

— STREET PSALMS —

LENTEN

DEVOTIONAL



Excerpts from **Meal From Below**

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Introduction

This Lenten devotional has been excerpted from **Meal From Below—A Five Course Feast With Jesus**, in which we explore the Eucharist as a spirituality of mission and what it means to be formed and shaped by the Jesus Meal.

In these Lenten reflections we lift up the third course of the meal, called “Broken.” It is the sacred center of the meal and the most difficult and liberating part of the meal.

Each course yields its own gift. The third course, cannot and should not be isolated, or we eat to our own peril, but we offer it here trusting the host of the meal to craft for us a culinary delight that is truly transformational.

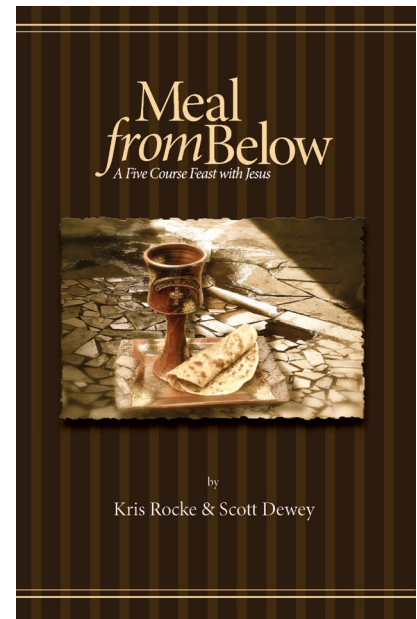
Here’s how it works.

The Eucharist inducts us into Reality and reveals its hidden patterns at work in our lives. Jesus “took the bread, blessed it, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘This is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me’” (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). In the same way, we too are *taken, blessed, broken, given, and spoken* in God’s love—that we might re-member the body of Christ for a hurting world and become instruments of peace.

Welcome to the Jesus Meal.

Meal From Below was written for activists and missional communities searching for an ecumenical, holistic, and liberating spirituality that sustains them in their call to serve the vulnerable urban communities in hard places. It is also for those of us who may not be actively serving in such settings, but who are hungry for a spirituality that liberates in the hard and dark places of our own lives.

Bon appetit.



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Eucharist: The Five Course Meal



FIRST COURSE: TAKEN—We are taken into the loving hands of God. We feast on God’s love as the foundation of all life and transformation. All of creation is taken into the love that is its Source.



SECOND COURSE: BLESSED—In the loving hands of God, we are blessed. We drink deeply of the Incarnation as the blessing of God’s presence in the world.



THIRD COURSE: BROKEN—We are broken in and through the love of God. We taste God’s own experience of suffering on the cross, and how that experience radically transforms death into life.



FOURTH COURSE: GIVEN—As broken ones, we are given to a broken world. We savor life inside of the resurrection and its gift to the world.



FIFTH COURSE: SPOKEN—We digest the living Word that speaks all of life into existence.

A Midweek Meal

Today is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent in the calendar of Christian faith. For followers of Jesus in liturgical traditions, we begin a time of focused spiritual companionship with our Savior leading to the cross. Lent lasts 40 days, in commemoration of Jesus' 40 days in the desert (Matt. 4:1-2; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1-2). In many traditions, the 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays, to continue the celebration of the resurrection—they function like mini-Easters. So each year the Christian church merges these two chapters of the life of Jesus (desert wandering and the journey to the gallows outside Jerusalem) with our own current chapter of life.

In solemn ceremonies today, ashes will be gently pressed onto our foreheads in the shape of a cross, with the reminder that we were formed from dust and will return to dust (Gen. 3:19). Following Ancient Near Eastern customs, where ashes on the head were a sign of distress or repentance, we reflect on our experience of desolation and alienation. The ashes typically are collected by burning the withered palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday. Rejoicing recedes into memory; only a blackened residue remains.

The symbolism here is vivid, but few seem to be drawn to its stark sign. There always seem to be more than enough palm ashes for the few foreheads that show up for such dismal proceedings. How can any of this be helpful, never mind spiritually uplifting?

As this reflection is being written, an email blinks across the screen from one of our Street Psalms Community friends:

The load recently has felt unbearable, with far too much time spent in the valley of the shadow of death. We had a Moment of Blessing service [a street liturgy for victims of homicide] last night for two murdered drug dealers and a four-year-old boy caught in the crossfire, a funeral service this morning for a stillborn baby of a street girl we have become very close to, with another Moment of Blessing service in the cemetery this coming Sunday. All that on top of teaching a Street Psalms

Intensive to a newly formed missional community tomorrow and Friday, and a Saturday morning ministry site visit. We are, as we say in Spanish, “agatados” (completely drained and exhausted).

For some of us, such as this dear brother, Lent is upon us unbidden, whether we are ready or not—in ways that make giving up coffee or chocolate mockingly trite. We are already empty, the landscape is bleak, and who needs reminders? Others of us are alright personally, but our calling brings us into regular proximity with the anguish of others. Still others are in a delightful season of life. Lent seems even more jarring and unwelcome if we are welcoming babies or embarking on exciting projects or heading off on honeymoons. Why invite such dreariness—for 40 days no less?

For those of us bent on coming up with a rationale for entering into this agonizing journey, we find little at this juncture. It is particularly difficult to make sense of the Lenten journey from the context of a gluttonous society. Instead, we have a simple but compelling invitation from the One who has so clearly “taken” and lavishly “blessed” us as his beloved: “Join me now in the wilderness. Taste now only dust. Learn with me what only hunger can teach. Pay attention to the empty regions you have busied yourself to ignore.” Can we accept this invitation, entrusting ourselves to the One who delivers it? Will we enter this long journey patiently and with openness?

Into the Desert

REALITY

Juan and Gabriella were living with their teenage daughter in a minivan out behind the big box store where Juan worked. They were so committed to paying their medical bills (both Juan and Gabriella had diabetes) that they could no longer afford rent. On the other side of town, Thomas had worked for a major international aid agency in Africa for several years, developing agricultural programs that helped lift many out of poverty. The death of his wife, the loss of a job, and a physical illness resulted in what would once have been unthinkable for someone so highly educated: homelessness.

REFLECTION

“A voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness” (Mark 1:11-12).

The shift from one verse to the next at this juncture of Mark’s narrative of the life of Jesus is stunning. In verse 11 we are with Jesus dripping in the waters of baptism, soaked in the voice of a loving Father’s affirmation and delight. Verse 12 finds the Beloved One driven out. The Greek verb here (*ekballo*) is the same verb Mark uses to depict Jesus forcefully driving out merchants from the temple or expelling evil spirits from afflicted people (Mark 1:34, 11:15). Immediately after his baptism, Jesus is the cast-out One. The wind of the Spirit drives him out into the desert.

Mark’s account of the desert experience is spare. While other accounts present more detail, Mark offers only this brief synopsis: “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:13). That’s it, for forty days.

Later Gospels, recounting the same bleak experience, soften the language a bit. “Immediately” becomes simply “then,” and “drove out” becomes “led into.” While in Mark we get a picture of Jesus almost hurled out from the lavish embrace of the baptism experience into a hostile land (only Mark adds that Jesus was “with the wild

beasts”), in Matthew and Luke we can imagine the Spirit gently leading Jesus into an uncluttered space.

So what are we to make of this for our shared Lenten Meal from Below? If we accept Duns Scotus’s assertion that “what happens to Jesus, happens to the soul,” we can surely expect desert times in the pilgrimage of our souls. However, our wilderness narratives may read quite differently from each other. Some of us find ourselves in a hostile land quite apart from what we might have ever intended, jarringly removed from what we have known of God’s care. “I never imagined I would be here. I couldn’t have envisioned this for my life and I wouldn’t wish this on anyone,” a colleague groaned recently. The dynamics might be external events or internal turmoil or both, but the experience is one of alienation and deprivation. Like Sam and Frodo crawling through the ash of Mount Doom in Tolkien’s mythic Middle Earth, we can barely summon the memory of “eating the first of the strawberries with cream.” Skin cracks; tongues are dry in the mouth.

Others of us actually have a sense of eagerness to be led into unfamiliar spaces. We’ve been filled. Bolstered by the nourishment of affirmation, we now have courage for rigors of the unknown. We may be heading out beyond what’s safe, but we’re game to discover what’s out there. We’ve feasted on the meal of blessing. We sense there might be health for our souls in going lean for a while. If anything, our willing submission to hunger and thirst will remind us that we are fully alive. The Spirit is leading us and off we go.

“Driven out.” “Led into.” In either case, our desert experience offers unique promise for communion with God.

DISCERNMENT

As you pray this week, remember that the most important treasure you can carry into your desert is the baptism voice: “You are my Beloved, in whom I am delighted.” It is the gift that will nourish you in this difficult course of the meal. Let the words echo in your soul. It is the truth that will connect you most surely to God in this time and provide the touchstone for discernment amid other voices that will accuse and test.

In the **Communion Prayer**, which we are eager to share with you for your Lenten

journey, the Street Psalms community prays, “We come to the table hungry and thirsty for life. We come having tasted the reality of your goodness and the mystery of your abundant love.” Drink deeply.

ACTION

If you find yourself in the wilderness with a sense of being “driven out” against what you might have wished (perhaps by unwelcome events or an intensely troubled spirit), sit still. Or even lie down. Your body probably recognizes your exhaustion, your inner hunger and thirst, before your racing mind does. Use whatever energy you have to make practical arrangements for reflection and discernment. Allowing “angels to minister” to you may mean tough calendar choices and the courage to call a trusted friend. If you have chosen a season of relinquishment and simplicity, keep walking into the empty spaces you have been invited into. This typically will mean declining good activities and commitments you would ordinarily pursue.

Exposed to the Elements

REALITY

“I’ve never known a safe person in my life,” she shared. “I’ve only known people who want something from me. They always take, never give.” Lynette had been abused as a child and always felt the need to protect herself from the next perpetrator. The pattern in her life had been repeated over and over again, and she was filled with fear and shame. Hardened, calloused, and terrified to trust anyone, she admitted how much she longed for connection and love. She had no idea what it felt like to be treated with dignity. Over time, she started to let a few people into her support network. She’s still skittish, afraid that at any minute the table can turn, but she can now say that she has at least four safe people in her life.

REFLECTION

The word Lent comes to us from an ancient word meaning spring; literally, “lengthening.” In the part of the world where these traditions were first formed, the days are growing longer and the night is receding. (For our Street Psalms friends in Alaska, this “lengthening” is quite dramatic. In Fairbanks, the shift is 7 minutes a day.) People with a particular attentiveness to the earth and sky, as well as to movements of the soul, discerned spiritual significance in this. At the very time when we are moving with intention toward the darkest and coldest regions of our faith experience, the cosmos is moving toward the life and light of resurrection. We call this paradox of faith and experience “the paschal mystery,” recognizing in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the unfolding revelation that death is the gateway to life.

In his wilderness wanderings, Jesus must have been acutely attuned to the elements of the natural world—probably with more focus than at any other period of his life. His familiar context was the world of cities and civilization, as it is for most of us. Stories of his life have him traveling from town to town. Urban life moves at the whims of social forces, but the natural world (particularly the desert) cycles in

fundamental rhythms. The sun sets, the sun rises. The moon slivers and grows full. Grass withers and seeds fall. Seasonal rains call forth bright colors again. Over time, the metronome of natural elements can serve to regulate the soul. The heart may rage within or grow dull from exhaustion, but dawn comes nevertheless.

For those of us accustomed to the struggle of managing our world, moving into empty spaces without our props may trigger profound anxiety. If we are paying attention, however, we may find ourselves discerning a regular ebb and flow of significant realities formerly masked by our bustle of ambitions and diversions. Morning, midday, and evening. Day and night. Again and again and again. Forty.

Repetition allows for the possibility of familiarity and trust. We need reassurance, especially when we are moving into the unknown! Our temptation is to reach backward for the lavish fare that has nourished before. But during Lent, the Spirit invites us to lean into a much older, more primal way of sustaining life, a pattern that we may experience as new and strange.

We can take heart that Jesus, our Brother and Lord, has gone before us in this desert way. We may have passed here before; maybe formally in an annual Lenten discipline or through life circumstances that have broken our spirits to bare subsistence. Here we go again, and our anxiety surges. Can we remember that the days are lengthening and that death gives way to life?

This is not an incidental pause. Like the voice of affirmation at our Lord's baptism, the elemental reassurances along the desert way are absolutely vital. We cannot be sustained for the trials of the desert (and beyond) without them.

DISCERNMENT

This week as you pray the **Communion Prayer**, relax for a change from managing your world or even serving it. Instead, allow the natural world to hold you. Notice if that produces anxiety or assurance. Pray now with that awareness. Notice also the simple repetitions in the **Communion Prayer**: "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." And the Paschal mystery: "Christ has died. Christ has risen, Christ will come again." Let these simple refrains minister to you.

ACTION

Seek out some connection to the rhythms of the natural world. These may be all but forgotten in our crowded urban lives, but can certainly be found. Sunlight and shadows slide across brick walls throughout the day. Day awakes even in cities with predictable sounds—insects, songbirds, poultry—and slumbers with others. Take a walk. Sit for a while. Find a place where you can pay attention to your surroundings and the quiet, often ignored, rhythms within your own soul. That place may be nearer than you expect. Ideally, visit the same spot over these weeks of Lent. What stays the same? What changes? What new things emerge?

Beauty and Affliction

REALITY

It may sound strange, but second-hand smoke is one of my favorite smells. I've never been a cigarette smoker myself. But for seven years I spent Thursday nights sitting on a front porch listening to street kids telling their stories (which were mostly not true, but were entertaining nonetheless), playing guitar and singing "hippy songs," and inhaling second-hand cigarette smoke. Today, that smell is almost like incense, or like an "Ebenezer" to me—a tangible reminder of good (and hard) places where God has led me.

REFLECTION

The French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil wrote, "Two things can pierce the human heart—beauty and affliction." The landscape of Lent presents itself as open, empty, deserted. Traditional Lenten observance, following Christ into the wilderness, emphasizes relinquishment. Following the One who emptied himself, we give up a familiar pleasure or comfort for forty days until Easter. Alcohol and meat are traditional standbys for doing without, but these days it might be Facebook or Xbox One. Maybe with less clutter, we'll detox a bit and have a few more moments reaching toward God in prayer and reflection.

That much will do. We all could use a little more simplicity, and a little more spiritual connection. Especially for those of us who are activists, Lent proves worthwhile for re-centering and renewal.

If Weil and the mystics are right, the desert experience of the soul holds the possibility for a shift of entirely different magnitude—tearing open the human heart. There is no adequate preparation possible. The assault of affliction or of beauty is upon us before we can collect ourselves. We are practiced in the skill of averting our gaze, distracting ourselves, of forcibly resisting. We're ready for joy only in trickles, and anguish not at all.

But the wilderness lures us into unguarded spaces. For Jesus, this space was the

natural world. Silence invited new hearing. The wide sky offered new sight. The mystic poet of Psalm 19 sings it this way:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from God's wedding canopy,
and like an athlete runs their course with joy.*

The psalmist moves seamlessly from being awestruck at God's creation to delighting in the dazzling beauty of God's own ways and the heart's capacity to apprehend them. "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world," writes C. S. Lewis. Perhaps only poetry, art, and music can begin to hint at beauty's penetrating power. A modern lyricist states it this way:

*Maybe to those who love is given sight
To pierce the wall of seeming night
And know it pure beyond all imagining...
like a big fist breaking down my door
I never felt such a love before...
Maybe to those who love it's given to hear
Music too high for the human ear
And clear as hydrogen to go singing.¹*

There will, however, be tremendous cost for such sight, hearing, and even singing. "Your servant is warned," acknowledges the psalmist (Ps. 19:11). For Weil, the big fist breaking down the doors to our souls wrecks our defenses with an ambidextrous, devastating punch in turns: beauty and affliction. Beauty breaks our various falsely constructed selves and lays open the possibility of discovering our truly created and unfolding self. Beauty compels desire for beauty, into which we are becoming.

DISCERNMENT

In our **Communion Prayer**, we acknowledge that we come to the table having tasted the reality of God's goodness and the mystery of abundant love (beauty). We also come having tasted the bitterness of our own sin and the sin of others (affliction). This week pay particular attention to the simple and unadorned beauty that you see this week. Are you open to it breaking you?

ACTION

Allow yourself contact with either the rawness of the natural world or the unguarded human condition. You will likely find it "outside"—either outdoors or with social outsiders. You may need to go out of your way. Or it may already be in your normal way but require special attention.

¹ Bruce Cockburn, "After the Rain," *Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws* (Myrrh, 1979).

The Work of Affliction

REALITY

He wears a toilet around his neck, literally. I'm not sure where a person finds a necklace charm in the shape of a toilet, but he found one and wears it every day. He says that it's a reminder of all the things he is tempted to deny. For a pastor and an alcoholic, denial is a deadly thing, especially when we deny the most elemental facts of life. For many of the people we serve, having access to a working toilet would be a gift too good to ever hide or deny.

REFLECTION

If affliction “pierces our souls” as Simone Weil said, it is no accident that she paired it with beauty as a force that overwhelms our carefully defended selves. Like beauty, affliction cannot be contained or managed. At times, an intense encounter with beauty itself produces an ache, a longing, an awareness of something precious beyond our grasp.

In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of the glory of the Lord and the splendor of his throne surrounded by heavenly worshippers. Awe soon gives way to grief; the vision collapses into lament: “I am undone; I am a man of unclean lips, among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the king” (Isa. 6:5). This movement of the soul from a vision of beauty to a cry of anguish is fundamental to our human experience, and therefore also essential to our experience with God by way of the cross. In the midst of the experience of anguish, we are bewildered by the senseless, almost mocking presence of the beauty we have been permitted to taste. A couple anticipate having a baby together and then find themselves childless and grieving. An activist community dreams of justice, works every angle for its tangible realization, and finds justice shattered or deferred—sabotaged by forces outside the group or even by fractures from within. An addict is clean for years, then shamed and ruined by relapse. A newly-single person attends the wedding of a friend, torn inside. “Lord have mercy.”

Affliction goes beyond simple pain. It might begin in the body, but it works its way into the soul. A toothache is not likely to deepen to the level of affliction, but enduring pain, from which there seems no relief or escape, sends us to the end of ourselves. It isolates. Others cannot understand, and often cannot accept our condition. We cannot accept it ourselves, but when does affliction ask our permission? It persists. “How long, O Lord, how long?”

Deeper affliction drives us into isolation, confusion, meaninglessness, and despair—moving not only into the wilderness experience of Jesus, but further still into his experience of the cross. This may seem little temporal consolation. We want relief. But there is something deeply true at work: the cross is ground zero for the meeting of divine and human. There is beauty beyond, for which we do not need to strive or to grasp.

At this point, we should remember that no work will accomplish union with God at the point of suffering. The union is God’s work. In Christ, God comes a long way into the wound of our humanity, even to the deepest wound of death. We will simply be invited to gaze upon the strange beauty of the suffering Savior, amid our own: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14-16).

Our Street Psalms Community is active in communities and contexts of pain. Our lives are marked not only with our individual wounds, but also with the wounds of others. Our very work among broken people is often subject to failure, confusion, and loss. The Lenten portion of the Jesus meal reminds us that broken work and broken workers are central to the peculiar way God is redeeming the world. As Mother Teresa wrote, “Without our suffering, our work would be just social work—it would not be the work of Jesus Christ, not part of the redemption. The important thing is not to waste suffering. Join it to the suffering of Christ; offer it up with his suffering. Don’t waste suffering.”²

DISCERNMENT

In our **Communion Prayer**, we are invited to contemplate: “As the body of Christ in

the world, we not only partake in the meal, [through beauty and affliction] we also become part of the meal in which we partake.” Consider what it means for you to become a part of the meal itself—to have union with God’s brokenness. How might this union nourish the world?

ACTION

Very likely your life this week will include activities and relationships that seem to be fruitless, failing, broken, or painful. If there was a simple fix you would have welcomed that long ago, but there is none. The seeds of transformation, either within you or in the situation, may lie in your mindfulness of God’s own experience of this very brokenness.

²Malcom Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (HarperOne; reprint edition, 1986).

Eating Brokenness

REALITY

It is a beautiful summer evening. As we sit around a table with a group of friends, I feel our wounds, even through all the laughter. It's deep, like a dull back spasm that regardless of how I sit I can't get comfortable. Our host invites us to take communion. The kids laugh a little and make it clear they don't want the wine as the parents offer them communion. The four-year-old ignores the cautions of the older kids and steps out front. He looks into the cup filled with what appears to be grape juice. After taking the bread, he drinks from the cup. He immediately yanks his head back. Shocked, his facial expression declares the bitterness. He looks at his mom as if he has been betrayed. Suddenly, I am reminded that this is my face, distorted by the bitter cup that Jesus offers me—the cup that invites me to acknowledge the broken places within our friendships and to forgive those who have hurt me. I want to spit it out. I know it is life-giving, but it tastes bitter on my tongue.

REFLECTION

In the communion meal, Jesus invites us to eat brokenness, to take it into ourselves. Much of our human reflexive impulse is to distance ourselves from brokenness, pain, and shame. We push it away. This impulse is so strong that we construct entire cultural, religious, interpersonal, and psychological patterns to sustain our denial of brokenness. The project requires considerable effort and resources. For that reason, the poor typically do it unsuccessfully, if at all. Their brokenness is frequently on display. Those with more wealth and status usually have, among other prerogatives, the luxury of hiding their mess.

Nothing could be more ordinary than breaking bread among friends, but Jesus infuses the broken bread with extraordinary significance. He gives the meal sacred, ritual meaning—that is clear from the context of the ancient Passover meal Jesus “eagerly desired” to share on the eve of his suffering and death. The remarkable thing is not in elevating something as ordinary as bread to the level of the sublime;

art and religion are adept at that. It is not even in appropriating the human body as something worthy of high regard, as the ancient Greeks famously did. The jarring thing is Jesus' invitation to eat his broken body. The symbolism must have baffled the first participants. Later, after the traumatic events it foreshadowed, we can imagine broken bread triggering vivid, repulsive memories the disciples would rather forget.

This is precisely what Jesus asks us to believe is the meeting point of the divine and human—not simply to believe it, but to eat! When Jesus was torn open in flesh and exposed to public ridicule, he did not simply acknowledge our broken humanity as an observer. He absorbed brokenness into himself. He became the broken One.

This, we must take and ingest. We have so often turned away from our own human brokenness as well as Christ's. We have tried to hide our sin and shame, and we have marginalized and made scapegoats of those we cannot bear to receive. We have attempted to deny or explain or control what is broken about us. Jesus says, "Join me in eating it."

On one level, this jarring invitation to eat brokenness is an invitation to relax into the honest truth of our fractured human condition. This is not so simple for those practiced in refusal! We may have a gag reflex. The poor in spirit are more accustomed to this fare. But Jesus reminds us that we must digest it again and again: "As often as you do it."

Because God has joined our human experience in Christ, we are relaxing into his saving work of transforming humanity through death and resurrection. The promise of the meal is union with God, wholeness within, and a table of joy with others. It begins with this invitation to eat.

DISCERNMENT

As you pray the **Communion Prayer** this week, focus again on the words, "we come having tasted the bitterness of our own sin and the sin of others." In what ways do you gag on the taste of brokenness in the meal of blessing? How are you tempted to refuse it, to push it away? On the other hand, how have you experienced grace to receive brokenness as the presence of Christ?

ACTION

The most literal response to this invitation to taste brokenness, of course, is to observe the Lord's Table, the Eucharist. But the table is extended in our lives in very real ways that might include: intentional presence with a person or group with whom you have a fractured relationship; conversation with someone you trust about a broken place within you; engagement with a broken and unjust social system. Practice compassionate listening to the wounds of another.

The Sign of Jonah

REALITY

We found John dead in the apartment we had just moved him into. He'd been stabbed in the stomach and died of internal bleeding. It wasn't much of a wound. He must have thought he'd be fine. He was killed by one of the largest, private owners of "affordable" houses in our city. John's death was ruled self-defense, but something didn't ring true. The police had to put on hazmat suits to search the home of John's assailant because of the unsanitary conditions in which the assailant lived. What an irony! John was one of nearly one million homeless people in the U.S., thirty percent of whom suffer from mental illness. After the investigation, it was unclear to us who suffered more from mental illness: John or his assailant.

REFLECTION

This week we celebrate Palm Sunday, the day we commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem to the adulation of crowds. The day marked the apex of his popularity. It is an event in our faith story truly worth celebrating because it so dramatically foreshadows the final stanza of the great ancient praise hymn quoted by Paul in Philippians 2:10-11 "At the name of Jesus every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Even as we hand out palm branches for kids and adults to wave in our churches today, we do so with an asterisk, a celebration with hesitation, because we know how the rest of the week's story played out. Inserting ourselves into the commotion of that day in Jerusalem, we might imagine two very different responses to the spectacle. On the one hand, we might simply be caught up in the enthusiasm with our own hosanna cheers. "Finally," we think, "a real wave to catch, something to get behind! God is in it! Here is a movement that is obviously going places, with possibilities of success written all over it."

On the other hand, some of us know how these things turn out. Call us cynical, but we've been down this road before. Schooled by life, we're smarter than the fickle

crowds. We're all too familiar with how things predictably turn south. We'll watch from a distance, disengaged and bemused, realistic in our expectations. Check with us later if you're interested in our perspective on how the mess could have been avoided.

Jesus himself shows a radically different way of being in his own story. He attaches a curiously obscure label to this "third way": the "sign of Jonah." By this point he has drawn great crowds with "signs and wonders," and could be poised to capitalize on the market share he commands. Yet Luke tells us that "as the crowds increased," Jesus drops a cold-water pronouncement, referring to one of the least uplifting stories from the Hebrew prophets, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Luke 11:29). Matthew spells it out in greater detail: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40). This sign, and only this sign, is the one finally given to show the way for an "evil and adulterous generation" prone to extremes of either enthusiasm or cynicism.

This "third way" of Jonah does not simply aim for a middle path between the extremes. It's a different trip altogether, as Jonah himself found out. It is the way of death and resurrection. In case those categories have become religious clichés for us, let's just say it's the way of being storm-wrecked, drowned, swallowed whole, and vomited up—hardly the way of over-enthusiasm or cynicism. But it is the way of transformation. When Jonah finally was spit up onto a distant shore, he was a different person in a different place. The sign of Jonah points to the way of baptism, of being born a second time, of falling into the earth and dying like a kernel of wheat, and rising to new life. It points to eating the meal of brokenness so that we may be nourished to wholeness. It is a way of struggle, loss, and relinquishment, so that we might find our way in renewed abundance.

Enthusiasm or cynicism cannot accomplish such transformation. It comes as a journey of grace, not a spectacle of magic as many miracle-watchers had come to anticipate. The invitation to salvation, shown by the sign of Jonah, is an invitation for our souls to follow Jesus as we have done in this Lenten course of the meal—through desert space and onward into the sorrows and shame of the cross. We do so

with trust and courage (mixed with ample doses of our doubt and fear), knowing the companionship of our Brother Jesus. He will share with us this meal of brokenness, and be our Host in the resurrection meal of blessing.

DISCERNMENT

As you pray this week, consider what the sign of Jonah might be pointing you toward. What in your life is being “storm-wrecked, drowned, swallowed whole, and vomited up”? What might need to be? In the **Communion Prayer**, we ask God to forgive us “for all the ways we diminish the meal, for the ways we guard against your mercy and withhold it from others, and for all of our misplaced and displaced desires that have caused so much harm.” This hasn’t been an easy course of the meal to digest (just ask the creature who swallowed Jonah!). Are you able to discern, however, something of the presence of Christ and the movement of the Spirit in the hard places in your life? In the life of your community or the people you serve? Receive with openness what God might have to offer in this most significant week in the rhythm of our spiritual life together.

ACTION

Risk a step in your life—your relationships, your work, your ministry, school, or other involvement—that you may have dismissed out of jaded cynicism. It may be a small step or large. Resist the need for manufactured enthusiasm to fuel the effort. Instead, trust the way of God’s work revealed in the sign of Jonah.

Holy Week Reflections

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Jesus calls us friend today, knowing we will betray him tomorrow. If there is an order to salvation, this is it. Friendship and forgiveness precede confession and repentance. Until we see ourselves as loved by God, we will never know the true nature of our sin. Our sin is known after it has been thoroughly soaked in grace. Until then, we confess and repent by hints and guesses. This is why our salvation can never depend on our repentance, which is always a work in progress. Complete repentance will have to wait for that day when we see God face to face. As we receive the fullness of grace given, we come to know the true essence of God, neighbor, self, creation, and yes, even our sin.

Dear friends of Jesus, who will soon be enemies, we are forgiven—now—completely.

GOOD FRIDAY

“Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’” (Mark 15:37-39). Consider the mystery of the phrases: “who stood facing him” and “in this way.” What does it mean that the centurion stood facing Jesus on the cross? How did this affect what he saw? What does it mean that he saw the particular way in which Jesus breathed his last breath? How does this help the centurion proclaim that Jesus is God’s Son?

May we stand facing Jesus and see the peculiar way in which he breathed his last breath so that we, too, might declare the true nature of his identity—and ours.

HOLY SATURDAY

“The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). Spirit of God, hover in the chaos and darkness of this day and call forth life, we pray.

Life Breaks Forth

REALITY

Before the earthquake, the seminary and slum sat adjacent to one another in separate worlds. The professor showed me his once-beautiful home, now cracked and ruined. He then showed me the tent where he was living with other refugees from the slum. His daughter now plays with new friends from the tent city. Since the quake, a children's ministry class is being held among the tents, and a pastoral care course meets in small groups among the residents. I was reminded how the "earthquake" of Calvary in effect becomes the great equalizer on a spiritual level, crumbling old barriers and bridging the gulf between heaven and earth. Here in Haiti, in one corner at least, the devastating earthquake has served to break down social divides few had been willing to cross.

REFLECTION

Christ is risen!

Many things might be said in response: Impossible! Crazy. Merely a religious fantasy, a projection of our infantile desires, a myth, a hoax, wishful thinking, a tool of social control, an opiate for the masses.

Or is this the ground of all that is, the first fruits of Reality itself?

May life break forth and pierce our illusions with love today.

DISCERNMENT

Easter marks the transition to the fourth course of the meal—Given. Consider how you have been taken into God's love, blessed, and broken in that love, and now are given to the world. The Resurrection is the ground of all givenness because it marks the emergence of life from the dark passage of death. How are you seeing this emergence in your life? In your world?

ACTION

Give yourself as a gift this week. It might be a note, a phone call, a helping hand,

a thoughtfully prepared meal, or a simple work of art or craftsmanship. As you consider what and how to give, take care that it reflects what is breaking forth as new life in you. It's all the better if it connects deeply with new life you perceive in the recipient.

Communion Prayer

It is with desire I have desired to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer.

LUKE 22:15

GREETING

Peace be with you.

CENTERING PRAYER

Lord, we are hungry and thirsty for life.

ASSURANCE

God of all life everywhere, you have been the stranger among us, preparing this meal since the foundations of the world. You have declared this meal your eternal joy. It is the meal that reconciles all of creation. It is the never-ending meal, ever-extending to a hungry and hurting world. Here, at this meal, you have declared that there is enough for all and there is always room for all. It is the sign of your peace into which we now enter.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world; have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world; have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world; grant us peace.

You said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

CONFESSION

Jesus, we come to the table having tasted the reality of your goodness and the mystery of your abundant love. We also come having tasted the bitterness of our own sin and the sin of others. We are part of a love-starved world that craves that

which cannot satisfy. You've happily let go of all our sin long, long ago, and yet we drag it to the table with us, unsure of how to live without it. We come to the table tempted to stuff ourselves in fear or starve ourselves in shame. Lord, help us.

Forgive us for all the ways we diminish the meal you have provided; for all the ways we are ruled by the myth of scarcity; for all the ways we grumble at the table; for all the ways we guard against your mercy and withhold it from others; for all of our misplaced and displaced desires that have caused so much harm.

Heal us, O Lord.

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

“On the night that Jesus was betrayed [by his friends from below, and arrested by his other friends from above], he took bread, blessed it, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take and eat; this is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper, he took the cup, blessed it, and gave it for all to drink, and said, ‘This cup is the blood of the new covenant, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me.’” The Apostle Paul adds, “For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

PASCHAL MYSTERY

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

CONTEMPLATIONS

As the body of Christ in the world, we not only partake of the meal, we also become part of the meal of which we partake. The Eucharist inducts us into Reality and reveals its hidden pattern at work in our lives.

Taken. We are taken into the loving hands of God. Let us now feast on God’s love as the foundation of all life and transformation. All of creation is taken into the love from which it comes.

Blessed. In the loving hands of God, we are blessed. Let us now drink deeply of the Incarnation and creation in Christ as the blessing of God’s presence in the world.

Broken. We are broken in and through the love of God. Let us now taste God's own experience of suffering on the cross, and how that experience radically transforms death into life.

Given. As broken ones, we are given to a broken world. Let us now savor life inside of the resurrection and its gift to the world.

Spoken. All of life is spoken into existence through this meal. Let us now digest the living Word that speaks all of life into existence.

OUR LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who is in heaven, holy is your name. May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

BENEDICTION

“When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

Jesus, like the disciples who were blind to your presence until they dined with you in the resurrection, we too are blind to your presence until you dine with us. You are the stranger among us, revealed as the loving Host of the meal of our salvation. Open our eyes, Lord, to the stranger among us. We want to see and celebrate you at work in the world, creating, sustaining, and uniting all of creation in the meal of our salvation.

We pray all of this in the name of the Father who is for us, the Son who is with us, and the Spirit who unites us all in the never-ending dance of Love. Amen.

Go in peace.

Note: This prayer is suited for either individual or group prayer. Scripture Sources: Greeting (John 20:21), Assurance (John 1:29, 14:27), Confession (Isa. 55:1-2; Matt. 8:8), Words of Institution (1 Cor. 11:23-26), Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6-9-13), Benediction (Luke 24:30-31).

**SEE AND
CELEBRATE
GOOD NEWS
IN HARD PLACES**