



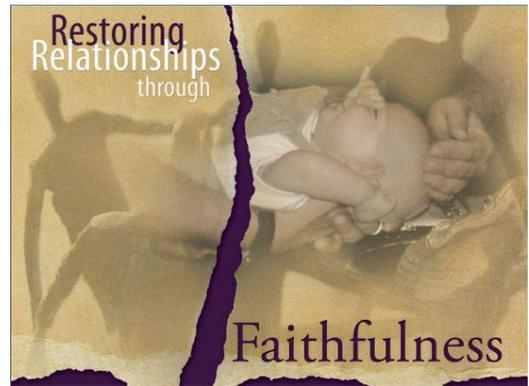
LENT: RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS

The Lenten season is a time for self-examination, repentance, and confession. It is also a time to take stock of our relationships: our relationship with God and with others. As sinful human beings, we feel the weight of broken relationships with God and with others and long to restore them to wholeness. As we walk together toward the cross, we discover ways to restore our relationships through justice, faithfulness, trust, limits, love and forgiveness.

2018 Lenten Devotional
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THEME OF THE WEEK | FEBRUARY 19-25
RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH FAITHFULNESS

GENESIS 9:8-17, PSALM 25:1-10,
MARK 1:9-5



Because of human sin, the Lord destroys the earth by flood, yet divine destruction gives way to divine commitment and faithfulness to his people and all of creation. The Spirit that comes upon Jesus at his baptism sustains him when he is tried by Satan. Our baptism sustains us to restore our relationships through faithfulness to God and to others.



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19 | GENESIS 9:8-17
COVENANT

Here we have a covenant, a new agreement between God and humans. And, like every legal agreement, it's bound by a seal. The seal of this new covenant is a rainbow, a visible sign of God's promise to never cover the earth with a flood again. This is God's mercy in visible form. The rainbow appears just when we might be living in fear that the rain will prevail, and a flood will come to threaten us. In fact, the greater the storm, the brighter the rainbow. Have you experienced this in your own life? Through troubles and trials, have you sensed a greater presence of the One who created all things? This new covenant comforts and encourages us. Because of God's promise, we can live with the gracious assurance that God is present with us in the storm of life and will be faithful today, yesterday and into the future. Ask God to remind you of God's faithfulness today.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20 | PSALM 25:1-10
FAITHFULNESS

Verse 10 summarizes this psalm beautifully. Here we have faithfulness and covenant connected together. The psalmist's heart is filled with joy because sin is forgiven. When we gather to worship, we are reminded again and again that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We are also reminded that when God forgives sin, God completely forgets what we have done; "remembers it no more." As you look back on your life, do you remember times of foolishness, when you behaved in ways you're not proud of today? Have you ever felt as if those acts separate you from God, making you somehow unforgivable? Those feelings of unworthiness can lead us to believe that God's faithfulness is directed toward someone other than us. Today we can celebrate with the psalmist that,

according to God's steadfast love and faithfulness, our sin is forgiven. Ask God to convince you of God's faithfulness today.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21 | 1 PETER 3:18-22

CONNECTIONS

This text connects the Noah story of the flood with our own baptism. The waters of the flood overwhelmed the world in which Noah lived, but God was faithful to deliver Noah and his family (eight people, according to the text) from death. The text not only speaks of deliverance from death, but also points us to resurrection life. Living in the ark for a few days is really just a temporary salvation compared to the eternal salvation that comes through resurrection. In baptism, the text says, God acts to save us from a sinful existence, and this spiritual cleansing gives us a brand new life. Water. It can sustain life, or destroy it. There are connections between the Noah story and our story: God is faithful through flood or drought, and in death and life. Ask God to help you make these connections today.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22 | MARK 1:9-15

BAPTISM

Jesus' actual baptism is recounted with minimal detail in Mark's Gospel. What follows immediately afterward, what Jesus sees and hears, is given greater weight. The only other passage in the rest of Mark's Gospel that offers a similar exalted view of Jesus is the transfiguration story, where the voice of God is heard again, declaring Jesus' identity in words similar to Mark 1:11. At the transfiguration, though, the people hear this voice, while at the baptism it is only heard by Jesus himself. The personal nature of this baptism revelation is different in Mark than the other gospels. The readers benefit, but those gathered at Jesus' baptism are not aware of God's declaration. Jesus is immersed in water, and then driven into the desert, a place defined by its lack of water. The same Holy Spirit that comes upon Jesus in baptism also sustains him when he is tried by Satan. Were you baptized? How does your baptism sustain you?

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23 | MARK 1:9-15 AGAIN

REVELATION

God's revelation is three-fold. The tearing of the heavens vividly indicates the supernatural dimension of the truth declared about Jesus. The descent of the Spirit marks Jesus as the one anointed to bring good news, and confirms the divine presence and power in Jesus' mission. The voice of God clearly commissions Jesus to undertake his God-given role, and identifies Jesus as the Son of God. But for now, Jesus' mission is declared to him, and him alone. Mark doesn't tell us if Jesus knows "who" he is before his baptism, but what's very clear in Mark's Gospel is that Jesus' baptism propels him into ministry, and his

status will become known as the story unfolds. Have you ever sensed the revelation of God in your life? Looking back over your life, do you detect a pattern of God's revelation for you? Ask God to help you understand how God works in and through you.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24 | ACTS 22:16

THOUGHTS ON BAPTISM

In baptism, we are given a new name: the entire name of God. We baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There are many promises, but every other promise hangs on the promise of baptism. We will never improve beyond baptism. We will not disciple ourselves out of the promise of baptism. Faith is given by the Holy Spirit in the promise of baptism. God's promise in baptism is a once-and-for-all promise, and justification is a daily event. The baptismal promise, applied daily, teaches us that we are both old and new. Baptism is not water only, but water and the word. The word accomplishes the forgiveness of original sin. It's an exorcism. We "renounce the devil and all his empty promises." The devil attacks us, makes us question our baptism, but we respond, "I have been baptized." Baptism is first, once and final. What does your baptism mean to you? Ask God to help you understand the deep meanings of baptism today.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25 | ROMANS 14-17

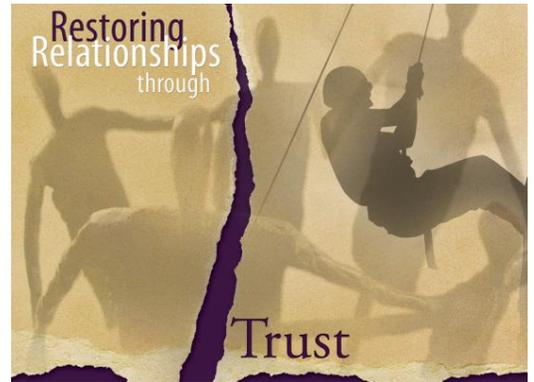
CHILD OF GOD

In baptism we become a "child of God," and this is our new name. Our journey is not baptism plus belief; baptism and believing go together. You don't need to add anything. Baptism is a gift, and in that gift is a promise: the forgiveness of sins. We are called "child of God." It's an external word that replaces our internal word, God's first and final judgment about you. We return to baptism by using its promise in our present circumstance of need, daily dying and rising. The internal word will either savage you in judgment, or produce destructive pride. Baptism moves us out of our test-taking scheme and frees us to enter relationships. When we use our baptism, we hear that external word judging us as "child of God." Ask God to help you see yourself, and everyone around you, as a child of God.

THEME OF THE WEEK | FEBRUARY 25 – MARCH 4
RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH TRUST

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16, PSALM 22:23-31,
ROMANS 4:13-25

God promises to make Abraham and Sarah the ancestors of nations. Though Abraham and Sarah are far too old to bear children, they trust that God will accomplish what God has promised. Their trust catalyzes their transformation as they receive new names and identities. Paul says God's promise comes to all who share Abraham and Sarah's faith and trust in God. We, too, get new identities in baptism, as we put on Christ.



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26 | GENESIS 17:1-7
ABRAHAM

The foundation of the Abraham story is God's promises. These promises are recorded in nearly every chapter of Abraham's story; perhaps Abram and Sarai needed regular reminders. There are a few things to note about this covenant. First of all, it's outrageous. Abram is 99 years old, and Sarai is 90 (verse 17). While Ishmael is 13 years old at this point, Abram and Sarai have no children of their own. And yet God promises to make them "numerous." Nations and kings will come from their descendants. The promise is so outrageous that it requires a change in Abram's name. Abram means "exalted ancestor," and Abraham means "ancestor of a multitude." Trust is the foundation of every healthy relationship. Do you trust God to keep the promises God makes? Ask God to help you live in trust.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27 | GENESIS 17:1-7 AGAIN
COVENANT

Abram is told to walk (live) before God blamelessly (not without sin, but faithfully), but it's not a condition of the covenant. The covenant is God's action. God refers to "my covenant" nine times in this chapter, and the certainty of this covenant is demonstrated in God's repeated "I will." Covenant is the foundation of God's relationship with Abram and Sarai, and this covenant is sheer gift. Abram and Sarai can only receive the promise, and marvel at it! Not long before, God was so upset with humanity that he destroyed the vast majority through a flood, so this is a significant movement in God's relationship with humanity. When it comes to promises, it helps to know the character of the one making the promise, and that person's ability to keep the promise. Do you sense that you are living in a

covenant with God? Do you believe God when God repeatedly says, “I will”? Ask God to help you receive the promise of God, and marvel at it.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28 | PSALM 22:23-31

HELP?

Many of us are familiar with Psalm 22, because the first half of the psalm is the prescribed reading for Good Friday. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus quotes verse one from the cross. The psalm is a lament; the psalmist cries out for God’s deliverance. Like most lament psalms, the final verses are praise for God’s goodness, and these are the verses we’re focusing on. The heart of this praise is verse 24: “For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.” God does not despise the psalmist, even in the midst of his trials, though others despise him. Overwhelmed by God’s goodness, the psalmist invites all of creation to join in singing praises to God, though it’s likely that God has not yet responded to the psalmist’s need. The psalmist’s trust in God’s love and promise is so deep that he talks about God’s help as if it’s already arrived, even before it does. Can you trust that help will come from God, even before it arrives? Ask God to help you live in deeper trust.

THURSDAY, MARCH 1 | ROMANS 4:13-25

FAITH

Paul has experienced God’s grace poured out upon the Gentiles. His experience tells him that they are saved. The question is, how? How can that possibly be when they are not part of God’s Sinai Covenant people? Being a good Jew, Paul goes back to the Scriptures for the answer, believing that they reveal the truth about God. But Paul does not find the answer in circumcision or the Law. Instead, Paul goes back in history before either one. He goes back to Abraham. How was Abraham made right with God? The answer is by faith; faith in God’s outrageous promise to make him the father of many nations when, in fact, both he and Sarah are older than old. For Paul, Abraham is our prototype, one who was made righteous apart from the Law. Faith, trust in God to fulfill God’s promise, is what establishes Abraham’s relationship with God. That same faith in God’s living promise, Jesus, is what establishes or restores our relationship with God, too. Can you place your faith in God’s outrageous promises? Ask God to give you faith in God’s living promise: Jesus.

FRIDAY, MARCH 2 | ROMANS 6:1-8

BAPTISM

Trust is the foundation of all healthy relationships, and yet we’ve all experienced the pain of broken promises. Chances are, we’ve broken a few ourselves. Our willingness to trust others, to take them at their word, isn’t what it once was.

Deals that were once sealed with a handshake now require massive amounts of paperwork and a legal team. Is it any wonder that many of us struggle to take God at God's word? Over and over again, God's people have given witness to their experience that God is faithful and able to do what God has promised. Lutherans tend to go back to our baptism when we want to be reminded of how rooted we are in the promises of God. In baptism, God has named and claimed us. In baptism, God has joined us to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In baptism we are made new people. In baptism, God has made us one in Christ. In baptism we are given the Holy Spirit, the guarantee and down payment on all that God has promised, all that we hope for. Can you trust that God has claimed you in baptism? Ask God to help you understand the meaning of your baptism in a new way.

SATURDAY, MARCH 3 | ROMANS 3:21-26

CYCLE

Our baptism is the foundation of our relationship with God through Christ. Luther would say that the object of our faith is what God has done for us in baptism. The transformation that this relationship creates sets us free to be people who keep our promises in this world, living the cycle of confession, repentance and forgiveness when we fall short. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But we're not left there. When that mirror is held up to our face, we can only fall on our knees in confession and repentance, and trust the promise of God to forgive. "We are justified by grace as a gift." It is a cycle of falling short (the reality of sin), confession (admitting our sin), repentance (a change of direction), and transformation (living into God's promises). Do you recognize this kind of cycle in your own life? Ask God to help you trust more deeply.

SUNDAY, MARCH 4 | GALATIANS 5:1, 13-15

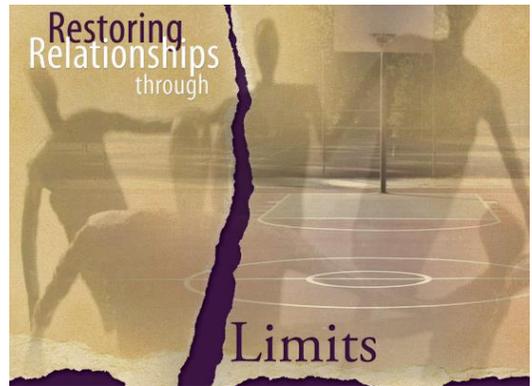
FREE TO TRUST

Jesus is God's living promise of love and forgiveness. The cross of Christ is God's proclamation that you are loved and forgiven. The resurrection is God's declaration that not even the darkness of death can overcome the light of his love and forgiveness. Jesus' death and resurrection isn't some intellectual concept to be grasped. It's an event that we are meant to experience. It is a promise so compelling that it creates faith in us, a daring to trust that God's love and forgiveness is true, and true for you. In Christ you are a new creation. In Christ you are set free: free from sin, free from guilt and shame, free to trust. Do you sense this kind of freedom in your life? What do you need to be set free from today? Ask God to help you trust that God is able to set you free, and make you free to trust.

THEME OF THE WEEK | MARCH 4 – MARCH 11
RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH LIMITS

MARCH 3-4 | EXODUS 20:1-17, PSALM 19, JOHN 2:13-22

After escaping from slavery, the Israelites come to Mount Sinai, where God teaches them how to live in relationship with one another. In order to live in healthy relationship, God sets loving limits in the Ten Commandments. Jesus also sets loving limits in the temple as he defends the worship of God alone and rejects the ways commerce can become our gods.



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MONDAY, MARCH 5 | EXODUS 20:1-17
TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments are some of the most familiar, but least understood, passages in the Bible. While the commandments are revered and protected, they're also often derided for being irrelevant and out of touch. They can be misunderstood as harsh, rigid, stifling, even archaic rules that no one in their right mind would adhere to. But they actually provide us with a way to live as fully as possible, to be more completely whole. Four of the commandments inform our relationship with God, and the other six inform relationships with one another. All relationships need limits. What would society be like if we didn't have laws to order our lives together? Ask God to help you find new purpose in the commandments.

TUESDAY, MARCH 6 | PSALM 19
LIVING RULE

This is a reflection on limits provided by the law, the Word of God. This life-giving law is a living rule for our lives. In the first six verses, we witness God's design of cosmic order. We look up into the night sky and wonder how it all came to be. Where is it going? What sustains it? The focus shifts to the importance of the Word of God creating and sustaining limits, boundaries, parameters and order. It revives the soul. God's Word (law, commandment, precepts, decrees) makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, and endures forever. Verses 11-14 focus on the value of God's Word for guiding conduct. It influences us, keeps us, sustains us, and provides limits that ultimately free us from death. Do you see the word of God as a living rule for your life? Ask God for a deep sense of wonder and awe as your consider how God is at work all around us.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7 | JOHN 2:13-22

CONTEXT

The Passover celebration took place every year in April, in Jerusalem, at the temple. It lasted a week, and every Jewish male was expected to make the pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem as indicated in Deuteronomy 16:16. Sometimes known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the celebration included eating the Passover lamb, commemorating death passing over the captive Israelites in Egypt. In the ancient world, Jerusalem was a kind of capital city. One commentator (Kenneth O. Holman) called Jerusalem the Big Apple of the ancient world. It was the religious center and the political seat of Palestine. Making it even more important, and adding a sense of expectancy, was the belief that the Messiah would arrive in the temple. Given the imposing setting of the temple, high on a hill, no one thought the Messiah would ride into town on the back of a donkey. How do you expect the Messiah to arrive? Why is Jesus so upset at the moneychangers? Does the commercialization of religion bother you? Ask God for a clear sense of the conflict between what Jesus sees and what Jesus wants.

THURSDAY, MARCH 8 | MATTHEW 21:12-17

TEMPLE

The Temple is crowded during this Passover, with thousands of visitors from all over the world. The religious leaders crowd the temple even further by allowing money changers and merchants, selling merchandise required for sacrifices, to set up booths in the court of the Gentiles. They rationalize that they are providing a convenience for the worshippers, and a way to make money to support and maintain the temple. But the religious leaders don't seem to care that the court of the Gentiles is so full of merchants that foreigners find it difficult to worship there. The clearing, or cleansing, of the temple is Jesus' response to this. God's temple has been turned into a marketplace. The merchants completely miss the purpose of God's house as a place of worship and use it instead as a place for profit. What tables need to be overturned in your life? How have you been guilty of the same thing? Ask God to help you identify things in your life that need clearing.

FRIDAY, MARCH 9 | JOHN 2:13-22 AGAIN

THREE DAYS?

Jesus's reaction is dramatic. His response is directed toward the merchants and moneychangers who exploit travelers coming to worship God in the temple. Jesus sees their actions as evil, an insult against God. Jesus' response: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." We can only imagine the stunned moment that follows! The Jews respond: "This temple has been under construction for 46 years; will you raise it up in three days?" The Jews think Jesus means the building, this temple that Zerubbabel had built over 500 years earlier. Herod the Great has begun remodeling it, making it larger and far more beautiful. And here it's still not finished. The leaders misunderstand Jesus' words

to mean that this imposing building can be torn down and rebuilt in three days. Their reaction is equally dramatic. But Jesus is not talking about the literal temple; he's talking about himself. His words take on new meaning for his disciples after his resurrection. What things in our culture need to be challenged? What have you "bought into" that would not make Jesus happy? Ask God for faith to believe more deeply in the One who was put to death on a cross, and raised to new life.

SATURDAY, MARCH 10 | LUKE 19:45-48

WORSHIP

Jesus is calling us to worship. While the temple is not a place of commerce for commerce's sake, Jesus also shows us that worship is related to one's heart and life toward God, not connected to a building. The temple would come and go; torn down and rebuilt through the centuries. But the temple of God within you is the enduring point to which Jesus calls his followers. Is your body a temple? One problem the church faces is the notion that we "go" to church. We don't go to church; we *are* the church. In the same manner, we don't go to worship; worship is living of our whole lives in devotion to the things of God. Do you see why Jesus is so angry? This is a consumeristic and idolatry clash of major proportions. As the body of Christ, we are the church alive and at work in the world every day. Sometimes we gather to celebrate the work of God and be challenged by the proclamation of the gospel; worship. How does the clearing of the temple connect with the ten commandments? Are there places in your life where you have built idols to worship? Ask God to help you see where you are misdirected.

SUNDAY, MARCH 11 | EXODUS 20:1-17 AGAIN

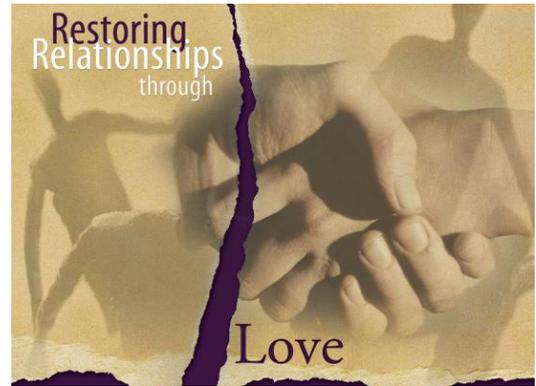
COMMANDS

With the possible exception of some stories in Genesis, and Psalm 23, the ten commandments in Exodus are probably the most widely-known portions of Scripture. They have been read, memorized, debated, revered, ridiculed, parsed, studied and argued over more than most others. Even on the most popular level, in today's supposed "post-Christian" culture, the average person has at least some sense of what these laws contain and from where they originated. The commandments have a deeply redemptive context; they're given to people already redeemed, not so that they might be redeemed. They're a charter of conduct for people who already participate in God's redemptive plan: being walking and talking examples of what it means to be created in God's image. While the commandments reflect how God's people are "holy" or "set apart" (Exodus 19), they also show us something of the nature of God. We see in them not simply "what we must do," but what God is like. They are given to the people as a whole, and the actions of individuals have broad repercussions. What characteristics of God do you see in the commandments? Can you view them as a charter of conduct for yourself? Ask God to make you a walking, talking example of what it means to be created in God's image.

THEME OF THE WEEK | MARCH 11 – MARCH 18
RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH LOVE

MARCH 10-11 | NUMBERS 21:4-9, PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22, JOHN 3:14-21

In the wilderness, the people become impatient and begin to lose their faith and trust in God. After God sends poisonous serpents among the people, his love for them prompts him to make a promise to Moses: those who look on the bronze serpent will live. Just as those who look upon the bronze serpent are healed, so we will be restored when we behold Christ lifted up on the cross, God's ultimate gift of love.



MONDAY, MARCH 12 | NUMBERS 21:4-9
TURNING AND TRUSTING

One of the most difficult questions this story raises is about the character of God. What kind of God inflicts death for lack of trust? But remember that these people have been to Mount Sinai. They have received the law, and are in a covenant relationship with God. From the perspective of this ancient writer, the complaining and lack of trust exhibited by the Israelites is a violation of the covenant, and deserving of punishment. But God also provides a remedy. God provides healing to those who look in the right direction, bringing what is most needed to those who are the least deserving. From the perspective of these ancient people, this is a story of grace. As people who are also living between promise and fulfillment, people who also complain and fail to trust, this story reminds us that even, on our worst days and in our worst failures and disappointments, God provides. Have you ever complained, or exhibited a lack of trust in God? Ask God to help you live in deeper trust, with less complaining.

TUESDAY, MARCH 13 | PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22
STEADFAST LOVE

This communal psalm of thanksgiving illustrates God's goodness and steadfast love through four vignettes. The third vignette, verses 17-22, describes a situation like the one the Israelites faced in yesterday's reading. The psalm reflects the ancient belief that sickness was a punishment for sin. But the point here is that, while our sin deserves punishment, God chooses to heal and forgive because of his steadfast love. Throughout Scripture, this pattern emerges: the people of God turn away from God (violate covenant community), God

intervenes, and the people of God are, once again, reminded of the steadfast love of God that chooses to forgive and heal. How do you turn away from God? Do you recognize it when you do? Can you remember a time in your life when God intervened and reminded you of your sin? Ask God for a clear reminder of God's steadfast love.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14 | JOHN 3:14-21

CROSS

To help the Pharisee Nicodemus come to terms with God's Messiah, Jesus connects his death to the bronze serpent incident. Just as the bronze serpent was lifted up for those afflicted to see and be healed, the Son of God will be lifted up (a common Roman phrase for crucifixion, and the same verb used for Jesus' ascension) for those afflicted with sin to see and be healed. In essence, the cure for snakes is snakes; the cure for death is death. This is the counter-intuitive plan of God. What John may be trying to say is that if we want to have real life, if we want to experience a rebirth, if we want to live into the joy and blessing of God's Kingdom, we need to see and hear what God is doing and saying through the cross of Christ. When you look to the cross, can you see how much God loves you? When you look to the cross, can you see how far God will go to proclaim that love? Does that change you? Can that make you new? Ask God to help you look to the cross.

THURSDAY, MARCH 15 | JOHN 3:16

ONE VERSE

There's a lot packed into this one, great verse. Pull it apart; what could it mean? God loves the world. That, more than anything, is the focus of this verse. "So" does not refer to how *much* God loves, but *how* (that is, God loves the world in this way). To believe does not mean to give intellectual assent to a set of propositions regarding Jesus, but rather to trust, to give your heart, to "be-love." In John, the phrase "gave his only son" refers to the incarnation, the coming of Christ into the world. Eternal life isn't so much life after you physically die, but life in the new age, the Kingdom of God. All this in just one verse, and it all points to how God chose to love the world through Jesus Christ. Can you hear this clear proclamation for you? Are you compelled to love others because of it? Do you think you can take a step into reconciliation with someone else because of this love for you? Ask God to help you clearly hear this proclamation of love.

FRIDAY, MARCH 16 | ROMANS 3:21-26

PROBLEM AND FIX

What is the problem that God needs to fix through Jesus? You could say sin is the problem, and the fix is atonement. David Lose's recent books have illuminated this thinking greatly. From his perspective, the human problem is failing to trust God's love for us, leading us to seek to be our own gods, the

center of our own universe. Doing so leads us to “death” – guilt, shame, broken relationships, violence, addiction – everything that stands against God’s intention for wholeness and abundant life. Jesus’ proclamation of God’s forgiveness is both a gift and a judgment. It’s a gift to those who know their need of forgiveness, and it’s a judgment upon those who don’t think they need it. You might say Jesus died because he loved and forgave too freely. The cross “fixes” our human condition by demonstrating so clearly and powerfully the depth of God’s love in a way we can experience. The cross is not just an event, but a transformational experience. This experience of being loved and forgiven is like being brought from death to life, like being born again. Can you understand the problem God was trying to fix in Jesus? Ask God to help you experience the transformation of the cross.

SATURDAY, MARCH 17 | MATTHEW 18:21-22 **BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS**

The deepest pain in our lives is relational brokenness. Broken relationship wound us more deeply than anything else. Every one of us knows how deadening it feels to be at odds with someone. While the cross restores our relationship with God through the proclamation of love and forgiveness, it also empowers and compels us toward reconciliation with others, restoring our other relationships through love and forgiveness. This week we’re taking seriously God’s movement of restoration and reconciliation in Christ, as well as our call to reconcile and restore relationships in our own lives. Are you experiencing the deadness of a broken relationship? Do you think that God could help you bring reconciliation into this brokenness? Ask God for a deep motivation to actively pursue reconciliation where it’s needed.

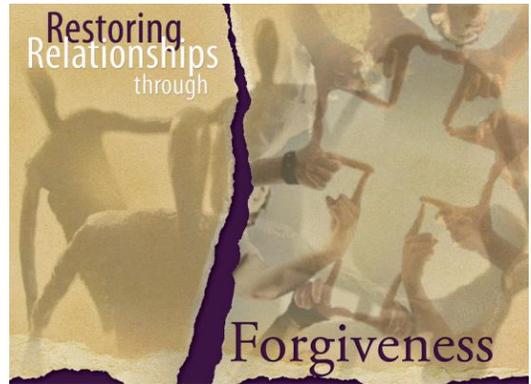
SUNDAY, MARCH 18 | HEBREWS 12:1-2 **SET FREE**

This text points us back to the cross, where God proclaims his love for us as we are. It is a proclamation so clear and so compelling that it grabs hold of our hearts and will not let us go. Like the Israelites long ago who were healed by looking up at the bronze snake that Moses lifted up, we are healed as we look up to the One whose love for us is stronger than death itself. Do you believe you are completely loved? Do you feel like you are wrapped in the arms of God’s baptismal grace? Do you sense that you have been (or are being) healed, changed, transformed, and made new? God’s love restores our relationship with God and empowers us and sets us free to love one another. We no longer need to hide. We are set free from our games, from our fears and anxieties. We are set free to be who we are, because that’s exactly how God loves us. Love restores us and our relationships. Ask God to give you a new awareness of how completely and deeply loved you are.

THEME OF THE WEEK | MARCH 18 – MARCH 25
RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH FORGIVENESS

MARCH 17-18 | JEREMIAH 31:31-34, PSALM 119:9-16, JOHN 12:20-33

God promises Jeremiah that a “new covenant” will be made in the future: a covenant that will allow all the people to know God by heart. God promises to “forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” We see these promises fulfilled in Christ, who dies on a cross to forgive our sin so that we may have life.



Because of this act of love, we are empowered to forgive ourselves and others.

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MONDAY, MARCH 19 | JEREMIAH 31:31-34
COVENANT

Situated in the midst of Jeremiah’s words of judgment and retribution, this passage breathes a needed word of hope. God promises a new covenant with the Israelites. The old covenant was written on tablets of stone. While God had been faithful to that covenant, the Israelites had not. The new covenant that God promises will be written on the hearts of the people. Did you know you have God’s covenant written on your heart? We know both from scripture and from experience that external law will never be enough to change us. The law can give us guidance and show us the boundaries, but it ultimately shows our inability to be obedient. Put another way, the more we’re told “no,” the more we’re driven to “yes!” So God promises to do what we cannot do for ourselves: renew our hearts. Why? Because God chooses to forgive sin. God’s decision to forgive restores the Israelites’ relationship with God. Do you see forgiveness as the doorway to restored relationships? Who do you need to forgive? Ask God to help you forgive.

TUESDAY, MARCH 20 | PSALM 119:9-16
LAW

Psalms 119 is written in segments of eight phrases, each about delighting in God’s word. Look for words like law, precepts, commandments, decrees, and statutes. In this section, every line begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet (beth). The verses preceding this section end with a promise to observe God’s law. Acknowledging that it’s easier to make a promise than fulfill it, this section begins with a question: “How can young people keep their way pure?” The proposed answer is to have a heart bent upon guarding, seeking, treasuring, delighting, declaring, and meditating upon God’s word (in this case,

the Pentateuch). In yesterday's reading, God promises to write the law upon our hearts. This reading show us the nature of that law, and how it can help us in daily life. Is your heart delighting and meditating on God's word? If you spent more time in God's word, would this change? Ask God to give you a heart filled with delight in God's word.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21 | JOHN 12:20-26

SEE

Jesus has recently raised Lazarus to life. Now the Pharisees are afraid that nothing can stop Jesus, that the whole world will follow him. This proves true as some Greeks (gentiles), in town for the Passover celebration, wish to see Jesus. Maybe they're just curious, but in John's Gospel, seeing is believing! The Greeks approach Philip, perhaps because Philip is a Greek name and he's from Bethsaida, near Greek territory. Philip finds Andrew, and together they tell Jesus. On the surface, it would appear that Jesus' words in 23-26 have nothing to do with the Greeks who seek him, but on a deeper level they connect in two ways. First, in order to truly "see" Jesus, they will need to see him raised up on the cross. It's there that Jesus will be glorified. Second, Jesus' words imply that Greeks will indeed bear fruit for the Kingdom. Along with many others, they will follow Jesus through death into new life, and will serve Jesus as disciples. Through Jesus' death will come the promised Spirit, the life of the body of Christ. Where do you need to see Jesus today? Ask God for new spiritual eyesight to truly see Jesus.

THURSDAY, MARCH 22 | JOHN 12:27-33

CROSS

John shows us a Jesus who walks with full intention to his crucifixion. Jesus glorifies God through obedience, and God would be glorified yet again at the resurrection. In John, Jesus' crucifixion is four interconnected things. First, the moment of glory. Jesus is finally and fully seen as the Messiah. Second, the time of judgment. If the cross is the clearest proclamation of God's forgiveness, it is good news to those who know they need forgiveness, and a judgment on those who think they don't. Third, the moment that Satan's rule would end. The Kingdom of God has come, and a new King is enthroned. Fourth, the cross draws all people to God. Like the bronze snake that Moses lifted up, it's the instrument of reconciliation and healing. Do you sense yourself being "drawn" to Jesus? How does that make a difference in your life? Ask God to help you more fully experience the crucifixion.

FRIDAY, MARCH 23 | ROMANS 7:15

I CAN'T

This text perfectly describes our obedience problem. We can't do what we want to do, and we do the very things we shouldn't do. Remember the old show

“Candid Camera”? They used to post a sign that said “Wet paint. Do not touch!” on a fence. Then they’d record people walking by. It was amazing how many people just had to touch that fence. The scenario was funny, in part, because we all can all see ourselves in it. We all have an obedience problem. Our inability to be obedient, even when we want to, requires a new covenant. Our hunger to be reconciled with God and one another will leave us famished until we are fed with the Bread of Life, the One who dies proclaiming that we are loved and forgiven. Having been so completely loved, forgiven and reconciled through Christ, we can let go of our futile attempts to “fix” our relationships with one another, and surrender to the One who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And so, with the Twelve Step community, we pray, “I can’t. You can. Go ahead.” Pray that prayer throughout the day.

SATURDAY, MARCH 24 | COLOSSIANS 1:11-14 **FORGIVENESS**

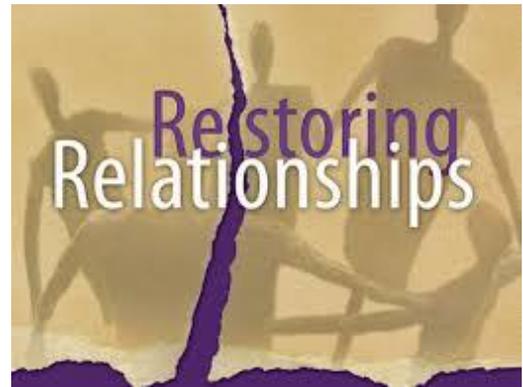
Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. We don’t have the power to forget. Forgiving is not pretending that nothing happened. Forgiving does not mean you have to like the offender. Forgiving does not mean the instant restoration of trust. Trust has to be earned, and when you’ve been burned badly, the relationship almost always has to start over again in terms of trust. Forgiveness means letting go. It means letting go of anger, hurt, bitterness, and our hunger for revenge. What do you need to let go? Forgiving is a matter of mercy, not justice. Forgiving someone does not depend on that person’s worthiness, just as God’s forgiveness of us does not depend on our worthiness. Forgiving is a process. It’s almost never a once-and-for-all thing. Forgiving is mostly a gift we give ourselves. We are the ones who benefit most by practicing the grace of forgiveness because it sets us free from the soul cancer known as bitterness. Can you take these ideas and put them into practice today? Ask God to help you become a forgiving person.

SUNDAY, MARCH 25 | GENESIS 3:1-7; REVELATION 22:1-5 **RESTORATION**

On a fundamental level, all religion is an attempt to connect humanity with divinity. All religion acknowledges a brokenness between ourselves and the divine that needs to be restored. In the Judeo Christian tradition, the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden describes how that brokenness came to be. The rest of our Bible is the story of restoring what was broken in the garden. If the story of Adam and Eve describes the genesis of our brokenness, Revelation 21-22 beautifully describes the completion of God’s work of restoration. What is it that you need restored? What relationship in your life is broken, so that forgiveness is necessary to move forward? Ask God to guide you through the doorway of forgiveness, and into restoration.

HOLY WEEK

The events of Holy Week look different through the lens of the cross and the empty tomb. Why would Jesus journey to Jerusalem, knowing full well what awaits him there? Why would the Son of God wash dirty feet? Why would the King of kings choose a cross for throne? The answer lies in the cross and empty tomb and what God accomplishes through them. When we look at the events of our own life through the lens of the cross and the empty tomb everything looks different.



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MONDAY, MARCH 26 | [MARK 14:1 – 15:47](#)

Bethpage and Bethany are about one and two miles respectively from the eastern wall of Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Bethany is the home of Jesus' dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; he often stays there with his disciples (John 11:1). It's possible that he returns there at night after his visits to Jerusalem during this final week. The Mount of Olives is a ridge about two and a half miles long on the other side of the Kidron Valley, east of Jerusalem. The view from the top of this 2,900-foot ridge is spectacular; you can see the whole city. From there, Jesus discusses the coming destruction of the city and temple (13:1-4). Mark's mention of the Mount of Olives is intentional, pointing to the messianic fulfillment. This mountain is important in the Old Testament as the place of God's final revelation and judgment (Ezekiel 43:2-9 and Zechariah 14:1-19). Ask God to help you place yourself in the passion story during this Holy Week.

TUESDAY, MARCH 27 | [MARK 14:1 – 15:47 AGAIN](#)

On Palm Sunday, the crowd is excited. People spread cloaks and palm branches on the road, shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Why do they shout these words? The road that Jesus and the disciples travel is packed with Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for Passover. They know Zechariah's prophecy, and many have heard about Jesus. If you had been in the crowd, would you recognize what Jesus is doing? Like the disciples, the crowd is more than ready for God's revenge to fall on the heads of the Romans. The last time Israel had been a free nation was 100 year prior, when Judas Maccabeus defeated the Romans and ran them out of Israel. Maccabeus became the king of Israel, and he adopted the palm branch as a symbol of his victory. He used palm branches in temple feasts

and had the image of a palm branch stamped on his coins. So when crowds rush to get palm branches as Jesus rides into Jerusalem, it's because they connect Jesus with Maccabeus. Jesus will be their next hero. That's why they cry out "Hosanna," which means "save us." Ask God to help you understand the crowd's mindset regarding Jesus.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28 | MARK 14:1 – 15:47

A primary theme running through this narrative is the question, "Who is Jesus?" This is the primary theme of the gospel itself, intensified in this section of Mark. The religious leaders, Pilate, the crowds and soldiers all misunderstand who Jesus is. This should be no surprise; Mark consistently portrays the disciples as confused and clueless about Jesus' identity. They, of all people, should know him. They have been witness to his miracles and recipients of his teaching. They've even heard Jesus' clear predictions of his passion, but they can only argue over who among them will be the greatest. Oddly enough, the climax of Mark's Gospel, seen through this lens, comes from a Roman centurion standing at the cross, witnessing Jesus' dying breath. He alone proclaims the truth: "Truly this man was God's Son." Do you think he had any idea what this means? After all, Jesus is dead, and with him dies all the hopes of the disciples, including ours. It won't be until the resurrection that they, or we, can begin to see and understand who Jesus is, and what his life, death and resurrection truly mean. So, who is Jesus to you? Ask God to help you answer this question.

THURSDAY, MARCH 29 | JOHN 13:1-17 and 31b-35

The focus today is foot washing, and how we are called to be servants to one another and the world. It would be easy to do this because Jesus told us to. But this is so much more than a call to civic-mindedness. It's proclamation of the cross and empty tomb. It's the brazen love of God in Jesus, felt in the awkwardness of foot washing. It's the proclamation that Jesus emptied himself for us, defeating sin, death and the devil. This new commandment leads us to not only live into that, but also, in doing so, proclaim it ourselves. In a world that lives and dies for hierarchy, position, power and all that comes with it, this can be a powerful juxtaposition. What is the proclamation of the world, and what is the proclamation of Jesus? Who wins? Actually, the question is: Who has won already? Let the proclamation be the motivation, as the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith for all who will hear the Maundy Thursday message. Ask God to help you understand the upside-down message of Jesus washing his disciples' feet.

FRIDAY, MARCH 30 | JOHN 19:16b-30

Jesus' identity is an issue throughout John's narrative. He is called both a threat to God and society, and an innocent man. But from an evangelist's point of view, the place where Jesus' identity is rightly proclaimed is on the sign over the cross:

“Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” It proclaims to the world what God is doing for the world by sending Jesus. The cross is where Jesus reigns, because it is where the love of God reigns. In John’s Gospel, the power of God is revealed as the love of God, seeking to reclaim the world that has turned away from him. God sends Jesus to be the King who comes from the Jewish people in order to reign for the world. God’s Kingdom is built through God’s self-giving love. In the crucified Jesus, the crucified King, the world comes to know the lengths to which God will go to reclaim the world in love. Do you feel the depth of Christ’s pain and anguish in this text? Do you think it has anything to do with you? Ask God for a deep sense of Christ’s presence as you walk through this Good Friday.

SATURDAY, MARCH 31 | ROMANS 6:3-11

“A paradox is a statement that seems contradictory but is nevertheless true.” For example, standing is more tiring than walking. This statement sounds contradictory, but those who stood for two hours in a row at Feed my Starving Children know it’s true. There are many paradoxes in the scriptures. I must lose my life to find it. I must take up a cross to follow Jesus. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. It is more blessed to give than to receive. In the passion story, we are reminded that, ultimately, Jesus is Lord. Through him, God overcomes any and all obstacles, including death, in order to redeem and restore us. When we feel most vulnerable, broken, and hopeless, Jesus will remind us of the promise that, just as he conquered through suffering and death, so also will we prevail and find abundant life through the sacrifice and triumph of Jesus. This is the hope we live on the eve of Easter morning. Ask God to help you live in this hope.

SUNDAY, APRIL 1 | JOHN 20:1-18 **EASTER SUNDAY**

The empty tomb means that the story isn’t over. It means that Jesus isn’t merely a historical figure, a man trapped in time and space, now enshrined in a book. It means that what Jesus began in his earthly ministry – the restoration of all that is broken in this world – is not only still happening, but happening in new ways. Because Jesus is no longer bound by the limits of time and space, flesh and blood, this movement of God to restore all things is happening in ways and in places we can hardly imagine, in circumstances we thought were beyond redemption. Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead to finish something; he was raised from the dead to start something – in you, in me, in us, in this world. All around us there is death and despair. But God raised Jesus from the grave, and so we dare to believe that we, too, are raised to newness of life. These things cannot co-exist: death and despair, and the risen body of Christ. So which will it be, people of God? Ask God to start something new in you this Easter day.

UPCOMING IN LENT

ASH WEDNESDAY

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday as we remember our finite status and our infinite God.

Wednesday, February 14, 2018 12:15 PM *followed by a soup lunch*

Wednesday, February 14, 2018 7:00 PM

MIDWEEK MIDDAY WORSHIP IN LENT

Wednesday, February 21, 2018 12:15 PM *worship followed by a soup lunch*

Wednesday, February 28, 2018 12:15 PM *worship followed by a soup lunch*

Wednesday, March 7, 2018 12:15 PM *worship followed by a soup lunch*

Wednesday, March 14, 2018 12:15 PM *worship followed by a soup lunch*

Wednesday, March 21, 2018 12:15 PM *worship followed by a soup lunch*

SEDER MEAL

Thursday, March 22, 2018 6:00-7:30 PM

HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY WORSHIP

On Palm Sunday we journey with Jesus through the passion story.

Saturday, March 24, 2018 5:15 PM

Sunday, March 25, 2018 8:15 AM

Sunday, March 25, 2018 10:45 AM

MAUNDY THURSDAY

On Maundy Thursday we remember Jesus' command to love one another and the meal he commemorated.

Thursday, March 29, 2018 7:00 PM

GOOD FRIDAY

On Good Friday, we marvel at Jesus' passion on the cross.

Friday, March 30, 2018 7:00 PM

EASTER

Saturday, March 31, 2018 5:15 PM

Sunday, April 1, 2018 8:15 AM

Sunday, April 1, 2018 10:45 AM