

LENT 2019: WITH ALL YOUR HEART

SERIES OVERVIEW

In this season of formation and preparation, we again approach the 40 days of Lent from a variety of different perspectives and points along the Christian journey. During this season, new and longtime Christians alike hear the call to return to God with all their hearts, thus entering a season historically characterized by much prayer and fasting. These works of discipline have for hundreds of years served as a means by which new converts prepare for baptism, which occurs as a part of the Easter Vigil. Using the words of Wesleyan theology, we believe all this work is initiated by God, who invites us to come before God with all our hearts.

Because of the duration of the season, this series mirrors Advent in both length and the number of Scriptures chosen this year. With the exception of Palm/Passion Sunday and Easter Day, we have selected the Old Testament and Epistle readings. These passages work hand-in-hand to clearly articulate the distinct pathway that begins with God's call (Ash Wednesday and Lent 1) and continues through the process of our own repentance (Lent 2 and 3), reconciliation with God and one another (Lent 4 and 5), and preparation to publicly proclaim our belief in the risen Christ (Palm/Passion and Easter). Every year, then, this season becomes a place for us to revisit and renew our beginnings along the Christian journey of salvation.

When approaching Palm/Passion Sunday and Easter Day, we have presented more readings, understanding that across the church, the proclamation of the gospel narratives that tell the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, passion, and resurrection are vital to worship and discipleship. The incorporation of Easter Day into this series creates a departure from the form of previous years of resourcing. You will notice that Easter Day serves as a hinge point between the seasons of Lent and Easter, and the Scriptures and resources for that day connect both seasons as formation and doctrine come together in one narrative stream.

May your Lenten season be one of challenge, commitment, and support as the church responds to the call of God – "Return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12).

Week 1.1: Ash Wednesday

March 6

Return to Me

[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

Week 1.2: First Sunday in Lent <u>Deuteronomy 26:1-11</u> <u>Romans 10:8b-13</u>	March 10	God's Generous Heart
Week 2: Second Sunday in Lent <u>Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18</u> <u>Philippians 3:17-4:1</u>	March 17	Imitating
Week 3: Third Sunday in Lent <u>Isaiah 55:1-9</u> <u>1 Corinthians 10:1-13</u>	March 24	Repenting
Week 4: Fourth Sunday in Lent <u>Joshua 5:9-12</u> <u>2 Corinthians 5:16-21</u>	March 31	Coming Together
Week 5: Fifth Sunday in Lent <u>Isaiah 43:16-21</u> <u>Philippians 3:4b-14</u>	April 7	Making a New Thing
Week 6: Palm/Passion Sunday <u>Isaiah 50:4-9a</u> <u>Philippians 2:5-11</u> <u>Luke 19:28-40</u>	April 14	Preparing
Week 7: Easter Day <u>Acts 10:34-43</u> <u>Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24</u> <u>1 Corinthians 15:19-26</u> <u>John 20:1-18</u>	April 21	Believing

*All scripture quotations are NRSV.

With All Your Heart
ASH WEDNESDAY: RETURN TO ME
Ash Wednesday, Year C
March 6, 2019

PLANNING NOTES
Reading Notes

See full texts, artwork, and *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* for this Sunday at [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectonnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

March

- All Month **Women's History Month**
- March 1 [World Day of Prayer](#)
- March 3 [Transfiguration of the Lord](#)
- March 6 [Ash Wednesday](#), and [Lent Begins](#)
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May 30	Ascension of the Lord

Planning for This Series

“Ash Wednesday begins with dust and ashes.” This service is the beginning of our holy season of Lent. Historically, this was a time in the church year for interested people to undergo intensive catechesis and formation in preparation for baptism and joining the church. The baptisms would take place at the Easter Vigil service six weeks later; and after that, people would be considered full Christians, with the ability to take part in the sacrament of Holy Communion. (This ritual still takes place for adults converting to the Roman Catholic faith.)

We are marked with ashes at this service, a reminder of our mortality. Some planning notes for your service: your service probably will not take a full hour, which is fine. If your church is located in an urban area, you may want to offer a half hour lunch service, so that people from neighboring offices can attend. You may decide to do an evening service, or to hold a couple of services at difference times of the day. We do emphasize that Ash Wednesday is a solemn community experience, similar to taking Holy Communion. Therefore, we do not suggest an “Ashes to Go” experience. You may consider leaving the lights in your sanctuary dim and keep the music fairly solemn. This is just the beginning of your Lenten season, so let the tactile experience of receiving the ashes be the focus for the service, and keep your sermon short.

PREACHING NOTES

[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

The people of God cross a threshold this day. We, as preachers, must help our people mark this new beginning. We step intentionally into that which is broken and torn – a space in which we learn to be vulnerable again so that we may journey into the very heart of God. We slow our pace during these 40 days because the landscape of Lent takes us through the wildernesses of our own hearts and souls. We must walk carefully. We must think deeply. We must allow our hearts to be broken open. We must be willing to lay bare all that is hidden, buried, or repressed. We are pilgrims in this land, looking to God for guidance in the unfamiliar terrain. This is a journey that every Christian must

take. We start in ashes and end in a garden teeming with new life and impossible possibility.

Lent is a season that is distinctly, unapologetically counterintuitive. It continues the work that Mary sang in the Magnificat—the world turned upside down—where the lowly are lifted and the mighty are brought down from their thrones. Lent, like Advent (a similar season of preparation for new life), is a turning, an overturning, a re-turning. Both the Joel and 2 Corinthians texts testify to this reorganization of the world under God’s reign. Lent disrupts the conventional wisdom of a world that says we begin in life and end in death. The ashes that we wear on this day are a reminder that death is only the beginning. It is on this day that we, as Christians, declare to the world our intention to die to all those things that keep us entombed – pride, avarice, self-doubt, fear, isolation, cynicism, and every single other barrier that prevents us from living a wholehearted existence with God.

It might seem strange to your congregation members to wear ashes as a sign of new life, but ask any gardener and he/she will tell you that under the right conditions, ashes make great fertilizer. So, we take the ashes from last year’s Palm procession and declare to the world our intent to cultivate new life, grounding ourselves in dust and ash with the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” This day is our yearly reminder that we are mortal and each moment is precious. These ashes challenge us to be fully human. Though our Lenten journey begins in ashes, we must remember that it doesn’t end there. We must take this season to return to the Holy One who formed us from the dust.

Being fully human, however, is unspeakably difficult. Life is hard. It comes with unwelcome diagnoses, seemingly insurmountable challenges, impossible decisions, systematic injustice, grief, pain, and loss. Is it any wonder then, that we guard our hearts so well from the haunts and hopes of our human existence? Into our messy humanness, into our “sleepless nights,” Paul declares that the day of salvation is at hand in 2 Corinthians. Yes, our life is hard, Paul exclaims . . . then there comes a triumphant “and yet . . .” “We are treated as impostors, *and yet* are true; as unknown, *and yet* are well known; as dying, *and see*—we are alive; as punished, *and yet* not killed; as sorrowful, *yet* always rejoicing; as poor, *yet* making many rich; as having nothing, *and yet* possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:8b-10, emphasis mine). We wear these ashes that mark our mortality, *and yet* we are on a journey of life. We face situations that break our hearts daily, *and yet* we declare those hearts belong to God. We admit that we have strayed from the pathways of righteousness, *and yet* we profess our repentance and turn toward the good.

The prophet Joel calls out across the millennia, “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; *rend your hearts and not your clothing.*” “Rend your hearts! Break them open! Those walls that you have built around your hearts to keep them safe and comfortable shut me out! Those walls block everything that makes you so delightfully and uniquely human! Remember that you are fearfully and wonderfully made! Turn around; come closer; come home,” says our God.

This is the call of Lent. When things seem hopeless, when there is fear and trembling in the land and a day of great darkness descends, and armies are encamped just outside the gates of our well-guarded hearts, that is when the call to return to God becomes most urgent and necessary. To hear and respond to that call takes all of us. Lent is not a solitary journey, but one that must be taken in community, as a community. We cannot leave any heart behind, not the aged ones, not the childlike ones, not the hardened ones, not the broken ones, not the empty ones, not the full ones. Every heart matters to God.

I have preached on this Joel passage every Ash Wednesday for the past decade, but reading these ancient words again this year leads me to the verse, “Who knows whether [God] will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him.” As we journey together, dear preachers, throughout this Lent, I encourage you to see the lectionary Scriptures for each Sunday as blessings that God has left us, like a trail of breadcrumbs, that lead us and our congregations into wholehearted, resurrected lives. Fed and nourished this way, we can endure the wilderness, *and yet* we anticipate the garden. The Heart of all hearts will not leave us wandering and directionless. Each Sunday there will be a signpost that marks another step toward home, toward Life, toward the rising that takes place once we are brave enough to rend our hearts.

There is an old gospel song that gives me a vision of God sitting on the porch in a rocking chair waiting for us, wayward children that we are, to find our way home again. Through blessing, breadcrumbs, Scripture and ash, the heart of our God is calling, “Come home. Come home. You who are weary come home; . . . calling, O sinner, come home!” (UMH 348).

Rev. Todd Pick is an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church, serving in the Central Texas Conference. He is a pastor, poet, and painter. He has contributed many articles on worship, creativity, and beauty to *Worship Arts Magazine*. In addition, his art and poetry were featured in the December 2018 issue of *Magnet Magazine*, a Christian publication in the UK. Todd is an accomplished artist who has created stage visuals for many United Methodist conferences, including the 2012 and 2016 General Conference

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GRAPHICS AND RESOURCES

Articles and Resources

- [21st Century Africana Worship Resources for Ash Wednesday](#)
- [Prayers for Ash Wednesday](#)
- [Contemporary Service for Ash Wednesday](#)
- [Smudges on the Soul: A Meditation for Ash Wednesday](#)
- [Making Ash Wednesday Accessible for Children](#)
- [Ash Wednesday Reflections: The Acknowledgement of Sin](#)
- [A Corporate Prayer of Confession for Ash Wednesday](#)
- [Changer: A Prayer Poem for Ash Wednesday](#)
- [Ash Wednesday Litany of Reconciliation and Litany Leading to Prayer](#)
- [A Service of Worship for Ash Wednesday](#)
- [Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God](#) (hymn)
- [O God, Be Merciful to Me](#) (hymn)
- [Liturgy Man: Why did John Wesley omit Ash Wednesday and Lent?](#) (video)
- [Water and Ashes Do Not Mix!](#) (article)

Seasonal/Secular

- [Women's History Month](#) (March): Nevertheless She Persisted: Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- [UMCOR Sunday/One Great Hour of Sharing](#) (March 31)
- Daylight Saving Time Begins (March 10) – [Time Change Song \(Spring\)](#)
- St. Patrick's Day (March 17) – [St. Patrick's Day and Celtic Christian Resources](#)

Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads

With All Your Heart
LENT 1: GOD'S GENEROUS HEART
First Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 10, 2019

PLANNING NOTES
Reading Notes

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Planning for This Series

It very well might be that many in your church could not make the Ash Wednesday service. That makes this first Sunday in Lent a true beginning of the Lenten season for those worshipers. You may want to lay out the arc of the season – direct your worshipers on the path that leads to the Risen Christ, even though they can't see that quite yet. Throughout the season, as you program liturgy and music, look for the themes of waiting, preparation, and formation.

Consider forming study groups for this season to follow the faith formation pieces in tandem with Sunday worship. In this historical season of Christian education and formation, a churchwide Lenten study would be appropriate.

If you enjoy creating altarscapes, consider what “wilderness” looks like in your context. Is it the middle of the woods? Abandoned areas of town? Desert? Mountains? How would your congregation describe and recognize wilderness?

PREACHING NOTES

[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#)

[Romans 10:8b-13](#)

As the first Sunday of Lent arrives, we find ourselves at a border with the ancient Israelites in our reading from Deuteronomy. We are standing on the edge of the wilderness, looking with great anticipation toward the Promised Land. Just in front of us is the Jordan River Valley, where Jesus' cousin will baptize him centuries later and God will name him (and every child of God) as Beloved. This river marks the boundary and entrance into a land flowing with God's promise and presence. It is a sight for sore and somnolent eyes.

Even as we begin our journey into the wildness of Lent where our parched souls are dry and weary, we are reminded that though we are asked to wander these 40 days, our journey is not aimless. Our “promised land” lies in our rising with Christ. We would do well to remember that as we explore the wilderness inside our own hearts, we will need

God's "mighty hand and outstretched arm" to give direction to our sojourn. We will need to be reminded over and over again who we are and to whom we belong. During these 40 days, we will need to rehearse the story of our faith and find our grounded-ness in the very heart of God.

The passage from Deuteronomy contains many dominant themes that we normally connect with the season of Lent – wilderness, journey, difficulty, sacrifice, and memory, to name a few. Any of these themes would be fertile ground to begin your way into the generous heart of God this first Sunday in Lent. Perhaps one idea speaks to you more loudly than another. It seems, however, that the commandment that resides at the heart of all these themes is the mandate to **remember**. The Greek word for this powerful action is *anamnesis*, literally "to call to mind." Our story as a people of God is firmly rooted in the call to *do* and *remember*.

Precisely at the heart of this reading, we find a story that the Israelite people are asked to repeat over and over again as they bring their first fruits to the priest to be consecrated. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor . . ." their story begins. It is a reminder that even when they have inhabited the land for such a long time that they come to the Temple with their arms laden with the fruit of their harvest, they never forget to whom the land truly belongs and the story of how they came to be. It is a story that grounds them in a tale of survival and struggle, even when (perhaps especially when) they begin to get comfortable and are tempted to forget that it is God from whom all blessings flow. These were a people who were shaped by the memory of being nomadic, rootless, and dispossessed, even as generation upon generation put down roots and settled in the land. But the rehearsed story wove them into the fabric of their past. The work of remembering the past calls for present action.

The recitation that begins with the "wandering Aramean" calls to mind that at some point, at some time, we have all been hungry, rootless wanderers dependent upon one another and God for comfort, care, and for our very survival. Perhaps this has not happened in our lifetimes, but in the lifetimes of those who have come before us. But their story is our story. Their call is our call. And that call comes out of the generous heart of God. That call is to embody *justice* and *joy*.

The Deuteronomy text ends with a celebration – a feast – where those who cannot or do not own land will feast with those who do! The priests, the immigrants—and if you extend the reading just a few more verses—the widows, and orphans are included as well. This is a journey that ends in *all* being fed. *This* is the "promised land." *This* is heaven come to earth. *This* is remembrance with an empathic purpose. When we are able to recall our own vulnerability, our own desert wanderings, then we are more apt to

include those on the margins who know too little of joy, too little of compassion, and far too little of kindness.

When we remember, powerful things happen. Our hearts as well as our tables become more open, more generous. We recognize the abundance of gifts we have been given is meant to be shared. Suddenly, our hearts and tables begin to look more like God's heart and Christ's table. "Do this in remembrance of me," Christ says. Tell this story, eat this bread, drink this cup, share all that you are and all that you have in Christ's name. This is the Word that Paul says in Romans is "near you, on your lips and in your heart."

At the time of this writing, there are an estimated 68.5 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.[i] That is equivalent to 44,400 people *a day*, two people *every second*, fleeing their homes because of persecution and conflict, lest we think that wandering peoples in search of their own promised land and a full table is a phantom of the past and not a reality of the present.

Global Migration Sunday

In 2017, the Council of Bishops designated December 3 as Global Migration Sunday. This one-time special Sunday recognized the millions of men, women, and children who have been forced to leave their homelands and migrate to new lands in search of safety. General agencies created worship resources, including prayers and music suggestions, as well as advocacy pieces. These can be found at umcmigration.org and may be incorporated into the service today. Although this special Sunday was not designated again for 2018, the world continues to see global migration as a very real crisis.

End Sidebar

On our Lenten pathways, how might we remember in such a way that calls us to spread a wider feast for those who are amid difficult journeys? How can we remember in such a way that we can authentically use our own versions of "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien . . ." to compel us into action in solidarity with those who are without home or homeland? How does memory stretch us to look into our hearts and around our tables and dare to ask, "Who is not here yet? How do we extend an invitation that includes all?" As we embark this Lent, let us remember, let us wander, and let God's generous heart beat within us as we search together for justice and joy.

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[1] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Figures at a Glance*. November 21, 2018, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

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Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads

With All Your Heart
LENT 2: IMITATING
Second Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 17, 2019

PLANNING NOTES

Reading Notes

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Planning for This Series

If you created a scene of wilderness last week, this week consider the stars. Add stars to your altar or sanctuary. You could have cut-out stars and crayons ready for children who are worshipping with you. It's a great way to capture the imagination of the children in your congregation. For adults, put small blank stars in the bulletin and find a time in the service to invite people to write down the prayers and promises that they wait for from God.

PREACHING NOTES

[Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18](#)

[Philippians 3:17-4:1](#)

1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. One septillion in the American counting system, 1 quadrillion in the European – it is a rough estimate of just how many stars there might be.^[i] Admittedly, it is probably a gross *underestimate*. The simple question that asks how many stars are in existence baffles even the most astute 21st century scientific minds, let alone one man in antiquity having a conversation with God under the night sky.

Last week, we looked to the land, the tilled earth, and the fruits that came from it, to ground us in our journey toward the heart of God in this Lenten season. We encountered a promise of story, identity, and at last, celebration. This week, we turn our gaze upward, aspiring to imitate our Creator, the source of our promise, our dreams, and our guiding star along our Lenten pathway.

Just as far as the stars are from us, God's promise seems very far off from Abram. Abram yearns for something closer and more concrete – the solid weight of a newborn heir in his arms or the firm ground beneath his feet in a place he could finally call home. Perhaps star-gazing wasn't enough for this paragon of faith. Perhaps, with

Abram, we know we are in good company when we question and impatiently demand that we see proof of God's promises kept.

Humans are meant for stargazing. From the earliest civilizations, humanity tended to look to the sky for answers to all sorts of questions. People have marked celestial movements with great enthusiasm, and sometimes, with great fear. Perhaps if they looked up at the night sky, they would find their place in the grand scheme of things. Or perhaps they believed that if they understood this **one thing**, then all the rest of their questions would melt away. Life would make sense. The orderly beauty of the night sky is undeniable. It is like a living dream.

When we look up at the night sky, we see the same stars that Abram did that night that he asked tough questions of God, the same stars that the magi did as they read the sky in search of a new king who would free his people, the same stars that made the psalmist break out in song and claim that God had a name for each one of them (Psalm 147:4). What happens, though, when God and God's promises seem as distant as the stars themselves? What happens when a family who has prayed for years for a child asks with Abram, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?" What happens when someone loses a house, a job, health care, and in the struggle to survive, asks: "O Lord, God, how am I to *know* that I shall possess it?" Certainty is elusive in the world in which we live. Each of us has members in our congregations that are waiting in the dark for urgent prayers to be answered and God's promise to come into fruition. How do we keep faith burning brightly in our hearts when the stars that are meant to guide us grow dim and cold?

Until this moment in Genesis, Abram has unquestioningly done everything that God had asked of him. He left his homeland, built some altars, made some bad decisions, parted from some of his family, all the while following God's promises of land and descendants like a trail of blessings. As chapter 15 opens, however, Abram has begun to question whether this promise of land and offspring will ever come to pass. It appears Abram is willing to have faith up to a point, then the fulfillment of the promises of God become implausible. That is precisely when the questions, confusion, fear, and obstinance set in.

Abram is walking the quintessential human journey of faithfulness in God. If we are grounded in our faith when we begin our journey, we too trust in the promises of God. If we keep walking on our journey and those promises don't seem to be any nearer, then we start questioning – our own faith, God's faithfulness, the possibility of our dreams, the hurt of human suffering, the fear that we were wrong to trust in the first place. It is a painful place to be, sitting on the ground and staring up at a sky that seems as far away

as we can imagine. It is precisely this experience that is a catalyst for our growth in faithfulness, as it was Abram's. It is in the questioning that Abram learns to trust again. Lent, as we know, is a transformation of the heart. Question by question, Abram's heart is being shaped into a more trusting form. Perhaps for those in your congregations, dear preachers, they might need to learn the same lesson this Lent as they explore their own wildernesses and dreams, as they count the stars. Their hearts are just as pliable (and fragile) as Abram's.

Abram sets a familiar pattern for Lent and our cycle of faith, doubt, and finally trust. What the lectionary reading leaves out is the part of Abram's dream that says before God's promises will be fulfilled (and they will be because God always keeps God's promises), there will be a time of struggle and hardship. Just like the lectionary, we tend to want to skip over that piece. Four hundred years is a long time to keep trusting, keep moving, keep following God through a land that is not our own. But this is what this long season of Lent is about. We are given time in the wilderness to ask the tough questions and learn to trust our heart to God's heart, our steps to God's pathway. The way may be long and winding, but the God who set the stars in motion will guide us on our journey. And perhaps the next time that we look up at the septillion stars, we might trust that God has put just one there so that we might find our way home.

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[i] “How Many Stars Are There In the Universe” Howell, Elizabeth. May 17, 2017
<https://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html>

GRAPHICS AND RESOURCES

Articles and Resources

- [21st Century Liturgy Resources for the Second Sunday in Lent, Year C](#)

Seasonal/Secular

- [Women’s History Month](#) (March): Nevertheless She Persisted: Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- [UMCOR Sunday/One Great Hour of Sharing](#) (March 31)
- St. Patrick’s Day (March 17): [St. Patrick’s Day and Celtic Christian Resources](#)

Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads

With All Your Heart
LENT 3: REPENTING
Third Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 24, 2019

PLANNING NOTES

Reading Notes

See full texts, artwork, and *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* for this Sunday at [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectionnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

March

- All Month **Women's History Month**
- March 1 [World Day of Prayer](#)
- March 3 [Transfiguration of the Lord](#)
- March 6 [Ash Wednesday](#), and [Lent Begins](#)
- March 31 [UMCOR Sunday](#)

April

- April 14 **Palm/Passion Sunday**
- April 14-20 **Holy Week**
- April 18 **Maundy Thursday**
- April 19 **Good Friday**
- April 20 **Holy Saturday**
- April 21 **Easter Sunday**
- April 24 [Festival of God's Creation](#)
- April 25 [World Malaria Day \(UM Communications\)](#)

May

- All Month **Christian Home Month**
- All Month **Asian Pacific American Heritage Month**
- May 1 **Older Adult Recognition Day**
- May 2 **National Day of Prayer**
- May 3 **May Friendship Day**

May 5	Native American Ministries Sunday
May 12	Mother's Day (USA)/Festival of the Christian Home
May 18-19	Change the World Weekend
May 19	Heritage Sunday
May 24	Aldersgate Day
May 27	Memorial Day (USA)
May 30	Ascension of the Lord

Planning for This Series

This week, consider setting your altar with a vision of feasting versus fasting. At one end of the table set out your “feast,” at the other end, your “fast.” What does this look like in your context? As our preaching notes writers have said, by this third week in Lent, people may begin to weary of this long holy season. Especially if your congregation is used to three- and four-week sermon series, you may need to capture their attention again. What does it look like to turn back to God at this point in the season?

PREACHING NOTES

[Isaiah 55:1-9](#)

[1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#)

We humans hunger for comfort and security, the assurance that everything is going to be OK when life threatens to overwhelm us. That may be one reason many of our faith communities specialize in plentiful potluck dinners. Gathering around tables and sharing our lives as well as food is part of who we are. I've been to countless potlucks in my life, and I can't remember ever going and *not* finding calorie-laden goodness spread like a crazy quilt of love and hope. Traditional *comfort foods* of our childhood both fill our bellies and hug our hearts. There is always just enough, like manna from heaven – never too little, never too much.

As faithful folk, we know how to fuel the *body* and how to make *love* the central ingredient in almost any dish. When we lack words, we bring food. When we wish to dispense comfort and care, it often comes in the form of casseroles and hot dishes, all seasoned with the spirit of love and garnished with a sprig of hope. Comfort food and tables of plenty are not, however, usually associated with the season of Lent.

Tradition compels us to think of Lent as a time of self-denial and intense introspection and contemplation. This season sets itself apart as a time of fasting from the luxurious and indulgent. A boisterous feast at God's table is the last thing that we would expect to see embodied in the words of our lectionary Scripture for this week. Yet here we are all

the same, duty-bound to come to God's table, no matter the state of our wallets or the state of our hearts. As preachers, we have led our people through two weeks of Lent. They have found themselves grounded in offering the first fruits of the harvest and uplifted by the promises suspended like stars in the night sky. This week, we will ask our congregations to leave their chosen pathways, repent, and turn back to a God who always has "plenty good room" at the Table for us.

Before we can hear the words of Isaiah 55 in any kind of meaningful way, we need to consider the context in which these words were written. The people of Israel find themselves at the end of a very long exile in Babylon. Even the recollection of what the Promised Land was and how to inhabit that land had faded from the collective memory. If these exiles had heard of the promises of the everlasting covenant made to David at all, it was only in hushed whispers and half-remembered tales that must have sounded more like a dream than any sort of possible reality.

It appears the people of Israel were feasting and fasting. They were feasting on the economy of scarcity that empire always places upon its people – the belief that they will never *have* enough, never *be* enough. While they were feasting on the logic of empire, they were also fasting. They fasted from the abundant promises of God and from the assurance that God would one day lead them back home. This fast left them starved of hope and starved of heart. In this vastly malnourished state, the call to come to a table of plenty must have sounded too good to be true. The invitation of Isaiah 55 was also a call to repent (literally to turn around) and accept God's gracious, irresistible invitation to come, buy, eat, listen, delight—break the chains of their long fast!

As we look out at our world this Lent, we see a similar type of feasting on scarcity, fear, and distrust. It seems to be the hallmark of our "well-fed" society. Perhaps, we need to repent of our feasting on the things that do not satisfy. When we turn our hearts and lives around and incline our ears to God's invitation to Wisdom's table, the sound is strange to our ears. "Nothing is free," we say. Nothing is without cost. We have stuffed ourselves for so long with greed, cynicism, and inadequacy that we have forgotten what real nourishment looks like.

There is nothing to fear from the invitation to the table of plenty. "Let them return to the Lord," Isaiah proclaims, "that he may have mercy on them." Solid helpings of repentance and forgiveness are served at the table. The grace of God is far more filling than anything else in which we have mistakenly put our trust. God reminds Isaiah's listeners that the ways of God are not our ways (thank God for that!). The way of God leads us to a table where all are welcomed and fed and are claimed beloved.

This table might begin to sound familiar to us as Christ's table where Christ invites "all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another." [i] This is the feast we should choose this Lent. And as for fasting, well, Isaiah tells us of a fast that is fruitful. Isaiah 58:6-11 claims:

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
10 if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
11 The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail."

We still have a way to go in this Lenten season. The journey is about seeking a way that is not our own way but following the pathway to God's heart. May your feasting and fasting bring justice, comfort, and living water to your road-weary travelers. May your heart find contentment and sustenance for the journey of homecoming.

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[i] United Methodist Hymnal, Invitation to the Table

GRAPHICS AND RESOURCES

Articles and Resources

- [21st Century Worship Resources for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year C](#)
- [Do You Hear Them? A 21st Century Worship Resource for Lent and Holy Week](#)

Seasonal/Secular

- [Women's History Month](#) (March): Nevertheless She Persisted: Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

- [UMCOR Sunday/One Great Hour of Sharing](#) (March 31)

Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads

With All Your Heart
LENT 4: COMING TOGETHER
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 31, 2019

PLANNING NOTES

Reading Notes

See full texts, artwork, and *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* for this Sunday at [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectonnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

March

- All Month **Women's History Month**
- March 1 [World Day of Prayer](#)
- March 3 [Transfiguration of the Lord](#)
- March 6 [Ash Wednesday](#), and [Lent Begins](#)
- March 31 [UMCOR Sunday](#)

April

- April 14 **Palm/Passion Sunday**
- April 14-20 **Holy Week**
- April 18 **Maundy Thursday**
- April 19 **Good Friday**
- April 20 **Holy Saturday**
- April 21 **Easter Sunday**
- April 24 [Festival of God's Creation](#)
- April 25 [World Malaria Day \(UM Communications\)](#)

May

- All Month **Christian Home Month**
- All Month **Asian Pacific American Heritage Month**
- May 1 **Older Adult Recognition Day**
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May 5	Native American Ministries Sunday
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May 24	Aldersgate Day
May 27	Memorial Day (USA)
May 30	Ascension of the Lord

Planning for This Series

The focus for this week is “Coming Together.” We are just over halfway through Lent at this fourth week. Focus your liturgy on repentance, reconciliation, and repair. Our Preaching Notes writers use the illustration of a frayed patchwork quilt that is in need of repair. Use this as your starting point for your altarscape. After last week’s service that focused on the feast at God’s table, this week is more inward focused. What other inward spiritual work still needs to happen on the journey to Easter? How is that reflected in your worship?

If you started formation groups to walk through Lent together, be sure to check in with them by this week.

PREACHING NOTES

[Joshua 5:9-12](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#)

We have embarked on a “journey of the heart,” walking these Lenten days toward resurrection. Embracing transformation, new possibilities, and new life is what our journey is all about. But we still have work to do before we arrive in the garden with an empty tomb. As Easter begins to appear on the very distant horizon, we might be tempted to quicken our pace. But if we listen to the Apostle Paul, we are reminded that we still need to walk slowly and with great care. Before we can get to the new creation of Easter, we have some repair work to do within our own hearts and in our world. So far on our journey, we have travelled through fruitful fields, barren wilderness, countless stars, promises of God both large and small, and tables where all are fed. Like threads that sew together a patchwork quilt, this week we begin binding together our journey with repentance, reconciliation, and repair.

There is a particular concept that our Jewish brothers and sisters use to describe how they are called to respond to a world that feels like it’s coming apart at the seams. It is a process that calls all humanity into action. *Tikkun Olam*, in the simplest of terms, means

“to repair the world.” When the fabric of society is torn, *Tikkun Olam* not only calls each of us to participate in mending what is broken, but to make it better than it was before it was damaged. And when it comes to the art of repairing the world, there are no shortcuts, no easy answers. It is the difficult and time-consuming work of repairing by way of reconciliation and restoration.

To repair systems and structures, we usually need to break them down to basic levels, see where the problem is, address the root causes of failure, and then begin rebuilding. It is not hard to look around this world, our own communities, perhaps even our own families, and see a thousand different fissures – cracks where God’s harmonious creation has somehow gone awry. *Tikkun Olam* is not about grand gestures, but rather small acts of kindness, small steps made in faith, small displays of love and solidarity. Each daily action that embodies lovingkindness does not necessarily make an immediate, large impact. But as we keep loving and walking in grace, our collective actions, all together, can add up. They can begin to make a new world—a whole new creation!—if we only have eyes to see it.

Paul urged the gathered community in Corinth to expand their vision, to see that “everything has become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This kind of seeing moves beyond what our eyes can plainly see. Humanity has always tended to focus on what is broken, what is limiting, what is imperfect – both in ourselves and in the world. What if, on our way to building a new and better world, all the limits we put on people and things were suddenly dismantled? What if we started to see the world through the eyes of Christ, whose eyes saw human difference as an opportunity to expand the reign of God on earth?

Jesus saw through all barriers and boundaries, broke them to the point where even death lost all its finality. Jesus saw through all brokenness and hopelessness, poured himself out to the point where love conquered all. What if part of our Lenten discipline involved learning to see with grace-healed eyes? What if we learned how to see with a newer, broader vision so that the widening of our vision led to a widening of our hearts? What if we focused on the threads of creation that bind us together and through the work of reconciliation began to stitch the threads of a new creation--threads that would bind us closer to one another and to God?

Our reading from Paul recalls a prophecy from Isaiah about the world made new: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:18-19). Paul continues this ancient theme, telling us the new creation is always and everywhere in our midst. It is always being created. And

it is created by us through Christ. We are God's vision. We are the ones that are resurrected with Christ. We are the ones who, while walking the wilderness way, have found Living Water in the desert. It is no longer enough to simply see and perceive that a new world is possible. Because we are to be the agents of reconciliation who keep working to bring God's vision into reality. Paul proclaims, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." Anyone? Anyone! Are you in Christ? Then there is a new creation. Is anyone in your congregation in Christ? Then there is a new creation.

The Lenten wilderness is a place where it becomes necessary to shed some of our old ways. We need to let go of sin and selfishness, greed and self-centeredness to make room for this whole new, resurrected life into which we are called to live. Paul asks his community—and us—to "be reconciled," "trusting the ministry of reconciliation to us." Reconciliation will involve letting go of our old ways of seeing. How can our Lenten journey help us to see beyond the obstacles and stumbling blocks, the places where the fabric of humanity seems too threadbare and torn? And how can we begin to open the eyes of our hearts, to dream of a world fully reconciled and renewed, resurrected and restored?

You no doubt have those in your pews who resist seeing a new vision, a new way of living and being, those content to stay in their own grave-clothes. But the good news is Christ keeps calling, beckoning, pulling at us, drawing us together so that all Creation might be reconciled to God. The good news is that when we see the frayed edges of human injustice and indignity with the eyes of Christ, then we are compelled to start the work of repair, the work of mending.

The world will never glimpse God's vision unless we share it, unless we make a concerted effort to say with our hearts and our lives: this is where the world has been torn asunder . . . this is where love is calling us to go . . . this is what love is calling us to bind and to build. Let us heal the hurt with the ties that bind it back together in Christ. Let us point to the places where water flows in the deserts of life. Let us work to live into the fullness of God's good creation. Let us see beauty while creating harmony, justice, and reconciliation – one small act at a time.

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GRAPHICS AND RESOURCES

Articles and Resources

- [21st Century Worship Resources for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C](#)

Seasonal/Secular

- [Women's History Month](#) (March): Nevertheless She Persisted: Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- [UMCOR Sunday/One Great Hour of Sharing](#) (March 31)

Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads

With All Your Heart
LENT 5: MAKING A NEW THING
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C
April 7, 2019

PLANNING NOTES

Reading Notes

See full texts, artwork, and *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* for this Sunday at [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectonnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

April

- April 14** Palm/Passion Sunday
- April 14-20** Holy Week
- April 18** Maundy Thursday
- April 19** Good Friday
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- April 21** Easter Sunday
- April 24** [Festival of God's Creation](#)
- April 25** [World Malaria Day \(UM Communications\)](#)

May

- All Month** Christian Home Month
- All Month** Asian Pacific American Heritage Month
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- May 24** Aldersgate Day
- May 27** Memorial Day (USA)
- May 30** Ascension of the Lord

Planning for This Series

This week, as you consider the visual elements of worship, reread the Isaiah passage. Isaiah writes of the promise of new things from the Lord, a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, all so that people might praise the Lord. What new things have sprung up in your church and community? What ministries or nonprofits act as wellsprings in the desert? In Nashville, I think of the many ministries like Room in the Inn, Open Table Nashville, or Thistle Farms. I might drape woven blankets or scarves made by women in South America or Africa, and light candles from Thistle Farms that were made by women survivors of sex trafficking. In your bulletin, highlight these pieces and tell their stories. If you take a Communion offering, consider designating it for these ministries. Visually represent the new work of God in your community.

PREACHING NOTES

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#)

[Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

It has been said that *anyone* can master *anything*, given 10,000 hours of deliberate practice.[i] “Deliberate practice” does not mean a few hours a day of half-hearted plunking on a piano will make you an expert concert pianist any more than playing around on the monkey bars would make you an Olympic gymnast. Deliberate practice requires total, whole-bodied, whole-hearted focus and devotion. It is the kind of practice for something that you would feel incomplete without; something that finds an echo in your very bones. Ten thousand hours is about 10 years’ worth of persistent, intentional effort, until mastery becomes more like muscle memory. Then doing that *one thing* that you’ve worked so long and hard to master feels like coming home.

For the people of God, our *one thing* is resurrection – the movement from death to new life. We practice resurrection as a church and as individuals all the time, or at least we should. Every time we gather in a space of confession, we practice resurrection, unburdening our lives and our hearts from the weight of sin we have carried far too long. Every time we come to the Table, we practice the movement of death toward new life. We come starving, hungering for nourishing grace and bread that sustains our bodies and souls and leave the Table, full of community, hope, and memory. Every time we lift ardent prayers for one among us who is suffering, trusting that our prayers rise to a God who hears our every need, we step out of a grave into a new reality. Every time a child of God comes to the waters of baptism and we recommit ourselves to be drenched in the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at the beginning of time, we walk into newness of life. It is deliberate, this practice that we do, until something as

counterintuitive as resurrection seems like the most natural thing in the world to us. It is our truest home.

In this long preparatory time of Lent, we still practice resurrection. It is still our *one thing*. It is still our home. We still pray and confess and come to Christ's Table. We still affirm, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." If we have really immersed ourselves in this Lenten season, we will find our hearts transformed on Easter morning. It still takes deliberate practice. We are starting that final push toward the empty tomb, but there is still some practicing we must do before the stone can be rolled away.

The Hebrew Bible lectionary reading for this week is from the prophet Isaiah, the themes of which are almost identical to that of Paul's writing from 2 Corinthians (Lent 4). This passage comes to us from a section of the text most commonly called Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55). What differentiates this section of Isaiah from the others is the experience of exile. These 15 chapters are written as a reminder that God is still practicing resurrection even when (especially when) life is at its darkest and it seems like hope is lost. These words from the prophet were a reminder that when the people of Israel were tempted to go back into slavery because the wilderness seemed too challenging and endless, God made a way from that death into new promise and will do it again (and again and again).

It seems strange that the prophet writes, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old" (Isaiah 43:18). Traditionally, every time that Israel forgot their history, dreadful things happened to them. Without being rooted in memory, the people of God were easily led astray and would neglect all the things that made them God's people in the first place. The prophet here, however, is talking about past trauma, haunts, and hurts that tended to keep the people of God bound in graveclothes rather than memory that propels them forward toward a future with hope.

Every human experiences dark times that are hard to release – grief, shame, despair, death, disappointment, anger, depression, and addiction can keep us from practicing resurrection. What, dear preachers, holds your people in their wildernesses? These shadows can even make us forget that resurrection is possible and natural for the people who claim the name of Christian. It's in times like these that the muscle memory of walking from death into new life is crucial. There is so much that can hold our hearts in death. There is only *one thing* that can compel those same hearts to open to new life. As preachers, we must be able to lead our people to perceive the new thing that is always springing forth. Before we can fully embrace that one thing, we must let go of all that holds us back.

In Isaiah, God promises that the new thing that is springing up will make gardens out of deserted places and even the weirdest looking animals (jackals and ostriches) will honor God by practicing resurrection. This newness is about transformation. Rivers will not run through deserts without fundamentally changing them, just as God's love cannot flow through our hearts without transforming us. We are reminded through the prophet's words that God has made us for this exact purpose. We cannot praise the risen Christ, let alone rise ourselves, if we are still mired in the old, former things.

As we turn our faces toward Jerusalem this week and the cross that awaits in a story of betrayal, crucifixion, and death that leaves us in stunned silence, we must remember to practice resurrection. The world knows too well this sad story. The world knows too often the pain of death, of innocents accused or injustice inflicted upon the last, lost, and least. The church is the only witness that can authentically testify that these deaths are not an ending. They are an opening for a rising up into a new life with more promise and joy than we dare to dream of as long as we keep practicing resurrection.

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ways to engage facets of emergent worship within large and small congregational settings. She draws upon all the senses in liturgical movement and ritual to create worship experiences that involve whole-bodied devotion.

[i] Popularized by Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers*, the assertion was originally published in a psychology paper called "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance" by K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer in 1993.

GRAPHICS AND RESOURCES

Articles and Resources

- [21st Century Worship Resources for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C](#)
- [THE GREAT THANKSGIVING FOR LATER IN LENT](#)

Seasonal/Secular

- [Lent/Easter Resources Archive](#)

Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads

**With All Your Heart
LENT 6: PREPARING
Palm/Passion Sunday, Year C
April 14, 2019**

PLANNING NOTES

Reading Notes

See full texts, artwork, and *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* for this Sunday at [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectonnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

April

- April 14** Palm/Passion Sunday
- April 14-20** Holy Week
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- April 20** Holy Saturday
- April 21** Easter Sunday
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May

- All Month** Christian Home Month
- All Month** Asian Pacific American Heritage Month
- May 1** Older Adult Recognition Day
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Planning for This Series

The visuals for this week tend to focus on the palms from the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Many churches have palms ready to hand out with their ushers, and in Sunday School, children may be learning to fold palms into crosses. As our Preaching Writer notes, however, palms are not found in Luke's Gospel. Instead, the visual focus is on the coats being laid down to make a path for Jesus. You can take that literally, using coats or fabric, as well as palms, on your altar today.

Perhaps consider another bulletin insert like the stars in Lent 2. A sheet of paper with a blank drawing of a coat can be a space for people to write down what they need to lay down for the coming Holy Week. It's an exercise in vulnerability and our ability to be vulnerable before God. What's the last piece of armor people need to let go of in order to welcome in Christ and walk through the Holy Week with him?

Check in with your formation groups as they wrap up this season and their work.

PREACHING NOTES

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)

[Philippians 2:5-11](#)

[Luke 19:28-40](#)

We emerge this week from our wilderness wanderings and find ourselves caught up in a parade, a party, a procession of palms! It has been a *long* journey to arrive at the gates of Jerusalem where Jesus will make his grand entry into the heart of political power and religious authority. We have not arrived here by chance. We have spent a considerable time remembering who we are and whose we are. We have spent weeks returning our hearts to the Heart of All Hearts.

As pilgrims on this Lenten journey, we have devoted the last five weeks to intentionally imitating Christ, repenting, coming together, and embracing the new thing that God is already doing within us and among us. It has been a season of turning our hearts to the One whose promises are bigger than the stars; a season of fasting from the things that harm, while feasting on grace. If we have walked the pathway in purposeful prayer and self-reflection, we discover that the very landscape of our hearts has been turned and cultivated. What was once a rocky desert is beginning to blossom with new and tender shoots. This season has hopefully reshaped our aching and broken hearts. The entire journey up until this point *is what has prepared us*—and our hearts—to enter these final days of Lent, to walk with Jesus, to remember his final days on earth, to endure the heartache and horror of death.

Jesus determinedly “set his face” toward Jerusalem in Luke 9:51, and the time has now come to enter the city. We remember that Luke’s Gospel opened in Jerusalem with Zechariah ministering in the temple and with the infant Jesus blessed there by Simeon and Anna. Luke has already put on their lips that Jesus is the one who will bring salvation, and it’s Anna who added that he will redeem Jerusalem (2:31, 38). The drama of the Passion is a bookend in this gospel that, at long last, brings Jesus and the Holy City together again.

As the Jewish people filled the city to remember God’s liberative act of delivering the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, tension and anticipation would have been thick in the air. As Roman imperialism crushed and oppressed God’s people, Pilate made the trip into town to uphold law and order. Pilate must have entered the city in a procession of pomp complete with war horses and an armored army.

In stark contrast to this display of military might, Jesus arrives just before Passover feast and curiously instructs two disciples to borrow a colt for him to ride. When its owners ask the two what they are doing, they answer as Jesus told them to: “The Lord needs it.” As preachers, we could easily point out that Jesus has need of each one seated in our pews, just as he had need of the colt. The questions for each of us on this Palm Sunday are: “Are we ready to carry the weight of the gospel beyond the parade into the rough places where darkness and death overwhelm? Will we carry the good news to the oppressed and those whose hearts are in need of binding up, even if it means putting ourselves in danger?”

After a cloak is spread over the colt and more are laid on the road, the simple parade begins. It’s a procession of humility and gentleness. It’s a demonstration of meekness and vulnerability. Instead of a big show of military might, Jesus defies expectations and comes in a different way. He doesn’t rally the crowds to incite revolt. His coming invites in them the response of, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven” (Luke 19:29). As we hear an echo of the song of both the angels and Simeon from Luke 2, we have to rethink what kind of king is being blessed here: one who comes ultimately to bring about God’s peace.

By now you and your congregation have probably noted that there’s something missing from this parade as Luke tells it . . . *palms*. Instead of waving signs of victory, of paradise, of the fertile ground of new life, Luke emphasizes instead the act of spreading cloaks on the ground. Here we have an act of deep reverence and subservience. As we in our sanctuaries are lifting up and waving our palm branches, perhaps there is a complementary action of laying down that needs to occur.

As we lift up our shouts of praise on this Palm Sunday, might we also lay down ways of living that do not honor God, our neighbor, and all life around us? As we lift up our voices crying out for an end to injustice and suffering, might we also lay down our lives, allowing Christ to fill them with humility and the new beginnings of hope? As we lift up our palms with songs to bless the One who comes in peace, might we also lay down the superficial cries of victory and triumph? As we lift up our eyes to see a vision of earth and heaven made one, might we also lay down our expectations of how God will change us and our world; of how God will come into our lives to accomplish this? As we lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, might we also lay down our hearts until they burn with the desires of God's heart? And in our lifting up and laying down, God might just weave us into a tapestry of resurrection.

The triumphant parade with shouts of joy and blessing will cause our hearts to rise and swell to the highest of highs. The excitement of the boisterous parade where Jesus is accepted by the crowds will fade, and our hearts will slip to the depths of despair, and Jesus is rejected. Holy Week brings us to a space and a time for lament, for struggle, for sorrow. Time slows, and we will walk through betrayal and unanswered prayer into darkness and death. We have done the work to prepare our hearts to walk from the procession to the table, from the cross to the stone-cold tomb.

Today, as we celebrate Love Incarnate who came to live, and work, and dance among us, perhaps we are the borrowed colt. Perhaps we need to lay down our coats to line the way. The story continues, and we have prepared our feet to follow its path with a hope that is stronger than despair, a light that is stronger than darkness, and a love that is stronger than death.

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GRAPHICS AND RESOURCES

Articles and Resources

- [Palm Sunday Processional Entrance with Psalm 118](#)
- [The Lord Needs It - A Call to Worship for Palm Sunday](#)
- [A SERVICE OF WORSHIP FOR PASSION/PALM SUNDAY](#)
- [Music for Palm/Passion Sunday](#)

Seasonal/Secular

- [Lent and Easter Resources](#)

Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads

**With All Your Heart
EASTER: BELIEVING
Easter Sunday, Year C
April 21, 2019**

PLANNING NOTES

Reading Notes

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Planning for This Series

I love seeing the different ways churches celebrate Easter morning. My husband's family's church finishes the early service by walking out of the sanctuary in the dawn light and sings while standing in their church's cemetery, proclaiming the Risen Christ. Our liturgically traditional church in Nashville has a small orchestra, handbells, and full choir. Our previous church had extra copies of the Hallelujah Chorus ready, and whoever wanted to join the choir up front was welcome to do so. However you program Easter, if you have lilies in your sanctuary, a small choir, an orchestra, or your pianist, only one thing matters today: celebrating that we are truly Easter people.

If you're looking for an unusual and moving Easter sunrise service, be sure to [look at the one](#) we wrote last year. Centered around a bonfire, it is a service that blends contemporary music with traditional music. Keep the gospel text the same, or switch to this year's John 20 text.

Be sure, as you plan any service, to make an invitation to the following week's service. Easter Sunday services are often filled with visitors. Be sure your ushers or hospitality team is welcoming visitors that morning. If you are following this series with another one, name that series and include an invitation. Consider having postcards highlighting the new series on hand to give to worshipers as they leave.

PREACHING NOTES

[Acts 10:34-43](#)

[Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#)

[1 Corinthians 15:19-26](#)

[John 20:1-18](#)

The story of resurrected hearts and new life begins early in the morning, just before dawn. In the stillness, in the darkness, Mary made her way to the place of death. Probably carrying spices to anoint Jesus' body, she persisted through the darkness; persisted in doing the necessary work of preparing him for burial. Her beloved One—the one who healed the sick, offered forgiveness of sins, and gave new life within the reign of God—was dead. And in the stillness, in the darkness, she made her way to a stone of shattered dreams and broken hearts.

Our Lenten journey has ended, and we have *finally* made it to Easter! Every year, we are asked to tell the same story over and again: gaping tomb, confused mourners, unexpected and unbelievable encounters with angels and a gardener. Every year, the story moves us along from searching in sadness, to shocking disbelief, and finally to joy. And every year, we meet the challenge at the heart of Easter Sunday: to persist through

fear and darkness, to believe beyond what we think we know, to welcome Christ in unexpected places and faces. Every year, we decide if we will allow our hearts to be transformed by the promise and the very presence of Christ; if we will trust in our own coming into life again and again. But it isn't just once a year that we get to decide. Every day, *every day*, you must decide whether hope is stronger than despair, whether love is stronger than death. That's what this story is about.

Every year, people whom we haven't seen since last Easter file into shiny pews on Easter morning in their Easter finest and take in the overwhelming smell of lilies and the sound of a full choir. Some of our people know this story so well that they could recite it by heart. Most probably know the general gist without remembering the details. And for a precious few, this may be their first time to hear the story at all. Still some preachers will lament that they never have anything *new* to say on this holiest of all holy days. You may feel like you've worked all the angles this story has to offer for the last 10, 20, or 30 years. On this day, however, you have *one job*: to proclaim resurrection!

Tell this story like lives depend on it, because they do. Tell this story in a way that will bring those that still live in death to the hope of new life. Tell this story not as a tale of the past, but of the rising that is happening right now, right here. Tell this story with your own heart in your throat. Above all – just tell the story. With. All. Your. Heart.

Tell the story of Mary Magdalene who came with a broken heart to the tomb just before dawn and saw the beginning of a transformed life. Tell the story of the two disciples who ran for their lives, hearts pounding toward the empty tomb, and who went back to their homes “believing,” but not understanding. Tell the story of God's messengers who sat among discarded graveclothes and questioned Mary's tears. Tell the story of the risen Christ who hung around the garden, so Mary wouldn't be alone in her confusion and fear. Tell the story of the risen Lord who calls Mary's name and at once transforms her broken heart to a burning heart. And perhaps, if you tell the story, then new generations of people can go back to the ones they love and proclaim as Mary did on that first Easter morning, “I have seen the Lord!”

As you prepare to preach resurrection, remember that it's in the darkness that the dawn of morning light comes. It's in the darkness that we discover the stone has already been rolled away and the love of God has been let loose in the world. It's not very hard at all to see the darkness in the world. The darkness is ever-present and is all too real for those who sit in our shiny pews. And the story we have to tell doesn't discount the darkness. But rather it affirms that resurrection has the power to transform a graveyard into a garden brimming with new life. Resurrection has the power to break open tombs and tear down walls. Resurrection has the power to transform the rocky wildernesses of

our hearts into instruments of grace. Resurrection has the power to show death for what it is: “the possibility for love to come again.” [i]

The resurrection of Jesus is not the ending of the story, but the beginning of many hope-filled risings to come. And because the Love of God will come, again and again (and again!), to raise us out of death, we have *hope*. It’s just a whisper now, but if you sit in the stillness and the darkness, you can hear it calling you to rise—*hope*.

We turn our hearts with hope this day to meet the risen Christ with us, within us, and within the love between us; within the unexpected that inspires us. We acknowledge that God is with us in our birthing, our living, our dying, and our rising again. Then, like Mary, we must each decide whether hope is stronger than fear, whether life is stronger than hate, and whether love really is stronger than death . . . every day, every moment, *with all our hearts*. That is what resurrection is.

[i] Cheryl Lawrie, “When the Inevitable is No Longer Sure.” 2010.
<https://holdthisspace.org.au/when-the-inevitable-is-no-longer-sure/>

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GRAPHICS AND RESOURCES

Articles and Resources

- [ACTS OF WORSHIP FOR HOLY WEEK](#)
- [PRAYERS AND COLLECTS FOR LENT AND HOLY WEEK](#)
- [Easter Sunrise Service](#)
- [Easter Sunday Greeting](#)
- [THE GREAT THANKSGIVING FOR EASTER DAY OR SEASON](#)
- [Morning Has Broken: Easter Call to Worship](#)
- [Celebration and Thanksgiving on Easter Sunday Morning: A Pastoral Prayer](#)
- [A Poem For Easter](#)
- [Handbell Music for Lent and Easter](#)
- [I Have Seen the Lord](#)
- [Bilingual Easter Sunday Service \(Korean and English\)](#)
- [Plan Easter for C.M.E. People](#)
- [Two Litanies Based on Psalm 118: A 21st Century Liturgy Resource](#)
- [Prayer of Great Thanksgiving for the Easter Season](#)

Offertory Prayer

Graphics Downloads