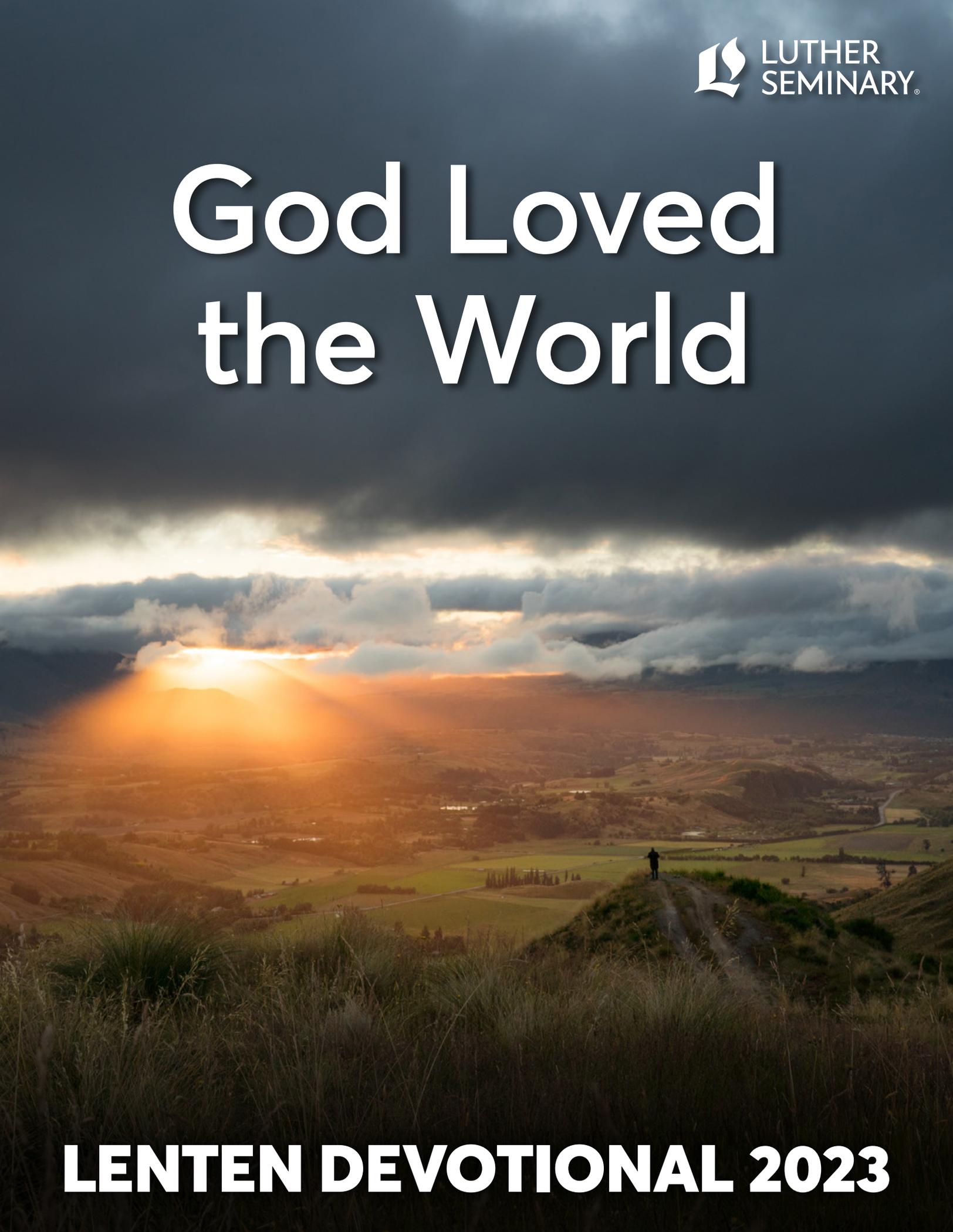


God Loved the World

A dramatic landscape at sunset or sunrise. The sun is low on the horizon, partially obscured by dark, heavy clouds. Bright rays of light break through the clouds, illuminating the scene. The foreground is dominated by tall, dry grasses. In the middle ground, a dirt path leads up a hillside, where a small, dark silhouette of a person stands looking out over a vast valley. The valley below is filled with rolling hills, green fields, and small clusters of buildings, all bathed in the warm, golden light of the setting or rising sun.

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2023

God Loved the World

"God Loved the World" ELW 323

- 1 God loved the world so that he gave
his only Son the lost to save,
that all who would in Him believe
should everlasting life receive.**
- 2 Christ Jesus is the ground of faith,
who was made flesh and suffered death;
all who confide in Christ alone
are built on this chief cornerstone.**
- 3 If you are ill, if death draws near,
this truth your troubled heart can cheer:
Christ Jesus rescues us from death;
that is the firmest ground of faith.**
- 4 Be of good cheer, for God's own Son
forgives all sins that you have done,
and justified by Jesus' blood,
your baptism grants the highest good.**
- 5 All glory to the Father, Son,
and Holy Spirit, Three in One!
To you, O blessed Trinity,
be praise now and eternally!**

Wednesday, February 22

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

At first reading, this traditional Ash Wednesday gospel reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount seems to present the correct inward-looking somber fit. With its focus on the practice of piety—paying humble attention to matters of righteousness, the proper conduct of giving, prayer, and fasting—we might seem to be directed to just the proper seriousness to accompany this beginning of our Lenten journey.

Yet our reading's concluding words, inviting us to consider where our heart is truly centered, may give some caution about a journey that looks solely or overly inward. That caution resides especially in the centering words of our Lord's Prayer—omitted in the reading (verses 7–15)—which would encourage us to focus instead on the mercy of our Father in heaven, on God's kingdom coming among us in the doing of God's will, and on God's gift of daily life-giving bread, all of which enable us to live in mutual forgiving relationships in our world. Now that might be a fitting way to center our reflections for this journey.

Our Father in heaven, teach us to live as our Lord taught us to pray, with our heart centered on the treasure of your love and forgiveness that renew and sustain us for each day of our journey. Amen.

God Loved the World

Thursday, February 23

Romans 5:12–19

Earlier in chapter 5, Paul has announced the heart of his gospel message: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (8). Now in today's reading he supports that assertion with an extended comparison between two alternative paths of life: the old way of sin and death, and God's new way of forgiveness and life. In repeated balanced phrases he repeats his basic premise: there is nothing that can compare to God's free gift of grace in Jesus Christ which God intends for all people (15).

Wow! If this is really true, then what other response is left? Certainly one like that suggested in the refrain of Helen H. Lemmel's hymn "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus."

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.

And one like the meditation on John 3:16—"God so loved the world"—that resonates in our theme hymn for Lent.

God of grace, let your free gift of love in Jesus Christ be the power to transform and sustain my life today with peace and hope. Amen.

God Loved the World

Friday, February 24

Matthew 4:1–11

Jesus is ready to take the stage of his ministry. At his baptism he has just heard the benediction of the voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son. In him I am well pleased!" With a pedigree like that, what more does one need? No wonder, almost in the next breath, the devil appears to test this new preacher-prophet, as if to say, "You've got it all. Go for it. Just trust yourself!" But "what if?" What if that trust is misplaced? As John the Baptist will later press Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another?" (11:3). But at each challenge, Jesus refuses the bait and reasserts his trust in God and God's word.

Jesus' example is certainly a model for us to ponder in our journey of life. When all the "what if's" come our way, in what or in whom will we place our trust?

God of promise, when temptations come to place our trust in ourselves or in the world around us, teach us to follow our Lord's example and place our trust securely in the word and promise of God. Amen.

God Loved the World

Saturday, February 25

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323)

As our reflections for Ash Wednesday suggested, there is often a strong temptation to direct our attentions during Lent inward on ourselves—to ponder our own piety, our record of righteousness, and to ask more deeply: “How am I doing in this journey of faith?” But a quite different direction, that of refocusing our attention upon the word and promises of God, might be suggested by our theme hymn for Lent. Its opening verse points us to the heart of the gospel witness: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe may have life in his name” (John 3:16). The remaining verses of the hymn tease out the implications for faith of that central testimony: how the word became flesh; how through Christ’s death and resurrection we have received forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation; and how that good news leads us to sing the praise and glory of God.

God of love, may the good news of your love for all your creation once again capture our thoughts and imagination in this Lenten season so that we may be inspired to sing your praises. Amen.

God Loved the World

Sunday, February 26

"God Loved the World" (ELW 323)

According to the church calendar, Sundays are not actually part of the calculations of the 40 days of the Lenten season. Sunday remains as always a reminder of Easter—a celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord—Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! So perhaps it is fitting on this day of Resurrection that we follow the movement of our theme hymn. Though in its center verses it reflects on Jesus' incarnation and death, and upon baptism as our link with Jesus' death, at the beginning and end, it dwells in Resurrection themes. At the beginning we hear the good news that God loved the world, and that through faith in him we receive everlasting life. And at the end of the hymn, the story of salvation invites us to join in singing to the praise and glory of God, much as we might do once again on the day of Resurrection when we celebrate the end of our Lenten journey.

God of grace and glory, let our songs and imaginations raise to sing your praises for your love you have shown to all your creation in the gift of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God Loved the World

Monday, February 27

Genesis 12:1-4a

The scripture texts this week attest "God Loved the World," and the good news starts in Genesis when the Lord chose Abram. Yet, as Martin Luther noted, Abram (Abraham) was no plaster saint, an idolater who made a mess with his family, lied to Pharaoh about his wife, then fathered Ishmael with their servant Hagar.

But God has a mission: "I will bless you." You have a commission: "So that you will be a blessing." God loves you first, and that's just the beginning. Working through mere mortals, like you, God intends to bless the world and all its peoples. Named and claimed in the water and word of baptism, you were called and sent to "bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world."

So what will happen today, O child of God? How will God's blessing work in you to love those close to you and care for strangers, even those who curse you, and to bless God's creation?

You have blessed me, Lord God, with life, with relationships, with opportunities to be a blessing in the world you so love. Open my eyes and warm my heart to extend your blessing in all I am and do this day in the light and love of Christ Jesus. Amen.

God Loved the World

Tuesday, February 28

Psalm 121

It's God's grit in the soul. In a world of trouble, the Black preacher calls, "God is good!" The people declare, "All the time!" Then the people call, "All the time." And the preacher echoes, "God is good!"

Psalm 121 is a declaration of faith, a recitation of trust in God, no matter what. This is divine assurance, not trivial optimism. The question is real, "From where will my help come?" The ground under the nation may be quaking. The voices of violence threaten by day and by night. Are the leaders of our communities sleeping? Is anyone watching over us?

When our daughter sends her children off in the morning with a hug, she makes the sign of the cross on their foreheads. God's care goes with them. And with you too! Dangers come, and losses. But God is good, all the time. As the apostle attests, nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:31–39).

Lord Jesus, be with me today, and with those I love, and with all who need your care. Today I am especially aware of _____ in your world. May we embody the love of the Lord who made heaven and earth. In your holy name, Amen.

God Loved the World

Wednesday, March 1

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

In the 16th-century Reformation, salvation by grace through faith was revealed anew through Paul's letter to "God's beloved in Rome," liberating believers from bondage to the medieval church's penitential systems. In the first century, the Apostle Paul was contending for the full inclusion of all who trust God's promise, including, but reaching beyond, those who observed Jewish rituals of circumcision and dietary practices. We mortals are forever tempted to point to markers of our "righteousness," proofs of our good standing before God and the world: long life, financial wealth, high-performing families, public recognition, etc., the stuff of well-crafted obituaries. "There's no righteousness like self-righteousness," sad and exhausting as it is.

Living in Christ Jesus is liberation. Beloved of God, you don't need to prove you are worthy. You are free to join God's care for the neighbor and the world, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Live in joy, loving those God sends to you, today!

Fill my life with your love, Lord Jesus, to trust I am beloved of God without proving myself and to share this gracious love with everyone I meet today in God's world. Amen.

God Loved the World

Thursday, March 2

John 3:1-17

In these next four days, we will be like Super Bowl fans holding up signs announcing "John 3:16!" We carry God's word with its promise of eternal life in our earthly lives. Children sing the faith, while learned theologians can never fully grasp its depth (see the lovely, clear witness of Professor Craig Koester, "The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel," Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008).

We begin with Nicodemus. As a "leader of the Jews," he belongs with our seminary grads and teachers of communities of faith. He shows up later to argue that Jesus should not be condemned without first being heard (7:45–52) and then with Joseph of Arimathea to claim Jesus' body at his death (19:38–42). Here Jesus is teaching him (and us!) about being "born from above," flesh and blood mortals who are "born of the Spirit." With Nicodemus, we wonder, "How can these things be?"

O Lord God, we come, often in secret or by night. We yearn to understand your ways, to trust your love. How can these things be? Help us, like Nicodemus, to follow Jesus, until we see him lifted up on the cross, and believe. Amen.

God Loved the World

Friday, March 3

John 3:1-17

Luther Seminary grads are educated to lead Christian communities “called and sent to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and serve in God’s world.” In John’s Gospel, salvation means life, eternal life, life in God’s kingdom, abundant life, starting now and continuing in the resurrection. The joy is not in how mortals get into heaven, but in both the physical life God gave in creation and the life in the Spirit. Eternal life is given to us now and forever in relationship with God, the source of life. Jesus is God’s way of loving us, our communities of faith, and the world. For life.

This is God’s mystery: “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14). There is no way for us earthly humans to ascend to God’s spiritual realm. But with Nicodemus, we ponder the amazing truth. God so loved, God gave, and God sent Christ Jesus to us, for us, for the world.

Blessed are you, Lord God, creator of the universe. You have so loved the world in Christ Jesus to give light and life to us, your earthly children. Warm our hearts, illumine our minds, and empower us to live in your love, today and forever. Amen.

God Loved the World

Saturday, March 4

"God Loved the World" (ELW 323, Verse 1)

Today we sing! We have been meditating on the theme, "God Loved the World," while the children memorized John 3:16 and sang their hearts out, "Jesus Loves Me." The song sticks with us too, even when our memories are failing, and especially when we have lost our ways and in the face of injustice. The creation itself longs for God's care.

As we meditate and sing with God Pause people all over the world, who else is out there? How is God's love at work in your lives, in your communities, for the world? And God has prophets and apostles and agents of the love of Christ beyond our imaginations. Yet here we are, unlikely mortals, beloved, called and sent into God's mission of love. So together we sing the amazing truth, quietly into our souls and aloud for all to hear. It's the song of creation and new creation. God has loved the world and its peoples unto death and into life in Jesus.

Your love, O Lord, is the hope of the world, including us. Help us walk in the way, trust the truth, and live in the life of Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.

God Loved the World

Sunday, March 5

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (ELW 631, Verse 1)

- 1 Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heav'n, to earth come down!
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter ev'ry trembling heart.

Charles Wesley blessed us with this joyful hymn to Jesus, God's love dwelling with us, in us. Jesus' deeply personal bond with "ev'ry trembling heart" also empowered the Wesleys' prophetic engagement on behalf of workers in industrial England. In our time, with help from Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed Jesus' nonviolent "Strength to Love." Tender and personal, God's love is transformative for the world.

"God Loved the World" has been our theme this week. Christ Jesus comes to us, giving us life. And this "pure unbounded love" reaches through us for our families and our communities, for our neighbors and the world God so loves. God is just getting started, again today, with us.

This is Sunday, the Lord's Day, in the Christian week. May the love of God dwell with you today with "all compassion" in your new life in Christ Jesus and in the strength of God's care for the world and all its peoples.

Come, Lord Jesus, abide with us. Humble human dwelling that I am, help me come alive in the Spirit of your compassion and love for the world. Amen.

God Loved the World

Monday, March 6

Exodus 17:1–7

Today's reading returns us to a familiar memory. Recently escaped from Egyptian oppression, the promises of freedom and abundance that motivated the wilderness wanderers now cloud their imagination. Fatigue and thirst will do that. There is that moment in every journey when your inner child exercises uncontrollable honesty to scream "Are we there yet!" Not really a question, it is an announcement of frustration with those yet-to-be-fulfilled promises. The competing expectations and emotions are legitimate.

The season of Lent eventually exposes everyone's agony with delayed gratification. In these liminal moments, Scripture confirms God provides all our needs. Like a prepared parent revealing a secretly packed toy or downloaded video or queuing up a favorite song to occupy the next half hour, God knows where the water is along the dry side of a rocky mountain.

Oh, by the way, the last time this happened, at Marah, they were just one exit from a water oasis at Elim (Exodus 15).

God who provides, today we acknowledge the volume of our quarrels. Yet, we choose to focus on the promise still to come, because in this liminal moment, your spirit again reminds us both of your loving presence and that you never tire of quenching our daily thirsts. Amen.

God Loved the World

Tuesday, March 7

Psalm 95

Someone once said the true philosophers of our times are those who write poems and songs. Songs allow us to hold a simple melody in our imagination. And the words become our way of speaking our world. It seems the songs we sing from the ages of 16 to 25 remain our favorites—which explains my father's favorite singer, Nat King Cole. Today's reading is traditionally pulled straight from the playlist of Israel's favorite king, David. It seems God likes noise! In response to God's presence, greatness, creative handiwork, and loving care, the psalmist calls for singing. Remembering how quickly his ancestors forgot God's goodness, David poetically rehearses the rock of their salvation, who called forth the sea from dry land and sweet water from a bitter stream. When we recognize God's loving presence like that, we remember whose image we are created to bear in the world. God spoke and stuff happened. That's something to sing about.

Water-walking God, move us from the shadows of singing in the shower to the hills that are alive with the sound of music. Fill us so with your spirit that we sing when the Spirit says sing. Amen.

God Loved the World

Wednesday, March 8

Romans 5:1–11

I seek peace with God ... but my neighbor? Hmm.

Yes, Christ died for me. But everybody else? God's gift of restoring humanity to bear divine glory is so out of sync with what we deserve. We are the weak, ungodly enemies. Those doubting God's promises; those yielding to temptation and walking away from God; those in need of reconciliation. Wait, who are we? In this letter, we are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Language usually used to speak of the other—Gentiles—is here being used instead to speak of the people of God—Jews.

This is God's grace. The wanderers, burdened and thirsty, are found, relieved, and filled. This proves God's love for us. What God is doing in us, God is doing also in others. When we understand this, we have our own story to tell about God's love showing up in Jesus.

Reconciling God, help me to live out the truth that we who are reconciled in Christ to you are also reconciled to one another. Amen.

God Loved the World

Thursday, March 9

John 4:5–42

After explaining to Nicodemus, a known teacher, that God loves the world (John 3:16), Jesus had to go to some area that expanded the neighborhood (John 4:4). So, Samaria. There, Jesus shows an unnamed woman unconditional belonging—the kind of love that is only trustworthy when a person knows everything about you and then calls you their own. The thirsting of her soul was quenched when Jesus asked her to fill his cup.

We never learn this woman's name, but we do know she brought an entire community to faith in Christ. Her response is to invite everyone to come and see Jesus. The text doesn't say she composed arguments to prove that he was the Messiah he claimed to be. Apparently, she trusted God to do in others what God had done in her. She just told her story to her neighbors. May we, who have encountered Jesus, likewise show others the way to meet Jesus.

Thirst-quenching God, knowing it is in giving that we receive, we ask to be the answer to someone else's prayers. Let us tell our stories of encountering Jesus in ways that invite the whole neighborhood to seek you. Amen.

God Loved the World

Friday, March 10

John 4:5–42

She came seeking water, not Jesus. Whether she had heard of his ministry is not hinted. Only that she knew the promises of Israel's Scripture—its hearing set in the centuries-old conflict between communities at odds with one another over interpretations of the law and customs. Could this be the place where Jesus shows up?

It is in the places where we are most divided that God intrudes into our world. Among those who we should call our community. We are like the woman—after centuries of hearing the promises of God—sometimes forgetting whom we are seeking as we complete necessary tasks. Yet, her enthusiastic introduction to Jesus changed an entire city. The end of the Gospel of John too will begin with the witness of a woman who came with watered eyes, seeking Jesus.

And her testimony to the Risen Lord confronts the betrayer, the doubter, the confused, and those who thirst for righteousness even today.

Resurrected Lord, intrude into our everyday moments in such a life-changing way that we might become those who speak of your yet-fulfilled promises with the confidence that reconciles communities. Amen.

God Loved the World

Saturday, March 11

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, Verse 2)

It has been said that the past is prologue. We can take this to suggest that when we begin something, we are preparing for the future. The Creator-God has been in the construction business a long time. Forming humanity from a lump of clay. Building a community from every nation, tongue, and tribe. Establishing a future where the riches from every nation bring glory to God. Not to be sold, traded, or stolen, but offered. There is healing there: the healing of racial division; the healing of economic classism; the healing of gendered sexism; the healing of the nations reconciled; the healing of hearts forgiven; the healing of the body no longer affected by handicap, injury, or disease. The tree of life is there. So there is life, and it is abundant.

All this is built on the solid rock, a firm foundation, and the cornerstone is Christ Jesus.

Creating God, by your Spirit, make us expectant for the future you are constructing, confident in the foundation of faith in Jesus, patient with ourselves and others in the meantime, and assured by your love that is made known to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

God Loved the World

Sunday, March 12

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, Verse 2)

Foundations can seem inconsequential. Once the structures are complete, we no longer see what they are built on. Our attention is captured by the splendor of what has been constructed. We are distracted by all that is now possible because the system is in place. But foundations do matter.

Surprisingly, the ground of our faith is a suffering servant, one who was despised and rejected. If someone is challenging your faith in Jesus, take heart. The reigning power does not come with military might, political posture, or cynical campaigns. Jesus' power outstrips that of any leader, past or present. However, this power came through emptying himself to become a servant, suffering a humiliating public execution. His communication team is a ragtag community of outcasts who choose to proclaim the promises of the creator God. This is something God alone has chosen to do in Jesus.

Creator God, plant my feet on the firm foundation that is Jesus Christ, crucified, the Risen One who demonstrates your love by quenching our thirsts with living water. Amen.

God Loved the World

Monday, March 13

1 Samuel 16:1–13

During this week's Lenten journey, we'll look for where God is loving us and the world. Today, we find God loving David, Jesse's youngest son, who was serving in a lowly shepherd role. Without God's guidance, Samuel might not have recognized a shepherd as "king material." Like Samuel, do we judge by appearances? For example, our communities are enriched because people across diversity's continuums—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, abilities, and more—serve capably in many roles. Nevertheless, folks tragically imply some people "don't look the part." However, today's verses reveal that whether people are in lowly roles like shepherds or powerful positions like kings, God calls people to serve based on what God sees on their hearts (16:7). During our Lenten journeys, let's look beyond appearances and, instead, let's look on people's hearts as God does. That's where we can find God loving us and the world.

All-seeing God, forgive us when we wrongfully judge people by their appearances or statuses. Help us look on all of your children's hearts and love them just as you love them. Amen.

God Loved the World

Tuesday, March 14

Psalm 23

When you reflect on your life during Lent, do you focus on your times of greatest struggles? I do. As you think back, do you recall feeling God's steadfast guidance and protection in fearful situations? We're comforted when we remember God's love endured in our lives—as well as in the world—throughout periods of desperation and devastation. During difficult times, we often turn to Psalm 23 for reassurance. But what about when things are going well or even great? Psalm 23 also reminds us to look for God's love in our lives and the world in satisfying situations. Then, God lovingly restores and maintains us with much-needed rest, green pastures' sustenance, and life-giving waters. During our Lenten journeys, let's look for God's presence with us in times of desperation and devastation, as well as of satisfaction and restoration. That's where we can find God loving us and the world.

Shepherding God, we're grateful that you share your steadfast love with us and the world during times of devastation and times of restoration. Help us to share your love with all people. Amen.

God Loved the World

Wednesday, March 15

Ephesians 5:8–14

In these weeks of my Lenten journey, I welcome increasing hours of sunlight. Yet even as I enjoy more physical light, I hide—all or in part—within the shadows of shameful remorse. Do you also sometimes harbor sinful thoughts, words, and deeds that you regret having done or even continue to do? We know these secrets aren't the fruit of "all that is good and right and true" (5:9). Thankfully, we need not remain lost in these shadows. God, in steadfast love for us and the world, beckons us to repent and escape from the shadows. God calls us to enter into the light that Christ readily shines for us; there, we'll experience God's forgiveness, grace, and abundant love. During our Lenten journeys, let's look for God's call to fruitful service in Christ's revealing light of love. That's where we can find God loving us and the world.

God of light, forgive our sinful thoughts and actions, which we attempt to hide in the shadows. Thank you for calling us into Christ's light of your love for us and for all the world. Amen.

God Loved the World

Thursday, March 16

John 9

During Lent, I contemplate my abilities and disabilities. We all have inabilities that we or other people recognize. Today's verses explore sight: a man's physical disability of blindness, and religious leaders' spiritual disability of not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. Have you noticed folks excluding people with disabilities? Perhaps they even imply sinfulness causes these conditions. Jesus said sin didn't cause the man's disability of blindness, and he used this circumstance to reveal God's loving works. Jesus saw, included, touched, and gave sight to the man. Later, Jesus reconnected with him. The man now could see physically and spiritually—he proclaimed his belief and worshiped Jesus! In contrast, the leaders remained blind to Jesus' Messiahship. During our Lenten journeys, let's look for God's love where inclusion and healing are needed, as well as where well-being and belief have grown. That's where we can find God loving us and the world.

Healing God, we recognize that we and the world are broken and disabled in several ways that need your healing. Thank you for your abiding love, which includes us and heals us. Amen.

God Loved the World

Friday, March 17

John 9

Lent is an opportunity to examine whether our communities treat people as “outsiders” or “insiders.” In these verses, neighbors identified the man who was blind as a beggar—an outsider. Yet he and his parents were Jewish community insiders. When leaders questioned the man about receiving sight, his proclamation about his experience grew bolder until they drove him from the synagogue. Now an outsider, Jesus found him again. And today we remember another outsider, St. Patrick. Kidnapped to Ireland, he survived by faith as an enslaved outsider. St. Patrick escaped and became a priest—a church insider. He returned to Ireland and boldly proclaimed God’s love, despite opposition from leaders. St. Patrick and the man Jesus healed experienced God’s love as outsiders and insiders. During our Lenten journeys, let’s look for God’s love among people regarded as outsiders or insiders. That’s where we can find God loving us and the world.

Inclusive God, you come to us in love, whether our communities treat us as outsiders or as insiders. Guide us to love all of your children as the insiders they are in your family. Amen.

God Loved the World

Saturday, March 18

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, Verse 3)

Verse three of our Lenten hymn, “God Loved the World,” considers physical death. But Lent is also a time we can put to death our often-hidden sins. However, breaking free from old ways is frightening to me because what’s familiar—even if it’s harmful and unjust—seems easier and safer. Be reassured, God loves us despite our sinfulness. Nevertheless, God loves us so much that God doesn’t abandon us in our dead-end plights. God calls us from sin’s shadows and leads us into Jesus’ light. Then, God abides with us in the light. There, God surrounds us with love as we face whatever’s intimidating, unfamiliar, and reprioritized within our newly re-created, fruitful, and righteous lives. During our Lenten journeys, let’s look for God’s love as it meets us in our old, sinful ways and leads us into new, righteous lives. That’s where we can find God loving us and the world.

Abiding God, thank you for loving us as we are, despite our faults and sinfulness. Give us the courage to follow you into Jesus’ light to undertake new lives that are fruitful and just. Amen.

God Loved the World

Sunday, March 19

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, Verse 3)

We conclude this week’s part of our Lenten journey by recalling illnesses and anticipating death. Have you experienced God’s love upholding you during sickness and then healing you? Nevertheless, we know we won’t always recover; death will come to us. Today, on St. Joseph’s Day, some Christians recognize that death is a sacred part of life. Joseph, the husband of Mary, Jesus’ mother, is deemed the model of a “happy death”—a believer who received grace as he died in loved ones’ arms. We also trust God’s grace and love will hold us as we die. We anticipate God’s steadfast love will transcend earth’s boundaries and transport us into eternal life. During our Lenten journeys, let’s look for God’s love as it upholds us during illness, and let’s anticipate God’s love will carry us into eternity to abide with us there forever. That’s where we can find God loving us and the world.

Eternal God, please lovingly abide with us throughout our illnesses, deaths, and into eternity. Thank you for your steadfast, abundant love that you give to us and to the world. Amen.

God Loved the World

Monday, March 20

Ezekiel 37:1-14

I have always had a hard time throwing things out, especially when it comes to wood scraps. If there's an 8-inch piece of trim board left, chances are I'll put it in the garage for "when it's needed." But if I'm honest, I rarely go back to those leftover scraps. I've admired artists (like George Morrison, Grand Portage, Minnesota, Anishinaabe artist, who made [paintings out of wood](#), or [John Beaver](#), scrap metal sculptor in Camrose, Alberta) who take bits and pieces and make something beautiful out of them.

God our Creator is an artist, who takes the ultimate scraps—the bones of the whole house of Israel—and shapes them into "a vast multitude" that stands on its own after being cut off completely. Beyond any human artist, God the Creator breathes life into the bones and brings them back to life.

God of the scraps, we praise you for creating beauty out of the leftover parts of our lives. Thank you for breathing life into our scraps so that we, and the whole creation, may be revived. Amen.

God Loved the World

Tuesday, March 21

Psalm 130

The Common English Bible (CEB) translates the opening line as, "From the depths, LORD." This cry "from the depths" comes even before we can say, "Why?" It's the moment when the life of your beloved has ended, when a relationship has disintegrated, when an accusation has stuck, and we know there isn't a way to avoid the pain. And as we sit with the pain, express our frustration, tentatively reach out to those around us for support, somehow a trace of hope glides in unexpectedly, and our attention turns completely to God in hope. "My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise." The psalm writer takes a step toward God because God is the place where we find faithful love and great redemption (CEB). Not restoration of what was lost or a return to how things should have been, but to a future worth living for.

God of our hope, you are there in our lives even when the worst has happened. Help us to feel your embrace in the painful moments and to recognize your presence as you guide us into a hope-filled future. Amen.

Wednesday, March 22

Romans 8:6–11

Did you know that if you place one end of a 12-inch birch log in dishwashing liquid and then blow on the other end, your breath can make bubbles on the soapy end? Just like that birch log, we can conduct the breath of God through our work and our everyday life. “People who are self-centered aren’t able to please God. But you aren’t self-centered. Instead, you are in the Spirit” (Romans 8:8–9, CEB).

It’s a great reminder to comprehend that being “in the Spirit” can simply mean being open so that God’s Spirit can flow through us. It gives us the freedom to be generous with our lives, our time, our money. This passage promises that when we let the Spirit guide our lives, “the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you” (Romans 8:11, CEB). We don’t have to supply all the effort—God will provide.

God of generosity, you gave us everything we need, and in you we find our greatest satisfaction. Be with us as we worry about how and what we are doing, and remind us that you are there, animating our lives with your breath of life. Amen.

God Loved the World

Thursday, March 23

John 11:1–45

Have you ever unloaded on a friend or family member when you felt isolated or ignored? Or have you been the person on the receiving end of such disappointment?

Lazarus' story stands out to me because both Martha and Mary express their disappointment directly to Jesus. Both of them say the exact same sentence, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Their grief has shorn them of niceties or deflections—they want Jesus to experience the full weight of their pain and bitterness at being ignored.

Jesus does not deny that he was late in arriving, nor does he offer excuses. But he goes to the tomb where Lazarus is laid, wades into their sorrow, and weeps with them. Jesus responds to his friends' disappointment with compassion and action. Jesus binds up Martha's and Mary's broken hearts and reunites them with their brother.

God of our consolation, you know our deep disappointments and you receive us with grace and open arms. Give us the courage to drop our guard and let you enter into our lives with words of comfort. Amen.

God Loved the World

Friday, March 24

John 11:1–45

Another part of the story of Lazarus that surprises me is the way that Jesus sounds like a know-it-all. His initial response to the message from the sisters seems abrupt, and even the way he responds to Martha upon arriving after Lazarus' death sounds uncaring: "Your brother will rise again."

But when I read this story as part of the same Gospel that opens with "In the beginning was the Word..." it makes more sense. In this Gospel, Jesus is the embodied Word, and his words display his divinity. The words of Ezekiel come to mind: "You shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act" (Ezekiel 37:14). Jesus displays the power of God, as the One who speaks and acts to save us. Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out!" and we witness God's saving action once more.

God of action, come into our lives and speak a word of new life. Assure us that you are present in times of trouble and that you will bring a word of healing and deliverance to our struggles and loss. Amen.

God Loved the World

Saturday, March 25

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, Verse 4)

“Be of good cheer,” says the hymn writer. That may sound hollow in times like these. So many things get in the way of our “good cheer”; sometimes even faith communities snuff out the spark of life by being too strict in worship. I remember that as a new parent, accompanying wiggly young ones in worship, I was surprised by my unimaginative response: “Would you just sit still and be quiet?”

But the “good cheer” that the hymn writer proclaims may speak to an even deeper issue—our need for rescue. It’s not about how we behave in worship. It’s not even about naming all of our sins. God is present, and God comes to rescue us in our time of need. The gospel song “[Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet](#)”—sung by an unnamed Londoner and made famous by Gavin Bryars—concludes: “There’s one thing I know, that he loves me so.”

God of rescue, we have problems that we cannot solve on our own. Stay with us through the difficult times and help us to know that you are there right beside us, holding us up in a loving embrace. Amen.

God Loved the World

Sunday, March 26

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, Verse 4)

Numerous products on the market are designed to protect our identity. Yet even if we find a way to keep our identifying numbers and documents secure, those services can't assure us of who we are.

Baptism is better than any identity protection service. It gives more than privacy—it grants identity, our true identity as a beloved member of God's family. The particulars of the baptismal ceremony may vary across Christian traditions, but its intent is the same: to mark each baptized person as part of God's family, and to seal that identity in a way that cannot be taken away.

That's the good news that we proclaim in verse four of the hymn “God So Loved the World”: “Baptism grants the highest good.” Better than any score, any membership, any honor, it assures us that no matter where we go or what happens to us, we have a home in Christ.

God of our baptism, you claim us as your own each day through water and the Spirit. Strengthen us on days when we forget that through baptism, you claim us as your own. Amen.

God Loved the World

Monday, March 27

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Have you ever been part of a crowd that spontaneously burst into applause or cheers? How did that feel? What sparked the moment? The home team wins in the last moments of the game. The orchestra flawlessly performs a piece with great passion. The hero overcomes the conflict in the movie. Can you hear the crowd go wild?

This week we come to the end of the Lenten journey. Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem and the crowds erupt in celebration with the words of Psalm 118. "Give thanks to the Lord!" "Hosanna (save us)!" "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" "God's steadfast love endures forever."

The Hebrew people sang this song when their king returned to Jerusalem in victory. The king had inspired hope and joy in them. Their trust in God's steadfast love was rekindled. What might inspire these words in you this week?

O great King, we give you thanks for this day that you have made. Let us rejoice in your steadfast love. Amen.

God Loved the World

Tuesday, March 28

Matthew 21:1–11

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowd erupted with praise in the words of Psalm 118. These were the words the Hebrew people had sung for centuries as they remembered the days when their king would return victorious from battle. Yet, something was strange about this picture. Jesus rode on a donkey. Everyone knew that a mighty king who was victorious in battle would ride on a horse.

Perhaps there was a similar scene happening on the other side of Jerusalem. Perhaps Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, was riding on a horse, flanked by soldiers, proclaiming to the people that Caesar would maintain peace in their land.

Jesus rode a donkey, flanked by fishermen, tax collectors, women, children, and the lost sheep of Israel. Was this the king they hoped for? Was this the one who would save them? What do you envision when you cry out, "God, save us?"

O God, give us eyes to see your vision of peace. Give us courage to follow you as you ride a donkey and lead the poor and lowly. Amen.

God Loved the World

Wednesday, March 29

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Crowds are fickle. One minute the leader is the hero and everyone is waving palm branches, singing their praises, and hitting “like” on their posts. The next minute the shouts are canceled. Only crickets remain.

Jesus felt that shift this week. Things began with the accolades of the crowd. They welcomed Jesus as the one who would save them. What did they expect of him? Did they want Jesus to storm Pilate’s palace, drag him out, slaughter his troops, and establish himself as the rightful king? Did they want Roman blood to fill the streets? If so, they were profoundly disappointed.

Jesus must have felt these words of Isaiah as the crowd turned their backs on him. Yet, he knew that it was not the crowds in whom he put his trust. Perhaps he thought with Isaiah: “It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?” (Isaiah 50:9).

O God, help us to filter out the noise of the crowd. Give us ears to hear your voice and trust in your steadfast love. Amen.

God Loved the World

Thursday, March 30

Psalm 31:9–16

It is a painful moment when friends turn on you. I've been through this type of pain in my ministry experience. My wife and I, along with a core of leaders, had spent a few years planting a new ministry. It experienced great growth and vitality for a season. Then something shifted. Factions rose against me and publicly denounced me. They left the church, and everything crumbled. The words of Psalm 31:13 rang in my ear: "For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life."

Jesus must have prayed these words as the crowd abandoned him, his friends conspired against him, and the end loomed on the horizon. Yet, this phrase rings throughout all our readings this week, "Save me in your steadfast love."

Crowds come and go. Public opinion ebbs and flows. God's unconditional and faithful love remains.

O God, ground us in your steadfast love. Give us ears for you, and filters for those who seek our harm and the harm of those you seek to protect who cannot protect themselves. Amen.

God Loved the World

Friday, March 31

Philippians 2:5–11

Suffering, pain, and loss are not usually popular themes in most dominant societies. “Successful” people, or “good” people, don’t suffer, are not in pain, and definitely do not lose.

Jesus didn’t agree. The apostle Paul knew this. That is why he could challenge his friends in Philippi (and us) to “let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus.” What mind did Jesus have? He emptied himself. He humbled himself. He let his enemies mock him, beat him, and kill him. He. Lost. Everything.

Don’t be fooled by the next words, which assert how God has “exalted” Jesus. Don’t think this is another version of “success” and “goodness” based on “everything goes my way.” Jesus’ exaltation WAS his suffering, pain, and loss. His extended arms on the cross made room for everyone—especially those who experience suffering, pain, and loss—to know that they are part of God’s kingdom, along with everyone else.

O God, let the mind of Christ be in us. Let us open our hearts and minds and lives to all those whom you love, that all may proclaim that God’s love is found in Christ. Amen.

God Loved the World

Saturday, April 1

“God Loved the World” (ELW 323, Verse 5)

As Lent draws to a close and we enter the passion week, we are invited to dwell in suffering, pain, and loss. We are invited to grieve along with Jesus.

But how do you reflect on your suffering, pain, and loss? Hear this, beloved one. It is not God's desire for you to suffer and experience loss. God didn't "do it" to you, or "allow it to happen for a greater good." It just happened. Bad things happen—to everybody—all the time.

And in the face of that, here is the hope and here is the promise. No matter how bad things might get, God is with you. The words of this hymn reflect on the radical theology that God suffers with you. Jesus took on the violence of the oppressor. He stands in solidarity with all who suffer violence, pain, and loss. He exposes the violence for the evil that it is and extends love to you regardless. God's steadfast love endures.

O God, give us grace to lament deeply the pain we bear. Give us courage to share it with trusted loved ones and to trust in your steadfast love. Amen.

God Loved the World

Sunday, April 2

"God Loved the World" (ELW 323, Verse 5)

Palm Sunday has arrived. We have ridden the volatile rollercoaster of Jesus' week. He began with the roar of the adoring crowd. He ended with the whispers of traitors and shouts of executioners.

Many worship services will lift up both of these emotional realities today. Many services will begin with a parade of children waving palm branches, singing "Hosanna," and end with a reader's theater shouting "Crucify Him!"

As human beings, we often swing through this full spectrum on a daily basis. Our love is often fickle, flimsy, and faltering. With God it is not so. Focus your attention on the final stanza of our hymn. It celebrates the essence of God. As Christians, we worship the God whose essence is Three Persons interdependently connected in love:

Abba–Jesus–Comforter.
Father–Son–Holy Spirit.
Mother–Child–Breath.
Creator–Redeemer–Sustainer.
Lover–Beloved–Love.

Crowds are fickle. Our love is flimsy. God's steadfast love endures forever.
Thanks be to God!

Blessed Trinity–Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer–draw us up within your flow of love today. May we be so filled with your love that we are able to bear our grief and trust in your faithfulness. Amen.

God Loved the World

Monday, April 3

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10), 11-14

The Exodus story narrates the struggle between the Lord and Pharaoh concerning to whom the people of Israel would belong. Would they belong to Pharaoh, the false human lord who enslaves and imposes hard labor? The god of death? Or would they belong to the Lord, the true divine being who frees and saves? The struggle was long; it was life and death. In the end, "death" is exactly what it took for the Lord to free the people and claim them as his own. At the Passover, the Lord sent the angel of death to claim the firstborn of every family, both human and animal. Death passed over the homes in which the blood of the lamb had been painted on the doorposts and lintels. The result was life, freedom, and a lasting relationship with the Lord. Centuries later, God's own firstborn Son, the true Passover lamb, died to secure new life for all.

Lord of life, from death you create life. Send forth your Spirit, to renew the face of the earth and grant us new life. Amen.

God Loved the World

Tuesday, April 4

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

In Psalm 116, a once-desperate seeker rejoices at the hoped-for-but-unexpected rescue received from the hand of the Lord. In ancient Israel, it was common for someone who had experienced divinely delivered liberation to throw a party in thanksgiving. The psalmist says, "What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation." More than 40 years ago—a biblical number—I was first diagnosed with cancer. Over the next three years, I lost every battle with cancer but somehow won the war. Now, every 10 years, I throw a party with family and close friends in thanksgiving to God for the rescue I received. We lift up the cup of salvation. In Holy Communion, the church sips from a cup that is a foretaste of the eternal feast to come. We lift up the cup of salvation in Jesus.

Dear Lord Jesus, with what shall we come before you? We lift up the cup of salvation and call upon your holy name. Amen.

Wednesday, April 5

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

What is it that Christians do when they celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion? At its worst, the church has fought inelegant theological wars over this simple question. Sometimes those theological wars have led to real wars. The tragic irony! 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 is one of the few places Paul narrates a scene from Jesus' life. Paul emphasizes that the truths about the Lord's Supper had been passed down to him from the Lord and that he in turn was passing them on to the church at Corinth. The surprise comes at the end of Paul's narration of the Last Supper: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The silent action of receiving the bread and the wine is actually a proclamation! The proclamation that in Christ's death, God meets us with new life.

Gracious God, teach us to be silent as we eat and drink, so that the good news of Christ's death may be clearly heard in a noisy world of death. Amen.

God Loved the World

Thursday, April 6

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Maundy Thursday takes its name from the “new commandment” (mandate) that Jesus gave his disciples: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” The commandment to love one another was not a new commandment. Leviticus 19:18b states, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The new element in Jesus’ commandment comes in the words “as I have loved you, you should also love one another.” Jesus embodied his brand of love when he washed his disciples’ feet. Jesus took on the role of the servant, making his guests both welcome and clean. Jesus also embodied his brand of love in the way he died. As Paul wrote, “he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7–8).

O Servant Lord, wash us so that we might serve others. Forgive us so that we might love others as you have loved us. Amen.

God Loved the World

Friday, April 7

Good Friday

John 18:1–19:42

The Gospel of John narrates Christ's passion with details that draw out the profound ironies of Jesus' crucifixion. As Jesus is being tried in the courts of power and testifying openly, Peter is being "tried" in the courts outside, denying he is a disciple of Jesus. Jesus—the way, the truth, and the life—is condemned by Pilate who scoffs, "What is truth?" The crowds choose to have Pilate free the bandit Barabbas, whose name means "son of (the) father," rather than Jesus, who was the Son of God the Father. As Jesus—the living water who turned water into wine—dies, he thirsts and is offered sour wine. All of these ironies serve to highlight the great irony of the Christian gospel: The crucifixion of the Son of God is simultaneously humanity's ultimate rejection of a relationship with God and God's permanent embrace of a relationship with humanity.

Gracious God, come to us in our suffering, in our sin, in our brokenness. Give us hope, healing, forgiveness, and mercy. Amen.

God Loved the World

Saturday, April 8

"God Loved the World" (ELW 323)

Our theme hymn for Lent, "God Loved the World," is based on one of the two New Testament verses that in my judgment most aptly summarize the good news of Jesus Christ: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (The other such verse is 2 Corinthians 5:19, but that's another devotion.) The hymn starts with a poetic restating of John 3:16 and then alludes to the incarnation ("who was made flesh and suffered death"), to the atonement ("Christ rescues us from death"), and to justification ("justified by Jesus' blood"). Holy Saturday—the strange day that sits between the solemnity of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and the raucous joy of Easter—is a fitting day to contemplate the infinite good news that indwells the singular moment of Christ's death.

Blessed Christ, you came not to condemn, for we were already condemned. Shine forth with the forgiveness, light, love, and eternal life you have promised. Amen.

God Loved the World

Sunday, April 9

Easter

John 20:1–18

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! In Genesis 2, Adam was placed in a garden and given the vocation to be a gardener—to serve and protect the garden. We know how that went. In John 20, Mary Magdalene meets the resurrected Christ in a garden, where she supposes Jesus to be the gardener—which, of course, he is. The resurrected Christ is the new Adam, says Paul, the gardener that Adam was intended to be but wasn't—one who would serve and protect the creation from every evil. It was not until Jesus spoke Mary's name—"Mary!"—that she recognized him. By speaking her name, he restored the relationship she had with him. She then went and uttered the gospel for the first time: "I have seen the Lord!" Because Mary heard, because she saw, and because she uttered those words, blessed are all who have abundant life in Christ. Alleluia!

Risen Lord, tend and keep, serve and protect your creation. May the light and joy of Easter abide with us all year and may the hope of the resurrection spring eternal. Amen.

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God Loved the World

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