

Created Anew

**A Journey for Lent
2026**



Prepared for the members and friends of

**Friendship United Methodist Church
Sherman, Texas**

by

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Welcome

Almost from the time of its beginning, the Christian Church has observed the season of Lent. Originally a time for new converts to prepare themselves to accept the vows of baptism, through the centuries it has now evolved to become a time for devout Christians to renew their faith through a period of self-examination and repentance. For us, it is a time to take a serious look at our faith and to amend those things that stand in the way of our full commitment to Christ. Analogous to the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness in preparation for his own ministry, a time when Jesus faced temptations in his life and overcame those temptations in order to fully serve God, this season leads us to face our own struggles and turn our shortcomings into strengths as we discover God's power to resist and repel the temptations of our lives. When we commit ourselves to God, a miracle happens: we are created anew as we come closer and closer to image of God, as expressed in Jesus. It is in this spirit that I offer you this devotional guide.

"Created Anew" focuses on the people Jesus encountered on his journey to Jerusalem. As we read the stories from the gospels, the doubt, fear, anxiety, and lack of understanding that Jesus encounters in these people are obvious barriers to their journey of faith. Yet Jesus responds to each of these obstacles with grace and opens the door for them to see his grace in a new way. In this new vision of God's love in their life, each person experiences a new birth in Christ.

The invitation of this devotion guide, therefore, is to examine ourselves as we encounter these people, coming to see their new lives as revealed in the gospel narratives, then to open ourselves to the grace of God that is revealed to us in the stories. Thus, we, too, will experience a new birth as we are transformed by grace. The pattern for this transformation can be clearly seen as Jesus faces temptation in his own life and counters that temptation with his understanding of faith. Thus, the daily devotions that are contained herein explore the temptations and fears that create darkness for the people of the stories, which are the same ones that we face in our own lives today. As you read these passages and the commentary that I have provided, I encourage you to see yourself in the characters of the story and to examine your own life and darkness. More importantly, I also encourage you to understand the presence of God's grace as it is revealed in the response of Jesus to the shortcomings of the people he encounters, knowing that the same grace comes to us from God in the midst of our own darkness and the need for new birth.

May God guide you on your journey of faith in this season of Lent and set you free, filling your journey with blessings!

Grace and Peace to you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Paul L. Spore".

Matthew 6:1

'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.'

These words of Jesus come from Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, which taken as a whole, invites his followers to a new life and a new lifestyle. This sermon is presented as a basic instruction to the new followers of Jesus regarding what their lives are to be like. They come as a warning to those who feel that they need to demonstrate their faith to others, to be admired or even congratulated for their piety. The term "piety" may be a bit uncommon to us, so we may feel more comfortable substituting the word "faith." Thus, the words of Jesus also invite us to consider how we live out our faith through acts of devotion (which is what piety really means), and to examine our motivation for those acts of devotion. Do we do them for God or for ourselves? The consequences of wrong motivation are clear: there is no reward in them.

This is a good time to ask ourselves some questions: *"Why am I engaging in these devotions? What do I hope to accomplish through this daily study and reflection? Am I ready to make a sincere commitment to complete the journey that I begin today? Am I ready to be made a new creation in Christ?"* I assure you that a sincere journey undertaken to examine your life of faith will reap rewards. Those rewards will be a new intimacy with God and a better understanding of God's grace as you see it at work in your life.

Lord, as I enter into this season of devotion, I seek your blessings: open my eyes to see those parts of my life that need a new creation; open my mind to see the Truth of your Spirit; open my heart to receive the grace that can make me anew; guide my feet to journey toward your Kingdom. For the love of Christ, empower me to complete the journey I now begin. Amen.

Matthew 6:2-4

'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Jesus was a master of double-entendre and uses it well in this teaching. Receptacles for “alms” (gifts for the poor) were wooden boxes affixed with brass funnels on the top to receive the coins. As the money was dropped into the funnel, the brass rang out with a clear tone, the pitch of which depended upon the size of the coin. Large coins rang out loud and called attention to the gift while small coins made a barely audible tone. Thus, large gifts were said to “*sound the trumpet,*” referring both to the audible sound they made against the brass and to the announcement of the gift made by that sound. Obviously, some people enjoyed the notoriety that came from their gifts, gaining their reward in the recognition they received. Yet Jesus countered this desire for recognition with the admonition to make gifts so secret that the left hand would not know what the right hand was doing; in other words, paying little attention to the gift ourselves, knowing that our true reward comes from knowing that we have done something that is acceptable to God and not from the recognition of others. The same action that feeds our pride can create in us a new stewardship of faith.

Lord I enjoy being able to give to others and I confess that it makes me feel good when I can give generously. Help me to understand, however, that it is what that gift does that makes it important: what you are able to do with the gift I give and how your grace is made known to others. Help me to set aside my pride and vanity to be born into a new generosity, not for my sake but for yours. Amen.

Friday

February 20

Matthew 6:5-6

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

It is hard for us to imagine why someone would want to stand on the street corner to pray; yet this was a common practice in the time of Jesus. Even in his day, though, such events were ostentatious displays of devotion that quickly called attention to the person. Who could ignore someone who stood on the street praying? Certainly, we would never do such a thing! Yet we must not immediately assume that these words were meant for someone else and not for us. Going behind the actual image helps us to understand what Jesus meant.

Is it not clear that the contrast Jesus is painting lies between the outward act of praying and the inner intention of the prayer? Thus, the benefit of our prayers does not lie in the outward form of our praying, but in the sincerity of our hearts when we pray. Put another way, we are invited to ask ourselves the question *"Why do I pray?"* When we place ourselves at the center of our prayers, our focus often is turned away from God and onto our own agendas and needs. Selfish prayers may as well be offered on street corners, for they offer the same reward: calling attention to ourselves. Thus, the selfishness of our prayers becomes a link in the chain of our sinfulness because we are unable to find room for God when we are focused on ourselves. Jesus invites us away from this selfishness, to be created anew in the understanding that our prayers help to break the chains of selfishness when we forget their form and formality and focus on our communion with God.

Lord, I often find myself praying for the things that you can do for me, to make my life better or easier or so that I can have less pain. Help me, instead, to pray for those things that I can do for you by doing things for others, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Saturday

February 21

Matthew 6:16-18

'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

Fasting is not a common event in our practice of faith, though there is much to be gained from it. The original idea of the fast was to do without the things of the body in order to focus on the things of the spirit. It was in the spirit of the fast that Jesus later said, "Don't worry about what you eat or what you drink; just as God feeds the birds of the air, so God will take care of you." Freeing ourselves from the worry of food enables us to understand the providence of God and to appreciate God's gifts in our lives. Yet Jesus clearly paints a contrasting image of the fast in this passage by citing those who use the fast as a way to make themselves look holy before their peers, thus making sure that everyone knows they are fasting.

Once again, the center of this act of devotion has become a selfish desire to call attention to oneself, which is a clear stumbling block on the road to become a new creation. Rather than using fasting or other acts of devotion as a way to call attention to ourselves, Jesus invites us to see this act as an opportunity to experience the true reward of grace: understanding the fullness of God's gifts in our lives. This reward does not come from others; it can only come from God. Thus, we die to our selfishness when we understand that emptying ourselves of our own needs opens the door for a new creation by understanding the providence of God.

Lord teach me the power of emptiness. Enable me to step aside from my own needs, which often stand in the way of my journey of faith. Help me to tread upon the stones of your grace and providence that I may walk in your path and not my own. May my journey of faith lead me to your Kingdom on earth. Amen.

Sunday

February 22

Matthew 4:1-2

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights...

Following his baptism by John, Jesus journeyed into the wilderness. We now believe that this journey took him to the community of Qumran to live among the people known as the Essenes. They were a group of devout Jews who dedicated themselves to preparation for the coming Messiah. Jesus also saw this time as one of preparation. During his 40 days there he spent his time discovering God's will for his life, for both his mission and his ministry. This was a time of extreme devotion for him, time to delve into his soul and discover the presence of God that dwelt within him. It was also a time to discover the obstacles that stood between him and God's will, between who he was and what God had created him to be. As with all human beings, Jesus faced his own temptations. We went into the wilderness as Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth. He would emerge as someone new.

As we consider this passage for our devotion during this week of Lent, we do so with the understanding that Jesus faced temptations in his life just as we face temptations in our own lives. While we believe that Jesus was the Son of God, we also believe that he had human doubts and fears just like we do. His ability to deal with the temptations in his life provides for us an example in dealing with the temptations of our lives. Presented in the form of confrontation with Satan, these temptations represent obstacles that distorted his vision and hindered his ministry. The invitation is for us to confront our own shortcomings, the temptations of our lives, which blind us as well. We learn from Jesus how when we turn toward God, we are created anew in His image.

Lord, grant me the courage to face the temptations in my own life. Open to my understanding the dark recesses of my soul that they may come into your light. In the light of your presence, help me to die to self that I may live in you. Amen.

Monday

February 23

Matthew 4:2-3

He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.'

In the tradition of the desert ascetics, the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness was accompanied by prayer and fasting. By denying himself food for a period of time Jesus came to concentrate on the providence of God in his life and to understand his complete dependence upon God. While this fasting likely did not include complete abstinence from all food, it did leave him hungry and ready to eat well at the end of his time of devotion. As he neared that time the desire for food surely became strong. In the image of Satan, temptation came as he discovered the power he carried as God's Son. The stones that lay on the ground appeared to him as loaves of bread; it would have been an easy matter for him to turn those stones into something that would satisfy his hunger.

We do not have within us the power to change the stones of this earth into food for our bodies. Nevertheless, we can understand the real temptation Jesus faced. It was the temptation to use the gift that God had given to him for his own desires and to satisfy his own needs. It was the temptation to disregard God's created order and to make what God had created something for himself. In this understanding we can see our own selfish desire, the desire to make God's creation something to satisfy our own wants and needs. This is the temptation to make ourselves the creator rather than the creature. It is a complete denial of what God intended life to be.

Lord, grant to me the ability to see creation as you have intended it to be. Enable me to look past my own needs and desires in order to see the beauty of what you have given. Take away the blindness of my own selfishness; replace my desire for satisfaction with a desire for you. Amen.

Tuesday

February 24

Matthew 4:4

But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

The temptation was for Jesus to turn the stones into bread and thereby satisfy his physical hunger. After a fast, it was a real temptation. To perform this miracle was within his power, but it would have been a terrible misuse of what God had given to him. Instead of giving in, allowing the temptation to become a stumbling block, Jesus turned to the strength that he had discovered. It was not the strength to manipulate creation, but the strength to rely upon God, the One who had created him. *"One does not live by bread alone,"* Jesus replied in the face of the temptation. In these words, Jesus turned to the providence of God and the strength that God gave him.

We all have needs. Some of those needs can lead us to desperate measures. Sometimes we will do all within our power to satisfy those needs. But Jesus knew that he was not placed on this earth to satisfy himself: he was created to satisfy God and to show others the way to the Kingdom. As we face our own needs and the use of our own power, we are confronted by the fact that God is more powerful than we can imagine. True power in life does not rest in the satisfaction of our own needs, but in the fulfillment of God's desires. Therefore, when we lay aside our own needs and call upon the strength of God, we are set free from our own image, to be made anew in the image of God.

Lord, as I consider the needs of my life, they pale by comparison to the life to which you have called me. Enable me to turn away from my own satisfaction and embrace the strength of your spirit as it presents itself in my life. Create a new heart in me through the power of your Word. Amen.

Wednesday

February 25

Matthew 4:5-6

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

In discovering himself and his calling Jesus also discovered the grace of God present in his life, which promised guidance and protection. As he came to understand what it meant to be the Son of God, surely, he also understood the power of God's protection. Perhaps he also began to sense a feeling of invulnerability, knowing that the power of God could overcome any adversity. Whether we understand Jesus as actually standing at the pinnacle of the temple, or whether we understand this passage to be a vision that Jesus had, it is still the same. Jesus was tempted to try out his new sense of power and authority: surely God would protect him and prevent him from injuring himself; after all, he was the Son of God.

I sincerely doubt that we would ever find ourselves in such a situation or that we could engage in such a foolish act and not suffer the consequences of poor judgment. Yet there are many other ways in which we put God to the test. How many times have we been guilty of engaging in poor judgment only to ask God to get us out of a bad situation? How many times have we thought that God's presence with us would save us from the natural consequences of our actions? To do these things is little different than if Jesus had thrown himself off the Temple. This attitude demonstrates the inability to understand what God's protective love is about: raising us up out of the depths of our tragedy and despair. When we put God to the test, we live in an image of our own power and strength, often suffering the consequences of the truth of our frailty.

Lord, I want to live under the umbrella of your protection: teach me what that means. Out of my arrogance help me understand what it means to walk with you. Amen.

Thursday

February 26

Matthew 4: 7

Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

Once again, in dealing with the temptation in his life Jesus turned to the scriptures: *"You shall not put God to the test."* The response that Jesus gave when faced with this temptation sounds very simple, but the ability to do this is a different matter altogether. Simply quoting scripture is not what enabled Jesus to resist this temptation; rather, it was his ability to place an absolute and complete trust in God. Jesus had nothing to prove by throwing himself off the Temple: neither who he was, nor who God was.

Do we need to prove God? Do we need to be convinced of God's power? To understand God is to understand that God remains far beyond our full understanding. The issue is not whether we need to prove God, nor is it that God needs proving of any sort. The issue is whether we can trust the reality of God that is already present in our lives. Just as his journey into the soul convinced Jesus that God lived there and would always be there, so our faith comes into play at that point when we are convinced of God's presence in every moment of our lives, and we don't require God to provide proof of that presence. Our assurance of God's presence places us in a right relationship with God and leads us to the Kingdom.

Lord, I do not doubt your presence, but sometimes the desires of my life get in the way and prevent me from seeing clearly. Out of the blindness of my doubt create a new image of your presence leading me toward faith. Amen.

Friday

February 27

Matthew 4: 8-9

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

Once again Jesus saw a vision of what might be. All the Kingdoms of the world could be his. It was a real temptation, even though we may not see it as such. It was not greed, nor the desire for power that was tempting to Jesus. Surely Jesus knew that God had called him for the world. Perhaps Jesus also had the foresight to know that one day his name would be spoken throughout all creation. The temptation that Jesus faced was to arrive at this point without effort, without the pain and suffering that would later characterize his life. The goal presented by the tempter was no different than the goal Jesus set for himself; the difference was the effort required to meet that goal and the price that would be paid to arrive at the destination prematurely.

Even the noblest of intentions can sometimes be a stumbling block to us. It would be a grand achievement to save the world, but at what price? We have no ambitions to be a world leader or to have the world look to us for the answers to all its problems. Sometimes, however, we get so carried away with the goals in our lives that we forget that often God's presence is best known in the struggle. It is the journey of faith that is important to us, not just the destination. We must not get so preoccupied with what we want for the world that we forget that faith is manifest in a simple relationship with God. Sometimes we have to go through the pain of birth to be created anew.

Lord, I want the world to be your Kingdom. I want to do my part to bring the world and your Kingdom together. But don't let me be so blinded by my goals that I forget why I'm here. Teach me the simplicity of faith in you. Amen.

Saturday

February 28

Matthew 4: 10-11

*Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '*

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

As tempting as it was to gain the whole world in an instant, Jesus fully understood his mission and kept things in perspective: his ministry was not to rule the world, but to bring God's Kingdom into the midst of the people. Turning away from God would not, indeed, *could not*, accomplish this purpose. Behind this understanding Jesus had a clear perspective of who he was and that his identity was not his own: he belonged to God and without God he was nothing. It was God who had made him, and God would bring him to the completion of his ministry as a new creation. Jesus the carpenter would soon become Jesus the Christ, the anointed one of God.

As we consider the goals of our lives, we do well to keep things in the proper perspective, knowing that we belong to God and that God will bring us to the fitting climax of our lives, provided we do not lose sight of who we are and the image of the one in which we have been created. We may not be able to see our goals come to fruition and sometimes may not even be able to see our goals at all, but faith teaches us that if we stay close to God, we will find our lives complete and worthwhile. Laid aside, our dogged desire for a fruitful life becomes a zeal to live in the image of God as we place ourselves in God's hands and trust God to bring a purpose to our lives.

Lord, there are many things that I want out of life and there are things I want for your Kingdom. Above all, though, I want you. In the wisdom of your guidance and direction, create in me the desire to seek your Kingdom. Amen.

Sunday

March 1

John 3:1

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

We do not know a lot about Nicodemus and most of what we do know comes from the passage we will study this week. What we do know, however, is that he was a Pharisee who came to Jesus by night and from there we can paint a fairly clear picture of him. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was a scholar and a student of the Law who took his faith seriously. The Pharisees were well known for their clear understanding of the Hebrew scriptures, especially the Torah (Law of Moses), and for their extreme devotion to upholding the Law in every moment of their lives. Generally speaking, they opposed Jesus, both because he was not a trained scholar and because he was not scrupulous in his observance of the Law. The fact that he hid his actions in the shadows of the night showed that Nicodemus came to Jesus at the risk of incurring the wrath of his colleagues. Yet he was willing to take that chance in his quest for understanding. He was not content with the knowledge he already had, and constantly sought greater understanding, evidenced by the fact that he was willing to ask questions. From Nicodemus, we come to understand the importance of growing in our faith. It is only when we ask questions that we find answers and only when we are willing to put our current understanding to the test that we grow in our faith. We must come to understand that God can handle our questions and through them lead us to greater faith.

Lord, it is nice to have all the answers and my knowledge of you provides comfort in my life, but I want to grow in my faith. Teach me how to be open to new understanding and fill my mind with new questions for you. Amen.

Monday

March 2

John 3:2

He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'

The Pharisees were always looking for signs. They wanted proof of God's will and this proof, in whatever form it came, was a sign that God approved of what was going on or of the person's actions. This sounds good and noble, until we understand the other side: in the absence of a sign, the Pharisees doubted the validity of a person's actions and God's approval of the situation. Thus, the desire for signs, in many ways, was symptomatic of a shallow trust in God and could easily lead to the temptation that Jesus faced in the wilderness: the need to prove God's ability and power. While the presence of a sign paved the way toward God, the absence of a sign became a stumbling block for Nicodemus and the Pharisees.

We all like to have signs, confirmation of God's approval, and when those signs are present it makes us feel good and reinforces our faith. Yet are we as confident of God's presence and providence when there are no clear signs in our lives? Faith means that we do not have to have confirmation of God's approval, that we trust that in our relationship with God we will be led to do the right thing and to become what God wants us to be. It is not the dramatic moments of grand happenings that confirm our faith, but the simple and quiet intimacy that comes in being close to God.

Lord, I feel good when you are clearly visible in my life; teach me to also feel good when I do not see you as clearly. Increase my faith so that I can feel you present in all the moments of my life and not be bound by my need for visible reminders of your love. Amen.

Tuesday

March 3

John 3:3

Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

At first glance, Jesus' reply to Nicodemus is quite confusing. Nicodemus has just affirmed him as a holy man, yet Jesus tells him that he cannot see the Kingdom of God without being born again. Did Jesus hear what the Pharisee said? Or did Jesus have another agenda? The answer to both questions is "yes" and makes sense when you understand Nicodemus' need for a sign. Consider what a sign is: an indication of some other reality. While a sign is not disassociated with the other reality, it stands apart from it. Thus, a sign objectively points the way to something else. Seeing a sign is not seeing the reality. Jesus knew the difference between seeing the signs of God's presence and knowing God's presence in one's life. In this spirit, his reply to Nicodemus *does* make sense; in essence, he is saying to Nicodemus, "*you see where the Kingdom is, but I can show you how to enter it.*" Jesus turned Nicodemus' desire for a sign into a doorway to the Kingdom, seeking to break the doubt that bound him to his limited viewpoint and open the door to new life.

For us, we can understand Jesus' reply to Nicodemus as one that leads from an objective understanding of God to a subjective relationship with God. To move from being an observer, on the outside looking in, to a participant, on the inside sharing in the event itself, requires passage from one to the other. Jesus likened this to a new birth, a new beginning, a new creation.

Lord, I know a lot about you, and I like what I know, but what I really want is to live with you. Give me a new birth in my spirit and turn my understanding into a doorway that leads to your Kingdom. Amen.

Wednesday

March 4

John 3:4

Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'

Nicodemus, the one who was always asking questions, was baffled by Jesus' reply: "How can this be?" Rebirth was not a possibility for him, and his reasoning was quite clear: old men cannot re-enter the womb and experience birth again. The problem Nicodemus faced was that he was only thinking in physical, biological terms. As the one who needed a sign, Nicodemus perceived reality from the sights of his eyes and the sounds from his ears, from the physical world in which he lived. In this world, rebirth was an impossibility. What was his strength, the ability to see and understand the world, became his liability, the inability to see the spiritual reality hidden from his eyes. His very strength was like a chain keeping him bound to this limited understanding.

As we analyze Nicodemus and this encounter with Jesus, we begin to see the reality of his faith: his God was too small. Nicodemus wanted to see God in terms that he could understand, which is another way of saying that he wanted to create God in his own image; to put a definition on God that did not recognize the fullness of who God is. We often have the same problem, expecting God to work in the ways that we think are best. It is difficult for us to see God "outside of our box." When God's actions do not meet our expectations, we have trouble reconciling our understanding of God to what we see. What we need is a larger vision of God, which begins with the understanding that what we know about God is only a small part of the reality we call "God."

Lord, I have always been taught that knowledge of you is a good thing and I truly want to know more, but sometimes I am confused by what I see. Help me to look past the box that I have made for you and see you in new and wonderful ways. Amen.

Thursday

March 5

John 3:5-8

Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

In response to Nicodemus' doubts, Jesus offered the evidence of the wind: no one can see the wind, but everyone can feel its presence; we do not know where the wind came from or where it goes, but we know when it is present. In the mystery of the wind, Nicodemus could see the mystery of God: the past and the present were invisible to his eyes, but the present reality was assured. Being born again meant entering into the mystery of God's world, not to analyze and scrutinize that world, but to rejoice in its comfort. The choice of images that Jesus made was no accident. The Spirit of God had always been imaged as the wind, no more vividly than in the story of creation: it was God's spirit (wind) that hovered over the face of the deep; it was God's "ruach" that touched the chaos and brought forth order. Surely Nicodemus caught this connection and understood that "being born of the water and the Spirit" meant being created anew in God's power.

As we contemplate this image for our lives, we come to understand the power of God to create anew: that God has created and is creating; that to live in God's presence means to live in the constant power of renewal and rebirth. We cannot understand the fullness of God's creativity any more than we can see the wind, but we know when it is present and that it always brings a sense of change and hope. From the chains of our limited vision comes the freedom of God's creative power, opening ever-new possibilities on our journey of faith.

Lord, I have always known you were present, but I have sometimes failed to understand what your presence means. Blow the wind of your Spirit through my life today to create me anew in your image. Amen.

Friday

March 6

John 3:9

Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'

Nicodemus was still not able to understand what Jesus was saying. The whole notion of being born again was foreign to him. He had never experienced anything like this before and had no point of reference for his understanding. In fact, the whole notion went against what he had been taught. God was present in the Law, given centuries before, and to approach God was a human task: one came into God's presence by being blameless in the Law. Now Jesus said that God comes into human presence by the power of the Spirit and being born into that presence was an act of new creation. Nicodemus could not accept this new understanding because it was so opposite what he had been taught and what he believed to be true. His understanding of God was a source of blindness to him because he could not see past what he already knew.

We are, once again, faced with the reality that sometimes our understanding of God and faith is too small. We become so certain of our beliefs that we leave no room for change. While it is important to hold solid beliefs of faith in our lives, we must also understand that God is a mystery. That does not mean that we latch ourselves onto every new theological fad, but that we approach God with a sense of openness and not allow ourselves to think that we know everything there is to know about God.

Lord, in this season of Lent I seek new understanding. Take away my limited vision and forgive me for thinking that I already know enough about you. Open the eyes of my heart and let me see anew. Amen.

John 3:10-15

Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

In his final response to Nicodemus' questions, Jesus laid out the whole issue: salvation does not rest in your hands; it belongs to God. The key to understanding all that Jesus said was not a matter of logic and analysis, but of trust. Being born again and entering the Kingdom was a matter of God's creative power and not a product of human will. Therefore, rather than seek a sign to verify God's presence or rationalize the whole process of rebirth, Jesus invited Nicodemus to trust God. Salvation did not depend on his ability to understand, but on God's power to recreate. The freedom to experience new life can come only from God

How often do we fall into the trap of thinking that we have to understand everything in order for it to be real or have meaning? We failingly think that if we cannot understand it, then it cannot possibly be true. Our desire for complete understanding often becomes like a prison to us, prohibiting us from seeing the mystery of God. Ultimately, we have to come to realize that salvation does not depend upon our ability to understand it, only on God's ability to bring new birth. The wonderful words of John 3:16, which follow this passage, confirm this fact: whoever believes in God does not perish (being dependent upon human understanding), but has everlasting life (a gift of God's eternal recreation).

Lord, I want to be born again, this day and every day, so that I can experience the assurance of your grace. Make me anew in your image and set me free from the prison of my short-sightedness so that I may live in your eternal Kingdom. Amen.

Sunday

March 8

John 4:5-6

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

It was about the noon hour when Jesus sat down at the well outside Sychar, a city in Samaria. He was tired and thirsty but getting a drink from the well was not a simple task. Jesus was in Samaria and Jews and Samaritans, though cousins in their heritage, had mountains of prejudice to overcome. Since the time of the divided Kingdom, after the death of Solomon almost nine centuries before, Judea and Samaria had been at odds with one another. Their worship practices had developed independent of one another, and their understanding of the Law had taken different paths. For this reason, Jews and Samaritans lived in animosity; Jews even regarded the Samaritans as “unclean,” since they did not follow the Law in the same manner. The fact that Jesus was in Samaria at all raised eyebrows on both sides of the border. The simple act of drinking water was complicated by all this intolerance.

This is a story of overcoming prejudice in our lives and seeing persons for who they are. In his encounter with the woman at the well the extent of the prejudice can be seen clearly. Others were bound by their bigotry, but Jesus, who looked past the prejudice of his culture, would see the woman approaching the well as a real person of worth and value. It is in that spirit that we devote ourselves to a new understanding this week, to confront our own prejudices and be born again into a new acceptance of others.

Lord, I would like to be free of my prejudice, but I must confess that this is not an easy task. I can deal with the biases that I know I have: it is the ones that I don't know about that scare me. Help me throughout this week to be able to confront my prejudice toward others and see the beauty of your people. Amen.

Monday

March 9

John 4:7-9

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'.⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

Jesus was physically capable of drawing his own water, but he submitted himself to the custom of his time: the well belonged to the people of Sychar and he needed their permission to draw from it. So, he asked this woman to draw the water for him, not as a means of making her subservient, but out of respect for the customs. The woman was baffled: since when did Jews care anything about the customs of Samaritans? In truth, Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans and to even speak to one was considered offensive to some Jews! Suddenly this woman was confronted with a new situation: she was being spoken to by a Jew who respected her customs. She was both surprised and confused by this action and was immediately suspicious of Jesus.

Is it very difficult for us to identify with the Samaritan woman? It seems like prejudice is an innate human characteristic, or at least one that is well taught in our day and culture, as it was in the time of Jesus. We have our notions of the way things are supposed to be and we are comfortable with the limits we have placed on our relationships with others. When things do not happen according to our preconceived understanding, we are placed off balance and become uncomfortable and even feel vulnerable, because we cannot predict the behavior of the other person and feel like we have lost control of the situation. Our prejudice becomes a major restraint to living in sincere relationships with others.

Lord, I don't like feeling vulnerable or being out of control. I want things to work in a way that I understand and can predict, so I stumble through life, bound by my own lack of acceptance, often blind to the value of others. Forgive me. Amen.

Tuesday

March 10

John 4:10

Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

As with Nicodemus before, Jesus' response to the woman at the well is baffling: she asked for Jesus to justify his action, and he started talking about "living water." Perhaps Jesus did not feel the need to justify himself and so passed lightly over her comment. Or it could be that Jesus saw behind the comment and used this as an opportunity to open a new door of understanding. Jesus surely knew that he had something to offer this woman that would work to overcome her prejudiced understanding. The "living water" that he offered imaged new life and refreshing relief. In many ways, it was an invitation for the woman to move away from her old, prejudiced understanding in order to open the door to a new image of himself and the life that he had to offer.

As we encounter our prejudices, we come to realize that they come from two places: what we have experienced in the past and what we have been taught by others. Our prejudices toward other people are not based on the moment or the present reality, but on what we have chosen to believe about a person from a single point in the past, often based on the opinions of others. Just as Jesus invited the woman to drink of a new and living water, he invites us to focus on the reality of the moment rather than on our preconceived notions of the way things are supposed to be. Seeing past our prejudices and facing the reality of the person before us is the beginning of a new birth.

Lord, help me to stop living in the past, in a world that I have already figured out and among people that I have already put in their place. Help me to see each new encounter as an opportunity to experience new life. Amen.

Wednesday

March 11

John 4:11-12

The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'

Jesus offered the woman living water, but she was unwilling to accept the offer. How could this man, a Jew, presume to do what Jacob had not been able to do? Jacob was, after all, Israel, the one chosen by God to carry the covenant, to be the father of the nation. Was this man better than Jacob? In her mind, the fact that Jesus even mentioned such a thing was ridiculous, arrogant, and even bordered on blasphemy. Her prejudice came back to greet her: how could this common Jew think that he was better than Jacob? Did he think that she was totally stupid and would believe him just because he was a Jew? Was she supposed to consider his request some kind of special gift just because he was a Jew, and she was a Samaritan? He was doing her no favor by asking for a drink of water!

Prejudice is born in a sense of superiority, and we can see this idea being played out in the story. No doubt she felt like Jesus was trying to put her in her place by treating her in a subservient manner. Her prejudice toward Jews in general prevented her from seeing Jesus for who he was and understanding the gift that he offered. Like so many of us, she was confined by her preconceived notion of who she was and how she was supposed to be treated. This prejudice could have cost her the most important moment of her life!

Lord, how many times have I been bound by my prejudice and missed out on a great opportunity? Am I so insecure that I cannot accept others at face value and give them an opportunity to be themselves? Forgive me, O God, for Christ's sake! Amen.

Thursday

March 12

John 4:13-15

Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus refused to play the woman's game and give into her prejudice. It would have been easy for him to argue with her, to convince her of who he was. He could have rightfully claimed that he *was* better than Jacob, but Jesus knew that engaging in this conversation on that level would only lead to more division and an outpouring of prejudice. Instead of focusing the attention on himself, Jesus turned to her and her needs. *"I give you a water unlike any you have ever known, a water that lasts for all eternity."* Apparently, the woman began to realize that her prejudice against this man was unfounded: he was not seeking to prove himself better than her or her people, but to offer her a precious gift. It became clear that Jesus did not share in her feelings of prejudice and was willing to look past the issues that divided them. *"Give me this water!"* she cried out.

Our prejudices can only be overcome by looking past those things that convince us that we are better than others and, thus, cause a wall to be built between us. When we understand that the other person has something valuable to offer to us, we can then accept him or her as a person of worth and value. Our lives are made poorer by our refusal to see people for who they are and richer by understanding that we have something to learn from them.

Lord, break the chains of my arrogance. Help me to see others as you see them and to accept the gift of their relationship. May what I learn from them free me for your Kingdom. Amen.

Friday

March 13

John 4:19-20

The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

Even after encountering Jesus on a personal level, the woman was still not able to accept him fully. The question of how and where to worship had been a major point of separation for Jews and Samaritans from the very beginning. Because the Temple was located in Judea, the Samaritans focused their attention on Shiloh, a religious shrine and a sanctuary for the prophets. For centuries each group felt that the other was inferior because they worshipped in different ways. Even though the woman's question may have been motivated by a sincere desire to know the Truth, it was, nevertheless, fueled by this centuries-old prejudice. *"Our ancestors said we should worship on the mountain; yet you, a Jew, claim that the Temple is the only place to worship."* Once again, she felt like the superior attitude of the Jews stood in the way of her acceptance of Jesus.

The prophetic nature of Jesus stood in contrast to his Jewish upbringing, at least in the mind of the woman. She was unable to bring the two together. Her question, as sincere as it might have been, simply furthered the contentious nature of her understanding of Jesus. Instead of looking for the things that brought them together, she, like we, looked for the things that divided them.

Lord, it is hard to realize that somebody else may have a better idea than me. It is even harder to think that they may be right and that I am wrong. Help me to stop trying to prove the other person's error and, instead, listen to what they have to say. Amen.

Saturday

March 14

John 4:21-24

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

For the first time in this conversation, Jesus claimed a sense of special understanding by pointing out that the Samaritans did not understand what it meant to worship in Jerusalem, which was clearly understood by the Jews. It is important to note, however, that Jesus did not leave the conversation at this level: the time was coming when neither the Jews nor the Samaritans could claim the proper way to worship. True worship did not depend on the mountain or the Temple, but on the heart of the worshiper. When one truly worships God, in spirit and truth, then the location of worship doesn't matter. This is what God really wants.

In this concluding segment to the conversation, we see how Jesus deals with the prejudice exhibited by the woman: life is not spent in the past, but in the future. What had been important to both the Samaritans and the Jews was not nearly as significant as what was to come. While God truly builds *upon* the past, God builds *into* the future. What we have been and done is not as important as what we will do and become. In understanding the Truth of God, the limitations of our prior, often prejudiced, understanding are destroyed, and from behind the walls that have confined us, we emerge as new creatures into the grace of God's Kingdom.

Lord, free me from who I am by the power of your Spirit and empower me to become what I can be. Take away those things that stand in the way of my relationship with you and with others and open the door to understanding and acceptance, through Christ. Amen.

Sunday

March 15

John 9:1

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.

With these words, John introduces what is a fairly common story in the gospels: Jesus encountering a man who is blind. Without hearing the rest of the story, we can clearly anticipate its probable outcome, because we know the power of Jesus and the compassion that leads him to care for those who have been cast out by society. Like the story of blind Bartimeus found in Mark's gospel, we can well imagine this man sitting beside the road, searching the hearts of those who pass by in the hopes that they would give him a coin or a morsel of food, but all the while really wanting the ability to see. As is the case with so many stories in the gospels, however, this is not just about a blind man and the power of Jesus to heal his blindness. It is clear from the story that the physical blindness of the man is minor compared to the spiritual blindness of those who witness the event and try to justify themselves in the face of Jesus' power. Thus, far more than the blindness of eyes that cannot see, this is a story about hearts that are unable to feel and souls that are unable to accept what is before them. It invites us to consider the blindness in our own lives. While we may have eyes that see, does that mean that we are totally free of blindness? Or are there things in life that we cannot see, either because of our inability to understand them or our unwillingness to accept them? So, this week we consider our spiritual blindness as we prepare to be born anew.

Lord, I admit that sometimes I do not see very well. Sometimes I cannot see you clearly and sometimes I cannot even see myself clearly. Wash the doubt and confusion from the eyes of my soul that I may be able to see the Truth and not be bound in darkness. Amen.

Monday

March 16

John 9:2

His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

The question asked by the disciples came from the heart of their theological understanding: physical maladies were a punishment for sin. Therefore, they wanted to know *whose* sin: his or his parents. This notion of physical ailments as a sign of punishment goes all the way back to the beginning of time and represents how God was perceived, as the one who maintained justice through a system of rewards and punishments. In this mindset, those who were healthy showed evidence of God's blessings and were, therefore, seen as righteous; those who suffered were the recipients of God's wrath and wicked. Seeing the blind man was, for them, the same as seeing the fruits of wickedness. Knowing the sin that caused his blindness would enable the disciples to avoid such a disaster in their own lives.

At first glance we are prone to say, "*Didn't the disciples know better?*" We like to think that we have grown past this mechanistic approach to understanding God, yet how many times have we uttered, "*I don't know what I've done to deserve this.*" Try as we might, it is difficult for us to move away from seeing God as the one who punishes us for sin and the wretchedness of our lives as evidence of God's wrath.

Lord, as I consider my relationship with you, I admit that sometimes I blame you for what is not your fault. Open my eyes to see the Truth of you and my heart to accept your grace. Amen.

Tuesday

March 17

John 9:3-7

Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

In contrast to the mechanistic view of the disciples, Jesus understood the reality of the situation: this man's blindness did not result from sin, either his own or his parent's. Instead of being caused by God, his blindness was an opportunity for God's grace to be experienced. In these words, Jesus proclaimed a truth that is often missed: God is not the one who causes bad things to happen, but the one who takes the bad things of our lives and turns them into something good. Thus, God's nature is not wrath, but redemption; not reward and punishment for what we deserve, but grace as the free gift of God's love.

While there are certainly consequences for our sin, we need not blame God for everything that goes wrong in our lives. Rabbi Harold Kushner has helped us understand that bad things *do* happen to good people, but that the love of God empowers us to move past those things and experience the strength of God's redemption. When we blame God for every bad thing that happens, we find misunderstanding hearts that easily make us angry with God. Yet leads us to see that it is God that sets us free by overcoming our blindness with the healing power of grace. Like the man whose eyes were opened, we begin to see God's love as the power to change all things for the good.

Lord, I know that you can overcome all evil with good and all blindness with new vision. Take away the blindness that distorts my vision of you that I might discover the healing power of your grace today. Amen.

Wednesday

March 18

John 9:8-9

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.'

The neighbors could not believe what their eyes were telling them. It appeared that the man who had once been blind was healed and returned able to see, but they had a hard time believing it. They argued among themselves about his identity, obviously prompted by their failure to understand that God actually could bring sight to blinded eyes through the hands of the man named Jesus. What should have been an occasion for rejoicing was turned into a theological and philosophical debate over the power of healing, no doubt fueled by the same notion of reward and punishment that characterized the disciples' lack of understanding. Even when the man identified himself, they had difficulty accepting the truth.

While it is difficult to imagine ourselves in the same situation, to understand the dynamics of their doubt we should pay attention to one of the realities in this passage: they were not convinced of the man's identity. The man had sat beside the road for years begging for his living and the people were so casual about his presence that they were not even able to recognize him as the one who was healed! John points out to us another blindness: the blindness of our apathy toward those who suffer. We only enter into their suffering by recognizing them as individual human beings with real feelings; ignoring their presence is like pretending they do not exist. The unfortunate side of this blindness is that it prevents us from seeing God at work in the lives of others.

Lord, I have always prided myself in saying that I care about others, but I must confess that I have sometimes looked the other way when I saw someone in need. Forgive me for not caring and closing the door to your healing grace in their lives. Amen.

Thursday

March 19

John 9:10-12

But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

In the midst of doubt, the blind man himself became the best witness to the power of God. While the neighbors could not understand the healing nor accept that this was truly the same person, the newly sighted man was a champion of the grace he had experienced. They may have had their doubts, but he was certain: his eyes were healed by the power of God, administered through the hands of the man called Jesus. There was no doubt whatsoever as to what he had experienced. By healing his blindness, Jesus made a new man out of him, leading him to the accept of the power of God, and he knew it!

How many times have we been like the neighbors? Our skepticism may come from our lack of faith or from our refusal to accept the worthiness of those who have experienced the power of grace. We do not hear them and expect them to provide proof of what they have experienced. Yet, if we take the time to listen, if we find the courage to accept, their testimony opens a whole new world of understanding for us as we are brought into the presence of God's grace. Like the blind man himself, the power of God's grace brings us a new vision of those around us.

Lord, open my eyes to see your grace at work in others. Instead of judging their worthiness, help me to hear the stories of their faith. Heal the blindness of my skepticism and lead me to your Kingdom, through Christ. Amen.

Friday

March 20

John 9:13-16

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided.

When they had exhausted all their arguments over the blind man's new sight, the neighbors brought him before the Pharisees. As the religious authorities, the Pharisees would determine whether or not the man had really been healed. The issue for the Pharisees, however, did not focus on whether he had been healed, but how and when. It was the Sabbath and the Law prohibited work on this day, hence physicians were not allowed to heal on the Sabbath. The blind man's healing became ammunition that they could use against Jesus, for he had broken the Law.

Once again, the author has revealed to us another kind of blindness. The Pharisees were not able to see the joy of the situation, that a blind man could now see, because it was outside the parameters of what they consider right. Instead of rejoicing over the power of God that was made manifest in this situation, their strict definition of righteousness and adamant insistence on following the Law led them to condemn Jesus for working on the Sabbath and, to a certain extent, even the blind man for allowing himself to be healed. They were blind to the grace of God because the structure of their faith left no room for exceptions: they were bound by their own belief.

Lord, I sometimes wonder if I am helped by my belief or held back by it. Guide me through the maze of my understanding so that I may see as you see and not be bound by my own understanding of righteousness. Amen.

Saturday

March 21

John 9:16-17

Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

While the Pharisees as a group condemned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, there were a few among them who were able to put things in perspective. Didn't the power of God's healing take precedence over the Law? After all, the Law was a gift from God to bring order to life: can God not also give a gift of healing, even on the Sabbath? What was a profane disregard for the Law for some became a profound display of God's grace and power for others. When they asked the man what he thought, his answer was clear and simple: this man is a prophet.

These Pharisees have given us a clear example of faith: the point of the Gospel is not obedience to the Law, but the abundance of God's grace. They were able to see beyond the letter of the Law in order to understand the intent of the Law, that is, to make life better for God's people and to draw the people and God together. By healing the blind man, Jesus showed the power of grace over the people's notion of Sin; in the fact that he did it on the Sabbath, he showed the limitlessness of God's mercy. As we seek to put this story into perspective for our own lives, we are led to see that when we become so dogmatic in our faith that we turn to rules and regulations as the purpose thereof, we often become blind to God at work in our lives and in the lives of others. When we look beyond the content of our doctrine to see the God it reveals, we discover a wonderful storehouse of love and grace. Brought into this new understanding, God works to create us anew.

Lord, help me to put my faith in perspective so that I can see the abundance of your love. Lead me beyond my notions of righteousness to understand the fullness of your grace. Amen.

Sunday

March 22

John 11:1-2

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.

The story of Lazarus is one of the most profound in the New Testament. In this story we clearly see the power of God over the pain of death as Lazarus is given new life. Placed here in the closing sections of John's narrative, when Jesus is approaching Jerusalem, it foreshadows what is about to happen in Jesus' life. But the story is not just about Lazarus being raised from the dead. In the story the author paints an intricate picture of how the dynamic faith of Jesus stands against the shortsightedness of the disciples and that of Lazarus' family. We come to see how the doubt and confusion of the other characters in the story is transformed by the clear vision of Jesus, who sees this episode as an opportunity for the manifestation of God's power. As Jesus brings new life to Lazarus, Mary and Martha experience a new creation as well.

Is reading this story, we do well to look beyond the miracle of resurrection so that we can also see the miracle of spiritual healing that takes place in the lives of the disciples and in Mary and Martha. If we forget about the ending for a moment, we can begin to see the pain and grief that are the center of this story rather than immediately jump to the jubilant climax. In this way we are able to focus our attention on our own understanding of life and death and what it means to experience the power of God in our most vulnerable moments.

Lord, sometimes I get so caught up in the promise of eternity that I forget about the joys and sorrows of this life. Hope is a good thing, but help me to also understand that its goodness leads me to live a new life in this world as well as in the world to come. Amen.

Monday

March 23

John 11:3

So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'

Mary and Martha already knew Jesus and found comfort in his presence. When their brother fell ill, they called upon Jesus to come. Perhaps they felt like Jesus could bring healing in the midst of their brother's infirmity, or maybe they just wanted Jesus to be close by because they received strength from his presence. One thing is clear, however: in the midst of this crisis, they felt vulnerable and turned to Jesus for support.

We also face vulnerable moments in our lives. Whether it is physical illness, the loss of a job or turmoil in our family, there are times when we feel helpless and in need of special love from those around us. In moments like these we often feel that our world is collapsing and tend to forget about everything else in order to spend our energy on the crisis at hand. We become so focused on our needs that everything else in gets put on hold; our priorities change, and life is restructured around our need to resolve our issues. Understandably, the crisis becomes a major obstacle to us, separating us from the fullness of life itself. We know how Mary and Martha felt!

Lord, as I face the difficulties in my life, grant me the wisdom and grace to put them in perspective and to understand their impact on my faith. Lead me beyond the pain and grief that I often experience and help me to receive the grace of your presence, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tuesday

March 24

John 11:4-6

But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

When told about Lazarus' illness, Jesus responded in a rather cavalier fashion, as if to say, "Don't worry about it." Perhaps the disciples felt like Jesus was taking the whole thing too lightly, but the author counteracts this notion in verse 5: Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Any sense of apathy toward their situation was laid aside in the presence of Jesus' love, and he attempted to lead the disciples to see beyond the crises in order to behold the power of God: "*this illness does not lead to death, but to God's glory.*" Did Jesus know what was going to happen? Did he purposely delay his departure so that events could unfold as he foresaw them? The answers to these questions will never be known, but the truth of the story is revealed: in the midst of life's calamities, the power of Jesus' love abounds.

We certainly do not invite calamity into our lives, nor do we revel in the bad things that happen to us. We do, however, realize that God is never more present than in our time of need. As we look back on the things that have happened to us, we come to realize that God's hand was always upon us, guiding us through our crisis and leading us to new life and hope. Thus, as we face unexpected moments in our lives, when we feel lost, alone, and vulnerable, we also come to accept the fact that God will never abandon us and that the love of Christ will be with us. In this we learn to trust God in all things.

Lord, when things get hectic in my life and I feel abandoned, remind me that life belongs to you and that you will never leave me alone. Teach me to trust you so that I am not paralyzed by my crises, but empowered by your grace. Amen.

Wednesday

March 25

John 11:7-8

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?'

In spite of what may have appeared to be a cavalier attitude on the part of Jesus, the strength of his love became clear to the disciples: he was ready to make the journey to Bethany. The significance of this decision is amplified by the fact that to do so meant that Jesus would have to return to Judea, a place where the Pharisees and Sadducees had already proclaimed him to be the enemy and sought his destruction. The disciples could not accept this decision, for it made no sense to them: why would Jesus willingly put himself in harm's way? The journey to Bethany carried the certainty of hardship and persecution, even the possibility of Jesus' death. They protested in no uncertain terms.

We are often found standing on the side of the disciples: our desire to help out those in need is held in check by fears for our own safety, comfort, and convenience. We are perfectly willing to lend a hand, as long as it won't cost too much. We want people to be helped, but we feel that we must look out for ourselves, too. We believe in the power of God's grace, but we also believe that grace has to be placed in the proper perspective. Our desire to look out for ourselves easily becomes a blindness to us, preventing us from service in God's Kingdom.

Lord, I know that I am often reluctant to get involved for fear of what that might mean later on, and that my desire to help others is often tempered by my desire to help myself. Forgive me, O God, and lead me to more trust in you. Amen.

Thursday

March 26

John 11:9-11

Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.'

While the disciples rose in protest of the journey to Bethany, Jesus rose to leave. His response to the disciples was couched in the image of night and day, a popular image for Jesus and the whole Jewish nation. The day was the time for activity and productivity, the night the time of rest. At first glance the response seems to be senseless, but closer examination reveals the point that Jesus was trying to make: just as one stumbles in the night for lack of vision, the disciples were stumbling because they could not see the larger picture. They thought only of their safety, while Jesus thought of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and the power of God that was working in their lives. The darkness that caused them to stumble must give way to the light that brings God's healing power.

As we consider this text in our own lives, we come to realize that we, too, often stumble in the night because we cannot see where we are going. Rather than place ourselves at risk, we stay put, doing nothing, lest we should trip over some obstacle in our path. We forget that there is a light in our darkness, that God's wisdom and grace illuminate the path of our faithfulness and let us see clearly. Our problem is that we, like the disciples, are so afraid of the dark that we forget to use the light. But God has given us the light of Christ to show us the way!

Lord, I must confess that it is sometimes easier for me to sit in the darkness than to walk in the light. Teach me to use the light that you have provided in order to make the work of my days fitting for your Kingdom. Amen.

Friday

March 27

John 11:17-21

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

Martha, the ordered and practical member of the family, greeted Jesus when he arrived, but her greeting carried a tone of judgment: if you had been here, he would not have died. While Martha was clearly acknowledging the healing power of Jesus, she was also shifting the blame onto him for his delay. Rather than gratitude for his coming, Martha welcomed Jesus with her resentment for not being present in her time of need.

On the one hand, this passage is consistent with what we know about Martha, that she was steeped in practical thinking and sought to put her entire life in order, so her greeting is not surprising: Jesus had failed to meet her expectations. On the other hand, it comes as a shock because it seems to be lacking in gratitude. Of course, knowing how the story ends allows us to look down on Martha and her inability to see the “big picture.” Yet without knowing the ending, would we not feel the same? Our condemnation of Martha’s shortsightedness may well be a condemnation of our own lack of vision. How many times have we found ourselves upset with God because things didn’t go as we had planned? When we pray for something and it does not happen, do we become like Martha and raise questions about God’s wisdom and providence? Is it enough just to have Jesus with us, or do we require Jesus to do what we expect?

Lord, as I read this story, I realize that I am more like Martha than I am willing to admit. Sometimes my prayers are an attempt to get what I want rather than what you want for me. Forgive my shortsightedness and help me to see your will rather than my own. Amen.

John 11:23-45

Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

In this rather lengthy passage, there are many elements to be noted: the emotion of Mary and Martha, the sympathy of Jesus, the power of God over death. The author has brought his audience from Mary and Martha's fear of death and the apprehension of the disciples to a victory in God's life-giving power. What was both unknown and

confusing at the beginning of the story makes sense as the climax is revealed: the power of God's grace is sufficient to overcome all our fears and apprehension. When we trust God to provide the light to our path, we see things that are often hidden by our darkness. When we place ourselves in God's keeping, even the pain of grief that comes from death can be turned to the joy of new life. What is a major source of worry and apprehension to us is an opportunity for God's victory.

The point of the story is quite simple: don't jump to conclusions until you hear the end of the story. Even though sometimes it may feel like we are losing life's battle, God is the one who brings ultimate victory. The key to a successful and joyful life is not how many times we fall, but how each time we are down God raises us back up. The affirmation of this story is that as we fight against the restraints to our faith, God is the one who loosens our bindings to set us free, bringing us to new life.

Lord, I sometimes feel like a stumbling fool, tripped up by every little thing that comes my way. Teach me the end of the story and let me see the victory that is to come so that my feet may tread upon the steppingstones of your redeeming grace and I may find new life in you. Amen.

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you,

humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

The story of Lazarus is a fitting introduction to this final chapter of our devotional guide, for it helps us understand that it is the climax of the story that gives it its meaning. The journey to Jerusalem was met with resistance from the disciples; they could see no purpose in it. All along the road they had questioned the wisdom of walking into harm's way and had attempted to persuade Jesus to take another path on his journey to victory. But it is clear to us that they did not see the end of the story. Their fears were fueled by the fact that they could only see the current moment and lacked the vision of faith that would let them trust in God's victory. Even as they entered Jerusalem their world was being turned upside down. Jesus was met by crowds of people singing his praise and welcoming him as king. Like a triumphant hero, he entered the gates in glory, but the people could not foresee that the glory of this day would soon turn to tragedy in the days to come.

As we enter into this final week of our journey, we have the opportunity to reflect on what we have learned and to understand that life is full of ups and downs. It would be nice if we could live in a utopia where everything was ordered and predictable and there was no tragedy, but that is not the way life is. It is in the varying intensity of life that we find our greatest opportunity for faith as our joy of triumph mixes with hope in our times of despair. In all things, God is present.

Lord, as I begin this last part of my journey help me to understand the beauty of life's ups and downs. Instead of falling into despair when things are bad, help me to find hope and look forward to new life, so that I may rejoice in your final victory. Amen.

Monday

March 30

Matthew 26:14-16

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Judas was one of the twelve, one of the trusted friends of Jesus who had journeyed with him for three years. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah and felt certain that Jesus had a clear plan in insisting that they all go to Jerusalem. Since the Messiah that was foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures was the one who would re-establish the throne of David and make Israel a sovereign nation once again, Judas was convinced that the time for revolution had come. His actions, though labeled as betrayal by the gospel writers, were surely an attempt to provide a catalyst for what he felt certain was about to happen. Judas thought that when Jesus was arrested the disciples would rally the people together to rise up in revolt, a revolt that would eventually see the Romans driven out of Palestine and Jesus sitting on the throne. Though misguided, his intentions were good.

In Judas we see the folly that occurs when we think we know more about what is supposed to happen than God. Even our best intentions are sometimes tainted by our own agenda and cause us to make hasty, if not disastrous, decisions in our lives. How often are we surprised that things that we thought were good turned out to be bad and things that we thought were right turned out to be wrong? It is hard to know the difference, but we do know that the likelihood of these reversals always increases when we are focused on our own agenda for God's Kingdom.

Lord, forgive me for thinking that I know more about what you should do than you. Help me to be clear about your expectations and have the courage to deny myself and my own agenda, for the sake of your Kingdom. Amen.

Tuesday

March 31

Matthew 26:20-25

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

Judas was caught in his own betrayal. Singled out from the rest of the disciples by his actions, he was forced to face the reality of what he was about to do. Yet in contrast to the bad judgment and misplaced agenda of Judas is the matter-of-fact response of Jesus. In this exchange between the two men, we can almost see Judas asking for permission to do his deed and Jesus granting that permission. Scholars have often raised the question: *"Was Jesus an accomplice in his own betrayal?"*

In this question we can begin to see a new dynamic: Judas thought he was turning over Jesus to the authorities in order to start the revolution and Jesus did not stand in the way. Of course, knowing the end of the story, we can understand Jesus' actions. What Judas intended was contrary to God's will, but was, nevertheless, a catalyst for the greatest event of all time. Out of our misdirection and ill-informed decisions, God is able to bring forth good things. Sometimes God works through us, and sometimes God works in spite of us. The ultimate deciding factor is not what we want, but what God wants. Jesus displays this rather calm assurance in allowing Judas to carry out his plan because he understands the power of God to turn things around and to use us for glory, even at times when we don't know it and in ways we cannot understand.

Lord, as I look back on the decisions I have made in life, I know that some of them were ill advised and brought pain. I also know that you have turned my mistakes into triumphs. Help me to think more clearly about what you want and less of what I want. Amen.

Wednesday

April 1

Matthew 26:31-33

Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,

*"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."*

But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.'

Jesus told the disciples quite clearly what he expected to happen: all of them would fail to carry through with their loyalty and devotion. Of course, Peter was outraged that Jesus could even think such a thing about him, and his anger was displayed in the forcefulness of his reply. Peter could not see himself failing Jesus in his hour of need. But Peter had no idea what he was about to face and how difficult it would be for him. His intentions, like those of Judas, were good, but his vision of himself was quite a bit higher than reality. When the final story was told, Jesus was right about Peter's inability to stay close to him in his time of need.

In Peter's response to Jesus, we may be able to see a bit of ourselves. We like to think that nothing will keep us from the fulfillment of our vows and that our faith is strong enough to weather any crisis. We are comfortable and self-confident in our commitment, feeling that we have done all that we can and are ready for the challenges that lie ahead. Unfortunately, we are often brought to a sudden awareness of the shortcomings of our faith when we face a new and painful situation. Instead of the bravado brought forth by our self-confidence, perhaps humility and supplication are better sources for our strength. What we feel is our strength can often be our greatest weakness, preventing us from the fulfillment of who we were created to be.

Lord, I want to be strong in my faith and commitment, but I know that sometimes I am not up to the challenges that are presented to me. Teach me humility that I might die to my pride and be born anew to your grace. Amen.

Thursday

April 2

Matthew 26:34-35

Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And so said all the disciples.

While Peter was displaying his bravado before the disciples, who all followed his lead, Jesus knew the truth. When the crisis came, they would not have the strength to carry through with their commitment; they would be confused by the unfolding events and paralyzed by their fear in the face of the unknown. Yet Jesus also knew that even when they turned away from him, lost and ashamed, he would not stop loving them. After the resurrection they ran away, but Jesus sought them out, to assure them that his love for them had not failed and that it would remain with them always. Nothing that they could ever do would cause his love for them to fail.

Even in those misguided moments of our pride and bravado, God, who sees through our false sense of confidence and security, loves us still. The love of God in Christ does not depend upon the strength of our will or the maturity of our faith. When we feel like failures and can't understand how we could possibly deserve God's love, that is the precise moment in which God's grace is the strongest. It often appears that we must first recognize the fullness of our failure in order to understand the richness of God's grace. Bound up in our pride by thinking that we can handle anything, God is there to pick us up and let us stand once again under the umbrella of love and grace as we come to understand that our greatest strength is not in our ability, but in God's mercy.

Lord, once again I find myself bound up by my pride, often confused about life itself and the circumstances I face. Help me to move beyond my self-made world, dying to all that I have made in order to be made anew in your image. Amen.

Friday

April 3

Matthew 26:36-38

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.'

"My soul is full of sorrow." Grieved and agitated, Jesus bared his true feelings to his most trusted friends. He faced the most difficult time of his life: his death. Perhaps his sorrow came from saying goodbye or from realizing that his ministry on earth was over. Certainly, it came from a sense of dread, evidenced by his prayer: *"...let this cup pass from me."* He did not want to face the ordeal.

It may be difficult for us to see Jesus in this way, but his reaction to his impending death was no different than our own. In the face of death, we find ourselves full of sorrow. We do not like to say goodbye to ones we love. We do not like to think that our time has come to an end. We fear the pain and suffering that often accompany death. We would rather not die at all. Then we think that all these feelings are foolish, so on top of it all, we begin to feel guilty for our emotions. Yet we look at Jesus in his final moments and see a reflection of ourselves, one who faces death with apprehension and fear. We need not shy away from this image of Jesus but learn from it. Perhaps the greatest darkness we discover on our journey of faith is the fear of death. We can ignore it and pretend like our fear does not exist, but we only blind ourselves to its reality. In the final analysis, we must die to this darkness if we are ever to walk in the light.

Lord, I admit that I am afraid of death and that I do not want to die. I love life and I enjoy living, and to think that this joy might be taken away scares me. I would like to think that I will never die, but then I feel the binding chains of my fear and know that I must be set free. In the mercy of Christ, help me! Amen.

Saturday

April 4

Matthew 26:39

And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'

Jesus faced his death with fear and apprehension, knowing the pain and suffering that he was about to endure. The agony of a horrible end stood before him. He could have walked away. He could have taken another path. He could have hidden himself from the soldiers. Yet his destiny lay in the cross, and his commitment to God led him to fulfill that destiny. Only the completion of what he started could be acceptable, so Jesus finished the prayer: *"nevertheless, not what I want, but what you will."* In the midst of his fear and apprehension, facing an excruciating death, Jesus' faith prevailed, and he placed himself in God's hands.

Faith is about placing ourselves in God's hands. In the vulnerability of our doubt and fear we try to run from the inevitability of death and of life's pain and suffering, but we find that we cannot escape. Try as we might, regardless of where we turn, the darkness is still there, preventing us from seeing the completion of the journey. We can only finish our course by acknowledging the darkness and letting the light shine within it, the very light of God that has shone in the eternal darkness, the light that cannot be overcome. Ultimately, all we can do is to place our faith and our fears in the loving hands of God and await God's new creation.

Lord, my prayer is simple: not my will, but yours be done. Amen.

John 20:1

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.

Jesus was dead and buried. A stone had been placed over the entrance of the tomb to seal his life away in the darkness of a borrowed tomb. The stone separated life from death, a barrier to the light protecting that darkness. But when Mary arrived at the tomb, she found that the stone had been rolled away; the barrier was gone, and life and death were no longer set apart. The light of God's creation overwhelmed the darkness. It was not the power of human will or the strength of human hands that brought that light, but only the love and power of God! The ultimate barrier of life had been destroyed, setting Jesus free from his pain and suffering as he entered into God's Kingdom.

What more can be said? Easter is about the light of life that shines in the darkness of the human soul: beyond the darkness of death, the light of life shines. As from the darkness of night the dawn brings new light, Easter is the day of new birth out of the darkness of our lives. In this, we rejoice! Let us forever walk in the light of Christ, the gift of God's new creation!

Lord, on this Easter day, help me see the dawn of your new creation: set me free from my anxiety, fear, apprehension, doubt, pride, lack of understanding and selfish ambition. Having placed myself in your hands, I trust you to overcome the darkness I have created and to make me anew. And for the gift of new life, I will always give you the thanks and praise, through Jesus Christ my risen Lord. Amen.