide that Jesus has suffered enough. It doesn’t work. The crowd still calls out “Crucify Him!” as Pilate declares Jesus innocent one last time. In Pilate’s mind, perhaps, the scourging will have a merciful effect, for the blood loss will shorten Jesus’ agony on the cross. But neither sympathy nor mercy is the purpose of the beating: it is, once again, to fulfill prophecy. Jesus is stricken, smitten and afflicted...by God...for us. By His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Pilate turns to the chief priests and attempts to pawn off the execution onto them. They refuse. They want Jesus dead, but they don’t want to get their hands dirty.

Who is left? With whom might Pilate bargain? There is only the condemned Man. Trying to provoke some response, some help, *something* from Jesus, Pilate demands, “Do You not know that I have authority to release You and authority to crucify You?” (John 19:10)

Jesus’ response is profoundly disturbing to the Roman: “You would have no authority over Me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered Me over to you has the greater sin” (John 19:11). The bloodied Man speaks His powerful Word. He tells Pilate that he’s not as “in charge” as he thinks. And if the accusations by the chief priests are true, then Pilate is about to execute the Ruler who has given him his authority.

One wonders if Pilate will reflect upon this later and find comfort. (Some church traditions teach that Pilate and his wife converted to Christianity later on.) Jesus has just told him that, while he plays an integral—and cowardly—part in this crucifixion, it does not take place without the Lord granting him the authority to sentence Him to death.

Here is comfort for you. As a Christian, you remain a citizen of a nation in this world. The Church has often co-existed uneasily with secular governments in history, and that unease grows today. It is easy for rulers to become idols. It can be easy to love and trust rulers more than God, because they can be seen and because they are instruments of God to provide for us. It can be easy to fear rulers more than God’s wrath; and the time may well come in our nation that Christians risk persecution if they are not willing to compromise the Lord’s Law and Gospel.

Either way, the Lord reminds us of our dual citizenship as He stands before Pilate. No matter our rulers’ religious views, we pray for them, honor them and obey them as long as we may do so without violating Scripture. We do so because they receive their authority from the Lord. We watch them, conscious that they are sinful like us and subject to incredible temptations of power: all the more reason to pray for those in authority.

Most of all, we rejoice in this: our help and salvation is in the name of Jesus: King of kings, Lord of lords, crucified, risen and coming again.

33. Carried Away

John 19:12-15

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

“We have no king but Caesar.” It’s a line you don’t expect to hear from the mouths of the chief priests. These are the same men who objected when Pilate’s guards marched with an image of Caesar on their standards because they considered such a graven image to be idolatry. If that’s how they felt about a picture, I daresay that they would be far more offended by Caesar’s claim to be a god.

But after all the seamy deception and dishonor of the past hours, they’ve come a long way. Their hatred for Christ the King is far greater than whatever shreds of consistency and integrity cling to their sinful natures. If it means getting Jesus crucified, they’re willing to say something that they probably never imagined they’d say: “We have no king but Caesar.”

They’ve gotten carried away. It’s more than that they’ve taken their idea way too far: this is the enslavement that sin brings. One transgression leads to another, which leads to another. Every temptation is meant to pull you further away from Christ until you don’t want to have anything to do with Him anymore—perhaps because of love for sin (“I’d rather have this sin than Christ’s forgiveness”), perhaps because of anger (“Who is God to punish me for this?”), perhaps because of despair (“I don’t think God could forgive me for what I’ve done”).

You see it in this world all the time. All sorts of addictions are a manifestation of the danger: one sample of methamphetamine or one click of a mouse button on a pornographic image leaves one looking for a little bit more, then a little bit more. The young are especially tempted to a little promiscuity in exchange for popularity, then a little bit more. A small offense on an irritating day paves the way to mean words that do damage and leave one asking, “Why did I say that? I didn’t mean that at all.” Missed communication opportunities pile up a wall that divides. Dulled consciences fail to react as sins mount. A little bit of false doctrine creates a toe-hold for more error, eventually leading the way to full heresy and away from faith.

None of this happens overnight. It’s gradual, frog-in-the-pot kind of stuff. That’s often how sin seeks to carry you away until you wonder if you could ever get back to God.

Here is hope: it is not a matter of you getting back to God, but the truth that Christ has come to you. He’s on His way to the cross because of sins like these, as well as all others. For you and your salvation, He’s borne your sin and gone farther with it than you’ve been carried up to now: He’s suffered the hell of being forsaken by His Father on the cross. All of your sins can’t take you farther than that.

But He wasn’t carried away. He went to the cross willingly; and having died for your sin, He is risen again. Romans 8:31-39 rightly proclaims that nothing can separate you from Him, because He’s defeated every enemy. Rejoice in God’s gift of repentance and confess your sins; for rather than let you be carried away by sin, Christ has taken your place on the cross to gather you in.

34. Blood

Matthew 27:24-31

Monday

The contrast in the two statements is startling.

First, there's Pilate: "I am innocent of this man's blood." Pilate wants to be innocent. He wants nothing to do with Jesus' death. His wife has warned him to have nothing to do with it, and he knows that this condemnation is being extorted from him. He's no stranger to bloodshed, but he wants nothing to do with this one. He's out of options, though: he's made the political calculations and realizes that he can't spare Jesus without losing himself. Jesus has to die.

If Pilate isn't going to prevent that, he can try to salve his conscience by averting the blame. So he washes his hands with water and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood." Ah, the dream of the sinner: "I'm not guilty because I say so." That's called "self-justification." Say it often enough, and you might even believe it. Any prison chaplain will tell you that "prisons are full of innocent people—just ask 'em." But your verdict doesn't hold up before God: you can't speak your sins away.

If Pilate's statement is pitiful wishful thinking, the crowd's is just appalling: "Let His blood be on us and our children." So certain are they that they want Jesus dead that they're more than willing to take responsibility. For the moment, anyway, they're happy to boast that they've had a part in this crucifixion. In fact, they're even willing for their children to share in the responsibility.

It's another angle that the sinful flesh takes: if you can't get rid of your sin, revel in it. Claim that you did it for noble reasons. Say that you did it for the children. Declare your "ownership" and talk about how it's made you a better person. Persuade yourself that wasn't such a bad thing to do; that it all worked out for the best, or that it will. But it won't.

Your sinful flesh doesn't care if you sound like Pilate or like the crowd. It doesn't care if you're denying your sin or boasting in it, because neither one is repentance. Both are ways of evading responsibility, of avoiding some of the words that Old Adam hates to hear, for you may speak them only by the work of the Holy Spirit: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13)

Here's what your sinful flesh hates to hear even more: you can't speak away your sins, but Jesus can. The battered One who stands next to Pilate could speak a Word and send His enemies into oblivion; instead, He meekly endures the jeers, the treachery and the rejection. He is going from there to the cross to die in your place, for your sins. Now He says, "You're not guilty anymore because *I* say so." That's the miracle of Holy Absolution.

You can't wash your sins away with a little water, but Jesus can. By water and the Word, He joins you to His death and raises you up a new creation. That's the miracle of Holy Baptism.

And while the crowd's "Let His blood be on us and our children" was a statement of defiance against God, the Lord has better use of His blood for you: "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Thus the miracle of His Supper, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

35. Green Wood

Luke 23:26-31

Tuesday

Just after the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus mourns that the city will soon be destroyed: her enemies will surround her until she falls. Why is this to happen? Because "you did not know the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:44).

The same theme emerges as Jesus is led to Calvary. Women weep along the way for Jesus, but He tells them to weep for themselves. Things will only get worse. Green wood does not catch fire easily, but once the "life" has left the wood, it catches fire and destruction spreads rapidly. On this day in Jerusalem, the Life is still there: He's being led to the cross and His death. He has been rejected, but the Son of God is still present in that place for their good. But what will happen in the future there because He is rejected? If Jerusalem's inhabitants reject the Gospel, then all that is left for them is Law. Along with eternal consequences, zealots will see their works as the only way to salvation, and that salvation will include the work of rebellion against Rome. Roman armies, led by Titus, will surround the city. The siege will be so terrible that the "blessed" of women will be those who have no children, because they will not witness their starvation. Those daughters of Jerusalem who try to escape the city will have their hands amputated by Roman troops before they are returned to the city, only to increase the suffering there even more. The citizens will pray for the mountains to fall them, but there will be no relief.

That horror lies forty years in the distance; but apart from Christ, there is eventually only death.

We soberly recognize that, when a nation no longer tolerates the Gospel, it will soon reject the Law of God. Once the Law is rejected, evil abounds and such kingdoms have fallen throughout history. All of that is in the hands of the Lord who would spare Sodom for the sake of ten righteous (Genesis 18). We pray for our own nation, her leaders and citizens; and we give thanks that our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth (Psalm 124:8).

On an individual level, death comes to us all. It is the devil's last chance and greatest weapon by which he can seduce us away from the Lord and His grace. It is at the end of life that we are far more dry wood than green, and the terrors of those days can be fearful. This is why you rejoice that you do not miss the day of the Lord's visitation to you. The One who rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is the same One who trudges to Calvary. He is the same One who, risen from the dead, visits you. He visits you in His Word and Supper, as really present as He was on the cross. He tells you that your sins are forgiven, that the grave's bonds are broken and death has no hold on you. He tells you that the devil is defeated, that his whispers of doom are lies—and no match for the Lord's true declaration that you are forgiven. He tells you that while your sin-plagued flesh must fail unless He returns, that is not the end. Because He took His flesh and blood to the cross, He will raise you up for eternal life. Yours is not an end of weeping and lamentation. In Christ, it is the eternal day of resurrection, the marriage feast of the Lamb.

36. Left and Right of the King

Mark 15:21-27

Wednesday

In this reading, we witness once again how backwards sinners are when it comes to an understanding of glory. Back in the first devotion, we noted that Jesus predicted His death to the disciples at least three times; and each time, the disciples failed to comprehend what He was saying. We hear of the third time in Matthew 20, after which the mother of James and John came forward with a request: “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom” (Matthew 20:21). In your typical court, these would be the positions of power, a king’s most valued advisors.

Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father” (Matthew 20:22-23)

The rest of the disciples were indignant, prompting Jesus to tell them that greatness is found in service, and “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

Now on Calvary, the Son of Man is nailed to a cross. The world sees a criminal undergoing an execution, a pitiful end to one run afoul with the law. It sees a man to be avoided, one who is despised, rejected and scorned. He is not alone: with Him, they crucify two robbers...one on His right and one on His left.

Faith, behold your King. His crown is thorns, not gold or precious stones. His robe is stripped from Him and gambled away. His throne is a cross raised up on a hill, and those who call Him “king” there do so only to mock Him. But that is your King, doing exactly what He has come to do. He has come not to be served, but to serve; and He is on the cross according to His Father’s will, in service to mankind. He has come to give His life as a ransom for many: this King does not increase His citizenry by conquering nations and forcing allegiance at the point of a sword. He makes disciples of all nations by shedding His blood to redeem them from sin. The world sees a waste to be ignored; but on the cross, faith beholds the King in His glory.

The robbers who flank Him are fitting companions, for they are sinners whose guilt is evident. One will die repentant, the other unbelieving: Christ will die for them both, for He is on that cross for all.

As for you, do not be misled to think that the things of God will appear glorious by man’s terms in this world. There is great glory in a diminished, rural congregation gathered around His Word and Sacraments, because the King is present with them there. There is great glory in the pure proclamation of the Gospel: although it appears no more helpful to the world than a crucified man, it is God’s Word which gives life and salvation. There is even glory in repentance: for by God’s grace, the penitent turns away from sinners ideas of worldly glory; and only by faith he looks to the cross and says, “There is my King, my Savior.”

37. The First Word: Forgiveness

Luke 23:34

Thursday

When I read through Luther’s commentary on Genesis 1 and 2, I’m left with a sad sense of “what might have been.” He writes about the perfection of creation, and especially the perfection of sinless man before the fall. Created in the image of God, Adam and Eve naturally understood glory in God’s terms. They naturally desired to serve one another—selfishness wasn’t within their thoughts. Furthermore, they were perfect in body, free from sickness, pain, injury or death. They were also perfect in mind: not only were they subject to neither mental illness or forgetfulness, but they comprehended far more than we are able to. It’s often said that we human beings use only 10% of our brain; in Eden, the other 90% was working perfectly and sinlessly. So when Luther writes about Adam’s perfect thinking, he notes that our minds are damaged by sin so much that we cannot even comprehend how much we’ve lost. We don’t know what holiness is like, and we can’t comprehend our terrible is our sin.

On Calvary, the perfect Man is crucified. As the Son of God, He is certainly all-knowing; and as sinless man, His human mind is unencumbered by sin. As the Word made flesh, He has worked—body and mind—to seek, serve and save the lost.

Sinful man has immobilized the Savior on the cross. The hands that once touched to heal are now nailed to wood, as are the feet that once walked on water to terrified disciples. The world doesn’t want the Savior doing good any more.

But His tongue is free, and the Lord saves by His Word. Even now, He speaks words of grace—and He speaks them for His enemies: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

It’s true: they don’t know what they are doing. Why else would so many delight in the brutal execution of a plainly innocent Man? Why else would they crucify the Son of God? Nowhere is the blindness of sin more evident than on Calvary. Nowhere else is the self-destructive nature of sin more on display. The Christ has come to save, and sinners make Him suffer for it cruelly as they put Him to death. Blind in sin, they have no conception of holiness—or of the depth of their own evil. They don’t know what they’re doing. They simply can’t, and it leads them to the ultimate act of rebellion against God: killing Him.

But it is also true, these words which Jesus speaks: He speaks that they might be forgiven, declaring that He dies for their sins, too.

He dies for your sins, too. Conceived and born in sin, you are unable to comprehend God’s holiness or sin’s malice. If you did, your sinfulness would terrorize you far more than it does. You may also be at the point in life where you can sense the deepening frailty of your mind. But by the grace of God, you trust His Word that you’re sinful and in need of forgiveness. You know that the One on the cross is afflicted for you, so that you might be forgiven—healed in body, mind and soul. Delivered from sin for eternity. For now, you see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. For where you do not know, the Lord still knows you—and He knows you to be fully righteous for Jesus’ sake.

38. I. N. R. I.

John 19:19-22

Friday

I. N. R. I.

Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum.

In English, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” It’s the sign that Pilate has placed above Jesus on the cross. For the Romans, it’s a common practice at a crucifixion: a sign is placed above the head of the victim to tell passersby what crime he has committed, and to discourage them from doing the same.

The official charge against Jesus, then, is that He is the King of the Jews. That’s why He is crucified. The chief priests argue with Pilate to change it, so that the charge is that Jesus said He was the King of the Jews, but really wasn’t. Pilate doesn’t budge, but instead declares, “What I have written, I have written.”

We don’t know Pilate’s motivation. We don’t know if it’s bad humor or beginnings of repentance or just a desire to stick it to his tormenters. But whatever his reasons, the sign declares some profound truths.

For one, just like all his three verdicts of “not guilty” upon Christ, the sign makes it clear that there is no misunderstanding. Jesus is crucified for being exactly who He is: the long-awaited King. The chief priests want the sign modified because they don’t believe He is the King—but their unbelief doesn’t change who He truly is. The Lord remains the Lord, whether people believe in Him or not.

For another, the sign is intended to discourage others from committing the same crime. Heed this well: according to this sign, all those who claim to be the King will die. There is an eternal truth proclaimed here, because Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son. He is the Savior—the Way, the Truth and the Life. Salvation is found in Him alone.

Therefore, anyone else who claims the same—to be the King who saves—will die, as will any who follows him.

This is certainly true of all false teachers and messiahs who have declared a different way of salvation: we do not say this with glee, but only to give Christ due glory and revert to the truth that salvation is found in Him alone.

But there is a threat closer to home. Remember the temptation that the serpent whispered to Adam and Eve in the Garden: “You will be like God.” That’s the desire of the sinful nature that still clings so closely to you and me. To defy God’s law and willfully sin is to say, “I make my laws—I’m the king!” To believe that we save ourselves by our works, our intentions, our decisions or anything else is to say, “I make my own gospel, because I’m my king!” But the one who claims to be the King who saves can read the sentence on the cross: death. Not just physical, but also eternal.

That’s why you rejoice in Jesus, the One on the cross for being the King. He dies that death in your place, so that He might put to death that sinful nature in you that desires to be your ruler. He suffers death and hell on that cross—your death and hell for your sin.

The King dies to give you life—life in His kingdom forever. So it is written. So it is true.

39. Ironies

Matthew 27:39-43

Saturday

The ironies are stunning and bitter.

The crowds shout, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matthew 27:40). It’s the voice of unbelief. They don’t believe that He’s the Son of God. They don’t believe He can save Himself. They don’t believe He can come down from the cross. If He truly were the Son of God, wouldn’t He do just that?

No, and this is where their unbelief especially manifests itself. *Because* He is the Son of God, He isn’t going to save Himself. Instead, He is going to die to save them. He *isn’t* going to come down from the cross precisely because He *is* the Son of God. His glory is in service and sacrifice. He works His power chiefly in mercy and pity.

But unbelief denies all that. It calls out to Jesus, “Save Yourself.”

And thus it is left to the unbeliever to save himself. But only death awaits.

The chief priests jeer, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, ‘I am the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:42-43). They don’t believe either, but they say what would make them believe: if Jesus would come down from the cross, they would believe in Him. *If the Savior abandoned the act of saving, then they would believe He was the Savior!* But this fits their theology: they believe they’re saved by works. They believe that the Savior should save Himself by works. Save yourself, and I’ll save me: that’s the idea behind works-righteousness. If Jesus comes down from the cross, He fits their ideas of what a Savior should be.

If He doesn’t, then they’ve got Him right where they want Him.

There’s another great irony in our text: they are fulfilling prophecy. They are acting out the part of the enemies of the Messiah in Psalm 22: “All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; ‘He trusts in the LORD; let Him deliver Him; let Him rescue Him, for He delights in Him!’” (Psalm 22:7-8). But the LORD doesn’t rescue Him: He is not on the cross to be rescued, but to rescue others by His sacrifice.

And once again, He is on that cross willingly. The crowds and priests might believe they’ve got Him right where they want Him, but it would not be so if it were not His own will.

This leads us to an irony of Gospel, your comfort at this ugly sight: no matter the jeers and the unbelief, the blood and the scorn, on the cross Jesus is right where you want Him. He is right where you need Him. By the Law of God, you are well aware that you cannot save yourself. Dead in sin, you need to be raised to life. The Lord is on that cross to die your death to sin, then to rise again—so that He might join you to His death and resurrection in Baptism. He did not save Himself so that He might save you. Now, in His means of grace, He remains with you so that you might have life in Him forever.

40. The Second Word: Paradise Restored

Sunday of the Passion

Luke 23:36-43

Paradise. It's a long way from the hill called Golgotha, "the place of the skull." I don't think that anyone looks at the Lord on the cross and thinks anything close to "Paradise." Anything is an improvement on this scene. Anything would be a relief from the spectacle of three tortured, dying men.

But Jesus speaks of Paradise to indicate far more than just relief. He's referring to heaven, of course, but there's a richness to this reference. "Paradise" is originally a Persian word that means "garden;" and by the time of Jesus' birth, the Septuagint (the Old Testament translated into Greek) used "Paradise" to indicate specifically the Garden of Eden.

Theologically, Eden is unreachable far from Golgotha. In Eden, God could walk with man, present with unhidden glory. When Adam and Eve fall into sin, God seeks them out and speaks to promise the Savior. On Golgotha, fallen man puts God, the Savior, to death. Eden is a lush garden, and in the center of it stands the Tree of Life. Hearing the Gospel accounts, one only imagines Golgotha as a desolate hilltop, in the midst of which is the cross and the dying Son of God.

Eden is heaven on earth—God and righteous man together. Golgotha is nearly hell as man tries to kill God and banish Him from their presence.

But it's not quite hell on that hilltop, because Jesus is still there speaking gracious words. His Word works faith; and despite all of the mockery and violence, a miracle occurs. One of the robbers repents of his sin and makes a faithful confession: "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

One might sneer that the robber is simply caving to desperation and making his 11th hour confession, that he regards Jesus as his only hope left and thus casts wildly for help. Our response is simple. The robber is convicted by the Law: far better than most, he is aware that he's sinful and deserves only wrath. He *does* regard Jesus as his only hope left, because that is true: not just for him, but for all. This is a miraculous confession: he looks at the Man hanging next to him, far more bloodied and weak, and declares Him to be the King who can save.

If there's any further doubt as to the robber's intentions, Jesus takes them away. He who knows the heart says, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

While we do not see Jesus in a glorious kingdom on Golgotha, there He is still the King. And wherever the King is, there is also His kingdom of grace. He forgives the robber his sins, for Jesus bears them on His own shoulders; and He declares what this means: for the robber, the desolate world of sin is almost over, but hell is not for him. Instead, for Jesus' sake—and by Jesus' promise, the Garden of Eden is restored. The robber will be in God's glorious presence, sinless, righteous and *alive* forever. All that was lost in Eden is his again, because the second Adam is dying to undo the sin of the first.

That Paradise is restored for you, too. You don't see it yet, but this you know by the grace of God: that cross on Golgotha is the Tree of Life. On it, Jesus has regained Paradise for you.

41. The Third Word: Mother and Son

Monday

John 19:25-27

Mary stands beneath the cross. Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2:35) of her anguish is fulfilled, that a sword would pierce her heart also. The Scriptures do not say, but one wonders what runs through her mind: years before, she wrapped her Creator in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger—a paradox beyond comprehension, to be sure. This is another one: now, she sees the Author of Life breathing His last and about to die. No matter how He looks, He is still her Son. And God's Son. And the Savior.

We don't know what Mary thinks, but we do know what Jesus does. Seeing her standing below the cross with John, He says, "Woman, behold, your son!" And to John, "Behold, your mother!" Even crucified, the Lord still speaks to keep His holy Law. The Fourth Commandment orders, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother." With some of His final words, Jesus honors His mother. He commends her to the care of a beloved disciple who will see to her temporal needs and tell her His life-giving Word. He is to care for her, and she is to be cared for by him.

The Son is dying. The mother comes. And it is the Son who acts in service to His mother. Even then, Jesus keeps His holy Law to credit you with His perfect righteousness.

Among others, Johann Gerhard has noted that Mary serves us as a portrayal of the Church. As Christ was born of her, so Christians are born in the Church by water and the Word. In fact, we confess in the Large Catechism (Creed, 3rd Article, ¶42) that the Church gives birth to every believer through God's Word.

Like Mary, the Church remains beneath the cross. We look at the One who hangs there and acknowledge that He is Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, Son of Man and Son of God. The cross is the King's throne on earth—a position of shame to sinful man, but the glory of Christ in service to all as He sacrifices Himself for the sins of the world.

As Jesus commended Mary to John, so He commends His Church to the Ministry of the Word. We are not left to fend for ourselves, to scratch out a living until He returns. We are not abandoned or forsaken, because we still have the Lord's Word. By that holy Word, He continues to give us grace and salvation. By that Word, the Incarnate Word remains present with His people.

As we are given the Word for life, so it is entrusted to us that we might keep it, treasure it and proclaim it. A church that does not hold fast to the Word will turn to other words instead, following manmade doctrines and rationales that lead them away from the Gospel. Such a church no longer stands beneath the cross, but looks for another savior—one more glorious in man's terms, one less bloodied and unappealing. But that is a different savior, one that cannot save.

So Jesus entrusts His vulnerable mother to an apostle who will speak to her His Word; and He commends His vulnerable Bride to His Word so that she might remain. For there, in His Word, we hear of Christ, the Son of the Living God; crucified, risen and coming again. And defended by this Word, the gates of hell shall not prevail against the bride of Christ.

42. The Fourth Word: God, Forsaken

Matthew 27:46-47

Tuesday

Even so near His death, the Lord is praying the psalms: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” So begins Psalm 22, which so graphically prophesies the crucifixion. It continues: “Why are You so far from saving Me, from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry by day, but You do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.”

There is night on Calvary in the midst of day: the sun has disappeared for the past three hours, for this is no place for light to shine. The Son of God is hanging on the cross, despised and rejected by men. But while that is fulfillment of prophecy, it is not man’s rejection that saves you. That is not the Gospel.

Here is the Gospel at its most raw: after an eternity of the closest communion as two persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father does not answer the cries of His beloved Son. The Son is forsaken by the Father on the cross.

The Father damns the Son for the sins of the world. As St. Paul later writes, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him *to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:20-21).

To phrase it one more way, the Son endures hell for those three hours of darkness. This is the outer darkness, the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, because the Father is no longer present for the Son. On the cross, Jesus is God-forsaken. For you, He is God, forsaken.

So when you are tempted to consider sin trivial or comfortable, set your eyes upon the cross. The afflictions that are visible from the cruelty of man are horrific enough, but are only a hint of the suffering that comes with God’s wrath for sin. Without the Lord’s presence, there is no light or life or any good thing; and that is hell. The Savior does not hang there only for the whoppers, the big sins that even you consider to be bad; He suffers there even for the little ones that you’re willing to indulge because they make your day a little easier and sweeter. When tempted to believe that sin is no big deal, mark the Sacrifice that is made to save you. It is not that sin carries no price tag, but that the terrible price has been paid by Christ Jesus for you.

And yet, Christ’s suffering is not there to burden you with guilt; rather, He is on the cross to relieve you of the entire load. Yes, the price to be paid for sin is a terrible one, for the wages of sin is death—not just the physical end of a body, but the eternal separation from God and His grace. The price is a terrible one, but the point of the cross is that Christ pays it for you. Because God made Him to be sin who knew no sin for you, He now knows no sin in you: He sees you clothed in Christ’s righteousness. Because God expended His wrath for sin on His Son at the cross, He has no wrath left for you—only grace, mercy and every blessing. Because Jesus was forsaken on the cross for your sin, you will never be forsaken by God.

Jesus’ God-forsaken cry is not the final Word—for Him or for you. The final Word is mercy and grace, for the Savior conquers sin and death.

43. The Fifth Word: Thirst

John 19:28

Wednesday

“I thirst.”

It’s no surprise. Hard labor will do that. So will blood loss. The sufferings of Jesus over the past hours will certainly lead to dehydration. It is no surprise that He is thirsty.

He says this to fulfill the Scriptures, and perhaps this goes back to Psalm 22 once again: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death” (Psalm 22:14-15). This is no small reason to give thanks: God is thirsty, and He is thirsty because He has become flesh that can be thirsty, in order to bear your sins to the cross.

Perhaps we can push this a little bit more. Without water, life is impossible. Without water, there is only death. The Lord as Shepherd in Psalm 23 does *not* lead His people to dry, burning sands, but beside still waters. This last Word of Christ is found only in the Gospel of John; and so is another well-known account in John 4. Outside the Samaritan town of Sychar, Jesus meets a woman who comes to draw water from the well. She comes alone, making it a pretty good bet that she’s a social outcast. She’s been married five times and is currently living—unmarried—with a sixth. Whatever sins she has committed, and whatever has been done to her, she’s had a rough go.

She’d be forgotten in history, except that she meets Jesus; and the Savior says to her, “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). The living water of which Jesus speaks is forgiveness, and He speaks that forgiveness to the woman that day. Forgiveness is hers because He is going to bear her sin to the cross: on Calvary, the sinless Son of God is judged for fornication, adultery and all sorts of squalid sins—because He is condemned in her place.

In John 7, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths, as the Jews remember their wanderings in the wilderness. It was an arid desert, where the Lord provided water miraculously at times (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:8). On the great day of the feast, Jesus stands and declares, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38). There is no relief, no life to be found by following the rules of the Pharisees, by working one’s way for salvation. For Jesus’ sake, the Spirit delivers living water, grace and salvation—because of the Son’s work of redemption on the cross.

Thus when Jesus says, “I thirst,” we marvel that He endures that physical suffering for our benefit. But beyond that is this awesome truth to ponder: Jesus’ thirst goes far beyond His tongue stuck to His jaws. So that you might be alive in Him, He is dead before His Father in heaven. There is no life for Him as He endures the Father’s judgment for the Samaritan woman, the Pharisees and you. But because He has done so, you will never be thirsty again.

44. Sixth and Seventh: The Last Word

John 19:30 and Luke 23:46

Maundy Thursday

“It is finished.”

Bear with me for a moment of Greek grammar. In Greek, “it is finished” is all one word in the perfect tense. That matters: the Greek perfect tense indicates that an action has been completed, but the effects of that action go on. So, if “I have stopped the ball,” it’s not rolling anymore.

So when Jesus says, “It is finished,” then it’s finished; and this is cause to rejoice. It is not that Jesus is saying His life is over: if that’s finished, you have no hope. Likewise, if He’s announcing the end of God’s mercy, then you’re left only with despair.

You rejoice that His announcement is far different news, informed by His final words from the cross: “Father, into Your hands I commit my Spirit!” Yet again, Jesus prays the psalms from the cross, this time the first half of Psalm 31:5.

The second half of the verse proclaims, “You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

What is finished? The time of God-forsakenness, the condemnation of Jesus for the sin of the world. That is what is done. Abandoned by God, Jesus has suffered hell on the cross during those hours of darkness. But now, before His last breath, that desolation is over. He commits His spirit to His Father—He announces that God, always faithful, has redeemed Him.

The price is paid. The sacrifice is finished. There is nothing else left to be done. When Jesus descends into hell, it will not be to suffer more, but to proclaim His victory to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:18-19). Risen again, He does not declare, “My part is over, and now your work of earning salvation has begun.” No, it is finished. And the effects continue.

The sacrifice made by Christ on the cross is once for all—once for all time, once for all sinners. There is nothing left to be done. There will not be a time when His forgiveness runs out. There will not be a time when He requires that you save yourself by your own doing. The price is paid. It is won and done.

Now, for the sake of Jesus, you pray, “Into Your hand I commit My spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” What comfort, for death looks like the finish. It looks like the end, since you and I see the grave give none back. It appears to the eye as the ultimate enemy, because it always wins: humanity suffers a 100% morality rate (Elijah and Enoch excepted), and many of your daily, mundane decisions—like when to pull into traffic or whether to eat the cheese that’s been in the refrigerator for a long time—are made to postpone death as long as possible. You’re no match for death: it’ll beat you every time.

But death is no match for Christ; and His “It is finished” also announces the end of death’s reign. Now, it is an enemy under His feet—one which He uses for now to deliver you from a world of sin to life everlasting. In Christ, your spirit is committed to God, for you are redeemed. Death does not have the last word. Christ does; and with it He proclaims eternal life for you.

45. Positive Identification

Mark 15:37-39

Good Friday

The Gospel of Mark begins, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). It’s quite a start: from first sentence of the book, you know the identity of Jesus.

Those in the Gospel do not; and one thing to look for as you read through Mark is who Jesus is perceived to be. Some, like Herod, are just plain wrong (Mark 6:14). Some, like the brutal soldiers of the Praetorian guard, are right, but don’t know it (Mark 15:18). Evil spirits, on the other hand, are right and know it (Mark 1:24); but they don’t like it one bit. Some, like Pilate, are right and don’t care (Mark 15:26).

Then there’s Peter back in Mark 8:27-33, who manages to be blessedly right and diabolically wrong in a matter of six verses (cf. devotion #17).

Apart from Christ Himself, if you want the best confession of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, my money is on the centurion at the cross who says, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” Here’s why: there is nothing at all about Jesus’ appearance that makes Him appear to be divine. He hasn’t performed any miracles from the cross or worked any wonders. He hasn’t even done anything to ease His own suffering. There is nothing that the centurion has seen during trial or crucifixion to make him think Jesus is divine at all; and now, all he sees is a bloodied corpse on a cross. So what does the centurion have as the basis for his statement? The Word. We know that he’s heard Jesus speak from the cross, words of grace and deliverance. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17). That’s what he has to go on when he calls Jesus “the Son of God.” Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

The centurion’s confession remains a scandal, a stumbling-block for many. Some “Christian” theologians have declared the cross to be far too barbaric a means for our redemption, saying that it’s incompatible with the Christian faith; out of Christian love and faithful to the Word, we must say that their argument places them outside of Christianity. Among many Christians, the crucifixion is a necessary doctrine, but one to be kept in a closet. The crucifixion is not an attractive selling point either to unbelievers or those who are looking for help with daily life. If you want to convince people that Jesus is the Son of God, it’s far better to go with His power and majesty, not His humiliation and death.

It’s the same error as Peter’s: people want Jesus who works wonders and performs miracles. They don’t so much want the Jesus who bows His head and meekly dies for the sins of the world.

That’s quite foreign to the truth of St. Paul, who purposed to preach “only Christ and Him crucified,” though he knew it was a stumbling-block to many (1 Corinthians 1:23). He knew that evangelism isn’t about Christians arguing people into faith, but speaking the Word through which the Holy Spirit calls.

As Christians, we learn from the centurion, who looks at the cross and says, “I believe.” In the darkness of Good Friday, when we see our Lord dead and all seems lost, we say, “Behold, our King—the Son of God, our life and our salvation.

46. From the Side

Saturday

John 19:31-37

“It is not good that the man should be alone,” declared the Lord at the Creation (Genesis 2:18). The Lord is not about loneliness and isolation. He is about communion, family, gathering. Flocks, not solo sheep. Royal priesthood, not individual priests. It was not good that man should be alone. “So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.”

While Adam slept his deep sleep, the Lord created his bride out of his side. They were created to be husband and wife, to complement and serve one another. Together, they were to eat from the Tree of Life and avoid the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Together, they fell into sin and lost Paradise for all.

In a bit of schmaltz, some have offered that Eve was created from Adam’s side because she was always to be close to his heart. Throughout history, however, many have pointed from the creation of Eve to Christ on the cross.

He has breathed His last, and now He sleeps the deep sleep of death. When Pilate orders that the prisoners’ legs be broken, Jesus is spared because He is clearly dead. Instead, soldiers pierce His side with a spear. This fulfills prophecy (Psalm 34:20; Zechariah 12:10), as the Lord provides mercy and grace through the One who is pierced. It also provides a beautiful picture of the Second Adam’s work, and the creation of His bride, the Church.

When Jesus’ side is pierced, blood and water flow. St. John writes elsewhere, “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). As we spoke of earlier (devotion #12), water and blood are consistent signs of God’s grace in the Scriptures. We have salvation because we are washed in the blood of Christ. The Spirit works through the waters of Holy Baptism to cleanse us of sin and bring us into the Church. Or, as we hear in Ephesians, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Eve, the mother of all the living, was created out of the First Adam’s side as he slept. The Church, the mother of all those alive in Christ (see devotion #41), is created by blood and water as it flowed from the Second Adam’s side. He still washes clean with water. He still delivers His blood and body in the Supper to forgive sins and strengthen faith.

For His sake, you are forgiven. For His sake, no matter your sin, you are holy and blameless in the sight of God. And while you do not see Him any more than the disciples did on the day after His death, you hear His Word. You’re His beloved child, a member of the bride of Christ.

Tomorrow and forever, let alleluias ring.