

Awaken Your Heart Anew to Christ

Lent 2025

"Yet even now," declares the LORD,

"return to me with all your heart,

with fasting, with weeping,

and with mourning;

and you will come

the LORD your God, gracious

and merciful.

and about his steadfast love;

and he relents over disaster."

Joel 2:12-13



"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

March 5 - Ash Wednesday

Introduction

by Pastor Suzanne Hart



Lenten Devotional 2025

*"Yet even now," declares the LORD,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments."*

*Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.*

- Joel 2:12-13

The winter days here in Michigan are short and often grey and dreary; and though the shortest day of the year was back on December 21, we often don't notice the days beginning to lengthen until around March 1, the date when meteorological spring begins. The word Lent comes from an Old English word that means "to lengthen." As the days begin to lengthen in the springtime and the hope of sun and new life begins to grow, so lent is a time set aside by the church to "lengthen our souls" and to get ready for the profound hope and new life of the Easter miracle. We do this by trying to cut through the hard layers of sin, complacency and hurt that have become layered over our hearts - layers that keep us from a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. On this day the burned ashes of our victorious Palm Sunday palms are traced on our foreheads in the shape of the cross reminding us that "we are dust and that to dust we shall return." We are reminded of our mortality

and that apart from Jesus who died on the cross for us - we have no hope. Until we recognize the despair of our situation, we can never really understand how much we need a Savior.

Lent is a time for repentance. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* (#88) reminds us, genuine repentance involves two things: “the dying-away of the old self, and the rising-to-life of the new.” Repentance digs beneath the surface of our souls and cuts deep into our hearts. Through the prophet Joel, God let us know how much he desires us to open our hearts to him. He doesn’t want us to be content with looking good on the outside, hiding under all those false layers; he wants us to return to him and be honest - with fasting, weeping and mourning in sorrow for our sins. Lent is an invitation to honesty, recognizing that as we take the scary step to open our true hearts, God “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;” he does not give us what we deserve, but instead gives us his Son so we can live forever.

This Lenten devotional is an invitation to take the first step of our Lenten journey together - to return to God with all our hearts and to allow his Spirit to lengthen our souls. May God be with us all as we take these steps toward Jesus who stepped down from heaven to earth to save us.

In the Sweet Name of Jesus,

Pastor Suzanne

The Rev. Suzanne Hart

Interim Pastor of Transition and Discipleship

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." For the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

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"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

Sunday, March 9

Jesus is Real

by Barb Kiekintveld



That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. - 1 John 1:1-4

Our son recently told us that he has spotted an owl a couple of times in a certain location while out for some early morning hikes. I know he has seen it because I trust what he tells me - even though I haven't seen it myself. This is a simple example of an eyewitness account.

I have been a Jesus follower for a long time, and I still find the whole idea of Jesus astounding. God came to us himself in human form. I have heard it my entire life, but I still find it incredible. The story of the life of Jesus is remarkable as well. What he taught. The way he treated people. The miracles. The Bible tells us he even brought dead people back to life! Eventually Jesus was killed on a cross and three days later God raised him back to life!

Is this believable? How do we know all this is true? These are good questions to ask.

One bedrock to the truth on which we can stand is that there are numerous eyewitness accounts about Jesus. These were carefully recorded and passed down to us. There are even accounts in

secular writings. Many, many people saw Jesus, heard Jesus, and touched Jesus. Thousands encountered Jesus throughout his lifetime. The Bible records that as many as 500 people saw him after his resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:6).

As Jesus left his disciples he said, “You will be my witnesses.” Jesus’ followers were witnesses to his life, death, and resurrection. They told their stories, boldly empowered by the Holy Spirit. John is proclaiming in this passage what he himself saw and heard and touched so that we can believe.

As we contemplate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus during this season of Lent, we can once again anchor ourselves in these truths. God is real. Jesus came in the flesh. Because of this, if we believe, we can have fellowship with God and with others and can look forward to someday living with God for all eternity. If we have this faith and have experienced the living Jesus, it is now our turn to proclaim it to others!

Prayer: Jesus, we believe you are real! We are amazed that you would come to us, live among us, and die for us. We want to live in your resurrection power. Please flow through us so we will proclaim to others with our lives and with our words who you are. Amen.



"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

Sunday, March 16
Hope Guarded by God
by Rachel Bartsch

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... - 1 Peter 1:3-8

My husband had grandparents that instead of giving him lavish toys on his birthday, they would contribute to an account that accumulated money for him over time. They did this for my husband so that when he became college-aged he could use this money to pay for school or to aid him in his transition from youth to adulthood. To a six-year-old, this didn't seem exciting, but to a now twenty-three-year-old, this was the best gift. The passages in 1 Peter remind me of this. God has an inheritance for you. Peter describes this inheritance as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. The Lord himself is guarding it for you in heaven so that it will be ready for you when the time comes. Even though you face trials now, there is hope waiting for you. Peter also faced trials, both internally and from the outside. He was imprisoned for speaking about his faith, and he denied Jesus because of his pride. Trials

refine us, strengthening our faith and drawing us closer to the Lord. Even when we do not see the full picture, God is working for our good.

Hope is not just for eternity; it transforms how we live today. Even in hardship, we can rejoice because our future, our hope, is guarded by God. We may not always feel hope, but faith reminds us that God's promises are sure. Our hope is a living hope, not one of wishful or optimistic thinking.

If you are struggling today, hold onto the hope that does not fade. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. He is with you, strengthening you, and leading you toward an inheritance that no trial can take away.

Reflection:

- What are some areas in your life that you feel hopeful about?
- What are some trials God has given you? Where have you seen God through these?

Prayer: Father, thank you for the living hope you have given us through Jesus. By your Spirit at work in us, may we be able to put our trust in you when trials come. Help us to remember the inheritance you are protecting for us. Open our eyes to be able to see hope in the world around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



"Yet even you" declares the LORD. Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

Sunday, March 23

How Easily Deceived

by Marilyn Bright



This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. - 1 John 1:5-2:6

Oh, how easily I deceive myself, how easily we humans deceive ourselves! Pretty pathetic!

Since my recent knee replacement surgery, I've had physical therapy two times a week, designed to promote healing and

strengthening. Yet how many times do I bargain with myself, "I'll do these exercises later, after breakfast, after devotions (that's being holy, right?), after lunch, before supper, after supper - oops, now it's too late. I'll do them tomorrow. Self-deception. I need to take an honest look at my lack of discipline - a sin in my life.

Deceive is a strong, ugly word: to lure, to delude, to ensnare; deliberate intention to mislead or trick others or self; contrasts truthfulness and integrity. A strong, ugly word to describe a strong, ugly action.

I recently read, "Behind every self-defeating act in our lives is a lie we've believed. Either we've lied to ourselves or we've believed one of Satan's lies" (Rick Warren). Jeremiah 17:9 says our heart is "deceitful above all things." Ouch! We so easily lie to ourselves. Stop rationalizing. Stop making excuses. Confess your sin, what the Lord is showing you.

There are wake-up calls all around me, around you. If only we'll listen. The Spirit prompts us out of deep love, caring for us. The truth sets us free.

Confess your sin. God's arms are open wide to forgive. Walk in the light. Be set free.

Prayer: Lord, wake us up to the lies and deceptions we tell ourselves. We want to come clean about them. You never let us down. You forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.



"Yet even you" declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

Sunday, March 30
God is Creator and Lord of All
by Will Daniels



The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. - Psalm 24:1

As we journey through Lent, we are reminded that our God is not only the Savior of our souls, but the Creator and Lord of all things. From the vast galaxies to the smallest atom, from the soaring mountains to the depths of the sea, all creation testifies to his power and glory.

Lent is a season of reflection, repentance, and renewal. As we draw closer to the cross, we must recognize the One who made the cross-bearing tree, the ones who pierced the Savior's hands, and the One who gave breath to such people as nailed him there. Christ, through whom all things were made (John 1:3), humbled himself to redeem his creation.

Acknowledging God as Creator and Lord means surrendering our lives to him. If the earth and all that is in it belongs to the Lord, then so do we. Our time, our resources, our very being are all his. Lent calls us to examine whether we are truly living under his Lordship. Have we acknowledged his reign in every area of our lives? Have we trusted him with both our joys and burdens?

This Lenten season, let us marvel at the creative handiwork of our God and bow before him as Lord. May we repent of the ways we have sought control and instead yield to his perfect will. As we walk toward the cross, let us remember that the Creator of all things has also made a way for our salvation through Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Lord, you are the Creator and Ruler of all. Help us to surrender every part of our lives to you. As we reflect this Lent, deepen our trust in your sovereignty and grace. Amen.



"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

Sunday, April 6
Not So with You!
by Stephen McCarthy



Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." - Mark 10:35-45

These days, it is tough not to be affected by the world. Social media drips with antagonism, self-righteous monologues, and denigration of others. Beyond that, we make daily choices whether to be an influence in our surroundings or to be influenced by our surroundings.

In this passage, James and John, are strolling along with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. They aren't really bad guys. They have chosen to follow Jesus. They want something they are missing, and they believe he can provide it. They want to influence their world.

As fishermen, they are tough and hardy. They live vibrantly. They are familiar with making decisions and experiencing significant outcomes. Rabbis had young followers as students, so they could have been under twenty-years-old. Jesus calls them the Sons of Thunder, probably because of their fervency. At one point, they impulsively ask to call down fire on a group of people (Luke 9:54). Who does that unless you want to impress someone or control someone?

Back to scripture, James and John ask to sit next to Jesus in heaven. Jesus responds by telling them they have not been listening to all his lessons: Do you really know what you are asking? After seeing my pain, will you still be able to face it? Jesus says, I know you. I have named you. I have trained you. Don't hold authority over others. Don't be like the world. Live as if you are not citizens of this world. Be servants, not judges, and not authorities.

We must die to the world's ways. We must be like convicts carrying the instruments of our execution (Rev. William Boekestein). Jesus says, "So, therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

We pledged our allegiance to a new King and Master when we gave our lives to Christ. Heaven is our home. Who do we look to please? Who is our audience? Are we being an influence or being influenced? Who are we serving?

Prayer: Lord, help us to see your ways, to follow you, and to serve others. Amen.



Sunday, April 13 • Palm Sunday

Jesus Enters Jerusalem

by Ken Disselkoen

"Let even now" declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...



As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'" The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple

courts, *“Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, “‘From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise’?” And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night. - Matthew 21:1-17*

Life is placid in Israel. It's been 400 years since Malachi chastised the Jews about ignoring God's commands. New traditions have been argued and established. Everything is organized to keep good order. A thousand years of conflict and discernment has gone into structuring society in a way that is comforting and peaceful. Religious rites are in place, sacrifices prescribed and prepared, discipline established, and rules for good conduct well understood.

An uneasy peace with the Romans is also in place. They allow the Jews to go about their life as long as there is no open opposition to the Roman Empire. Peace and balance envelopes the country.

But wait; there are some unsettling ripples on the fringes of society coming closer and closer to Jerusalem. Passover is in the offing, not a time for unrest. What is that shouting and clamoring parade approaching the city? An unlikely sight comes into view; a crowd accompanying a man in dusty clothing astride a small young donkey.

The rulers of the city have no idea of the earthquake about to strike them. Earthquakes, out of all natural disasters, are the most disruptive. They come without warning. Seismographs around the world still are not able to predict them, only measure them afterwards. They come like the proverbial “thief in the night.”

Wait! That's Jesus on that colt. He upended the world thirty-three years ago at his birth. He's also been challenging traditions for the last three years. He's about to do it again with his death and resurrection. He also does that to us. When life seems to move along smoothly and evenly, suddenly our life can be upended by any number of circumstances causing pain and suffering.

It's just at that time that we can look to the end of Lent and take comfort in Jesus' words spoken to his disciples and ultimately to us: "behold I am with you always even to the end of the age." It's not guaranteed to be smooth and comfortable but it is assured because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection commemorated during Lent.

Prayer: Lord our God, infinite in power, presence, and grace; we are so grateful for the sacrifice you made in sending Jesus to live among us, dying to redeem us, and rising again to assure us a place in your heaven. Keep that grace ever forefront in our minds as we commemorate your journey during Lent. Amen.



"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

April 18 - Good Friday
Reflect, Examine, Rejoice!
by Phil Holmes

And they twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'

– Matthew 27:29

One of the most overlooked aspects of Christ's Passion is the mental and emotional torment he endured. The soldiers mocked him - already beaten and yet possessing all the power of the universe. With a single thought, he could have destroyed them all. But instead, he endured their ridicule. These were not strangers to Jesus; he knew them each by name. Imagine the deep betrayal he must have felt, seeing the very people he created turn against him.

They mocked his power, draped a robe on him, gave him a staff, and treated him as a lunatic. But in all of this, Jesus responded with love. He endured for the sake of fulfilling his Father's redemptive plan, as foretold in Isaiah 53.

It's easy to condemn the soldiers for their cruelty, but we must also recognize that we too mock and betray Christ. Every time we take his name in vain, disobey his teachings, doubt his power, or live for ourselves, we mock him. Our sins are part of the reason he endured the cross.

This Good Friday, take three steps:


- Reflect on what Christ's finished work means for you.
- Examine your heart and repent of your sins.
- Rejoice in the forgiveness he offers through his grace.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for enduring the pain of Calvary. Thank you for giving your life so that we could have eternal life. We confess our sins and ask forgiveness for the times our hearts and actions turn away from you. Today, give us a fresh start. Open our eyes to see you clearly and our hearts to embrace your plan for us. In your name, Jesus, we pray. Amen.



"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

Sunday, April 20 - Easter
What Universe Do You Live In?
by Pastor Stan Mast



Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. - 1 Peter 1:3-9

A good friend with whom I frequently disagree recently challenged something I said with the snarky question, "What world do you live in, dude?" That's the question I want to ask you in this Easter season. What universe do you live in? When I went online, I was captivated by three possible answers: the physical universe, the metaverse, and the Easterverse.

1 Peter 1 introduces us to the Easterverse when it says that God has "given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...." Those words "living hope" introduce us to the various dimensions of the brave new world Jesus created by his resurrection. The physical universe has four dimensions: length, height, depth, and time. The Easterverse has five dimensions.

Our living hope includes an incredible future, “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for us....” Earthly inheritance might do all of those things, but we can lose what we’ve inherited from loved ones. That cannot happen with this inheritance, because the Lord keeps it and us. Our incredible future is secure.

Our living hope also includes an unchangeable present in which we are “shielded by God’s power....” Yes, bad things can still happen to the re-born children of God, but as Paul said in Romans 8, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Whatever else changes in our world, nothing can change the ever present power of God for us.

Another dimension of the Easterverse is meaning in our suffering. Shakespeare said that human existence is “a tale told by an idiot... full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” In a world that says everything means nothing, the resurrection of Jesus assures us that even our suffering will accomplish something, a faith that comes out of suffering like pure gold.

The fourth dimension of the Easterverse is the eternal presence of Christ. Even though we cannot see him, we know he is with us and that gives us great joy. As Aslan said to Lucy in the Narnia Chronicles, “I have been here all the time, but you have made me visible.”

Finally, the resurrection of Jesus was the climactic step in “the salvation of our souls.” When your body dies, you aren’t done. Your soul will live on until Jesus repeats the miracle of the resurrection and your body is reunited with your soul. And we will live in the brave new world of the new heavens and the new earth.

So, what universe do you live in?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that by faith we can be born anew to the living hope of the Easterverse. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.



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