



A Lenten Devotional

Beginning the Journey

Welcome to the wilderness! Lent is a holy season that is set apart for Christians as special, but often many people misunderstand this season. It is not a time to dwell on our own sinfulness, or make our lives more difficult by “giving things up” or practicing penitence. And it’s not a time to prove our worth to God or make sure we’re “good enough” by the time Easter rolls around. Lent is a season of journeys.

In the church, we remember and reflect upon the journey toward Holy Week during this time of year. But it is also a season to reflect upon our own personal journeys, where they have brought us, and where God might be leading us as we move forward.

These are the questions for us to ponder this Lent:

Where is God leading *you* on your personal and spiritual journey?

Where is God leading *us* – as a congregation?

During this holy time of year, we at St. Paul’s are using this time as an opportunity to hear God’s voice among us – to listen to each other, to close our mouths and open our ears, to hear how God might be already whispering the next chapter of our lives and our story to us.

Lent is a season for listening.

I hope you’ll join me on the journey.

Pastor Brad +

Into the Unknown: Using this Devotional

There are several ways that you can be a part of our journey at St. Paul's this Lent. Each week in worship – the entire month of March – we will be hearing and exploring stories from the Israelite's journey through the wilderness as they searched for the Promised Land. This was *the* foundational journey for the Israelites, and in so many ways their identity as a people and a nation was forged by wilderness. Many have argued that the entire foundation of the holy scriptures, and therefore both the Jewish and Christian faiths, was forged in the wilderness experience.

This devotional is meant to be used daily, or at least reviewed weekly. Each week throughout Lent the scriptures used in this devotional build upon each other, telling the story of a particular season or chapter of the Israelite's journey. Because of this, each week should be seen as a single unit, telling the story that will be explored more deeply in worship that Sunday.

While we listen, explore, and learn from these foundational stories each Sunday in worship, this book will provide tools for you to continue the journey each week throughout this holy time of year. This will work in several different ways, depending on your preference – and where you are in *your* spiritual journey.

Here are some of the ways to use this devotional:

- 1) As a cross+generational family or small group daily devotional – simply gather with one or more of the people closest to you at a set time each day, and open the book! Each day has clear, simple instructions for you to follow. This is the way this tool is primarily designed to be used, and how you will get the most out of it.

2) As a weekly small group devotional. We will be using this resource as the foundation for our Wednesday evening Lenten gatherings throughout Lent. We will also be launching several small groups you can sign up for if you prefer to do your Lenten devotion at a different time, or in a more intimate setting. Sign ups for small groups will be sent out electronically with our weekly emails.

3) As a personal daily devotional. Listening is at the heart of both the season and our focus on wilderness. Listening for what God is saying to you on your own journey is a powerful way to engage in the Lenten journey. If using the devotional this way, be sure to spend more time listening than reading – silence and pausing from the busyness of life is central to the Lenten experience. As you read each passage, practice dwelling in the Word – asking yourself these questions:

What is God saying to me in this passage?

What lands on my heart as I read?

How might God be speaking to my own life, struggles, and joys in this text?

We hope you will journey with us. Just as the Israelites forged their identity in the experience of wilderness, we at St. Paul's are in a season where we are forging the identity of our congregation that will shape our future together. Maybe you are in a similar place in your own journey. Regardless, God has big things in store for us as we move forward – if only we have ears to listen.

So come with us, it's time to go on a journey!

The Faith 5 Model:

Every Week in Church, and Every Night in Every Home

The *Faith 5* is a simple, profound, and powerful tool for small group and family devotions developed by well-known speaker, resource creator, and all-around church guru Rev. Dr. Rich Melheim. It is a simple faith practice rooted in ancient tradition, contemporary brain science, and the latest in educational theory. This makes it a powerful framework that deeply connects people to God and one another, connects church to home, and connects faith to daily life. In other words, it works.

Faith 5 is the foundation of this devotional journey, and a tool that I hope you will find enriching of your own Lenten journey into the unknown.

Here's how it works:

STEP 1: SHARE your highs and lows

STEP 2: READ a Bible verse or story

STEP 3: TALK about how the Bible reading relates to your highs and lows

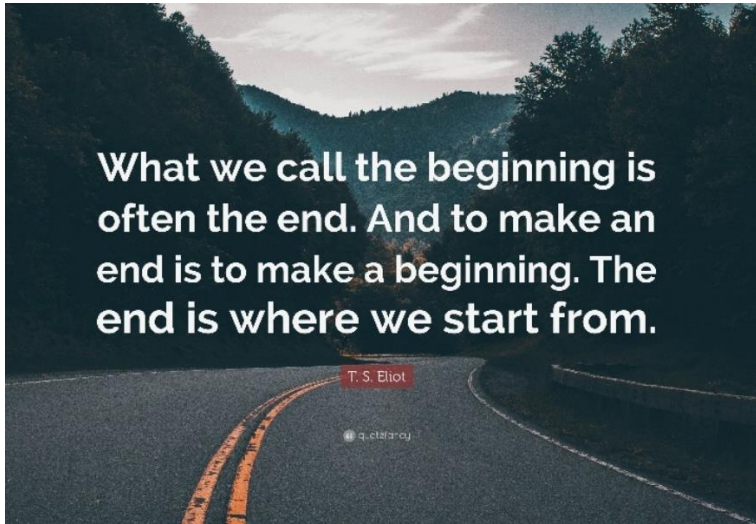
STEP 4: PRAY for one another's highs and lows

STEP 5: BLESS one another

This practice works best when there is regularity and continuity to the process. If you and your family or small group commit to regular daily or weekly use of this process, I promise that you *will* hear God's voice speaking to you this Lent – possibly from the most unlikely of places.

So let's get to it!

Ash Wednesday: The End is Where we Start From



T.S. Eliot, the famous author and poet, once famously wrote, *“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”*

This powerful statement is something that time and maturity often teach us in a poignant way. Every ending is also a beginning. And every beginning is also – by necessity – an ending of one kind or another. On Ash Wednesday we begin Lent with a statement of the obvious, *“This too shall pass.”*

It is impossible to begin a meaningful spiritual conversation (or really a meaningful conversation at all) without first confronting the great lie of our society. Our lives are temporary. One day, we will die. And we name this on Ash Wednesday when we receive the ashy mark of the cross upon our foreheads, and hear these words directed to us, *“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*

The end is where we start from – in other words, as we prepare to enter the wilderness where we will encounter God, we better be ready for change. For risk. For growth.

Starting Lent with open eyes is terrifying, but it is also liberating. By admitting that our journeys have an end – that they do not just continue on forever – we name that our lives have a trajectory, a course, and a direction. Even more important, the fact that our lives don't just go on forever imbues each moment and step of our journeys with infinite meaning. Our choices matter. Our relationships matter. The way we live, how we use our time, and the things we prioritize *matter*. Because we can't do it all. Each of us has only so many years, hours, minutes, and seconds to spend in our lifetimes. *And how we use them matters.*

This is the essence of how community, relationships, and family work. *Your story* is bigger than just you. *Your life* means more than just what you manage to accomplish in the few years you have on this earth. You are part of a bigger story – a longer journey – and how we choose to live shapes not just ourselves, but *our story* as a community. *St. Paul's* story. *God's* story.

And that is where we start from.

Wednesday, February 26: Holy Dust

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Genesis 1:4-7 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Thursday, February 27: Holy Ground

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Genesis 13:14-18 The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you. So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the Lord. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Friday, February 28: Holy Fire

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 3:1-6 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Saturday, February 29: Holy Call

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 3:7-12 The Lord said to Moses, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you.”

The Word of the Lord.

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

The First Sunday in Lent: The Call of the Wild



Wilderness means different things to different people. Some people love the wilderness – the adventure, possibility, and excitement that it holds. Others cringe at the very prospect of leaving the well-worn path behind – and stepping into the uncertainly, danger, and challenges that the wilderness can bring. Wilderness is the exact *opposite* of what some people are looking for, thank you very much. But one thing is undeniable about the wilderness – while we are in it, ***we are not in control.***

This is what is both thrilling – and terrifying – about the wilderness. We can do our very best to prepare: we can think of all the possible contingencies, what the weather might bring, and how the mountains, rivers, hills and valleys may be navigated. But the one thing we can never do is know what will happen once we get out there. When we step off of

the known and certain path and enter the wild, we step out of our own control – and into the unknown.

This is no doubt why *wilderness* is so often, and so universally, used as the location of God’s most powerful action in scripture. When we enter the wild, we not only surrender control, we also open ourselves up to possibilities we never considered or expected. It is scary. It is daunting. It can be paralyzing.

It is also where God is found.

It’s no coincidence that it is in the wild where God has the most intimate and ongoing relationships with his holy people throughout scripture. Or why it is there – in the wilderness – that Satan tempts Jesus. It is the wilderness where Jesus goes to pray, reflect, re-energize, and sometimes wrestle with God. The context matches the content. For it is only when we begin to surrender control that we are able to hear God’s voice, embrace God’s possibilities, and open ourselves up to something new.

It is in the wild that we realize that it is truly God – and not ourselves – who is in control.

And that’s why – if we listen – it is where we can begin to hear God.

Monday, March 2: Time to Go!

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 12:31-34 During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me.” The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. “For otherwise,” they said, “we will all die!” So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Tuesday, March 3: A Path Provided

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 13:17-18, 21-22 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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Wednesday, March 4: No Way Back

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 14:21-23, 27, 29 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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Thursday, March 5: A Promise Made

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 19:1-5 On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then above all the nations of the world you will be blessed’.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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Friday, March 6: A Covenant Forged

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 19:6-9 [Then God said to Moses on Sinai,] “Though the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” So Moses went and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, “We will do everything the Lord has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.” Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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Saturday, March 7: God on the Mountaintop

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 19:16-20 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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The Second Sunday in Lent: Mountaintop Moments



All of us have heard of, and likely have had, mountaintop moments in our lives. Mountaintop moments are those times when we suddenly see the world more clearly, things we had been wrestling with suddenly make sense, or we get a glimpse of life that somehow makes the pieces finally click into place a little more clearly. Often these moments are described in spiritual or even religious language – those fleeting moments when we experience the power, love, and grace of God in a way difficult to capture with words.

Often a mountaintop moment comes when we are away from the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives, and open to seeing things in a new or different way than we usually might. Sometimes they come when we are searching for clarity and purpose, but other times they come seemingly out of nowhere, like a strike of lightning on a cloudless day. But they are almost always something that happens only when

we are ready for them – when we have stepped off the comfortable, known path of the everyday and into the uncertain, exciting terrain of the unknown. Whether it is a short hike to a literal mountaintop, a quiet afternoon sitting on a beach watching the sun glitter off the water, or a hard-won moment of clarity after a long journey to a remote location – these moments are powerful, and some of our biggest decisions or insights in life can come from these few solitary moments.

Mountaintop moments matter, and they are where we encounter God.

But we can't climb to the mountaintop until we are ready to let go of the things that keep us at base camp. Until we truly let go and open ourselves up to the possibility of the unknown, God can't break in.

God speaks to us. But only when we are ready.

When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

How are you stepping off the map and into the wilderness this Lenten Season? How are you opening yourself up to the surprising and unpredictable movement of the Spirit in your life and our church? How are you planting yourself at the foot of the mountain, letting go of your hesitation, and ascending towards the unknown future and unknowable adventures God has in store for you?

Are you ready to step into the unknown?

Are you ready to hear God?

Monday, March 9: God Speaks to Moses

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9 [On the mountaintop] God spoke all these words to Moses: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Tuesday, March 10: Wisdom from On High

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 20:12-18 [On the mountaintop, God continued to speak to Moses] “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” And when the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other’s highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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Wednesday, March 11: Straying from the Path

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 32:1-4 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.” Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

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Thursday, March 12: Mistakes were Made

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 32:5-8b Aaron built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.” So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Friday, March 13: Divine Give and Take

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 32:7-11 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” But Moses sought the favor of the Lord, saying, “Lord, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand?” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Saturday, March 14: God Changes His Mind?

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Exodus 32:11-14 Moses continued to seek the favor of the Lord, saying, “Lord, why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham and Isaac, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and give them all this land, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

The Third Sunday in Lent: Thorns and Roses



When I was growing up, I was actively involved in my local Boy Scout Troop – Troop 80 in the tiny town of Reeders, Pennsylvania. (Don't bother looking it up, you'll never find it on a map!) And one of the things our Scoutmaster would always do after every campout, backpacking trek, or other adventure was gather us all together at our next troop meeting and invite us to share *Thorns and Roses*.

Thorns and Roses was really just an opportunity to share the highs and lows from our adventures – to swap stories, remember embarrassing moments, and complain about random disappointments. But more than anything, it was a time when we were able to grow closer as a group. We had all been there – all gone through the same experience. But to *remember* the story – to share the highs and lows and process it all as a group – somehow took our journeys to the next level. It was no longer just a trip we had gone on – it became a *story that we shared*.

Every journey has highs and lows along the way, failures and successes, triumphs and disappointments. Sometimes journeys can seem all too similar to our lives: like a series of disconnected happenings, one after another, just random and pointless and strange. Particularly when times are tough it is easy to see our journeys, and our lives, this way.

But our lives – and our journeys – are *not* just a disconnected series of events. Our experiences shape us. Our journeys make us who we are. And it is our *stories* – the ups and downs along the way, the thorns and roses, joys and failures – that make us *who we are*.

A story with no hardship, no adversity – where the protagonist never stumbles along the way – is not a very interesting story. We are shaped not just by our high points, by the times everything went right and we just kept on succeeding, but also by our failures. The Israelites journey had hills and valleys, mountaintop moments and golden calves. And so do ours. It is not just the mountaintop moments, but the failed projects, abandoned endeavors, and aborted initiatives that make us who we are. The golden calf was just as important to Israel's journey as Moses on the mountaintop. Just in different ways.

As you walk *your* journey this Lent, remember that life is filled with thorns and roses, mountaintops and valleys. And it is precisely in our failures – our thwarted plans, our biggest failures, our greatest disappointments – that we begin to discover *who we really are*.

Monday, March 16: The Journey's Beginnings

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 29:1-4 These are the terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb. Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them: Your eyes have seen all that the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those signs and great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Tuesday, March 17: Reminder of the Journey

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 29:5-9 The Lord says, “During the forty years that I led you through the wilderness, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet. You ate no bread and drank no wine or other fermented drink. I did this so that you might know that I am the Lord your God. When you reached this place, Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of Bashan came out to fight against us, but we defeated them. We took their land and gave it as an inheritance to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh. Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do. **The Word of the Lord.**”

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Wednesday, March 18: Renewal of the Promise

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 29:10, 12-15 All of you are standing today in the presence of the Lord your God – your leaders and elders, and all the people of Israel. You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Thursday, March 19: A People Formed

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 30:1-4 When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come and you take them wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Friday, March 20: An Identity Solidified

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 30:6-10 The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. Then the Lord your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The Lord will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your ancestors, if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Saturday, March 21: The Legacy of Wilderness

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

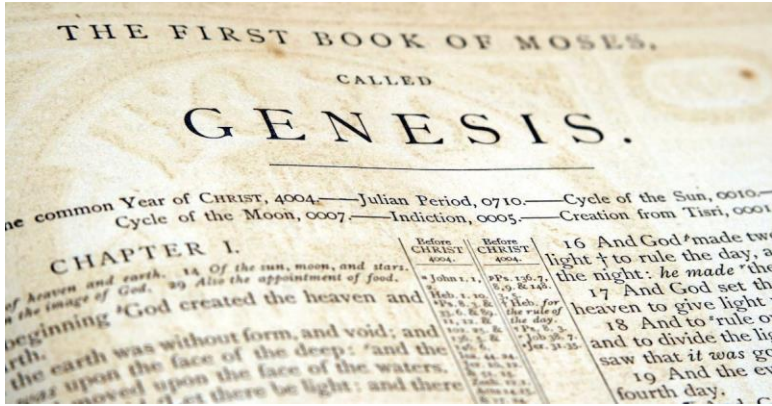
Deuteronomy 30:11-16a Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

The Fourth Sunday in Lent: A Journey's Ending, an Identity Forged



Identity is shaped by story. And the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and where we come from matter. They shape our whole perspective of who we are, where we come from, and what is important in our lives. It is often only by sitting down and reflecting on our journeys, by *retelling the story* and remembering the peaks and valleys, thorns and roses, along the way that we come to see ourselves as a part of something bigger than ourselves.

And we are – each of us – part of a bigger story. Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, our story didn't begin with us. There are generations who have come before us, lost tales of our family's own struggle and survival, success and failure, triumphs and disappointments. The modern idea that we are all the captains of our own destiny – existing as individuals detached from those who have come before us or come after us – is just a bunch of phooey. As soon as you begin to pull at its thread, the modern individualist lie is exposed for what it really is – the most dangerous kind of make-believe. As always, the truth is much more complex – and far more interesting.

The poet John Donne once famously wrote, “*No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*” Each of us are far more connected to one another than we care to admit. And as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness, something incredible began to happen. They were gradually transformed from a stiff-necked and disparate group of former slaves into God’s holy people. This transformation took struggle and hardship, growth and pain – but by the time the Israelites prepared to leave the wilderness they were simply not the same people they were when they started. They had changed. They had grown. They had been made into something *new*.

The book of Deuteronomy makes clear that what was happening as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness was about more than just survival, or even discovering God’s will. When the Israelites neared the end of their journey, they reflected back on where they had come from, and the ways they had been shaped and changed along the way. They are no longer just former slaves – they are now also survivors tempered by forty years of walking with God.

Where they were once uncertain, they are now people of faith. Where they were once scattered, they are now unified. Where they were once individuals with no story, they are now a family with a shared story.

They have *become* God’s holy people.

Monday, March 23: Moses Speaks to Israel

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 31:1-5 Then Moses went out and spoke these words to all Israel: “I am now a hundred and twenty years old and no longer able to lead you. The Lord has said to me, ‘You shall not cross the Jordan.’ The Lord himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land. Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the Lord said. And the Lord will do to them what he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom he destroyed along with their land. The Lord will deliver them to you, and you must do to them all that I have commanded you.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Tuesday, March 24: Do Not be Afraid

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 31:6-8 [And Moses said to Israel,] “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of [the nations ahead of you], for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Wednesday, March 25: Never Forget

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 31:10-13 Then Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Thursday, March 26: A Vision of the Future

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 34:1-4 Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land—from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the Lord said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Friday, March 27: A Legend's Passing

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 34:5-9 And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over. Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Saturday, March 28: The Journey's End

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 34:5, 10-12 [And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said.] Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt – to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

The Fifth Sunday in Lent: Prep for Re-Entry



“It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Coming down from the mountaintop is hard. I know that for me personally, it is always challenging coming back to reality after a vacation, a camping trip, or some particularly meaningful journey. Especially if I feel I have been impacted, shaped, or somehow changed along the way. I wonder if I will be able to carry my new hard-won wisdom with me. I fight to maintain the insight and clarity I had in that one, brief moment on the mountaintop. Sometimes I try to cling to the fleeting memories of it for as long as possible – trying to mentally re-create the mood, the moment, the lighting strike of clarity. It almost always ends in failure.

That's the thing about journeys. They end. And when they do, often we are left as the living testaments to the journey. The journey is left behind – but the work, the growth, the change that the journey has wrought in us lives on.

The hard part about this is that some journeys we can never repeat. The Israelites as a nation *were never again* as close to God as they were during those first forty years of arduous, intimate relationship in the wilderness. Although their story, and their identity, continued to unfold – they would always remember their days of walking with God in the wilderness. Their forty-year road trip with God formed the foundation of their identity, their understanding of themselves, and how they understood their own story.

The hardest part about all our journeys is that eventually each chapter closes. Sooner or later, all that is left of them is the impact they made on *us*, and how we carry that journey in us as we move forward. The most important question at the end of any journey is not how many photos we took or how well we tanned – but what do we carry with us when it is over? What work did the journey do in us, that we can now carry forward in a new or different way? As *our* Lenten journey winds down and we begin to prepare for re-entry into the world, *ask yourself...*

How am I *different now* than when I began this journey?

Monday, March 30: Remember the Journey

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 8:1-3 The Lord said to Israel, “Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase, and enter the land the Lord promised to your ancestors. Remember how the Lord led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Tuesday, March 31: Remember the Lord

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Deuteronomy 8:14-18 Do not forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Wednesday, April 1: A Path in the Wilderness

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Isaiah 40:1-5 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Thursday, April 2: Tempted in the Wilderness

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Matthew 4:1, 3-4, 8-10 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Friday, April 3: Hosanna in the Highest!

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Matthew 21:6-11 The disciples went and brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Saturday, April 4: The Outrage Begins

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Matthew 21:12-15 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.” The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Palm Sunday: Remembrance as Peaceful Resistance



When Jesus rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover, he wasn't just making another stop on his journey. For years, Jesus had bounced from town to town, healing and teaching at every turn. But when he turns his face toward Jerusalem, he knows another chapter is beginning. He even says to his disciples as they set out for Jerusalem, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death" (Matt 20:18). But there is more going on here.

To understand this, we need to set the scene. Jesus enters Jerusalem just as the Passover festival is beginning, when all Jerusalem swells with travelers and pilgrims from across Israel. They are gathering *to remember* the Passover, one of the most formative experiences of their history – the story of God's mighty arm freeing them from slavery and launching them on the wilderness journey that would forge their identity as a nation. It is precisely as all Jerusalem gathers to remember this radical and powerful liberation from Pharaoh that Jesus enters the city.

Even as Jerusalem is preparing to celebrate and remember this great story of liberation from empire, another tyrant – the Roman Empire – holds the city, and the nation, under its iron grip. *At the very same time* that Jesus is riding into town, Pontius Pilate is entering the city across town with thousands of Roman soldiers. It is a preplanned show of force – a military parade – so that the people of Israel don't get any funny ideas about freedom during the Passover.

By comparison, Jesus "triumphal procession" seems silly, petty even, as this alleged *messiah* enters town on a donkey, attended only by the poor masses too unimportant or forgotten to attend the *real* parade on the other side of town. When Jesus enters Jerusalem – at this *specific time and place* – he is saying something very intentional about power and politics, but even more importantly, about God. Jesus' entry on Palm Sunday is a choreographed demonstration of peaceful resistance, a deliberate statement to the people of Jerusalem: "God has not forgotten you. *Now remember – remember who you are and where you come from.*"

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and his ministry throughout Holy Week, are deeply rooted in this call to remembrance. He says, through his words and deeds – the powerful and wealthy in the world may tell you one story of who you are. But don't believe them. Never forget. Never forget where you come from.

For them – and for us – the story of where we come from is one of liberation and wilderness. And it is in this call to *remember* that Holy Week begins.

Monday, April 6: You Will Know Love by This

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

John 13:1, 3-5 It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so while they were sharing the Passover meal, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Tuesday, April 7: Famous Last Words

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Luke 22:14-20 When the hour came, Jesus reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, all of you.” And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise, the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Wednesday, April 8: Arrested & Imprisoned

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

John 18:1-5 When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it. Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place and came to the garden guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Thursday, April 9: Beaten, Broken, Betrayed

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

John 19:1-6 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.” When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Friday, April 10: A Journey Ended

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

Mark 15:22, 24-25, 33, 37-38 They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). And there they crucified him. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: ‘The King of the Jews.’ At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, “NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”*

Saturday, April 11: A Journey Ended?

SHARE – *Share your Highs and Lows from the day, week, or since you last met. Don't comment – but listen – to what others have to share. Often God is speaking most powerfully to us through the words of others.*

READ – *Read the following passage together.*

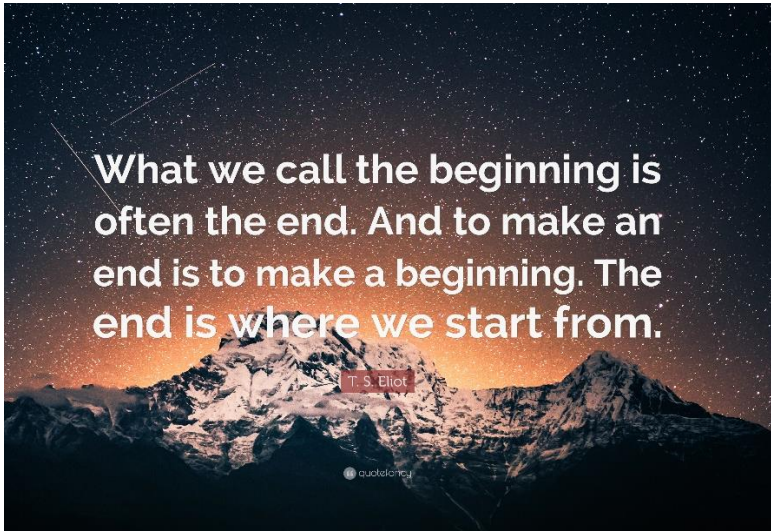
John 19:38-42 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he was afraid. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, who brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. **The Word of the Lord.**

TALK – *Discuss how this scripture passage might relate to your highs and lows, and each other's highs and lows. God is always speaking to us through scripture – but God is also always speaking to us through our lives, experiences, and journeys. The intersection of the two is powerful.*

PRAY – *Pray together, out loud, for one another's highs and lows, as well as anything else that came out of your conversations together. Be genuine. Be vulnerable. God is listening – even while we are listening for God.*

BLESS – *Turn to one another and, marking the sign of the cross upon their forehead, bless them with these or similar words, "NAME, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever."*

Easter Sunday: The End is Where we Start From



“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.” – T.S. Eliot

Knowing the ending to a story sure changes your point of view, doesn't it? If you've ever jumped ahead in a book or fast-forwarded to the end of a movie you know what I'm talking about. (Apparently there are people who do such things!) But the paradoxical reality is that whether we are focusing on Jesus' story or the Israelites' experience, we do know how the story ends – and that shapes how we hear these stories. We're simply not able to put ourselves into the shoes – or sandals – of the people who walked these journeys, and saw these things, firsthand.

We already know the ending, and that changes how we see these stories forever. But let me hazard a dangerous guess – I would imagine that while they were in the middle of things,

even these great biblical heroes didn't know how their journeys would turn out. They put one foot in front of the other, doing the best they could with every step, and hoping that God was big enough to make up the difference. And *remembering* these stories of God's great faithfulness and love – that should change how we understand *our own* journeys as well.

Whether in our own lives, our families, or the life of our congregation – *knowing* that God is faithful, that God is good, and that God fulfills His promises changes everything. When we are lost in the middle of our journeys – when we've wandered astray and can't find our way – God is there. When things are going great – when we're on the mountaintop or preparing to enter the Promised Land – God is there. When we see no way out – even when, like Jesus, we are facing torture, pain, or death – God is there.

What we can learn from these stories, and take away with certainty, is that God *is* faithful, that God *listens* when we call, and that God wants nothing less than life, love, and hope for each and every one of us. These stories give us a foundation on which we can safely build our own adventures. They teach us that God can work miracles from *even this. Even us.*

All praise and glory be to the God who can – and does – make all things new. Always. Perennially.

Even here.

Even now.