

THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

2026 Lenten Devotional

*Discipleship in a Divided Age:
A Lenten Journey through Matthew's Gospel*

**LIVING FAITHFULLY AMID
DIVISION AND UNCERTAINTY**

**WRITTEN BY
TERI MCDOWELL OTT**



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*T*he Gospel of Matthew feels strikingly contemporary. Matthew's first audience was seeking a faithful path in a turbulent, confusing time. Scholars believe this early church was young and fragile, formed of Jewish followers of Jesus who had recently left—or been pushed out of—their synagogues.

Tensions were high, beliefs deeply rooted, divisions painful. Matthew's Gospel includes harsh rhetoric about Jews that should never be removed from context or applied to all Jews; it reflects the heartbreak of a community in conflict and the sharp feelings that arise when good people disagree on matters of deep conviction. This church also lived in a diverse urban setting, sharing space with Gentiles — people they had long been taught to avoid.

Into this setting Matthew proclaims a kingdom breaking in — a way of life grounded in humility, compassion, and courage. As we walk through Matthew during Lent, we too are invited to follow Jesus on the narrow path, confront our own divisions, and seek God's kingdom amid today's fractures.

Resources used to create this Lent devotion:

Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion, by Thomas G. Long, (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.)

The Westminster Study Bible (Westminster John Knox Press, 2024)



Day 1

ASH WEDNESDAY

God's story breaks barriers.

Matthew 1:1-17

Focus verse:

Matthew 1:1

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

If you or I were writing a knockout bestseller, we wouldn't open with a long list of names. Matthew clearly didn't take a literary workshop on "hooking the reader." In our age of distraction, the average attention span hovers around eight seconds — just enough to read the first two or three names before our eyes glaze over. Yet Matthew begins his Gospel with a lengthy genealogy. Why?

Matthew's original audience needed roots. In a fragile new church, the Jewish Christians, recently separated from their synagogues, felt lost and vulnerable as they ventured into unfamiliar territory. This genealogy tethered them to a lineage — their larger story — stretching back to Abraham, through Ruth and Jesse, David and the prophets, to Jesus, the Son of David. These names weren't filler. They were family.

And tucked inside this family tree is a surprise. Matthew includes five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, "the wife of Uriah" (Bathsheba), and Mary. Biblical commentator Thomas G. Long compares this to paging through a 1949 West Point yearbook and suddenly seeing five women's portraits among rows of men. In a patriarchal culture where genealogies listed only fathers and sons, this would have shocked Matthew's audience. We may never know precisely why Matthew included these women, but his opening chapter signals that with Jesus, we should expect the unexpected. God's story keeps breaking barriers and including those the world overlooks.

And maybe, at the start of Lent, we need the same. The world feels like a hot mess. Churches are shrinking, faith feels like wishful thinking, and the needs of the world scream for a Savior. Lent invites us into the wilderness, but we don't go alone. Like Matthew's community, we belong to a lineage of faith that stretches far beyond our individual lives. Lent grounds us, roots us, and calls us back into God's story of redemption.

Reflection

Where do you feel "rootless" right now — in your faith, your work, your church, or your life? How does remembering the great cloud of witnesses (ancestors, mentors, saints — including surprising ones) steady you as you begin Lent?

Prayer

Holy God, at the start of this Lenten journey, steady our wandering hearts. Remind us that we belong to your story, woven across generations. As we step into this season, ground us in your grace, and let your love take root in us as we follow Jesus. Amen.



Day 2 THURSDAY

God is doing something new.

Matthew 1:18–25

Focus verses:

Matthew 1:22-23

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him “Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Reflection

Prayer

Joseph was a righteous man. In his world, righteousness meant keeping the law. When he discovered Mary was pregnant – presumed unfaithful – Mosaic law gave him only one path: cast her aside. Joseph, however, was also a kind man. He didn’t want Mary publicly disgraced or harmed, so he chose to obey the law, but quietly.

Then the angel appeared. Mary’s pregnancy was not a violation of God’s will, but the fulfillment of it. God was doing something new.

How often do we miss the new thing God is doing? How often do we cling to the old patterns because they are familiar, safe, or socially acceptable? How often do we default to what we know instead of opening to the newly possible? Like Joseph, we can confuse obedience with faithfulness. Lent gives us a chance to pause, look, and listen — to become alert to the holy disruptions in our own lives and the lives of others.

Matthew does not linger over the details of the birth. Instead, he emphasizes the name. Emmanuel: “God is with us.” This is another unimagined turn — that God would become so humble, so vulnerable, to not only be with us but to take on the flesh of a newborn child. God is not distant. God is with us, surprisingly, shockingly, lovingly, in the here and now.

Where might God be inviting you to release an old pattern, habit, or assumption to make room for something new? How might “God is with us” change your understanding of your current circumstances?

Emmanuel, God-with-us, open our eyes to the new thing you are doing. When we cling to old habits, loosen our grip. When we resist your surprising grace, soften our hearts. Help us to trust that your presence is always with us, even in the unexpected. Amen.



Day 3 **FRIDAY**

Who is showing up at the manger?

Matthew 2:1-12

Focus verse:

Matthew 1:1

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

*I*n the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi[a]from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east[and have come to pay him homage.”

If you’ve ever looked at a nativity set on a windowsill or lawn, you’ve seen everyone gathered: Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus; a shepherd or two with sheep; maybe an ox or donkey; and always the magi with their camels, kneeling before the Christ child. It’s a beautiful scene, but also a mash-up. Luke gives us shepherds. Matthew gives us magi. Our Christmas crèches put them all together.

Matthew tells the story his way: The magi appear sometime after Jesus’ birth, and Matthew gives us almost no details about their origin or character. People have interpreted them as astrologers because they follow a star, but all Matthew says is they were “from the East”— meaning, not from around here. It’s safe to assume they were not Jews, yet here they are paying homage to “the one born king of the Jews.”

This is the surprising power of Matthew’s story: the insiders – the religious authorities and scholars in Jerusalem – do not come to Bethlehem to worship. Those closest to the Scriptures, the priests and scribes who can quote the prophecies, stay put. Instead, it’s outsiders, strangers, those farthest away geographically and religiously, who kneel at Jesus’ feet. God’s kingdom breaks boundaries, and Jesus draws unexpected people into his story.

Lent is a good time to ask ourselves: who is showing up at the manger today, and are we willing to join them? God may be revealing Christ through people, places or practices far outside what and who we know.

Reflection

Where might God be appearing in unexpected people or places in your life? What might it look like for you to “travel” beyond the familiar to meet Christ there?

Prayer

God of the unexpected, expand our hearts and imaginations. Help us notice the “outsiders” who reveal your presence. Lead us, like the magi, to seek and honor Jesus wherever he may be found. Amen.



About visio divina

Visio divina, or “divine seeing,” is a prayer practice that invites us to encounter God through art. Just as *lectio divina* guides us to listen deeply to Scripture, *visio divina* encourages us to slow down and see with the eyes of faith. Rather than analyzing the artwork, we allow it to speak to us through color, light, texture and emotion. As you gaze upon the image, notice what draws your attention, what stirs your heart, and how the Spirit might be inviting you to see God’s story in a new way.

Joseph’s Dream

Inspired by Matthew 4:1-11

By The Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
A Sanctified Art, LLC.
sanctifiedart.com



Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What details draw your attention the longer you look?
- How does this artwork make you feel — calm, curious, unsettled, inspired?
- Do any of the themes from this week’s reflections — finding roots, welcoming the unexpected, noticing God’s work beneath the noise — emerge for you in a new way through this image?
- Where might you sense God’s quiet, steady presence in what you see?

Prayer

Creator God, open our eyes to the ways you speak through beauty, color, and form. As we journey through this first week of Lent, help us to see your hand at work in all things, in stories ancient and new, in moments ordinary and sacred. Root us in your grace, awaken us to your presence, and prepare our hearts for the unfolding of your redemptive story. Amen.

Day 5 SUNDAY

The story that must be told.

Matthew 2:13-15

Focus verse:

Matthew 2:13

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Reflection

Prayer

*I*f Matthew's Gospel were published as breaking news, King Herod would dominate the front page. A ruthless ruler, willing to do anything to preserve power, keeps his people in line through fear and violence. The world tends to tell the story of whoever holds the headlines.

But Matthew tells a different story, one that runs quietly beneath the noise. When Joseph dreams of danger and flees with Mary and the infant Jesus into Egypt, Matthew connects this escape to Hosea's prophecy: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1). In the Hebrew Scriptures, those words recalled the Exodus — God delivering Israel from bondage. Now, Matthew sees that same divine pattern unfolding again. The God who once brought Israel out of Egypt is at work in Jesus, shaping human history toward redemption.

It's a reminder that history is not only the story of kings and empires, but of God's persistent grace. Even in the shadow of tyrants, God is writing a quieter, deeper narrative, one that bends toward deliverance and hope.

Our news cycles are still filled with Herods — leaders who cling to power, stories driven by fear and outrage. Lent invites us to tune our hearts to a different frequency, to listen for God's ongoing work of liberation. If people are to have hope in a world full of Herods, this is the story that must be told.

Where do you see God's quieter story unfolding beneath today's headlines? How might your faith help you bear witness to that story of redemption?

Redeeming God, when the world's stories leave us anxious and afraid, remind us that you are still at work writing grace into human history. Help us trust your larger narrative of hope, and give us courage to tell it. Amen.



Day 6 MONDAY

Jesus steps into our muddy waters.

Matthew 3:13-17

Focus verses:

Matthew 3:13-15

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

Reflection

Prayer

Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized, and John can't imagine how this visit makes sense — why the sinless one is submitting to a baptism of repentance. But Jesus insists: "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." That word "righteousness" can sound lofty, moralistic, even stiff. But another way to understand it is "right relationship": to live rightly with God and with one another. Jesus' baptism isn't about washing away sin; it's about immersion in humanity. He steps fully into the human experience, into our muddy waters, so he can show us the way back into right relationship with God and with each other.

I once baptized a seven-year-old girl who couldn't sit still. During worship she squirmed, darted down the aisle, rolled under the pews and giggled loudly while her parents tried (and failed) to contain her. But when the time finally came, and her father lifted her to the font, something shifted. As the water touched her head, she grew still. When I baptized her "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," she nodded solemnly each time my wet hand brushed her hair — as if she knew, intuitively, that this was her moment. She knew that she was seen, loved and right in God's eyes.

Lent invites us to return to that kind of knowing — to trust that through Jesus we are already claimed, already loved, already made right.

Where in your life do you feel out of right relationship — with God, with others or with yourself? What might it mean for you to let Jesus step into those muddy waters with you?

Loving God, thank you for sending Jesus to enter fully into our human story. Immerse us again in your grace. Restore our relationships — with you, with others and within ourselves — until all is made right in your love. Amen.



Day 7 TUESDAY

Jesus stands with us in the wilderness.

Matthew 4:1-11

Focus verses:

Matthew 4:1-2

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished.

Reflection

After Jesus' baptism, the Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Hungry, weary and alone, Jesus faces three tests set by the devil: to turn stones into bread, to throw himself from the Temple to prove God's care and to bow to evil in order to receive worldly power.

These temptations are not new. They echo Israel's own wilderness journey in the book of Exodus. God's people were tempted to give in to hunger (Exodus 16), to test God's faithfulness (Exodus 17) and to worship false gods (Exodus 32). Those who first read or heard Matthew's Gospel would have known those stories well. In the account of Jesus' testing, they would spot the familiar pattern — and they would note the good news that this time, the story goes differently.

The wilderness exposes what we trust most. Do we trust God to provide when we hunger? Do we trust God's faithfulness without demanding proof? Do we trust God's sovereignty rather than bowing to the idols of power, success or control? These are not ancient questions only — they're ours too. Every day we meet them in small and large ways, in our personal lives and public life.

But Jesus stands with us in the wilderness. The story of his temptations warns us of the dangers of misplaced trust and also encourages us. Temptation is not the end of the story. Jesus shows us that faithfulness is possible. His footsteps mark a path through the dry and desolate places, leading us to discipleship and meaningful ministry.

Where and when do you feel most tempted to take control rather than trust God? How might Jesus' example in the wilderness give you strength to choose faithfulness today?

Prayer

Faithful God, when we wander in the wilderness, hungry and uncertain, meet us there. Strengthen us to resist what lures us away from you, and guide our steps in the way of righteousness. Through Christ, who walks beside us. Amen.



Day 8 WEDNESDAY

Jesus calls us to let go, follow and trust.

Matthew 4:18-22

Focus verse:

Matthew 4:22

This is the only passage in Matthew's Gospel where we hear how Jesus called his disciples. In the rest of the story, they simply appear — already following, already learning (see Matthew 10:1-4). But here on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, we watch it happen.

Reflection

Prayer

Matthew emphasizes two things about these first followers: their family ties and their work. Simon Peter and Andrew are brothers, as are James and John. Matthew even names Zebedee, their father, who remains in the boat as his sons walk away with Jesus. And all of them are fishermen, whose lives are defined by hard labor, familiar routines and deep family bonds.

When Jesus shows up, everything shifts. His invitation – “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people” – isn't about improving their craft or enhancing their family business. His is a call to transformation. The kingdom of God reorients every relationship and disrupts the patterns we once thought were permanent. The goal of God's kingdom is not to make us more successful at what we already do, but rather to draw us into God's work of redeeming the world.

As a parent, I think of that moment in Baptism when we acknowledge that our children ultimately belong not to us but to God. They are children of God's covenant, marked as Christ's own forever. Their lives are held and shaped by the one who calls them. My role is to love them fiercely, raise them well and then let them go — trusting that God will use their gifts for good.

Jesus' call is always a call to let go – of nets, of expectations, even of our own plans – and to trust that what God is building is greater than what we leave behind.

What nets – habits, roles or relationships – might Jesus be inviting you to loosen your grip on? How might following him transform not just your life but the world around you?

God who calls us, you interrupt our routines with your holy invitation. Give us courage to drop what holds us back and to follow where you lead. Transform our hearts, our homes and our work until all life serves your kingdom. Amen.



Day 9 THURSDAY

Imagine a society that follows the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:1-12

Focus verse:

Matthew 5:6

*Blessed are those
who hunger
and thirst for
righteousness, for
they will be filled.*

In his volume *Matthew* in the Westminster Bible Companion series, Thomas G. Long describes the Sermon on the Mount as the “constitution” of the church – and calls the Beatitudes its “preamble.” In a nation’s constitution, the preamble captures the vision of who the people aspire to be. It identifies what is most essential about the nation’s identity and its hopes for its citizens.

The Beatitudes do the same for the kingdom of God. They describe what life looks like when God reigns: what kind of people belong to this kingdom and what kind of society they create together. Yet Jesus’ description is shocking. The kingdom of heaven belongs not to the strong, the wealthy or the powerful, but rather to the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. In a world that celebrates domination, power and individualism, Jesus envisions a kingdom that blesses humility, compassion and peace.

These blessings aren’t sentimental — they’re revolutionary. The Beatitudes turn the world’s values upside down. They call us to imagine our world turned right-side-up again through God.

Close your eyes and imagine a society that truly lives by these Beatitudes: a community where the poor are prioritized, mercy is the norm, peace is the policy, and righteousness (right relationship) is the national ambition.

- What would our laws look like?
- Who would be our leaders?
- What would we value and reward?
- What might you need to release or reclaim to live as a citizen of that kingdom?

Reflection

Which Beatitude feels most hopeful to you today — and which feels most challenging? Why?

Prayer

God of blessing, your kingdom confounds our expectations and reshapes our desires. Help us hunger and thirst for your righteousness. Form us into people of mercy, humility and peace, that our lives might reflect your reign on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.



Day 10 **FRIDAY**

A little salt goes a long way.

Matthew 5:13-16

Focus verse:

Matthew 5:13

*You are the salt
of the earth, but
if salt has lost its
taste, how can its
saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good
for anything but
is thrown out and
trampled under foot.*

Reflection

Prayer

Jesus tells his followers, “You are the salt of the earth.” It’s a simple phrase but a profound metaphor. Salt adds flavor. It preserves what might otherwise spoil. It keeps things fresh. And we don’t need much — a small pinch can change everything.

Matthew’s church needed that reminder. They were a small, struggling congregation trying – with mixed results – to live an alternative way of life amid a teeming, fast-changing world that neither appreciated nor understood them. Jesus’ words offered both encouragement and commission: You may feel small, but you matter. A little salt goes a long way.

The same is true for the church today. We can look around at a culture in constant motion and feel like what we do hardly makes a difference. But the Gospel insists otherwise. Every casserole delivered to a grieving family, every food pantry stocked and shared without shame, every building that opens its doors to AA meetings, affordable childcare, elder care or a yoga class for the community – all these are small acts of salt and light. They add the flavors of love, compassion and kindness to a bland world. They preserve hope. They reveal the steady work of God’s kingdom.

When Jesus calls us the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he’s not demanding grand gestures or headline-making miracles. He’s reminding us that holiness often looks ordinary: faithful people who show up day after day, doing small things with great love.

Where have you seen the quiet work of the church – or your own small actions – make a difference in someone’s life? How might you add a little more salt or light this week?

God of the small and steady, thank you for calling us to flavor the world with your love. When we feel insignificant, remind us that even a little faithfulness can shine bright. Keep us salty, radiant and ready to serve. Amen.



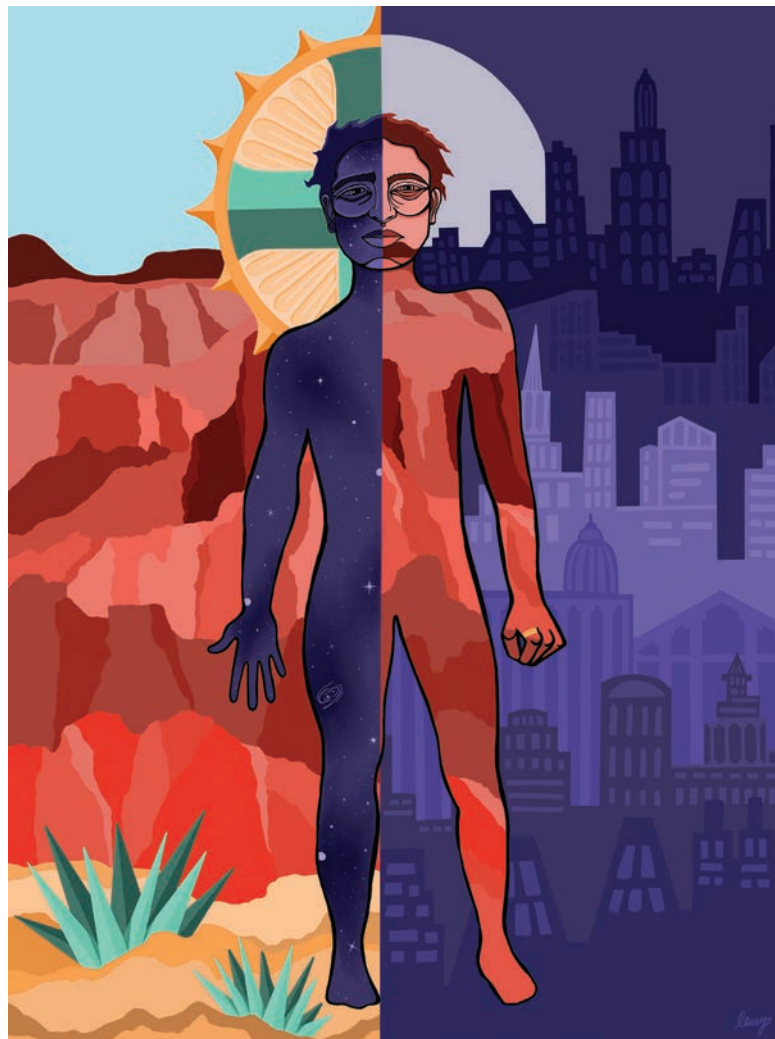
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Spirit Led

Inspired by Matthew 4:1-11

By The Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
A Sanctified Art, LLC.
sanctifiedart.com



Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What colors, shapes or movements stand out?
- As you linger, what emotions begin to surface — wonder, longing, conviction, peace?
- Do you see echoes of this week’s journey — Jesus stepping into the waters of baptism, walking through wilderness temptations, calling disciples to follow, proclaiming a kingdom that blesses the humble and sending us out as salt and light?
- What might this image reveal about your own calling, or about the quiet ways in which God’s Spirit transforms ordinary life into holy ground?

Prayer

Transforming God, open our eyes to the movement of your Spirit. When the path feels uncertain or the wilderness long, remind us that you walk beside us. When you call, give us courage to follow. When you bless the meek and the merciful, teach us to live those blessings aloud. As we journey through this second week of Lent, may our hearts be kindled with your light and our lives be seasoned with your grace — signs of your kingdom breaking in, even now. Amen.



Day 12 SUNDAY

Love and pray for your enemies.

Matthew 5:21-48

Focus verses:

Matthew 5:43-45

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Reflection

Prayer

This passage from the Sermon on the Mount contains six examples – six teachings – each of which addresses problems within the early church community. Jesus speaks about anger, jealousy, adultery, divorce, oaths and retaliation. Through each teaching, he deepens the law, showing that righteousness is not about rule-following but about living in right relationship with God and with one another.

Then Jesus brings it all to a startling conclusion: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

This sentence may be the most demanding teaching of all. We find it easy enough to love our friends and to show kindness to those who show kindness to us. But Jesus calls us to love the ones who frustrate us, the ones who have wronged us, the ones who don't think or believe like we do. If we love only those who love us back, Jesus says, we merely imitate the world. But if we love those who do not love us, we imitate God.

That's where the transformation happens.

I know what it feels like to meet ugly with ugly, to answer harsh words with more harshness. I've fallen into this behavior too often, and it never satisfies. It just leaves me feeling ugly too, because in that moment I'm not living into my potential as a child of God. I'm not acting in love.

To love our enemies isn't to excuse their behavior or pretend harm doesn't hurt. Instead, loving our enemies means choosing a different way – the way of God – whose compassion extends to all, even those who don't deserve it. Including me. Including you.

Whom do you find it hardest to love right now? What would it look like to pray for that person — not to change them, but to keep your own heart open to God's transforming grace?

Merciful God, when anger rises and grudges take root, soften our hearts. Teach us to love as you love, to pray for those who wound us and to see every person as your beloved child. Make us instruments of your peace, that your kingdom may take shape in us. Amen.

Day 13 MONDAY

Practice does not mean perfection.

Matthew 6:1-18

Focus verse:

Matthew 6:1

Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Reflection

Prayer

Jesus reminds his followers that faith isn't just something we believe; it's something we practice. In this passage, he names three familiar practices: giving to the poor, praying and fasting. These weren't new ideas. They were already familiar to Matthew's first audience. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting were central to Jewish faith and life, and they became foundational to Christian discipleship as well.

But Jesus adds an important warning: Don't do these things for show. Don't pray, give alms or fast to impress others or to prove your piety. Do them for God alone. Spiritual practices are not about earning approval. They're about cultivating relationships. Practicing faith helps us grow into the likeness of Christ, not to glow in the admiration of others.

I love that we call these spiritual disciplines "practices." The word takes the pressure off perfection. Practice implies progress, effort, humility — and grace. Practice assumes we'll stumble and start again.

My own prayer life is far from perfect. I go through some seasons when prayer feels steady and sustaining, but during others it's sporadic and distracted. I pray most faithfully in times of crisis, when "Help!" or "Why?" are the only words I can manage. Yet even then, the practice keeps me tethered, reminding me that God's attention doesn't depend on my performance. God sees me, hears me and loves me — always.

Lent invites us to keep practicing — not to be flawless, but to be faithful.

What spiritual practice helps you feel closest to God right now? How might you reengage in that practice this Lent — not for perfection, but for presence?

Gracious God, thank you for meeting us in our imperfect practices. When our prayers falter, our giving feels small or our fasting fails, remind us that you see the heart behind the effort. Help us keep practicing faith not for show but for love of you. Amen..



Day 14 TUESDAY

Jesus invites us to decide whom to serve.

Matthew 6:19-34

Focus verse:

Matthew 6:24

No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

*T*his passage from the Sermon on the Mount isn't about financial planning. It's about the orientation of our hearts. Jesus is asking us: What shapes the way we live? Whom or what do we serve?

Do we see our abundance and possessions as gifts from God, blessings to be held lightly and shared freely? Or do we see life as a competition, a struggle between winners and losers over limited resources? When our creed becomes "Where's mine?" we are no longer free. We're bound by fear of not having enough, chained to the illusion that our worth or security depends on what we own.

A family I know recently lost their home and everything in it as a result of a California wildfire. The fire moved so fast that they barely escaped with their lives. Their grief was – and still is – real and raw. But in the days that followed, what struck me most was their clarity. Amid the ashes, they said, "We've lost so much, but we still have what matters most – each other, our community, our faith." Their possessions were gone, but their hearts remained anchored.

God and wealth are two demanding masters, each with different messages. The master of wealth whispers, *Go ahead and indulge — you've earned it. God says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

One promises control. The other offers freedom. Lent invites us to decide whom we will serve..

Reflection

What gives you a false sense of security? How might loosening your grip on possessions – or fear – make room for deeper trust in God's abundance?

Prayer

Generous God, remind us how fragile the treasures of this world can be. Teach us to hold lightly what we have and to cling tightly to you. Free us from the illusion of control, and ground us in your steady love, the one possession we can never lose. Amen.



Day 15 WEDNESDAY

Jesus calls us to transform.

Matthew 7:1-5

Focus verse:

Matthew 7:3

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?

Reflection

*I*n this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus isn't telling us to ignore wrongdoing or to stay silent in the face of injustice. Accountability matters. Truth-telling matters. But before we call for the transformation of others, Jesus requires that we attend to our own. None of us stands unmuddied on pure moral ground.

This teaching feels especially urgent today, when outrage is our reflex and social media rewards quick judgment. We are fast to condemn and slow to listen. I recognize this pattern in myself. When a reader responds with biting criticism of something I've written, my instinct is to fire back. How tempting I find it, in those raw moments, to hurl Jesus' words back at my critic – "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" – not as wisdom to live by or as a shield for my feelings, but as a sword against my critics.

But then I remember: I must also recite these words to myself. Because I have times when I am loath to get close enough to my neighbor to see clearly, to listen with compassion, to understand why they believe or act differently than I do. Self-righteousness blinds me to my own need for grace.

Jesus' invitation is not to suspend discernment but to practice humility: to look inward before we look outward, to remember that transformation begins at home and to understand that the same grace we hope for ourselves must extend to others.

Where and when do you find yourself tempted to judge quickly or harshly? What might change if you paused first to examine your own log of wrongdoing and to listen for God's transforming grace?

Prayer

Merciful God, forgive us when we judge before we understand. Teach us humility, patience and compassion. Help us to see ourselves and others through your eyes of grace and to seek transformation that begins within. Amen



Day 16 THURSDAY

Compassion is divine.

Matthew 7:12

Focus verse:

Matthew 7:12

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

With this single sentence, Jesus brings the Sermon on the Mount to its center of gravity. These words summarize all that has come before: every teaching about humility, mercy, forgiveness, generosity and love.

What's striking is that this teaching is not unique to Christianity. Versions of the Golden Rule appear in nearly every major faith tradition:

- Judaism: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." —*Talmud*, Shabbat 31a
- Islam: "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." —*Hadith*, Sahih Muslim 45:71
- Hinduism: "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." —*Mahabharata* 5:1517
- Buddhism: "Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." —*Udana-Varga* 5:18
- Confucianism: "Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself." —*Analects* 15:23

Across centuries and cultures, humanity seems to understand that compassion is the truest expression of the Divine.

At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks us to remember what we most desire as citizens of God's kingdom – mercy, compassion and peace – and to live those desires outwardly. To treat others not with suspicion or superiority but with the same grace we hope to receive. To work for a world where everyone can live in peace.

Reflection

What would change – in your family, your church, your community – if this single rule guided every decision? What small action could you take today to treat someone as you long to be treated?

Prayer

God of all peoples, your mercy spans every border, every belief. Teach us to live by your rule of love. Let our words, our choices and our relationships reflect your compassion until all creation lives in the peace you desire. Amen.



Day 17 FRIDAY

Our hope is built on Christ, our rock.

Matthew 7:24-27

Focus verse:

Matthew 7:24

*Everyone, then,
who hears these
words of mine and
acts on them will be
like a wise man
who built his
house on rock.*

Reflection

Prayer

*I*n the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I joined a group from my church on a mission to the devastated coastline of New Orleans. For miles and miles, where homes and neighborhoods once stood, we saw nothing. Gone was any evidence of community. All that remained were the concrete slabs. The wind and water had taken everything but the foundations. The flat, empty landscape was a wordless testimony to sudden, tragic loss.

Life brings many storms — some literal, others deeply personal. Grief, illness, conflict, fear ... all of these batter us and reveal what our lives are built upon. When Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with the image of two houses, one built on rock and one on sand, his words are both promise and warning. Storms will come, but if you ground your life in my teaching, you will stand.

To build on rock is to root our lives in the way of Christ, the way of mercy, humility, forgiveness, generosity and love. These aren't abstract virtues; they are daily practices that form the structure of a resilient life. Put them into practice, Jesus says, and you will build a home for your soul that can withstand the storm.

The crowds who have listened to Jesus preaching from the hillside must now rise and follow him. The sermon is over, but discipleship is just beginning. This moment is when faith gets real, when the words we've heard must take shape in our living, when belief becomes practice, when we sustain ourselves, like all the saints who walked this road before us, singing the truth of the old hymn "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less": "On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand: / all other ground is sinking sand."

On what foundation are you building your life right now? Which of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount most strengthens – or most challenges – your faith?

Steadfast God, when life's storms rise around us, anchor us in your love. As we leave the mountain, help us carry your Word into our daily living. Teach us to build our lives upon your truth, to practice what we've heard and to trust your solid ground beneath our feet. Amen.



About visio divina

Visio divina, or “divine seeing,” is a prayer practice that invites us to encounter God through art. Just as *lectio divina* guides us to listen deeply to Scripture, *visio divina* encourages us to slow down and see with the eyes of faith. Rather than analyzing the artwork, we allow it to speak to us through color, light, texture and emotion. As you gaze upon the image, notice what draws your attention, what stirs your heart, and how the Spirit might be inviting you to see God’s story in a new way.

Invited In

Inspired by Matthew 4:1-11

By The Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
A Sanctified Art, LLC.
sanctifiedart.com



Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What colors, forms or movements stand out?
- As you linger, what emotions begin to surface — conviction, compassion, longing, peace?
- Do you see reflections of this week’s journey — Jesus calling us to love even our enemies, to practice faith not for show but from the heart, to serve God rather than wealth, to withhold quick judgment, to treat others as we wish to be treated and to build our lives on solid ground?
- Where might this image reveal God shaping your inner life into outward action, and teaching you to live mercy, humility and love in real, embodied ways?

Prayer

God of steady grace, open our eyes to the ways you are shaping us from the inside out. When we are tempted by judgment, pride or self-reliance, turn our gaze back to you. When storms rise or foundations tremble, remind us to stand firm on your Word. May what we see in this image – and what we practice in daily life – draw us deeper into your mercy until our lives become reflections of your love. Amen.

Day 19 SUNDAY

Jesus calls us to the margins.

Matthew 8:2-4

Focus verses:

Matthew 8:2-3

And there was a man with a skin disease who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing. Be made clean!" Immediately his skin disease was cleansed.

Reflection

Prayer

*T*his passage offers the first of three healing stories in Matthew, chapter 8. Each features someone who lives on the edge of society: a leper, a Gentile slave and a woman. Each story shows Jesus reaching across boundaries – religious, cultural and gendered – to restore life where others have drawn lines.

Leprosy in Jesus' day meant more than a skin disease. It carried the weight of moral suspicion. People believed leprosy was a punishment for sin. People with leprosy were cast out, were made to live apart and were required to shout "Unclean!" if anyone came near. To touch one was to risk both infection and ritual defilement. The law of Moses warned that anyone who touched an unclean person became unclean themselves (Leviticus 5:1-3).

But Jesus touches him anyway. In that single gesture, Jesus not only heals a disease but also shatters stigma. He fulfills, not abolishes, the intent of the law. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, the heart of God's law is restoration: to bring people back into right relationship with one another and with God. The miracle here is physical, yes, but it's also social and spiritual. The leper is made whole, both in body and in belonging.

People all around us live on society's edges: the unhoused on our streets, the Dalits of India, the millions incarcerated in America. Jesus' ministry doesn't keep these people at the margins; he moves straight toward them. And his work isn't a side project or a short-term mission trip. It's the ongoing priority of God's kingdom. If we are to follow Jesus, then we must center these people on our path of discipleship.

Who today lives on the margins of your community? How might you, in word or action, reach across boundaries to restore relationship and dignity in Christ's name?

Healing God, you reach across every line we draw and touch what we fear to touch. Cleanse our hearts of prejudice and indifference. Lead us to the margins where you already dwell, and make us instruments of your restoring love. Amen.



Day 20 MONDAY

New wine requires new vessels.

Matthew 9:9-17

Focus verse:

Matthew 9:17

Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are ruined, but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

As Jesus walks along, he sees a tax collector named Matthew sitting at his booth. Jesus simply says, “Follow me.” And Matthew gets up and follows. Just like that. No résumé of good intentions. No demand for proof of moral improvement. No spiritual prerequisites. Just invitation — and response.

Then Jesus goes to dinner at a house full of the wrong people. These are “tax collectors and sinners,” we are told. The religious leaders are scandalized. This outreach is not how a holy person is supposed to act. But Jesus is doing something new. He is not afraid of the mess. He goes where grace is needed most.

But the newness of Jesus’ ministry does not mean discarding the old. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, he has not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but instead to fulfill their deepest purpose (Matthew 5:17). The problem isn’t the tradition — it’s how tightly we cling to it. We cannot put new wine into old wineskins, Jesus teaches; “otherwise the skins burst.” New wine requires new vessels—not because the old wine was worthless, but because the new wine is still alive: fermenting, expanding, growing.

The life of faith is like that. God is still fermenting something in us. Yet churches – and church people – can be tempted to hold tightly to what we know, to what feels familiar, to what has worked before. Change can feel like loss.

But Jesus doesn’t call us to throw away our history. He calls us to make it newly meaningful for the generations who come after us — to let the same Gospel stretch, breathe and take shape in ways we could never have imagined.

Reflection

Where are you clinging too tightly to an old wineskin: old habits, old expectations, old ways of doing church? What might God be fermenting, expanding, growing in you or in your community now?

Prayer

God of the ever-living Word, keep us open to your newness. Honor the traditions that have formed us, and give us courage to let your Spirit reshape them for this moment. Make us vessels, flexible and faithful, ready to hold the new wine of your grace. Amen.



Day 21 TUESDAY

We are called to offer peace.

Matthew 10:1-15

Focus verses:

Matthew 10:12-14

As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

Reflection

Prayer

After teaching, healing and restoring, Jesus now sends his disciples out to do the same. He gives them authority to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Theirs is breathtaking work. Holy work. Vulnerable work.

Yet Jesus does not send them out like power brokers or conquerors. They carry no money. No spare clothing. No extra sandals. They are to enter towns not with swagger, but with humility. They are to rely on the hospitality of strangers, to receive before they offer, to listen before they teach.

As Thomas G. Long writes in *Matthew*, “The gospel does not coerce or bulldoze its way intrusively into people’s lives.” The good news is not something we force. It is something we embody.

Jesus tells the disciples they will be rejected at times; their message will not always be welcomed. But rejection is not failure, and their job is not to convince or control — only to bear witness. They are to offer peace. If peace is not received, they are to move on, still carrying peace with them.

That mission is as true now as it was then.

When we speak of our faith — in conversation, in our work, in the way we live — it can feel tender, even risky. Sometimes we will be misunderstood. Sometimes our intention will be questioned. But disciples of Jesus do not respond with defensiveness or resentment. We respond with peace.

We share the Gospel not by overpowering others, but by showing up humbly with compassion and curiosity, ready to listen, serve and love.

Where have you experienced rejection or misunderstanding in your efforts to live or share your faith? How might Jesus’ call to “let your peace return to you” help you release anxiety and continue in love?

Gentle Christ, send us out in the spirit of your peace. Keep us from striving for control or influence. Make us humble, patient bearers of your good news: receiving hospitality, offering compassion and trusting that your Spirit is already at work in every heart. Amen.



Day 22 WEDNESDAY

We are known and loved by God.

Matthew 10:16-31

Focus verse:

Matthew 10:16

I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Jesus doesn't sugarcoat discipleship. Following him is a path not of comfort or safety, but of courage and conviction. He warns his disciples that persecution will come — but he also assures them they will never face persecution alone. "Do not fear," he says. "Even the hairs of your head are all counted. . . . You are of more value than many sparrows."

Throughout history, Christians have faced persecution for speaking and living the truth of the Gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian, resisted Hitler's regime and spoke boldly against its evil, knowing his resistance could cost him his life. And it did. He was executed in a concentration camp in 1945. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Yet for him, even this cost was a form of grace, because his death led to a true and authentic life in Christ, one rooted not in comfort but in faithfulness.

Most of us will never face persecution like Bonhoeffer faced, but we all know moments when faith sets us apart. I remember telling a girl in my college dorm that I planned to go to seminary after graduation. She stepped back in shock and never spoke to me again. Consider also the teenager who chooses church over soccer practice and ends up sitting on the bench. These small losses sting, but they too are part of the cost of discipleship. They form our own invitations to live faithfully in a world that doesn't always understand or value faith.

Jesus' words remind us that courage and faithfulness are possible because we are known and loved by God. The one who watches over sparrows also watches over us. We are not promised ease, but we are promised presence —and that makes all the difference.

Reflection

When have you felt misunderstood or rejected because of your faith? How might Jesus' assurance of God's care strengthen you to live courageously?

Prayer

Loving God, you know our fears and count every hair upon our heads. When faith feels costly, remind us that we are never forgotten. Give us courage to speak truth with love, to follow Christ without fear and to trust that your eye is always upon us. Amen.



Day 23 THURSDAY

What saving grace do we miss?

Matthew 11:1-19

Focus verses:

Matthew 11:18-19

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

Reflection

Prayer

John the Baptist stands at a hinge in salvation history as the last in the long line of prophets pointing the way to God's promised Messiah. From Isaiah to Malachi, the prophets proclaimed that one day, God's reign of justice and mercy would break into the world. In Matthew, chapter 11, Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1 to describe John's role: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

John fulfills that prophetic calling, yet even he struggles to recognize how God's promise is unfolding. Imprisoned and waiting, he sends word to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus responds not with a title or a creed but with evidence: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." In other words, look at the fruit. The reign of God is already breaking in through acts of healing, mercy and restoration.

Still, not everyone can see it. "This generation," Jesus says, rejects both John and himself — John for being too austere, Jesus for being too free. Neither fits the mold. Neither plays by the expected rules. And because they do not, many miss the saving grace standing right in front of them.

It's worth asking: What saving grace might we miss because it comes in an odd or unfamiliar package? Because the messenger doesn't look like us, speak our language or fit our spiritual expectations? Lent calls us to open our eyes to the unexpected ways in which God still breaks in — through surprising people, unconventional ministries and unlikely moments of mercy.

When have you struggled to recognize God's presence because it came in an unfamiliar form? How might you keep your heart open to God's grace in unexpected places?

God of surprises, you send prophets and messiahs who defy our expectations. Open our eyes to see your saving work all around us — in the humble, the outcast, the overlooked. Free us from judgment and fear, that we might receive your grace wherever it appears. Amen.



Day 24 FRIDAY

In God our souls can find rest.

Matthew 11:28-30

Focus verses:

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Reflection

In Judaism, a “yoke,” a type of harness, symbolized the law: the teaching and wisdom of God that guided daily life. To take up the yoke was to live under God’s instruction, to walk in God’s way. Jesus draws on that image and offers his own yoke: not a release from responsibility, but a reorientation of it. His yoke is light not because he asks little of us, but because his yoke aligns us with truth. The rest that Jesus promises for our souls is not escape from struggle but rather peace in doing what is right.

On April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. took up that yoke in a new way. Speaking before 3,000 people in New York City, he broke his public silence on the Vietnam War. King had wrestled for months with whether to speak out. Advisors warned that an anti-war stance could fracture the Civil Rights Movement and cost him political allies. But King recognized that his silence betrayed everything he held sacred: his call to nonviolence, his belief in the dignity of every human being and his faith in Jesus’ Gospel.

The backlash was swift and harsh. Friends distanced themselves, and newspapers called him reckless and unpatriotic. Still King refused to retreat. “I was politically unwise,” he said, “but morally wise.” Later he wrote in his sermon “The Christian Doctrine of Man, that “God’s unbroken hold on us is something that will never permit us to feel right when we do wrong.”

That is the paradox of Jesus’ yoke: it can feel heavy when we resist it, but it becomes light when we yield to its truth. God does not allow us to feel peace when we do wrong – or when we benefit from wrong or ignore it. But when we choose what is right, even at great cost, our souls find rest.

When have you felt the rest that comes from doing what is right, even when it was costly? What moral burden might God be inviting you to lay down by taking up the yoke of Christ?

Prayer

Gentle Teacher, you invite us to find rest in obedience to your truth. When fear tempts us to stay silent, give us courage to speak. When comfort lulls us into complacency, stir our conscience. Teach us to carry the yoke of your love with integrity and joy, until our souls find rest in doing what is right. Amen.

About visio divina

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Trust

Inspired by Matthew 1:18-25

By Hannah Garrity

A Sanctified Art, LLC.

sanctifiedart.com



Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What colors, gestures or symbols stand out?
- As you linger, what emotions rise — compassion, conviction, courage, rest?
- Do you see echoes of this week’s journey — Jesus reaching out to heal those on the margins, welcoming outsiders and skeptics and calling us to risk something new for the sake of love? To bear the cost of discipleship, to stay faithful when it’s hard, to recognize grace in unexpected places and to find true rest in doing what is right?
- Where might this image reveal Christ’s presence — touching what the world calls untouchable, breaking boundaries of fear and prejudice or offering peace to the weary in body or soul?

Prayer

Restoring God, open our eyes to the places where your mercy still breaks in. When courage falters, strengthen our hearts. When faith feels costly, remind us that your love is worth the risk. Teach us to see your image in the overlooked and the outcast and to find our own rest in walking your way of truth. May what we behold in your image awaken compassion within us until our seeing becomes serving and our hearts beat in rhythm with yours. Amen.



Day 26 SUNDAY

Mercy is the only faithful response.

Matthew 12:1-14

Focus verses:

Matthew 12:11-12

*He said to them,
“Suppose one of you
has only one sheep
and it falls into a pit
on the Sabbath; will
you not lay hold of it
and lift it out? How
much more valuable
is a human being
than a sheep! So it is
lawful to do good on
the Sabbath.”*

Sabbath was a treasured gift in Israel: a day of rest, freedom and delight. The Pharisees weren't wrong to care about it; they wanted to honor God's law. But when they ask Jesus if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, Jesus asks a simple question: If a man has only one sheep, and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, won't he pull it out?

Of course he will. Mercy matters most, especially for the poor. That lone sheep is the man's livelihood, his survival. The law was never meant to prevent compassion; rather, it was meant to cultivate it. “How much more valuable is a human being” than a single sheep? Jesus asks.

We still face moments when the law and mercy collide. Consider Guilherme Silva, a Brazilian father detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement while driving to pick up his four-year-old daughter — despite having no criminal record and working toward legal residency. Or Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish Fulbright scholar and Ph.D. student, who was arrested by masked officers on her way to break her Ramadan fast. Or Esdrás R., an 18-year-old Guatemalan student detained during a workplace raid, leading his community to rally in anguish for his release.

The harshest among us speak of “illegals” as if a human being can be illegal. But Jesus will not allow us to look at suffering people and shrug. When someone's “one sheep” — their child, their education, their stability, their whole future — falls into a pit, mercy is the only faithful response.

Jesus shows us that compassion is not the breaking of God's law but its fulfillment. Sabbath means rest, freedom and restoration, and these gifts cannot be reserved for the comfortable. They belong first to the vulnerable.

Reflection

Where might you be tempted to defend rules instead of offering mercy? Who in your community needs you to reach into the pit and lift them up?

Prayer

God of compassion, soften our hearts when we cling to what is familiar or safe. Teach us to see the worth of every person and to choose mercy over fear. Let our Sabbath keeping and our law abiding reflect your justice, your tenderness and your love. Amen.

Day 27 MONDAY

Our work is to sow faithfully.

Matthew 13:1-9

Focus verse:

Matthew 13:3

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

Chapter 13 opens the third major teaching section of Matthew's Gospel: the first time Jesus turns to parables. Opposition to his ministry is increasing, and Matthew makes clear that Jesus begins teaching this way because of growing resistance. Parables become his strategy for those ready to learn more deeply: his disciples, the curious, the committed, the ones willing to lean in. Parables, when connected to daily life, are simple enough to remember yet profound enough to open doors into God's mysterious ways.

This first parable describes a farmer who doesn't plant seed in tidy rows but casts it widely and extravagantly. His method is almost wasteful, reckless — scattering seed on the path, among thorns, on shallow soil and, thankfully, on good earth. This lack of human efficiency suggests divine generosity. Like this sower, God lavishes grace, mercy and love without caution or calculation.

And the results? Mixed. Some seeds are snatched away, some shrivel, some get choked out. But some — *some* — produce a harvest beyond what anyone dares to expect.

I think of this parable often in ministry. After 27 years of sermons preached, hospital rooms visited, youth retreats led, worships planned and classes taught, I still wonder: *Was it enough? Did any of it take root?* And then — unexpectedly — a note from a former student arrives. A pastor writes to say the *Outlook* liturgy has brought her comfort. A young woman shares that she has entered ministry because I was the first female pastor she'd known.

Every time, I'm stunned. And I'm reminded: God works through us not because we are perfect, but because God is faithful.

Real ministry isn't epic. It's the steady accumulation of small, almost imperceptible acts: a phone call returned, a prayer whispered, a meal delivered, a presence offered. Our work is to sow faithfully. God's work is to grow the harvest.

Reflection

What seeds has God entrusted to you — small acts of kindness, courage or faith? Where are you invited to sow generously, trusting God with the growth?

Prayer

Sower of life, teach us to scatter love with open hands and hopeful hearts. When our efforts feel small or uncertain, remind us that you bring the growth. Make our lives fertile ground for your grace, and let the seeds we scatter bear fruit far beyond what we can see. Amen.



Day 28 TUESDAY

We are called to plant mustard seeds.

Matthew 13:31-33

Focus verses:

Matthew 13:31-32

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed — tiny, unimpressive, practically invisible in your hand. But when planted, it grows into something far larger than anyone expected. Not a towering cedar or a majestic sequoia, mind you, but a mustard bush: a scrappy, persistent, wildly spreading plant that refuses to stay contained.

Sometimes I think churches forget and neglect their value. Many congregations — especially small ones — look at larger churches with professional choirs, multiple staff and brand-new buildings and wonder, "What do we have to offer?" That crisis of confidence deepens when they can't find a pastor — when search committees wait months or years for applicants. Congregations in that situation can find it easy to believe they have nothing worth claiming.

But that's simply not true.

A church's value is not defined by its size, staff or sanctuary count. The church is not a building or a budget line. It's the living body of Christ. Still, we church folks often think too small. We are too shy about what we have to offer. Too humble to speak joyfully about the hope we carry. We don't want to be like those "pushy" Christians, so we whisper good news into a world that's screaming bad news.

I have a Big Hairy Audacious Goal — a BHAG — for the *Presbyterian Outlook*: I want our platform to grow so large that the stories of our church's ministries drown out the messages of anger, division and hate. I want us to fill the internet's dark corners with light. I want us to get loud about God's love and Christ's radical welcome — so loud that fear-based versions of Christianity lose their megaphone.

This is mustard seed work. It starts small and grows quietly, yet it spreads farther than we can imagine. And Jesus promises that this is exactly how the kingdom comes.

Reflection

Where might God be planting a small seed in your life or community? What seemingly small gift, ministry or act of love might God be waiting to grow into something far bigger than you expect?

Prayer

God of mustard seeds and hidden yeast, teach us not to despise small beginnings. Expand our vision, enlarge our courage and help us believe that you can grow your kingdom through our ordinary gifts. Make us bold in sharing your love, persistent in sowing hope and joyful in watching your grace take root. Amen.



Day 29 WEDNESDAY

God works through the ordinary.

Matthew 13:54-58

Focus verses:

Matthew 13:57-58

And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own hometown and in their own house." And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Reflection

Prayer

Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and teaches in the synagogue. The people are astonished. They recognize his wisdom; they witness his deeds of power. Yet their reaction isn't wonder or gratitude. It's offense. This is a scandal!

The Greek word used here – *skandalizō* – can mean to trip, to stumble, to feel scandalized. But it wasn't Jesus' message that scandalized them. They didn't reject his teaching — no, they rejected him. Isn't this the carpenter's son? Aren't his sisters still here with us? They cannot see past who they think he is: Joseph's boy, the kid who grew up down the street, the one they've known forever.

There's a human truth here. Once we think we know a person, we can find it almost impossible to see them differently. Familiarity dulls our imagination and blinds us to transformation.

There's another truth: We often trust the outside expert more than the person in front of us. The outsider comes with credentials, degrees, distance. And distance feels safer. After all, the outside expert doesn't know our history. Our flaws. Our secrets.

Jesus, on the other hand, knows us too well. His authority comes not from letters after his name but from a life lived in our midst — eating our food, walking our streets, knowing our joys and failures. The grace that meets us in our most familiar places can feel threatening. It sees us as we really are.

Nazareth couldn't receive the Messiah because they couldn't imagine greatness coming from their own neighborhood. They couldn't fathom God working through the ordinary, the local, the familiar. Sometimes, neither can we.

Where might you be resisting God's voice because it comes through someone familiar — or because it asks you to be seen too closely? What would it take for you to welcome Christ's authority in the ordinary places and people around you?

God of surprising grace, open our eyes to your presence in the familiar. Heal the ways we dismiss those closest to us. Give us humility to receive wisdom from unexpected voices and courage to be known by you in the deepest places of our lives. Amen.



Day 30 THIRSDAY

God provides abundance amid scarcity.

Matthew 14:13-21

Focus verses:

Matthew 14:16-17

*Jesus said to them,
“They need not go
away; you give them
something to eat.”
They replied,
“We have nothing
here but five loaves
and two fish.”*

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle story recorded in all four Gospels, signaling its importance to the early church. In this account, we encounter a God who provides abundance even when resources appear scarce. We also hear our clear call: We are to feed the hungry. And when we look around our world today – food pantries stretched, benefits from SNAP and the United States Agency for International Development threatened, millions unsure where their next meal will come from – we see how urgent that call remains.

A Los Angeles nonprofit called Every Day Action rescues surplus high-quality catered meals from film and TV production sets and delivers them to unhoused and underresourced communities across Los Angeles County in California. Hillary Cohen and Samanth Luu, two assistant directors with over a decade of experience on film and TV sets, founded the nonprofit after repeatedly asking why leftover gourmet food from catering services was thrown in a dumpster rather than donated. The answer was always the same: With all the liability issues, it's just too complicated.

God provides abundance, but someone has to organize its distribution. Someone has to notice the waste, imagine a better way, gather volunteers, solve the logistics and show up day after day. Feeding the hungry takes creativity, commitment and a willingness to give not only from our abundance but also from our time and talent. Cohen and Luu solved the liability obstacles by drafting a contract that releases each studio from legal responsibility for excess food. Once the contracts are signed, the meals are packed – and the hungry are fed the food of celebrities.

Reflection

What “loaves and fish” do you have – money, time, community, food, influence – that you could give away as a sign of trust in God’s abundance? How might you participate in God’s multiplying work this week?

Prayer

Generous God, you feed your people when we have little, and you multiply our offering when we share. Help us trust your abundance, organize our resources for your sake and participate faithfully in your work of feeding the hungry and restoring life. Amen.



Day 31 **FRIDAY**

Jesus' grace reaches out to the whole world.

Matthew 15:21-28

Focus verses:

Matthew 15:25-28

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Reflection

Jesus has just confronted the Pharisees for elevating purity rituals over the desires of God's heart. But as he travels toward the far borders of Israel into Gentile territory, Jesus himself is confronted. A Canaanite woman dares to shout after him, begging him to heal her daughter.

Everything about her approach breaks the rules. Canaanites are the enemy. Gentiles do not address Jews. Women do not address men, and women certainly do not shout. Yet here she is: urgent, insistent, unignorable.

We expect Jesus to respond with compassion. Instead, his words land with a sting: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The Greek word *kynarion* – "dog" – was a common ethnic slur. Hearing Jesus speak it shocks us. It should.

The tension in this encounter is dramatic because it situates us, as readers, in a borderland between old and new, insider and outsider, expectation and surprise. Many churches know this borderland well. We stand between what once worked and what no longer does, between familiar patterns and an uncertain future. In these spaces, people feel stretched thin, anxious, unsure of what comes next.

But borderlands are places where something new is born from juxtaposition.

The Canaanite woman shows us what faith in the borderland looks like: desperate, courageous, persistent. She trusts that Jesus' mercy is broader than the boundaries humans draw. She challenges him not with hostility but with hope: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And the story turns. Jesus recognizes her great faith and grants her request, and from that moment his ministry expands beyond Israel. A marginalized woman – powerless by every social measure – becomes the catalyst for grace widening to the whole world.

Where do you feel yourself standing at a border between the familiar and the unknown? How might the Canaanite woman's courage invite you to trust a God whose mercy exceeds every boundary?

Prayer

Border-crossing God, meet us where old ways collide with new possibilities. Give us the courage of the Canaanite woman — persistent, bold, hopeful. Break open the boundaries we cling to, and widen our hearts for the ministry you call us to embrace. Amen.



About visio divina

Visio divina, or “divine seeing,” is a prayer practice that invites us to encounter God through art. Just as *lectio divina* guides us to listen deeply to Scripture, *visio divina* encourages us to slow down and see with the eyes of faith. Rather than analyzing the artwork, we allow it to speak to us through color, light, texture and emotion. As you gaze upon the image, notice what draws your attention, what stirs your heart, and how the Spirit might be inviting you to see God’s story in a new way.

Beseeching

Inspired by Matthew
16:21-23

By Hannah Garrity

A Sanctified Art, LLC.
sanctifiedart.com



Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What colors, shapes or gestures pull you in?
- As you linger, what emotions arise — boldness, longing, discomfort, hope?
- Do you see traces of this week’s journey — Jesus moving toward the margins, crossing boundaries of ethnicity and tradition, widening the circle of grace and listening to the voice of the outsider?
- Where might Christ be calling you to see differently, to love more widely or to trust that God’s mercy spills across every human line?

Prayer

God, open our eyes to the places where you meet us at the edges. When we feel uncertain or resistant, soften our hearts. When we stand between the old and the new, steady us with your grace. As we behold this image, teach us to recognize your presence in unlikely places and unexpected people. May our seeing lead to deeper compassion, wider welcome and courageous faith until our lives reflect the boundless mercy of Christ. Amen.

Day 33 SUNDAY

“Who do you say that I am?”

Matthew 16:13-20

Focus verses:

Matthew 16:13-16

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Reflection

Prayer

Halfway through Matthew’s Gospel, the camera lens zooms in. We’re no longer watching Jesus feed crowds or silence storms. Now Jesus turns to his disciples – and to us – and asks the most personal question in Scripture: “Who do you say that I am?”

We already know the answer. But Peter speaks it for the first time: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Peter’s confession matters. It signals a turning point in the Gospel and in his own life. And it reminds us that faith is chosen.

“Deconstruction” has become a buzzword lately. So-called ex-vangelicals deconstruct the faith of their childhood. Feminists deconstruct biblical womanhood. Queer Christians deconstruct harmful interpretations of Scripture. The word “deconstruction” evokes the painstaking work of pulling apart what no longer holds true, brick by heavy brick.

But deconstruction assumes construction happened first.

For many of us, faith began as an inheritance: the God of our parents, the theology of our childhood church, the doctrines we absorbed before we knew how to question them. I still remember walking into my first seminary class confident in the faith I’d carried since childhood. But my professors didn’t want me to repeat it — they wanted me to wrestle with it. Each class shook my foundations. But somewhere in that rubble, I began building faith for the first time, not blindly accepting but asking: *Do I believe this? Why? Who is the God I am choosing to follow?*

Peter’s confession is a revelation, both for him and for the future church. This Lent, “Who do you say that I am?” is a question worth asking and answering for ourselves.

Where are you rebuilding or reexamining your faith right now? What truth about Jesus feels newly discovered – or newly claimed – in this season?

Living Christ, you ask us who we say you are. Give us courage to answer honestly and faithfully. Steady us as we build, claim and renew our belief in you, the Messiah and Son of the living God. Amen.



Day 34 MONDAY

Jesus' light can guide our steps.

Matthew 17:1-13

Focus verse:

Matthew 17:2

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light.

Halfway through Matthew's Gospel, we arrive at another turning point: the Transfiguration. Recall that at Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven announced, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Here on the mountain, we hear the same words, but with a crucial addition: "Listen to him!"

Everything about this scene is luminous. Jesus' face shines like the sun, his clothes become dazzling white, and suddenly Moses and Elijah – giants of Israel's story – stand beside him. It's overwhelming, holy and beautiful. Peter wants to stay forever. "Lord, it is good for us to be here," he says, offering to build three dwellings on the mountaintop for Jesus and the two prophets.

Peter is not wrong. It is good to be there. Anyone who has ever attended a youth retreat, a church conference, a pilgrimage or even a quiet weekend of prayer knows the sweetness of those moments. Hearts open, prayers deepen and God feels near. These mountaintop experiences give us clarity and courage and joy. They remind us of who Jesus is — and who we are, too.

But the story doesn't end on the mountain. It can't. The voice from the cloud gave a command: "Listen to him." Listening means following Jesus back down the mountain into the world's pain, into conflict and confusion and onto the road that leads straight to Jerusalem, where Jesus will suffer and die.

Mountaintop moments are gifts, but they're not destinations. They are fuel for the harder, holier journey ahead. Faith is confirmed not in the glow of transfiguration but in the valleys where fear, grief and resistance meet us. There is work to do; there are people to love, burdens to carry. There is justice to seek. And Jesus walks ahead of us, still speaking, still calling, still worth following.

Reflection

When have you experienced a mountaintop moment in your faith? How might that experience strengthen you for the more difficult path Jesus is calling you to walk now?

Prayer

Radiant God, thank you for moments when your presence feels bright and unmistakable. Help us listen to Jesus — not only on the mountaintop, but also on the road below. Give us courage to follow him into the places of need, sorrow and hope in our world. May the light we glimpse in him guide our steps each day. Amen.



Day 35 TUESDAY

God uses our gifts to bear fruit.

Matthew 17:14-20

Focus verses:

Matthew 17:19-20

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

Reflection

Prayer

*T*he disciples have just returned from their own attempts at ministry: attempts that, frankly, haven't gone well. A desperate father brings his suffering son to Jesus because the disciples could not heal him. Jesus calls their faith "little"; but for Matthew, this word doesn't mean unbelief. Rather, "little faith" means distracted faith — faith overwhelmed by fear, discouraged by problems that look like mountains, shaken by all that seems unchangeable in the world.

Little faith sees poverty, injustice, hunger and division and quietly concludes, *This is just the way it is.*

But mustard seed faith — small as it is — anchors itself in God. It is not blind to the mountains; it trusts that God is bigger than what stands in the way. Mustard seed faith does not require heroics. It requires persistence, hope and the willingness to offer what we have, believing God can grow it into something more.

Villisca Presbyterian Church in rural Iowa — a congregation of about 50 people — started something called the Blessing Box more than 20 years ago. During worship announcements, members share a blessing from their week, and with each blessing they add one dollar to the box. Some Sundays the gift totals only a dollar or two. On other Sundays — like when someone turned eighty — the box grew by \$80.

Whenever someone in town had a need — a new parent, a teacher arriving in the community, a neighbor struggling — the church emptied the box and gave away the funds. Over time, the community has quietly shared more than \$3,000 in blessings.

"We've always had the attitude of 'whatever we have, we can share,'" their pastor, the Rev. Sandy Wainwright Rossander, told the Presbyterian News Service. "A small gift is just as significant as a large one. ... Even in our smallness, we can still make a difference in the mission of the church."

This is mustard seed faith: small, steady, generous. Not overwhelmed by what it cannot do, but faithful in doing what it can, trusting God to grow every offering of love.

Where do you feel overwhelmed or discouraged today? What small act of faith — one seed — might God be inviting you to plant?

Mountain-moving God, anchor our hearts in you. When problems seem too big and our efforts too small, remind us that even mustard seed faith is enough. Take what we have — our time, our gifts, our small offerings of love — and use them to bear fruit for your kingdom. Amen.



Day 36 WEDNESDAY

We are called to reconciliation.

Matthew 18:15-35

Focus verses:

Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Reflection

Prayer

Conflict is baked into being human. We annoy and disappoint one another. We misunderstand, betray and wound each other, sometimes without meaning to, sometimes with more calculation than we'd like to admit. And the church, for all its hymns and hospitality, is no exception. We are a community of ordinary people trying – and often failing – to love well.

Matthew knows this. So he highlights Jesus' advice on conflict in this fourth major teaching section of the Gospel.

Jesus gives us a process of forgiveness that sounds simple but asks everything of us: Go directly to the person who has hurt you. Speak honestly. Listen earnestly. Bring others in only if needed. And forgive – not once, not seven times, but 77 times.

In other words, stop counting.

Stop keeping score. Stop tightening your grip on the grievance.

Everything in us resists this. Avoidance is easier. So is resentment. Walking away feels cleaner. But according to Jesus, reconciliation is the holy work we owe one another, because God never stops doing this work with us.

Ursula Le Guin paints a striking picture of conflict in her novel *The Dispossessed*. In this world, conflicts are always worked out directly, starting from childhood. When her main character, Shevek, finds himself pulled into a petty fight with another child and the teasing escalates to arguing, tussling and crying, no adults intervene. No other children gather to gawk or cheer. Eventually, the boys work it out and return to their play.

That is the kind of community Jesus envisions. Conflict is seen as a natural part of community, not a threat to it. He envisions a church where we tell the truth in love. A church where mercy is generously offered and where relationships are prized enough to repair – again and again – because we belong to one another in Christ.

Where do you feel the tug to avoid conflict rather than address it? What might happen if you approach that difficult conversation not to dominate or win but to repair?

Reconciling God, teach us the courage to face one another honestly and gently. When we are hurt, guide our words. When we have hurt others, soften our hearts. Free us from keeping score, and shape us into a people who choose repair over resentment, mercy over avoidance and love over fear. Amen.



Day 37 THURSDAY

Jesus calls us to welcome all.

Matthew 19:13-15

Focus verse:

Matthew 19:14

*But Jesus said,
“Let the children
come to me, and do
not stop them, for it
is to such as these
that the kingdom of
heaven belongs.”*

Reflection

Prayer

As Jesus leaves Galilee and begins the long, painful journey toward Jerusalem, the disciples are learning just how demanding the work of God's kingdom will be. In today's passage, parents bring their children to Jesus for a blessing, but the disciples, wanting to protect Jesus from interruptions, step in to block them. In the first century, children carried little social significance. They weren't valued, weren't influential and certainly weren't considered worthy of a teacher's time. From the disciples' perspective, these little ones were getting in the way of very important work.

But Jesus stops the disciples in their tracks: “Let the children come.”

Here Jesus isn't just being tender; he is being radically corrective. These children – so small in their own world – have great significance in God's kingdom. Their worth is inherent, their presence essential, and Jesus insists they be welcomed.

Jesus' welcome extends far beyond children, stretching to all whose worth is overlooked: those with little status, little power, little voice. In our world, too, those “little” ones are often the hardest to reach and the easiest to ignore.

That's why I'm such a fan of The Missing Voices Project at Flagler College in Florida. This Lilly-funded initiative equips churches to welcome youth who are rarely found in pews: foster kids, LGBTQ+ youth, unhoused teens and young people carrying trauma or distrust from past harm. These are beloved children of God, yet welcoming them requires patience, courage, creativity and deep faithfulness. Such a welcome requires congregations to move beyond comfort and convenience into committed, costly relationship.

This is the holy work Jesus calls us to.

Who are the “little ones” in your community — the overlooked, the undervalued, the ones who seem to get in the way? What would it look like to welcome them as Christ welcomes them?

Welcoming Christ, open our eyes to the people the world overlooks. Teach us to make room, to reach out with courage and to embrace those you call precious. Give us the faithfulness to welcome not just those who are easy to love but those who need love the most. Amen.



Day 38 **FRIDAY**

Jesus calls us to compassion, not comparison.

Matthew 20:1-16

Focus verse:

Matthew 20:15

*Am I not allowed
to do what I choose
with what belongs
to me? Or are you
envious because I
am generous?*

Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard isn't meant to teach us how to run payroll or negotiate hourly wages. The story is designed to pry open our imaginations so we can glimpse God's radically different economy.

In this parable, the landowner goes out again and again to hire workers. Those hired at dawn agree to the usual daily wage. Those hired at nine, noon, three, even five o'clock, just an hour before quitting time, are promised only "what is right." But at day's end, every worker receives the full day's wage.

It feels outrageous. Unfair. Backwards.

But Jesus wants us to notice what the landowner sees: not résumés or productivity metrics, but need. The last-hired workers weren't lazy – they simply weren't chosen sooner. Maybe they were overlooked. Maybe they didn't stand out. Maybe they were smaller or didn't "look the part." Still they waited all day hoping someone, anyone, would give them a chance.

This story lands in a cultural moment obsessed with merit. We hear debates about "diversity hires" and "lowered standards." But talk of merit often ignores unequal starting lines. It assumes everyone has the same opportunities. The workers in Jesus' parable have all showed up. All are willing. But only some are chosen first — not because they work harder, but because someone in power deems them useful.

The landowner in Jesus' story refuses to play by those rules. He pays according to compassion, not comparison. Mercy, not merit. He honors need before achievement.

The kingdom of God is built on a generosity that startles us, stretches us, exposes our envy and invites us to see the world through God's eyes: a world where no one is left standing in the marketplace at the eleventh hour, unseen and unchosen.

Reflection

When have you been tempted to measure your worth or someone else's by merit instead of mercy? What might it look like to trust a God whose generosity disrupts your sense of fairness?

Prayer

Generous God, loosen our grip on comparison and scarcity. Open our hearts to your boundless mercy. Make us generous as you are generous, so that we may glimpse your kingdom in the way we give, welcome and love. Amen.



About visio divina

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Seventy-Seven Times

Inspired by Matthew 18:15-22

By The Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

A Sanctified Art, LLC.
sanctifiedart.com



Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What colors, shapes or gestures pull your gaze?
- As you linger, what emotions arise — courage, curiosity, hesitation, gratitude?
- Do you see echoes of this week’s journey — Peter daring to confess who Jesus truly is, the disciples wanting to stay on the mountaintop instead of following Jesus into the valley, Jesus welcoming children whom the world overlooks, or a landowner whose generosity defies our instinct for fairness?
- Where might this image invite you to see as Jesus sees — to listen deeply, to cross boundaries, to trust God’s abundance over scarcity and to recognize mercy breaking open in places you least expect?

Prayer

Boundary-breaking God, help us see with the clarity and compassion of Christ. Where our vision is small, stretch it. Where we hesitate to follow you into unfamiliar places, steady us with your love. May what we behold in this image shape how we live – listening, crossing borders, welcoming the small, trusting your abundance – until our seeing becomes a way of discipleship. Amen.



Day 40

PALM SUNDAY

The one who changes everything.

Matthew 21:1-11

Focus verse:

Matthew 21:10

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

*A*s Matthew tells the story, the world shakes whenever Jesus draws near.

At his birth, all Jerusalem shakes with fear (2:3).

At his death, the earth itself trembles, and rocks split open (27:51).

Now, in this Palm Sunday moment, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, Matthew says the whole city is in "turmoil" – which in Greek can also be translated as "shaken" – by his arrival.

The ground is rumbling not with the thunder of war horses or the heavy march of soldiers – the kind of royal parade the people were used to – but with something stranger, deeper. A different kind of power is entering the city.

Jesus doesn't ride in as kings usually do, mounted high on stallions, wrapped in armor, flanked by troops announcing their dominance. He plods on a donkey. Yet Matthew suggests the earth responds to him with the same seismic force, as though creation itself knows:

This is the one who changes everything.

No wonder the crowds cry out. No wonder the city shakes with questions. Jesus' entry announces a kingdom that conquers not by fear, weapons or spectacle — but by truth, mercy and the kind of sacrificial love that shakes things up. This love unsettles injustice, disrupts the comfortable order and rattles the powers that rely on quiet compliance. This love trembles through the world like a holy earthquake, shifting what we think is immovable.

As we stand at the start of Holy Week, we too may feel the rumbling: in our churches, our neighborhoods, our strained relationships, our hopes for the world. Christ's entry into our lives unsettles us because he calls us to a different way.

The question that shakes Jerusalem's people still shakes us: "Who is this?"

This Holy Week invites us to answer not just with words, but with our lives.

Reflection

Where do you sense holy rumbling in your life: places where Christ's presence unsettles, challenges or reorients you? What might Jesus be riding into and asking you to see or surrender or receive anew?

Prayer

Humble King, as you enter Jerusalem, enter also the trembling places of our hearts. Shake loose what needs to fall away, and steady us for the road ahead. Give us courage to follow your way of peace, even when you unsettle our expectations. Let your gentle strength reshape our lives, our communities and our world. Amen.

Day 41 MONDAY

Our loyalty is to God.

Matthew 22:15-22

Focus verse:

Matthew 22:21

Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

The tension around Jesus is rising. His authority is now unmistakable, and those who fear losing power scramble to trap him. The Pharisees and the Herodians (groups who normally wouldn't be caught dead agreeing on anything) join forces in a desperate attempt to discredit him. They pose him a political landmine of a question: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?*

It's a cruel setup. If Jesus says yes, he alienates his Jewish followers who loathe the Roman tax: a denarius stamped with Caesar's face and the blasphemous claim that he is divine. If Jesus says no, he hands Rome the evidence it needs to arrest him as a revolutionary threat.

But Jesus doesn't take the bait.

"Show me the coin," he says — revealing, with exquisite subtlety, that he doesn't carry one. They do. They're the ones carrying Caesar's propaganda in their pockets.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, Jesus answers. *Give to God what is God's.*

It's brilliant. And it's also easily misunderstood.

Sometimes people quote this verse to shut down protest or critique: *Just obey the government. Jesus said so.* But that isn't Jesus' point. Caesar's image is on the coin, so he tells them to let the coin go. Whereas God's image is on us. Our whole life belongs to God: our allegiance, our conscience, our courage, our hope.

Thus, when earthly power contradicts God's justice, God's compassion and God's vision for human flourishing, we don't shrug and submit. We remember whose image we bear. We speak. We protest. We resist. Our loyalty is not to emperors, parties or systems but to the God whose imprint is on every human life.

Reflection

Where do you sense a tension between the demands of earthly authorities and the call of God? What would it look like this week to live as one who bears God's image?

Prayer

God of all authority, claim my heart again. When lesser powers demand my fear or my silence, remind me whose image I bear. Give me courage to honor you with my choices, my voice and my life. Amen.



Day 42 TUESDAY

Let God shape your life and leadership.

Matthew 23:1-12

Focus verse:

Matthew 23:8, 10, 12

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher. ... Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ... All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Reflection

Prayer

By this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has faced every trap the religious and political leaders can devise. Now he turns — not to attack them, but to teach the crowds and his disciples a better way. The Scribes and Pharisees, he says, love titles, honor and the performance of authority. They take the best seats. They speak as experts. They carry the law but do not carry its heart.

Jesus' words here do not pertain only to religious leaders. He identifies the temptation that lurks in every human heart: the desire to be seen as important, competent, impressive. To lead with ego instead of humility, to speak when we should listen, to treat certainty as a badge of honor rather than to admit what we don't know.

There is another way.

Zen Buddhism has a term, the "beginner's mind": a posture of openness, curiosity and willingness to learn. It contrasts with the "expert's mind," which believes it has nothing left to receive. Jesus' teaching echoes this wisdom: the truly wise remain teachable. The truly great remain grounded. The truly faithful remain humble, willing to serve.

I've learned to trust leaders who can say "I don't know," because they're honest enough to keep learning. They resist the urge to take up all the space in the room; they leave space so others can breathe, speak and be heard. Jesus calls this posture greatness.

In a world that equates leadership with domination, visibility and expertise, Jesus offers a different model: Kneel low. Listen deeply. Stay teachable. Serve freely. Let God be the one who shapes your leadership and your life.

Where might God be inviting you to lead with humility rather than certainty? How could adopting a "beginner's mind" open you to deeper wisdom or more compassionate leadership?

Teacher, humble our spirits and widen our hearts. Keep us curious, open and willing to learn. Guard us from the pride that closes us off from others and from you. Shape us into leaders who listen, serve, apologize and grow so that in all things, we reflect the gracious leadership of Christ. Amen.



Day 43 WEDNESDAY

Jesus calls us to endure, keep loving, stay tender.

Matthew 24:1-13

Focus verses:

Matthew 24:12-13

And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Jesus' prediction of the Temple's destruction (24:1-2) would have sounded painfully familiar to Matthew's community. By the time they heard the words of Matthew's Gospel, Rome had already crushed the Jewish revolt of 70 CE, leveling the beloved Temple and tearing apart families and communities. These early Christians were trying to survive political upheaval, religious conflict, internal disagreement and a deep uncertainty about their future.

In that chaos, Jesus' apocalyptic speech was not meant to terrify — it was meant to steady. Yes, the world was shaking. Yes, trouble would come. But Jesus urged them: *Do not let your love grow cold. Endure.*

That might be the hardest command of all.

When life feels harsh, we can become harsh. When the world grows cruel, our hearts are tempted to protect themselves by hardening. Exhaustion breeds callousness. Fear sharpens into suspicion. Hope thins into cynicism.

Yet Jesus says: *Hold fast. Keep loving. Stay tender in a brutal world.* This is not naïve optimism — it's defiant faith. Trust that the God who brings life out of death is still at work, still making all things new, even when destruction and division seem to have the upper hand.

To endure in love is its own kind of resistance. Enduring is choosing compassion when indifference would be easier; it means refusing to mirror the cruelty around us. Enduring is keeping our hearts open to Christ when everything in the world encourages us to shut down.

Matthew's church needed this reminder. So do we.

Reflection

Where do you feel the pull toward cynicism, weariness or hard-heartedness? What would it look like for you to endure in love this week?

Prayer

Steady God, when the world feels unmoored and our love feels thin, hold us fast. Keep our hearts open, our compassion alive and our hope grounded in you. Help us endure not with fear, but with love that refuses to grow cold. Amen.



Day 44 MAUNDY THURSDAY

Jesus will strengthen you for the road ahead.

Matthew 26:17-29

Focus verse:

Matthew 26:26

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."

Reflection

Prayer

*O*n this night, Matthew invites us into the Upper Room — not simply to witness a meal, but to receive the heart of the Gospel. By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, Communion had already become a liturgy, not a full meal. So in this account, Matthew leans into theology. He places Jesus' words in the middle of the Passover supper, drawing our attention to the center of Jesus' identity and the center of God's saving story.

When Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and says, "Take, eat; this is my body," Matthew wants us to hear more than a ritual formula. This account shows us Jesus offering his whole life — everything he has taught, healed, lived, suffered, promised and fulfilled. The bread and cup gather the entirety of Matthew's Gospel:

- Jesus as God's long-awaited promise in the genealogy.
- Jesus as teacher on mountainsides and in fishing boats.
- Jesus as healer, boundary breaker and rest giver.
- Jesus as mercy poured out, as forgiveness embodied.
- Jesus as the one who points us toward God's coming kingdom, where all creation is restored and every relationship is made right.

"This is my blood of the covenant." Not a symbol alone, but a pledge. A commitment. A life offered so that ours might be reconciled, healed and made whole.

Tonight, we sit at the table with this long story behind us, the costly road to the cross before us, and Christ's love — steadfast, inexhaustible — given freely into our hands.

What part of Jesus' story feels most alive to you tonight: promise, teaching, mercy, forgiveness or hope? How might receiving his life again strengthen you for the road ahead?

Jesus, on this holy night you give yourself to us completely. In bread and cup, in promise and presence, you offer your life for our healing. As we remember your story and receive your love, draw us into the mercy you embody and the future you promise. Strengthen us for the way of the cross, and make us ready for the dawn of resurrection. Amen.



Day 45

GOOD FRIDAY

Jesus' death shakes and reshapes the world.

Matthew 27:1-54

Focus verse:

Matthew 27:54

Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Reflection

Prayer

Good Friday brings us to the heart of the story: Jesus' crucifixion. But Matthew tells this story differently from the other evangelists. He focuses less on the physical details of Jesus' crucifixion and more on the impact of his death: the way it shakes the world and reshapes human hearts.

At the start of the story, the Roman soldiers are anything but sympathetic. They are the mockers, the taunters who dress Jesus in a scarlet robe, twist a crown of thorns and kneel before him in cruel parody. Their derision spreads like wildfire. Passersby join in. Religious leaders sneer. Even the rebels who are crucified beside him revile him. Matthew wants us to see the scene clearly: the whole machinery of society – empire, religion and the crowds – standing against Jesus.

But something begins to shift.

In the middle of the noise, the soldiers sit down to keep watch (27:36). Theirs is an ordinary military assignment. Yet as Thomas G. Long notes in his commentary on Matthew, "keeping watch" is also a posture of faith: waiting for God's kingdom, attending to what God is about to do.

And under their watch, the world begins to quake.

After Jesus takes his last breath, the earth shakes. The Temple curtain tears from top to bottom, signaling the end of the old order and the opening of access to God for all people. Then comes an astonishing moment: the very soldiers who scorned Jesus, who hammered the nails, who laughed at his pain, are the first to proclaim: "Truly this man was God's Son!" (27:54).

The executioners become witnesses. The tormentors become truth tellers. The hardened become transformed.

Good Friday is many things: tragic, brutal, holy. But it is also a story of transformation. The love Jesus offers on the cross is more powerful than mockery, cruelty and violence. His love is strong enough to shake the earth, strong enough to change the human heart.

Where in your life do you need the transforming power of Christ's love? Where might God be softening a hardened place in you, or inviting you to see an enemy with new eyes?

Crucified Christ, your love reaches farther than our cruelty and rises higher than our fear. Shake loose what keeps our hearts hard. Tear open whatever separates us from you. Transform us as you transformed the soldiers at your cross, until we confess with our lives as well as our lips: Truly, you are God's Son. Amen.



About visio divina

Visio divina, or “divine seeing,” is a prayer practice that invites us to encounter God through art. Just as *lectio divina* guides us to listen deeply to Scripture, *visio divina* encourages us to slow down and see with the eyes of faith. Rather than analyzing the artwork, we allow it to speak to us through color, light, texture and emotion. As you gaze upon the image, notice what draws your attention, what stirs your heart, and how the Spirit might be inviting you to see God’s story in a new way.

Palms Journey

Inspired by Matthew 21:1-11

By Hannah Garrity

A Sanctified Art, LLC.

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Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? A contrast of light and dark? Stillness or motion? A gesture, a shadow, a figure?
- As you linger, what emotions begin to surface — sorrow, longing, ache, hope?
- Do you sense echoes of this week’s journey — Jesus entering a city shaken by expectation and fear, his courage before those who sought to entrap him, his teaching on humility and servant leadership, his call to endure in love even as the world grows harsh, his breaking of bread and offering of himself, or the shattering sorrow of the cross and the unexpected confession of faith that followed?
- Where might this image invite you to wait with God in the silence of Holy Saturday — to hold the ache of what was lost, the uncertainty of what comes next and the quiet hope that something new is already stirring beneath the surface? Listen for the places where mercy is still unfolding, even when unseen.

Prayer

God of the in-between days, meet us in this Holy Saturday silence. Hold us in the tension between grief and hope, between what has been and what will be. When the world feels hushed and heavy, draw us into your steady compassion. Prepare our hearts for the dawn only you can bring. Amen.

Day 47 EASTER SUNDAY

We do not walk this road alone.

Matthew 28:1-20

Focus verse:

Matthew 28:20

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Reflection

Prayer

Before the sun even rises, the earth shakes. Not for the first time in Matthew's Gospel — and not for the last time in God's story. Creation trembles at the death of Jesus, and now it quakes again as the stone rolls back and life breaks open where death once ruled. The women arrive expecting to tend a grave. Instead, they are met with an angel, an empty tomb and a message that shakes them even more: "He is not here; for he has been raised."

This is the climax of the story we've walked through all Lent. Yet not even Easter morning is tidy. Fear mixes with joy and disbelief. A parallel narrative is fabricated by the chief priests to deny what God has done. And the disciples, entrusted with the next chapter, come to the risen Jesus with both worship and doubt. Matthew names it plainly, almost tenderly. Jesus does not rebuke them. He commissions them.

Go. Make disciples. Teach, baptize, bless. Tell the story.

Easter does not remove the difficulty of discipleship. The world still groans. People still suffer. Faith still wavers. There are always more hungry people to feed; there is always more mercy to show, more courage needed for justice, more growing for us to do. But Easter does give us the promise we need most: that we do not walk this road alone.

"I am with you always," Jesus says. Not just on mountaintops or in neatly folded moments of certainty — he is with us in doubt, exhaustion, confusion and the ordinary Tuesdays of your life. The Christ who conquered death walks beside us into every room, every grief, every calling. Nothing — not empire, not cruelty, not despair, not even the grave — can obstruct the love of God.

Resurrection is not the end of the Gospel story. It is the beginning of ours.

Where do you need to hear Jesus' Easter promise — "I am with you" — in your life right now? How might that assurance reshape the way you move into the work God is calling you to do?

Risen Christ, meet us in our fear and in our joy, in our doubt and in our hope. As you called the women and the disciples, call us again into courage, compassion and faithful witness. Walk with us as we share your love in a weary world. Stay close to us, now and always, to the end of the age. Amen.







THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK