

DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR LENT



40 DAYS WITH

THE COMING KING



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
Church of Nashville



## 40 DAYS WITH THE COMING KING

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Once again, as we approach another liturgical season of our church's calendar, we are aware that this Lent, this Easter, will look different from those in the past. If Covid has taught us anything, it is that we are not in control. We have countless systems in place to help us believe we are, but in reality, we have very little control over our lives. It is Christ alone who is King and Lord over all. This Lent we are invited to meditate on that very truth – Christ is King. As we make our way through the Gospel of Mark, may we draw deeper into relationship with Him, for his Kingdom is not some far-flung walled-off fortress, but it is in our very midst open to all. May each day of this Lenten season reveal to us a bit more about who this King is that we are called to serve and prepare us to follow Him to the cross and on to the empty tomb!

## DAY 1

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17

### READ

Mark 1:1–20

### REFLECT

Mark gets right to the point. In just the first 20 verses of the gospel, Jesus has been heralded by John the Baptist, baptized in the Jordan, tempted in the desert, and has just called his first disciples. This is characteristic of Mark's gospel throughout. We'll see that he wastes no time in getting into the action. There is little "fluff" and no "transition sentences" (my high school English teachers would be appalled!). But this is part of Mark's charm – there is an urgency to his writing just as there is an urgency to the gospel message Christ comes to proclaim. The simplicity also leads us to be more attentive to what the author chooses to include. The frugality of words helps focus our study.

For example, the words spoken from heaven over Jesus as he rose from the waters of baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," were included because they are important. It is not just John's prophetic voice, but the very voice of God that confirms Christ's identity as the Son of the Most High.

### RESPOND

NT Wright puts it like this, *"The whole Christian gospel could be summed up in this point: that when the Living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ."* God looks at you and says, "you are my dear, dear child; I am delighted with you." Try reading that sentence slowly, with your own name at the beginning. Sit with it for a while. Perhaps try speaking it aloud.

As we begin our journey through Mark's gospel, pay attention to the stories, the dialogue, the intentionality of each episode, and then ask the question "Why would Mark include this? What does this have to say about Jesus's identity? How does this point me to Jesus's kingship?"

### PRAY

*Gracious Father, what a gift that You see us through the lens of Your Son, that your love is so vast. You do not look past our sin, but rather see us in all of our brokenness and love us anyway. Help us to act like the beloved children we are that our lives might point others back to You. In the name of Your Son, our Brother, Jesus Christ, Amen.*

By Sarah Bird Kneff

## DAY 2

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18

### READ

Mark 1:21–39

### REFLECT

After Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John, he goes to their hometown of Capernaum. Mark's Gospel wants to answer the question, "Who is this Jesus?" In the next two scenes, Jesus teaches with authority, calls out an unclean spirit, and heals the sick of the whole city. The response is all are amazed. Jesus does not quote other authorities; he is the authority. Jesus' words have power over the unclean spirits and demons. His touch heals Peter's mother-in-law and the town's people. Who is this Jesus? All of Capernaum are amazed and seeking this Jesus.

Today, the ruins of Capernaum are a wonderful pilgrimage spot on the shores of Galilee. As you walk the floor of the synagogue, you can almost hear Jesus calling out the unclean spirit. A church has been built on pillars over the excavation of what tradition claims is Peter's house. The glass floor enables you to look down into the house where Jesus healed so many. Peter tells Jesus, "everyone is seeking you." I am sure the whole town was ablaze with amazement and excitement. I imagine some were thinking, with this Jesus, Capernaum could become the healing center of all Galilee. Think of the commerce, notoriety, and power that could become theirs. How does Jesus respond to all this excitement? He does what he will repeat after many successful events; Jesus goes to a deserted place and prays.

To keep things in perspective, to be reenergized, and to seek God's direction, Jesus turns to God in prayer. The whole town seeking him may have been another temptation: a temptation to just stay in one place and be honored and respected. The amazing results at this beginning of his ministry might have tempted him to hunger for self-glory. No, Jesus turns to God in prayer. God is the source of all power, authority, and honor. In prayer, Jesus knows his mission is far greater than this village of Capernaum.

### RESPOND

"Who is this Jesus?" is the question we all must answer for ourselves. As we hear of the powerful acts of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, may we be amazed. With the unclean spirit, we must proclaim, "He is the Holy One from God." We, too, are called to follow this Jesus. As we follow, we need to emulate his life. If Jesus needed to pray, we most certainly need to pray. Daily prayer will keep things in perspective, empower us, and guide us.

### PRAY

*Gracious heavenly Father, blessed are you the source of all things. Keep us on the right path of following Jesus. Keep us humble, knowing all good comes from you. Keep us filled with your Spirit, empowering us to do what is right and good, delighting in your will. Through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.*

by John Musgrave

## DAY 3

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19

### READ

Mark 1:40–2:12

### REFLECT

Who is not amazed by the account of the friends bringing a paralytic to Jesus for healing? They were not daunted by the crowds blocking their way to Jesus. Instead, the friends looked up! They had such faith in Jesus's power to heal physical infirmities that they found another way to reach Him. They simply climbed atop the roof, with their friend on a stretcher, made an opening in the roof and lowered their friend to Jesus.

Jesus' response, however, must have puzzled them. Jesus saw their faith and said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Forgiveness of sins was not what this group was seeking. They were seeking a physical healing of their friend's paralysis. But Jesus knew the real problem, and the real problem was this man's response to the challenges of his life. The real problem was his sin.

Life presents each one of us with challenges. But what is most important is our response to the difficulties we face. None of us anticipated living through a pandemic, and we certainly did not envision the duration and the number of lives impacted by COVID. But God is most interested in how we respond. Are we seeking God's help and trusting in His goodness and His provision of what we most need despite our circumstances? Are we recognizing that our deepest need is for our focus to be on Jesus?

When Jesus forgives the man's sins, He is revealing that He is the Son of Man through whom God is acting on this earth. To show the doubting listeners that God has given to Jesus the authority to forgive sins, Jesus heals the paralytic physically. The paralytic rises and walks, healed not only physically, but also spiritually. Jesus is not only the Son of Man, but the King of Kings, revealing the power, authority, wisdom and compassion of God.

### RESPOND

What are some of the challenges you are facing? How are you responding?

Our scripture passage encourages us to examine our lives with the help of the Holy Spirit, to confess our need for God's forgiveness and to place our trust in God alone. Jesus reminds us that He is the Good Shepherd, and as we trust in Him, He will carry us through the darkest valleys. Jesus is always with us, and He offers us peace. "Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus says, "Do not be afraid" (John 14).

### PRAY

*Dear Lord, help me to be still before you and know that you are God. In the stillness, may I receive that which I most need: your forgiveness and your peace that passes understanding. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

by Sandra Randleman

## DAY 4

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 20

### READ

Mark 2:13–28

### REFLECT

One theme in Mark that rises above all others is this: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

One theme that holds together all but one of these scenes in Jesus' life is this: Jesus hosts all sorts of people for festive meals. Those two themes converge in Jesus' saying in verse 28: "The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

To study Jewish attitudes toward the Sabbath is to learn that they weren't nearly as "legalistic" as we imagine. Not long after Jesus' earthly life, the rabbis were referring to the Sabbath as a bride (see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*). The rabbis would greet the Sabbath's arrival at sundown joyfully, dressing festively and feasting as if each Sabbath were a bride and all Israel the groom. I'm persuaded that such habits of the faith are underneath all these scenes from Jesus' life.

The word "lord" has a double meaning: not only "master" but "husband." When the Pharisees upbraid his disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus replies in a way that says far more than "you guys are too legalistic." Jesus says, "Not only do I say what is allowed (and not) for this day, but the day belongs to me. I'm the groom to this bride! Now that I am here, the marriage is consummated."

### RESPOND

Did you notice that Lent includes six Sundays but only forty days? That's because Sundays aren't fasting days. One may fast the other six days each week during Lent, or just on Fridays, but one does not fast on Sundays. They are feast days, even during Lent.

One way to mark the season of Lent is to keep the Sabbath/Lord's Day. How does one do that? Consider feasting. Consider an old-fashioned practice of preparing a festive meal for those in your household (and when Covid is conquered, opening your table to folks beyond your household). Make your preparations before Sunday: what you'll wear, what you'll serve, the table itself, what you'll discuss. The Sabbath/Lord's Day is a sign that Jesus is Lord, that he offers life abundant, and that he welcomes everyone to his banquet table – even sinners and outcasts.

### PRAY

*We rejoice, Lord Jesus Christ, that your arrival is the sign that heaven and earth are wed, and you invite everyone to the marriage feast. Empower our observance of that great day to come: draw us to the communion table as its sign and foretaste, and gather us around banquet tables to demonstrate the fellowship of the children of God. Amen.*

by Stuart Gordon

REST & REREAD

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21

## DAY 5

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22

### READ

Mark 3:1–19

### REFLECT

By the end of Mark 3:6, the scribes and Pharisees have made up their minds about Jesus. Originally, maybe they thought they could use Jesus' power and authority, but he's proven too difficult to handle. He refuses to be domesticated and controlled. So, they make the decision to silence him. Already Jesus is moving towards the Cross. Nevertheless, this doesn't stop the crowds from swarming Jesus. No surprise, nothing else has been able to satisfy their deepest longings, no one has been able to heal their greatest need.

I love the listing of the Twelve. All these names come with stories, and these stories—much like our own—are less than heroic. And still, they are the Twelve. Jesus has called them, and Jesus will equip these men. It is also curious what Jesus tasks these men to do, “And he appointed twelve so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.” Two things. That is what's asked of them: be with Jesus and go and preach. You've heard the St Francis quote, “Preach the gospel, and use words if necessary.” Well, the one problem is that St. Francis never said this! This quote doesn't square with what Jesus tells his disciples. Spend time with Jesus. Preach the gospel. Use words. Use the beautiful words of Jesus himself.

### RESPOND

Take a moment and reflect on life as one of the Twelve. You are one of Jesus' disciples. Hear his words: Be with me and preach the gospel. Hear those words as a gracious and beautiful invitation. And hear those words as challenge. How can you respond?

### PRAY

*Jesus, you are with me. The Holy Spirit makes this possible. So fill me with your life, your compassion, your love, your holiness, your goodness, your truth, and your beauty full to overflowing, that I may shout the gospel from the rooftops. Amen.*

by Ryan Moore

## DAY 6

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23

### READ

Mark 3:20–35

### REFLECT

Ever been embarrassed by your family? Ever been in a room, out to dinner, or with friends and your parents, siblings, aunt, uncle, or grandparents do something that completely mortifies you? In this passage, it looks like Jesus' family might be a little embarrassed. They think Jesus might have gone crazy. So too do the religious authorities. The scribes and Pharisees claim Jesus is a demon or has the power of the Prince of demons. Jesus refutes this, arguing that a house divided cannot stand – an argument used by President Abraham Lincoln pleading with our nation to come together. So many are gathered around Jesus that his family can't reach him. The message that his family is outside and calling for him reaches Jesus, and Jesus does what Jesus does. He expands the boundary of welcome and belonging. He extends the invitation to be family with those gathered. Whoever does the will of God, they are the mothers, brothers, and sisters of Jesus.

### RESPOND

We remember and proclaim in baptism that God has claimed us as beloved children - that we are co-heirs with Christ. We are a part of the heavenly family. Is it possible, that just like Jesus' earthly family we may be a little embarrassed by him at times?

*Love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me?* Seriously Jesus? Do you know my enemies?

*Take up your cross and follow me?* Jesus doesn't protect us from suffering but sustains us through everything.

*Love one another the way I have loved you?* Jesus talks to prostitutes and keeps company with sinners. He invites those on the margins, the outcast and the scandalous to be family. Jesus, stop embarrassing us. Don't you know who those people are?

Who are the people in your life that Jesus is calling you to love? Where are you afraid that Jesus might embarrass you? What would it look like to know and do the will of God in your life today?

### PRAY

*God, help me to no longer be divided. Make me of one mind as I seek to know and follow you. I confess the ways your love is too much for me to handle sometimes. I confess the boundaries I place around your grace. Expand the capacity of my heart to do your will O God, that I might truly be your family. In the name of Christ the King, Amen.*

by Adam DeVries

## DAY 7

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24

### READ

Mark 4:1–20

### REFLECT

The parable of the sower tells many truths about the world. God’s Word seems to be all over the place. There is plenty of ground that won’t bear Kingdom fruit. Time is telling when it comes to the sort of endurance needed to live out a life of faith in this world. Of course, the looming question in a parable such as this always seems to be, “what sort of ground am I?” In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus makes the point, “you will know them by their fruit.” (Matthew 7:16) The final scene of the parable of the sower describes the one who hears God’s word, accepts it, and bears fruit, a lot of fruit. One only needs to consider the fruit of their faith to honestly answer the question of what sort of ground one might be.

Of course, answering the question for the one who has thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold sort of fruit will be an exercise in gratitude; an opportunity to praise God for His word and all the ways God has been faithful in this world.

Answering the question for the one who has less than thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold will be a different exercise. The season of Lent offers an opportunity to prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in this world, and in one’s life. If one can say, “Satan has taken God’s Word from me.” or “I once received God’s Word with joy, but troubles came, and I fell away.” or “Wealth and things have choked God’s Word from my life.” Consider the season of Lent an opportunity to listen once again for God’s Word in this world.

### RESPOND

What sort of ground am I? How might God be speaking to me this season? What is the fruit of my faith?

### PRAY

*God of all creation, you have spoken. Give me ears to hear, that I might faithfully follow your Son, Jesus, my Savior. Amen.*

by Josh Rodriguez

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25

## READ

Mark 4:21–34

## REFLECT

Once, my husband Michael's boss took a mission team on an excursion to a local cave. They thought it was just a fun adventure, but as usual, Maury had another goal in mind. They found themselves in this huge cathedral-like space deep in the heart of the cave. Maury had all of the students turn off their flashlights and as their eyes began to try to adjust to the darkness, they found that there was no point of reference, no way they would ever be able to stumble out of the cave on their own.

Maury proceeded to crack a small glow stick – one you could buy in bulk at the Dollar Store. He tossed it into the middle of the room, and slowly the students' eyes begin to make out some shapes, shadows, arches through which they could hike out of the cave. It just took that one glow stick. Maury would then read this passage pointing out that even the smallest flicker of light can banish the confusion and fear of the darkness.

## RESPOND

Jesus is saying something like this in today passage. He knows that the message of light He is ushering in is but a flicker now, here, at the beginning of His ministry. But His disciples will then take that message, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to the ends of the earth. And we too are called to shine the light of Christ's love into those dark corners of our world.

It doesn't have to be super bright or strong. There are times when we feel as though our acts of service or love are inconsequential. But every bit of light, every act of compassion breaks up the darkness and may help others to see more clearly. It's one of the reasons I love the tradition of lighting our candles in worship on Christmas Eve. It begins as one small flame, and as that light is shared, the whole room is illuminated (and y'all's faces look like those of angels).

This can be an easy metaphor to brush past because it is so familiar, but what could it look like to "shine your light"? What concrete ways can you see and spread the light of Christ today?

## PRAY

*God, as your servant Isaiah once prayed, "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light." Lord, you are the Light of the World. You have come to give us hope in the midst of despair. Help us to embrace your hope and love and shine Your light wherever you call us. Amen.*

by Sarah Bird Kneff

## DAY 9

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26

### READ

Mark 4:35–5:20

### REFLECT

“Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” Jesus’ disciples have been filled with fear as the storm ravaged their boat, but this Jesus had stilled the winds. Their awe continues the revelation that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the King. After Jesus taught in parables, he crosses the sea of Galilee to the Gentile side. St. Augustine interpreted this story as the church (the nave) being tossed around by evil on its mission to the world. Yet, Christ protects and stops the evil when the church has faith. On the Gentile side of the lake, Jesus confronts Legion (evil) in the disturbed man living in the tombs. The demonic spirits ask to enter the swine. The result fulfills the realization that when it gets its way, evil is always destructive and ultimately self-destructive. The strange consequence of this miracle is that the town’s people are filled with fear and ask Jesus to leave. The Gentiles are not ready to hear the gospel, yet Jesus sends the healed man to spread the Good News among the Decapolis (the ten cities). Jesus’ power over evil, both natural and supernatural evil, connect these two stories. The second connection is fear: the disciples’ fear of the storm and the town’s people’s fear of Jesus’ power. The antidote for fear is faith. “Have you still no faith?”

### RESPOND

Anxiety and fear destroy. Fear is also useless. Statistics show that of the things we worry about 40% of the time never happen; 35% can’t be changed; 15% naturally turn out good; 8% are petty worries; and for only 2% worry might help. In the midst of chaos, Jesus asks, where is our faith? Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable; fear creates hopelessness, faith rejoices in God.

### PRAY

*Gracious heavenly Father, we are anxious and fearful. Come Lord Jesus and still the storms of our hearts. Cast out the destructive thoughts that disturb us. Fill us with faith that Christ is in the nave of the church proclaiming, “Peace! Be still!” Filled with faith enable us to live out the Good News of your love through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

by John Musgrave

## DAY 10

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27

### READ

Mark 5:21–34

### REFLECT

The Gospel of Mark often inserts one story into another, and the two stories in Mark 5 have several similar features. One such feature is that the language of sickness and healing is a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both stories include the element of fear and yet also hope and faith in Jesus' healing power.

The woman suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years is afraid to tell Jesus that she reached out to touch Jesus' clothes with faith that she would be healed. Jesus tells the woman, "Daughter, your faith has made you well."

The father of the 12-year old girl is filled with fear when he hears that his daughter has died. Jesus tells the father, "Do not fear, only believe."

Through the power of God present in Jesus, both the woman and the girl are healed. Both are restored to new life. The woman is no longer "unclean" and can return to her new life in her community as a "daughter" of Israel. The 12-year old has been raised from death to new life.

Through Jesus Christ, we need not fear even death, for nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. In Jesus Christ' resurrection we are given the hope of new life, eternal life that begins even now.

### RESPOND

What attitudes, fears, feelings, or other aspects of your life need to be removed or transformed? Where are you in need of new life? Lift these up to Jesus Christ in prayer and ask that He will give you greater faith and trust in Him. Trust that He will guide you into the new and abundant life God created to live.

### PRAY

*Lord Jesus Christ, You came to give us new life, abundant life lived ever closer to You. You are the Lord of life with power over all that would separate us from God. Put to death in us our sinful ways. Heal us and we will be healed. Save us and we will be saved. May we come to You in faith that You have the power to transform us, that the life of Jesus Christ might be made manifest in us. May the peace of Jesus Christ rest upon us and, through us, be shared with others. Amen.*

by Sandra Randleman

MONDAY, MARCH 1

## READ

Mark 5:35 – 6:6

## REFLECT

Anne and I know what it's like to have a baby in the hospital, in intensive care, struggling for life. We knew the helplessness, the powerlessness, the desperation not once, but twice. Yes, we know what it is to fall on your knees and beg God to save your child.

We also know what it's like to have your prayers answered while others' seem to fall on deaf ears. Those parents had faith; they were supported by praying congregations; they were just like us. Our prayers were answered while theirs were not.

Whenever I approach these healing accounts from the Gospels, I am reminded of those other families. I want to claim the witness of Mark to Jesus' healing power while also acknowledging that Jesus does not choose to heal every sick child. In doing so, I recall Jesus' words in Mark 1:37, in response to Peter's plea that Jesus return to Capernaum to heal more people: "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

It is a bitter medicine. Mark warns us even as he summons us to trust Jesus: this God is doing more than healing the sick. The Son of Man is bringing redemption, which is hard and painful and costly.

You might say that the first question of the Gospel is, "Who is Jesus?" and a second is like unto it: "Who is your God?"

Is your God the one who does everything you ask, shields you from tragedy, rolls out the red carpet for all your arrivals? Is your God the one who always makes sense to you and never makes demands of you? Mark says, "If so, you probably don't want to follow Jesus."

However, if your God is the one who willingly endured rejection, false conviction, suffering, and death for your sake and the sake of your enemy, then Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me."

## RESPOND

Yes, Jesus does heal – sometimes. Blessedly, he answered our desperate prayers all those years ago. But that is the beginning. Still he says to us: "Fear not; only believe" and every day we must begin anew. What is your challenge to trust him today?

## PRAY

*We believe Lord; help our unbelief. Amen.*

by Stuart Gordon

## DAY 12

TUESDAY, MARCH 2

### READ

Mark 6:7–29

### REFLECT

Do you remember putting your little one on the school bus for the first time? Or, if not the school bus, do you remember seeing them in your rearview mirror after dropping them off at summer camp?

This is the moment: Jesus kicks the disciples out of the nest for the first time. Sink or swim, to change the metaphor. Jesus is trusting these jokesters with his power...a lot of power! “And [he] gave them authority over the unclean spirits.” What was Jesus thinking? Don’t know, to be honest.

One thing is certain, Jesus didn’t anticipate them having perfect success. “And if any place,” Jesus says, “will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet....” It’s as if their batting average didn’t matter that much to Jesus. All that seems to matter to the King, is that they are obedient to move on out at a moment’s notice, to get in the game, and to assume his work and be his presence to a hurting world.

### RESPOND

Get over performance pressure! The first disciples failed miserably on tons of occasions! When God calls you, he’s not worried about success and “mission accomplished.” God is looking for obedience. And he’s willing to extend the power of the Son to see the Kingdom come.

### PRAY

*Gracious Father, have your way in me. Give me the courage to say “yes” to Jesus’ call on my life. Fill me with the Holy Spirit. Give me strength to be obedient. Amen.*

by Ryan Moore

REST & REREAD

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3

## READ

Mark 6:30–44

## REFLECT

The disciples are tired. They are hungry. They want to spend time with Jesus without all these people around him. After all, didn't Jesus promise them a little R&R together? Can you imagine the disciples getting a little annoyed with their Rabbi's compassion distraction? It's getting late and dangerously close to dinner time. They walk up to Jesus and encourage him to send the people away so everyone can get something to eat. How does Jesus respond? "You give them something to eat." He asks something impossible of them to do on their own. They protest, saying there is no way they could afford it. They don't have the resources to provide for the needs of those gathered. It's foolish to think that they could meet the needs of thousands. Jesus doubles down. "How many loaves have you? Go and see." Jesus invites them to participate in his compassion. Jesus invites them to join in his generosity. Jesus invites them to be a part of the miraculous. What's left over is more than enough.

## RESPOND

Could Jesus have simply snapped his fingers and fed thousands by himself? Yes. But that's not who Jesus is. Jesus invites us just as he invited his disciples to join in ministry. How often do we practice the same scarcity mentality as the disciples? What inequalities and hunger exists in our community today that we do our very best to dodge and avoid? How often do we view the radical compassion of Christ as theologically beautiful but inconvenient, impractical, and maybe impossible? Jesus says to us, give them something to eat. Do something about it. When we see injustice in the world and send people to the food pantry, perhaps Christ could be calling us to sit down and eat together. Unlike the disciples, we are well resourced, and more often than not we have more than enough. If Jesus could feed thousands with the disciples' scarcity, imagine what he could do with our abundance . . . if we let him.

## PRAY

*Thank you Lord God that me plus you is always enough. Thank you for your compassion. Grant me the wisdom to not see it as a distraction. Thank you for your generosity. Grant me the courage to be a part of it. Thank you for your calling. Grant me the grace to go, see, and share. In the name of Christ the King, Amen.*

by Adam DeVries

THURSDAY, MARCH 4

## READ

Mark 6:45–52

## REFLECT

Jesus has just fed thousands of people. Instead of basking in the glory, he sends his disciples away, in a boat to Bethsaida. Jesus goes to pray by himself. The disciples were on the sea and Jesus was on the land. The disciples were struggling in the weather and Jesus walked out to them. It is hard to know why Jesus walked out to them, the text says he was going to just pass them by, but the moment does provide an opportunity for revelation. The disciples do not recognize Jesus. They thought he was a ghost. He tells them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!” Then he climbs in the boat, and the winds cease. This is not the first time the disciples have been in a boat with Jesus. Earlier in the gospel Mark tells the story of Jesus sleeping in the stern during a storm. The disciples wake him up because they are afraid they are going to perish. He rebuked the wind and sea saying, “Peace! Be still!” The winds cease and the text says there was a “dead calm.”

The disciples have experienced Jesus to be someone who can calm storms, who can bring peace in the midst of troubled times, one who can offer comfort despite the surrounding chaos.

The scene in Mark 6 doesn't end with the disciples being reminded of what they already know and resting in that truth. The scene ends with Mark saying that the disciples were “utterly astounded” but “not understanding about the loaves” and “their hearts were hardened.” It can be easy to condemn the disciples and wonder how they can leave the scene with a hardened heart, and yet, when I survey my own life, it seems all too easy to relate with the disciples in forgetting the revelation of who I have experienced Jesus to be in this chaotic world. I relate to the disciples in their forgetfulness. The grace and mercy of Jesus shines through all the more in the gospel texts as we see these flawed humans attempt to waddle along in the journey.

It is a great comfort and terrible tragedy to read the disciples failed attempts at faithfulness in the gospel texts. Thank God Jesus doesn't give up on the disciples. Thank God Jesus doesn't give up on me.

## RESPOND

Who have you experienced Jesus to be in this world? What moments of revelation have you had? Who is Jesus to you? What sense do you make of the disciples' response in the scene on the sea?

## PRAY

*Lord of all Revelation, may we take heart and not be afraid. May we remember you are with us, always, to the end of the age. Amen.*

by Josh Rodriguez

## DAY 15

FRIDAY, MARCH 5

### READ

Mark 7:1–23

### REFLECT

One of the most common criticisms of the church is that it is full of hypocrites. When faced with this accusation, I never try to dispute that fact. Yes, we are hypocrites, but we know we are broken, and so we continue to rely on God’s grace alone to heal and guide us.

Here, as Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being hypocrites, he is doing so because they are not aware of their brokenness. They don’t understand that these empty rituals, like hand washing, are not what will purify them, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (v. 6). Their worship was indeed beautiful. I’m sure the chanting and the incense and the ritual of 1st century Jewish temple worship was a sight to behold. Perhaps the choir sounded similar to ours, perhaps they had flowers and robes and tall ceilings with exquisite carvings and soft velvet pads on their pews. But here Jesus is saying that is not what God longs for. Beauty is a gift and a way to lead us into God’s presence; however, it is the posture of our hearts that open us up to be ushered into the throne room of the King.

### RESPOND

Verse 15 reads, “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean’.” The Pharisees were so militant about “cleanliness” as they sought ceremonial purity through their diet and cleansing rituals. All the while, they allowed their hearts to drift further and further away from the King.

Are there times you feel like you’re just “going through the motions” in worship? Are there times when you feel like you just showed up out of habit without bringing your whole self to that hour in the sanctuary (or on the livestream)? Even as a pastor, I have moments like that, and this passage helps remind me of what is really important. If everything else were to be stripped away, God just wants our hearts, our attention, our love.

This Sunday, before worship, pray that God would give you the grace to “show up” fully. It is by His grace and the work of the Holy Spirit alone that we are even welcomed into that space. So with gratitude, tune your heart to worship.

### PRAY

*Lord Jesus Christ, we can so easily slip into the pattern of the Pharisees and take for granted the privilege of worship. So, please, take our hearts and let them be consecrated to Thee. Amen.*

by Sarah Bird Kneff

## DAY 16

SATURDAY, MARCH 6

### READ

Mark 7:24–37

### REFLECT

After Jesus responds to the Pharisees demanding his disciples follow the laws of cleanliness, He enters the unclean land of the Gentiles, Tyre and the Decapolis, and begins a ministry to the Gentiles. At first, we are startled at Jesus' harsh words to the Syrophenician woman. Can this be the compassionate and open Jesus who wants to be left alone and speaks belittlingly to this woman hungering for the healing of her daughter? Is this the human nature of Christ, tired and closed? Or is this a critical moment to demonstrate that the gospel will reach the Gentiles? Tyre was an island with a strong economy, but it had to import its produce from Galilee, the breadbasket of the region. In times of plenty the exchange was mutually beneficial. But in times of crisis, the Tyreans were able to literally buy the bread off the Jewish tables. Jews resented the Gentile "dogs" taking the bread of Jewish children. This faithful persistent mother turns the table on Jesus asking to be the little household dog eating the crumbs from the little children. Jesus responds by declaring her child healed, but then goes to Gentile territory to continue his ministry. He shows the deaf mute what he is going to do by poking his ears and rubbing his tongue with saliva. But heals him by commanding, "Open up!" Again, all were astounded beyond all measure. "He has done everything well." He then feeds the four thousand. Jesus' Gentile ministry is the same as his Galilee ministry.

### RESPOND

The early church's hardest struggle was to come to terms with the notion that Christ was for all peoples. Their heritage was that non-Jews were unclean. Mark is reminding the early church that Jesus ministered to the Gentiles. Are there elements of our heritage that have created prejudices in our lives that keep the message of God's love bottled up inside us. Can we proclaim that God shows no partiality? Can we show no partiality? Great news! Jesus proclaims, "Ephphatha," that is "Be opened!" The result is our cultural prejudices are removed, and we can speak plainly of God's love.

### PRAY

*Gracious heavenly Father, forgive our deafness to those oppressed. Come Lord Jesus, open our eyes that we might see your love, open our ears that we might hear your calling, open our mouths that we might proclaim your grace, and open our arms that we might embrace all through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

by John Musgrave

## REST & REREAD

SUNDAY, MARCH 7

## DAY 17

MONDAY, MARCH 8

### READ

Mark 8:1–21

### REFLECT

There are many similarities between our story in Chapter 8 of the feeding of the 4,000 and the earlier story in Chapter 6 of the feeding of 5,000. But there are good reasons for the inclusion of both stories.

Both stories suggest the time of fulfillment of the biblical prophecies of a king promised by God, a good shepherd of the people, who shows compassion for his people and provides for their needs. Jesus feeds the crowd of 4,000 because he has compassion for the people. Jesus recognizes that the people have been with him for three days with nothing to eat.

There are also significant symbolic differences in the stories. In the earlier story, the feeding of 5,000 can represent Jesus giving the bread of life to the Jews (five scrolls of the Law). The geographical location of the feeding of the 4,000 indicates the inclusion of the Gentiles. The story also follows that of Jesus healing the daughter of the Syrophenician woman despite Jesus' original response that the "children [of Israel] should be fed first" in Chapter 7. In addition, the number four can suggest the four corners of the world, and the number of seven (seven leftover baskets) can suggest wholeness and completion.

Jesus has come to be the King of all nations. Yet the disciples are slow to understand who Jesus is and the significance of the miracles of the feeding of both the 5,000 and the 4,000. Yet, there is hope. Our passage concludes with Jesus asking the disciples, "Do you not yet understand?" The word "yet" gives hope that the disciples will, in time, understand who Jesus is, the King all Israel has been awaiting and the King all nations of the world so desperately need.

### RESPOND

Reflect on times when you have been slow to understand the significance of a promise of Jesus recorded in scripture. How do you feel when you ponder the meaning of Jesus' promise to be with us always through the Holy Spirit as our advocate, our comforter and our teacher?

What does it mean to you that Jesus came to be the King and the Good Shepherd of all people, and not just one nation?

### PRAY

*Gracious Lord, you were born in humble circumstances, and yet, you were born a King. Disciples of your day and our day are slow to recognize the meaning of who you truly are. As your disciples, may we open our hearts to learn more about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. May we serve you alone and help others to come to You. May the life, love and compassion of Jesus Christ be made manifest in us. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

by Sandra Randleman

TUESDAY, MARCH 9

## READ

Mark 8:22–33

## REFLECT

*Who is Jesus?*

If you were to fold Mark in half, these verses would practically wrap around the center. Mark began in 1:1 with “The beginning of the good news Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” He begins Act II with Peter’s confession, “You are the Messiah.” So, who is this Messiah?

There is one last, powerful healing at the end of Act I when Jesus directs the recipient, “Do not even go into the village” to tell people what I did for you. Again, Jesus performs a deed of power and then downplays it. Jesus does not want people fixating on the “miracles” to the exclusion of the main revelatory event to come.

On the other side of the fold, Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he will (has to!) suffer, be rejected, be killed, and rise. Surely it is the kind of message that no one can hear, so surreal is it in the face of Jesus’ deeds of power. It is so surreal that Peter feels confident enough to pull Jesus aside and dress him down for such foolishness.

And in the center is Peter’s confession, “You are the Messiah.” So, this is the Messiah Mark is revealing to us: powerful but in a surreal way. I am persuaded that, no matter how long we live, how many times we read this Gospel, or how long we follow Jesus, his suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection will remain surreal to us, nearly incomprehensible.

## RESPOND

*We still struggle to understand him.*

Think of experiences in your life that were surreal: you knew they happened, but it was as if they didn’t. I can think of two: the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 and the Christmas Day bombing in Nashville. Yes, I saw them on television. One was just thirteen miles down the road, on a street I’ve driven and walked countless times. But even though I saw it on television, it didn’t seem possible.

The Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, had to suffer, be rejected, be killed, and rise. We know that and trust that, but practically speaking we can’t fathom that. Everything else in our life testifies to the glories of winning over losing, of success over failure, of popularity over principle, of results over integrity. Our Messiah proved who he was by suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection.

Tomorrow, you’ll read Jesus’ summons to anyone who would follow him. It will be the test of a person’s embrace of this Messiah. If you’re thinking right now that this Gospel of Mark isn’t surreal to you, isn’t contrary to everything else you know, keep reading.

## PRAY

*Lord Jesus, keep speaking the truth to me until I can hear and follow. Amen.*

by Stuart Gordon

## DAY 19

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10

### READ

Mark 8:34–9:13

### REFLECT

John Calvin wrote that Mark 9:34, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,” is the sum of the Christian life. Wow! Every day the call of Christ bids me come and die.

One of the questions that has stumped unbelieving academics for ages is, “How did a religion with a crucified messiah that invites its followers to journey the same path grow, and grow, and keep growing?” It just doesn’t make sense, when every other ancient religion seemed to cut much better deals with god(s).

Well, if we read a bit farther in our text, we’ve got our answer. On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus is revealed for who he is: the “Son of Man,” which is Mark’s shorthand for beloved Son of God. And this beloved Son has not put on flesh and come into the world on a fieldtrip. He’s not here to do some sightseeing, to experience life as a human before returning to divine-only form at the right hand of the Father. He’s come into the world to change it, from the inside out, to take on death itself, so that the dying that matters most for his followers is the death that happens in and through the baptismal font. So as the martyrs of the faith breathe their last breath, they do so confidently, because they have died in the font and already risen to newness of life...a life that is without end.

### RESPOND

This day consider what it means to die to self. How is it that Jesus can be operative in your life? Invite the Holy Spirit into your life more fully. Invite the Living God to make your heart his home.

### PRAY

*Father, make me fearless. I’m alive because your Son lives in me. [If you’ve never invited Jesus into your heart, then listen to the Spirit calling you, die to self and rise to newness of life in Jesus.] Holy Spirit, I want to walk as a child of the light ready to walk the way of the Cross, to bring glory to the name of Jesus my King. Amen.*

by Ryan Moore

THURSDAY, MARCH 11

## READ

Mark 9:14–29

## REFLECT

Jesus does not appear to be in a good mood in this passage. He seems frustrated and angry, or at the very least tired and annoyed. “How much longer must I put up with you?” Ouch Jesus. His disciples have failed. They are unable to cast out the unclean spirit from the boy. To which Jesus responds in a classic exhausted parent fashion, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I put up with you? . . . Bring [the boy] to me.” If you want to cast out a demon right, you have to exorcise it yourself. But perhaps that was the problem. Later the disciples are alone with Jesus and inquire as to why they were unable to perform the exorcism. Jesus’ response: “This kind only comes out through prayer.” Could it be that the disciples were trying to cast out the spirit by themselves? Jesus’ frustration continues when the father of the possessed boy uses a phrase that appears to be an emotional trigger for the King of Kings. “If you are able”. What’s ironic about this phrase is that Jesus is the only one who is able. Christ the King has all power and authority given to him by God. The only one who seems to recognize King Jesus is the unclean spirit, who causes the boy to convulse the second he sees Jesus. The father, recognizing he’s put his foot in his mouth all the way up to the knee, immediately regrets his choice of words. He quickly corrects himself, “I do believe, help my unbelief.” Jesus then successfully casts out the demon. Jesus works with the unbelief of a desperate father.

## RESPOND

The grace in this story is abundant. “*How much longer must I put up with you?*” May not seem like a grace filled statement, but where is Jesus at the end of the passage? With the disciples who failed him. Their failure and even Jesus’ frustration are not enough to separate them from the King’s love. Jesus says, all things are possible for those who believe, but the father admits his unbelief and Jesus heals the son anyway. Grace. Christ’s judgement and grace go together. How often do you allow moments of conviction and shame to convince you that God is no longer gracious and loving toward you? This passage tells a story of a Savior who will not leave or forsake us regardless of failure or unbelief. What failures or doubts are preventing you from saying “yes” to God’s presence with you today?

Secondly, how often do we act just like the disciples in this story? How often do we seek to do the will of God without God? How often do we seek to do things *for* God instead of doing things *with* God? What are the prayers you need to pray? Where is the suffering in our community that has been present for a generation that God is calling us to pray to change?

## PRAY

*My Lord God, I do believe, help my unbelief. In the name of the one who is able, Christ the King, Amen.*

by Adam DeVries

## DAY 21

FRIDAY, MARCH 12

### READ

Mark 9:30–32

### REFLECT

Jesus is walking through Galilee with the disciples. He wants to keep a low profile because he is teaching them about his death and resurrection, a sensitive subject to say the least. Jesus says, “The Son of Man will be betrayed, killed, and after three days, will rise.” The disciples did not understand but were afraid to ask him to clarify. Perhaps the disciples are intimidated by Jesus, or they are embarrassed by their lack of comprehension. It’s hard to know the foundation of their fear, but the text makes their lack of understanding plain. They do not understand Jesus, which can be hard for us to make sense of because Jesus’ words read so straight forward. Why is it so hard for some people to understand Jesus?

Mark drops this foretelling right in the middle of two stories. The story before is about the father who comes to Jesus looking for healing for his son, the one who cries out with the famous line, “I believe; help my unbelief!” The story after is about the disciples arguing over who is the greatest, and Jesus uses the moment to teach them that the “first shall be last...” Mark put’s the disciples’ confusion in between disbelief and arrogance.

When one reads the gospels there are at least two levels at which to consider the text. The first are stories about healings and humblings. Questions come up about whether Jesus could really heal a son, or the implications for being willing to be last in a world that honors those who strive to be first. Then there are the foretellings about Jesus’ death and resurrection. Questions about resurrection and salvation come up when you read the text on this level. When Mark wrote his gospel, it was as if he wanted his audience to understand, to get the full picture of Jesus, somewhere between disbelief and arrogance is where one would need to sit to fully understand everything Jesus had to offer. May we approach Easter this year with eyes to see and ears to hear all of who Jesus was, is, and will be. May it be so.

### RESPOND

When you read the Bible, what do you tend to pay most attention to in the text? What do you tend to overlook?

What part of Jesus’ life or ministry do you tend to be most confused by?

Like the disciples in the scene, is there anything you are afraid to ask Jesus?

### PRAY

*Jesus, give me eyes to see, and ears to hear; that I may see and hear all of you this Easter. Amen.*

by Josh Rodriguez

SATURDAY, MARCH 13

## READ

Mark 9:38-50

## REFLECT

There's a quote commonly attributed to Groucho Marx that says,

*"You can divide the world into two groups of people: Those who believe you can divide the world into two groups of people, and those who don't."*

Jesus' disciples belong to the first group; Jesus belongs to the second.

In verses 38-41, we catch a glimpse of Jesus' disciples once again missing the point. John literally says, "he was not following us." He is drawing lines around who is in and who is out, and he is lumping himself in with Jesus. But in doing so, John doesn't understand that there is no "us" to follow – there is only Jesus.

A friend of mine use to say, "whenever you draw a line in the sand separating those who belong and those who do not, Jesus is almost always on the other side of that line looking back at you."

The disciples had just been corrected earlier in the chapter as they were arguing about who is the greatest and Christ took a child upon his knee naming her the greatest in his Kingdom. But here they are again trying to discover and name some hierarchy.

## REFLECT

You can't blame the disciples for their misunderstanding. That is how their world works. They know who the "haves" are and who are the "have-nots". Children definitely fall into "have-nots" category, along with most women, and the beggars and demon-possessed – all of whom Jesus insists on engaging with and caring for.

Can you think of those in our world Christians today might consider on the outside? Or, closer to home, what about those in our community or in your own life? Bring those people before Jesus in prayer and talk to him about your feelings towards those who don't appear to be "following us."

## PRAY

*Jesus, loosen my grip on the categories I impose on the people around me. Give me your eyes to see each person and help me to understand just a little bit more of your amazing grace that saved a wretch like me – a grace that continues to move and save in spite of me. Amen.*

by Sarah Bird Kneff

SUNDAY, MARCH 14

MONDAY, MARCH 15

## READ

Mark 10:1–16

## REFLECT

With the beginning of Mark 10, Jesus leaves Galilee and makes his way across the Jordan to Judea. As he does so, he is questioned about divorce and rebukes the disciples for preventing people from bringing their children to him. In both instances Jesus offers teachings that call for a reordering of relationships in the Kingdom. Prohibiting divorce protected women from being cast aside with no means of support. Only a Jewish male could divorce his wife. A female could not divorce her husband. A Jewish male did not commit adultery against his wife. He committed adultery against a fellow Jewish male if he had relations with that man's wife. To divorce his wife, he only had to say, "I divorce you" three times. Jesus declares this was not the intention of God in creation. "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife." Leaving father and mother meant establishing a new family; being "joined" or "yoked together" meant the priority of the marriage relationship above all others. In Jesus' radical statements about marriage, he elevates the wife to a position of equal partnership and rights in the marriage. Creation is a gift. Marriage is a gift to treasure and to care for the relationship. In like manner, Jesus upends the cultural demeaning of children. In Jesus' day a Rabbi would have nothing to do with children. But Jesus lifts them up as members of the Kingdom of God. One must come with humility and delight as a child receiving a gift. The Kingdom belongs to those who do not presume to merit, deserve, or be entitled to it.

## RESPOND

How is Jesus asking us to reorder our lives? Lent is a time of reflection as we prepare for the dramatic movement celebrating Jesus' death and resurrection. To realize the extreme self-giving of Jesus to redeem us with his love is to be overwhelmed with gratitude. We are loved. We are forgiven. Our response is to live in this amazing love. It starts in our immediate relationships. Our relationship with spouse and children is based on God's creative love. Jesus calls us to approach our family with humility and delight.

## PRAY

*Gracious heavenly Father, fill us with your rule of love. Help us to live in your kingdom where all are forgiven and seek your way. Create in our families a new creation of positive relationships. Today may we walk in your love and delight in your will. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

by John Musgrave

TUESDAY, MARCH 16

## READ

Mark 10:17–31

## REFLECT

Jesus' discussion with the rich man is a difficult one for many of us. The rich man appears to be most sincere in his desire to inherit eternal life. He affirms that he knows and has followed the commandments since his youth. When Jesus looks at him, Jesus loves him. But the price of discipleship that Jesus prescribes is too high, and the rich man goes away grieving.

Jesus tells his disciples that it is hard to enter the kingdom of God and perhaps, especially hard for people who are attached to their worldly possessions. Even the disciples are astounded by the high price of discipleship Jesus set forth.

This is Jesus' point. It is not hard, but impossible for humans to earn our way into salvation by following a set of commandments. Instead, we must love God with all our hearts, minds and soul. We must be so willing to follow Jesus wherever he leads us that love for others and service in Jesus' name flow from our love for God who first loved us. We want to follow Jesus.

Earning salvation is impossible for mortals. We will never follow Jesus perfectly. We are saved only by grace through faith. With God all things are possible. Thanks be to God.

## RESPOND

How do you respond to the discussion between Jesus and the rich man on what one must do to inherit eternal life? Are you discouraged? Confused? Or, like the disciples, astounded?

How do you interpret Jesus' words to his disciples: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."?

Invite God to lead you into a deeper relationship with him. Ask God to help you to receive his love and to grow in your love of God and of others. Invite God to teach you what it means for you to follow Jesus.

## PRAY

*Thank you, dear Lord, for your love, for your Son, Jesus Christ and for the gift of His amazing grace. We acknowledge our sinfulness and seek forgiveness through your mercy. Help us to grow in our gratitude to you and to love you more. May we follow Jesus Christ as we are led by your Holy Spirit. We need your transforming Spirit that the Light of the world, our Lord and Savior, to shine in and through us. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

by Sandra Randleman

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17

## READ

Mark 10:32-45

## REFLECT

## The GOAT

I write this before the Super Bowl, so I don't know who won the game or the Most Valuable Player award. Odds are good that it was the Buccaneers and Tom Brady, whom many call "the GOAT," or "Greatest of All Time."

What is "great?" Forgive me some brief references to the dictionary: "Notably large in size or number. Remarkable in degree or effectiveness. Eminent, distinguished. Superior in quality or character."

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus had to tell his disciples not once, but three times, that he was to be rejected, suffer and die, and rise from the dead. Apparently, two times was enough for the message to get across, because verse 32 tells us that the others were amazed that he walked ahead of them on the road, as if he were eager to arrive for his execution.

Nonetheless, the heart of the message did not sink in, likely because the message is surreal. The dictionary definition of greatness is the one we all use, but Jesus redefines greatness for Christians. There is absolutely nothing wrong with knowing and using the dictionary definition; it just won't help people understand Jesus one bit. Neither will it serve anyone who wants to follow Jesus into his kingdom.

9:35: "Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all."

10:15: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

10:25: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

10:37: "Grant us to sit in your glory." "You don't know what you're asking."

## RESPOND

## Awaiting the King

I once read that you can no more force a person to believe in God than you can make flowers bloom by pulling on them. Faith is mysterious. The same message can be heard one, two, three times but not really comprehended. These Lenten devotions are a gift in that we are paying attention, daily, to the word about the Cross, the word about Jesus, who is the unlikely great one. When will it become clear to us? When will it make us children of his Kingdom?

## PRAY

*Save us, Lord, from worldliness. Deliver us from definitions unfit for your Kingdom. More than that, deliver us from aspirations unfit for your Kingdom. Reveal yourself as last of all and servant of all and draw us into the path where you lead. Amen.*

by Stuart Gordon

## DAY 26

THURSDAY, MARCH 18

### READ

Mark 11:1–25

### REFLECT

Jesus is in the resurrection business. When all hope is lost, Jesus makes a way. There is nothing more final than death. We've all experienced the pain of this reality. And yet, the tomb stands empty! Death has lost its sting. We make this affirmation, knowing the war has been won, but with skirmishes still happening. Word of victory is still to reach the outermost fields of conflict.

Jesus, in the middle of our passage, is standing in front of a fig tree that he earlier cursed. It has shriveled away to its roots. It might as well be cut for firewood. "Have faith in God," Jesus says. The best is still to come. The story of the tree is not yet finished. The story of Israel's rebellion still isn't finished. The story of our own battered lives is not yet in its final act!

We can have more than an appearance of something being beyond hope, even our own lives or the lives of those we love. Like the phoenix rising out of the ashes, so too our Lord Jesus will be at the front of a parade of that which did not merely appear dead, but was actually dead, marching forth from death to life.

### RESPOND

Who have you given up hope on? Who, though their heart may still be beating, have you believed to be dead in the ways that matter most? Take heart! Trust in Jesus! He is not done with us yet!

### PRAY

*Jesus, we desperately need you to be Lord over that which is dead. That's me! Quicken my fruitless body. Make me alive. Holy Spirit, send your Pentecost power. Amen.*

by Ryan Moore

FRIDAY, MARCH 19

## READ

Mark 11:27–12:12

## REFLECT

Ever feel like you just can't get a straight answer from God? The scribes and Pharisees in this passage know exactly how that feels. They have a real simple question for Jesus. They want to know by what authority he does what he does. The conversation that takes place back in Mark 3 continues. How and by what authority is Jesus teaching and performing signs and wonders? Is it by the Prince of demons that he casts out demons? No. Jesus is not Beelzebub, but Christ the true King. Jesus promises to answer their question if they can answer his question about John the Baptist. Unfortunately, the scribes and Pharisees can't answer Jesus' question, so Jesus doesn't answer theirs. But he doesn't leave them empty handed. He offers them a parable instead. And this parable doesn't pull any punches. It is a direct indictment of the religious authority of the day. It's easy to read this parable and judge the Pharisees from a distance, but if you are reading this devotional, then you are in the position of the Pharisee. Today, the church has been called to steward the vineyard. We are the new tenants. Jesus' parable invites us to consider how we respond when the landowner sends for their share of the produce of the vineyard.

## RESPOND

It may be easy to simply pay attention to the end of this parable. The old tenants are destroyed, and the stewardship of the vineyard is given to others. But what about the countless times the landowner attempts to work with the wicked tenants? How many servants are beaten or killed? Finally, the son and heir is sent and his life is taken? Grace comes before destruction again and again and again and the wicked tenants miss it every time. As the church, we are the tenants of today. How are we doing? How many of Christ's messengers do we ignore, beat, or even kill? Are we saying yes to opportunities to make disciples? Are we gathering for worship growing our capacity for gratitude and praise? Are we loosing the chains of the oppressed, setting the captive free, caring for the orphan and the widow? Do the blind see? Do the deaf hear? Do the lame leap? Do the voiceless speak? Are we missing chance after chance to receive and share the grace and blessing of the King? What are the moments, where are the places, and who are the people God is putting in our life to share the harvest of the vineyard with?

## PRAY

*God, make me a tenant worthy of your vineyard. In the name of Christ, the King who calls me. Amen.*

by Adam DeVries

SATURDAY, MARCH 20

## READ

Mark 12:13–17

## REFLECT

Reading through the Bible it seems like the religious leaders of the day had a well-stocked arsenal of questions that were meant to trip up rabbis, especially ones who were teaching things like Jesus. They brought their question to Jesus expecting to shut him up or get him killed or perhaps something in between. If Jesus answers their question as expected, in any direction, he will likely upset a powerful group, the Romans or the Jewish elite, in which case, it will seal his fate. However, instead of answering directly, Jesus speaks to a deeper concern.

He tells those present, “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s” which is a perfectly plain answer about taxes. That is really nothing too amazing. It is the second half of his answer that garners their amazement, “and to God the things that are God’s.” As a coin holds the image of the emperor, so does a person hold the image of God. Jesus tells them, “Give your coins to the emperor and give your life to God.” There is no debate which one is of more value here.

The hypocrisy that is mentioned earlier in the text tends to the attention that is given to this whole scenario. The Herodians and Pharisees have joined forces, two unlikely allies, around a common subject, the taxes, in an effort to test Jesus. The emperor did not deserve these people’s time and energy in this way. Jesus wishes these people would give this sort of effort to the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ teachings call these religious leaders to give their life to God, something they likely would have assumed they’d already done.

## RESPOND

Have you given your life over to God? How do you know?

Have there been moments or seasons when Jesus has called you to surrender more of your life?

How did you respond?

What gets more of your attention than it deserves?

## PRAY

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus*

*Look full in His wonderful face*

*And the things of earth will grow strangely dim*

*In the light of His glory and grace*

*Amen.*

by Josh Rodriguez

MONDAY, MARCH 22

## READ

Mark 12:35–44

## REFLECT

Often, referred to as the story of “the widow’s mite,” this passage can easily be sentimentalized. I’ve even heard it paired with the passage from Corinthians about God loving a cheerful giver (2 Corinth. 9:7). However, Mark says nothing of this woman’s disposition as she made her way to the treasury that day. And I am grateful for that.

It reminds me that giving from our poverty (or even our abundance) can be challenging. When I first began thinking about tithing, I was very reticent to begin the practice. I had always imagined that my father’s service to the church as a pastor more than “covered” us in that department. That excuse then gave way to my reasoning that I just wasn’t making enough money to tithe, and that God would want me to pay off my school debt before I began giving money away. In seminary, I thought of my monthly payment to Compassion International as my tithe. However, it wasn’t until I sat down with a spreadsheet and looked at what I was making and what I was giving, that I realized how far off the mark I was. I was leaning on my “poverty” as an excuse to not fully enter into the trust and joy offered to me in offering my tithe.

That first time I hit the “donate” button on the church’s website, I felt a rush of anxiety. But right behind it – peace.

We cannot know what the widow was feeling in that moment of great risk as she offered up her seemingly insignificant gift. Two copper coins would be just 1/64 of the living wage of the day. But we DO know what Jesus was feeling and how He embraced her offering with joy.

## RESPOND

In this passage, Jesus is not only commending the widow’s generosity, but condemning the rich folk’s stinginess. That is a hard word. And it doesn’t just apply to money.

Where in your life have you been blessed with abundance (money, time, talent)? How have you given out of that? What more can you give?

Where do you feel impoverished? What would it look like to offer even the little you have to Jesus – to entrust him with that?

## PRAY

*Lord, when faced with the prospect of loosening our grip on the gifts you’ve given us, we are often fearful. Free our hearts from fear, from selfishness and pride. Give us generous spirits that we might catch greater glimpses of YOUR abundance as we let go of our own. Amen.*

by Sarah Bird Kneff

## DAY 30

TUESDAY, MARCH 23

### READ

Mark 13:1–23

### REFLECT

Mark 13 is called Mark's Little Apocalypse. Many say it is the foretelling of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Others will say it talks of the end times. Apocalyptic writings are full of symbolic images that proclaim that evil is real, that there will be persecution. But have faith, God is ultimately in charge and will destroy evil. It is not hard to examine history and discover that evil has had its way. The holocaust, genocides, civil wars, and 9/11 are just a few. Evil is real. Life is vulnerable. The passage not only talks about evil coming our way, it describes false witnesses or messiahs in our midst. Evil exists not only outside but also within. Throughout all time some have used apocalyptic writing to prophesy the end of the world; usually immediately. Yet, Jesus says these signs are "but the beginning of the birth pangs." Our task is not to forecast the future end of the world, but to know the Holy Spirit is with us. God's presence with us will give us the right words and actions to persevere. Evil is real, but God is with us.

### REFLECT

The words of Jesus remind us to hang on and place our trust in something more than ourselves, our possessions, our relationships, our health, our capacities, or our intellect. It is to place our ultimate trust in God from whom all things come. It is to accept our finitude and mortality in a radical trust of God's unchangeable grace and goodness so that we might be freed from the captivity of anxious fear and finally live fully and freely as God's beloved children. God's love wins over evil.

### PRAY

*Gracious heavenly Father, protect us from the evil without and within. Cleanse us of all doubts and anxieties. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, giving us all we need to boldly live the life of faith as your forgiven beloved children through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

by John Musgrave

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24

## READ

Mark 13:21-37

## REFLECT

Our scripture passage encourages us to live with the expectation that Jesus will be returning as the Son of Man to establish God's Kingdom. Yet, while we remain alert, we must also acknowledge that we do not know when the time will come. We live in the "in-between time": the interim between Jesus' resurrection and the return of the Son of Man as the King of kings.

During this time, we have the responsibility of faithfully fulfilling the work that Jesus has entrusted to us. The church has a mission to the world to share the message of Jesus Christ. We are called to teach others of the gift of the love of God shown through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Together, the members of the church are the body of Christ. All the members are needed to fulfill the mission entrusted to us. We are to receive and grow in our love of God and of Jesus Christ and, through this love, grow in our love of our brothers and sisters. We are to share this love with others in both word and deed, and especially to engage in acts of kindness and caring for others. We are called to support the ministries and missions of the church in our community and in the world.

If we so live our days faithful to the work entrusted to us, we need not fear the return of the Son of Man as the coming King. When he comes, we will be fully welcomed into the house of the Lord as good and faithful servants.

## RESPOND

You have been given special gifts and opportunities for service for the purpose of building up the body of Christ, the church. What are your God-given gifts? How are you using these gifts and abilities in service?

If you are not sure what your gifts might be or how to use these gifts in ministry, pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit. Friends and close family members may also help us to discover our special gifts. Just ask!

## PRAY

*Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, that you have called us to serve you in a way that will bring glory to you and joy to ourselves and others. Fill us with your love, that others will see you and your light and give thanks to God. May we be your faithful servants, living without fear but with hopeful anticipation of the day you will return as the King of all kings. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

by Sandra Randleman

## DAY 32

THURSDAY, MARCH 25

### READ

Mark 14:1–25

### REFLECT

Darkness shrouds chapter 14 under murderous plotting and betrayal. The religious leaders of the people literally scheme to kidnap Jesus and kill him. One of his chosen followers decides to trade on the relationship by betraying Jesus in exchange for money.

The contrast with the woman who anoints Jesus couldn't be harsher. She makes a generous offering (and note that Jesus does not judge her for possessing such a luxury item) while Judas plans to turn a profit from knowing Jesus. It all has the feel of the demonic.

Look back at chapter 3, in which Jesus was accused by the religious leaders of being possessed. Jesus replied with a parable about plundering a strong man's house. Underneath the parable is the assertion that Jesus came to reclaim what is rightly God's, what the devil has seized for himself.

Now return to chapter 14 and note the parallels. Jesus, having entered the temple in chapter 11, symbolically cursed a fig tree that bore no fruit, and denounced the religious leaders for their abuse of office (12:38-44). The drama now unfolds with the wicked designs of those same leaders. They occupy God's house – the Temple – abusing their authority and stewardship of it. The great showdown is near, when Jesus will bind up the demonic powers and plunder the house, reclaiming what is rightly God's.

### RESPOND

Wherever there is religion, there the demons will flock. Wherever there is religious authority, there will be the temptation to abuse it. The proper response is not to reject religion or religious authority; after all, wherever there is power of any sort, demons flock and abuses emerge. No, the proper response is to follow in the way of Jesus, resisting temptation, rejecting corruption, denying oneself in the face of every sort of appeal to one's desires. The obedience of Jesus to God's will is our salvation. Our obedience to the call of Jesus is our sanctification.

### PRAY

*Lead us, O Lord, step by step. Obedience is possible, because of Jesus and his powerful Spirit. Lead us along in the face of temptations and against corrupting desires. Amen.*

by Stuart Gordon

FRIDAY, MARCH 26

## READ

Mark 14:27–42

## REFLECT

Dying is lonely. One of the most heroic acts of friendship—not to mention the most difficult—is to walk with someone you love in their final days. In these final days and moments, there is no use for veneer. These are raw and honest moments.

Jesus invites us along with Peter and James to Gethsemane. Are we willing to draw close? Are we willing to sit with Jesus? Do we check out by falling asleep? Are we willing to walk with the soon-to-be crucified God in his last moments?

Part of the gospel's credibility is that Mark would include 14:32-46. If you wanted to start a new and popular world religion that had broad appeal, then you might scrub a few of these more embarrassing moments of the central figure's life. But Mark doesn't spare us from the messy details. This is a God who is willing to go all the way down with us...all the way to hell itself... to become the man of sorrows that we desperately need him to be.

## RESPOND

Stay and watch. Sit and pray. Don't move between Palm Sunday and Easter without walking with Jesus through his Passion.

## PRAY

*Lord Jesus, we call you Savior. This says as much about our need as it does about your power. We are lowly. We are sinful. We are unfaithful to help carry your burden. None of this stops you from submitting yourself to the will of the Father for us and for the life of the world. Amen.*

by Ryan Moore

## DAY 34

SATURDAY, MARCH 27

### READ

Mark 14:43–65

### REFLECT

Who is Jesus? This passage captures two stories where Jesus' identity must be revealed. The first it is Judas who reveals which one is Jesus. However, the disciples have yet to understand who their Rabbi truly is. They are ready to fight. One draws a sword. But Jesus stops the violence just as soon as it begins. He did not come to save a state from an occupying nation, he came to save a suffering broken world and make it whole. Jesus' arrest takes place only after he says, go ahead and arrest me. If there is any question about who has the authority here, it's King Jesus. The story quickly turns to the trial before the High Priest. Jump back and forth between different media outlets and that's probably what it felt like to be in the room when Jesus was on trial. The testimonies about who Jesus was and what Jesus said just don't line up. We know what it is to be in culture in which opinion has replaced truth and perspective has replaced fact. It is not until Jesus speaks that there is clarity on the truth. Finally, Jesus reveals his true identity. Christ the King speaks. Jesus doesn't simply say he is the Messiah he invokes the name of God - the name God gave to Moses out of the burning bush. "I AM." Christ is not just the king of the Jews but the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the fullness of God, the Word made flesh. Again, if anyone has authority in this narrative it is Jesus.

### RESPOND

In Mark 3 Jesus calls Judas to be one of his apostles. He called Judas to be with him, to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. The scary reality is this, just because Jesus calls us, doesn't mean we won't betray him. Judas and the other disciples all eventually run. Peter follows at a distance. Following Jesus doesn't always take us to places we want to go. Are there places in your life you feel Jesus is leading you that you don't want to go? Are there times and circumstances where it just feels easier to betray Jesus? In the trial it is the word of Jesus that sheds light on what is true. Where are the places of confusion or discernment in your life that you need a word of clarity from God? Both the disciples as well as the scribes and the pharisees get more than they bargained for with Jesus. How has Jesus exceeded your expectations or surprised you this lent? When have you gotten more than you bargained for when it comes to Jesus?

### PRAY

Set a timer for 5 minutes. Stop what you are doing. Slow down. Turn your attention toward God's gracious presence with you here and now. Ask Jesus Christ, "are you the one coming into the world? Are you the King of Kings and Lord of Lords?" Listen for the words of Jesus spoken directly to you -- "I AM."

by Adam DeVries

REST & REREAD

SUNDAY, MARCH 28

MONDAY, MARCH 29

## READ

Mark 14:66–15:15

## REFLECT

Earlier in Mark all of the disciples said as Peter did, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” (14:31) The disciples thought they were willing to die for Jesus. Time will prove that some of the disciples are willing to die for Jesus, but not before every single one of them deny him on some level. Once Jesus is arrested, all of the disciples desert him, and Peter follows at a distance, keeping warm in the courtyard. Mark writes Peter into the Passion as the one who explicitly denies Jesus, just as Jesus said he would. When the servant girl of the high priest confronts Peter he says, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” She starts in again, and Peter denies it again, and the third time. Peter begins to curse, even swore an oath saying, “I do not know this man you are talking about.”

It seems impossible that Peter would say such things.

The next scene is equally as confusing. Jesus is before Pilate. Pilate is asking Jesus questions. Jesus could easily answer these questions in such a way that keeps would keep from getting crucified. The man who has had so much to say to so many leaders, the one who has put so many in their place, now stands speechless.

It seems impossible that Jesus wouldn't speak up.

As the reader you can't help but begin to feel a call for justice begin to shake deep in your bones. It gets worse. It is as if Mark is playing us. Like he knows we want justice, so he tells us of just a situation that could finally end this whole mess. The crowds who heard the teachings of Jesus, the ones who laid palm branches and shouted “hosanna,” the ones who Jesus' ministry has so obviously benefited, surely they will call for his freedom. Nope. They call for Barabbas to be freed, and Jesus to be crucified.

It seems impossible that the crowd would shout all this.

In the midst of all this impossibility, God is bringing salvation.

In the midst of all this injustice, God is bringing salvation.

In the midst of all this desertion, God is bringing salvation.

## RESPOND

Why do you think Jesus was so quiet before Pilate? Do you wish he would have said something? The crowd seems swayed so easily, do you sense this sort of tendency in yourself at times? What sort of picture is painted of God's sovereignty in this text?

## PRAY

*God, you turn deserters into faithful disciples. You use silence to praise your name. You allow the chorus of crowds to usher in the life saving death of your Son. May I learn to embrace the ways of your Kingdom and love Jesus as my King. Amen.*

by Josh Rodriguez

TUESDAY, MARCH 30

## READ

Mark 15:16-39

## REFLECT

*“Hail, King of the Jews!”*

As we move through this Holy Week and continue to reflect on Jesus’ kingship in our lives and in our world, this phrase of mockery called out by those gathered at Golgotha 2,000 years ago can teach us a great deal. What they were saying was truer than they could have imagined. Not only was Jesus King of the Jews, but He was King of all. He was their king, and yet they did not know it; they could not receive it.

These were the same people who just days before had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with palm branches and shouts of “Hosanna!” But Jesus’ kingdom was not what they expected, and so they rejected him. Translated literally, “hosanna” means “Please save us!”. This gives me more compassion for the crowds. They are us. We too want to be saved. We too long for a king to rush into our midst and defeat our enemies. But when Jesus fails to show up in the way we want or to exercise power and dominion in the manner we see fit, we reject him.

## RESPOND

Our world is calling out, “please save us!” And King Jesus is here offering salvation that may seem unattractive – repenting from our sins, forgiving those who wrong us, showing compassion, sacrificing comfort or power or certainty. These don’t always fit neatly with our desire for Jesus to just baptize our own plans and opinions.

What might Jesus want to save you from today that you would rather stay enslaved to?

Reread this passage and ask the Holy Spirit to place you in the story. Where do you find yourself? Calling out “Hosanna!”? Jeering at the cross? Are you a fearful disciple or just an indifferent bystander?

Ask that God would lead you to transformation through the repentance His radical mercy inspires.

## PRAY

*Hosanna, save us. Save us from the darkness of this world and of our own hearts. Help us to be honest with ourselves about both, and then bring them into the light of Your presence in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

by Sarah Bird Kneff

## DAY 37

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31

### READ

Mark 15:40–47

### REFLECT

Everyone had deserted Jesus except the women observing from a distance. They watched Jesus die. They saw Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body and place it in a tomb hewn out of rock. It is the Day of Preparation for the festival of the Passover. On that day the lambs are slaughtered for the Passover meal. Jesus, the Lamb of God, has been slaughtered to take away the sin of the world. Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin, apparently has been a silent admirer of Jesus. He is no longer silent but asks for Jesus' body to give it an honorable burial. Joseph probably uses a new tomb that was prepared for himself. Today outside the ancient walls of Jerusalem is a site called the Garden Tomb. It is near the Damascus Gate and standing in the shadow of Skull Hill. The site has many similarities with the biblical description of Jesus' tomb. For Protestants it has become a beautiful site to contemplate Jesus' death and resurrection. Entering that tomb is a stark reminder that Jesus suffered a violent death for us. Yet the tomb is empty, pointing to the assurance that God moves over death and brings life.

### RESPOND

The Lenten journey must move to the tomb before the celebration of the resurrection. We are so eager to move directly from Palm Sunday's entry into Jerusalem, "Jesus is King," to Easter, "He is Risen," that we pass over the great cost that Jesus suffered on the cross and his cruel death. Jesus died for us. It is because of our human rebellion that Jesus died a horrific death on the cross. He suffered not only physical pain but the spiritual pain of separation from God. He calls us to follow in suffering for the world.

### PRAY:

*Gracious heavenly Father, forgive our self-centeredness that forgets your amazing self-giving in Jesus Christ, the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. Help us to follow Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha, Skull Hill. May we not desert Jesus but participate with him in the self-giving fight against sin and evil through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

by John Musgrave

THURSDAY, APRIL 1

## READ

Mark 16:1–8

## REFLECT

The oldest and best manuscripts end the Gospel of Mark with verse 8. While later manuscripts add one or more of three different endings, it appears that Mark's original conclusion was the discovery of an empty tomb by three women. They went to the tomb early on Sunday morning, expecting to find the dead body of Jesus and worried about who would roll away the stone to his tomb. But the stone was already rolled back.

A young man dressed in white reassures the alarmed women and announces Jesus' resurrection. He directs the women to tell Jesus' disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. The story concludes with the distressing statement that the women fled the tomb in terror and amazement and told no one because they were afraid. We are left with an empty tomb, the fear and silence of three women and no sightings of either a dead body or a resurrected Jesus.

## RESPOND

How do we respond to this bleak ending? We know the message of Jesus' resurrection was eventually revealed to the disciples, and the other Gospels recount that Mary did inform Peter and the beloved disciple that Jesus had risen from the dead. We also know that Jesus did appear to the disciples and even commissioned them to go out and make disciples of all nations and to teach them. Jesus promised his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit and to be with his disciples always.

Why does the original ending of Mark conclude with a recounting of the women's fear and silence?

Perhaps the listeners and readers of the Gospel of Mark are being encouraged to go out and share the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. They are being shown how important it is to serve as faithful disciples and to seek to make disciples as the message of Jesus life, death and resurrection is shared. If the Good News of Jesus Christ is to be known in our world today and tomorrow, it is up to us to boldly share the Good News of our Risen Savior.

## PRAY

*Thank you, dear Lord, for those who have shared with us the wondrous news of Jesus Christ, who though crucified, was raised from the dead and granted us the hope of everlasting life. We are grateful for the gift of our Christian faith. May we grow as faithful disciples and, strengthened by your Holy Spirit, may we boldly proclaim the wondrous story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is through this story that we receive and share your love for us. May we grow in our love for you and for our brothers and sisters. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

by Sandra Randleman

FRIDAY, APRIL 2

## READ

Mark 16:9–20

## REFLECT

Your Bible probably notes the disagreements about whether these verses were part of Mark's original Gospel. We know that scribes would make additions or changes to biblical books they were copying by hand, in the days long before the printing press.

Verse 8 strikes me as unlikely because it doesn't sound at all like the rest of the Gospel: ". . . Jesus sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation." That's vocabulary you don't see elsewhere in Mark, and a style that is fancier than the rest.

Leaving aside critical questions of whether or not verses 9-20 were from the pen of Mark, how about this question: how should a Gospel about Jesus end? Should it end as in verse 8, "And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid"? I suspect that if Mark's were the only Gospel, without the support of the other three, anyone would judge it grossly inadequate.

As the Bible is, we have four Gospels, the oldest of which is Mark. We have the leisure of allowing Mark to speak on his own terms. So, for the sake of argument, let's say Mark put down his pen after that verse quoted above. Now what?

Maybe you noticed during Lent, in reading Mark, that the disciples are portrayed, consistently, as dim-witted and small of faith. After reading it, one wonders how on earth the Gospel of Jesus managed to make its way to the ends of the earth. Mark's "shorter ending" could be read as an encouraging word for all disciples of Jesus.

The spread of the Gospel is not a function of keen perception on our part, or even perfect obedience. The spread of the Gospel is a function of the power of God at work in Jesus. The Bible scholar Ken Bailey, who taught in the Middle East for decades, spoke at a conference I attended a few years ago. He told stories of Muslims coming to faith in Jesus not through the mediation of apostles, but through dreams and strange coincidences and oddly-found Bibles. My conclusion? This Gospel about Jesus has a power all its own. It doesn't have to follow the expected script. It will spread to the ends of the earth.

## RESPOND

Even though God can spread the Gospel without us, remember what Paul said: "We have this treasure in jars of clay." Why does this Gospel make you glad? What is the thing about this Gospel you can most easily share with someone else? What about the world makes you grieve and makes you eager to offer the joy and gladness of Easter?

## PRAY

*You are the Potter, Lord; we are the clay. Share something beautiful for the world through us, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

by Stuart Gordon

## DAY 40

SATURDAY, APRIL 3

### READ

Mark 16:15–20

### RESPOND

Remember back to Mark 3. Jesus sends the Twelve out on their first mission trip. He sends them out two-by-two. Always a good reminder that Christian life and certainly faithful ministry is always meant to be done in community. But remember, Jesus instructs the Twelve to preach the gospel. Apparently, that directive hasn't changed, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel..." This story, in other words, needs a larger audience. And that audience is ALL the world. The gospel is good news for everyone. Jesus' conquest over sin, death, and darkness is news worth declaring to all peoples.

Mark gets a bit weird at the end (FYI, some would say this part of Mark is extra-biblical, added at a later day). Casting out demons, snake-handling, drinking deadly poison and still living... well, these apparently are all signs that the gospel is efficacious. Well, I haven't seen pastors handle snakes lately. And I haven't survived a big gulp of deadly poison. But I do believe that wherever the world of God is rightly divided (to use the language of the old Westminster Divines), then there the kingdom of God breaks forth in strange ways.

### REFLECT

How is the proclamation—the telling of this old story—part of your life and witness? Pray that God would use you to share the story of his love in Jesus Christ.

### PRAY

*Almighty God, do weird stuff in my life and in this world. Cause enemies to become siblings. Raise up leaders bent on establishing your peace. Compel us, your followers, to practice radical ordinary hospitality. Let this be a start of many stranger things yet to come. Amen.*

by Ryan Moore

## CELEBRATE

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 4



## WORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

### SUNDAY WORSHIP

February 21, *1st Sunday in Lent*  
8:30 & 11:00 a.m. | Sanctuary  
Lord's Supper\*

February 28, *2nd Sunday in Lent*  
8:30 & 11:00 a.m. | Sanctuary

March 7, *3rd Sunday in Lent*  
8:30 & 11:00 a.m. | Sanctuary

March 14, *4th Sunday in Lent*  
8:30 & 11:00 a.m. | Sanctuary

March 21, *5th Sunday in Lent*  
8:30 & 11:00 a.m. | Sanctuary

### LENT

#### ASH WEDNESDAY

February 24 | 5:30 p.m. | Sanctuary

#### LENTEN VESPERS

Every Wednesday from March 3 – March 24  
5:30 p.m. | Sanctuary

### HOLY WEEK

#### PALM SUNDAY

March 28 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 a.m.

#### MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 1 | 6:30 p.m. | Sanctuary  
Lord's Supper\*

#### GOOD FRIDAY

April 2 | 12:00 p.m. | Sanctuary  
The Seven Last Words of Christ

### EASTER SUNDAY

*Register for indoor services beginning March 22 at [fpcnashville.org](http://fpcnashville.org).*

April 4 | 6:30 a.m. | Front Porch  
8:00, 9:30, 11:00 a.m. | Sanctuary  
4:30 p.m. | Front Porch

*Highlighted service times will be livestreamed on YouTube and Facebook.*

*\*Communion kits can be picked up at the front desk for those worshipping at home.*