

## **Ash Wednesday, March 5th, 2025**

Welcome to the season of Lent. We will be providing you with a daily meditation that has been written by members of First Lutheran and Pastors Ellen Schoepf from Edgewood Lutheran, Mackenzie Jager from First Presbyterian, and Lisa VanLonkhuyzen from Covenant Church. What a joy it is to have all of these bright minds focus our attention on the Lenten journey, particularly as it is brought to us by the gospel writer, Luke! This is the year of Luke, the year when most of the gospel readings assigned for Sunday come from Luke. You will be given the opportunity to read from Luke 16-23 through these meditations. You can share them with others, if you desire.

Ash Wednesday is probably one of the favorite brutal days of the church year. It is a day that slaps us in the face with some ashes and says: "You aren't going to live forever. And what's more, while you live, you really aren't in charge." You are mortal. You are sometimes even brittle. You at all times are vulnerable.

Again, it's a brutal day. Who wants to hear this message? I suspect all of us. Down deep, we know we are vulnerable. But we like to pretend that we aren't. Life is much richer, much more meaningful, when we don't need to pretend anymore. Ash Wednesday gives us permission not to pretend. The slap of Ash Wednesday really is a slap of grace.

## **March 6th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 16:19-31

**Verse:** "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day and at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus..." (vs. 19, 20)

**Reflection:** The parable of the rich man and Lazarus begins with a drastic reversal of what happens after these two men die. In his lifetime, the anonymous rich man is dressed in purple attire made of fine linen - the color of royalty and high social status rich. The man eats as lavishly as he dresses. Lazarus, on the other hand, is camped outside the gate of the rich man's house. He is covered with seeping sores and hungry. After Lazarus' death, he is carried away to an honored place beside Abraham. By contrast, the rich man is in a place of torment and eternal punishment. A radical reversal for sure.

Jesus is always concerned with the poor, sick and marginalized. Wealth becomes concentrated within the top one to two percent of the population while masses live in poverty. The parable today attempts to raise the consciousness of the rich about poverty, compassion and social inequality. It also attempts to raise our consciousness, too.

Note the *poor* in this story has been given a name, Lazarus - *God has helped*. Naming this person humanizes him. He has been given an identity in the kingdom of God while the rich man remains anonymous. Whose name will we learn during these forty days?

**Prayer:** Gracious God, grant that we might see and act upon the injustice in the world.

*Paula Dusseljee is the Pastoral Assistant at First Lutheran Muskegon. You can often find her walking along the shores of Lake Michigan or enjoying time with friends.*

## March 7th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 17:1-6

**Verse:** “So watch yourselves. If someone sins, rebuke them, and if someone repents, forgive them.” (vs. 3)

**Reflection:** What is the key issue of Jesus’ words in Luke’s text today? Could it be sin, or perhaps faith? To me it appears to be about recognizing mercy. Jesus seems to be saying, “Hey, don’t fret over sin too much: it’s going to come, no matter what, so don’t be too hard on yourselves. But then comes the inevitable: “But hold on a minute, you do have some responsibility in the situation, so take heed to watch yourselves, so as not to be too hard on others either”. He then continues with the beautiful teaching of practicing endless forgiveness, as if saying “This is how you handle sin, how you stop the ravages of it, by showing mercy, over and over and over”.

How can we see faith increase? By following Jesus’ advice to watch for even the smallest moments of mercy showing up all over the place, all over creation and humanity.

**Prayer:** Lord, help us receive and share the mercy of forgiveness.

*Scott Gearhart is a retiree who lives in Michigan during the summer and in Florida during the winter. He is a member of First Lutheran and is a poet.*

## March 8th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 17:7-10

**Verse:** “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!’” (vs. 10)

**Reflection:** A word of caution: this passage is difficult to both read and understand because of the language that Jesus uses regarding slaves/slavery. Because these are short meditations however, I ask that you not take my silence on the issue as tacit approval of slavery. Slavery is not acceptable. Full-stop. What is your motivation for following Christ? This is the question that Christ asks his disciples in this passage. What is your motivation? What are you hoping to get out of this? What return on investment are you seeking? What are you hoping will tip the balance of the risk/reward analysis? If you’re following Christ, serving others, and making disciples so that you will receive rewards – an extra jewel in your crown in heaven, a larger room in the house of God, closer proximity to Jesus at the table of Plenty, then you’ll be sorely disappointed. You’ve missed the point. The posture of one who follows Jesus must be one of faithfulness and obedience to Christ because of what God has already done for us – not the expectation of a reward. So, what is your motivation for following Christ?

**Prayer:** Loving God, help us to follow Christ faithfully in service, not so that we might be rewarded or recognized, but simply because it is what you call us to do. In Christ we pray, Amen.

*Lisa VanLonkhuyzen is a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, and serves as Pastor at Covenant Community Church, R.C.A. in Muskegon Heights, MI. She’s been married to her husband, Bob, for 8.5 years, and they just moved to Muskegon in November of 2024.*

**March 9th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 17:11-19

**Reflection:** In this story, ten people get a miracle. Ten people are filled with joy and relief! Nine of them run off to tell their friends and family the good news, and only one sticks around to thank Jesus. I'd like to think that if I were there that day, I would have sung or danced or wrapped my arms around Jesus in a messy hug, but ... If I'm honest? I think I would have been a runner too. You see, the runners aren't ungrateful. They know exactly what Jesus has done for them! But their first reaction after receiving a miraculous healing is to go and tell their friends. That's often my first impulse too. When something terrible or wonderful happens, I whip out my phone to tell my friends all about it. We're meant to be witnesses to God's glory and power and goodness! Sharing the good news of what God had done for us is part of our Christian calling! But this story reminds us that there's something else we're meant to do first. Before we run and tell the good news, we need to worship.

**Prayer:** God of Miracles, use this season of Lent to focus our hearts, minds, and bodies on you. When something wonderful—or terrible happens—we want you to be our first thought. Amen.

*Mackenzie Jager is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Muskegon. She loves books so much that she can never commit to reading just one at a time. In between juggling all those novels, Mackenzie also enjoys writing, baking, and spending time with her friends. Lake Michigan is one of her favorite places in the world.*

**March 10th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 17:20-21

**Verse:** "The kingdom of God is among you." (vs 21)

**Reflection:** The kingdoms of this world thrive on the "facts on the ground," things that can be observed. For Jesus, the reign of God can be seen and experienced, but is not limited to that which can be observed. A woman is often defined by her appearance, smile, or hair. All are real, but her essence is not limited to any of those realities. In many ways, I think that truth is what is meant by the term "soul." We are more than what can be perceived by the eyes. There is a depth to us which cannot be captured by appearances. The reign of God is no ethereal or next world reality. In fact, it is among us. It is encountered in our gathering, our relating, our living. But there remains a mystery to the kingdom. We do well not to think we have it figured out. There is a slipperiness and unknown-ness to it, which makes sense, since it comes from God and not us.

**Prayer:** Open our eyes to see your reign among us and give us the grace to receive it, not always figure it out. A-men

*Bill Uetrict is the pastor of First Lutheran. He loves cycling and swimming and spending time with his ants-in-his-pants-and-much-loved grandson, Liam.*

## March 11th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 17:22-36

**Verse:** Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. (vs. 33)

**Reflection:** Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will face the cross and, as he teaches about the kingdom of God, he uses apocalyptic language to essentially say, “Wake up and seek what is really important, the stuff of God’s kingdom. Don’t be distracted by someone trying to get your attention in one misguided direction or another, the kingdom of God is in fact breaking in upon you. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.”

I continually find this to be the great paradox in life – that it is only in dying to self, emptying oneself of self, dying to the cult of self, and living to God where true, meaningful life is to be found. This is the path Jesus walked to the very end, giving himself fully into life and death, losing himself, all for the sake of **love** for this broken world. It was not love stored up but love utterly poured out that opened the gates to the Kingdom of God. This is what we are called to live.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, enable us to increasingly let go of self and live your love in relationship to all others. Amen.

*Ellen Schoepf is a part-time pastor at Edgewood Lutheran Church in Fruitport. She is married and treasures spending time with their kids and eight grandchildren.*

## March 12th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 18: 1-8

**Verse:** “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” (vs. 1)

**Reflection:** Praying always and not to lose heart. The two instructions seem to be woven together to provide a stronger fabric. Praying without a hopeful heart or wistfully having a heart of hope lacking purposeful prayer is not enough. Jesus instructed us to do both.

I wonder if this was the verse Nelson Mandela meditated on during his long imprisonment under apartheid in South Africa. Twenty-seven years of praying, holding onto a thin, fragile thread of hope, and resisting despair. More amazing, and a testament to the fierce power of prayer, was how he was transformed during those unjust years with a heart of forgiveness and peace. Surely, this is an example of “praying always and not losing heart.”

**Prayer:** Help me find that golden thread of hope, even when all seems unjust, and pray unceasingly with a heart of sacred hope. Amen

*Kelley Peel is a retired educator and counselor, wife, Mom, author of children’s books, and a wedding planner (their two kids’ weddings are within nine months of each other!) Nature and all it teaches is where her heart softens into peace.*

## March 13th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 18:9-14

**Verse:** "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (vs. 14)

**Reflection:** Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Imagine that you and I are sitting on a bench. We see these two going up to church to have a "heart-to-heart" talk with God.

Easily we know they each are different from the other. We know one is offering a list of good works to God. The other person offers a short list of confessions asking for mercy. This exercise of going up to speak to God is a calling for each of us no matter our agenda. Our Lord points out that the one who goes down to his house and his people has started this journey, accepting his need and knowing God responds in time from his vast store of good gifts.

In my 80 years, I have discovered that blessing is found in attending to the ups and downs. Blessing is being in places where we offer to God what is on our heart and accepting his responses to live and to love.

**Prayer:** Lord, of our best intentions and ups and downs, work with us wherever we go. Amen.

*Gary Hansen is a former pastor and bishop. The First Lutheran community gives him a place and a real dose of energy.*

## March 14th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 18: 15-17

**Verse:** "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (vs. 16)

**Reflection:** It was in the basement of the church where the *Father and Son* banquet was held. After the meal, the adults played a game called, Guess Who. Seated in a chair in front of all the fathers and sons was a blindfolded grownup. Standing behind him was an unidentified person. The blindfolded man tried to guess his name from clues offered in response to questions. Anyone in the room could offer a clue, including the man behind the chair, who disguised his voice. There was a lot of laughter. A six-year-old boy was eager to play.

Joel was seated then, blindfolded. Old Spice after-shave revealed his dad instantly. Joel was confused and anxious. He wanted to give the right answer - 'My Dad' or what others named him. Pressed with encouragement, he answered, "Wayne." Laughter erupted. Joel felt embarrassed. Dad tussled his hair, which made things right.

**Prayer:** Thank you, Lord, for gentleness.

*Joel Dulyea is a military retiree. He's been married to Merijo for fifty years. They have a daughter who gave them a granddaughter who calls Joel "Papa".*

## March 15th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 18:15-17

**Verse:** "People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it." (vs 15)

**Reflection:** Erin Hicks Moon refers to this passage as "The story of an expansive God compacting every bit of God's nature into a fragile, vulnerable infant." In this passage, we witness the disciples unwittingly acting as the gatekeepers for access to Jesus. The disciples practiced an adult faith of administration, prioritization, security concerns, and time constraints. This work was vital to Jesus's ministry. But Jesus is always rewriting our priorities. Jesus not only promotes the acceptance of infants, which we often discuss, but also the simple and radical child-like faith of the families who brought them, believing-- no, knowing-- that to be touched by God was more than sufficient blessing for their children. Infants cry in faith that their needs will be met. They do not worry about logistics. Jesus calls us to this simple practice of faith and trust in God's very nature.

**Prayer:** Lord, grow my faith by shrinking it down to its simplest form. Unburden me from the logistics and the hierarchies of this world and simply touch me.

*Catherine Tolley is a member of First Lutheran in Muskegon. She believes in the restorative power of God's love... and knitting.*

## March 16th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 18:31-34

**Verse:** "But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." (vs 34)

**Reflection:** Often, we don't get the deeper stuff. Sometimes it is because our intellects can't grasp things. Sometimes our emotions can't handle the pain. And sometimes we can't reconcile in our minds or our hearts how what is going on fits into some kind of understandable narrative. I suspect that this is what is occurring in our reading. How can pain and suffering fit into the God story and into the story we as disciples are living into in our relationship with Jesus? Our hearts and minds struggle to make sense of the craziness of it all.

The Lenten journey takes us into the land of craziness. Paul calls it the land of foolishness. Who would expect the cross to be at the heart of the story of God? Not the disciples. Probably not us. It's worth our while to sit with the oddity of the story we tell. We won't truly get it until we understand that we don't get it.

**Prayer:** Give us new understandings so that our hearts join yours.

*Bill Uetrict is the pastor of First Lutheran Church in Muskegon. He is privileged to serve with a wonderful group of folks at First, loving their energy, their openness, and their commitment to serve a hurting world.*

## March 17th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 18:35-43

**Verse:** “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me see again?” (vs. 41)

**Reflection:** We all suffer from some kind of blindness, and we are literally blind to our blindness, blind to our blind spots. It is hard for us to see or comprehend that we might be wrong. It is difficult to see our own biases and errors as we live in relationship to others, to the world around us, and within the community.

While not always successful, I try to remember this in my own life and ask myself where I think I could be wrong. I try to be aware of instances where I am deliberately creating blind spots in my life.

This is one reason why we need weekly worship within the community of faith. When we gather for worship, we often begin with Confession and Forgiveness and we sing the words of the blind man, “Lord, have mercy on me; Christ, have mercy on me; Lord, have mercy on me.” We ask for Christ’s presence to wash over us, cleanse us and open our eyes, our hearts, and minds, so we can again see how deeply God loves us and see how deeply God loves **all** others.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, open our eyes so we can see, see when we might be wrong, see your image in **all** others, and more deeply share your love with **all** others. Amen.

*Ellen Schoepf is a part-time pastor at Edgewood Lutheran Church in Fruitport. She is married and treasures spending time with their kids and eight grandchildren.*

## March 18th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 19:1-10

**Verse:** “He was trying to see who Jesus was...(vs. 3)

**Reflection:** The Ten Commandments, 613 laws in the Torah, AND Jesus accepted a corrupt, curious man?! I can understand the frustration and outrage from the crowd, who had clearly followed more of those laws than Zacchaeus, absurdly perched in a tree!

As children, we sang a cute, heartwarming song about Zacchaeus. Who cared about taxes?! This guy climbed a tree wearing long clothes and sandals! Yep, he’s one of us!

Curiosity is a child’s game—yet Jesus invites us, non-climbing adults, to embrace it. Curiosity requires us to loosen our grip on good vs bad, right vs wrong, in vs out, and so on.

Curiosity does require a bit of knowledge on the subject though, because we’re rarely curious about subjects we know absolutely nothing about. Ironically, having expert-level knowledge can become a barrier to curiosity.

Finally, I believe Jesus is asking us to adopt a childlike, beginner’s open mind—one willing to do anything, even climb a tree, and be open to new ways of thinking and being.

## **March 18<sup>th</sup> cont.**

Curiosity: lacking certainty, having cursory knowledge, and maintaining an open, childlike mind of wonder. Curiosity was Zacchaeus's ticket price for acceptance. There was no need to be flawless— **just curious.**

**Prayer:** Jesus, please lift the veil on my “certain” thoughts. Spark curiosity within me, and help my mind rediscover the joy in Your stories, as I did as a child.

*Kelley Peel is a retired educator & counselor. Wife, Mom, author of children's books, & wedding planner - (their two kids' weddings are within nine months of each other). Nature and all it teaches is where her heart softens into peace.*

## **March 19th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 19:28-40

**Verse:** As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen. (vs 37)

**Reflection:** As Jesus was now approaching the path down from the mountain, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen.

Imagine that you and I are along the parade route. We see a confusing sight. The one called Jesus is riding on a donkey and people are going crazy.

You and I look at each other and wonder if we too belong in the parade.

We too remember all the times when things seemed dark, different, and almost impossible. In these times we too sensed the power and guidance that could only come from God. We too knew that the deeds of power were not our doing. We too knew the by-product of being on this mission was joy and forgiveness.

During Lent, we can know that at the cross, and before and after, God works for good.

**Prayer:** Lord, in our times of being spectators, and times of being in the parade, let us keep our eyes on YOU! Amen.

*Gary Hansen is a former pastor and bishop. He gives thanks for being in West Michigan. His nine grandchildren and three great grandchildren are a joy!*



## March 20th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 19:41-44

**Verse:** And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (vs. 42)

**Reflection:** My heart hurts for Jesus when I read this verse. He had entered the city of Jerusalem accompanied by a multitude of disciples laden with great expectations praising God and saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord..." It was a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Some Pharisees called for the teacher to silence his disciples, to which Jesus answered, "If they were silent, the stones would shout out." Did the praise stop when Jesus wept over the city? Were the disciples confused? Jesus said, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." From a disciple's perspective it seems the city (we) has (have) broken Jesus' heart with expectations that blind us from the things that make for peace.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, help us recognize and walk the way of peace, especially within our homes.

*Joel Dulyea has been married to Merijo for fifty years. They have a daughter, who gave them a granddaughter with their son-in-law's help.*

## March 21st, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 19:45-48

**Verse:** Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there, and he said, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard. (vs. 45-46)

**Reflection:** Luke's account of Jesus taking action leaves us with a paradox: was Jesus a teacher, an activist, or both? In following His example, how do we discern the time to act against insults to God's kingdom? Luke tells us the people were spellbound by what they heard, not by the action of driving out of the merchants. As we read on, a deeper lesson of obedience emerges. Jesus was likely aware the leaders of the temple were looking for a way to kill him. How did he respond? Fully human and fully God, He obeyed His mission and kept teaching. In this and other passages, Jesus persists in living, acting, and speaking the truth even though it sets Him on a collision course with His enemies. Whether speaking or acting, our call is to obedience, which is fidelity to the truth of God's kingdom.

**Prayer:** God, grant me the courage to speak and act out of the radical love that is your kingdom.

*Catherine Tolley is a member of First Lutheran in Muskegon. She believes in the restorative power of God's love... and knitting.*

## March 22nd, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 20:1-8

**Verse:** "And they (the leaders) spoke, saying to Him, "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?" (vs. 2)

**Reflection:** Just like the spiritual leaders of Israel we ourselves often do not see Jesus for what he was and should be in our lives. Yes, the Word proclaims his full authority and once or more we have through the sacraments acknowledged that power, but in the end, we often do not truly see the depth of His calling for our lives---a depth that reaches back through John the Baptist to the prophetic words found in Malachi 3:1.

So, the text asks us to answer the question Jesus poses. Will we be like Peter and respond in what we do with the words, "You are the Christ" of my life with full authority from heaven? Or will we too walk away from the Biblical record, a record that anticipates and underscores Jesus' full authority on earth and in heaven. Will we walk away or live each day living with him?

**Prayer:** In this Lenten season and always, God, we acknowledge your authority in our lives. In our hopes, our dreams, and our actions, may we seek your forgiveness and joy.

*Donn Werling is an interpreter of heritage by training, a composer by inspiration, married to Diane, parents and grandparents of Ben, Amy, Simon and Grace and a sinner who works to find joy and forgiveness in all the seasons of life and church year.*

## March 23rd, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 20:9-19

**Verse:** "He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

**Reflection:** Jesus was in the temple for the last time. He was gaining in popularity which became a concern of the temple leaders. They sent people to demean Jesus' character by asking trick questions. It did not work. They then began to plot Jesus' death. Jesus told a parable about tenants in a vineyard. When the time came to collect the owner's share, the tenants rejected the owner's representatives. Finally, the owner sent his son and the tenants killed the son. The owner of the vineyard pronounced serious consequences upon those tenants.

In this parable, Jesus said, when the former prophets were rejected, there were consequences. He was addressing the temple leadership and what they had done, and they knew it.

What about you and me? Does acknowledging Jesus' matter? Is our Lord just another choice in life like choosing toothpaste? Lent is a time for hard questions, like "Who do you say that I am?"

As was the case with the temple leaders then, there are those now who would try to demean Jesus' teachings. Jesus words build a better life, a better world, and support for our lives. There are consequences from whom we follow or admire.

### **March 23<sup>rd</sup> cont.**

**Prayer:** You are my creator. Help my decisions to be favorable in your sight.

*John Jack is 81 years old, married to Annette, and they have four grown children, and three grandchildren. He enjoys reading and learning new information. The church and related organizations have been major part of his whole life.*

### **March 24th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 20:20-26

**Verse:** "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (vs. 22)

**Reflection:** Jesus' opponents obviously are trying to trick him. Whose side are you really on, they want to know? His response leaves us perplexed. For sure, this is not a Biblical justification for the separation of church and state. That is a modern imposition on an ancient text. Jesus or no ancient Jew would split life up in that way. His claim that we are to give to God what is God's is intriguing. For ancient Jews, what wouldn't be God's? I suspect nothing. Paying taxes is probably a good idea. It's how we support our common life. But we shouldn't conclude that we allow Caesar to run our lives. Caesar takes himself entirely too seriously, as do most of the kings or presidents of the world. We should never conclude that we are to bow down to them or not question what they are doing. After all, the world belongs to God, not Caesar.

**Prayer:** Help us discover what it means to be faithful primarily to you.

*Bill Uetrict is the pastor of First Lutheran. He loves to write, teach, preach, care for people, swim, and cycle. He is living these days within the tension of the call to proclaim the truth and the call to love and care for people.*

### **March 25, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 20: 27-40

**Reflection:** What do you do when you are confronted with a small idea?

In today's lesson we have Jesus confronted by the Sadducees with what they think is a tricky question. Instead, it just shows how small minded their thinking is about the Resurrection. God has great plans for his children. Earthly things will be no longer needed in the age to come. Can you even imagine what that would look like? Feel like? No more need to wash dishes, do the laundry, fill the gas tank, put dinner on the table. Sounds good to me! I do think there might be a bit more to that idea. I can't even begin to wrap my mind around it. Big ideas, new ideas, just plain different ideas can be scary. We have no need to fear what the new age will bring us. God will provide for his children.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Creator, stir up in us the confidence to face new ideas with an open mind. Amen

*Rhonda Lee Sweet: Wife, Parent, Creator*

## March 26th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 20:45-47

**Verse:** Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.

**Reflection:** Perhaps it's because Pastor Bill asked me to reflect on this particular text the week of President Trump's inauguration that the image that immediately came to mind when I read this passage was that of the tech billionaires sitting in the front row at the inauguration. The CEOs of Meta (Facebook), Amazon, Google, and X/Tesla/SpaceX, among the richest men in the world, were there in the "most important seats." I found it unsettling.

In our scripture, Jesus calls out the hypocrisy of those in power. These billionaires hold tremendous power, controlling the information we see and hear, with access to our personal data. Jesus reminds us that the rich and powerful don't always have our best interests at heart. In a world where the voices of the wealthy, the popular, the "influencers" clamor for our attention, this passage serves as a reminder to look beyond the loud voices, the advertisements, the manipulated online content, and listen for the quiet voice of Jesus.

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to hear your voice among the chaos of this world. Amen

*Kathryn Hall is a recent transplant to West Michigan. Her and her husband have four sons in various stages of "adulthood." She works as an environmental scientist focusing on water and finds daily joy in God's creation.*

## March 27th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 21 1:4

**Verse:** As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

**Reflection:** Greed is in vogue in our culture at the moment. Billionaires are kings in this country, unfettered by laws or human decency or the very concept of limits. Sometimes they justify their rule in religious terms, their riches divinely ordained and apportioned by the Great Entrepreneur on High. God is CEO of all, perched in His ultimate luxury real estate development in the sky.

Well, in today's gospel verse, Jesus is not speaking the words of Executive Vice President of Heaven, LLC.

### **March 27<sup>th</sup> cont.**

In Jesus's telling, the poor's contributions are to be venerated; the wealthy don't impress him much. Sacrifice, not riches, are lifted up. I can't read His words without wondering: what would our world look like if we took Jesus's words here seriously? Would our worship of the wealthy at the uppermost echelons of society look different? Would our despising of the poor — at the border, sleeping on the streets, working two jobs and sleeping in their cars — look different?

**Prayer:** O God, we know that the contributions of the poor have been denigrated and minimized. Help us to follow the example of Jesus and to lift up the least of these, instead. Amen.

*Micah Uetricht is the eldest son of Pastor Bill and Bev Uetricht at First Lutheran in Muskegon. He works as a magazine editor and lives in New York City.*

### **March 28th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 21:5-8

**Verse:** "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

**Reflection:** I hate running—but I love having run. If I know when I will run, I can grit my teeth, get through it, and feel good about having run.

For the disciples, the beautiful temple was the place of God's presence among them, and Jesus tells them that the temple will be destroyed. I hear myself in the disciples' question here: "If the temple will be destroyed, tell me when, so I can grit my teeth and get through it."

The disciples' question reveals that their faith is in their own endurance, their ability to grit their teeth and get through things on their own. But when we look back on our own hard times, we realize, "If I had known how hard that was going to be, I would have avoided it." But when we came up short, God sent people with the help we needed. We want to grit our teeth and endure, as if we didn't need anyone else—as if I could keep running forever. But instead of a mistaken faith in ourselves, let's trust God and his people.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, when I am in need, help me to trust in you and your providing people to help me, and not to try to make it on my own. Amen.

*Joel Westerholm is a former Literature professor who now sustains his life by reading, making music, and being in the woods.*

### **March 29th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 21: 9 – 18

**Verse:** . . . Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. (vs. 11)

## March 29<sup>th</sup> cont.

**Reflection:** These types of statements can cause anxiety and distress to even the most 'Zen' of us. If I didn't just copy this verse out of my Bible, I could believe that it could have come from a headline from yesterday's news. The feeling that comes from knowing that we cannot change these Apocalyptic occurrences can be devastating. WE. CANNOT. CHANGE. THEM.

What we can change is how we react. We can pray. We can become members of organizations and become part of a greater Whole. We can vote. We can choose "kind." We can do what we have the power to do. We can 'reset.'

Science shows that deep breathing, meditating and even reciting mantras can return your nervous system to a calm, relaxed state. We are much more likely to encounter and overcome adversity in this state.

Close your eyes (finish reading this first!). Breathe in deeply through your nose in 4 slow counts. Hold briefly and then exhale through your mouth in 8 slow counts. Repeat the exercise but extend the exhale an additional 4 counts until you reach 24 counts. I do this numerous times a day sometimes! It is much easier to take on challenges with a clear mind.

**Prayer :** Loving God, thank you for the gift of discernment. Please help me remember to employ it whenever needed!

*Sharlene Bourdon has been a member of First Lutheran Church since Autumn of 2011 and director of music since late 2012. The most important thing she has done in the time since then has been learning about what is revealed in the Bible and trying to live via Christ's bottom line – love.*

## March 30th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 21:20-24

**Verse:** "Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days." (vs. 23)

**Reflection:** It is likely that Luke's words were written after the fact. In 70 A.C.E. the Romans flattened Jerusalem and its temple. It was a horrible time of violence. I suspect that Luke knows that history, since he probably wrote his gospel between 80 and 85 A.C.E., and is integrating it into the story he is telling. It, like our own era, was an apocalyptic time. Apocalyptic times are especially tough for people whose current situations are meant to be experiences of hope—those who are carrying babies and those who are nursing them.

Many folks these days wonder if they should do the things that represent signs of hope. There is a lot of despair in our world. Apocalyptic times nurture despair. Why would we even want to give birth to kids these days and bring them up in such turbulent times? The question is understandable. Apocalyptic literature that shows up in a reading like today's text and appears in other Biblical books like Revelation and Daniel was written not to call people into despair but to invite them into hope, a hope rooted in the God who is thought to have the last word in life and history. Blessed are the women who continue to give birth and continue to nurse their babies. They are signs of hope in the midst of turbulent times.

### **March 30<sup>th</sup> cont.**

**Prayer:** We thank you for being like a mother hen to us, gathering us together and nurturing us. Be among us during apocalyptic times to bring hope.

*Bill Uetrict is the pastor of First Lutheran Church in Muskegon. While he is aware that these are tough days to be hopeful about the church, he is hopeful. For him, these apocalyptic days might be opportunities for the church to do its best, hopeful work.*

### **March 31st, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 21:25-33

**Verse:** “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (vs. 28)

**Reflection:** We’ve all experienced times when we just wish, amongst all the chaos, that there was a sign telling us what is happening, where we are going, and who will help us. Well, perhaps if we take notice there are such signs, all around us, as surely as the sun by day and the moon by night. Signs in good times and difficult times, signs that, honestly, can create alarm and yet, still constitute hope. Signs that in one way or another, directly or indirectly, are pointing not only to where hope is taking us, but also pointing to the redemptive Christ, who is always coming to and for us. Look up, see the signs of life, both those we understand, and those we, as of yet, cannot. In them all, seek the reassurance of how near is God’s loving kingdom, the one thing that shall last forever.

**Prayer:** Lord, help us lift our heads and hearts to see the signs around us showing your eternal presence. Amen.

*Scott Gearhart is a retired air traffic controller. He lives part of the year in Florida, where he can flee from the snow and cold. During the non-snowy time of the year, he lives in Muskegon. He loves to write poetry, read, hike, and ride his bike.*

### **April 1st, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 21:34-38

**Verse:** “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.” (Lk 21:34-35a.)

**Reflection:** Keep watch. If you’re anything like me, this phrase might strike a bit of anxiety into your beings, because it seems too big. There’s too much going on. Our news cycles inundate us with never-ending stories of things that fall into the “end of the world” signs that are found throughout the Scriptures. We are overwhelmed with constant news of wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, and enmity between peoples. Keeping watch? It seems like that’s all we’re doing. But what if in our attempts to be alert, we fall into the trap of being preoccupied with everything that is happening? Are we allowing our attentions to be captured by the tactics of overwhelm which force us into inaction? Or are

## April 1<sup>st</sup> cont.

we keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, and moving forward in the face of all the distractions of the world?

**Prayer:** God, the worries of this world are overwhelming and often draw our attention away from you. Keep our eyes fixed on Christ, our feet walking the path you have set for us, and guard us from the things that might trap us. In Christ we pray, Amen.

*Lisa VanLonkhuyzen is a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, and serves as Pastor at Covenant Community Church, R.C.A. in Muskegon Heights, MI. She's been married to her husband, Bob, for 8.5 years, and they just moved to Muskegon in November of 2024.*

## April 2nd, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 22:1-6

**Reflection:** The chief priests were afraid. And according to this text, they weren't really afraid of Jesus. They were afraid of the people. And when Judas betrayed Jesus, he did it in secret. He agreed to the plot in a secret meeting. And then he decided he'd do the dirty deed itself in secret too. In this story, we see how fear can fester into violence. We see how betrayal is born behind closed doors. I wonder if this text might be an unexpected call to community and even community activism. When we're afraid, do we withdraw? Do we head into some secret meetings to plan betrayals? Or do we gather together and plan for peace? I attended a training recently that encouraged concerned citizens to go to school board meetings, library board meetings, city council meetings. "Don't let them conduct their business in secret," the speaker said. "Make them conduct their business out in the open. And make sure you're there to be a voice for peace, unity, hope, compassion ..."

There are lots of reasons to be afraid in a world like ours. But if you're tired of fear boiling over into violence, maybe it's time to try community instead of isolation. Maybe together, we can turn secret meetings into open-table discussions where we practice choosing love instead of fear.

**Prayer:** Prince of Peace, disrupt our fearful, violent ways with your peace and teach us to be peacemakers working alongside you. Amen.

*Mackenzie Jager is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Muskegon. She loves books so much that she can never commit to reading just one at a time. In between juggling all those novels, Mackenzie also enjoys writing, baking, and spending time with her friends. Lake Michigan is one of her favorite places in the world.*

## April 3rd, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 22:7-13

**Verse:** So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. (vs. 13)



### **April 3<sup>rd</sup> cont.**

**Reflection:** I love to fix big holiday meals. But I must say that I always get stressed and anxious about how everything might work out. I can't help but think about this as I read this passage. Were the disciples anxious about what they would find as they followed Jesus' instructions? Were they anxious about how things might work out?

After all, it had already been quite a week. There was that triumphal entry into Jerusalem, then that scene in the temple with the moneychangers. Tension was in the air and the anxiety level had to be elevated. Jesus gives Peter and John instructions, asking them to simply trust his guidance, and provisions will fall into place.

This passage gives us a dramatic, memorable example of trusting in God's provision and guidance. As we move into an uncertain future, we know we can trust God to be present to us. In fact, God is drawing us into the future where God is already present. This is something we can trust.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, life feels so uncertain right now. Help us to trust your loving presence to us in the midst of that uncertainty. Amen.

*Ellen Schoepf is a part-time pastor at Edgewood Lutheran Church in Fruitport. She is married and treasures spending time with their kids and eight grandchildren.*

### **April 4th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 22:14-23

**Verse:** "And he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.' ... The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed."

**Reflection:** The "powers and principalities," the leaders of our world spend a lot of time and money trying to protect themselves. It makes sense: they're in charge, and many would like to do them harm. When our leaders are harmed, it's a major crisis in our society.

What does it mean, then, that the Son of God, Jesus Christ himself — the earthly leader to whom we as Christians turn — is here willingly offering himself up to die? Indeed, he seems to almost welcome it. That isn't the kind of leadership we see very often.

Though we do see it occasionally. By coincidence, today is the 67th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. That is a leader who did not operate according to the logic of powers and principalities. Quite the contrary: he antagonized them. He had no armed guard to protect himself like a typical leader — he gave himself up to die, almost willingly. Maybe that is the kind of leadership we should look to.

**Prayer:** O God, help us to look to those who talk and act like Jesus, that they may show us a better way to live with each other and our planet. Amen.

*Micah Uetricht is the eldest son of Pastor Bill and Bev Uetricht at First Lutheran in Muskegon. He works as a magazine editor and lives in New York City.*

## April 5th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 22:24-30

**Verse:** But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.

**Reflection:** Jesus is clearly asking us to consider the role of a servant. Yet, in our capitalistic society, this idea seems completely counterintuitive. Leadership is glorified—books on the subject are endless—while books on servanthood are scarce. Leadership sells, while Jesus' servant position might even be looked at as inferior.

But we do appreciate a good servant! Remind yourself of a great restaurant experience—how it felt to be attended to, to have your preferences matter, even your needs anticipated. You likely left looking forward to returning.

If we value good service so much, why do we resist being the servant? True servanthood requires humility—letting go of our ego, our need to be right, and shifting focus to others. It means listening actively, noticing the details, and receiving complaints or criticism without taking them personally. It requires abundant empathy.

I understand what Jesus is urging of us, but it goes against the grain of our culture. Living this way takes prayer, intention, and a community to support such a radical mindset.

**Prayer:** Jesus, please help me find the stillness to understand your ways. Help melt the resistance to your loving ways. And finally help me follow you in your ways.

*Kelley Peel is a retired educator & counselor. Wife, Mom, author of children's books, & wedding planner - (their two kids' weddings are within nine months of each other). Nature and all it teaches is where her heart softens into peace.*

## April 6th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 22:31-34

**Verse:** And when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.

**Reflection:** Peter was sincere in his statement, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." He was true to say that. He loved Jesus that much, and he did go as far as he could, until he denied knowledge of Jesus three times. I can't imagine the emotions Peter experienced at the crow of the rooster. I do know that shame can cause embarrassment. It may take hold of us. If we let it linger it can disrupt our full participation in life and work. Shame can cripple, if we let it. Jesus knew Peter well. He prayed that Peter's faith may not fail. But if we falter, and when once we have turned again, the work of disciples must continue, the work that strengthens our siblings in Christian faith.

**Prayer:** God of second chances, we thank you for our enthusiasm but are keenly aware that our enthusiasm often disappoints you and us.

*Joel Dulyea has been married to Merijo for fifty years. They have a daughter, who gave them a granddaughter with their son-in-law's help.*

**April 7th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 22:35-38

**Verse:** “When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “No, not a thing.” He said to them, “But now . . .”

**Reflection:** “Finally!” the disciples must have thought. “Grab the swords, boys. No more going out like lambs in the midst of wolves (Luke 10:3). The revolution starts today!” Jesus here tells his disciples that things are changing, and they need to be ready. The disciples misunderstand, thinking what the world would think, that Jesus wanted them to fight back with their two swords.

But Jesus’s followers don’t use the world’s tools to protect themselves; that’s why Jesus healed the victim of Peter’s sword. We ready ourselves by having the mind of our Savior, looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4-5). It makes no sense, this abandoning self-defense—unless you believe, as Jesus did, that love, even for one’s enemies, will always win, that even death cannot defeat the God of Life.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as my circumstances change, help me to remember that your love never changes, and help me to make that love my way of responding. Amen.

*Joel Westerholm is a former Literature professor who now sustains his life by reading, making music, and being in the woods.*

**April 8th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 22:35-38

**Verse:** He said to them, “When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “No, not a thing.” He said to them, “But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless,’ and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.” They said, “Lord, look, here are two swords.” He replied, “It is enough.”

**Reflection:** It seems like Jesus is saying, “Ok boys, time to giddyup... let’s roll.” But He started with a reminder from their earlier missions: they took nothing for their own upkeep, and it turned out all right for them. “Remember when it sounded bananas to go on the road with nothing? But you trusted me and it worked out, right? So... things are about to get interesting and I’m asking you to trust me now like you did then.” In the context of the last supper, I would have needed that reminder too. When the apostles dig up two swords-- not one for each of them, but only two-- Jesus says (bafflingly) two is enough. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Time to saddle up, you’re going to have to take care of yourselves. But we aren’t going to battle, we will continue in peace. You only need enough, and you can trust me about what ‘enough’ is.”

**Prayer:** Dear God, when we are lost, afraid, threatened, and alone... when we feel like we are losing you... remind us that you will equip us with just enough, and no more, of what we need, and trust that “It is enough.”

*Catherine Tolley is a member of First Lutheran in Muskegon. She believes in the restorative power of God’s love... and knitting.*

**April 9th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 22:47-53

**Verse:** "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?"

**Reflection:** Jerusalem was thronged with pilgrims. Authorities had to proceed with caution. Even the Mount of Olives was studded with encampments. So, in the middle of the night temple leaders planned to use Judas to point out Jesus. What was Judas thinking? Had he abandoned the idea of Jesus as the Messiah? Was he tired of Jesus not leading an insurrection? Had he renounced Jesus' method of loving and forgiving while seeking the kingdom through rebirth and denial of self? Sometimes Jesus can seem frustrating. Why has he not come now to solve the world's problems?

Does your faith seem to wear down at times? Even in our weariness of faith, Jesus does not give up on us. We are nurtured by Word and Sacrament within the Community of Faith. At times, given life's struggles, faith is challenged. But we are not alone. Jesus, betrayal, death, and resurrection demonstrates his being a victor in life and death. He knows our hearts and minds. He will not betray us.

**Prayer:** Lord, when life is hard, thank you for your care and guidance for us.

*John Jack is 81 years old, married to Annette, and they have four grown children, and three grandchildren. He enjoys reading and learning new information. The church and related organizations have been major part of his whole life.*

**April 10th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 22: 54-62

**Verse:** The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had told him, "Before a rooster crows today you will deny Me three times." (vs. 61)

**Reflection:** We may not think that we ever deny the fact that we know Jesus. But are we not denying Him when we consciously choose not to obey God's law? Jesus said that he came not to do away with the law but to fulfill it. Even though he fulfilled the Law for all of humankind that does not give us an excuse to go against God's will.

All our denials are forgiven by God through Jesus. It is through his justification that we can move forward from Lent into the joy and peace of his forgiveness.

**Prayer:** Dear heavenly father we ask that we never deny our Lord either consciously or unconsciously but that we always look to Him for His strength and forgiveness.

*Donn and Diane Werling live in Spring Lake and are members at First Lutheran. They moved here from Fort Wayne to be near their son, Ben and their two grandchildren. Donn loves history and re-enacting it. Diane is a writer. Both are musicians.*

**April 11th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 22:63-65

### Amor Apasionado

**Verse:** Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him...They kept heaping many other insults on him. (vs 63a, 65)

**Reflection:** We are just a few days away from Passion week, and I can't help but read the text for today and sense passion. Not the type of passion that we typically associate Jesus with as he inches closer to the cross, but dark, demented, passion. Passion driven by fear. The fear of wealthy and powerful men who catered to the aristocratic upper class and cowered to the empire. A cold, calculating, fear of political expediency lashed upon Jesus by the judicial system of the high Jewish Court.

Insults, mockery, blindfolds and beatings do not seem far behind when fear, combined with power, leads the way. The high priest Caiaphas, had wealth, an honorable position and the respect of the people, but was deficient in the one area that truly matters: the passion of Christ. Passion driven by love and grace and mercy, not mockery.

We aren't completely sure if Caiaphas *was* the one who wielded the power to order the beatings of Jesus, but when faced with the reality of who Jesus is, Caiaphas denied the Truth that literally stood before him. When faced with fear, what do we deny?

**Prayer:** Dios de la pasión, Aléjanos de todo lo que no es amor, de las fuerzas de la codicia, el miedo, la ansiedad y la brutalidad; llévanos al encuentro en la encrucijada de la verdad y la negación. Amén.

God of Passion, draw us away from all that is not love— from the forces of greed, fear, anxiety and brutality. Meet us at the crossroads of truth and denial. Amen.

*Paula Dusseljee is the Pastoral Assistant at First Lutheran Muskegon. You can often find her walking along the shores of Lake Michigan or enjoying time with friends.*

**April 12th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 22:66-71

**Verse:** All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am." (vs. 70)

**Reflection:** All of them asked, are you him, the son of God? Imagine that you are I are put "on the spot" about what we really believe. Lots of answers are possible...Jesus was a special person unlike most we will ever meet... Jesus appeared and disappeared like a ghost...either of these might be your answer.

Leaders, in the hours before the crucifixion, are put in a place that their answer might be our answer. Personally, do I believe that God made possible the delivery of his own son in the world? His own being sent because he loved the creation so much is a great answer! As Martin Luther suggested, every day I need to begin by accepting that I am a child of God. The certainty of that is "nailed down" at the cross.

## **April 12<sup>th</sup> cont.**

In a sense, we answer the questions by our acceptance of belonging. Worship and service only underline that Jesus is our Lord, the Son of God.

**Prayer:** Creator, Spirit and Savior, come to us in full measure in darkness as well as light. Come to us when we are wandering and when our path is sure. Amen.

*Gary Hansen is a former pastor and bishop, In May of 1945 he was baptized at Trinity Lutheran Church in New Era. God is Good.*

## **April 13th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 23: 1-5

**Verse:** . . .And they began to accuse Him, saying, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king. (vs. 2)

**Reflection:** Wow. Jesus seems to have gone from hero to zero almost in the blink of an eye. In actuality, he was heralded into town by his own people. The Pharisees, High Priests and other “influencers” were the ones who did not want Jesus and his throng upsetting their applecart. They were afraid that Jesus would topple the precarious balance of power between themselves and the Romans. Jesus was moving toward what Richard Rohr calls “necessary suffering.”

Necessary suffering. Think about things that happened in your past that helped shape who you are now. It might have been something that you never thought you would get past, yet you came out the other side stronger and better. If you’re doing it right, (living,) that suffering will serve as a catalyst. When you get punched in the gut by life, TAKE CHARGE of what happens to you next. We can stay on the ground and let the world tramp on us, or we can take control.

Jesus took control, but He did not make the easy choice. He knew that necessary suffering was the difficult choice but the correct choice. He loves us so much that He chose to lead by example. As Jesus suffered, so must we. Our suffering will pale in comparison but have faith. Necessary suffering indeed. Don’t leave Jesus hanging. Follow Him.

**Prayer:** Loving God, thank you for helping me discover the power of suffering. I will do my best to remember that our suffering pales in comparison to the suffering of Your Son, Jesus, the Christ.

*Sharlene Bourdon, member of First Lutheran Church since 2011, loves music.*

## **April 14th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 23: 6-12

**Verse:** “He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.”

**Reflection:** What are we to take from Jesus’ silence– an unexpected response during an unjust trial that would decide his fate?

## April 14<sup>th</sup> cont.

Was this moment prophesied in Isaiah? Was he the sacrificial lamb “oppressed..afflicted..did not open his mouth...led to slaughter”? Was Jesus powerless in a predatory system with no hope? Is that why he asked for the cup to be passed by him? Yet, even then, he prayed that God’s will be done, not his own. (Matthew 26:39)

Or maybe he was in full command of the situation—non-reactive, non-defensive, realizing anything he said would have been misinterpreted for the agenda of powerful Romans or Jewish leadership. His silence probably invoked rage, yet he taught, “Do not resist an evil person.” (Matthew 5:39) A silent power existed by allowing the accusations without allowing them to take residence in his heart. A reminder that silence can be a companion to innocence.

Or perhaps the silence reveals wise discernment. Yes, Jesus had moments of silence during the trial, but he wasn’t a voiceless lamb. He claimed his identity—not in a defensive or elitist way to diminish the interrogators, but with clarity of who he was. Perhaps his silence wasn’t endurance, but Holy discernment.

**Prayer:** Holy Father, help me discern when I should use my voice, and when I should let the moment pass through me.

*Kelley Peel is a retired educator & counselor. Wife, Mom, author of children’s books, & wedding planner - their two kids’ weddings are within nine months of each other. Nature and all it teaches is where her heart softens into peace.*

## April 15th, 2025

**Reading:** Luke 23:13-25

**Verse:** “Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people, and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.’”

**Reflection:** “Perverting the people.” Pilate probably understood that as “leading the people to rebel against Rome,” and it wasn’t true. To the chief priests and leaders, it probably meant, “Teaching people to do good on the Sabbath, touch lepers, eat with tax collectors—break the purity code!” We recognize how that would seem like perversion to them, and why it was meaningless to Pilate.

Jesus just didn’t care about any law that got in the way of loving those around him. But before I decide that these religious leaders were just horrible people, I must consider my own purity code. What iron-clad laws do I think supersede Jesus’ call to love my neighbor? Cutting me off in traffic? Playing loud music at the beach? Wearing, or not wearing, a disease-fighting mask while in public? Voting differently from me?

“Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it” (Nadia Bolz-Weber). Pilate lacked the will to resist the crowd’s call to crucify Jesus. Do we lack the will to abandon our purity codes and love our neighbors?

## **April 15<sup>th</sup> cont.**

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, let me never be on the other side of the line from you. Better yet, let me come to realize that in your love, there are no lines. Amen.

*Joel Westerholm is a former Literature professor who now sustains his life by reading, making music, and being in the woods.*

## **April 16th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 23:26–31

**Reflection:** Wildfires. Hurricanes. Cancer. Suicide. School shootings. Hate crimes. The Pelicot trial. The loss of women's rights in Afghanistan (and everywhere). Plane crashes. Refugee crises. Wars and more wars. I can't count the number of times the news has made me cry this year. And let's not forget about the personal disasters. The friends who called me to say, "The fertility treatment didn't work." "I don't feel safe in this country." "My grandma died." "I think I'm going to lose my job." I've officiated at a lot of funerals and not a single wedding or even a baptism. One of my long-distance friendships fizzled out. Family members have disappointed me. Our culture doesn't make a lot of space for grief. We're supposed to hide it, tidy it up, make it palatable for everybody else.

But then here comes King Jesus, marching through the city on his way to his death, and he looks at the women weeping alongside the side of the road and he says, "Yes. That's right. Weep! You don't even have to weep for me. Weep for yourselves, because this is a cruel world." Thanks be to God for permission to be fully human. To acknowledge that the weight of terror and grief are pressing down on us, crushing us like the weight of a cross strapped across our backs.

**Prayer:** Holy God, hold us as we weep. Amen.

*Mackenzie Jager is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Muskegon. She loves books so much that she can never commit to reading just one at a time. In between juggling all those novels, Mackenzie also enjoys writing, baking, and spending time with her friends. Lake Michigan is one of her favorite places in the world.*

## **April 17th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 23:32-43

**Verse:** "One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'" (vs. 39)

**Reflection:** This isn't the first time Jesus' power has been questioned. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus interacts with people who require signs – who ask Jesus to prove his power. And throughout the Gospels, Jesus' power is revealed not to the ones who request (require?) it, but to those who need it most.



## **April 17<sup>th</sup> cont.**

And once again, Jesus' power and authority are reserved for the one in this story who needs it most. No, Jesus doesn't hop down from the cross and set free the prisoner who rebuked the other prisoner who was blaspheming him; but Jesus forgives – saves – the prisoner who humbly requests to simply be remembered.

This is the true power of Christ – not that he ended the pain and suffering of crucifixion, but that he is able to bring eternal life to those who ask for it, even when he himself is staring into the face of death.

**Prayer:** God, sometimes we ask you to prove yourself. We challenge your power and authority because of the pain in our lives – pain that is often too hard to bear. Remind us that your power need not be proven, and that you are with us in our pain and listening to the cries of our heart that you remember us. In Christ we pray, Amen.

*Lisa VanLonkhuyzen, Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, is serving as Pastor at Covenant Community Church, R.C.A. in Muskegon Heights, MI. She's been married to her husband, Bob, for 8.5 years, and they just moved to Muskegon in November of 2024.*

## **April 18th, 2025**

**Reading:** Luke 23:44-56

**Verse:** “And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him ... stood at a distance and saw these things.” (vs. 49)

**Reflection:** Terrible things happen in the world. The light of reason and truth can go dark for a time. The voices of good, innocent people can be temporarily silenced. Institutions can go astray and be torn asunder. And yet, in the foray of such uncertainty, as followers of Jesus, it is wise for us to take a moment to prayerfully stand back and watch, noticing how God's Spirit of Love can and does move in unexpected ways--ways that reveal the reality of corruption; ways that enable the recognition and proclamation of innocence; ways that turn hard hearts of hatred into hearts filled with healing remorse, allowing confession to create openings for compassion and justice.

There is wisdom in thoughtfully watching what is going on, wisdom in taking time to pray, and wisdom in then going and doing even some small thing that shows the way of love for all, the way that is hastening the return of Christ.

**Prayer:** Lord, please grant us wisdom to both watch and respond, in the proper time and manner. Amen.

*Scott is a retired air traffic controller. He has two daughters he loves greatly. He is enjoying the warmth of Florida's sun but soon will be back to rejoin the community at First Lutheran.*

## April 19th, 2025

**Reading:** Meaning of Saturday

**Verse:** On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (*Luke 23:56b*)

**Reflection:** Today we are called to dwell in that dreadful, uncertain, in-between time: the time between Jesus' death and his resurrection. This time represents *the Saturdays of our lives* when we live between a dead past and an uncertain future, a future yet unborn. And we wait.

The Saturdays of our lives are those times when we feel as though Sunday, that day of resurrection and the promise of new life, seems like a fantasy or fairytale that is certainly nowhere in sight. As I write this, I am deeply feeling the Saturdays of our lives and I wonder if maybe we spend most of our lives living in this in-between space.

Thankfully, we know that after death comes resurrection, after injustice comes liberation, after wounding comes healing. But we can't skip over the darkness of the tomb.

On this Holy Saturday, before the joy of Easter morning, befriend and be close to sorrow, whether your own suffering, that of a loved one, or the pain of creation. In this liminal space of waiting and the unknown, as poet David Whyte writes, let "the night put its arm around" you. And remember, this descent into death in itself is not the last word because Sunday is coming.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, enable me to not run from the darkness, but to discover your loving presence in that place. Help me to remember that it was in the darkness of the tomb that resurrection and new life broke forth. Amen.

*Ellen Schoepf is the part-time pastor at Edgewood Lutheran Church in Fruitport. She is married and treasures spending time with their kids and eight grandchildren.*

## April 20th, 2025

Happy Easter! I hope your day of celebration is filled with a large joy that is capable of including all things and all people.

Sadly, we throughout church history have shortchanged the hope that is ours because of Easter. Often, the hope of Easter has been described in this way: Jesus was raised from the dead, so we can go to heaven when we die. We have collapsed the hope of Easter into individual immortality, an "evacuation plan" for the next life, as some folks have called it.

Paul tells in First Corinthians 15 that Jesus as the raised one is the "first fruits." In other words, he is the first to be raised. And others are to follow. And then what is to follow the resurrection of others, according to Paul, is the transformation of all things.

The hope of Easter is massive. It includes, if you read Biblical books like Ephesians or Revelation, everything. Revelation tells us that there will be a new "heaven and a new earth." That is to say, everything will become new.

The hope of Easter is massive. It is not just hope for your private soul. It is hope for everyone and all things. Such a perspective changes how we view our own work and ministry now. The work of the church is not simply about private souls; it is about the transformation of everything. We who know that kind of hope live now as if everything is new, as if all are one, as if creation is a gift, rather than our due.

Jesus raised from the dead is good news for the earth, the streams, the oceans, the animals, the cosmos, for Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, straight people, gay people, white people, brown people, and black people. Resurrection is the truth for all people and all things.

Happy Easter! Let the hope of Easter blow your mind in how massive it is.

**Prayer:** Enliven our imaginations so that we can trust the bigness that is the hope of Jesus risen from the dead.

*Bill Uetracht is the pastor at First Lutheran, who, while deeply disturbed by much that is happening in our country right now, lives with hope that ultimately God has a good future planned for all things and all people.*