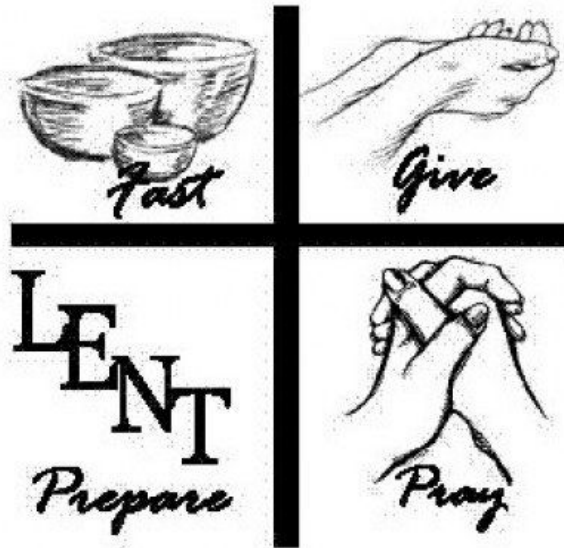


SAINT LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Organized 1871

Celebrating 154 Years of ministry in Columbia, South Carolina

*The Mission of St. Luke's Episcopal Church is to spread the Word
and share the love of God with all people*



The Third Sunday in Lent

A Penitential Order w/ The Holy Eucharist: Rite I

March 8, 2026

10:00 a.m.

The Rev. Raphiell Ashford, Rector & Priest

Mr. Ezra Blackwell, Supply Organist

Vestry Theme for 2026

Reset to the New Normal: The Work Continues

Mission Statement

The mission of St. Luke's Episcopal Church is to spread the Word and share the love of God with all.

Vision Statement

{To become} a vibrant self-sustaining institution that serves and respects the spiritual, social, and physical needs of our community and congregation, while preserving the history of the church.

Quiet Please: Please be mindful of others as you enter the church before the service. Upon entering the nave, there should be a period of quiet and reverence as many parishioners are in prayer and or meditation.

OFFERINGS can be made online

<https://onrealm.org/StLukesEpiscopa59532/Give>

QR CODE FOR GIVING



*Use your phone to hold over the image

PARISH LENTEN THEME:

“Give me a clean heart.”

Saint Luke's Episcopal Church



It is the parish custom to observe silence prior to the start of the Eucharist. Be thoughtful, be silent, be reverent, for this is the House of God. Before the service, speak to the Lord, during the service, let the Lord speak to you; after the service, speak to one another.

We invite you to join us as an active participant in our worship of God. This bulletin is your guide to our worship. You will find three books in front of you that contain most of the material needed for this service; *The Book of Common Prayer* [BCP], *The Hymnal 1982* [H], and *Lift Every Voice and Sing, II* [L]. [S] denotes service music which is found in the front of the hymnal.

✠ indicates where to make the sign of the cross

**At the ringing of the bell, all stand.

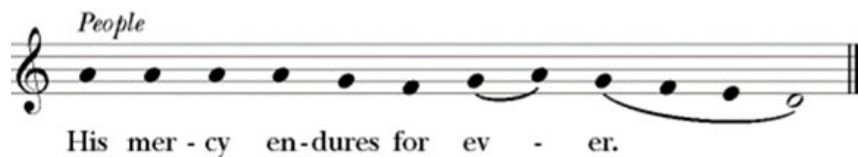
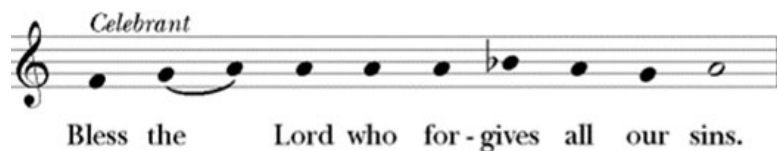
Prelude “Adagio for Strings from Op. 11” Samuel Barber (1936)
Tr. By Franklin Eddings

THE WORD OF GOD

Hymn in Procession H • 522 “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” *Austria*

The Opening Acclamation✠

Missa orbis factor
arr. David Hurd



The Decalogue

BCP 350

**The people kneel or sit*

The Confession of Sin

BCP 352

**Silence may be kept.*

The Absolution

BCP 350

✠ *“grant your absolution and remission ...”*

Kyrie eleison S • 91

from Missa de Sancta Maria Magdalena
Healy Willan

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**The people sit.*

The Lesson

Exodus 17:1-7

Lector A reading from the Book of Exodus

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

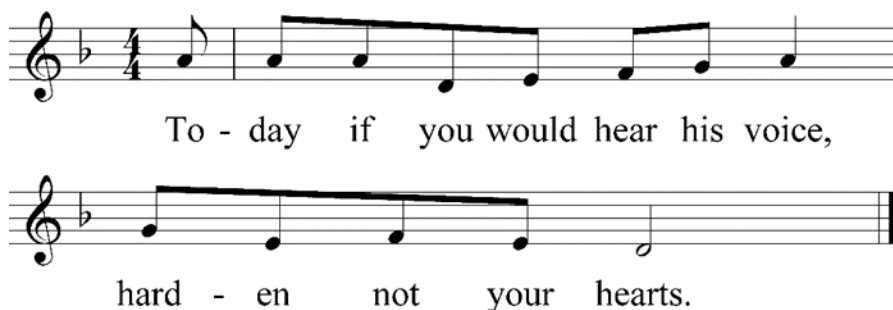
[Silence]

Lector The Word of the Lord.

People Thanks be to God.

Psalm 95 *Venite, exultemus*

**The antiphon is sung first by the Cantor and then by all; thereafter where indicated.*



To - day if you would hear his voice,
hard - en not your hearts.



A *B*

A1 Come, let us sing to the LORD; *

let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.

B2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving *

and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.

B3 For the LORD is a great God, *

and a great King above all gods.

{Antiphon}

4 In his hand are the caverns of the earth, *

and the heights of the hills are his also.

5 The sea is his, for he made it, *

and his hands have molded the dry land.

{Antiphon}

6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, *
and kneel before the LORD our Maker.

7 For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. *
Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice! {Antiphon}

8 Harden not your hearts,
as your forebears did in the wilderness, *
at Meribah, and on that day at Massah,
when they tempted me.

9 They put me to the test, *
though they had seen my works. {Antiphon}

10 Forty years long I detested that generation and said, *
"This people are wayward in their hearts;
they do not know my ways."

11 So I swore in my wrath, *
"They shall not enter into my rest." {Antiphon}

The Epistle

Romans 5:1-11

Lector: A reading from the Letter of Paul to the Romans

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if

while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. [Silence]

Lector: The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

The Sequence Hymn H · 455 “O Love of God, How Strong and True” *Dunedin*

The Lenten Gospel Acclamation

Prendergast; Sullivan

REFRAIN: 1st time: Cantor, All repeat; thereafter: All

E \flat B \flat E \flat B \flat C \flat A \flat B \flat A \flat E \flat B \flat 7 E \flat Fine

Praise to you Lord Je - sus Christ, King of end - less glo - ry!
Alt. Ref.: Praise and glo - ry to you O Christ, to - day and for - ev - er!

“Repent, says the LORD; the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (*Mt. 4:17*)

The Holy Gospel

John 4:5-42

Priest ✠ The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

People Glory be to thee, O Lord.

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a

woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are

ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Priest The Gospel of the Lord.

People Praise be to thee, O Christ.

The Sermon

The Rev. Raphiell Ashford

The Nicene Creed

BCP 358

✠ and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Prayers of the People

Form III

BCP 387

✠ “Give to the departed eternal rest.”

The Peace

Celebrant The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People And with thy spirit.

Announcements

Fr. Raphiell+

Birthday & Anniversary Blessings

Fr. Raphiell+

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Offertory Anthem

“God Be in My Head”

arr. K. Lee Scott

Shekinah Frieson, soprano

At the Presentation of Alms

*All standing

“From All That Dwell Below the Skies”

Old 100th

1 From all that dwell be - low the skies let
2 E - ter - nal are thy mer - cies, Lord, and
*3 Praise God, from whom all bless - ings flow; praise
the Cre - a - tor's praise a - rise! Let the Re - deem - er's
truth e - ter - nal is thy word: thy praise shall sound from
him, all crea - tures here be - low; praise him a - bove, ye
Name be sung through ev - ery land, by ev - ery tongue!
shore to shore till suns shall rise and set no more.
heaven - ly host: praise Fa - ther, Son, and Ho - ly Ghost.

Words: Isaac Watts (1674-1748), para. of Psalm 117. St. 3, Thomas Ken (1637-1711)

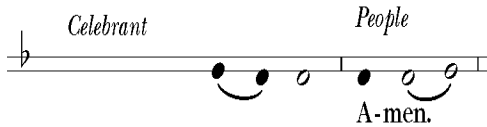
Music: *Old 100th*, melody from *Pseaumes octante trois de David*, 1551, alt.; harm. after Louis Bourgeois (1510?-1561?)

The Prayer of Consecration

BCP 334

✠ “Sanctify us ...”

The Great Amen



The Lord's Prayer (*Pater Noster*) S · 119

Plainsong

**The priest intones the Pater Noster (Our Father).*

The Breaking of the Bread (The Fraction)

**A period of brief silence is kept.*

The Fraction Anthem “O Lord, I Am not Worthy”

Non Dignus

***See pew card or inside back cover of the hymnals.*

Agnus Dei

O Lamb of God, that takest asway the sins of the world,
have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, that takest asway the sins of the world,
have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, that takest asway the sins of the world,
grant us thy peace.

The Prayer of Humble Access

BCP 337

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. *Amen.*

Priest ✠ The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Instructions for Receiving Communion

- *All baptized persons are welcome to receive Communion, and those who do not desire to receive Communion may come to the Altar rail to receive God's blessing.*
- *An usher will direct you to approach the Altar for Communion or a blessing. Please kneel, if you are able, at the Altar Rail.*
- *To receive the consecrated bread, extend your hands upward, palms crossed and facing up.*
- *To receive the consecrated wine, please guide the chalice to your lips as it is offered. However, if you prefer, you may leave the consecrated bread in your palm and the Chalice bearer will intinct the host into the wine and place it on your tongue. **Please do not personally intinct the host into the chalice.***
- *If you desire to receive the Sacrament but are not able to come to the Altar rail, please notify an usher and the Priest and Chalice bearer will bring the Sacrament to you.*

The Music at Communion

H • 309

“O Food to Pilgrims Given” *O Welt, ich muss dich lassen*

H • 676/L • 203

“There Is a Balm in Gilead”

Negro Spiritual

H • 685

“Rock of Ages”

Toplady

A Solemn Prayer Over the People Lent III

Celebrant Bow down before the Lord.

*The people kneel or sit.

Celebrant Grant, Almighty God, that your people may recognize their weakness and put their whole trust in your strength, so that they may rejoice for ever in the protection of your loving providence; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The Post Communion Prayer

BCP 339

**All kneel as able or sit.*

Celebrant Let us pray.

Celebrant and People

Almighty and everliving God, we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; and for assuring us in these holy mysteries that we are living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom. And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord. To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

The Blessing

Go forth into the world in peace. Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no-one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Show love to everyone. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit; And the blessing of Almighty God, ✠ the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. *Amen.*

Hymn in Procession H690 “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” *Cwm Rhondda*

The Dismissal

Priest Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

People Thanks be to God.

Postlude

“Original Improvisation on *Rock of Ages*”

Virginia Carrington Thomas

*It is the custom of this parish to kneel or remain seated in prayer and reflection during the Organ Postlude. If you need to leave, please do so quietly.

Parish Fellowship is sponsored by the Gwendolyn Meadows & the Altar Guild in thanksgiving for sixty years of service by Julia Meadows.

INTERCESSIONS



- **Parishioners:** Charles W. Blakely, Gary Bowden, John Bowden, Damion Cokley, Jackson Cokley, Patricia Cokley, Byron Eaddy, Gloria Eaddy, Eddie Glenn, Cynthia Goines, Robert Green, Yvonne Hall, Daryl Hammonds, Jr., Desmond Hammonds, Valencia Hammonds, Tarnez Hickman, Justin Hickmon, LaToya Hickmon, Levi Johnson, Sr., James McLemore, Marie Martin, Gwendolyn Meadows, Carmen Murray, Jay'ceon Quattlebaum, Malik Quattlebaum, Joseph Ray, Reginald Reed, Cassandra Sims, Peyton Parker-Smith, William Smith, Jr., Ronald Turner, Dorothy Walker
- **Family & Friends:** Ingrid Dowdell, Ernestine Grant Gerald L. McNair, Elsie Mitchell, Quinten Morris, Katherine Robinson, Mattie Anderson-Roberson, Theodora Washington,
- **Diocesan Cycle of Prayer...** Ministry of the Covenant of St. Helena, North Augusta
- **Birthdays...** Beverly Turner (12th), Herman Hickman (13th)
- **Anniversaries...**
- **Births...**
- **Deaths...** Mary McLemore
- **Traveling Mercies...**
- **Confirmands...** Kennedy Johnson, Nadia Muhammad

Create in me a clean
HEART
O God;
and renew a right spirit
within me.

PSALMS 51:10

SERVANTS FOR THE LORD

The Old Testament Lector

Beverly Turner

The Gospel Book Bearer

Sheryl D. Belcher

Intercessor

Karen Castelli

Crucifer

Jaylen Caldwell

Thurifer & Boat Bearer

Herman Hickman

Videographer

Deadra Bowden

Cantors

Elliott Brown

Angela Blalock

The Epistoler

Christine Counts-Davis

Server

Valencia Hammonds

Lay Eucharistic Minister

Sheryl D. Belcher

Oblation Bearers

Darnell Holmes

Maxima Holmes

Ushers

Gloria Eaddy

Rachel Hall

Darnell Holmes

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SABBATICAL INFORMATIONAL...For those who want to know more about the Rector's upcoming sabbatical, or want to know more about what a Sabbatical entails and how it benefit the Rector and the Parish, Fr. James Lyon, IV, Rector of Good Shepherd Episcoapl Church, Columbia, will join us for Parish Fellowship in Griffin Hall after the Mass for the presentation.

THE REQUIEM MASS FOR MARY McLEMORE will be at at St. Michael's and All Angels' Episcopal Church (6408 Bridgewood Road) on Tuesday, March 10th @ 11:30am. Interment Location: 2:00PM @ Fort Jackson National Cemetery, 4170 Percival Road, Columbia, SC. A public viewing will be held at Leevy's Funeral Home on Monday, May 9th from 4:00PM-6:PM.

ST. LUKE'S ENDOWMENT FUND...Please consider giving a donation on your birthday and/or anniversary of \$1 per year. Donations to the Endowment Fund will help to secure the future of St. Luke's. Your donations are needed and appreciated.

EASTER BRASS...If you would like to have Brass on Easter Day, please make a donation to the Blakely-Robinson Fund and earmark it "Easter Brass."

EASTER LILIES...Help us to decorate the church for the Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day by purchasing a lily or lilies to adorn the Nave and Narthex. **The price per plant is \$15. Please see Corliss Wise or DeNell Hickman to place your order. Orders will be accepted between 2/15-3/15.** If there is a dedication to go with your purchase please contact the parish office by phone, email, or in person.

155th CHURCH ANNIVERSARY/ST LUKE'S DAY...Our beloved parish will be 155 years old on May 21st. We will observe this anniversary on the Feast of Saint Luke Sunday, October 18th. Each parishioner is asked to give \$155 in celebration for the anniversary. If you think of it monthly, between now and October, it breaks down to roughly \$22.15 per month.

MORNING PRAYER/ANTE COMMUNION SERVICE... If you would like to learn how to lead these services or any of the other Daily Offices, please contact the Rector. The bishop has mandated that persons leading these services must be trained by their priest and licensed by the bishop. I would like to hold the training in Lent.

SERVANTS FOR THE LORD... If you have a desire to serve in the Church in a certain capacity, please contact the Rector. If you are not sure what your calling is, contact the Rector for a one on one so that the two of you might discover your gifts and talents.

PASTORAL CARE... The Rector is always available for pastoral care, but you must inform him of your need. This also includes needs for home blessings, anointing and confession.

SECURITY.... Parishioners, in light of recent events in our nation and city, the importance of security cannot be taken lightly. Please consider giving a donation for Security so that we may be proactive and not reactive.

ST. LUKE'S CHORAL SCHOLARS & BLAKELY-ROBINSON MUSIC FUND...Your contributions are always appreciated and needed more than ever. Contributions to these funds help to secure choristers & instrumentalists for our Sunday services as well as special services: funerals, weddings, etc. It is because of your continued generous contributions that we are able to present glorious choral & instrumental music to the glory of God. Please consider contributing towards this fund

MARCH 2026 CALENDAR OF SERVICES/MEETINGS/EVENTS

MARCH	SERVICE/MEETING/EVENT	TIME & PLACE
8 th (Sunday)	The Third Sunday in Lent The Holy Eucharist: Rite I	Nave 10:00am-11:30pm
	Fr. Lyon (Rector, Good Shepherd Episcopal Church) addresses the Congregation regarding the Rector's sabbatical.	11:45am Griffin Hall
	Confirmation Class	TBD
9 th (Monday)	Rector's Day Off	
	Historic Waverly Neighborhood Association Meeting	6:00pm Bishop Memorial AME Church, 2221 Washington St.
10 th (Tuesday)	Archives Committee	Archives Room 10:30-1:00pm
	Requiem Mass Mary L. McLemore	St. Michael's and All Angels' Episcopal Church
	Finance Committee	Griffin Hall 3:00pm-4:30pm
	Historic Waverly Community Meeting	6:00pm-7:15pm Bishop's Memorial AME Church/ 2221 Washington St.
11 th (Wednesday)	Choir Rehearsal	6:00pm-7:30pm Griffin Hall
12 th (Thursday)	Fresh Start Ministry	9:00am-12:00noon The O'Neal Center
13 th (Friday)	Rector's Spiritual Day: Sermon Prep, Pastoral Care, Self-Care, etc.	
14 th (Saturday)	2 nd Saturday Feeding	12:00-1:00pm Griffin Hall, distributed at the door

15 th (Sunday)	The Fourth Sunday in Lent Laetare Sunday & Mothering Sunday The Holy Eucharist: Rite I	10:00am-11:30am Nave
	Memorial Garden Committee	12:00pm Griffin Hall/ Memorial Garden
16 th (Monday)	Rector's Day Off	
17 th (Tuesday)	Vestry Meeting	6:00pm-7:30pm Griffin Hall
18 th (Wednesday)	Quilters & Crafters	10:30am-1:00pm
	Choir Rehearsal	6:00pm-7:30pm
19 th (Thursday)	Fresh Start Ministry	9:00am-12:00noon The O'Neal Center
	Bylaws Committee	5:30pm-6:30pm
20 th (Friday)	Rector's Spiritual Day: Sermon Prep, Pastoral Care, Self-Care, etc.	
21 st (Saturday)	Acolyte Instruction/Refresher (Interested Persons are also invited to attend)	10:30am Griffin Hall
	Daughters of the King (DOK)	3:00pm (Griffin Hall)
22 nd (Sunday)	The Fifth Sunday in Lent The Holy Eucharist: Rite I	10:00am-11:30am Nave
	Confirmation Class	TBD
23 rd (Monday)	Rector's Day Off	
	Lenten Tea Sponsored by the ECW (Episcopal Church Women)	5:30pm-7:00pm Griffin Hall
24 th (Tuesday)	Buildings & Grounds	5:30pm-6:30pm Griffin Hall
25 th (Wednesday)	Quilters & Crafters	10:30am-1:00pm Griffin Hall
	Choir Rehearsal	6:00pm-7:30pm

		Chancel
26 th (Thursday)	Fresh Start Ministry	9:00am-12:00noon The O'Neal Center
27 th (Friday)	Rector's Spiritual Day: Sermon Prep, Pastoral Care, Self-Care, etc.	
28 th (Saturday)	4 th Saturday Feeding	12:00noon-1:00pm Griffin Hall, distributed at the door
29 th (Sunday)	The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday	9:45am The Liturgy of the Palms The O'Neal Center 10:00am The Holy Eucharist: Rite I
30 th (Monday)	Holy Monday/Rector's Day Off	
31 st (Tuesday)	Holy Tuesday Clergy Renewal of Vows & Chrism Mass	11:00am-1:00pm Trinity Cathedral

Music Acknowledgements & Permission for Use

Psalm

The Portland Psalter
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Lenten Gospel Acclamation

from *Oregon Catholic Press*

Service music

Opening Acclamation, *Kyrie, Sursum corda, Sanctus, the Lord's Prayer & Agnus Dei*; Permission by RiteSong online music library for one-time use of this material for congregational use.

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Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe's Ash Wednesday letter to the church Posted Feb 18, 2026

Dear people of God in The Episcopal Church:

When God told Moses to lead the ancient Israelites out of slavery in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh stood in his way. Pharaoh wanted power and control over God's people, and Exodus tells us that the more serious the situation got, the more hardened his heart became. Despite locusts and frogs and all manner of chaos in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh remained trapped by his view of the world, which had himself and his power at the center. He could not see that God's imagination was far bigger and more expansive than his. He could not imagine liberation for God's people – or for himself.

Today, in the opening collect of our Ash Wednesday service, we ask God to “create and make in us new and contrite hearts.” I think of Pharaoh's hard heart, and sometimes my own, when I say that prayer, and never more so than this year.

These days, it can seem as if we are living in a wasteland of Pharaoh's imagination. We see the principalities and powers promulgating violence, dehumanization, and injustice on our streets, and it seems nearly impossible not to react along the lines of the divisions and polarization that our political leaders have championed. It is easy to have a hardened heart. It is tempting to get angry and be governed by outrage, or to grow cold and indifferent.

If we turn from Pharaoh's imagination toward God's imagination, however, we find a different path. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. With that great commandment, he is teaching us that we are all one, all part of God's chosen people, and when we hate and revile each other, we are actually destroying ourselves. Theologian Howard Thurman, whose thinking helped shape the Civil Rights movement, put it like this in “Jesus and the Disinherited”: “The logic of the development of hatred is death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values.”

It is not easy to leave behind Pharaoh's imagination and its toxic drip of polarization that hardens our hearts and minds. The liberation we seek requires the conversion – the

turning – of our hearts. We can begin that process anytime, but Lent gives us an opportunity to undertake the work together.

In the old 1928 Book of Common Prayer Ash Wednesday service, we called on the book of Lamentations: “Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned.” I believe that as we Episcopalians turn, as we fast and pray for the conversion of our hearts, we can make a great witness to a world that has been brought to its knees by the power of hatred and division.

On Monday of Holy Week, a number of my bishop colleagues will hold public liturgies or prayer services to lament the violence and hatred that has come to define our common life and to witness to our conviction that Christians must come together across our unholy divisions. I hope that if you can attend a service nearby, you will.

I will also host a service on Zoom on Palm Sunday, March 29, at 8 p.m. Eastern so that we can pray together for God’s blessing on our witness. Look for more information coming soon.

Like the apostle Paul, the conversion of the heart that we must undertake may start with a blinding light, but the ongoing change it requires is the work of a lifetime, and may require everything we have. This Lent, I pray that God might create and make in us new and contrite hearts that will sustain us as we make our witness to the world.

Faithfully,

The Most Rev. Sean W. Rowe
Presiding Bishop

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“The Episcopal Church is a secret too well kept. Many are starved for what we experience daily and too easily take for granted. Invite others to come to your parish to experience this joy.”
Louie Crew, author of *101 Reasons to be Episcopalian*