

Steadfast Love: A Lenten Playlist

Lent/Holy Week 2025 worship series

INTRODUCTION

A playlist? For the season of Lent? A Lenten playlist? What an odd idea. Lent is often seen as a somber and even silent season. Certainly, there is space for contemplation, for embracing the quiet, for being still to seek out God. Many of us, however, find music a helpful tool for contemplation. So, we offer this playlist as another tool for your worship experience this season. We chose a song for each worship moment in the series from Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday. We aren't suggesting that these are to be used in worship, unless that fits your context. Rather, this is preparation work, thinking about making connections, about plumbing the depths of heart and soul, of the community of faith and the wider culture. However you use them, let music be a guide into worship this Lent.

As part of the worship resources for this series, we have put together a playlist for inspiration, meditation, and reflection through Lent. [Click here](#) to see the full playlist. At the end of the worship planning notes for each week, you will find a social media devotional and YouTube video link that link the themes of that service with the related song from the playlist.

Ash Wednesday – *Sustain in Me*

March 5, 2025

[Psalm 51:1-17](#)

Color – Purple

**Fix You by Coldplay*

WORSHIP PLANNING

Ash Wednesday begins our Lenten journey, and it can be – needs to be – both an individual and a corporate experience. There is space, as the worship planners determine, for quiet reflection. Worshipers are used to an Ash Wednesday service that allows them to contemplate the state of their souls and their continuing walk with Christ. Am I moving forward on my discipleship journey? Am I prioritizing the things that will bring me healing and wholeness? Am I paying attention to the relationships that come with my faith, with God and neighbor? All of these and many other questions are good to consider as the Lenten journey begins.

Some consider Lent a time for repentance, for making a catalog of personal sins as a way of asking for forgiveness and leaving behind old behaviors and priorities. Confession and repentance are central to this season and this service. But dwelling on sin and sinful behaviors without considering what might replace or transform these behaviors doesn't bring the changes that are sought. What spiritual disciplines, for example, could be suggested or modeled in this time of gathered worship to begin that work? What hope are you offering for those who year after year find themselves in the same place in their faith walk?

The other resource for transformation is found in the work of the community. Together we can encourage and keep one another accountable as we seek to grow as disciples. In worship, we can

practice this as we sing together and pray together. We accompany one another to the chancel to receive the imposition of ashes. While this may seem like a private and individual act of worship, it is done in public, and the sign of our mortality and need of a savior is visible to all. The difference here is that there are those around us who also bear that sign. We seek the comfort of fellow travelers on the journey, pilgrims making their way with us to that embrace of holiness we call sanctification or, in Wesleyan terms. Christian perfection or perfection in love. Love is about relationship, about binding hearts together for mutual support and to multiply acts of service.

From our Lenten playlist, we begin with Coldplay's "Fix You." Whether this is something you play during worship depends on your context. But the invitation is to let all these songs be a spark to individual and corporate contemplation. The song talks about the individual experience of missing the mark and the relational promise to work together for healing. Ash Wednesday may not be about being "fixed", but it is certainly an acknowledgement of the need to continue the journey toward being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

PLAYLIST SONG

"Fix You" by Coldplay

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a season of forty days (minus Sundays) during which we prepare ourselves for the events of Holy Week and Easter. We start the journey of Lent with confession, pardon, and the imposition of ashes, a reminder of our mortality. Though this can often feel like a serious service, Psalm 51:1 says, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love." We begin Lent with the reminder that God's love is steadfast—it never fails. In words like those of Coldplay's "Fix You," God's love is like a light that guides us home, ignites our bones, and fixes us, putting us back together for relationship with God and one another. As you listen to Coldplay's "Fix You," consider where you notice God's love reaching out and guiding you home.

PREACHING NOTES

When you try your best, but you don't succeed / When you get what you want, but not what you need / When you feel so tired, but you can't sleep / Stuck in reverse

*Songwriters: Christopher Anthony John Martin, Guy Rupert Berryman,
William Champion, Jonathan Mark Buckland
"Fix You" lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Mgb. Ltd.*

It would be difficult to believe that Coldplay set out to write an Ash Wednesday song. But it sure seems like they did. "*When you try your best, but you don't succeed.*" Is there a better opening line to capture something of the struggle we face as those who seek to follow Christ and yet fail more often than not? Is there a better way to express the despair we feel as we stumble over our own limitations, our own mortality?

Well, there is Psalm 51. Year after year, we return to this psalm because it speaks to the depths of our human predicament, but also the hope inherent in our faith. "*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,*

and sustain in me a willing spirit” (Ps 51:12 NRSV). That is a powerful and hope-filled plea, but it is surrounded by an expression of brokenness and guilt and confession so strong that it threatens to overwhelm the possibility of redemption.

“When you lose something that you can’t replace.”

Tradition suggests that this psalm was the one David wrote after his confrontation with the prophet Nathan over the Bathsheba affair. Or, some argue, it was written after the child from that ill-fated liaison died, and the despair and guilt that wracked David afterward brought forth this heartfelt prayer. There is certainly human anguish captured in Psalm 51, and an overwhelming sense of guilt.

We want there to be levels of sinfulness. Surely what King David did was much worse than anything we might have done. Surely. And yet the experience written about in Psalm 51 seems to resonate with our own experience and desire for redemption. The plea in the midst of this psalm sounds as if it could have come from us. We want restoration. We want a clean heart and a new and right spirit within us. That’s why we’re here on Ash Wednesday—for a new start and a new hope.

But that one line, verse 4, doesn’t seem to capture the deeper reality. “Against you, you alone, have I sinned,” wrote David. I wonder if Bathsheba would have a different opinion about that. I wonder if Uriah from the flag-draped coffin or the baby bundled into blankets might feel differently. That’s the problem with sin; it leaks. It spills out and affects folks around us. “As long as no one gets hurt” is a naïve cliché that doesn’t give us a sense of the true impact of our actions or decisions or priorities. We think we can get away with something because it is just between us and God. It’s my soul I’m putting at risk, no one else. Or so we think.

So, what did the writer, David or whoever, mean when writing “against you, you alone, have I sinned”? Our highest allegiance is to God, and therefore that’s what matters most? Well, maybe, but that doesn’t feel satisfactory to a faith that demands that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. So, why then? Why start with God to begin to fix what is broken within us? Maybe for the strength to heal the relationships. Maybe we start with God so that we can then go further.

That’s why we’re here. At worship this night. Where else could we go for restoration to joy? Where else could we go to be purged and made clean? Where else could we go for a new heart? Worship, of course. The purpose of worship is to glorify God. And the result of worship that glorifies God is to reconcile the worshiper with the Presence. For reconciliation to take place, cleansing must occur. For cleansing to occur, an open heart must be offered. For an open heart to be offered, a hunger must be acknowledged—a hunger to be fixed, a hunger to be whole again.

When we come to worship hungry, then something happens. We are transformed; we are healed; we are made clean. We are made right with God. Then it becomes possible to be made right with one another. That is why we worship as a body, so that the effect of our worship can be felt among us as well as within us. Because we know that even though we start with God, it is not God alone who is sinned against. We need to begin that healing process too.

That is what is missing when we are missing from worship. That is the “not right” feeling that we get when we are away from the body. Many have spoken about that lack, that unsettled feeling that we get when we miss worship for whatever reason. It is hard to name sometimes, but it is real. The truth is, we can have that feeling even when we are present in worship because *presence* doesn’t always mean

engagement. Presence doesn't always mean coming hungry. We are so filled up by the busyness of this life that we forget how hungry we are. We forget to seek the face that defines us, that accepts us, that loves us with a love almost beyond description. We think we are self-sufficient, when, in fact, we are anything but. We are needy. We are often empty. We are hungry for that word of acceptance, of unconditional love. We are hungry for meaning and direction and hope.

Our unspoken fear is that the one we seek this from won't offer it. We fear that we are somehow not worthy, that we are too dirty to be made clean, too broken to be made whole, too rotten to be made healthy. That feeling of disconnect is not just inside us; it is from that source, and we are cast away from all that will make us "right."

The psalmist feels that too. Yet there is a plea; there is hope; there is a remembrance of wholeness and joy. So, the psalmist seeks it, even as we seek it. The psalmist worships, even as we worship, that we might be made right again. "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and put a new and right spirit within me." That's our prayer, our theme for worship. Then our lips will open, and our mouths will declare praise. Come and worship; come hungry and worship with joy. Then we can tell the story; then we can ask forgiveness from all those we have harmed. Then we can be reconciled, or at least begin the process of reconciliation. Then we can see the lights that will guide us home, and we can feel it in our bones, and we can be on our way to being fixed. That's our prayer and our hope and our desire this Ash Wednesday.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

We come, aware of our sin, of all the ways we miss the mark.

God welcomes you with compassion.

We come, longing for restoration, to be made new.

God surrounds you with grace and forgiveness, reconciling you to God and one another.

We come, thirsting for reconciliation, to draw close to God and one another.

God embraces you with love, reuniting us with God and one another.

ALL: Sustain in us, O God, a willing spirit to return to the joy of our salvation as we journey together through the season of Lent.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, August 2024.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. Call forth our prayers and acts of kindness, and strengthen us to face our mortality with confidence in the mercy of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

From Ash Wednesday Liturgy (page 1) posted at
<https://ms.augsburgfortress.org/downloads/Ash%20Wednesday%20ELW%20Liturgy%20Sample.pdf>.

Litany

(Begin with a blast from a shofar or trumpet)

Leader: Get ready; get ready to return to God. Place your trust in God and God alone!

(Trumpet or shofar is played again.)

Leader: Return to the Lord!

People: It is not always easy to return to God; we have had our way for so long.

Leader: Blow the trumpet. Sound the alarm. Call the young and the old; tell everyone that the Lord is coming.

People: It is not easy to talk about the Lord to people who have heard our preaching so many times.

Leader: Call for a fast.

People: Fasting is not easy; we hunger for so many things.

Leader: Nobody said it would be easy. But we must return to the Lord. The Coming of the Lord is near!

People: We commit to turn from our old ways.

Leader: Nobody said it would be easy.

People: We will turn our lives over to the One who makes a way.

Leader: Nobody said it would be easy.

People: Nobody said it would be easy.

All: Nobody said it would be easy, but we must return to the LORD!

Written by Darlene A. Moore in *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 63.

Prayer of Confession

(inspired by Psalm 51)

On this first day of Lent
we pause, look within,
and examine our consciousness.

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Where we have neglected prayer,
been apathetic in worship,
found reasons to avoid generosity,
or lacked compassion:

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Where we have colluded
in the oppression of those
who become invisible in their suffering,
and ignored on the streets:

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Where anxiety has eroded
the gift of Your peace, and where
we have cared too much
about what others think:

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Words of assurance

As Lent begins, know that God understands
how we struggle to stay open and compassionate.
The invitation is not to focus on our inadequacies,
but on God's gift of grace and love
which transforms our hearts and minds.
That gift is given to us again, here and now.
Be encouraged.

Amen.

Written by Ann Siddall, in *Lent to Easter liturgies: Year C*. Posted on the website of the **Stillpoint Spirituality Centre**, <https://stillpointcentre.com.au/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/08/confession-based-on-psalm-51.html>.

Benediction

**Created from dust,
held together by God's extravagant love,
we turn away from sin,
and leave today embracing God's love.**

From "An Ash Wednesday Liturgy" written by Tim Graves and posted on **LiturgyBits**. You can find the whole liturgy here: <https://liturgybits.wordpress.com/2017/03/08/an-ash-wednesday-liturgy/>.

First Sunday in Lent – *Rescue Me*

March 9, 2025

[Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16](#) [Luke 4:1-13](#)

Color – Purple

**Rise Up by Andra Day*

WORSHIP PLANNING

For many worshipers, this is the beginning of Lent. Weekday or weeknight services are sometimes difficult to manage in our overly busy world. So, the worship teams can recapture some of the essence of the Ash Wednesday service as we gather for this First Sunday in Lent. There is an invitational quality to this beginning. Whatever call was issued on Wednesday needs to be repeated here. Are there recommended spiritual disciplines the community is focusing on this season? Are there opportunities to gather, to partner with others, to join a small accountability group that will walk with you this Lent? If so, then reissue those invitations, not with a wagging finger saying, “You should have already been on board with this,” but with an open, enthusiastic invitation, making the genuine offer to “observe a holy Lent,” as our *Book of Worship* has it.

This is how we will “Rise Up,” as our playlist song puts it. Listen carefully to this one. Again, the decision to use the song in worship is one you have to make. But it can certainly inspire the worship planning and the congregation as a whole as you think of the individual effort required to become disciples and the corporate dimension of that journey. “I’ll rise up, in spite of the ache” and “all we need is hope, and for that we have each other” encapsulate those twin themes of individual effort and relational support. Pay attention to the invitation.

Yet we also remember that as we gather here, none of this is possible on our own. The plea from the psalmist is to God, “Rescue me.” So, when we gather, there is both our continued petition for God’s rescue to be seen in our lives and the gratitude for what God has already provided in each of us and in all of us. We give thanks for the capacity to grow and the grace to continue, even when the way is hard. That means that while Lenten worship is serious, it need not be somber. There can be joy in the journey. There can be hope of realizing the vision of who we are as the people of God. There can be community, even when we wrestle with temptation, as our Lord did in the gospel text for this week. We call on the resources that he provides by example and continuing presence. We remember the gift that he gave by making that journey, so that, in our journey, we have a companion who knows. As we worship today, let us celebrate the Christ who knows us and our journey because he has walked this same lonesome valley.

PLAYLIST SONG

[“Rise Up” by Andra Day](#)

Rescue me. Perhaps Jesus said it during his temptation in the wilderness. Certainly, the psalmist says it over and again in many ways. We call out to God to rescue us today, sometimes with a certainty that God will answer and other times out of desperation, hoping God will listen when it seems no one else will. As you listen to Andra Day’s “Rise Up,” let the words wash over you as a prayer and as an answer to prayer,

and consider: “Where in your life are you calling out for rescue, and how might God be calling you to reach out in love to rescue your neighbor?”

PREACHING NOTES

All we need, all we need is hope / And for that we have each other

“Rise Up,” Sung by Andra Day

Songwriters: Cassandra Monique Batie and Jennifer Decilveo

“Rise Up” lyrics © BMG Rights Management

Lent is a somber, reflective, internal season designed to make us feel sorry for our sinfulness. It is about our individual journey with Christ, our wandering in the wilderness for these forty days, as Jesus wandered in the wilderness for forty days. But what does all this somberness, all this being sorry, all this repenting, all this introspection have to do with loving? Everything. Just ... everything. What if Lent isn't supposed to be an individual exercise? What if our introspection, our confession, our examination of the inner being is supposed to be done in community? What if the heart of our Lenten examination is about how we live in community? About how we love?

We live in love: that is the secret of our existence. We are surrounded by a love that is almost indescribable. We're wandering in the wilderness, remember? That's our Lenten journey. Like Jesus. But remember, wilderness for Jesus isn't the wilderness we think of. We think of green, of trees so thick you can't see through, of grass and weeds and undergrowth that catches our feet, making it hard to walk. We think of dark and secluded, damp and mossy, and bugs that carry us off because they're so big. We think of creeping and slithering things, things with teeth and claws. Swamps and rotting vegetation, our wilderness, peopled with creatures of our imagination and film history, is different from his. His wilderness was a desert: rocks and sand, the sun beating down, sapping strength and life. It was dry, parched, sere. He was exposed and vulnerable. So, Psalm 91 was a blessing. You who live in the shelter, who abide in the shadow. It was not hiding; it was relief. Relief from the blazing sun.

You who abide in shadow. Ahh, can you feel it? The cloud covers the sun for a moment, and suddenly, you can stand straighter and run a little further. You can open your eyes again and see what surrounds you. Relief. God's love is a relief. Human love is a relief—relief from the dry feeling of isolation and abandonment; relief from the hearts parched from a lack of love that they can sense or receive. It's the relief of residing in the cool shadow of acceptance and security; of standing up straighter instead of bent over from the weight of emptiness. My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.

For what? Trust God for what? There is a thread in this psalm that feels ... dangerous. Angels will bear you up so you won't dash your foot on a stone? Treading on lions and snakes? No scourge will come near your tent? Dangerous and conditional: Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. What about those who don't know because they haven't been told or haven't been told in a way that makes sense to them? What about those who don't know how to love God yet? Are they, are we. on our own if we find ourselves in that category, temporarily or permanently?

If we do know, if we love as best we can, then what do we get? A bubble suit? A tireless guardian angel, pulling us back from busy curbs, protecting us from airborne diseases, shielding us from flying projectiles

hurled by accident or intent? Are we impervious to hurt? If that is the promise, then why do we hurt? Because God isn't paying attention or because we didn't love rightly? We didn't know enough?

We know better. In our heads anyway. Sometimes our guts wonder. We feel abandoned at times. At other times, we feel inadequate, like we disappointed God. But we know better. We know that God's love is constant and unconditional. Psalm 91 says there is nothing that can happen to us to take that love away. The last two verses explain the promises.

"When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them." Verse fifteen says God promises to answer whenever we call. We don't always hear the answer because we've moved out of hearing distance, or because we haven't learned the language of God well enough, or because we've set up a hoop for God to jump through and God hates hoops. But the promise is God will always answer.

The second promise from this verse is that God will be with us. "I will be with them in trouble." We'd prefer God keep us from trouble, but since a lot of the trouble we're in is our own fault and God gives us the freedom to wander away, we should celebrate the good news that even our stubbornness, even our bad choices, even our attempting to take God's place doesn't keep God from being with us.

But wait, that verse does say rescue! "I will rescue them and honor them." So, there you go! Our get out of jail free card!! Except, it doesn't seem to work that way. God will honor us? By allowing us to make our own choices and then to live with the consequences—that's honoring us. But we do have that card, in the end. We are rescued. Verse sixteen says, "With long life I will satisfy them and show them my salvation." What could be longer than eternity? That's the promise. That's the rescue. We want something more temporal, usually, but God thinks big picture and tries to show it to us. God invites us to live it now. Another way of thinking about this protection, this rescue, is to say. "Let's live as God wants us to do and see if our lives aren't better, more full, more alive. Let's love as God encourages us to do, and see if we aren't better lovers all around. This allows us to rescue and be rescued within the community where we live this love in powerful ways. That is where we can find our way to hope again.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

On this first Sunday in Lent, we join Jesus in the wilderness, a place of wild and dangerous things, of testing and temptation away from the security of home.

God, rescue us in the wilderness!

Once again, we watch and listen as Satan throws out temptation upon temptation, and we find our security in Jesus, who does not waver from the truth.

God, rescue us within the wilderness!

Once again, we face our own frailty and realize that the wilderness is not nearly as dangerous as our choices to prioritize selfish gain and hoarding of power.

God, rescue us through the wilderness!

Once again, we call upon God in the wildernesses of our lives, and we trust God's faithful reply:

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble; I will rescue them and honor them. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, August 2024.

Opening Prayer

God, you are our refuge.

You are the shore in sight,
you are hands that reach out,
you are the ground on which to rest.

God, you are our strength.

You are the life we long for,
you are the refusal to give up,
you are the keys of home we carry with us.

God, you are our help in time of trouble.

We call on you from the ruins and the rubble,
We call on you from the wildness and the deep,

ALL: We call on you to meet us in this place! Amen.

Found in Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 40.

Prayer of Confession

Jesus,

We confess that when we read about your temptations, we excuse ourselves. After all, we reason, we are not you. Of course, you passed the test, we say. You're God, right? But we mere mortals have no expectation that we can withstand evil like you did. But we are reminded that you are not only Savior; you are example. You faced the temptation to prove yourself, to be spectacular, and to have consuming power. And you walked away, resisting. Forgive us when we have not resisted; when we have yielded to

temptation. Forgive us for loving power and prestige more than God. Help us to choose a life rooted in God's word and grace. Amen.

Written by Valerie Bridgeman Davis, *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 146.

Benediction

Beloved, you—**you**—who live in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the shadow of the Almighty — will find in God your refuge and fortress. Go now, in the blessing of the Triune God who shelters you and rescues you, that we all might be a shelter and a rescue for and with one another. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, August 2024.

Second Sunday in Lent – *Conceal Me*

March 16, 2025

[Psalm 27](#) [Luke 13:31-35](#)

Color – Purple

**Head Above Water by Avril Lavigne*

WORSHIP PLANNING

Let's talk about sanctuary. We seem to have moved away from calling the space where we hold gathered worship a sanctuary. We now prefer worship centers or something like that. That makes sense; let's define what we do in that space. Let's find something a little more contemporary and dynamic. Let's emphasize the event that is worship, the experience of worshipping. It seems a positive move to leave sanctuary behind in favor of something new.

Except that sometimes there is no better word to describe what we need than sanctuary. "For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble," writes the psalmist (Ps 27:5 NRSV). And when aren't we in a day of trouble? There is something appealing about providing space to withdraw from the world for a time—a place to breathe, a place to be. Let worship give space for being this week. Sometimes that is silence. Sometimes that is prayer. Sometimes that is song. Wherever you make the space for sanctuary, for protection, for a plea to God to come and help keep our heads above water. That's our need this week.

But there also needs to be space to advocate for others, to acknowledge that even though it might be going well for us – and let's not manufacture oppression that we don't really feel – there are others for whom life is a constant struggle to survive. Our hurt makes us sympathetic to the hurts of others. Our hunger opens us up to the deep hungers of those around us. Intercessory prayer is an empathetic gesture. Worship can be an opportunity to ask how we can provide sanctuary for others in our broken world. It is a chance to practice compassion rather than division; acceptance rather than judgment.

We are called, with Christ, to lament over the city but not with anger and pointing fingers. Instead, we are called to open our arms to gather, like "a hen gathers her brood" (Luke 13:34). Some might argue that such an approach doesn't work in our divided age, but perhaps that is because no one has been willing to try. What does it mean to care for the city, to care for our community in this way? What is being asked of us? This might be something we could contemplate as we worship in our sanctuary on this day. How might we extend the table, extend the protection? How might we be a sanctuary for our community?

PLAYLIST SONG

["Head Above Water" by Avril Lavigne](#)

Like many of us, the writer of Psalm 27 knows trouble, as does Jesus when he is confronted by the Pharisees attempting to scare him into being quiet or, at the very least, getting out of town (Luke 13:31). Yet both the psalmist and Jesus do an odd thing when faced with threats: they stay the course. They

refuse to be swallowed up and swayed by fear. Instead, they root themselves in God, whose steadfast love conceals and protects, whose love keeps their heads above water. As you listen to Avril Lavigne's "Head Above Water," consider the storms in your life that you need God to protect you and sustain you through. Do you trust that God will take care of you through those storms?

PREACHING NOTES

*So pull me up from down below / 'Cause I'm underneath the undertow
Come dry me off and hold me close / I need you now, I need you most*

*Songwriters: Avril Ramona Lavigne, Stephan Moccio, Travis Clark
"Head Above Water" lyrics © Sing Little Penguin, Travis Clark Music,
Songs Of Universal Inc., Avril Lavigne Publishing LLC.*

The psalmist knows trouble. If this is David as some traditions have it, then he indeed knows trouble. David was threatened by enemies and loved ones alike, loved and despised in turn, filled up with God's presence and then seemingly abandoned by God because of his hubris, because of his arrogance and self-conceit. He knew what it was to fear. He knew what it was to want to hide. But David's glory was that whenever he found himself in trouble, he turned to repentance and humility. Then he sought redemption from the only source who could calm his fears.

It wasn't his own strength, flexing his own muscles that brought him comfort. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" Who indeed? You want a list? Because I can find a list. There are plenty out there who will itemize the fears we need to embrace. It is the way of the world, it appears.

Exactly. The way of the world. And while we live in and embrace the world, we don't live by the ways of the world. We are called to live differently. We are called to live confidently. Have you ever noticed that scripturally, the opposite of faith is not doubt? Doubt seems to be prevalent in the Bible. Doubt seems to coexist with faith rather well. Remember the prayer of the desperate father? "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Go look it up: Mark, chapter nine. Jesus doesn't chastise this poor man. Belief and unbelief often sit side by side. There are indications that belief without unbelief, without a measure of doubt, turns into a crusader's arrogance, into those who believe themselves incapable of error. A certain amount of doubt gives us the right amount of humility to be an effective instrument of God's grace in the world. Job, who had spent about thirty-seven chapters convinced he was right and that someone - namely God - had messed up and needed to fix all this mess really quick, falls to his face when God does show up. He says, "I didn't know what I was talking about! I spoke above myself; of things I didn't really understand." And God blessed him in that doubt and uncertainty.

No, the opposite of faith isn't doubt. It is fear. Throughout the Bible, the call is to not fear. Angels said it every time they showed up. God proclaimed it. Jesus lived it. Paul theologized about it. John put it on a bumper sticker for us to cling to when things got shaky. Perfect love casts out fear. Perfect love—the love that comes from Christ—casts out fear. There is no room for fear when we are filled with love.

You can't get rid of fear with wisdom. You can't argue people out of fear. You don't show up at your child's door in the middle of the night and say, "Now Billy, you know there are no such things as monsters under your bed. This being afraid in the middle of the night is simply illogical. Think about it,

Billy.” No, that won’t work, and it sounds odd for a parent to do. Instead, we step in, rush in, and gather little Billy up in our arms and hold him close and remind him that he is loved—powerfully, completely, unconditionally loved. That’s how you handle fear.

The psalmist says the same thing in a different way. “Seek shelter in the tent of the Lord,” he says. Hide in God and be lifted up, above our fears, stable on that rock. Then, we’re told, worship with joy—shouts of joy. Not sitting in the pew while the worship show goes on, but shouting with joy while we make sacrifices. Sacrifices? Animals? No, not anymore. The blood has been spilt already. Instead, let’s sacrifice our pride; let’s sacrifice our propriety, our stiffness, our standoffishness. Let’s sacrifice our “me first” attitude and offer a hand to someone else, someone not like us. Let’s act like we really have nothing to fear but fear itself.

So, you’re thinking, “Ok, I like the sound of that. That living without fear kind of thing.” But how? I mean, I hear the speeches. Our political life seems based on fear. There are lots of things to fear, we’re told. Our world is falling apart. Making fear choices seems to be the smarter way to go these days. Acting out of fear seems the logical response. So, how do we get to where we can live without fear?

The psalmist is right there with you. He needs a little pep talk to get where his theology tells him he needs to be, even if his guts won’t let him. Luckily, he slipped his little inner dialog right into the psalm. “‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face.’” You want to overcome fear? Seek God’s face. Seriously. This isn’t just a cliché to make you feel better. It is a program for ridding yourself and the world of fear. Seek God’s face. Set yourself the task of looking for God at work in the world. We claim to believe God is at work among us; we claim to believe God is at work within us. So, look. Look for God’s face in the face of the stranger serving you your lunch, working on your car, asking for a handout. Look for God’s face in the gestures of kindness in this terrible world, in the opportunities to laugh and sing, in the moments of grace with loved ones, in the passion of body and soul. Seek God’s face in the beauty of music, in the wonder of the world around you. You’re on a mission. If you fill up your life with the search for God, you won’t have time to fear.

Let me see your face, O God, my light and my salvation! Conceal me so that what shows is not me and my fears, but the presence and the confidence and the hope of God.

Just as Jesus did. “If you have seen me, you have seen the father,” he said (*John 14:9 NRSV*). He was hidden in the Father, concealed in God. Or God concealed in him. In our Gospel text for this week, Jesus seems to reflect on this hiding. Sort of. Maybe.

There is considerable agreement that Luke is messing things around again. In Matthew’s Gospel, this lament over Jerusalem comes on the threshold of the Passion. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem for the last time; he is about to lay down his life. And it is out of that event that Jesus begins with these words, with this desire - to gather the children of Jerusalem (which probably means all the children of God). It certainly makes sense that on the brink of the events that would lead to his death, Jesus would lament missed opportunities. So, it does seem likely that Luke took an event out of order so that he could make a point.

But then what might that point be? What does the juxtaposition of the warning from the Pharisees about Herod’s homicidal rages and Jesus’ lament over the city of Jerusalem say to us?

Does anyone else find it odd that it is the Pharisees who come purporting to save Jesus' skin? These are the guys who would like nothing more than for Jesus to find a speedy and messy end. These are the guys who stumble all over themselves to find tests he can't pass and questions he can't answer. And now we are supposed to believe that they have Jesus' best interests at heart? Yeah, right. Even Jesus seems to suspect something, because his response is an acknowledgment of a relationship. "Go and tell," he says to them. Run on back to the puppet master pulling your strings, Jesus says. He declares that he is in charge of his own destiny; he is in charge of his worth and his value; he isn't planning to run and hide from anyone. He knows to whom he belongs. He is not far from home.

It might make perfect sense that having declared his own sense of belonging to his mission and to the one who sends him on this journey, that he then pauses to reflect on the object of that mission and the subject of the love that comes from the one who sends him. It seems right that his heart would break for those who have said *no* at the moment he is reminded of the cost he will have to pay.

Besides, he has met the fox, so now he heads to the henhouse. Go and tell that fox, he says, that scavenger, that trickster, that unscrupulous schemer, that his power, the power of destruction has its limits. Having chased away the fox, he then wants to gather the chicks. It is as if Luke is giving us an option here. Do we find our safety and security in the powers that function out of fear and self-interest at least in part? Do we find our connection, our sense of meaning and purpose in those who seek to define us by amassing a count of our failures and disappointments? Or do we run to the one who shelters us in the shadow of his wings, who is broken and poured out through an unimaginable love for us?

We need to know love like Christ offers. We need to cling to that love, to that hope when we walk through those valleys, and we feel like motherless children. We also need to be in the business of loving like that. All around us, at any given time, there are those who feel disconnected, those who feel as though no one cares, no one is there for them. There are those who feel that their mistakes define them in your eyes, who need you to spread your wings and gather them in.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, when you are surrounded on every side by shadows that frighten and voices that deride and confuse, what do you say?

God is our light and our salvation! Whom shall we fear?

When threats bombard you from every corner, stealing the security and peace you long for, what do you say?

God is the stronghold of our lives! Of whom shall we be afraid?

When anxiety and loneliness overwhelm and you do not know who or what to trust any more, what do you say?

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Because God knows our suffering. God makes a home among us, welcoming us to come home to God and one another.

Come! Let us worship God who hides us in the day of trouble and conceals us together under the cover of the tent of Love.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Prayers of the People

*This prayer includes an option to sing the congregational response, using the chorus from “Jesus Is a Rock” (Worship and Song, 3074). If you choose not to include the sung response, consider using the final line of each petition as the congregational response. Alternatively, you could also conclude each petition with “God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**”*

Loving God,

We pray for those in our community who are bombarded with troubles, surrounded on all sides by threats to their well-being, their livelihood, and their thriving. God, be their shelter in the time of storm.

**Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a weary land, a weary land;
my Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a shelter in the time of storm.**

We pray for those in our community who long for peace, those who are burnt out, shut out, and ready to hide out because it all feels like too much. God, be their shelter in the time of storm.

**Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a weary land, a weary land;
my Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a shelter in the time of storm.**

We pray for those in our world who can’t remember what safety feels like, who, after years of violence and unrest, cannot imagine what a day, a week, a year without fighting would feel like. God, be their shelter in the time of storm.

**Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a weary land, a weary land;
my Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a shelter in the time of storm.**

God, teach us to be your sanctuary in the world. Give us the courage to make peace, extend care, and provide for the thriving of all who wonder how they will even survive. Help us be their shelter in the time of storm.

**Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a weary land, a weary land;
my Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a shelter in the time of storm.**

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024. Prayer response from “Jesus Is a Rock in a Weary Land” in *Worship and Song* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 3074.

Prayer of Confession

We live in the shadow of peace, O God, but too often, we face the shadow and not the light. We pray for peace today because we know we are not a whole people without it. Forgive us our warring madness, our abuse of power, and our disregard of the rights of others. Lift from us the burden of the need always to be in control. Teach us the ways of mutual love for all people. Help us to give peace a chance. Amen.

Written by Paul B. Robinson in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated*, eds. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 222.

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Benediction

Go, now, in the blessing of God who conceals you in the tent of God’s love, that you may invite others to come home to God who is Love. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Third Sunday in Lent – *My Soul Clings*

March 23, 2025

[Psalm 63:1-8](#) [Luke 13:1-9](#)

Color – Purple

**Light of Home by U2*

WORSHIP PLANNING

To what do you cling? That might be the question before the worship planning team this week. Perhaps your first reaction is, “No, I don’t cling. Clingy is not a good adjective for people. Let’s move on to something else.” Hold on. Maybe you’ve sung this: “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” Or “I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown.” There are even more contemporary songs with the idea of clinging to Jesus, including one by Sovereign Grace titled “Cling to Christ.” And that song has a verse that says:

*It’s more than I can do / To keep my hold on You
But all my hope and peace / Is that You cling to me*

*Songwriters: Bob Kauflin, Jason Hansen, David Lachance Jr
“Cling to Christ” lyrics © Sovereign Grace Praise*

So, let’s ask again, “To what do you cling?” The opportunity for worship this week is to offer a strong support for the living of these days, to provide foundational faith that grounds the community in the real world, and yet lifts vision to a larger truth. It would be a good week for a creed or affirmation of faith—maybe something familiar like the Apostles Creed (881 *United Methodist Hymnal*) or something more contemporary like “A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada” (883, *United Methodist Hymnal*). We need reminders of the ground upon which we stand (or the one to whom we cling).

The psalm invites us to thirst for God, to hunger for God’s presence in our daily lives—the low moments as well as the high ones, and especially throughout daily life. We need to cultivate an awareness of God as we worship so that when we are apart from the community, we still have that sense of not being alone.

Our singing can express that reaching, that hungering for a glimpse of God’s presence. We can sing of the desire to have something to cling to and the promise to do so as much as we are able and then rely on the community that surrounds us to help us with our grip. So, let our prayers be an invitation to see the resource that fills the pews around us. We can give thanks for one another and for the witness and the willingness to be that body that encourages and mentors and challenges and holds us accountable. We can celebrate and petition at the same time. The Christ we cling to often can be found in the people around us. The faith we cling to can be seen in the relationships of faith. We don’t cling to abstract ideas, but to real incarnations lived before us.

PLAYLIST SONG

"Light of Home" by U2

To what do you cling? Psalm 63 invites us to reflect on where we find security and sustenance when we are desperate, disillusioned, or in danger. Yes, we need food, water, and shelter. Yes, we need community that protects us when we feel threatened and alone. Yet underneath these basic needs is something even more necessary: God. As you listen to U2's "Light of Home," consider: "When you are surrounded by chaos and turmoil, how do you find security, confidence, and home in God?"

PREACHING NOTES

I can see the lights in front of me / One more push and I'll be born again

Songwriters: Adam Clayton, Alana Haim, Ariel Rechtshaid,
Danielle Haim, David Evans, Este Haim, Laurence Mullen, Paul Hewson
"Lights of Home" lyrics © BMG Rights Management, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.,
Universal Music Publishing Group

The first day I spent with my mom turned out to be the best day. It was not what I'd call a good day, but it was the best I got in those few days I was able to make the trip down. Not terribly responsive, she at least seemed to allow my presence with her. She let me feed her lunch and sit with her for a while that day. I asked if she wanted me to read to her, and I think she said yes. I read anyway, and she seemed to listen, somewhat. I read through three chapters of *The Harvester* by Gene Stratton-Porter. I grabbed the well-worn copy sitting on the table in her room and read that story she once knew by heart. We slipped into another world, my mother and I, a simpler one, a quieter one, rural Indiana, a century ago, when things were simpler, gentler. I liked it there; I have to confess. I kept asking the other days if I could read, but she wouldn't let me.

I kept reading, that first and only time, even though there was too much activity going on outside her room. I wanted to close the door, but also didn't want to interrupt the cadence of my voice that seemed to be soothing her. So, I kept reading, as nurses and aides and curious other residents of the memory care ward wandered in and out of the room across the hall. I kept reading about a world of love and loss and hope and despair, as two strangers disappeared into that room and closed the door. I kept reading about a world insulated from the heartache of today, yet full of its own tragedy, as the door across the hall opened and the two strangers wheeled a gurney with the all too familiar zippered bag discretely covered with a sheet down the hall and out the locked door. When mom fell asleep, and I asked that she be put to bed for a nap before I left to check on Dad back at the house, I stepped into the room. It was Winnie, or Miss Winnie, as she was there in Tennessee. I stood in the room now emptied of her presence and prayed for her and her family and for all the other residents who most likely wouldn't know what happened.

It was daytime, midafternoon, as I prayed in that room, yet it felt like night—when the questions come and doubts rise up, the night when our failures seem too heavy to bear and our losses like wounds in our

souls. I hadn't eaten all day because I was worried about Mom, but the hunger in my heart was for more than food.

Psalms 63 carries the superscription, "A psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah." Given that David spent a lot of time in the wilderness, we can't really know what time is being referred to. We don't know what was going on. But we do know of a couple of times when David fled to the wilderness of Judah in particular. The first was when he was young and somehow fell into and out of favor in the palace. He sang soothing songs to calm King Saul's moods, but then had to run for his life from that king who wanted him dead. He was in the wilderness, running for his life. Later, as king, David fled into the wilderness when his son, Absalom, attempted an insurrection, wanting to be king in his father's place. David fled for protection while his generals sorted out this battle. Then he wept for his son who wanted him dead. It was not a happy place, the wilderness, not for David, not for kings, not for fathers and sons.

And yet. Look again. Yes, there is hunger and there is thirst. There is a longing for the presence that is as real as the longing for food and water. In the wilderness, you'd think the first thing on the list would be physical sustenance. But no, the deeper hunger, the more powerful thirst, is for God. He is fainting for God's presence, driven to see not his own safety, not his own revival, but the very face of God. O God, you are my God, I seek you.

Underneath (this is the amazing part), underneath the need, underneath the hunger and thirst, underneath the wandering in the wilderness, there is confidence and certainty. "I have looked upon you in the sanctuary." "I have," not "I will," or "I want to," or "please let me," but "I have." You have been my help. There is a memory here that is sustaining. That's what he is doing in the watches of the night—not despairing, not doubting and fearing, not letting the wilderness swallow him up, the emptiness of the room across the hall echo in his soul. No, he is remembering. I will meditate on you "in the watches of the night."

How do you meditate? Isn't that Eastern mysticism, some foreign practice not a part of our religious tradition? Doesn't that involve nonsense words and uncomfortable positions and chanting monotones and smoke? Lots and lots of smoke? By no means, as St. Paul would say.

"I will meditate on you in the watches of the night." That means finding a memory, a word, a verse from the Bible, or, even better, a moment—a moment of joy and hope, a moment of encounter, of intimacy and healing, a moment of shared love and closeness and holding it like a jewel in your mind. That means looking at it, remembering it from every angle, letting the light of understanding shine through it, sparkling with presence and comfort. "I will meditate on you in the watches of the night." I will remember the moments when you felt close, when we were one. Now, in the darkness of this wilderness time, I will let that moment fill me with love and hope and joy. Because that moment defines me more than this moment. That togetherness, that union, that is where I reside, even though right now, I am alone in the dark. "I will meditate on you in the watches of the night."

Suddenly, the darkness is not the absence of God but the shadow of the healing wings. Suddenly, the darkness is not a place for whispers and for tears, but for singing and joy. It's not a place of hunger, but of feasting. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast because I remember. I was meditating on a moment, on a word that meant something at one time, a word that spoke to me, a word perhaps from another important to me, a word that survives the wilderness.

Isn't this something each of us has to do? This meditating, this remembering, as well as this feasting and rejoicing? I am the one who needs to cling to God. Right?

Right. But. But my experience of God is always plural. Always. We are Trinitarian. We experience God as community: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer - or Father, Son, and Spirit in the traditional language. God is always plural. There is always community. My experience of God is always shaped by the community in which I live and in which I grew. I know God because of you. Because I love you and you love me, I can have an inkling of what it is to be loved by God. Because of the experiences I have had with you and those who came before you, I can remember God in the watches of the night. Part of what I remember is not just God, but the God in you, the God I know in you—your love, your support, your care, your correction, you. You.

And her. She was part of my you. It was not a good day, but it was the best day we had that time. The other days were more distant, more agitated, more lost. But on that day, there was a glimpse. It was fleeting, but it was a glimpse. I was wheeling her by someone in the common room, and she reached out and said, "How are you doing?" She sounded like my mom again—caring for another, loving and welcoming another. It wasn't me she was speaking to, but it was my mom for a moment. A moment. We got to her place at the table, and I wheeled her around to her tray, put the napkin around her neck, and sat beside her with a fork to feed her. And she looked at me and said, "Do I know you?"

Yes, Mom. You do. I'll remember for you. I'll remember us. And together we will live in the memory of God, and in the watches of the night, we will sing for joy—for what was and what is and what will be.

In the remembering, we are tending the tree so that we can produce more fruit. We are remembering what it is we cling to; we are remembering the lights of home, and we are learning to live as though it might be our last days. Jesus does not call us to fatalism, but to a way of clinging to life, the full life, the fruitful life. We are not waiting for a proper time, because now is the proper time. We are not waiting for our season, because this is our season. Even in the darkness of night, this is our season.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, what has God done for you?

God saves, provides, and holds us in God's steadfast love.

Consider and remember: in the joyful times and in the sorrowful times, what has God done for you?

God covers us and lifts us up, protecting and empowering us with steadfast love.

When you have been like the fig tree in Jesus' story that seems unable to produce and that everyone has given up on, what has God done for you?

God tends the soil and waters the ground, nurturing us into life with steadfast love.

Children of God, come, let us worship God who never gives up on us!

We come to worship and cling to God, for God's steadfast love never fails!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Prayer for the Day

We are wounded, worried, betrayed, afraid, and injured. We are physically, mentally, and emotionally challenged.

Drink from these waters and you will never thirst again.

We chase thrills, happiness, wealth, health, longevity, *him, her*, peace; the right job, the right look, anything to lessen our pain. We exhaust even ourselves with our efforts.

Drink from these waters and you will never thirst again.

We continue, broken—day in and day out, hopelessly applying quick fixes. The pain will not subside. We are beckoned by an eternal yearning. We remember a prayer that grandmamma taught us; a lesson learned the hard way, or a word from the Word spoken by a sage. We long for relief, we seek it, search for it, yearn for it— relief that can't be purchased or bartered.

Drink from these waters and never thirst again.

God we are grateful that your thoughts and your ways are higher than our own. Thank you for forgiving our sins. Thank you for new mercies each new day. Thank you for always welcoming us back into fellowship with you. Thank you for providing waters from which we may drink and never thirst again.

Written by Toni Payne in *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 89.

Prayer of Confession

God, you call us to step more deeply into ourselves
as we amend and awaken to who you desire us to be.
Let us acknowledge our transgressions in stillness and in silence
So that may prepare our hearts for change.

Moment of silence

**We confess that we have not always brought forth good fruit.
In the midst of chaos and frenzy, we have often lost our way.
Our feet have strayed from the place where we met you.
Our egos have kept us from noticing our missteps;
Yet, with you, we know there's another chance for change.
There is another opportunity to bear good fruit
In a world full of spoiled and rotten produce and systems designed to kill,
We are called to be the change that sustains generations.
Let us lean with you into this chance for transformation.**

Words of Assurance

God's grace and mercy abounds.

God is with us in the change.

God's everlasting arms embrace us.

Each of us is beloved, affirmed, and set free.

Amen.

Adapted from Rev. Mia M. McClain on the Worship Ways site of the United Church of Christ,
<https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/lent-3c-march-20-2022/>.

Benediction

May God bless you with the hope to cling to God, knowing that in the highs and lows, the joys and the sorrows, the known and unknown of this life, God's love never fails. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Fourth Sunday in Lent – *Steadfast Love*

March 30, 2025

[Psalm 32 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

Color – Purple

**Rainbow by Kacey Musgraves*

WORSHIP PLANNING

Psalm 32 is a *Selah* psalm. There are only three of them, but they are powerful. Sure, no one knows what they really mean or how they function in the psalm. But there is something intriguing about the placement of the word in Psalm 32. The first one comes after a statement about how difficult life is and how faith is sometimes a burden that we bear. After expressing that pain and admitting that weakness, there is the word “*Selah*,” and then everything changes. The psalm becomes a celebration, a declaration of faith, a cleansing, a renewal. One of the understandings of *selah* is that it means *to breathe*. Some think it is a musical notation for singing or an instrumental interlude like a music bridge. I think it is a call to breathe, to stop and reflect and breathe.

Worship is catching our breath in the busyness of living. It is that moment when we pause and reflect and remember who we are and whose we are. We need *selah* moments in our lives daily. And when we gather, there should be that sense that we are pausing to breathe and collect and redirect ourselves for the tasks ahead.

The second *selah* comes after that moment of redirection, confession, and forgiveness. Then a breath, before widening the vision to include others. “Let all who are faithful offer prayer,” the psalmist declares and then gives witness to the power in his life. This is what God is for me, he declares, this is the result of paying attention.

Then the third breath, and it changes again. I will teach and counsel. “Don’t do this,” the psalmist writes, “do this.” Don’t be stubborn but be joyful. In other words, having declared the discipleship journey, the psalm turns to making disciples. This is what we do; this is who we are. This is the work that is set before us. But we can’t do it without stopping to breathe.

So, breathe. Let worship be a breath-giving experience. Let there be space to breathe this day. Let the music help us catch our breath. Let the prayers be breath prayers as we breathe out our confession and breathe in God’s grace and forgiveness. The prodigal couldn’t return home until he stopped and caught his breath. And in that breathing, he saw himself and he saw hope hanging like a rainbow over his head. So, breathe.

PLAYLIST SONG

["Rainbow" by Kacey Musgraves](#)

Steadfast love. What does that mean? Much as we might like it to mean that we will never experience problems and life will be easy and happy all the time, that kind of love is a fairy tale—and not a very good fairy tale, at that. Psalm 32 offers a richer and more robust account of God's steadfast love—a love that never ends and never fails, no matter what life throws at us. As you listen to Kacey Musgraves' "Rainbow," take a deep breath and consider how God might be calling you to "let go of the umbrella" and trust in God's steadfast love.

PREACHING NOTES

*Let go of your umbrella / 'Cause, darlin', I'm just trying to tell ya /
That there's always been a rainbow hangin' over your head*

*Songwriters: Shane McAnally, Natalie Hemby, Kacey Musgraves
"Rainbow lyrics" © 351 Music, Songs Of Mv2, Tempo Investments/smack Hits,
Wruckebucks Publishing, Rainbow Shoals Music*

In the never-ending list of things I wasn't taught in seminary, there were times when I was called to check out a plumbing problem. Check out? Look at. Standing there with hands on hips, saying, "Yep that's a problem." Not that I solved anything, as if I could. But I acknowledged it was an issue. Drains backing up, water on the floor, yep, that's a problem. The door was blocked; don't use these. The head of trustees was called. The custodian was called. Block the doors; don't use them. We'll call a plumber on Monday. OK, did that.

Did that. I didn't fix anything; I just went and looked. It didn't really help; it wasn't much good. I didn't get anything out of the trip—except maybe a metaphor. Backed-up drains spilling over, causing a problem, making a mess. Just close the door. That's a good response, a common one anyway. Close the door. You go to visit neighbors; they show you around, but pass the closed door. "Don't look in there," they say. "It's a mess." We're used to a mess; we've got our own closed doors.

Clogged plumbing, closed doors: I'm not really talking about housekeeping. You got that, right? *Metaphor*: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. Everyone needs a junk room; everyone gets clogged pipes now and again. It happens. But it is a mess, especially when the closed door is hiding unconfessed sin. The pipes are clogged with attacks on the sovereignty of God.

You should leave the "Selah" in there when you read Psalm 32, just for fun. No reason really, just a bonus. The truth is no one knows for sure what it means. Well, some know, have decided, chosen, but Hebrew scholars will tell you that we aren't sure. It could be a word of praise. It could be a musical interlude, like a bridge connecting different parts of the psalm. A key change, maybe. Or it could be a pause. A breath.

I like that one. A breath, a place for the Spirit to blow through, a moment to sit back and remember that even reading scripture prayerfully is a dialogue. It's not just what we think of it, what we hear in it; it is

what God is saying to us. Listen. Breathe. Pause a moment before you leap in. “Speak, Lord, your servant hears!”

It’s good to stop and breathe before you clean out the pipes. It’s good to let the Spirit blow through before you open the door you want to keep closed. *Selah*. Let God in. The psalmist says that before remembering to breathe, before asking for God’s Spirit to blow through; there was only the weight of the brokenness. “While I kept silence.” How long can you keep silent? About the clog in the drain, or the clutter behind the door? How long can you pretend that it isn’t that bad? That it doesn’t drive a wedge between you and those you love? How long can you go hiding from the breath of God because you’re too embarrassed to admit you’ve fouled the air around you?

“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (32:1-2). The psalm doesn’t deal in metaphors. No clogged drains and locked doors. Transgression, sin, iniquity, deceit. Whew. Four different words for sin. There’s not a lot of wiggle room there, no place for equivocating. “Anything” seems to be the argument; anything that gets in the way of letting the breath of God blow through your life needs to be removed, needs to be lifted up. The happiness sought cannot be found outside the relationship with God, outside of full communion with the Spirit. Thinking that there is nothing to confess, nothing for which to pray, nothing that you can’t handle on your own is to choose to live under the weight that crushes bones. It is choosing to live in the desert, dry as a bone.

Breathe. And then open the door. “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not hide my iniquity: I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (32:5). There are four words for *sin* there. Did you notice? Four words in verse two, and four in verse five. I want to hand over everything—everything in my life, everything in my head, everything in my heart, everything in my mouth.

Sometimes I hear folks say ... no; let’s be honest, sometimes I say, “It’s not that bad;, I don’t need to bother God with that. When I commit a real sin, a really bad one, then I’ll go to God. I don’t want to waste God’s time on trivialities. I know plenty of worse sinners than I.” But what if it wasn’t the degree of the act committed? What if it was simply the clog? It’s no big deal, but it’s still a clog. We can live with that, can’t we? A small blockage won’t hinder us that much. It won’t slow us down.

Until it does and knocks us to our knees. The blood can’t rush through; we are dried up as though in the heat of summer. The air can’t come through, and we are groaning all night long trying to breathe because we’ve neglected the arteries of our relationships with God and one another. They’re the same, you know. Jesus was asked for the single law, the one most important. He gave two: Love God; love neighbor. They are woven together, he implied. The pipes that connect us and God are the same arteries that connect you and me, all of us. A clog between us gets in the way of the breath of God. A sin before God keeps me from loving you the way I need to.

That is why, once the psalmist breathes again, there is a call to the community at large. First the address is to God. Oh, that everyone knew what I’ve just remembered, what I’ve just experienced. All it takes, all it takes to be able to find a shady place in the heat of the burning sun, all it takes to find some dry ground when the waters of the world seem about to sweep you away, all it takes is a prayer to God. A prayer. A faithful prayer. A prayer of release and confession. A prayer of reconciliation and hope. A prayer

of healing for healing the broken relationships, the hurt feelings, the misunderstandings that drove us apart. A gesture of community.

Don't wait. The psalmist turns to the community. Don't wait to be led around by the nose. Don't wait for someone else to take the first step, to make the first gesture. You can live in the agony of brokenness and stubbornness if you want to. But it is no way to live, no way to breathe. You can pretend the pipes aren't clogged and that sludge oozing across the floor is nothing to worry about. You can stand alone in the certainty that you were right all along, while the water rises over your shoes.

The prodigal had that choice. He came to the realization that things were clogged, that something got in the way of his dream of a better life. And now he was standing in a pig pen up to his knees in a plumbing nightmare. He could have kept tossing out the husks. But, coming to himself, he realized that was not the way to live. He had another option. He could reach out to a community, to a family—the same family he slapped in the face when he launched off on his own. He knew he wasn't worthy; at least, that was the speech he rehearsed. He knew he didn't deserve the love that showered down on him. His brother knew he didn't deserve it, that's for sure. And yet, there it was. Steadfast love surrounded him, even when he ran away, even when he thought only of himself and his immediate pleasure. There was something powerful, transformative, eternal that surrounded him, even though he didn't deserve it. That is what *grace* really means.

He could have stayed in his certainty, in his self-centered fixation. Or he could have made a choice to live in joy, to turn around and wrap himself in the steadfast love that supported him, even when he didn't realize it or particularly want it. He could have chosen to raise his vision enough to see the rainbow in the sky.

You can choose to live in joy. *Happy are those*. Isn't that what we want? To be happy? Here's the formula: Heal the breach. Clear the clog. Open the door. Say, "I'm sorry," even when you aren't sure you're wrong. Say you're sorry for being misunderstood, for being mule-headed, for letting the clog continue to build. And when the relationships are restored, you can shout for joy. You can laugh again. You can breathe deeply at last in the steadfast love that surrounds you.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

When we struggle to live as you teach us, and we fail to answer your call...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us.

When the truth clogs up in our throat, and we fear what will happen if we speak and if we keep silent...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us.

When we open our hearts and let the truth of our sorrows, our sin, our joys, and our doubts flow freely...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us.

When our stubborn hearts encounter the grace that teaches and guides us into a life of trust and joyful obedience...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us today and every day. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Opening Prayer

Loving God, it was said of the Prodigal Son that he “came to himself.”

Help us to wake up to ourselves, and to You.

Set us free from the illusion of trying to be perfect

so that we might be more fully human.

Help us not to chase after an imaginary life,

and to find satisfaction in our real lives.

And turn us away from our self-rejection

so that we might notice Your arms open in welcome. Amen.

Adapted from Ann Siddall, in *Lent to Easter liturgies: Year C*. Posted on the website of the **Stillpoint Spirituality Centre**, <https://stillpointcentre.com.au/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/02/prayer-prodigal-son.html>.

Prayer of Confession

God, we admit that we are prone to try to hide our sins; to keep our mouths shut and hope we are not found out. But there is no place to hide from you. Our silence only makes us sick in body and spirit. But you delight in forgiving us and in covering our sin. You are glad when we confess our failings and our needs. Hide us, O God, from trouble; teach us the way we should go. Deliver us from our own stubbornness, and draw us near, we pray. Amen.

Written by Valerie Bridgeman Davis in *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 147.

Benediction

May God’s grace go ahead of you,

trail behind you, and encircle you

each and every moment,

that with every move you make

you would know with absolute assurance

that God's steadfast love
will never leave you alone. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Fifth Sunday in Lent – *Fill Me with Laughter*

April 6, 2025

Color – Purple

**Cover Me in Sunshine by Pink*

WORSHIP PLANNING

Humor is more difficult than it appears. Laughter too often comes at the expense of another person. Yet, when used well, humor is a binding agent, bringing total strangers together in a shared experience. So, this is not a call for worship to be replaced with a stand-up comedy routine. Yet, a lightness of heart seems called for this week—the ability, perhaps, to see blessings instead of burdens. This laughter is not because something is funny – though it might be. Rather, we laugh because of the sheer joy of living. We give thanks for the gift of living and loving, for being in community, for having space to worship. Gratitude leads our prayer time this week.

The psalm for this week has a hint of overcoming. While the psalmist doesn't say much about what has been overcome, there is the remembrance of rescue. That's the connection with our playlist song for this week, "Cover Me in Sunshine" by Pink. While the song appears to be living in a difficult time, the call is for the ability to see hope, to be covered with sunshine and the confidence that all will be well. So, what have we overcome for which we can give thanks today? How has God rescued us and given us the space and the breath to laugh again, to see beauty and wonder in the world around us? Suffering limits our vision; redemption raises our vision. Let's celebrate the new hope that we have or the constant hope that we remember.

But be careful. We can celebrate new hope, some may still be struggling. There may be some in your congregation for whom the latter part of the psalm resonates more deeply. Restore us again, the psalm claims: "Those who go out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy..." (Ps. 126:6 NRSV). Some are still in process, longing for the joy that others feel. Some are still trapped and don't feel strong enough to rise. Remember them as you prepare liturgy for this day. Laughter might be divisive for those who don't see the joy just yet.

So, cast the vision. What is there to laugh about? What joy is within reach? What testimony can we give to redemption, rescue, and hope? You might project pictures of beautiful places as you give thanks today. Or post pictures of your community and the people around you; there is beauty and joy there. Find ways to lift the hearts of those who have gathered, so that they might see themselves laughing together.

Does this seem out of sync with Lent? Maybe our usual expression of this season does seem antithetical to laughter. And yet, the Sundays in Lent were always supposed to be feast days, days of celebration and laughter. So, recapture some of that holy space during an intense season and let everyone rejoice in the hope that Easter is coming.

PLAYLIST SONG

"Cover Me in Sunshine" by P!NK and Willow Sage Hart

"Fill me with laughter." This is not what we expect so deep into the season of Lent. We are supposed to be getting more serious the closer we get to Good Friday, right? Or, perhaps Psalm 126 is right on time. Laughter, stories, and memories of God's provision are necessary at all stages of our journey with God as individuals and as family in Christ. They shore up our faith and feed our hope. They remind us that God's goodness still infuses all creation, and God's love remains steadfast. So, as you listen to P!NK's "Cover Me in Sunshine," take in the words and consider how they might serve as a prayer, a call to God to bring sunshine and laughter as reminders of God's sustaining and life-giving love.

PREACHING NOTES

*Just imagine people laughing /
I know some day we will
And even if it's far away /
Get me through another day*

*Songwriters: Maureen McDonald / Amy Allen
Cover Me In Sunshine lyrics © Artist Publishing Group West, Kenny + Betty Tunes,
Superreal Songs, Way To Go Mo*

Every now and then, all those classes in theatre history come in handy. I was reading our psalm for this week, and a term from one of those classes just jumped out at me: "Restoration comedy." Oh yeah, you are saying with skepticism clouding your eyes, I remember not reading a single thing about that!"

Restoration comedy, also called Comedy of Manners, was a late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century theatrical style that was all the rage among the classes in England and the Continent. Part of the reason for its popularity was that it made fun of the aristocracy. The lower classes loved seeing those with power made to look like fools. And those in power enjoyed seeing their colleagues taken down a peg, secure in the knowledge that the object of the joke was that other guy and not them! But in fact, while the antics of the upper crust provided the context of the comedy, it was never designed to question the status quo, and many historians believed it shored up the class system in the minds and hearts of the whole of society.

Yet, boundaries were pushed. Another significant milestone of Restoration comedy was the advent of women! Oh, wait. Of course, women had been around before this period of history. But this is the first time in modern history that women acted on the stage in any significant numbers. In the Elizabethan period, young boys played all the female parts because ... well, because.

Not only on stage, however—the first women playwrights appeared writing Restoration comedy. That was a good thing, too, because the subject matter was, well, let's just say, a little more palatable when presented between men and women. Ribaldry was the term that fit—risqué humor, flirtations, and innuendo. What was once taboo was now subject to public humor, not explicit by today's standards, but earthy, human, real-life men and women, relationships and misunderstandings, longing and desire,

failure and success, hope and disappointment, anything and everything played out on the stage of human experience, and played for laughs.

That's how they got away with it, you know. Because it was comedy, no one thought to take it seriously. No one thought that humor could change reality from an oppressive social system into something more, something different. And yet, changes were afoot.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

Psalms 126:1-2, NRSV

Some of the most significant psalms are some of the shortest ones. Like Psalm 23, Psalm 126 is only six verses long. Yet it points to a deep reality. Wait, you are thinking, "a deep reality"? OK, it is a nice psalm, even fun in a way, laughter and shouts of joy, great, good. But deep? It isn't even the end of tears and proclamation of heaven, because the last couple of verses remind us that we are still in the midst of the struggle. Sowing in tears and going out weeping: It isn't all good news, no rainbows and unicorns here. There is still the struggle of daily living. There is still the risk of loss, the futility of pouring out, not knowing whether your efforts will bring a return, and there is still the recognition of the fragility of life and hope.

You can't help but feel lost in these six verses. Is the bad time over? Have we returned home? Are the dreams realized? If so, then why is there a prayer for restoration halfway through? "When the Lord restored the fortunes ..." writes the psalmist, only to turn around a few verses later and write, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord!" Did it happen, and we lost it? Or is the dream only a dream, and we woke up and there wasn't anything to laugh about, no reason to shout with joy? Are we still waiting for the Lord to do great things for us? Or did it happen, and we missed it somehow; we lost our grip on those great things and lost our grip on joy?

We want our fortunes restored. The recurring mega-lottery storylines have us all thinking, "Boy, if that was me ...". We are still convinced that if we had only a little more, were a little better off, all would be well. But maybe that is a misunderstanding of the psalmist's idea of fortune. Maybe the call is for something else entirely, not the material well-being provided by a good harvest, not the sheaves we would bring in when the weather conditions are ideal and the timing is perfect. Restore our fortunes, O Lord.

What was restored in the era of Restoration comedy? The year 1660 is considered the beginning of this renaissance in British theatre, and it was also, not coincidentally, the year the Puritan ban and subsequent closings of all the playhouses in the country ended. What was restored was the ability to laugh, to enjoy poking fun at the antics of human frailty and pretension. The joy of exposing human life at its most vulnerable—our creatureliness—was restored.

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in the seriousness of our situations, the struggle and brokenness, the slights real and imagined from those who seem to be our enemies, we are overwhelmed by the tears with which we sow that we can't imagine reaping, let alone shouting for joy as we do it.

Perhaps what we are begging for, praying for, is the ability to laugh again, to hope again. Living as a person of hope and joy is claiming a fortune no lottery can award. Restore our fortunes, O Lord. Fill our

mouths with laughter and our tongue with shouts (shouts, mind you, not chuckles under our breath, not grins behind our hands, but shouts) of joy.

Judas, on the other hand, didn't know how to celebrate a moment (John 12:1-8). Judas was a man who knew the cost of everything, but the value of nothing. He was willing to shout at Mary and say, "You shouldn't have," but it wasn't the false humility of a grateful receiver. No, John says it was the cold look of avarice that was aware of what he was not getting. He wouldn't be so bold as to say it should have gone to him, so he condemned the whole act as wasteful.

But we must wonder if John put those words and that parenthetical explanation in the story to cover his own guilt since other versions tell this story a little differently. Maybe he had been the spokesperson earlier; maybe he was one of the "some who were there" and was now looking for someone to blame. Surely, I couldn't have said that or thought that. That jealousy, that hunger to have could only have come from someone truly evil, right?

Jesus points out to all of them and to us as well that no gift is wasteful when it is given in love, no matter how extravagant. No act of service, no matter how humble, can be demeaning when it is given in love.

What about that last verse, though? ("You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.") Aren't we in danger of misinterpretation here? Luke thought so. Luke has a consistent call toward solidarity with the poor in his Gospel. And while his story, particularly in the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry, mirrors Mark's version in many ways, Luke leaves out this story completely. It is as if he was sure that we would seize these words as permission to let up in our ministry to and with the poor. He was afraid that we would claim this loophole in the clear command to share and give and help.

"You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." What does that mean? Give to Jesus more extravagantly; give to the poor out of duty? Give to Jesus everything; give to the poor some things? Give to Jesus always; give to the poor when you can?

I don't know. Honestly, I am puzzled and troubled by this verse. But I find it hard to believe that Jesus would ask us to back off of giving wholeheartedly. I wonder if Jesus is once again speaking to our experience, warning us about how our lives are lived out sometimes. I am sure that, at the time, he was trying to get across to his followers - even the slow ones - that his earthly life was coming to an end soon. But at the same time, I wonder if he was saying to us that sometimes when we give to the poor, we will see his face and sometimes we won't. Sometimes we will know his will and feel his presence, and other times, we will wonder what he would have us do and wonder why he seems so far from us. But that no matter what, we should give and serve out of love, with extravagance.

Maybe it has to do with what fills us. When we are filled with fear, or scarcity, or self-importance, then our giving becomes suspect. But if we are filled with laughter, with the joy of giving and community and relationship, then everything changes, and the dream is realized.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

We come to worship, remembering God's goodness that has carried us and sustained us to this present moment.

We remember the days when God covered us in love and filled us with joy.

We come to worship, weary from stress, heavy with grief, and wondering when relief will come.

We long for the days God covered us in love and filled us with joy.

We come to worship to remember and remind one another that God's love has never left us, and God's joy cannot be extinguished.

God, restore us that we know your love and your joy once again.

We come to worship to remember and become the Body of Christ, a community called to restore the world around us.

God, empower us to be your restoration people who fill the world with love, laughter, and abundant life. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Opening Prayer

Come to this sanctuary, this house, this home, Holy Christ,

And let us receive you with lavish welcome.

You are the Restorer of our fortunes,

The Promise of new life –

We pour out our praise to you.

Fill this room with your Spirit:

The sound of wind, the warmth of flame, the scent of perfume

And fill our hearts with your compassion,

Not just in this time and place,

But in all times and in all places,

So that as we celebrate the great things you have done for us,

We may also embody the love you give to all. Amen.

Posted on the United Church of Christ's **Worship Ways Archive**, <http://www.ucc.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/02/opening-prayer-psalm-126.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Like Judas, God of new things, we like to complain about your generous ways, rather than living in your grace. The poor are always with us, we believe, which justifies our ignoring them. In our memories, we focus on a perceived golden past, and so we ignore the new things you do in our midst. We are so enamored with our achievements that we are not willing to throw them away in order to follow Jesus. Forgive us, Restoring God, and help us to notice the kingdom springing forth in our midst. By your grace, may our fears turn to faith, our seeds of grief produce a bumper crop of joy, and our tears turn into torrents of tenderness as we journey with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, to Jerusalem.

Silence is kept.

Assurance of Pardon

Making a way through all the foolishness and mistakes of our lives, God leads us into new life, where we are restored to grace, to hope, and to peace.

Do we notice what God has done for us, what God is doing in us? This is good news for everyone. Thanks be to God, we are forgiven! Amen.

Adapted from Thom Shuman, posted at <https://pilgrimwr.unitingchurch.org.au/?p=2008>.

Benediction

May you go out from this place in the blessing of God, who turns your weeping into laughter and your laughter into joy that plants seeds of restoration, justice, and abundance for all of God's creation. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Liturgy of the Palms – *Open the Gates*

April 13, 2025 -

[Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](#) [Luke 19:28-40](#)

Liturgy of the Passion

[Psalm 31:9-16](#) [Luke 22:14 – 23:56](#)

Color – Purple

**You Will Be Found from Dear Evan Hansen*

WORSHIP PLANNING

This day is surely the most paradoxical of any on the liturgical calendar. Is that a controversial statement? Perhaps, but it seems true. There is a paradox on this day. The obvious one is the juxtaposition of Palm and Passion on this day. How does one service contain the emotions present in the celebration that was the Palm Sunday parade and the painful solitary walk to the cross on Good Friday? It seems impossible, and we usually make a choice to observe one over the other. Maybe we focus on the parade and let the children dance around the sanctuary waving palm branches and shouting for Jesus. More rarely, today could become an extended Good Friday, as the attention to the Passion overwhelms the liturgy of the day. It is possible to begin with the parade and then transition later in the service – interestingly often after the offering is taken! Maybe this is a recognition of the sacrificial nature of giving our financial resources.

But there is a deeper paradox woven into this day that we could bring to light. The reality is on this day, those who lined the street and laid down their garments and waved their branches and shouted got it right. They shouted, as we know though the Luke text doesn't record it, "Hosanna." That had become, as Luke claims, a statement of praise, a celebration of the one who comes. But it also has a translation: "Save us." That's what the word "Hosanna" means. "Save us." So, on that day, the crowd got it right. But they probably didn't even know it. That's an assumption, admittedly. We don't know what was in their minds and hearts on that day. But reading on in the story, we recognize that if, even in the moment, they knew what they were saying, it certainly didn't last long. To go from "Hosanna" to "Crucify him" seems a long journey.

But maybe it isn't a long journey. Within each of us is the capacity to claim Christ and reject him almost at the same time. Palm/Passion Sunday is about the celebration and acknowledgement of the one who comes in the name of the Lord. It is a time for declaration of faith and reaffirmation and recommitment to discipleship as we follow Christ with our whole lives. But it is also a time of confession, of acknowledging that we don't live up to the commitments we have made in the past and that our declarations with our lips seem far from the actions of our lives.

Through it all, however, is the theme that the one who comes will come. No matter how many times we mess up, the Savior still comes, riding into the heart of our city with an offer of redemption, a promise of salvation. And we can rejoice in that.

PLAYLIST SONG

[“You Will Be Found” from Dear Evan Hansen](#)

We have arrived at Holy Week. We followed Jesus into Jerusalem amidst joyful multitudes who hailed him as a king, yet we know Friday is coming. The triumphant multitudes will not stick around long. Yet, God’s steadfast love never fails. So, as we move into this holiest of weeks, listen to “You Will Be Found” from the musical *Dear Evan Hansen* and consider: “How does God’s steadfast love find you, even when you feel lost?”

PREACHING NOTES

*So let the sun come streaming in / 'Cause you'll reach up and you'll rise again /
If you only look around / You will be found*

Songwriters: Benj Pasek and Justin Paul

“You Will Be Found” lyrics © Pick In A Pinch Music, Breathelike Music

A word to you, preacher: Where do you stand this week? First of all, you must decide whether this day is primarily about the parade or about the Passion or whether there are hints of the one in the other. But perhaps most important is whether you, as the preacher, stand aloof and apart, relating the story with the ending firmly in mind, with the wisdom and interpretation all sewn up. Or will you stand with the crowd, the community, and wonder what it all means and where it will all end?

I know that it is hard to move away from the center, from being the one with the answers and the wisdom. Upon reflection, however, it seems right to step back; it might also give an interesting perspective on the whole Palm Sunday event. There were a lot of backseat people. In fact, everyone was a backseat person. The only one in the driver’s seat was Jesus. This was his show from the beginning to the end. Everyone else was just a spectator Invited to look and see, shout for joy, and welcome the one who comes.

So, one wonders if the crowd that lined the streets of Jerusalem was genuinely glad to see Jesus or if the celebration revealed something else.

Did you notice any significant omissions from Luke's account? There are no palms in this Palm Sunday parade, and they do not shout "Hosanna!" Instead, they quote from Psalm 118, a psalm for pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. So, did they see him as the one they wanted? Or were they simply in the psalm-singing mood?

This whole affair could be read from different perspectives. On the one hand, there are militaristic overtones. If you read the verses preceding the Palm Sunday account in Luke, you see Jesus telling a parable of a nobleman who went to claim a kingdom. This story ends so ruthlessly that any attempt to put Jesus in the place of that nobleman is uncomfortable. Yet isn't Jesus riding in to claim a kingdom? Isn't this whole Palm Sunday proclamation about Jesus declaring who he is?

Certainly, but Jesus is also careful to announce who he is in contrast to the kings of this world. While there are elements that could be lined up with conquering generals in this account - the commandeering of an animal for the purpose of presentation, the riding into the city surrounded by loyal followers

singing praise - both prerogatives of Roman military generals. But there are also subtle signals that Jesus is declaring himself to be a different kind of conquering hero. Unlike the generals, he wears no crown. His crown will come later, one of thorns pressed upon him in derision. The psalm sung to Jesus does not evoke King David, as do Matthew and Mark's versions of this story. But Luke's quote echoes the angelic chorus from the infancy story at the beginning of Luke's account and speaks of peace on earth.

The nobleman in the parable kills those who oppose his rule, while Christ will shortly give his life to save those who oppose him. In Luke's mind, at least, the nobleman of the parable is not Jesus. He is perhaps the ruler of this world, or Satan, as one commentator suggests, against whom Jesus' life stands in opposition.

Whether in Jesus's planning or in Luke's telling, we are meant to know from this account that Jesus was indeed claiming a kingdom. But it was a kingdom not of this world or of this world's way of doing things. It was something new, something different. It was an answer to prayers that we didn't even know to pray before he came.

This brings us back to the question I asked in the first place: what can we know about the motivations of the people who lined the parade route that first Palm Sunday? Anything? Well, on the one hand, probably nothing. People like spectacles. And whether this was a large crowd or a small diversion from the spectacle that was Passover time in Jerusalem, many of those who were shouting that day probably had no idea who the man on the colt really was, nor did they know enough to seek solace, to seek peace from him - despite their song. The crowd's fickleness will be revealed in a few days' time.

Yet perhaps some were earnestly searching, who stood there and observed and sang and waved their palms, hoping that maybe there was someone who could give them a reason to hold on to their faith. Maybe a few who held out their hands to him hoped that what would cross their palms would be grace for living, a sign of power. Maybe.

We don't know. We do know our own motivations are often misplaced, sometimes distracted, sometimes focused. Sometimes, we have an idea of what we are doing, and sometimes, we are as lost as any of the pilgrims in Jerusalem. So, it is probably safe to assume that they were all over the place, too. That means that some of them didn't know. Some of them were genuinely glad to see him.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Today, we join Jesus in the final ascent to Jerusalem, knowing the depths we will descend on our journey through Holy Week.

Open the gates of righteousness, that we may come worship God!

We join the disciples in declaring that Jesus, riding on a donkey, is our Ruler, the One who will bring peace and salvation for all.

Open the gates of peace, that we may come worship God!

We join with the bystanders who questioned and wondered who this Jesus really is, who feared the consequences of angering the powers that be.

Open the gates of truth, that we may come worship God!

The journey through Holy Week brings us face-to-face with the stark reality of sin and God's faithfulness to save.

Open the gates of salvation, that we may come worship God whose steadfast love never fails!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Opening Prayer

God, we gather on this day to begin a week of contrasts.

From hope to despair to hope again.

As we begin the week, as we join with the crowd,

help us cut through the noise to see what is happening,

to see what is at stake.

As the story unfolds,

open us to both the hope and the pain.

In this time of worship,

prepare us to celebrate, to weep, and to wait. Amen.

Adapted from Rev Gord on his blog, **Worship Offerings**, <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/03/opening-prayer-palm-sunday.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God,

With the psalmist, we declare, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them!" But we forget that only by your grace can we be righteous. With the crowds, we proclaim, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" But we neglect to follow you when you show us the ways to make peace on earth as it is in heaven. With the Pharisees, we notice our siblings doing their best to follow you and command, "Order them to stop!" But we refuse to listen to your command to love our neighbors as you love us. Forgive us, merciful God, and free us to follow Jesus down the road into Jerusalem, confronting the death-dealing powers of this world with the truth of your peace and steadfast love. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Benediction

Friends, Go forth humbly to serve the God whose love endures forever.

Go forth in the name of the Christ who entered Jerusalem on a lowly donkey.

Go forth in the strength of the Holy Spirit that calls us to rejoice in this very day God has made. God's love endures forever.

God's love endures forever. Amen!

Written by Rev. Dr. Chad Abbott and posted on the Worship Ways website at

<https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/palm-passion-a-april-2/>.

Maundy Thursday – *You Have Loosed My Bonds*

April 17, 2025

[Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#)

**Stand Up by Cynthia Erivo*

WORSHIP PLANNING

Maundy Thursday worship tends to be heavy, somber, and quiet. We aren't necessarily recommending you throw a raucous party here, but we are suggesting that might focus on the resolution of the Savior instead. Jesus, whether you are reading the John text or the Luke one, has his face set toward Jerusalem. This doesn't diminish the prayer in the garden where, for the last time, Jesus asks for the cup to pass from him, but emphasizes the end of that prayer, "nevertheless, not my will but yours be done."

It is that word *nevertheless* that needs to carry the worship this day. Whether we want to emphasize the call to humble service and engage in some form of foot washing or gather around the Table and hear the words of institution as we catch a glimpse of the preciousness of the sacrament, both carry the act of will of the one who came to love us in person and redeem our lives. We kneel in awe, first of all, amazed at the love that would bring him to his knees before us for cleansing and claiming. We kneel, amazed at the gift he wanted to give that the common elements of bread and wine now become signs and symbols of his eternal presence and transforming love.

Following the awe is a resolution, once again, to love like that. To serve like that. To give of ourselves, to sacrifice like that. As the traditional prayer after Communion states:

"We give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others."

"A Service of Word and Table I," United Methodist Hymnal, 11

When we rise from the Table or from washing feet, we rise to a life of Spirit-directed service. We know that such a life will gather others, and together we will go to this brand-new home. Our playlist song, "Stand Up," may seem unusual for Maundy Thursday, but it conveys something of the essence of this day, this call to walk with Christ to a new reality, a new hope. There are difficult days ahead, we know that. But we also walk because we can hear freedom calling.

PLAYLIST SONG

["Stand Up" by Cynthia Erivo](#)

At the center of Maundy Thursday is a mandate, or a command, to love one another as Christ has loved us. "Stand Up" by Cynthia Erivo may seem unusual for Maundy Thursday, but at its core, it is a call to live into this new reality and to embody hope, care, and love with one another. Difficult days lie ahead, but God's steadfast love frees us to move forward toward life together in Christ. As you listen to this powerful song, consider: "How does the command to love one another as Christ has loved us set you free?"

PREACHING NOTES

*That's when I'm gonna stand up / Take my people with me / Together we are going /
To a brand new home / Far across the river / Can you hear freedom calling?*

*Songwriters: Cynthia Chinasaokwu Echeumuna-Erivo and Joshua Brian Campbell
"Stand Up" lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group*

"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord" (Psalm 116:13 NRSV). That has to be it. That's why this psalm was chosen as the text for Maundy Thursday, don't you think? The meal of remembrance is the center of this service, after all. It is what we reenact year after year so that every time we receive this sacrament we are reminded of this moment. We are taken back into the upper room and hear those words about body and blood. We might not fully grasp what is going on here, but we have a sense of presence as we partake. The bread is more than bread; the juice not just juice. No, we aren't leaning into what others call *transubstantiation* where the bread becomes the literal flesh of Jesus. We don't have to go that far to have a sense of something beyond the physical element and embrace the spiritual presence in the eating of the bread and the drinking from the cup. The real presence, we call it. That's what this day is about: this meal and that presence.

Or is it? If the center of the Maundy Thursday experience is the meal, why do we turn to the Gospel of John for this day? John's telling of this event doesn't include anything about the meal. Well, there is some action around the giving and receiving of bread, but it isn't the sacrament of Communion as we observe it or as the other gospel writers and Paul want to pass it on. And we have to fill in with the verse that the lectionary reading skips over to get it.

In fact, if the center of the event is the meal, then why do we call it Maundy Thursday at all? Maundy comes from the Latin *mandatum*, which translates as *command*. Some understand this to mean that the real observance for this day during holy week is the washing of feet. That is the ritual Jesus performs as an act of service in the upper room. That is the startling revelation of the kind of leadership that Jesus was looking for, hoping for, from his followers, then and now. And that was what was overlooked in the normal act of hospitality around the meal when families and friends would gather together. Paying attention to hospitality is important. Jesus leans into it as he instructs his negligent disciples around the table.

Acts of service: that's the model that's being given here. And washing of feet is both humbling and transforming when it is performed in the context of worship. There is an invitation to live into the self-sacrificial service that Jesus models when we gather for worship. It is hard not to feel something of the demands of the life of service when engaging in this ritual. Perhaps there are some who might give witness to the impact of the experience by sharing these thoughts with the congregation.

Certainly, the psalm text encourages this shift in emphasis from meal to service. We read that the response to the gift of salvation the psalmist speaks of, of being heard by the God to whom many supplications have been given, is to be a servant. Service is central to understanding the life of the redeemed—not, of course, to earn that redemption, but as a response to it. Not because of what is now owed, however. "I will pay my vows" is not a transactional response to faith. But the generosity of spirit, the life of service comes from gratitude and joy and from the constant awareness that one dwells with God or that God dwells with us. There is joy in that presence, in that relationship.

Sacrament and service are the themes of this Maundy Thursday. But we ask, “Is that the ‘mandate’ from this Maundy Thursday? To eat bread and wash feet?” These are powerful, symbolic acts— maybe even more than mere symbols. But to truly capture the spirit behind the acts that we do in worship this evening, we have to go a little further in the story. After the incident with the bread, and the company is now reduced by one, Jesus identifies the commandment from which this day takes its name. Verse 34:

“I give you a new commandment, that you should love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.”

We can argue, as some do, whether this command to love is universal or within the fellowship of the body. Some argue that Jesus was trying to get his group of gathered followers to recognize that they could continue on only if they did it together. They could represent the life of a disciple only in relationship with the encouragement and support of others who have claimed this faith and who have committed themselves to this way of living and being. Jesus was asking them to take care of one another, serve one another, and love one another.

Others argue that this was a commandment that was to shape every encounter and every relationship everywhere at every moment. Certainly, the one who invited us to love our enemies wouldn’t hesitate to invite us to love everyone. Certainly, the one who invited us to see everyone in need as our neighbor, and then remind us that the greatest commandment was to love God and love neighbor – two sides of the same coin; one rule with two manifestations. “We’re gonna stand up and take our people with us on our way home” — all people, any people, people in need, people under oppression, are our people. That’s what it means when he said in that upper room on the night before he suffered and died that *we are commanded* – commanded remember – to love one another.

We’re not very good at it. That’s the hard truth behind our observance. We find loving others hard. We’re afraid. We’re hesitant. We prefer drawing lines, identifying enemies, and keeping our distance. We like scapegoats. We are afraid that loving is too risky, too uncomfortable, too challenging to the way we like to imagine the world around us.

In the end, that is why we come to this table of grace. That is why we need to be healed and forgiven and why we need to model service in humbling kinds of ways. So, as we kneel before our friends and family here in the community of faith, we begin to imagine a different world—one of acceptance and grace, one where God’s will may be done on earth as in heaven. For that, we will stand up.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Just as the disciples gathered in a room with Jesus, so we gather in this place, ready to watch, listen, and pray on this Holy Thursday.

We come to remember and encounter Love Incarnate, who sets us free.

As Jesus kneels to wash the dirt from the disciples’ feet, we join in their surprise; we’ve never seen a Savior who acts like a servant.

We come to remember and encounter Love Incarnate, who sets us free.

As Jesus calls the disciples to wash one another's feet, we receive with them a new commandment: to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

We come to remember and encounter Love Incarnate, who sets us free.

Beloved, come. Come to kneel as a servant, come to the table with your fellow disciples, come to worship Love Incarnate, who sets you free.

We come to remember and to worship God who has loosed our bonds and set us free to love one another as God has loved us.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Opening Prayer

Holy God, source and sovereign, you put all power and authority into the hands of Christ— Christ, who washes our feet in humble service. Teach us to love one another as Christ has loved us, so that everyone will know that we are his disciples; through Jesus Christ, our Teacher and Friend, we pray. Amen.

Adapted from Presbyterian Church (USA) Resources for Maundy Thursday (page 1) posted at https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/resources_for_maundy_thursday.pdf.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful, Mighty, Matchless One,
You have loved us to the end.
There was betrayal in our heart,
Yet you loved us anyway.
You knew we would deny you,
Yet you loved us anyway.
In our selfishness, we balked, we objected, we disapproved,
Yet you loved us anyway.
We sought to point the finger at anyone other than ourselves,
Yet you loved us anyway.
Forgive us, we pray.
Renew our healing convictions,
Restore our call to service,
Rekindle our flame for justice,

That we may once again become your people of peace.

Offer silent prayers of confession.

Assurance

Receive the good news.
The One who created us has called us.
There is now no condemnation,
No shame at the table of God.
Only the love that makes us whole again.
Only the love we offer others.
In God's name, we are forgiven.
In God's name, we have been set free. Amen.

Adapted from Michael Anthony Howard on the Worship Ways website at <https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/maundy-thursday-c-april-14-2022/>.

Benediction

May you go now in the blessing of the Triune God to love your neighbors, yourself, and all creation with the love Christ has demonstrated for us this day and every day. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Communion Liturgy

The following liturgy for Holy Communion incorporates the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet and giving his disciples a new commandment. If a separate foot-washing ritual is not an option in your congregation, consider setting up stations in your worship space where congregants can wash each other's hands as they make their way forward to receive Communion. At each station, include a basin of water and hand towels that congregants can use after they finish washing each other's hands.

As part of incorporating the foot-washing narrative into the Communion liturgy, place a pitcher of water, a towel, and a basin on the altar in addition to the Communion elements. Alternatively, place the pitcher and towel on the altar and use the baptismal font as the basin. It is recommended that the celebrant be joined by another pastor—particularly if you have a deacon on staff or in connection with your church—or a layperson who can assist during the liturgy.

Celebrant:

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts. *(The celebrant may lift hands and keep them raised.)*

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing,
always and everywhere to give thanks to you,
almighty God, creator of heaven and earth.
In the beginning, you hovered over the waters and
poured out your love over the formless void,
turning chaos into life.
You formed us in your image
and provided for us from the fruit of creation.
When we turned away, and our love failed,
Your steadfast love never failed.
You set the Israelites free and brought them through the waters.

When they doubted and complained,
You provided manna from heaven and water from a rock.

Even when we betrayed and broke covenant with you,
You never abandoned us.

And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven
we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

The celebrant may lower hands.

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.**

The celebrant may raise hands.

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son, Jesus Christ.
When we turned away from you and abused your gifts,
you gave us in him your crowning gift.
Divine Love poured out in human form,
Christ fed the hungry, healed the sick,
ate with the scorned and forgotten,
and taught us how to love by incarnating Love among us.
By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection,
you gave birth to your church,
delivered us from enslavement to sin and death,
and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

Pastor/layperson takes the towel and raises the pitcher of water while the celebrant says:

On the evening in which he gave himself up for us,
Jesus rose from the supper table and took a pitcher of water.

He poured it into a basin, knelt down, and began to wash the disciples' feet.
When he was finished, he sat down and spoke with the disciples, saying,

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Pastor/layperson pours the water into the basin or baptismal font.

Celebrant and pastor/layperson prepare the Communion elements together.

The celebrant may hold hands, palms down, over the bread, or touch the bread, or lift the bread.

That same night, Jesus took bread,
gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

The celebrant may hold hands, palms down, over the cup, or touch the cup, or lift the cup.

When the supper was over, he took the cup,
gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant,
poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The celebrant may raise hands.

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us,
as we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

The celebrant may hold hands, palms down, over the bread and cup.

As Christ, Divine Love poured out for us,
came to show us how to love one another,
pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here
and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood and called to
love one another as Christ loves us.
For it is by this love that everyone will know
We are his disciples.

The celebrant may raise hands.

By your Spirit, make us one with Christ,
one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty God, now and forever.

Amen.

If you include stations for handwashing, direct congregants to go to one of the stations first to wash one another's hands in pairs. Invite them to cup water in their own hands and pour it over the other's hands while saying a simple blessing like, "You are a beloved child of God" or "May the love of Christ surround you." Then, the pair will switch roles.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024. Adapted from "The Great Thanksgiving for Holy Thursday Evening," Copyright © 1972 The Methodist Publishing House; Copyright © 1980, 1981, 1985 UMPH; Copyright © 1986 by Abingdon Press; Copyright © 1987, 1989, 1992 UMPH. Used by permission."

Good Friday – *Do Not Be Far from Me*

April 18, 2025

[Psalm 22 John 18:1-19:42](#)

Color – No Color

**Strange Fruit by Billie Holliday*

**The Hanging Tree from Hunger Games*

WORSHIP PLANNING

Is Good Friday about trying to overcome distance, or is it about acknowledging the distances between us? On this day, we feel a long way from God. We think we've resolved that childhood question, "What's good about Good Friday?" but our answers still seem inadequate. This day doesn't feel good to us. It feels a long way from good. I suppose that is part of the point.

We gather this day in dim lighting to remember that even the sun refused to shine over this death. Our music is slow and weighty, carrying the hammer blow of crucifixion and the desolation of the abandonment at the cross. We set a mood, not to manipulate emotions, but to express what is in our hearts and heads as we contemplate this day, this event, this gift.

Worship this day is about standing in silence at the foot of the cross. Too many words get in the way of the weight, the meaning, the moment of this day. Tell the story; don't explain it. Just bow in awe of the sacrifice, tremble at the suffering, weep for the necessity, for the hard-heartedness that made this death a part of the result, the antidote. But don't say too much. Just listen.

When you do speak, remind the community who gathers that this is not just a historical observance. Crucifixions continue; innocents dying painful deaths still goes on. We weep for them like we weep for his death. We weep for the hardness of heart that believes that violence is a solution to the world's problems. We bring all this brokenness and hurt with us as we gather for worship today. We bring our doubts and our pains as well as the inclination to recoil from this gruesome death. We offer them up, these burdens, to the one who already carries the weight of the world on his bruised and bloody back. We hear his whispered prayer, asking for forgiveness for all of us, because, indeed, we do not know what we are doing.

Tell the story. And spend some time in silence. And then depart to a Saturday of in-between time, while we wait for Easter.

PLAYLIST SONG

["Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday](#)

["The Hanging Tree" from *The Hunger Games*](#)

**You are invited to use one or both songs linked above with this social media devotional.*

Of all the difficult, terrible things that can happen in this world, one of the scariest is being alone. Suffering, pain, tragedy—all are easier to bear when we know we are not alone in the struggle. When Jesus cries out from the cross, echoing the opening verses of Psalm 22, he cries out of a longing not to be alone in the midst of senseless violence. Our song today invites us to remain present and bear witness when suffering and injustice visit our neighbors and us. As you listen, let the music wash over you and consider: "How does God's steadfast love strengthen you to be present and tell the truth in the face of sin and evil in the world?"

PREACHING NOTES

Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root

"Strange Fruit" sung by Billie Holiday. Written by Abel Meeropol

*Strange things did happen here / No stranger would it be
If we met at midnight / In the hanging tree*

*Songwriters: James Newton Howard, Jeremy C Fraites,
Suzanne Collins, Wesley Keith Schultz
"The Hanging Tree" lyrics © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.,
Universal Music Publishing Group, Warner Chappell Music, Inc*

Some days you feel far away. From everything. Or maybe from everyone. It is a common human condition, unfortunately. We wonder about those who are important to us, particularly if they are a long way away from us. I called my parents a week ago, and since then, I have wondered how they were really doing. It is as if the miles between us are even longer than usual.

We don't do well with distance. I know there is the "absence makes the heart grow fonder" idea. But there is also the "out of sight, out of mind" reality. Both are true. Both war within us. I have a close family. No, I had a close family. We were close, in one house, falling all over one another, getting in each other's way, getting on each other's nerves. We were close.

But now we are far apart—from coast to coast, north to south. We get together from time to time, and it is great. We pick up where we left off and then pledge to keep in touch. But we don't. And most of the time, we're okay with that. We've got lives to live; we've got responsibilities and structures. We've got new lives, different lives, lives that don't always include those we were close to.

I had a good friend in high school. Well, a couple of years of high school anyway. We did all sorts of things together; we were as close as friends could get for those couple of years. But then I moved away, and we lost touch. I learned that his father died some years ago. I got his address to send him a note. But

the address sat on my desk as I tried to think of what to say. “I’m sorry for your loss” seemed inadequate, but the common ground between us seemed to be gone. I feel distant, disconnected, unsure of what to say, how to bridge the gap that had grown between us.

That’s life, some say. We can’t stay connected to everyone. And that’s true. But then there are times when we wonder if we can stay connected to anyone. It is as though we live in an isolation chamber, cut off, misunderstood, ignored, alone.

Psalms 22 is about just such an experience. It is one of the personal lament psalms, expressing the human pain of disconnection. The cause of the pain is not clear from the context. It could be an illness of some sort, or it could be an attack from enemies of one kind or another. But in the end, it is a spiritual problem, regardless of the genesis of the experience. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” is the most famous first verse of the psalm. The feeling of abandonment, of disassociation. For nearly twenty verses, the psalmist struggles with this lack of connection, with the sense of the void, the emptiness of life.

The imagery is powerful and painful at the same time. It’s painful because it evokes memories of suffering and even death. Jesus recalled this psalm as he was dying on the cross. We can’t read that opening line without picturing that suffering. And while we have never had to endure such a degree of pain and sense of abandonment, there are still echoes in our own soul. “I am poured out like water; my bones are out of joint.” That resonates to some degree. “I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” We’ve had those sleepless nights, those lonely days. And we’ve wondered whether anyone is listening, whether there is anyone who loves us still.

Keep reading, however. Psalm 22 makes a change and turns a corner. And it sounds very different. Dramatically different. Something changed from the first half of the psalm. But what happened? Well, maybe the psalmist got well; the illness that was afflicting him has broken, and now there is healing. Maybe. Perhaps the enemies that were besieging wandered off to harass other victims. Could be. The moment of despair has passed; the cause of concern has abated. “Whew,” we think, “Glad that is over. I’m ok now. Back to normal.”

Except there is the small grain of doubt that sits in a corner of our hearts, saying, “What about next time?” Will it all come rushing back? Will the doubts rise up? Will the loneliness overwhelm again? Is it possible that this sense of being alone in the universe creeps back into our thoughts and fears in the next weak moment? In other words, is Good Friday over and done with? Or does it hover around the margins?

Almost assuredly, if the change in the tone of the psalm has an external cause, then the worries will continue. If the writer is able to now speak of praise and comfort and satisfaction because the illness has abated or the enemies have wandered off, then all will crash down again if and when those circumstances change again.

But what if the change in the psalm is not due to an external difference? What if the writer is still fighting an illness or an enemy? What if the change is an internal one? A spiritual rather than physical difference? What if we are still wrapped up in Good Friday, and the nails tear at our hands, and the sense of abandonment is almost overwhelming? What then?

The singer-songwriter Sara Groves has a song titled “It Might be Hope.” The refrain goes like this:

"Hope has a way of turning its face to you / just when you least expect it / you walk in a room / you look out a window / and something there leaves you breathless / you say to yourself / it's been a while since I felt this / but it feels like it might be hope."

Songwriter: Sara Groves

"It Might Be Hope" lyrics © Music Services, Inc

Hope is what happened in Psalm 22—not a feeble wishing for a change in circumstances, but a robust hope based on faith in a loving God who will not leave us abandoned forever. It is hope in a God who desires wholeness for all God's children, who creates community by connecting hearts, who provides enough for all to be satisfied. The effect of hope on the psalmist is obvious: where once there was separation and fear, now there is community - an ever-widening community that includes all of creation - from the offspring of Jacob to the great congregation, to the poor, to all nations, to those who have gone before and those who are yet to be.

Hope reminds us that we are not alone, despite our existential experience. Our faith tells us that God has not abandoned us, even when we no longer hear God's voice or sense God's presence. Hope also reminds us that when we have lost our grip, we can find it in the community around us. By reaching into the void, we find there are others who will take our hand and lift us up. By seeking a connection, we find ourselves being put back together again.

Hope can leave us breathless. Hope grows from our faith. Hope reminds us of love. Even on Good Friday, there can be a hope that lets us say with confidence, "God heard when I cried out."

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

On this Holy Friday, we follow Jesus through a sham trial and up the hill to Golgotha, all the while questioning:

My God, my God, where are you?

We follow the women who held vigil at the foot of the cross, all the while despairing:

My God, my God, where are you?

We come near to Jesus as soldiers mock him, all the while crying out:

My God, my God, where are you?

We sit in grief and dismay, once again confronted with the horrible reality of sin and evil in our world that people just like us would crucify Love Incarnate. And all the while, God sits with us, saying:

My child, my child, I am here.

Come, let us worship God who, even on this day, is never far from us.

Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Prayer for the Day

Now we know:

all is grace

all is gift.

You give us all good things:

life and love;

daily bread and water that quenches our thirst;

friends and faith.

Most of all, in your Son, Jesus,

you meet us with a love that will never let us go;

you utter words of mercy and forgiveness

that override the hurts,

and heal our brokenness;

you offer new beginnings

where we had expected only dead ends.

We give you thanks and praise

for the mystery of your suffering love

that gives us life.

We give you thanks and praise

that you know our weakness

and hear our prayers.

We give you thanks and praise

that all our dying and living
is held in your good keeping.

Now we know:

all is grace,

all is gift,

all is Love.

Amen.

Adapted from **Christine Jerrett**, <https://christinejerrett.wordpress.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2019/04/a-prayer-for-good-friday-now-we-know.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Ever-present God, on this Good Friday night,
our whole world is engulfed in shadows
as we remember the story of Jesus' death.

We confess that we want to push the fast-forward button on this familiar story
because it hurts so much.

It hurts to think of the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

It hurts to imagine Jesus abandoned and suffering on the cross
with only a faithful few watching him breathe his last breath.

It hurts to watch your light overtaken by the shadows of the world.

But we must find our place in this crucifixion story and feel the pain that is there:

The pain of the world,

of faithless decisions; of betrayal; of injustice.

Jesus entered that pain out of faithfulness to you and to us,
to witness to the Truth that is Justice, Wholeness, and Love.

We confess, we are afraid to enter this pain with Jesus.

Strengthen us with your courage;

offer glimpses of hope in the shadows of death;

let us know you are present with us here in this moment of pain;

now as always.

Assurance of Pardon

Beloved followers of Jesus, it is okay to feel hurt and uncomfortable
as you enter into this story and imagine your place in it.

Know that God meets you in the story,
with forgiveness as well as conviction;

With comfort as well as challenge;

with courage as well as love.

Amen.

Adapted from Rev. Dr. Ginny Brown Daniel on the Worship Ways website at
<https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/good-friday-april-2/>.

Benediction

As the echoes of “It is finished” still ring in our hearts, go now in the assurance that God’s steadfast love never fails, this day and every day. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Holy Saturday

[April 19, 2025](#)

**A Safe Place to Land by Sara Bareilles*

*So say the Lord's Prayer twice, hold your babies tight / Surely someone will reach out a hand /
And show you a safe place to land*

Songwriters: Lori McKenna and Sara Bareilles

*"A Safe Place to Land" lyrics © Tiny Bear Music, Creative Pulse Music,
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While you wait on this Holy Saturday, we suggest a song about hope. We've been falling throughout this Holy Week, stumbling over our own brokenness and losing our sense of balance as we confront our own sinfulness. We look toward Easter while we look for a safe place to land. Listen and ponder while we wait in hope for Resurrection.

PLAYLIST SONG

["A Safe Place to Land" by Sara Bareilles](#)

Holy Saturday is a day for waiting, sitting, pondering, and grieving...and hoping. We've been falling throughout Holy Week, stumbling over our brokenness and losing our sense of balance as we confront our sinfulness. Where will we find a safe place to land? As you listen to Sara Bareilles' "A Safe Place to Land," ponder and reflect on God as your safe place as we wait in hope for Resurrection.

Resurrection of the Lord – *Steadfast Love: A New Cut*

April 20, 2025

[Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 John 20:1-18](#)

Color: White, Gold

**Light of a Clear Blue Morning by Dolly Parton*

WORSHIP PLANNING

It is Easter; let there be light! Let there be color and music and joy. In everything, let there be joy as we worship this day. We certainly understand that, for many, this day is driven by tradition. And that's a good thing. We don't have to reinvent ourselves every time we celebrate this highest and holiest of days. Meeting the expectations of those who are a part of the community can be a powerful way to worship on Easter Sunday. Can it really be Easter in our tradition if we don't sing "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"? I don't think so. But there are new songs that your community has not sung that could be sung. The key is a balance between tradition and innovation, between the comfortable familiar and the edgy new territory. Lean into the former and sprinkle in the latter and things will go well.

Our Lenten playlist series has emphasized the power of music to lead us into worship. Easter is the epitome of that belief. We need to hear great music on Easter Sunday. But even more importantly, we need to sing great music. The participatory element of worship is essential. We are the worshipers, after all. The ones in front are prompters helping the whole congregation offer their best as we gather in worship. We all love being captivated by an excellent choir. We all are moved by a powerful, compelling preacher. But worship happens when the whole congregation stands to sing, or bows to pray, or offers a testimony to some or to all. Worship comes from the hearts of the whole body who have gathered. So, the question becomes, "How do we provide avenues for the people to engage?"

We worry about the logistics of movement through a crowded sanctuary, but somehow, we can make our way to a prayer station, or a cross, or an empty tomb and be present, offer a prayer, make a connection. In the coming in and going out, conversation can be encouraged. Prime certain hosts to seek those standing alone and talk to them. When we come on Easter, we are longing for Resurrection.

Let there be life in the midst of the congregation. Turn the "passing of the peace" into an engagement time, a shared prayer time. Tell folks to ask, "How can I pray for you?" instead of saying "Good morning?" (or maybe in addition to saying, "Good morning!") Be gentle and respectful but be hospitable and invitational. And always remember that the invitation is to a life of faith, a call to discipleship, not to join a church. Joining the church should be helpful and a benefit to that life. Lead with Jesus.

PLAYLIST SONG

"Light of a Clear Blue Morning" by Dolly Parton

We've come through the shadows of Holy Week, and Easter morning has dawned once again. Christ is risen! Whether 2,000 years ago or today, this is a simple, yet irrational declaration: Christ is *risen*! We don't fully understand Resurrection. We can't make logical sense of it. But it is perfect and fitting for God, whose steadfast love endures forever because even death cannot stop Love. So, listen and sing along with Dolly Parton's "Light of a Clear Blue Morning," giving thanks to God whose love never ends, never fails, and brings us into new life today and every day.

PREACHING NOTES

Oh, I've been like a captured eagle, you know an eagle's born to fly / Now that I have won my freedom, like an eagle I am eager for the sky // And I can see the light of a clear blue morning / I can see the light of brand new day

Songwriter: Dolly Parton

"Light of a Clear Blue Morning" lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

If there is a day for singing, it is this day. Does the preacher feel squeezed out today? Probably. But maybe that's the way it should be. Maybe the preacher should take a back seat to the singers today. The musicians who bring the Easter announcement need to lead this morning. The sermon should sound like an anthem. But don't sing unless you have a voice worth hearing! Rather, let your words paint pictures in the hearts of those who listen. This is not a day for explaining; it is a day for describing.

Tell the story: John's story of a frightened Mary of Magdala who found a tomb empty and a simple explanation that she came up with on her own. That led to a foot race that ended in confusion and a lonely, tear-filled vigil in the garden, interrupted by two interlopers who asked about her tears but gave no explanation. They smiled as Mary turned around and bumped into a gardener turned Risen Savior who knew her by name. Tell it as if you were running with Peter and John and weeping with Mary. Tell it as if you don't have any clue what Jesus meant when he said "Don't hold on to me" because you don't. Tell it as if you know that sense of abandonment, because you do. Tell it as if things are out of your control, because they are. Don't tell what you know; tell how it feels. Or, if you must, tell what you know because of what you feel and what you've felt. Tell of your faith that grows out of experience, out of living in the real world just as everyone listening to you does.

If you lack the words to describe the events and your reaction to them, ask Dolly Parton for help. Our Lenten playlist leaks over into Easter with the finale, "Light of a Clear Blue Morning," by Dolly Parton. You don't have to play it or sing it (*though I'm told there is a choral version out there should you have a choir or ensemble up to it; check the music notes!*). But listen to it as you prepare to preach. Listen to the light breaking through the darkness as Dolly sings with faith in the coming dawn. Let that hope infuse your words. Let the taste of freedom put wings to your words as the sermon takes flight like an eagle.

Too much? Is it possible to be too much on Easter Sunday? Yeah, I suppose it is. But still, this day is about the joy of possibility in the face of a grim certainty. We are convinced that death has the final word. But

Easter says differently. And what's more, it is fully consistent with the God we have known from the beginning.

If the gospel account seems too familiar for this experiential approach, then turn to the psalm. "The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever" (*Psalms 118:2*). Maybe the emphasis on the steadfast love of the Lord is the way to go this day. In the psalm, we have the songs of victory (v. 15); we have the promise of eternity (v.17 and 18); we have the promise of joy and the hope of a clear blue morning. We have a sense that everything is going to be all right.

But not in a rose-colored-glasses way of denying the reality of the world. No, this is not groundless optimism. This is hope—not an empty hope, but what one scholar calls "a feral hope." It is a wild hope that opens the door to the possibility that the only thing that makes sense anymore is a kingdom approach to living in the world. The only thing upon which we can build a life is loving God and loving neighbor – which includes those we are supposed to call enemies. The only thing that will give a sense of wholeness is to live generously, freed from the call to amass so much stuff that it becomes a weight pulling us down. Freed to see the light of a clear blue morning.

The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. What better proclamation can we make than that on Easter Sunday? Another way we can say it is simply, "Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed." Time to sing some more.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Our Savior is risen!

Our Savior is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Steadfast Love is risen!

Steadfast Love is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This is the day that God has made;

Let us rejoice and be glad! Alleluia!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, today we come celebrating God, who looked beyond our faults and saw our needs. We come celebrating that victory is ours today. We come rejoicing that sin and evil did not get the last word. We praise you and we thank you for being a loving, patient God and for sending us Jesus Christ!

Thank you for giving sinners like us a second, third, and endless chances to right our wrongs and follow the Author of Grace. Thank you for giving the Good News of your Son's resurrection to the dutiful Mary Magdalene. You called her name, and she finally believed and proclaimed that she had seen the Risen Lord!

Like Mary, time and time again, you have called our name. You have gotten our attention, and we stopped wallowing in despair, sin, and self-reliance. We turned, and there you were! Assuring us that God delivered you from death and God will deliver us also from sin and death.

Today, we put Mary's proclamation in our hearts and on our lips. May our tears turn into laughter as we hold fast to the Easter knowledge that in Christ, all things are possible, if we will only believe.

Amen.

Adapted from Sherrie Dobbs Johnson in *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 127.

Prayer of Confession

Christ, we come to the empty tomb,
we see our own death,
we see our own tomb, we see our own emptiness.
And we remember how we have treated other people—
members of our family, friends, and neighbours.

**Lord, we come to your tomb,
we see a hungry world before us,
the pain of starving children,
the guilt of war on our hands,
and we know that collectively we share in those injustices.**

Lord, we come to the empty tomb,
we search within ourselves, and we cannot escape what we are,
people caught up in the pain of our own wrongdoing,
for some, a deep sense of loneliness
and a frustration of what we would be but are not.

**Lord, when we come to the empty tomb,
we lay before you our pain,
our emptiness and look to you for hope.**

People of God,
why do you seek the living among the dead in an empty tomb?
Are you afraid, are you uncertain, and are you uncomfortable here?

**Our wounds are deep,
we have turned away from that man,
we have broken with him
and seek his fellowship.**

Do not dwell on your wounds any longer
for he has risen to heal you,
he has risen to forgive you;
he has risen to change us all and bind us together now.
Christ has risen to forgive us.

Thanks be to God.

Excerpted from **Service of Holy Communion 2010**, posted on the [River of Life](http://www.riveroflife.org) website. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/02/easter-confession.html>.

Benediction

May God's abiding love and hope give us new life.
May God's unmerited grace and mercy keep us hope-filled.
And may God's restorative justice bring to us all, perfect peace.
For Steadfast Love is risen!
Steadfast Love is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen.

Adapted from Rev. Dr. Sheila Harvey Guillaume on the Worship Ways website at <https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/easter-day-april-4/>.