

Picturing God

A Lenten Devotional



Fra Angelico: Annunciation



William Turner:
The Annunciation



Henry Ossawa Tanner:
The Annunciation



Raphael:
The Transfiguration

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Tuesday, February 21: Introduction

What image comes to mind when you think of God? How can art and beauty draw us closer to Jesus?

This year's Lenten devotional is called "Picturing God." A group of pastors, scholars, and folks who love Jesus have worked together to create a devotional that is inspired by the power of art, specifically religious art, to point us to God.

Each entry focuses on one piece of religious artwork (broadly defined), connects it with Scripture or the life of faith, and offers a reflection on how this image can deepen our experience of Lent and/or our spirituality. The people writing these devotions are not art historians or professional art analysts. They are followers of Jesus who are seeking to explore art as an aid to our prayer, aids to the study of Scripture, and a location where the Holy Spirit might meet us and turn our hearts to God.

This devotional includes entries for throughout the season of Lent, but will not be released daily. For the first several weeks of Lent (beginning on Ash Wednesday, February 22), there are entries for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, of each week. Beginning on the Wednesday before Holy Week (March 29), we move to daily entries, which run through Easter.

May God open our eyes, so that we might see God's glory together.

Wednesday, February 22: Psalm 23

Art: "Psalm 23" by Barbara Thelin Preston, used with artist's permission

Written by Amy Lenow, retired United Methodist Deacon



"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

Psalm 23

This beautiful watercolor has had a place of honor in our living room for over 20 years. With its vivid pops of red, oranges, greens, and blues, it has provided a color wheel for our home decorating palette. It was given to my husband and I by the artist, Barbara Thelin Preston, and artfully framed by her husband Craig Preston. Barbara entitled it Psalm 23. The artwork holds dear memories of painting under her instruction in an incredibly moving art experience she called color veiling. It reminds me of dinners and get-togethers with the Prestons filled with good food and fabulous laughter. It helps me recall deep meaningful conversations shared between friends. But never did it mean as much to me as when I lived a portion of my life within the painting. Good paintings can do that, you see - they can draw you in and hold you within the brush strokes. You can feel yourself being surrounded by the vibrancy and the rich meaning the artist evokes on canvas. It is when I lived within the valley of the shadow of death that the artwork was no longer a two dimensional expression but held me as I walked my difficult journey.

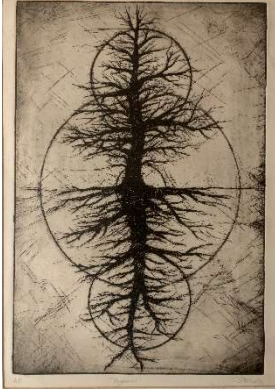
The journey began with a simple invitation for my parents to come live in our home when they were struggling with health issues. My mother was suffering with advanced kidney failure and my father was diagnosed with Lewy body dementia. They could no longer do it alone, so they moved in and we sheltered them. I provided them care for three years as we lived within the valley. It was an arduous, precious, painful, and grace-filled time. The painting became like an icon to me as I took great strength from the Psalm to which it pointed.

Psalm 23 is a mainstay in our churches, as we lift up the words at almost every funeral I have attended. The shepherd imagery is preached and sung about in peaceful and comforting ways. We lift up the admonishment not to fear, and the bounty of God's love overflowing, but rarely do we linger in the dark valley. It was when I lived my life in that valley that I realized there was nothing else to do but

to walk on. In the dark times of our life, we can try to go around by ignoring or denying the strain. We sometimes work to go over the obstacles by masking them with alcohol or pills. We even try to go under by burrowing into ourselves and shutting out God and the rest of the world. The Psalm leads us through the valley. Lent leads us through the valley as well. Christ knew the journey he was walking. He invites us to come with him through his valley of the shadow of death. It is within the darkness that we feel God's presence with us. It is within the valley that we receive God's comfort. As we journey again this Lenten season, may we linger in our own valleys. May we brave walking through the darkness where we encounter our deepest pain and struggles. May we find the presence and comfort of God within our own distress. And may our journey to the cross lead us to dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Friday, February 24: Seeing God through the Trees

Art: “Yggdrasil,” by Caleb Prewitt, used with artist’s permission
Written by Lauren Lobenhofer, Lead Pastor of Cave Spring UMC



“From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’”

Acts 17:26-28a

I pass probably a hundred trees every day on the short drive between my home and my church, but most days I don’t even see them. My eyes pass over them as I’m steering the car, but my thoughts are usually focused on the to do list for the day or the next event on my calendar or the podcast on the stereo. Most of the time I take those trees entirely for granted. Still, despite my inattentiveness, the trees carry on making my existence possible.

These trees I so often overlook are constantly doing the work of photosynthesis; they remove the carbon dioxide that would suffocate us and turn it into oxygen that gives life to our bodies. Their branches give us shade from the sun and shelter from the rain. Their deep root systems hold the soil in place so that the land on which we build our homes, streets, and businesses doesn’t erode and collapse beneath us. The trees surround me constantly with their life-giving presence, but they are so quiet, so steadfastly just *there* that I become inattentive to them.

Perhaps that is why in the Scriptures trees are so often a sign of God’s presence and providence. From the trees in Eden where God walked with the first humans to the oaks of Mamre where God appeared to Abraham to the tree of life in the New Jerusalem in Revelation, trees point to God’s life-giving power and commitment to the good of God’s children. These towering plants remind us that it is in God that we have life, that we have air to breathe and ground to walk upon. They remind us that God is always near, upholding our very existence. They are a sign of God’s sustaining presence, and an invitation to cultivate our awareness of that presence.

Theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher once wrote that the essence of the Christian faith is the “feeling of absolute dependence”, that is, an awareness, a trust, that our entire existence depends on God. We are called to trust completely in God’s power, to recognize that it is in Christ, and not any other power, that we live and move and have our being. We are invited to become attentive to that dependence, to choose consciously to place our trust in God’s power.

That is why I moved those trees I overlook on my daily drive into a place where I am more likely to see them: My mantel. This piece, “Yggdrasil”, hangs over the fireplace in my house. I put it in a place where I will see it daily because it reminds me of the sustaining power of God. When I see that

enormous root system I think of the life-giving work of the Almighty that so often passes beneath my notice. I look at this piece and I remember that God's provision upholds me every single moment.

What signs of God's sustaining power are around you today? How could you become more attentive to those signs? For God's life-giving presence surrounds us, God is upholding us even now. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Monday, February 27: The Painted Desert

Art: "The Painted Desert, Arizona (Matthew 4:1-11),"

by Elaine Ellis Thomas, used by permission of artist

Written by Elaine Ellis Thomas, Rector of All Saints Episcopal Parish, Hoboken, NJ



The Painted Desert of Arizona

Reflection on Matthew 4:1-11 and Isaiah 35

*The desert shall rejoice
and blossom as a rose:
it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with praise and singing.*

One wonders what was going through Jesus's mind when, rising out of the waters of baptism and hearing himself named beloved, he is rudely cast into the wilderness by some unseen and irresistible force. It is doubtful that there was anything inviting or beautiful as far as the eye could see. Nothing but sand and rock and a baking sun. Where was this rejoicing desert of which Isaiah spoke?

*The desert shall rejoice
and blossom as a rose,
for the ears of the deaf shall hear
and the blind, their eyes be opened.*

Who are these deaf and blind whose ears and eyes are healed? In the desert, there is no sound but the beating of one's own heart, the blood pounding the ears, the occasional eagle's cry as she circles her prey. There is nothing to see as the relentless sun turns everything to a washed-out ochre. And what's that? It sounds like a voice, a terse whispering, inviting, tempting utterance, tricking the mind to see bread where there are only rocks.

*The desert shall rejoice
and blossom as a rose,
for the tongue of the mute shall sing
and the lame will dance with gladness.*

After weeks of wandering, there is no voice for singing, no leg strength for dancing. How easy it would be to lie down and give up. But the voice is relentless. The visions of earthly realms displayed seamlessly across the landscape and the enticement to claim it all with its riches and comfort. To leave this god-forsaken wilderness and soak in a cool spring.

*The desert shall rejoice
and blossom as a rose,
for the ground will become a pool
and the dry land springs of water.*

Forty days. Wandering in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Of course the psalmist thirsted by streams of water, longing for God to turn and save. Where, oh where is that One who called Jesus beloved? Would God in heaven leave him there to die? There is only one offering life in this moment. All it would take is to bow down.

*The desert shall rejoice
and blossom as a rose,
as the ransomed return to God
and come singing back to Zion.*

Perhaps there is a way out of this wilderness. Keep walking. Keep moving. Banish the tempter who promises what is not his to give. Through Sinai the people found a home. From the long years in Babylon, a highway opened to Judea. The people – *his* people - made their way through the wilderness, longing for the holy city.

*The desert shall rejoice
and blossom as a rose,
unto Zion we come with joy,
for our God has come to save us.*

An angel told his father to call him Jesus, God's salvation. This wandering in the desert, resisting the wiles of the adversary, every step planting the seeds for the desert to blossom, for the streams of living water that will fill the dry riverbeds, inviting us to Zion, singing, for our God has indeed come to save us.

Wednesday, March 1: The Bread and the Cup

Art: “Last Supper” from wall of Kremikovtsi Monastery, Bulgaria, 16th century AD, photo by Edal Anton Lefterov, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Last-supper-from-Kremikovtsi.jpg>

Written by Brian Johnson, Pastor of Haymarket Church



“I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me.” He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me.” Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.”

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I am not particularly comfortable talking about visual art.

I don’t have anything against visual art – I like it as much as the next person. But when I discovered that the theme for this year’s Lenten devotional was going to be reflections on Christian visual art, I felt a bit of a knot in my stomach. “I can’t do that,” I thought to myself, “I don’t have anything useful to say about art. I’ll just look like a fool.”

I was so uncomfortable with this idea that I ended up writing multiple entries (I know that sounds odd, but hear me out). For the first entry I wrote (which we will share later on during Lent), I found a photo of a stage production of a well-known musical theater show and used that photo as an excuse to talk about the show’s music. I didn’t really engage with the visual art at all. Because, again, the thought of it overwhelmed me. But then (maybe because I’m an oldest child and find myself driven to succeed and prove my excellence in all things), I decided that I needed to try to engage with actual visual art. And thus, here I am, writing a second entry (which you are reading first, because, I dunno, time is weird, I guess).

Anyway, as I struggled with what to do, how to engage with this assignment, and how to deal with my feelings of discomfort with visual art, my thoughts kept returning to the Eucharist. The Eucharist (Holy Communion, The Lord’s Supper) is much more than visual art, but it is also definitely a visual representation of God’s story. At the church where I’m the pastor (Haymarket Church), we celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday. Sometimes, when someone new comes to Haymarket Church, they will ask why we celebrate communion so frequently. There are lots of good answers to that question, but one of the ways I like to explain it is to say that when we celebrate Holy Communion, God’s story

comes alive in a special way. When we get to Holy Communion on Sunday, we've spent 45 minutes doing God's story through words and prayer and music. Then, when we celebrate communion, the story of God becomes something we can taste and see and touch and smell. Jesus is present in the bread and the cup and he is present in and among us. And, as we celebrate communion, the story that we read in the Bible comes alive all over again, in ways that we can't fully understand. The story is reenacted and continued in fresh and beautiful ways that go beyond our understanding.

Every Sunday I look at a loaf of bread and a cup of grape juice and expect something holy to happen. I have an expectation – I believe – that God can use these physical things – things I can see – to change me at a spiritual level. And, so, it seems reasonable to believe – to expect – that engaging deeply and prayerfully with visual art might also have the power to change me. The thing about being a Christian is that we believe that the God of the universe has become flesh. The God who is, by nature, immaterial and unknowable, has chosen to make God's self known to us – and has done that precisely by entering into this physical world. In Jesus Christ, the invisible God became visible. Jesus Christ is the icon – the image – who shows us who God is, the One at whom we look in order to catch a glimpse of the heart of God the Father.

And, so, if you're someone who struggles with visual art – if you're a little overwhelmed or disoriented by this devotional theme – you're not alone. I'm right there with you. And, also, I'll tell you what has me convinced that visual art matters: the bread and the cup, which point me to the body and blood of Christ, the One who became flesh in order to help us see who God is. And, because God has done that, we can trust that God can also use images like the ones contained in this devotional to transform us and lead us into deeper faith.

Friday, March 3: When Jesus Doesn't Challenge Us

Art: "Madonna mit Jesus umgeben von Kindern,"
by Eduard Veith, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eduard_Veith_Madonna_mit_Jesus_umgeben_von_Kindern_1896.jpg

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of Bethel United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, VA



“Jesus was from North Africa. How come in pictures he always looks like one of the Bee Gees?”

What does God look like? The Sunday school answer is that God looks like Jesus. But how do we depict Jesus, how do we depict God? Two millenia of Christian art have given us myriad depictions of the divine. Very often, Jesus becomes depicted very similarly to the one doing the depicting. Jesus looks a whole lot like the artist.

And in some ways this can be beautiful. When we see a collection of icons that show Jesus embodying the full diversity of the human race we gain a deeper appreciation for what it means for God to become truly human, for God to share in our flesh. And for all who share the flesh of Christ to find redemption in Him. As we see a vision of Jesus from all corners of our world we understand the fullness of the rescue mission that God undertook in Jesus Christ: for God so loved *the world!*

But this can also quickly become problematic when one culture wants to assert that their Jesus is the most correct Jesus. The image selected for this devotion is a painting of Mary and Jesus by Austrian painter Eduard Veith. In the painting you can see that Mary and Jesus look very, well, Austrian. There's no trace of any of Jesus' and Mary's Jewish or Palestinian origins.

When this is our way of understanding how God has come to identify with us in Jesus Christ it is beautiful. But when we propagate our version of Jesus to the rest of the world, when we tell the rest of the world that our version of Jesus is the best one (cue Ricky Bobby "I like the baby version the best!") we make God in our own image rather than being conformed to the image of God in Christ.

The Jesus we meet in the Bible is the suffering servant, who died that we might live. Too often we want to make a Jesus in our own image, a Jesus who doesn't challenge us, but instead confirms our own beliefs, votes for our preferred political leaders, and stands for all of our values. And too often we want to preach to others this is the only Jesus that exists.

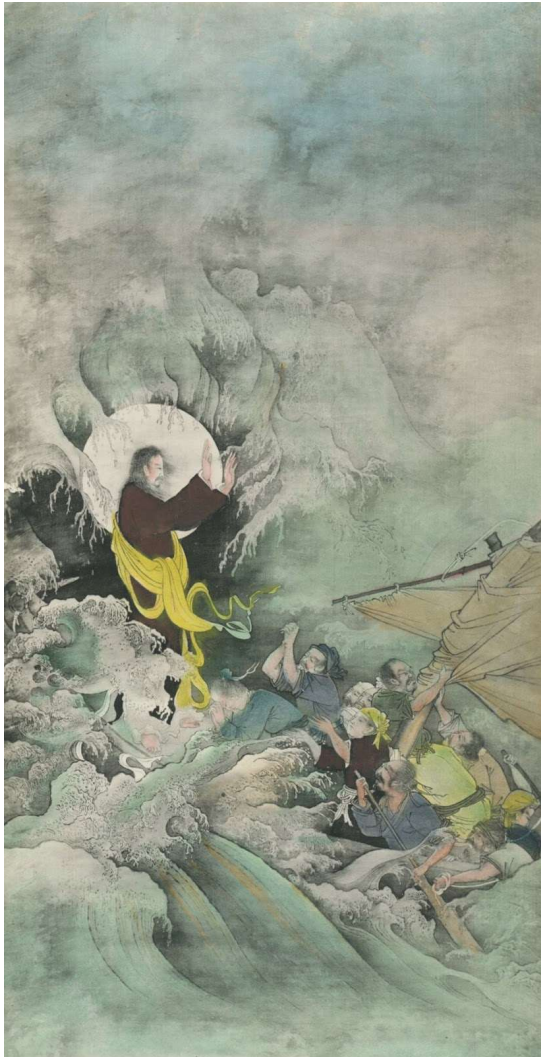
This Lent, may the true Jesus, the Christ of the Bible, confront your pre-existing notions of who Jesus is and what God looks like. And might you come to see, perhaps not the Christ you want, but the one whom the Father graciously gives us.

Monday, March 6: Jesus Calming the Storm

Art: "Jesus Calming the Storm," by Wang Suda. No date. Société des Auxiliaires des Missions (SAM) China Photograph Collection, Whitworth University Library, Spokane.

Available online at: https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/g31_chinese_art1/6/

Written by Ashley Oliver, Pastor of Mount Pisgah United Methodist Church, Harrisonburg, VA



“When Jesus got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm suddenly arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

Matthew 8:23-27

Jesus is right there with the disciples. The water is crashing up against the boat, the waves are tackling it from all angles, and the wind is roaring. The disciples, recognizing the power of the sea, are afraid for their lives.

Jesus is right there with them.

Amidst the worst of the storm, Jesus is there. The disciples, each with a death grip on the boat, plead to Jesus to help them - while the disciples recognize the power of the sea, they also recognize the power of Jesus. With his powerful hands and mighty calm presence, Jesus calms the storm.

As you journey through Lent, may you remember Jesus is with you. In the wilderness, Jesus is with you. In the midst of the storms you might face between now and Easter, Jesus is with you. You might suffer at times. You might have hard days. You might feel like you're drowning at times. You might feel like you are being tackled from all angles. At times, you might feel as though every voice but God's is roaring in your mind - Jesus is and will be right there with you.

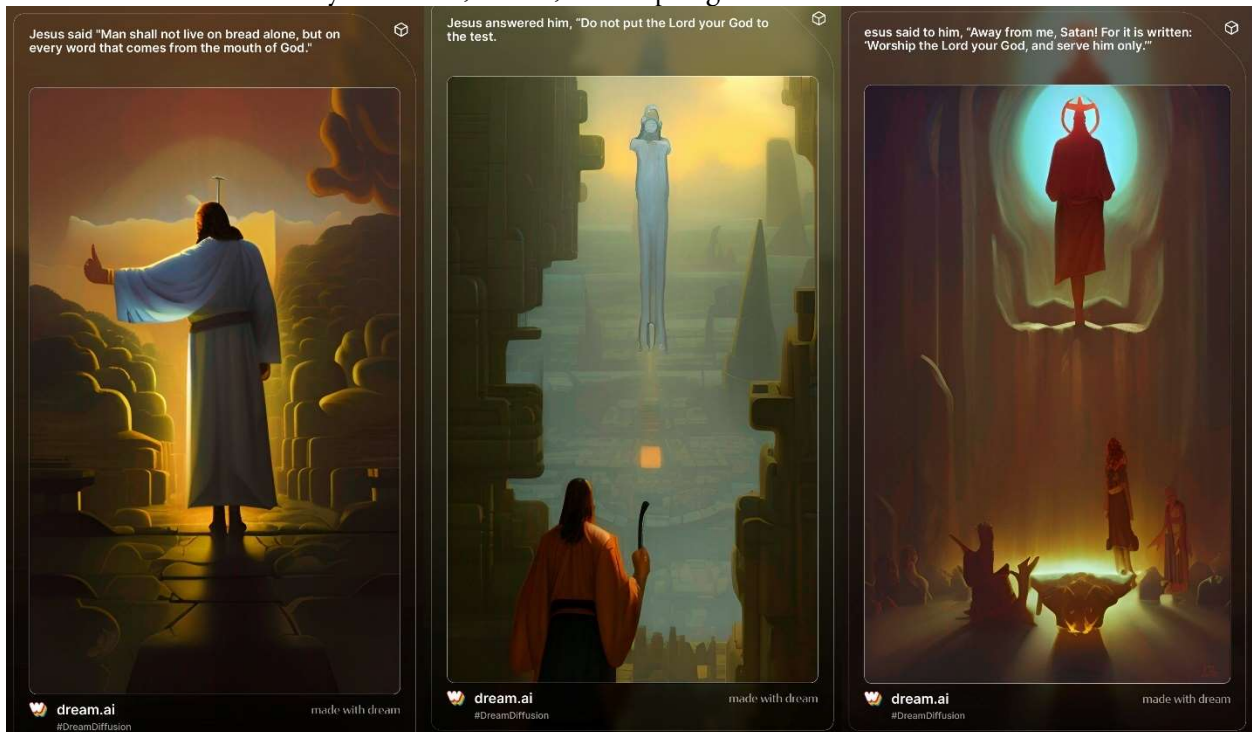
It is clear that the truth of Jesus' presence does not mean the trials we go through are magically fixed or that the storms we face are calmed instantly. Perhaps it simply means we are not alone in those trials or

in those storms. Perhaps Jesus' presence might bring you some calm, the way he did for the disciples at sea. I pray this comforts you the way it comforts me.

Wednesday, March 8: Artificial Intelligence, Authentic Incarnation

Art created by dream.ai (artificial intelligence)

Written by Dan Kim, Pastor, Gum Spring United Methodist Church



Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

*“He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”*

Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Luke 4:1-13

What you see before you is an AI (Artificial Intelligence) generated art from the website dream.ai. All I did was go to the website, input Luke chapter 4, verses 4, 8, and 12 separately into the query, and within a few seconds, a completely unique, one-off, image was produced by a computer program. If you've been following the news lately, you will have noticed some headlines that read like "ChatGPT passes Bar exam" or "These jobs are most likely to be replaced by chatbots like ChatGPT" or "AI Generator can turn any subject into a Drake-like song." Just to explain a few terms here, ChatGPT stands for "Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer" which uses the principles of AI and can mimic human language in both written and spoken form so well it passes the Turing Test, the gold standard of benchmarks measuring whether a computer program has reached human-level intelligence. In short, Artificial Intelligence has come so far as to being indistinguishable from human-being created work in the areas of music, poetry, narrative, conversation, and even art. In this devotion, I try to put that to the test.

But this devotion isn't about AI. It's about God. It's about Lent. It's about the Temptations of Jesus. It's about *Picturing God*, a meditation on how an image can help deepen our experience of Lent and our spirituality. However, the reason why I chose to have AI create an image of these passages of scripture is because I wanted to know if I could tell that it was a computer-generated piece of art. I even arranged it into a triptych to try and mimic historical Christian art. I thought for sure this self-proclaimed art critic (I'm not) could tell. Moreover, I presumed that because it wasn't "handmade" so to speak, I wouldn't be able to have a prayerful, meditative, and spiritual experience with it. I asked, what, if any, experience of the divine can I have while meditating on what is obviously an artificially created image? Does it even matter?

Here is what happened. I noticed my own humanity being called into question as I mentally downspiralized into the oblivion that is the anxiety-ridden space of conceiving an AI ruled world. These images were incredible. Each piece was extraordinary. So...human. And then, I thought, could AI preach a sermon? Or write a devotion? Better than me? Yikes! And will AI replace the jobs of the future? How will this new form of intelligence change our workplaces, our home-life, social-life, economies and livelihood? I got lost in these images, not because of the image itself, but because of they might represent. Kind-of like noticing a piece of graffiti sprayed on an overpass as I drive under it. I'm thinking "How in the world did someone get up there?" And then, as I'm trying to figure-out how, and/or what it says, it becomes a fleeting observation lost within a myriad of distracting thoughts that potentially puts my own life at risk because I'm not paying attention to the road. And then, I realized I was resonating with Luke 4 in a way I had never before.

The temptations of Jesus are attempts to test his humanity. As the devil (tempter) acknowledges the divinity of Jesus and therefore how powerful he really is, the devil instead goes after his humanity; namely his hunger, pride, sense of security and control, and loneliness. The devil presumes Jesus' humanity as his "weaker" side. Turns out, being human isn't a weakness to be exploited, but rather due to Jesus' hypostatic nature, a choice to exhibit the strength and grace of God. In other words, God,

in Jesus, does not become weak and temptable because God chooses to be human. Rather, God chooses to become human so that being human might be for us an exhibition of strength in the “imago Dei” and prime example of grace.

Lent is a season that oftentimes reminds me of my humanity, fragility, weakness, and mortality. Funny thing is, the process of writing this devotion did the same thing. It reminded me of my humanity; maybe even a test of my humanity. A humanity that can seem so frail, fragile, weak at times so as to be easily copied by clever programming and call to question God’s firm grip of grace upon me. How can I be so susceptible by the temptations of our world that is constantly offering me an artificial God, when the truth is, I know the authentic incarnation in Jesus, the definitive word of God, who in the beginning said, “Let us make humans in our image...and it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Genesis 1, NRSV). I didn’t expect to have such a wilderness experience with this (does anyone?), but here I am. While I don’t wish such wilderness experiences upon anyone, I hope and pray that you experience such things in light Jesus the Christ found in our Lenten wilderness. Jesus Christ, who has gone through it all the more and comes out choosing to go through it again because that’s what it takes to be with us, always. May the wilderness experiences of our being human be an invitation to surrender to the need of God’s divinity, God’s strength, God’s love, God’s grace. Amen.

Oh, by the way, this whole devotion was written by ChatGPT.

Just kidding.

Friday, March 10: The Return of the Prodigal Son

Art: "The Return of the Prodigal Son"

by Rembrandt Van Rijn, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rembrandt_Harmensz_van_Rijn_-_Return_of_the_Prodigal_Son_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

Written by Blaine Thomas, Pastor, Bethany United Methodist Church, Weyers Cave, VA



The servant replied, 'Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.' Then the older son was furious and didn't want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, 'Look, I've served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you've never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' Then his father said, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.'"

Luke 15:27-32 CEB

As we find ourselves in the season of lent, a journey of remembrance of who we are and to whom we belong...this image strikes me to my core. The son who has screwed up in every possible way, returns with ratty and torn clothes, fallen on his knees and embracing his father. This is the climax of the Lenten story.

Somedays I feel like I am the son who left his father and lived according to his own way. Somedays I feel like I am the older son, the one who stayed and remained faithful to his father. And other days, as a pastor; I feel like I am the father...just excited for his child or member of the flock to return to a place of grace and welcoming. We have strayed, and we have given into worldly impulses, and yet God is waiting for us to come – broken and as we are – and embrace the love and hope that God offers us.

The father does not sit and scold his son for leaving and being loose with his inheritance. NO. The father opens his arms and embraces his lost and broken son.

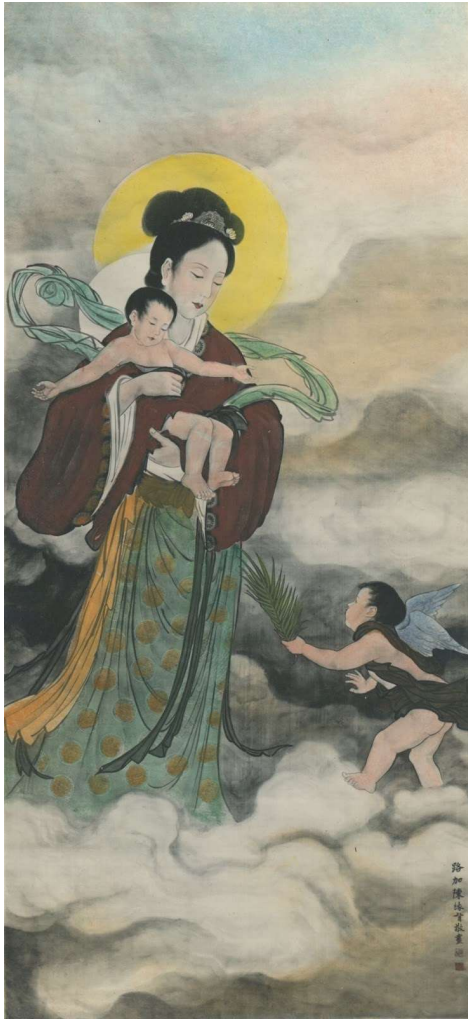
Whether you feel like the younger son, older son, or the father during this Lenten season, I pray that you cling to the truth that God is still waiting with arms wide open, for us to come as we are. Let us as we walk farther along the journey to the cross, to be people who are willing to embrace the worn and tattered people, just as the Father welcomed his worn and tattered son. Amen.

Monday, March 13: Mary and Child

Art: "Mary and Child," by Chen Yuandu, Société des Auxiliaires des Missions (SAM) China
Photograph Collection, Whitworth University Library, Spokane.

Available online at: https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/g31_chinese_art1/34/

Written by Elizabeth Snader, Campus Minister at Campus Christian Community at the University of
Mary Washington



“And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.’”

Luke 1:46-55

We often read and study this passage during the season of Advent, but this picture of Mary and Jesus stopped me in my tracks, and made me think about this unique relationship between Mary and her son, Jesus. This Lenten season is very different for me than any other I have experienced before - I am pregnant and expecting my first child in August! As I am coming closer to the reality of becoming a mom, I find myself wondering how Mary felt while pregnant with Jesus.

In this beautiful picture we see her with Jesus as a child, and in this passage, known as Mary’s Magnificat, we are witnessing Mary as she is starting to realize more and more the importance of the child she is bearing. She is connected with God in this moment more than she ever has been. Not only will she birth the Son of God, but she will witness, as his mother, him grow up and watch him lean into his divinity as he initiates the Kingdom of God here on earth. Mary’s life was forever changed when she learned that she would give birth to the Son of God. This is a major reorientation for Mary as she is waiting to give birth to Jesus. I can imagine Mary, as the mother of Jesus, feeling excited but nervous, thankful but worried. She knows that this son of hers will come to this earth and shake things up - but yet she is faithful and ready to be his mother.

How are we reorienting our lives during Lent? Through reorienting our lives, we grow. Not only do we grow in knowledge and experience, but we grow in our relationship with God. I encourage us to think about the ways in which God is calling us to step into something new during this season. We can trust that God is faithful and will be with us every step of the way.

Prayer: God of all the seasons of life, we come to you knowing that things change. We may not be the biggest fan of change, but we pray that through it all we grow closer to you and lean in to see the work that you are doing. May we be mindful of this season and be open to how you are calling us to reorient our lives. May we remember the commitment that Mary had to bring Jesus into this world knowing that he would change the world forever. God be with us, now and forever. Amen.

Wednesday, March 15: Light of the World

Art: "Light of the World," by William Holman Hunt, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hunt,_William_Homan_-_The_Light_of_the_World_-_1853-54.jpg

Written by Sherry E. Hietpas, Associate Pastor of Andrew Chapel United Methodist Church, Vienna, VA



“Again Jesus said to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’”

John 8:12

When I was a little girl, I remember a children’s Bible song about Jesus knocking at the door and waiting for someone to open so he could come in. The song is based on Revelation 3:20 and it came to mind when I first looked at this piece by Hunt. As children we learn some of the foundational messages of our faith through song. “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Of course, the Jesus who loves us would stand at the door knocking until we answered. As adults we tend to grow more deeply in our faith with a bit more nuance.

In John 8:12, Jesus offers one of his Christological statements as he proclaims to the Pharisees, “I AM the Light of the world.” When God created the earth, God first spoke forth “Let there be light.” (Genesis 1:3) Light was necessary to bring order to the chaos. Light was necessary for life to be brought forth. The writer of John’s Gospel is very specific as he continues to build upon the framework that Jesus is more than an eccentric rabbi or knowledgeable prophet, he is in fact the Son of God. We can be grateful for this framework because it gives us a

much wider understanding of the Triune nature of God. Hunt’s work further calls us to reflect on what Jesus meant when he called himself the Light of the world.

Most young children are the first to admit they don’t like the dark. They aren’t ashamed to admit that they are scared and ask the nearest adult to turn on the light. The truth is, while many adults can move past fear of darkness, many would admit that they don’t like it all that much either. Jesus offers us the opportunity to live in the light. We don’t have to fear the darkness, because Jesus so graciously offers himself to us out of deep and persistent love for us. In the busyness of our adult lives, it can be easy to look past some of the foundational truths we learned about God as children. We often complicate

things - forgetting some of the simple truths we know to be true. During this Lenten journey, may we reconnect with the basics of what we know: Jesus loves us. Jesus wants to be in relationship with us. And Jesus offers us life, filled with hope, love, and light.

Prayer: Holy God, help us to remember who we are in Christ. During this season, draw us into your light. May it fill us with hope and renew our strength to follow where you lead. May your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Spirit, help us to remember that we are deeply loved as children of God. AMEN.

Friday, March 17: The Trinity

Art: "The Trinity," by Andrei Rublev, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rublev_Troitsa.jpg
Written by Grace Han, Pastor, Trinity United Methodist Church, Alexandria, VA



The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.

Genesis 18:1-3

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

2 Corinthians 13:13

One of the great mysteries of our faith is how we understand the Trinity. What does it mean that God is one God in three persons? What is the divine relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit? What is the

work of each person of the Trinity and how do they work in union? We have used countless metaphors and diagrams to try to explain the Trinity. Unfortunately, most of these depictions don't seem to capture the depth and breadth of the Trinity, often leaving us more confused, or on theologically shaky ground.

In Andrei Rublev's *The Trinity*, we see a slightly different depiction of the Holy Trinity than most of us who grew up under the influence of Western Christianity are familiar with. Rather than a dove or an old bearded man, we see three figures who appear somewhat angelic or divine sitting across from each other at a table. We see three in blessed communion sharing in loving relationship. I wonder if there is something to be gained by reflecting on this image of the Trinity, something that in this Lenten season can deepen our understanding, our faith, and bring us closer to our Triune God.

Here's what's really interesting. In addition to being titled *The Trinity*, this icon is also called *The Hospitality of Abraham*. It recalls the story in Genesis 18 when three heavenly messengers (angels) visit Abraham and Sarah, revealing they were to have a child. We can clearly see the Genesis 18 story played out in this icon. In the background we see Abraham's house and the Oak of Mamre named in the scriptures. We see a mountain in the background, representing Mount Moriah, where Abraham is

later told to take Issac. On the table there is a cup with the head of a calf, which Abraham prepared for his guests.

But Rublev takes it one step further. The three angels, the strangers who visited Abraham, are depicted not only as random angels but also as representations of the Holy Trinity. If we read carefully in Genesis 18 we see it was *The Lord* who appeared before Abraham, *and three men stood near him*. In Rublev's reading of Genesis 18, the most important part is the three heavenly messengers who appeared when Abraham encountered the Lord. For Rublev, these were no ordinary angels or strangers or visitors, they were God Godself.

In this icon, we see three sitting at a table, facing each other so the lines of their body form a circle. If you look at their eyes, they are looking at each other, bringing us into union with them. Their expressions are peaceful and harmonious. We see a cup on the table, representing their holy communion. Their divinity is highlighted by the halos around their heads and their wings. We see that while there are three, they are clearly united as one as depicted by their bodies (which seem identical), spirits, and purpose. While there is mystery, there is also clarity.

Finally, in this icon, we see the Holy Trinity meeting us where we are. The Trinity is not in a far off land or in the heavens or high above the earth, but among us, surrounded by the same trees, mountains, and homes that we inhabit. For Abraham, the Holy Trinity came to him by the Oaks of Mamre, and stayed in his home. They shared a meal with Abraham and Sarah and their household. They revealed that Sarah would have a son and that *nothing is too wonderful for the Lord*.

While the Trinity is indeed a mystery, it is also in the Trinity that we see the fullness of our God. The Trinity is the God who is with us in moments when we might least expect it or barely notice it. The Trinity is the God who is with us and for us. God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Monday, March 20: Abraham's Sacrifice

Art: "Abraham's Sacrifice" by Rembrandt Van Rijn, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rembrandt_-_Abraham%27s_sacrifice_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

Written by Stephanie Parker, Pastor, The Gathering at Scott Memorial United Methodist Church, Virginia Beach, VA



Genesis 22:1-18

This is a hard scripture to read. It is hard to imagine God asking this of Abraham. If you ever hear voices telling you to sacrifice your child in this way, call a professional immediately. God does not ask this of us, this was a one-time request from God. This story should never be used to justify abusing a child or sacrificing a child. After this story we find God forbidding human sacrifice, in Leviticus we see you shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them.

As we find in our story today, God has finally blessed Abraham and Sarah with a son, Isaac, even in their old age after decades of trying to have a child. We're told at the beginning

of our text that after these things God tested Abraham. Abraham has likely already felt tested by God. He was tested in his belief if Sarah would ever conceive, by going to a land he has never seen but this test would be the hardest test ever asked of Abraham, ever asked to any parent. Abraham was told by God to take "your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will show you."

We imagine the questions asked on this journey. Isaac is not an infant, as we see in the painting. Isaac asked questions of his father, like, where is the lamb for the burnt offering? Isaac had seen enough of these sacrifices during their worship to know what was missing. He was confused, everything else was there and they always brought the animal for sacrifice. And then the story gets even stranger, as Abraham built an altar and then placed Isaac on top of the altar, on top of the wood. Isaac was observant enough to know that he was in the position where the lamb was placed. As Abraham was reaching out his hand and taking the knife closer to his son, an angel of the Lord called out to him,

calling his name. This is the image we see here, this moment when Abraham is stopped in Rembrandt's depiction of this story.

We see Abraham has covered his son's eyes, he's trying to spare him at this very moment any more pain than necessary. While we can't see Abraham's eyes, I imagine relief in them as he looks to the angel. We hear the angel of the Lord's words, "do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me."

As we're told in scripture, this was a test. Kathryn Schifferdecker writes in her commentary on this that this is a genuine test and Abraham is free to do as he will.

When God asks Abraham to take his son, your only son Isaac whom you love to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering, there is a small participle that in Hebrew means "please." God isn't commanding Abraham to take his son, God is asking, and even says please. This implies Abraham had a choice. If he decides to do this, it was his choice and done willingly.

We can interpret this almost sacrifice as the question of whether Abraham fully trusted God. Is God really big enough to carry out God's plan? God asked Abraham to destroy his son, yet God said Abraham would be the father of multitudes, how can he be the father if he has no heir? Does Abraham trust God more than logic?

Abraham trusted God even though the logic didn't make sense: how could Abraham be the father of multitudes when he'd sent his one son Ishmael away and God is asking him to sacrifice his other son Isaac? Our reason would say it's impossible, but yet it's what God asked of Abraham and Abraham was asked to trust God, even with this seemingly cruel request.

Linda Pepe writes on her blog about this text that Abraham showed that he trusted God to carry out the plan, without having the physical signs right in front of him, and he passed the test. Abraham was now ready to go on to the next step, he could be the father of the multitudes because he understood that everything he had, everything he would ever have or would ever be promised to have, was ultimately a gift from God, it didn't belong to him- Isaac didn't belong to him, the covenant didn't belong to him, the promise didn't belong to him, the future didn't belong to him, it all belonged to God.

Do we see everything as a gift from God? Do we believe God is big enough even when the logic suggests otherwise?

Wednesday, March 22: The True Meaning of the Scapegoat

Art: "Sending Out the Scapegoat" by William James Webb, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Webb_Sending_Out_the_Scapegoat.jpg

Written by Samuel Addo-Donkoh, Pastor, Hope UMC, Vienna, VA



Leviticus 16:7-10

College was fun. For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of joy and freedom, free from direct parental control and able to make my own decisions. I had left my parents' house for college, so I reveled in this newfound independence and took full advantage of all the opportunities college offered. I delved deeper into my studies and continued to have fun, but a time came when things became rough, and I had to work hard to gain control over my life. I came to a profound realization as I sat down to reflect on the opportunity cost of my autonomy. I discerned that freedom and independence come at a cost. In my case, while this independence was an opportunity for personal growth, self-sufficiency, and the ability to make my own choices, which were valuable benefits, the trade-off was the loss of financial support,

direct guidance, and the comfort of a familiar environment. Sometimes, when things do not go as we anticipate, we find it easier to shift blame unto others instead of looking deep into ourselves for what we did wrong and owning up to it. I cannot imagine the number of times my entire division got punished because one shipmate messed up but would not own up to it. You know what a scapegoat is, right?

Easter is a time of joy and celebration as we remember the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the triumph of life over death. But Lent presents the window of opportunity to reflect on the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross. I would like us to look at an aspect of this sacrifice using the scapegoat concept.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites would perform a ritual in which they would place the community's sins on the head of a goat, which would then be sent into the wilderness. This goat, known as the "scapegoat," bore the people's sins and symbolically carried them away (Leviticus 16:7-10). In our modern world, we often use the term "scapegoat" to refer to someone who is unjustly

blamed for the mistakes of others. However, as seen in the book of Leviticus, the scapegoat's true meaning is one of sacrifice, atonement, and redemption. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, we read that Jesus, who knew no sin, was made to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. Jesus became the ultimate scapegoat for our sins. He willingly took upon himself the punishment that we deserved and carried our sins away through his death on the cross. Just as the Israelites placed their sins on the head of the goat, we, too, can put our sins on Jesus and find forgiveness (Matthew 11:28-30).

As Christians, redeemed of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, it is crucial that we identify and eschew the various unhealthy forms in which scapegoating presents itself in our societies today. This is because scapegoating creates division and perpetuates harmful stereotypes. By blaming others for societal problems, we not only miss the opportunity to address the root causes, but also miss the chance to learn from each other and grow together. Furthermore, when we scapegoat, we are not acting in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, who taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). Blame shifting keeps us from experiencing the transformative power of redemption and forgiveness, and instead perpetuates a cycle of hatred and division.

As we fast, pray, and meditate during this Lenten period, I will join in the words of the apostle Paul in Hebrews 12:1-2 to admonish us, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author, and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Let us remember the sacrifice of Jesus and the true meaning of the scapegoat. Because he cares for us, let us cast all our anxiety on him and give thanks for the gift of eternal life he offers us through his death and resurrection. Amen.

God bless you.

Friday, March 24: The Ladder and the Cross

Art: “Nailing of Christ to the Cross (Cell 36)”

by Fra Angelico (born Guido di Pietro), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_Angelico_025.jpg

Written by Drew Colby, Pastor, Grace United Methodist Church, Manassas, VA



I lied in a sermon recently. It wasn't like a bald-faced lie, just some creative art history. I was preaching on the Jacob's Ladder story and I even climbed up a 16-foot ladder for the children's moment.

Jacob, like every human that ever lived, loved a good ladder. Jacob was the kind of guy who would do anything to achieve, to get ahead, to earn God's blessing even if he had to wrestle it from God's own hands (see Genesis 32).

The truth is, we are all like this. It is basic human instinct to turn just about anything into a ladder we can climb up, even if it's just to climb out of the sinking feeling that we are, in fact, not okay.

There's the corporate ladder, the perfect parent ladder, the perfect student ladder, the college acceptance ladder, the 401K ladder... and each ladder

has its own rungs like the right skin care regimens, and social media likes, and self-care practices, and workout routines, and weight loss plans.

This is the heart of human religion, the tendency to make anything into a ladder.

But the thing about Jacob's ladder in Genesis is it turns out to not be Jacob's ladder at all! Instead, when Jacob sees the ladder, it is the angels, bearers of the word and presence of God, who are ascending and descending it. Then, just as Jacob thinks about trying to climb it who is standing next to him? God! God is beside him on the ground! This is not Jacob's ladder to climb *up*. This is the ladder God has used to climb *down* to be with Jacob.

There, at the foot of the ladder God extends to Jacob the same promise given to his grandfather Abraham, later to be fulfilled in the Word and flesh of Christ himself: "I will be with you always. I will remain with you, and, I promise, I will bring you home."

Here's where the lie came in. "That's why," I said with enough confidence that no one would question me, "That's why in many depictions of Christ's crucifixion you'll find artists including ladders... the ladders are not there for us to climb up, they're there to reveal to us that the cross, and the man on it,

are *God's* ladder, God's ultimate means of joining us, living life among us, and even enduring death for us."

Do I actually *know* that's why there are ladders in a bunch of paintings of the crucifixion? No. I don't. But preachers have never let things like that get in the way of good theology. Regardless of their intent, I'll never see these artists' ladders in the same way ever again.

The gospel revealed here is good news for barren broken climbers: this God is not waiting for you at the top of some ladder. This God, the god who *really is God*, is not commanding you to climb to him. This God is here, with you, at the bottom.

This is not one more ladder-climbing religion. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the descending God, who climbed down from heaven, then up onto the cross, who descended into hell, and then rose up from the grave, with this promise on his eternally speaking lips: I have come down *to you*, I am *with you*, I will remain with you, and, I promise, I will bring you home. Thanks be to God.

Monday, March 27: In Which Basil the Great Annoys an American

Art: "In Which Basil the Great Annoys an American" by Charlie Baber, used with artist's permission

Available online at: <https://www.wesleybros.com/wesbros/in-which-st-basil-the-great-annoys-an-american/>

Written by Charlie Baber, Associate Pastor at Highland United Methodist Church in Raleigh, NC



As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do so that I may inherit eternal life?" But Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not give false testimony, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth." Looking at him, Jesus showed love to him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But he was deeply dismayed by these words, and he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.

Mark 10:17-22

The reality of our world is that we are born into economic disparity, and the social structures in place create a tremendous up-hill battle for the poor. Those with privilege who realize and care about this disparity often toss up our hands, overwhelmed by how impossible it seems to actually make a difference. The problems are just too big, and we are too comfortable with our lifestyle to do anything meaningful.

Basil the Great (4th c.) took seriously the command of Christ to "sell your possessions and give to those in need." He challenged our normal objections to these words, reminding us the logic of our wealth. If you think everything you have you earned for yourself, you are an atheist, unwilling to recognize that every good and perfect gift comes from God. If you recognize you have nothing that you have not received from God, you must give an account for why God gave you so much and others so little. "Is God unjust, who divided to us the things of this life unequally?" Basil merges the reality of economic disparity with belief in a just and loving God. Life is the way it is because God intends for you with wealth to share with you who have none. Everything you have beyond what you need for basic survival belongs to those who don't have enough for their own basic survival. Because it belongs to them, you are robbing from them by keeping it for yourself, you greedy cheater-pants.

We experience the grace of God as we practice works of mercy. As we give generously to those in need, the lines get blurred between who is being served. Giving away from your stores begins to set you free from the trap of your possessions. Meeting the people who struggle to survive, learning to love them, transforms our hearts more and more to see Christ in everyone, enlarging our hearts for peace with justice on this earth.

Prayer

Make us worthy, Lord, to serve those people throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands, this day, their daily bread, and by our understanding love, give them peace and Joy. Amen.

-Mother Theresa

Wednesday, March 29: Jeremiah 17

Art: "Jeremiah 17" watercolor print by Emma Tilley, 2019, used by permission of the artist
Written by Katie Tomlin, Associate Pastor at Pinehurst United Methodist Church in Pinehurst, NC



*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

Jeremiah 17:7-8

Jeremiah was a prophet during the exile of Israel, standing alongside his people to proclaim repentance and hope as they suffered for having turned away from God. Jeremiah was not afraid to share his reluctance and distaste for the task God has given him, but God reassured him it would be okay as long as Jeremiah continued to obey. Jeremiah remained

alongside his people as they suffered for having turned away from God, but God helped him endure the hardships. Here, and in other parts of the prophetic book, God's response is clear: despite the trials you are going through and will go through, I am with you. Even as God punished the people, God's heart was breaking for them. Jeremiah pushed forward, despite wishing the job belonged to anyone else.

Painted in 2019, the watercolor print "Jeremiah 17" came out of a difficult season of illness for the artist, my friend, Emma. These verses remind us when pain and hardship come, there is something deeper that connects us and roots us. We might rely on God in new ways we haven't experienced before, or ways that we can't see God is providing for us. When life is full of struggles, deep roots in worship, scripture, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines are there to ground us in God, whose living water can flow through us. A tree planted by water will never dry up and die, because it continually stays connected to the source of life.

Lord, may we find ourselves deeply rooted in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 30: Unburdening the Scapegoat

Art: "The Scapegoat" by William Holman Hunt, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Holman_Hunt_-_The_Scapegoat.jpg

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor, Bethel United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, VA



In the series finale of the critically lauded but little watched HBO series *The Leftovers*, one of the main characters, Nora Durst, finds herself at a wedding in a town square in Australia. She is welcomed into the reception where beads are placed around her neck. Towards the end of the reception it becomes clear what the beads are for. A goat is brought into the center of the reception while the groom describes

the role of the scapegoat. The scapegoat was not a goat used in an atoning sacrifice. Rather the community would place all their sins upon the scapegoat and then cast the goat out into the wilderness, driving all the sins of the people away with it.

The groom explains that those beads are the sins of the people. That they are to put their beads, their sins, onto the goat and that the goat would then be cast off into the bush. And that is precisely what happens. And yes, even if you've watched the show from beginning to end this moment seems really, *really* weird.

Nora leaves the wedding on her bike and is on her way home when all of a sudden her bike seizes up on her and she crashes. Upon investigation she sees that a bead necklace caught in the wheel and chain has caused her to crash. And that's when she hears some bleating. She finds the scapegoat caught in a barbed wire fence. The beads, the sins of the people, are what are keeping the goat caught, threatening his life.

Nora knows what she must do. She has to remove the beads, the sins, from the goat's neck if he is to survive. And upon removing the beads from the goat's neck and freeing the goat, she then places the beads on her own neck.

When I looked at this image, William Holman Hunt's painting "The Scapegoat," my mind immediately went to this scene. I saw the goat, running free, because the sins had been removed from the scapegoat. Another had taken them on and, in turn, saved the scapegoat.

We no longer have any need for a scapegoat. Not because Nora comes to every scapegoat, unburdening them of the community's sins, but because in Jesus the sins of the world are not *just*

taken upon the Christ, but are atoned, are redeemed. The sins of the world have been placed upon the Son of God and through His death and resurrection are forgiven.

And yet how often are we so quick to put our sins back upon ourselves? To think we need to justify ourselves and prove ourselves worthy of God. How often do we want to put our sins onto others or feel others putting their sins onto us? How often do we think that these sins are still ours to deal with?

Hear the good news: William Holman Hunt's scapegoat has no blemish. It has no fault. It is unburdened. Because Jesus Christ has taken the sins of the world, the whole world, upon Himself. They are no longer ours to deal with through atonement or scapegoating. This Lent, look upon the unburdened scapegoat and know that in Christ, you are forgiven. In Christ, all our sins are forgiven. In Christ, all is forgiven, we are redeemed, and the scapegoat is unburdened. Thanks be to God!

Friday, March 31: Vanitas Still Life with Books and Manuscripts and a Skull

Art: “Vanitas Still Life with Books and Manuscripts and a Skull” by Evert Collier, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Vanitas+-+Still+Life+with+Books+and+Manuscripts+and+a+Skull&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image>

Written by Rhody Walker-Lenow, Doctoral Student, Duke Divinity School



As I sit down to write this devotion, I am having trouble focusing. Usually, the desk in my office that overlooks the parish graveyard of the church where my husband is the priest is a reliably peaceful spot. My husband and I love walking around the graveyard in the evenings, and we’ve walked it so many times now, in fact, that we’ve mapped it out in our minds. We know the graves of 19th-century John and Eleanor, who, even though they died 50 years apart, are remembered in stone as “Beloved Husband” and “Beloved Wife.” I know the grave of Emily, who died shortly after the Civil War, on whose tombstone reads, “Thine Forever, Lord of Life,” a perfect line of an old hymn that I had to look up. And we always walk by the grave of Anna Beth, the nine-year-old my husband buried last year. Her grave is just to the left of our house. Her family lives a few states away, so I visited her most days last summer right after she was interred. I see her spot clearly from the window of my office now, where I am trying to write about Lent.

But today there is a funeral happening at the church—a bigger one than usual. This is the reason for my lack of focus. More than 300 people will be there, my husband tells me (the church only seats 250). There are so many cars today that the parking has overflowed into our front yard.

The scene has me looking up every few minutes. (Even writing the above two paragraphs has taken me an hour.) Especially now: the mourners are walking from the church, across our yard, to the new side of the cemetery for the interment. I should be writing, but I am watching—all 300 of them, dressed in black, pulling their coats tight against the wind.

Of course, I say with a bit of embarrassment, this is also the day—the day of this uncharacteristically large funeral—that FedEx has decided to deliver all the gifts our friends and family bought from our wedding registry. Hundreds of people are crying in the cold, and I am trying to intercept the FedEx trucks before they get so far up the driveway that they have to loudly beep as they reverse back down and interrupt the interment happening 20 yards away. A body is being buried and I am worrying about the delivery of our very cool oversized and overpriced wine glasses.

So, it happens that I am having trouble focusing. *Focus*, from the Latin for “hearth” or “fireplace,” or the more figurative “home” or “family,” meant something like “point of convergence” in the English language when it cropped up in colloquial use in the 1650s. (We have mathematical Kepler to thank

for that.) To be unable to focus, then, signals a loss of convergence—a dispersion, a scattering, a separation. And in a less mathematical sense, to lose one’s focus is to lose one’s family, some core that essentializes us.

I got married last year, but my parents also separated after more than thirty years together. The divorce will be finalized this summer. I welcomed two nieces, but my best friend struggled with infertility. I am starting to build relationships at my husband’s church in Maryland, but our marriage meant leaving the church I loved in North Carolina where I was the children’s pastor. So it goes. A season for everything, I try to remind myself. “Vanity of vanities,” reminds the preacher. “A generation goes and a generation comes. The sun rises and the sun goes down.” Funerals happen. Matrimonial wine glasses are delivered.

In 1663, right around the time “focus” was coming into the English language, the Dutch painter Evert Collier painted “*Vanitas Still Life with Books and Manuscripts and a Skull*.” The *vanitas* genre—named for the aforementioned ecclesiastical refrain “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!”—became popular in the Netherlands in the 17th century. The trope began when painters occasionally painted skulls on the backside of portraits, little reminders of the inevitability of death, and evolved into an identifiable genre by the mid-16th century. (It is perhaps no surprise that the paintings’ popularity was nurtured by the rampant Calvinism in the area which stressed our total depravity.)

Most *vanitas* paintings contain a predictable constellation of objects. On the one hand there are objects signifying life’s great pleasures: books of art and science, maps, musical instruments, jewelry, playing cards, gold, and goblets. On the other, there are objects that remind us of mortality: clocks or hourglasses, bubbles about to pop, mirrors crystallized and blurred with age—and, of course, skulls.

Collier’s “*Vanitas Still Life with Books and Manuscripts and a Skull*” fits the genre in some obvious ways. The eponymous skull sits just left of center, lower jaw missing and only three teeth still intact in the upper. A flute sits just below a downturned *roemer*, a wine goblet with a thick, beautifully decorated stem. An hourglass is the highest point in the painting, towering over everything else on the table. We cannot see the bottom portion of the hourglass, but there is no sand left in the top. This is a vision of a life whose bones are long dry, whose time is long past.

The painting is charmingly chaotic. Pages from a notebook are falling off the table. Quill pens are tipped over. Eyeglasses are perched precariously. The image seems to lack focus—there’s not an obvious center, not a core *self* holding it all together. In some ways, this is the point of the genre: *vanitas* paintings intend to juxtapose life’s brevity with what we perceive to be life’s point—joy, achievement, *pleasure*. They’re meant to make us contemplate our mortality—that what it is to be alive is also and always to be not-yet-dead. They’re meant to be humbling, and to remind us what has the final say.

It is a painting of a funeral with a wine glass in its center.

But there’s something else going on Collier’s painting. There’s something that is altogether atypical in the genre. Nearly the whole righthand third of the painting is consumed by a large open book that is

propped up by the skull's temple. It's a thick, dense text at first glance. The words are not distinguishable—they're just thin, black squiggles—but the headings are legible: "Sermoon VI" the left page reads. "Decadis IIII, Fol. 191" reads the right.

It's not unusual to have books in *vanitas* paintings. It's not even unusual to have religious texts (like the Bible) in these paintings. But a book of *sermoons*—sermons—is uncommon. A bit of research taught me that the book is Heinrich Bullinger's *Decades*. Bullinger was a 16th-century Swiss reformer and priest who worked with Calvin to systematize Protestant theology. *Decades* was his most significant theological work, a compilation of 50 sermons that were widely distributed and kept in the homes of many. Collier has pointed us to the second page of the sixth sermon in the fourth decade, or volume. The sermon's epigraph reads: "That the son of God is unspeakably begotten of the Father; that He is consubstantial with the Father, and therefore true God. That the selfsame Son is true man; consubstantial with us: and therefore true God and man, abiding in two unconfounded natures, and in one undivided person." In other words, the sermon that Collier has perched against this poor skull is a sermon on the incarnation.

In the fifth week of Lent this year, the Old Testament lectionary reading is Ezekiel 37:1-14, the passage in which the Lord sits Ezekiel down in a valley of bones. The Lord leads Ezekiel around the valley, where Ezekiel notices that there are, in fact, *many* bones, and that the bones are very dry.

"Mortal," the Lord says to Ezekiel, "can these bones live?"

"O Lord God, you know," Ezekiel cryptically replies.

"Prophesy to the bones," says the Lord, "and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

And the word of the Lord for these bones is incarnation: "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

Ezekiel's prophesying in this chapter has been the subject of much visual art in the last thousand years, and yet I still find it hard to visualize. It is hard to imagine the precise choreography of a resurrection. It is hard to imagine the knitting together, the convergence, of muscle, skin, and breath that the Lord describes. This is why Collier's painting strikes me and strikes me hard. It seems to me that Collier's *vanitas* might be another image of Ezekiel's prophecy. In the painting, a dry skull rests under God's prophetic, incarnational word. "To give life everlasting doth belong to the power of God," reads the Bullinger sermon. Christ "forgiveth sins, that by his power he maketh alive and raiseth up from the dead, even as his Father doth," he writes.

"I am going to open your graves," says the Lord to the bones. "I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people."

It is unlikely that Bullinger ever preached his sermon aloud in a church or anywhere else. The *Decades* were treatises written in the style of sermons. It is therefore unlikely that, though our skull has rested

beneath the prophetic words of Bullinger for over 400 years, it has ever heard them spoken. We ought to hear an invitation in this silence. We ought to hear an invitation to preach these words ourselves.

If Easter is a story about what God does in graveyards, it seems that Lent might be a story about what we do in graveyards—in the power of the Lord, by the grace of God. Absent God, graveyards are principally places of decay. But because of the risen Lord, we may also preach in them, though the words we might say seem hard to imagine. The oldest grave in Maryland is outside my window, just slightly out of view. The grave belongs to a woman named Rachel, and she was buried here about the time Collier painted this skull. It seems hard to imagine that I might say to Rachel, “O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” She has waited so long.

The funeral outside my window is nearly over. A delivery man arrived halfway through with the wine glasses. They are gorgeous. I have been unfocused. I see my husband preaching over bones not yet dry. And now I must determine what will be my last word, what will have the final say.

Saturday, April 1: Jesus Christ Superstar

Art: “Image from Jesus Christ Superstar,” Otterbein College Production, 2005; Photographer: Karl Kuntz, Otterbein University Theatre & Dance from USA, CC BY-SA 2.0

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Written by Brian Johnson, Pastor of Haymarket Church



Every year, during Lent, I listen to “Jesus Christ Superstar” on a continual loop.

For those of you who aren’t familiar, “Jesus Christ Superstar” is a musical adaptation of the biblical story of the week leading up to the death of Jesus. And, like the Gospels, while it covers that full week, the musical really zooms in on the final hours – on the last few days leading up to the crucifixion.

I was first introduced to “Jesus Christ Superstar” when I was in my mid-20’s and saw it performed by a touring company at a local theater. I’ve seen it a few times since then – from live performances at the Kennedy Center to the NBC “live” performance, with John Legend as Jesus (he was great).

The show isn’t perfect. Sometimes, it can be just plain weird. The campy 70s movie version is, honestly, just too much for me – it’s a little too odd, and I just can’t get into it. I saw a great performance at the Kennedy Center in 2022, but during the scene when Jesus was being whipped, they represented the whipping by having the cast throw red glitter at him (it was kinda interesting but also mostly just really bizarre). And, if I’m honest, certain key plot elements in the play depend more upon the author’s creative license than on the story as it’s actually told in the Bible.

But, even with those flaws, the reason I return to “Jesus Christ Superstar” every year is because it helps me experience the story of Holy Week at an emotional level. For me, it’s really easy to fall into the trap of experiencing the story of Jesus primarily in my head, and not letting the story reach my heart. I tend to be someone who wants to process ideas and figure out how they fit together. I’m open to emotional experience (or at least I want to be and I try to be), but sometimes deep emotional experience doesn’t come easily or naturally to me.

But the story of Jesus is something that should – or that I want to – touch me both at the level of my head AND at the level of my heart. God has reached out and come near to us, and not only is it important to understand what that means, it’s also something that I want to impact me on an emotional register. The One who hung the stars in the sky also hung on a cross for me. The One who is Life itself died in order to set me free. The One who is always faithful to us was betrayed by his

closest friends. The One who will never abandon us was abandoned for our sake. When God showed up in our world, we human beings responded by putting God-in-the-flesh to death. This is a story of a God who does not remain distant, but who enters into our world in order to save us. This is the story of a God who walks through the darkest night in order to bring us through to the glorious light of resurrection. This is a story that should move us. It should challenge us. It should break open our hearts and make us feel something.

But none of that comes naturally to me. Those feelings don't come easily to me. And, so, throughout the season of Lent, I listen to this story over and over again, and I find myself moved – by songs of betrayal and heartbreak and regret and death. And, as I open myself to experiencing the story of Christ's suffering and death at an emotional level, I find that I better understand the words of Philippians 2:

*“Though [Jesus Christ] was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus everyone
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

When God-in-the-flesh walked among us, we responded by putting God to death. And, yet, instead of punishing us for this, somehow all of this has become the story of our salvation. It is a heart-rending mystery. And it is Good News.

April 2, Palm Sunday: Jesus Weeps

Art: Apse Window of Dominus Flevit Chapel, Antonio Barluzzi, architect

Written by Larry Lenow, Retired Elder, Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church



“As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop. He answered, “I tell you, if this were silent, the stones would shout out.”

As he came near and saw the city he wept over it, saying “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

Luke 19:37-42

Jesus weeps for Jerusalem, for her imminent destruction and the resulting diaspora. Yes, Jesus wept for Jerusalem, but make no mistake, Jesus weeps for all of us. The *Dominus Flevit* (the Lord Wept) Chapel is a Franciscan church located on the Mount of Olives. It was designed by architect Antonio Barluzzi in 1955. I do not know the name of the metalsmith who crafted the beautiful Apse Window. But the artistry is self-evident. The window draws us to see the holy city of Jerusalem through the scrollwork fashioned as the crown of thorns. Central to the window is the chalice and host, the broken body and shed blood. Thus we are invited to see Jerusalem through the lens of Christ's sacrifice.

In our view of the city we see the golden Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine. But look carefully and you will also see the tin dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a Christian sacred space. Not visible but equally present nonetheless is the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism. Collectively it is a snapshot of human faith, our highest hopes and ideals. It is a Holy City, a place of prayer. Yet it is also the most fought over real estate on planet Earth. How much hurt and hate has arisen, how much blood has been shed over it throughout the centuries? We see the walled Old City of East Jerusalem but also the high-rises of the West. An ancient city yet the ancient quarrels remain real and current even in recent days.

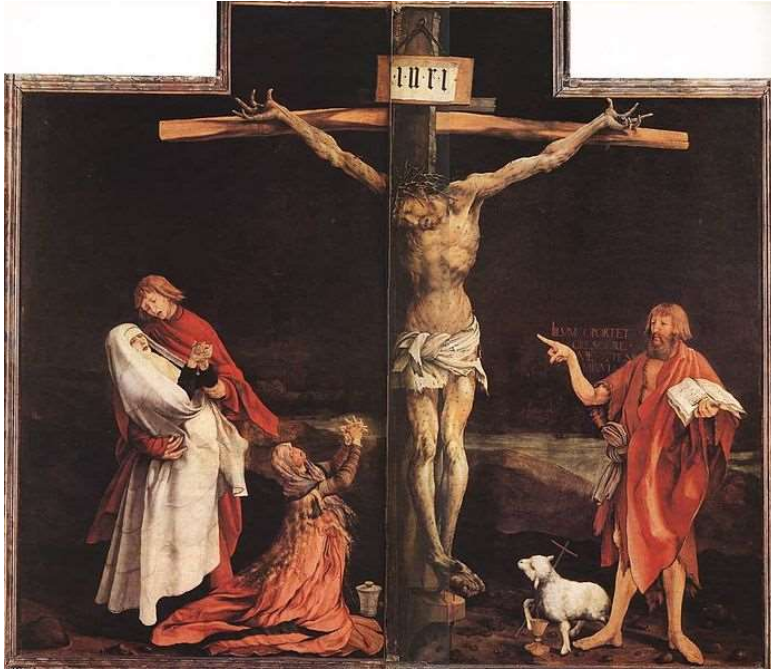
To see the city through the crown of thorns and chalice and host reminds us that Jesus died for this. It is precisely for our need - not sectarian nor merely historic - but for our inherent and universal human

need for which Christ was crucified. This window proclaims that he wept for all. He died for us all. What would it mean for us to truly see our world through the lens of the crown of thorns, through the broken body and shed blood of our Lord? Might we see others and even events in a different light? How might it change us? How might it change our world? It's worth pondering, and perhaps confessing. It's only an image, beautifully crafted ironwork framing a window. But Jesus wept. Jesus still does. Will we?

April 3: The Long Bony Finger

Art: "The Crucifixion" by Matthias Grunewald, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Matthias_Gr%C3%BCnewald_-_The_Crucifixion_-_WGA10723.jpg

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor of Raleigh Court United Methodist Church, Roanoke, VA



When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2

Matthias Grünewald was a German Renaissance painter of religious works known for his brutal depictions of realism. Among his various works, his most famous is the Issenheim Altarpiece depicting the crucifixion of Jesus. Grünewald was approached in the early 1500's

about creating the altarpiece for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Issenheim (North-Eastern France) and it took him and another German artist named Nikolaus of Haguenau four years to complete the altarpiece and it is widely considered Grünewald's masterpiece.

At the time of creation, the monastery specialized in hospital work with a particular emphasis on caring for plague sufferers and those with various skin diseases. Grünewald specifically portrayed the crucified Christ with plague-type sores in order to help patients understand that Jesus shared their afflictions.

The altarpiece went largely unnoticed by the art world until the early 20th century when it became a focal point of veneration before and after the first World War. In short, the violence of the painting resonated with the violence of the war, and it began to truly enter the cultural consciousness. So much so that a young pastor-theologian by the name of Karl Barth discovered the painting in the summer of 1918 when he also finished his first manuscript of his *Epistle to the Romans*. Barth famously kept a copy of the painting above his desk throughout his ministry from his time as a preacher, through his professorial stints in Germany and Switzerland, until his death. He referred to the painting more than 50 times through his various writings, and it is the only piece of art so honored other than Mozart.

The painting itself displays an emaciated, wounded, and suffering Christ on the cross with various witnesses to the crucifixion including Mary the Mother of God, Mary Magdalene, John the Beloved, and (anachronistically) John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, of course, was not present at the crucifixion since he was beheaded by Herod earlier in the Gospel.

However, Barth always considered John the Baptist's inclusion in the painting to be instructive for Christian preaching. John stands to the side of the cross, pointing a rather large and bony finger away from himself to Christ, with the scriptures opened in his other hand. The Christian preacher, therefore, does well to preach from the scriptures while pointing away from him/herself to the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

In other words, the painting continues the Pauline work of "knowing nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

One of the things that differentiates the Catholic Church from the Protestant Church is the Protestant Church's reticence to show Jesus on the cross. The Protestant Church's emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus over and against his suffering has resulted in empty crosses in various sanctuaries. The emphasis on the resurrection is well put and yet, divorcing Christ from the cross results in a Christian symbol that carries little, in any, offense.

The crucifixion of Jesus is inherently scandalous! God dies on the cross! For us!

The season of Lent, for better or worse, is the great opportunity to come to grips with the scandal of the Cross. Lent, with its texts, prayers, and songs forces us to contend with the bewildering claim that the author of the cosmos knows our suffering because we worship the crucified God.

I remember a Good Friday from the past when I stood before the gathered congregation and encouraged everyone to stand and sing the hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus." It's a strange hymn in a minor key and we all suffered through it, but when the service ended a woman was waiting for me in the narthex and she said, "I am never coming back for a Good Friday Service ever again."

I inquired as to what exactly upset her so much and she said, "It was that damn hymn. I don't think we should spend so much time focusing on Jesus' death, let alone sing about it. I don't know about you, but I would never have crucified Jesus."

Verse 2: "Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee! 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee."

There is the innate desire within us to believe, had we been there, we would've been good little disciples and we would've stayed with Jesus till the end. However, we do well to remember that even the first disciples called by Jesus, the one upon whom Jesus said he would build his church, denied him and abandoned him in the end.

The lack of Jesus on crosses in the Protestant church sanitizes the crucifixion in a way that gets us off the hook for the death of God. But, the Lord will not allow us to get away with such arrogance. We can avoid all the hymns, and even all the symbols, but those who follow in the line of John the Baptist will continue to point their bony fingers to Jesus reminding us what we've done.

And yet, Paul decided to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified, because the cross reveals the great lengths to which God was and is willing to go for us. Or, as we say in the United Methodist Communion liturgy: "Hear the Good News! Christ died for *us while we were yet sinners*; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, *you* are forgiven! Glory to God! Amen."

April 4: The Taking of Christ

Art: "The Taking of Christ" by Caravaggio, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Available online at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Taking_of_Christ-Caravaggio_\(c.1602\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Taking_of_Christ-Caravaggio_(c.1602).jpg)

Written by Jonathan Page, Pastor, Herndon United Methodist Church



After he said these things, Jesus went out with his disciples and crossed over to the other side of the Kidron Valley. He and his disciples entered a garden there. Judas, his betrayer, also knew the place because Jesus often gathered there with his disciples. Judas brought a company of soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They came there carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus knew everything that was to happen to him, so he went out and asked, "Who are you looking for?"

They answered, "Jesus the Nazarene."

He said to them, "I Am." (Judas, his betrayer, was standing with them.) When he said, "I Am," they shrank back and fell to the ground. He asked them again, "Who are you looking for?"

They said, "Jesus the Nazarene."

Jesus answered, "I told you, 'I Am.' If you are looking for me, then let these people go." This was so that the word he had spoken might be fulfilled: "I didn't lose anyone of those whom you gave me."

John 18:1-9

Years ago, I participated in a dramatic re-enactment of the Last Supper. I can't remember which of the disciples I portrayed, but what I remember vividly is sitting around a table and having to ask the question, on multiple occasions, "Am I the one who will betray my Lord?" Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* is not a reflection on the Last Supper at all but, much like the re-enactment question, it does invite us to consider our role in the proceedings that lead to Jesus' crucifixion.

Amidst this dimly lit slew of characters, perhaps we might see ourselves in the curious glancings of Peter on the right or the frantic panic of John on the left. There is potential that we might see ourselves in the sunken face of Christ or the hollow eyes of Judas. Many historians and theologians believe that Caravaggio had great intention in forming the armor of the soldier reaching for Jesus in the middle of the painting, believing that the mirror-like armament is meant to be an invitation to us to see our own reflection in what is unfolding. Can you see yourself there?

The truth is, in different seasons of our lives, we may find ourselves as different characters in this story. Moments of curiosity can bleed into moments of worry and there may be times where we feel the weight of pain or the fury of accusation. In this season, we may find ourselves asking the question of the re-enactment and what Caravaggio seems to be asking us in this painting: “Am I the one who will betray my Lord?”

No matter our location or our question, a reason to hold onto hope is found in the gospel. Consider the last phrase of this pericope, the very words that this moment is meant to fulfill: **“I didn’t lose anyone that you gave me.”** In our many betrayals of Christ, conscious or otherwise, there is a beam of light in the darkness of this tale: we are not apart from Jesus. Not in our moments of betrayal, not in our moments of fear, not in our moments of aggression, not in our moments of nosiness. Not even in our own journeys to death and resurrection is it possible to find ourselves apart from the love of God that is found in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Am I the one who will betray my Lord? It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the answer to this question is yes. And yet, as a part of the fabric of God’s beloved creation, you have not been lost. Christ is with you. No matter where you find yourself in the picture or if you find yourself in the picture at all, God’s love is found in the depths of your soul.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

April 5: The Flight Into Egypt

Art: "The Flight Into Egypt" by Ki-chang Kim

Written by Hung-Su Lim, Associate Pastor at Trinity United Methodist Church in Richmond, VA



"When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt.

Matthew 2:13-14

I see a picture of a Ukrainian family. The mother holds her son and stands with her husband in front of their home, which was destroyed by a missile strike. Her family is now displaced and stays in

makeshift accommodation. This story of a Ukrainian family reminds me of my grandmother and her family, who had to flee from her hometown to the south during the Korean War. She shared how my grandfather carried their three little children and necessities. She was pregnant, and my mother was born during the Korean War. It was, all sudden, confusing, terrifying, unknown, and panicky. They even lost their son during that difficult time. War is a time of sorrow, loss, despair, terror, horror, and fear.

Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, had to flee to Egypt. They probably had a difficult time getting up and hurrying to save the family. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were forced to become refugees and immigrants. They experienced human suffering and pain. Even though the escape to Egypt may have a beautiful symbolic meaning - Jesus is the new Israel and the new Moses, and Egypt is again a place of refuge - Herod's massacre of children aged two or under is an unimaginably evil act.

The Korean artist Ki-chang Kim interprets biblical stories with a Korean perspective. One of them is "The Flight into Egypt." Mary and Joseph wear traditional Korean clothes, and Mary holds the baby Jesus wrapped in cloth, riding on a donkey. Joseph looks back and checks on his wife and baby. It is a night when they flee in the painting. The tree that has lost all its foliage and the crescent moon indicates a dreary and gloomy night in a unique East Asian style - in the style of 18th-century Korean painting.

This painting is very meaningful to Korean people who have experienced the same escape, because Kim drew this painting during the Korean War. Seeing the family of Jesus from a Korean perspective is such a powerful way to comfort and encourage people because this painting conveys a message of the incarnate God who has known, seen, and experienced people's pain and suffering. Jesus' story is read

and seen as people's indigenous story. Jesus' story becomes the story of the people, a story that reflects human life.

Kim's painting helps us to see that, through Jesus, God has already walked in the darkest valley of the earth. God has already known human agony and despair by being vulnerable. God has already worked in human brokenness to restore and reconcile. So, then, God has continuously invited people to be part of God's redemptive works because God empowers the wounded, the sick, and the afflicted to bless others and help them flourish.

Lent is a significant season in which we witness God undergoing a time of humiliation and suffering. We hope to see and experience God's salvation in places of brokenness, hardship, sorrow, pain, and injustice. Through self-examination and repentance, we may focus on the Lord and be part of God's redemptive works because God will use our sacrifices, suffering, and pains to bring redemption and restoration for others. We anchor in the mystery of faith and hope that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

April 6, Maundy Thursday: Madonna and Child with St. Anne

Art: “Madonna and Child with St. Anne” by Caravaggio, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madonna_and_Child_with_St._Anne-Caravaggio_\(c._1605-6\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madonna_and_Child_with_St._Anne-Caravaggio_(c._1605-6).jpg)

Written by Joseph Walker-Lenow, Rector, St. James Parish, Lothian, MD



*You shall tread upon the lion and the adder; *
you shall trample the young lion and the serpent
under your feet.*

Psalm 91.13

The first thing that draws my eye is St. Anne’s face. She has, noticeably, the most weathered face of the three persons comprising the image: darker, looser, more wrinkled. There’s no reason to read the setting as being especially cold, but her clothes are heavier than those of her daughter, heavier (of course) than the clothes that the naked child has likely cast off in some corner. Anne’s mouth is open, her brow is raised: her eyes are wide with surprise, alarmed at the scene that’s unfolding before her. She is used to stepping in to ward off danger, to being the one responsible for the safety of the children in her home; it is taking some time to get used to the idea of her daughter setting the rules, deciding when it’s time to intervene. She holds her hands together, kneading her knuckles with worry. Staying her hand, perhaps, but only with effort.

She is looking down at the viper at her feet. Its pointed head leaves no doubt about the danger it poses. For all Anne’s concern, and for all its true potential for harm, it is trapped—powerless, for the moment. It arches off the ground acrobatically, throwing itself into the air in protest. It gleams in the sun as the light slips over its body. It is beautiful in this light, its wrath contorting it in unknowing imitation of the halos above Anne and Mary, as sin cannot ever help but echo grace.

The Christ-child is curious. Perhaps he’s never seen such a creature before. He clutches one hand close to his body; the other reaches out cautiously—you get the sense he’d bend down to get closer if he could. Attraction tintured with an appropriate wariness. He is far older than eight days old (a true toddler here, his arms and legs grown long and lithe), but distressingly uncircumcised; his red hair, legible to the Renaissance viewers of the painting as indicating his Jewish ethnicity, is the only sign of his having been brought within the people of the Covenant. He is rosy-cheeked, smooth-skinned, eager for this work; a blessed child, not yet grown into a man of sorrows.

His mother holds him back. She knows that he will meet this serpent again, when it returns at an opportune time. She bends over to keep him safe while she can. Yet it’s not worry she feels. She is attentive, of course, making sure that things do not spiral out of control. Yet it’s a patient resolve I find

in her young face. Go slowly. Perform each step in order. Do as I do; I'll show you how. It's not Jesus that is stepping on the serpent's head—it's Mary. "I will put enmity between you and the woman," God said when cursing the serpent in Eden, "and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Maybe so; but today, she's doing the dirty work. She guides his foot atop hers, teaching him where to place his toe like a father teaching his daughter to dance, each step back and forth on his dress shoes. Right there—*that's* where the snake is weakest; that's where he can do you no harm. Perhaps she's still hoping against hope that if she can teach him properly, the second line of the serpent's curse will go unfulfilled—that the snake can be overcome, without this poisoned chalice being drunk to the dregs. That a sword may not, in fact, pierce her soul also.

It is one thing to imagine Christ, the new Adam, trampling our sin underfoot on the Cross. This is the work he's meant to do, the work his Father *sent* him to do. It's another thing entirely to imagine the Blessed Virgin his mother *teaching him how*. Yet that's the clear implication of this painting: the boy Jesus has no halo yet, in marked contrast to his mother and grandmother. Not that he isn't holy; he just isn't *ready*. He is—has been from the womb—the Son of God in flesh; but he must yet learn—from his rabbis, from his cousin John (who will be the Baptizer), from his mother and her mother—how to be the Savior of the world. The symmetry is, I would say, providential: as Adam learned sin from Eve, biting into the fruit of transgression just as the serpent had taught her to do, so now Christ tramples the serpent under his feet by repeating his mother's act of faith. She can do so only by the grace he brings into the world, taking her flesh; he can do so only by joining his divine life to that flesh absolutely, the Lord of all things submitting to tuition at Mary's feet.

Seeking to follow Christ, the disciples scattered on Maundy Thursday; following Mary, the women remained faithfully at the foot of the Cross.

April 7, Good Friday: Crucifixion of Jesus

Art: "Crucifixion of Jesus" drawn by Gustave Doré, engraved by J. Gauchard Brunier. Scanned by Michael Gäbler with Epson Perfection 4490 Photo., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gustave_Dor%C3%A9_-_Crucifixion_of_Jesus.jpg

Written by Matthew Benton, Pastor, Bethel United Methodist Church, Woodbridge, VA



They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him.

Mark 15: 22-24a

It's the broken body of our Lord Jesus that dominates the foreground of this nineteenth century drawing by French artist Gustave Dore, but it's what's in the background that captivates me. The background of the painting is so littered with Roman military personnel and insignia that it could be photoshopped in from the opening scenes of *Gladiator*. We see multiple Roman soldiers. We see weapons of war. And we see the famed SPQR staff, the sign of the Roman republic and the virtues Rome was bringing to the world. The backdrop to the crucifixion is the symbol of the peace

and civilization that Rome claimed to bring to the world and the manner by which they brought and protected it.

Jesus wasn't the only person crucified that Friday nearly 2000 years ago and he certainly wasn't the only person crucified in the Roman Empire. Crucifixion was the preferred method of public execution by the Romans. It was how they tamped down dissension. It was how they maintained law and order. It was how they kept the peace. The difference with Jesus on Good Friday is that this time they did it to God.

In the name of peace they killed the Prince of Peace. To keep lawful order they tortured the One who ordered the cosmos. To preserve their power they murdered the One whom God anointed with power.

And somehow, nearly 2000 years later, these are still things we fight for. These are still things we kill for.

We believe we live in peace all the while that peace is maintained by the largest and most well funded military the world has ever known. We continue to accept that broken bodies are an acceptable cost for maintaining order. We work to preserve our (economic) power while the status quo leaves countless families (economically) oppressed and hurting. We like to think that we are somehow different from those who killed Jesus - that we would have made different choices. But our lives are not so different from theirs. Our society is not so different from theirs. We still all too often choose comfort over justice, power over liberation, our own self-gratification over caring for those who are in need.

And so it is that the impulses, the forces, the reasons that led the Romans to (reflexively) kill Jesus the Christ are still alive and well today. Alive and well in each and every one of us.

“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

John 3:19

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.*

Holy Saturday, April 8: Where are the Paintings? Where is God?

Art: "Rothko Chapel paintings" by Mark Rothko

Available online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rothko_chapel_interior.jpg

Written by Leah Wise, Curate at Grace Episcopal Church in Houston, TX



"There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night..."

John 3:1

*There is in God, some say,
A deep but dazzling darkness.*

Henry Vaughan, "The Night,"

When I reluctantly agreed to visit Houston's ecumenical Rothko Chapel with a friend on an overcast day in November, I was prepared to be underwhelmed. The chapel is known for its gigantic canvas panels painted by modern artist, Mark Rothko. The chapel paintings are a sharp departure from Rothko's more famous works that incorporate bright, jewel-tone hues. At first glance, they are simply...black. Nothing else. Just black paint. In fact, when visitors first enter the chapel, one source says they often ask, "Where are the paintings?"

I entered the chapel and took my place on a bench facing a triptych of black canvases. The room was nearly as dark as dusk, lit primarily by a central skylight. I waited for my eyes to adjust. After a minute, the black paint betrayed subtle paint strokes. After a couple minutes, I started to see gradations of color, then deep greens and blues. Something was happening in the midst of the blackness, of the void.

John of the Cross, like other Mystics, taught that the felt absence of God - the darkness of God or the "dark night of the soul" - was the truest path to full communion with God. In this tradition, suffering becomes a conduit to divine revelation. It turns us into the parched kindling most suitable to enlighten the fire of God. This is not to say that suffering is intrinsically good, or that we should place ourselves in harm's way. What it gives us is the reassurance that God is active in the worst, most painful parts of our lives.

In other words, God paints brushstrokes on our black canvases. If we let our eyes adjust to the darkness, we can begin to see the Spirit's movement, the gradations of God's activity, the saturation of God's presence as God paints in the midst of our confusion, sorrow, and loneliness.

Where are the paintings? Sit down and let your eyes adjust - they're right here. Where is God? "God takes you by the hand and guides you in the darkness" - God is right here.

April 9, Easter Sunday: Death is Defeated

Art: "Resurrection Icon" Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Available online at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Resurrection_\(24\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Resurrection_(24).jpg)

Written by Brian Johnson, Pastor of Haymarket Church, Haymarket, VA



I passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died.

...

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. He's the first crop of the harvest of those who have died. Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came through one too. In the same way that everyone dies in Adam, so also everyone will be given life in Christ. Each event will happen in the right order: Christ, the first crop of the harvest, then those who belong to Christ at his coming, and then the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he brings every form of rule, every authority and power to an end. It is necessary for him to rule until he puts all

enemies under his feet. Death is the last enemy to be brought to an end.

...

Death has been swallowed up by a victory. Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death?

1 Corinthians 15:3-6, 20-26, 54b-55

Christ is risen!

Death could not hold him! The grave could not keep him! He has broken the chains that bind us, he has defeated the final enemy, Death itself.

On Good Friday, we told the story of God-in-the-flesh walking through the darkest night of human history – a story of a God who loves us so much that God is willing to be abandoned for our sake. God submits to the darkness of death in order to bring us into the overwhelming glory of eternal life.

Today is the other half of that story because, as Frederick Buechner put it, Easter means that “The worst thing is never the last thing. It’s the next to last thing. The last thing is the best.” The last thing is the thing that overturns and overthrows everything we thought we knew about how this world works.

The last thing – the end of history as we know it – is Jesus Christ, the crucified one, raised from the from the dead.

And notice what he's doing in this icon – he's bringing us along with him. His resurrection is not just a sign of how awesome he is. It's not just vindication of all he did before his crucifixion. It's not just another reason for us to worship him as God. (Though, it is certainly all those things and more). The resurrection is also our liberation. It is our victory day! When Christ breaks the chains of death, he breaks them for all people, for all eternity. Here, in this icon, we see him pulling Adam and Eve – the symbolic parents of all humanity – out from their graves. Their graves lie open. Because Christ is risen, they have hope. Their sin – their rebellion against God – does not get the final word. The final word is not death. The final word, now and always, is eternal life.

Notice the old man bound at the bottom of this icon – perhaps it's Satan, who Christ has defeated (the strong man who must be tied up so his house may be plundered, as in Mark 3:27). Or perhaps it's the old humanity, our former nature, the old way of being human - which has been crucified with Christ (as in Romans 6). Perhaps it's a representation of all the evil forces and systems which seem to be so powerful – the powers and principalities, authorities and rulers, who Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6:12. Perhaps the old man represents Death itself, whose reign is now over. However you wish to name it, the Good News is this: the forces of evil have been defeated, we have been liberated, and Christ is victorious.

Easter is a promise – Easter is a victory – which means that death does not get the final say. Evil, while it may still seem strong, is on the run. Peace is stronger than violence. Love is stronger than hatred. Life is stronger than death. In the end, God wins. And even if we can't always see it in our day-to-day lives, we know – we trust – that this is true, because we have seen it in Jesus Christ.

Christ is Risen! He has defeated death itself. And, by his victory, he brings us – he brings all people – with him into the Kingdom of his Father, into eternal life.

Christ is Risen! Thanks be to God!