

A close-up photograph of a weathered stone surface. The stone is dark brown and grey with some green moss or lichen. A prominent white rectangular mark, possibly a piece of tape or a stencil, is visible on the right side. In the lower-left area, there is a bright red stain, possibly from a liquid spill. The overall texture is rough and aged.

a word from below

Holy Week Devotional

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cover image: "Communion 2002"



MONDAY

Reflection by: Rev. Sarah Wiles
Artwork: "Mary Anoints His Feet" by Wayne Forte

Word

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

John 12:1-11

Made Flesh

It's Monday. Jesus has entered Jerusalem. It's gotten serious. We begin. We enter into this ancient story and rhythm with him.

But first, this happens. It's almost embarrassing to begin this week this way. It is not dignified. It is not reasonable. It's physical and intimate and profligate.

Judas was right. This was a waste. The Christian thing to do is to sell everything you have and give it to the poor. Or at least be more responsible than this. Judas may end up being the bad guy, but he's got a point.

But Jesus doesn't lift up Judas's reasonableness as the ideal. He lifts Mary, the one bent at his feet. People have come up with lots of explanations for what she's doing here, trying to make it not just an irrational, wasteful thing. Some say that she's prefiguring his sacrifice. Some say she was anointing him as Messiah. Others say she is preparing him for burial.

Those may all be true, but I don't think they're the point. I don't think Mary was trying to make a point. Sometimes beauty for beauty's sake is enough. Sometimes extravagance is necessary.

What Mary did was definitely extravagant. She poured almost a pint of perfume on him. Think of a

typical bottle of perfume. Then think about a carton of milk. That is too much perfume. It would have cost almost \$30,000. Any way you count it, it was too much. But Mary doesn't care. She doesn't care what is reasonable. She doesn't care what people think. She doesn't care about what's appropriate. She throws caution to the wind and pours it all out in love. Beauty for beauty's sake.

This goes against every well-behaved, hardworking, justice-seeking impulse we may have. Mary gives no evidence of working hard. She shirks her chores and lets her sister do the heavy lifting. When her brother dies, she's willing to make a complete scene, confronting Jesus in her grief. And she's willing to waste resources on pleasure rather than using them for those in need.

Surely she knows the cost of all this. Surely she sees the mob gathering around Jesus, and the storm looming over him. Surely she knows the risk of wild love. And yet she kneels.

And why not! After all, at every turn, Jesus has seen her just as she is, and he has welcomed and accepted that whole self. In his gaze, she has been transformed until at last she throws all caution and reason to the wind and pours it all out. Sometimes beauty for beauty's sake is the most important thing there is and the impending doom makes it all the more necessary.

When I was twenty-one, I had the opportunity to go to India and serve for two weeks in Mother Teresa's ministries. It was completely overwhelming. We spent our mornings at different sites of ministry, and our afternoons at Kaligat, Mother Teresa's first home for the dying, a hospice for indigent dying people. As unskilled volunteers, there was basically nothing we could do that was "useful." We spoon-fed women who were hungry. We brought water to those who were thirsty. We changed bedpans. But most of the time we were told to just massage sweet-scented lotion into their weary hands and feet. Often the women were non-responsive. Sometimes they were obviously in pain and our touch did nothing to relieve that. These women had lived hard lives, and it showed on their bodies. We'd rub the lotion over scars and scabs and dry skin. We'd work our way carefully around wounds that were open or festering. It was powerful and useless and the most beautiful thing imaginable.

Of course, it doesn't make sense for college students from the United States to spend thousands of dollars to fly halfway around the world to rub lotion into dying women's feet. It doesn't make sense for the Sisters of Charity to run their organization that way. Someone must spend thousands of dollars on lotion alone every year. It's wasteful. Irresponsible. And yet—there is something unspeakably beautiful about bringing people from wildly different worlds together over sweet lotion and dying feet.

The beauty of Mary's action is that it is both extravagant and human, just like the one at whose feet she kneels. This week will be intensely dehumanizing. But before that, before the violence, before the pain, this comes first. Beauty for beauty's sake. The Human One anointed.

Dwelling Among Us

As we begin this week, where is beauty poured out around you? Notice, are you guarded against it? How does Jesus' experience open us to receiving beauty, too?



TUESDAY

Reflection by: Rev. Sarah Wiles
Artwork: "God Plants First Seed" by Wayne Forte

Word

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

John 12:20-36

Made Flesh

It's Tuesday. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, and before everything else, he has been blessed by beauty for beauty's sake. He has received humanizing kindness before the dehumanization and violence that is to come. But the week is rolling on, ready or not.

Now people are starting to gather and pursue. They want to see. I wonder, what did they want to see? What did they expect to hear? What were they hoping for, longing for? I know I would not have been longing to hear what he actually said: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain... those who love their life lose it..."

I love my life. My middle school email address was lovnthislife@hotmail.com. I am deeply attached to my life, to this life. I don't think it's too much projection to believe that Jesus also loved life deeply. He was no life-denying ascetic. He feasted and partied, embraced and healed, and even gave new life to the dead.

Jesus loved life. And I love my life. But the truth is, I also love my false self. I am inordinately attached to all the ways that I shore up and protect my fragile ego. I am in love with my excuses, my defenses, my distractions. I gossip and lie and sow violence. At times maybe I grow weary of all that, but I don't let it go. Any honest accounting reveals that I'm not weary enough to die to it, even as that life—the life of the ego—gets in the way of my real life. It diminishes my joy, limits my depth of relationship, impoverishes my imagination.

One year at the Tacoma Preaching Peace table, we were talking about the beginning of lent,

comparing what we were giving up or taking on. There were all the usual suspects: giving up meat, sugar, alcohol, taking on practices of generosity, self-reflection, acts of kindness. It came around to one of the freest thinkers among us, and I will never forget what she said. “I’m giving up defensiveness.” Can you imagine? Of course, we can’t give up the self-protective instinct entirely, but letting God root out that need to defend ourselves and our actions and opinions at all costs? She was living through a particularly difficult time with the churches she served. Mean words were being said. Approval was hard to find. But for a season she was going to let Jesus soften her, lean into vulnerability, drop the defenses.

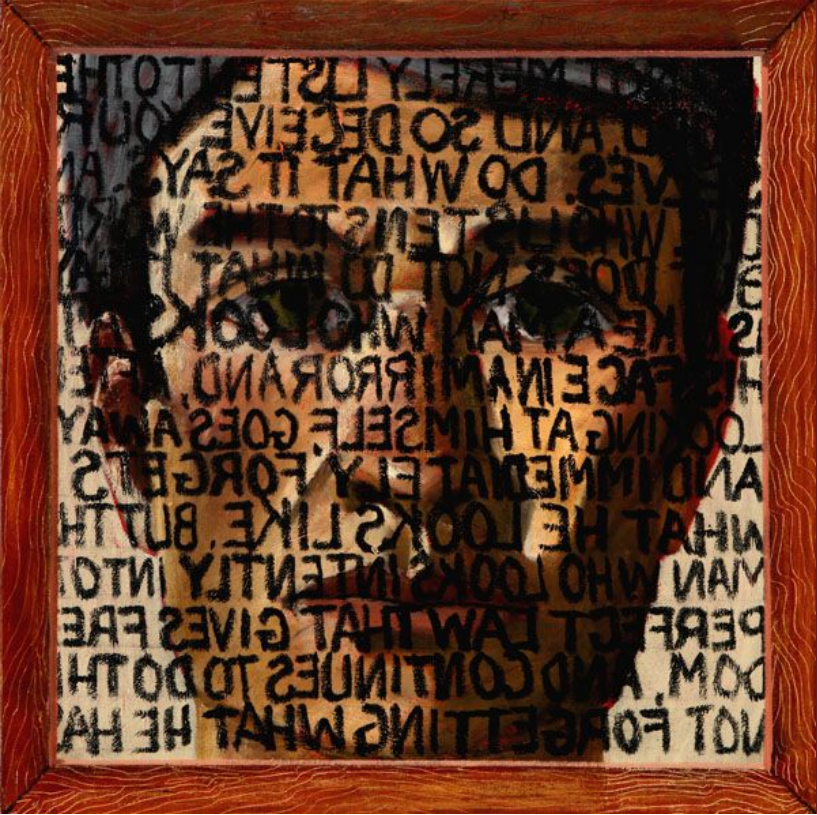
Imagine for a moment what it would be like to be completely and utterly unconcerned about defending our own reputations. Imagine how much energy that would free up for us to defend those who truly need defending. To imagine this is to know something of the utter freedom of God who can then invite us to let go, die to our false selves and live freely into all that is true.

I’ve never been bold enough to try such a fast, but I think this is what Jesus is inviting us into. Hating our lives is not about demeaning or denigrating the gift of life, the breath of the Holy Spirit that fills our lungs. It is not a word of further oppression to the already oppressed. It is not a word of shame to the ashamed. It is clear, Jesus’ intent in these paradoxical statements is to lead us to a deeper, freer life.

We may even need to die to the illusion that we can accomplish this ourselves. It is something Jesus does for us and in us. He opens a way to being truly human—one who dies and in dying receives life. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” There’s the word of grace. Our limitations can, through the transmutation of vulnerability, become abundance. This is not painless. But it is true and saving. Letting that which is false fall away, giving up what separates and pits one against another, is hard, often bitter. But the promise is not just that we’ll be a better version of ourselves all on our own. The promise is that in Christ’s work in our lives we’ll experience abundance! Much fruit! Through vulnerability, through emptying, we discover not just our own lives, but a rich community we walk with, a life that never dies.

Dwelling Among Us

What within you needs to die? What might be born in its place?



WEDNESDAY

Reflection by: Rev. Sarah Wiles

Artwork: "Man in the Mirror 2" by Wayne Forte

Word

"The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking."

John 13:21-32

Made Flesh

The week picks up speed and the mystery deepens. Jesus' words about death and life are taking on flesh with startling speed. In this reflection, we're taking Thursday night and breaking it into two pieces so that we can linger longer with the text. Today we are with Judas.

Judas—the object of endless speculation and malicious imagination. In the end, we only know two things for sure. Jesus called Judas to be his disciple, and Judas handed Jesus over. The gospels differ in the motivation. Some blame the money. In John, the devil makes him do it. It is easy to demonize Judas. Never mind the power of the council or the Romans, it's all Judas' fault. He is the embodiment of betrayal. The Sunday school lesson is easy: do not be a Judas. Though all the disciples deny and abandon, Judas is the scapegoat.

And there's where we should be careful. When anyone among us becomes the sole embodiment of what is less than good, we've gotten off track. It's such an attractive, appealing temptation. If it's all their fault, then it can't be ours. We can slide right by the verse at the beginning. When Jesus had just declared that one of them would betray him, "the disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking." They didn't know. It could have been any one of them. Andrew. James. John. Peter. The beloved disciple—whoever that may have been. Who is it? Who will it be? For a minute did everyone's breath catch? What am I about to do?

Whatever else “Satan entered into him” might mean, it at least means that it really could have been any one of them. It wasn’t that Judas himself, in his right mind, was especially evil.

This is the tragedy we all have to reckon with. It could have been us. It still could be. And, of course, is.

I really do not want this to be true. It feels much safer to divide everyone up into good people and bad and locate myself securely on the side of the good. My initial response to the reality that it could be any one of us, it could be me, is overwhelming anxiety. What am I about to do? Scapegoating is so much safer, so much more secure.

I am perhaps most prone to this in my closest relationships. I can’t bear that a fight, a disappointment, a betrayal might be my fault. It must be theirs. I am only safe if I cast all the blame on someone else.

Of course, this is precisely what Jesus came to disrupt. As the week wears on, he will enter as deeply into this mystery of death and scapegoating as it is possible to go. But we’re not there yet. We’re living in the in-between time. The invitation here and now is to wrestle with our own capacity for harm—personally, socially, structurally. Not cast it off on others. For once, not minimize or explain away. A pure reckoning with our ability to betray what is most dear to us.

This is deep work. It is only possible with a deep trust in the grace and unending love of Christ—a love that dissolves all rivalry and disarms all scapegoating. As we will see tomorrow, Jesus washed Judas’ feet, too. He sat at the table with him. He broke bread with him. And, I am convinced, as the Forgiving Victim, the words of peace and forgiveness that he breathed in resurrection were spoken for Judas, too.

Dwelling Among Us

Find a quiet place today to sit in a spirit of honest examination, not out of shame, but out of deep reliance on the mercy of God.



MAUNDY THURSDAY

Reflection by: Rev. Sarah Wiles
Artwork: "Not Only My Feet" by Wayne Forte

Word

"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself."

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Made Flesh

It's Thursday. We have followed Jesus this far. He has been anointed with beauty, spoken of death, and his betrayal has begun. Tonight, he kneels and washes his friends' feet—all of them, yes, including Judas.

I have to confess I'm pretty allergic to asking for help. I will struggle with a jar lid for a full five minutes before handing it over, and even then, it's reluctantly. I will arrive home, arms overloaded with work bag, lunch box, coffee mug, groceries, mail; it'll be slipping out of my hands, falling behind me in a little trail. But will I let someone else carry it? No. No, I will not. The same with too much work or emotional baggage. Will I let someone else carry it? No. No, I will not.

I relate to Peter. I don't need any help washing my feet! I'll do it myself, or I'll just have dirty feet. That's fine. But no way are you kneeling down and doing it for me, thank you very much. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Jesus, why do you have to be so difficult? I like my illusions of self-sufficiency and independence. I'm rather attached to them. But Jesus, as he so often does, interrupts my illusions and attachments, invites me into another way of being.

To shift gears for just a minute, too often I have heard this passage not just as a call, but a demand for service. It is used to glorify those who already have too much to do. It is used to further oppress those who already pour out their lives in service. Jesus gave it all. So should you. If you don't, then you'd better feel guilty, because Jesus is all about endless sacrifice and you should be, too.

But this year, for the first time, I noticed the verse before the one where Jesus actually kneels. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God..." That changes things. Jesus is not some superhero strongman who can give and give and give and give and give and never be diminished. He is the beloved of God. His source is endless love. His ultimate home is endless love. And he knows it.

He bends down not out of a steadily emptying fund of service, but out of an endlessly refilling stream of life. He knows he is loved down in his bones. And, I believe, he needed that. To be who he was, what he was, he needed not just the fact of being loved, but the intimate experience of it. He is not independent. He is dependent on love given and poured out for him.

So, why do I imagine that I should, or even can, be self-sufficient? If Jesus needed to experience love, what makes me think I'm somehow more independent than he is?

We need to wash others' feet. Yes. We have work to do. Yes. But we cannot do it until we are rooted down to the very core of our being in our own belovedness. We come from endless love, and we are going to endless love. And, even better, God not only loves us, but likes us. Can we soften into that? Can we let down our guard and allow others to be as Christ to us and let them help and serve us? Can we see Christ kneeling at our feet, taking one gently in his hands, doing for us what we're perfectly capable of doing for ourselves, washing us, and gazing at us in love? Do we dare?

Dwelling Among Us

Ask for help today. Let someone else embody the love of God for you and meditate on your dependence on that love.



GOOD FRIDAY

Reflection by: Rev. Sarah Wiles
Artwork: "Deposition Reredo #1" by Wayne Forte

Word

"There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them... Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."

John 18:1-19:42

Made Flesh

War rages. Imperial powers invade and occupy other countries. 10.35 million people are imprisoned around the world. 884 million people do not have access to safe drinking water.

Jesus still thirsts. Jesus is still imprisoned. Jesus still resides in occupied territory. This is a story we need today as desperately as we needed it two thousand years ago.

It could be a story of despair—yet another person of color, guilty of no sin, lynched by a mob. And it is that. But that is not all it is. This is a story to reflect on year after year, plumbing the depths, finding new meaning, new life in the midst of the dying. For it is God's very self that hangs dying on that cross—out of love for us, in solidarity with us.

I think part of the difficulty of the cross is that there is nothing to do in the face of it. It is something that happens to us. God is accomplishing all that is to be done. Even then, part of the horror is that it is not even something Jesus is actively doing. It is happening to him. He is the victim. What he does do is accept all that happens. The gospels each add a layer. He forgives from the cross. He cries out in abandonment from the cross. He thirsts from the cross. In all, he dies. We cannot save him;

he saves us—in his incarnation and resurrection, yes, but also here, in his dying.

In the face of suffering and tragedy, I so desperately want to do something. I want to rush to the bedside, say the prayers, send the donations, protest, and advocate. And all of that is right and good. But it is not at the heart of what we really need to do in the presence of death in all its manifold forms. Because of the cross, because it is Christ dying each and every time one of us dies or suffers, our primary task is simply to bear witness, to undergo what Christ is doing, to let it happen to us, too.

We bear witness, suffer alongside, join Christ in the dying, like Mary his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene did. We allow what happened to Christ to happen within us, as well. We do not fight the many dyings to self that precede our physical death. We do not give in to the impulse to enter into rivalry, sacrifice, and violence. Instead, we stand there, falling silent, simply refusing to turn away, to be in any other place or time.

It is almost unbearably simple. And, through logic that is almost beyond us, it saves us. When we are willing to undergo what Christ does for us on the cross, we are set free. Paradoxically, in the face of fear and suffering, we find there is nothing to fear, not really. And so, we can bring our whole selves and the whole world to the foot of the cross. We bring all our shame, all our shortcoming, all our sin, all our suffering, and we lay it down, let it die at the feet of Jesus.

Dwelling Among Us

Where is Christ crucified today? In our world? In yourself? Today, like the women, bear witness to that dying.



HOLY SATURDAY

Reflection by: Rev. Sarah Wiles
Artwork: "Prayer #1" by Wayne Forte

Word

"After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one... asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus... Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weight about a hundred pounds."

John 19:38-42

Made Flesh

Friday night and Saturday are perhaps the strangest time of this strange, holy week. It is the time that all falls silent. There is nothing to do but wait. And it is not a waiting for new life. No one guessed what was to come. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus see to the burial, tending to Jesus' mangled body with mercy.

I am captivated by these two disciples.

John tells us Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple, and he was afraid. Matthew tells us he was rich. Mark and Luke tell us he was a member of the Sanhedrin—the council that had tried Jesus just the night before. Despite all this, every gospel tells us he was good.

It's the detail about being on the council that gets me. Mark says the whole council agreed unanimously that Jesus should be executed. Was Joseph there? Did he vote for Jesus' death? Maybe he stayed home, let it play out the way he knew it would. Or maybe he was there, but he was afraid, so he stayed quiet. Maybe he was so afraid, or so conflicted, that he voted yes when he meant no. Whatever happened, he was part of it. But then, at Jesus' death, Joseph used every bit of

his power and privilege to bury Jesus with honor.

And Nicodemus, well, he was a slow disciple. He came to Jesus by night, John reminds us. He seemed embarrassed to be seeking Jesus out, uncertain and scared. Later, when Jesus has been teaching and offending people, so much so that the authorities wanted to arrest him, Nicodemus intervened. He, too, was part of the Sanhedrin. We can wonder the same things about his presence or absence on the night of Jesus' trial. But then, finally, at Jesus' death, Nicodemus comes bringing his whole self and all his resources. It took him some time, but he got there.

Joseph was scared, and Nicodemus was slow. But something—and we might as well call it grace—worked on them over time. Their fear, their hesitation, did not get the last word. Grace gave them the courage, the conviction, to do the next right thing despite what they had done or left undone before.

I find this immensely difficult. I am much more likely to be paralyzed by guilt, to wallow in shame. When I have done wrong, it takes tremendous force of will for me to repent and return. I wonder if that's because I am trying to do it myself, rather than allowing grace to do its slow, silent work within me.

We do not know how it happened for Joseph and Nicodemus, but by the strange, tender mercy of Christ, they were transformed. On this night and day of silence and stillness, they were able to loosen their hold on their power, privilege, fear, and hesitation, and pour out their very selves in love and service. I like to think they relaxed into God's love which had been there all along—the love which turns our hearts from rivalry and violence to the forgiveness and peace of Jesus.

Then all falls silent. Now all there is to do is wait, watch, keep vigil.

Dwelling Among Us

Can you find time and space to be silent today? In the stillness and waiting, trust that God's mercy is working within you.



EASTER SUNDAY

Reflection by: Rev. Sarah Wiles
Artwork: "Empty Tomb Resurrection" by Wayne Forte

Word

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb."

John 20:1-18

Made Flesh

Early in the morning, on the first day, God said let there be light. And there was light. And it was good. Early in the morning, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. It didn't seem good, though. There was no light. All was dark. Mary came to grieve. She came to a tomb, a place of death.

And Mary found the stone had been rolled away. The stone, that heavy, immovable boundary between the garden of the living, and the tomb of the dead—had been rolled away.

The world has never been the same. Mary was never the same. Did she know that? As she ran, heart pounding, breathless, to tell the others, did she know that it was a day like that first day, when God created not just light, but morning?

The disciples race back with her. Had the sun begun to rise by then? Is that why they stuck their heads in where Mary hadn't dared? Something had happened. He was gone. Where death and decay were supposed to be there was only absence.

The other two leave. Mary stays to weep. We know how the story ends, but she only knows that the

last vestige of the one she has learned from, followed, and believed in has disappeared. All that is left is for her to weep, as Jesus once wept at a grave.

And then, still early, on that morning, the first day of the week, before the dew had burned off the grass, Jesus comes to her. The one who was dead, the one who had been defeated, the one who was gone—this Jesus, comes to her.

But she does not know him. Did he look different? Did tears cloud her vision? She is so very brokenhearted. And then, in that moment of deepest darkness, as the dawn broke, he called her name: Mary. And she turned and knew him.

This is still how it happens. This is how we meet Jesus. Our name is called.

It's not a matter of having all the facts laid out in front of us. It's not a matter of reading the evidence correctly, or praying the right prayers, of being in the right place, or doing the right thing.

No. It comes early in the morning, or sometimes very late at night, on the first day of the week—whether it's a Tuesday or a Friday or a Sunday, when new life breaks in, it's always the first day of the week. Often it comes while we are a mess, hair askew, face streaked with tears, standing in the midst of brokenness, totally lost.

This is how Jesus comes to us: he calls our name. He is our shepherd. He knows your name, just as he knew Mary's. And not just our names, but our very selves—inside and out, secrets and shames, the contours of our scars and the wounds that have never healed, our deepest hopes and our fears, the darkness and the light that lives within—all of it he knows and loves.

And he comes to us, when we are trapped by death, trapped by all that chokes out life, trapped by a stone that stands between us and the garden of life. He comes to us, walks with us, and calls us by name.

In a still small voice, in the voice of a friend or stranger, in the songs of choirs like angels, or the raucous noise of a party, in the glory of God's good green earth, in every language and every tongue, he comes to us and calls us by name—the way he called out, that first morning, very early, on the first day of the week, Mary! And we turn and see: he is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Dwelling Among Us

Jesus still calls our name. How do you hear him today? What new word of life is being spoken to you?

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