

First Sunday in Lent, Year B (February 18, 2024): Depths of Love – Has Come Near

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants talk about a time they've been in the "wilderness." Perhaps it was a walk in the woods, a state or national forest. Was it a desert, forest, mountains, or swampland? Did you see wild animals? If so, what kind? How did you feel about being in the wilderness? Relaxed, excited, stressed, happy, frightened, awestruck?

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Mark 1:9-15](#)

- According to Mark 1:10, as Jesus was being baptized by John, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove." How do you imagine the Spirit of God? If you were going to draw or paint the Spirit of God, what would it look like?
- As Jesus is being baptized, a voice from heaven says, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). What reminds you that you are God's "beloved"?
- Mark 1:12 says the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Have you ever felt driven (or nudged) by God to go somewhere or do something you wouldn't normally do? How did this work out for you?
- Mark 1:13 says Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. Can you think of other places in the Bible where the number forty is significant?
 - Genesis 7: In the story of Noah and the flood, it rains for forty days and nights.
 - Exodus 24: When Moses received the Ten Commandments, he stayed on the 'mountain of God' for forty days and nights.
 - I Samuel 17: Goliath taunts Israel for forty days.
 - Acts 1: There are forty days between the crucifixion of Jesus and his ascension.
- Mark 1:13 says angels waited on Jesus while he was in the wilderness. What do you imagine those angels looked like? What might they have done for Jesus?
- Mark 1:14 says that after John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. What good news does our world need to hear today? What good news does our community need to hear today? What good news do the most vulnerable in our community need to hear today?
- For personal reflection and prayer: Of what do you need to repent? What good news from Jesus do you long to hear?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord's Prayer:

O God, some of us feel like we are in the wilderness. May we feel your angels taking care of us, even in the wilderness of our lives. Convict us when we need to repent. Open our spirits to know we are beloved in your sight. Guide us in ways to share the good news of your love and care to those who most need to hear it. Amen

Second Sunday in Lent, Year B (February 25, 2024): Depths of Love – For the Sake of the Gospel

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants share about a time they misunderstood a situation and said the wrong thing. (Example: I once greeted a friend I had not seen in quite a while and mentioned how happy I was about her pregnancy. She replied that the baby had been born 3 months earlier.)

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Mark 8:31-38](#) or [Mark 9:2-9](#).

- In Mark 8:31, Jesus is trying to tell his disciples that he will face great suffering, rejection, and death. But Peter, who had just identified Jesus as the Messiah in Mark 8:27-29, can't handle it. This is not what he expected, so he "rebukes" Jesus. Mark doesn't tell us exactly what Peter says to Jesus. Why do you think Peter responds this way? What do you imagine Peter says to Jesus?
- In Mark 8:33, Jesus tells Peter, "...you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." What helps you focus more on "divine things" and less on "human things"?
- In Mark 8:34, Jesus says his followers need to be prepared to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him. Fortunately, most of us don't have people literally nailed to crosses in our communities today, so what might it mean for us to 'take up our cross' to follow Jesus? Are there people in your community who are persecuted for who they are, what they believe, the color of their skin, how they express themselves, or where they come from? How might you and your church share the love of God with these community members?
- For private reflection and prayer: What might you need to leave behind to follow Jesus more faithfully?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord's Prayer:

O God of great compassion, thank you for your presence with us, especially during seasons of suffering. Forgive us for the times we have turned aside from those who suffer. May we be conduits of your love and mercy to those in physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. Help us discern what we need to put aside so that we can be more faithful followers of Jesus. Amen.

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B (March 3, 2024): Depths of Love – I Will Raise It Up

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants discuss these questions: “How do you respond when you are angry? Do you shout? Curse? Throw things? Stew in silence? Calmly express your feelings?”

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [John 2:13-22](#).

- Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the “synoptic” gospels because they are similar in the way they present Jesus’ life and ministry. John is different. The writer of John seems more concerned with theology than chronology. John places the narrative of Jesus going to the temple in Jerusalem and “clearing the temple” early in Jesus’ ministry; whereas, the synoptic gospels place the passage during the last week of Jesus’ earthly life. Why do you suppose the writer of John’s Gospel chose to do this? (The Preaching notes suggest that John’s agenda begins with worship – and having a “right spirit” for worship.)
- Where and when do you normally worship? What helps you feel like you are in a “right spirit” for worship?
- In John 2:16, the New Revised Standard Version quotes Jesus as saying “Stop making my Father’s House a marketplace. The Common English Bible uses the phrase “a place of business.” Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase says, “a shopping mall”.
 - Why do you suppose Jesus was so angry?
 - Would Jesus turn over the tables of a Christmas mission market in your church? How about the youth group selling tickets to a spaghetti dinner to raise money for their mission trip? What if the youth were selling tickets to a fundraiser for a ski trip?
 - What constitutes using the church as a marketplace or a shopping mall?
- In John 2:18, after Jesus drives out the people selling animals for sacrifice and turns over the tables of the money changers, some of the Jewish temple authorities challenge Jesus about showing a “sign” (his prophetic credentials).
 - What is Jesus’ response in John 2:19-22?
 - How did the temple authorities misunderstand Jesus’ words?
 - Do readers of the gospels sometimes misunderstand (or misuse) Jesus’ words today?
 - What can help us make decisions about how to read and understand Jesus’ words today?
- In Christian tradition, every Sunday is a celebration of Jesus’ resurrection. How can our worship help raise us from the things in the world that threaten to tear us down? How might we invite others to worship with us and experience the joy of Resurrection?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

Gracious God, we are thankful for the blessing of being able to worship freely. Help us to turn from those things that distract or demean us and enter worship with a right spirit so that we may be strengthened to serve you.

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B (March 10, 2024): Depths of Love – Loving the Light

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, invite participants to talk about a time they were in the dark and longed for light. (Perhaps during a power outage at home, on a camping trip, etc.)

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [John 3:14-21](#).

- The passage we are looking at today, John 3:14-21, is part of a larger passage that starts with 3:1 and centers on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Look back at John 3:1. What are we told about Nicodemus? (He is a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. He comes to Jesus at night. He has questions about who Jesus is.)
- Why do you suppose Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night? (The Pharisees had a tense relationship with Jesus. In the gospels, Jesus is often challenging the Pharisees on their understanding of "the law." Maybe Nicodemus didn't want the other Pharisees to know he was seeking Jesus out as a teacher.)
- In John 3:14, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." What is this about Moses lifting a serpent? Look back in the Old Testament at Numbers 21:8-9. (When the people of Israel were wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, God responded to the people's complaints by sending a plague of poisonous serpents. Moses intercedes by erecting a bronze serpent on a pole that saves the people from the serpents.)
- John 3:16 is probably the best-known verse in the Bible. You might have seen it on a poster held on a street corner or a banner in the end zone of a football game. Is this an effective way of sharing the good news that "God so loved the world that he gave up his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."? What might be other more effective ways of sharing this good news?
- John 3:17 says, "God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Why is it so easy to fall into the trap of condemning others? What helps us to be more loving and less condemning?
- Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus concludes with Jesus talking about how some people love darkness, but the light has come into the world. What does it mean to live in the light? What

might it mean today to live in darkness? Who in our community might be living in darkness? How might we share the light of God's love with them?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord's Prayer:

Prayer: O God of light and love, thank you for sending Jesus into the world to show us the extent of your love. May the light of your love shine into the darkest corners of our lives. May we be beacons of your light in this dark world, so that all know they are loved by you. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B (March 17, 2024): Depths of Love – Whoever Serves

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants discuss, "Who is someone you have never met but are curious to meet?"

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [John 12:20-33](#).

- John 12:12–19 describes Jesus' "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem and says the crowd went to meet him. John 12:19 says, "The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look the world has gone after him.'" The passage we are studying today opens with "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Phillip...and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'" (John 12:20-21). Why do you suppose John makes a point of telling his readers that "some Greeks" sought out Jesus? (One possible answer is to illustrate that Gentiles were turning to Jesus also.)
- John doesn't tell us why "the Greeks" wanted to see Jesus or anything about their conversation with Jesus. But we can use our imagination to fill in the gaps. Why do you imagine "the Greeks" wanted to see Jesus and what might their conversation with him have been like?
- How can our church be more welcoming to those who are curious about Jesus but don't fit in with our typical demographic?
- Just after John tells his readers that some Greeks came to see Jesus, Jesus says in John 12:23, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." What does he mean by this? Do you have a footnote in your study Bible that offers some information? (A footnote in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, NRSV, says, "The arrival of Greeks points to the fulfillment of the eschatological promises of universal salvation and marks the beginning of a new age.")
- In John 12:26, Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also." What does it mean for us to serve and follow Jesus today?

- In John 12:27-28, Jesus says that his soul is troubled and asks that his Father, “glorify your name.” A heavenly voice responds and says, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.” What might this heavenly affirmation have meant to Jesus as he was anticipating his crucifixion? Where do you find comfort and strength during difficult times?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

O God of love, thank you for sending your son Jesus for all people. May all those who are curious find a warm welcome in our church. Help us to grow stronger in our desire to serve and follow Jesus in our community and our world today. Amen.

Liturgy of the Palms, Year B (March 24, 2024): Depths of Love – Blessed Is the One

Fellowship – Snacks or a Meal (10 minutes with snacks; longer, obviously, if there is a meal).

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants think of examples of when someone was extremely popular and then folks turned against them. (A winning football quarterback who throws an interception causing his team to lose to their biggest rival; an international soccer star who goes into a slump, can’t seem to score a goal, and starts getting death threats; a male pop singer who starts regularly dating a woman and then the woman starts getting death threats, etc.)

Group Dialogue (Approximately 30 minutes). Read [Mark 11:1-11](#)

- Today’s passage is rich in connections to the Old Testament. In Mark 11:1-2, as Jesus and his disciples are approaching Jerusalem, Jesus instructs a couple of them to go ahead and find a colt that has never been ridden and bring it back to him. Look back at the prophetic Old Testament book of [Zechariah 9:9](#). How does this passage relate to what is going on in Mark 11?
- Mark 11:8 indicates many people threw their cloaks on the road for Jesus (riding on the colt) to pass over. Check out [2 Kings 9:13](#). According to this passage, throwing cloaks and palm branches on the road is a traditional way to welcome a new king. Do you think the Palm Sunday crowd was welcoming Jesus as a king? If so, what do you imagine were their expectations for their new king?
- According to Mark 11:9-10, those following Jesus into Jerusalem are shouting, “Hosanna” – a Hebrew word that means “save us.” Why might the people have been shouting “save us” to Jesus? Do you think they wanted to be saved from their sins or saved from the Roman oppression they were living under?

- If you are familiar with the story of Jesus, you know that while “Holy Week” starts with the crowd in Jerusalem welcoming Jesus as a king, it ends with Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. Do you think the people who shouted “Hosanna” to Jesus early in the week were the same people who were shouting, “Crucify him,” later in the week? If so, what caused them to change their feelings about Jesus? Or do you think these crowds might have been made up of different people? Why might different groups of people have had such different reactions to him? How has your understanding of and relationship with Jesus changed over time?
- How does our church help people grow in their understanding of and relationship to Jesus? Are there new approaches we might take to help people grow in their understanding of and relationship with Jesus?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). End with the following prayer, a similar prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer:

Lord Jesus, may we welcome you anew as king of our lives. May we continue to grow in our understanding of and commitment to you. When following you gets difficult, give us the strength to stay the course.

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Rev. Alecia Curtis Glaize is a United Methodist minister specializing in Christian education. She was educated at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, and Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California. She currently serves as Interim Director of Field Education at [Claremont School of Theology](#) and is a volunteer adult Bible study teacher at her church.