

# This Glorious Quest



*Raven*

a packet of resources  
for Lent and Eastertide

*Worship tools with a peace and justice emphasis from Seeds of Hope Publishers,  
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from  
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**This Glorious Quest**

**a word about this packet**

These materials are offered to you on clean, unattached pages so that you can more easily photocopy anything you wish to duplicate. We are constantly looking for ways to make the pages more attractive and easier for you to photocopy. Feel free to copy any of this, including art, and adapt these tools to your needs.

The art on the cover was created by Rebecca Ward, a student at Midway High School in Woodway, Texas. The emphasis on "setting one's face" is inspired by the poetry of Deborah Lynn, a massage therapist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. As always, we are indebted to John Ballenger, a pastor in Decatur, Georgia and our "editor of creativity." This year we include hymn lyrics, a new venture of John's. We are also delighted to feature, in this packet, sermons by Richard Groves, a pastor in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

This year's packet emphasizes Lent, almost to the exclusion of Easter, it would seem. But what we are trying to do is to emphasize the adventure of the journey itself. We also left out some of the regular Lenten services that we have included before, such as Tenebraes and dramas. Because there is so much material, we tucked the bulletin art in various places to save space.

The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to choose a variety of age groups, worship areas, events, and angles, so that you would have a potpourri of art and ideas from which to choose.

We make a conscious effort to maintain a balance between the apostolic and the contemplative—on the one hand, the dynamic challenge to stay true to God's mandate to feed the poor and struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams.

We prayerfully hope that these aids will enhance your congregation's Lenten worship experiences. In fact, we hope it will inspire an adventure.

# a brainstorming session

from editors and friends

## Thinking about Lent

As we begin to shape our Lenten plans—before we find where we put the ashes of last year’s palm branches and get the purple stoles back from the dry cleaner—perhaps we should spend a little time thinking about the season itself. There are many words of wisdom floating around Christendom about this time.

We have caught a few that seem timely and carefully chosen, to set the mood, if you will, for our brainstorming session.

Should Lent be a time of penitence or reflection? What should we do with the sense of guilt we often take on during these weeks? How do we respond to the “dust to dust” lesson without abusing ourselves emotionally or psychologically?

Fred Ball, a minister in Little Rock, Arkansas, points out that our worship should take on a more reflective mode during Lent. We restrain ourselves liturgically, he says, “burying our Alleluias” for a few weeks. He wrote, in a note to the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans, that his church even puts aside the Doxology during Lent, replacing it with a spoken offertory sentence.

“However,” he wrote, “there is yet some liturgical balance. The Sundays at this time of year are Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent (contra Advent, where they are Sundays *of* Advent). As you know, Sundays are not counted among the forty days of the season. The weekly rhythm of the celebration of the Resurrection continues—Sunday remains the Lord’s Day. We never fast on Sundays, even during Lent,” Fred wrote. “We still enjoy the presence of the Bridegroom at the altar week by week. We recall the forty days in the wilderness, Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness, Moses’ 40 days on Sinai, Elijah’s 40 days at Horeb, but we do not pretend that Christ is not yet risen.”

Jimmie Reese, a minister in Jacksonville, Texas, also writing to the OEF, said of Lent and Easter worship: “The mood of Lent is extreme in that flowers are not placed on the table or in the sanctuary, the music is full of remorse and discipline, the lectionary readings carry deep and profound signal meanings for the soul—and yet comes the Tridium from Good Friday to Easter where there is this sudden burst of sunlight and joy. This is the other extreme and, in between, we live our daily stuff filled with the profundity of Lent and the expectations of Easter.”

## Thinking about Our Themes

So how can we make this Lenten and Eastertide season meaningful for our congregations? We chose the theme of the glorious quest (inspired by the musical *Don Quixote*) and the

subtheme of “setting one’s face.” The latter comes from the description in Luke 9:51, in which Jesus is described as “setting his face” towards Jerusalem. (This occurs rather early in the Gospel, to our collective surprise.)

We have included some poetry by Deborah Lynn—a gentle and wise massage therapist who lives near Chapel Hill, North Carolina—that inspired our theme of facing and embracing one’s quest. Susan Shearer Ballenger, a minister in Atlanta, Georgia, says that this particular verse has always caught her attention. She thinks of a hardening of one’s jaw as that one chooses to do what must be done.

There is, of course, the metaphor of the road which seems to show up with most Lenten experiences. There is also, we hope, a sense of adventure and possibility on this road—and not just at the end. Hence the “glorious quest” theme. This is what we have tried to evoke in these pages. Richard Groves, in one of his Lenten sermons printed here, describes the Lenten journey as a sort of Outward Bound experience for the soul. Brett Younger speaks of the expectation of the Messiah as a kind of Camelot.

## Brainstorming

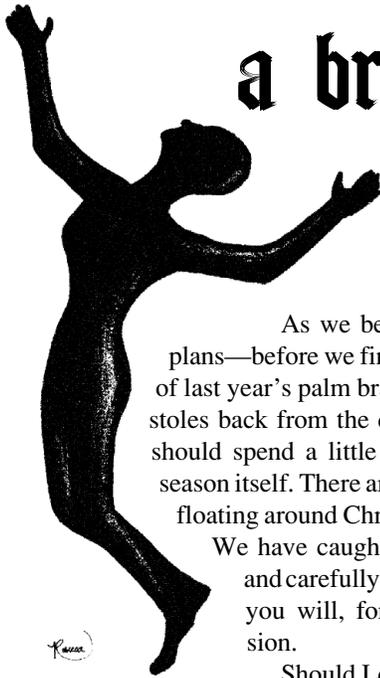
John Ballenger, the official keeper of the creativity that comes out of the Seeds offices, suggested the art on page 17 by Sharon Rollins. He suggests the use of similar street signs in the sanctuary—perhaps at the front of the church. You will find an idea for a different kind of ash service on page 4. It is written as a youth activity, but could easily be used for adults as well.

Mark McClintock, a minister in Waco, Texas, suggests that children be included in the Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday worship. Many churches start off their Palm Sunday procession with children going down the aisles waving palm branches and laying them on the floor around the altar/pulpit area. One church brought clothing to spread on the floor of the aisles for the processional, and then gave the clothing to an agency that works with the poor. Mark suggests that the children be given bells on Easter Sunday to ring every time the word “Allelujah” comes up in a hymn.

The concept of the Lenten quest can be evoked in many ways. We had occasional visions of Don Quixote and King Arthur while putting this packet together. We hope that that feeling of heroic, divinely foolish, optimistic courage has come through somehow, and that the offerings included here will help your congregation to make these weeks an adventure, and not a drudgery.

We have not included many “normal” Lenten services here; we have printed a variety of those in previous Seeds packets. You will find Ash Wednesday services, Tenebrae services, dramas for Easter, an Easter Walk for children, and activities for youth in earlier packets. We have included some creative ideas in this one that we hope will build on those services and dramas, but can be used separately as well. —lkc

art by Rebecca Ward



# Ashes from Our Lives:

## An Ash Wednesday Idea for Youth (and Others)

by Katie Cook

**T**he Sunday school class of eleventh and twelfth graders which Donna Kennedy and I are assigned to teach has recently taken up the practice of burning pieces of paper to represent the fact that we are turning problems, fears, and hurts over to God. Every now and then, when we all seem to come to class burdened with something, someone will suggest that it's "time to burn things."

We each take several pieces of paper (about the size of an index card) and a pen (sometimes the color of the pen is significant to the writer), and we write down whatever is weighing down our hearts and spirits. Then, one by one, we burn them in a stainless steel bowl, using the Christ candle (left over from Advent) to light them.

This year we came up with the idea that we would add the ashes of all these pieces of paper (we haven't emptied the bowl in a long time) to the ashes from last year's palm branches.

Our class also has a tradition of doing our own personal ceremony of ashes at the beginning of Lent. This year the ashes that we put on each other's foreheads will have extra meaning; they will include the ashes of tears and griefs of the past year.

So all of this gave me an idea for a meaningful Ash Wednesday service for a youth group (or even a group that includes adults.) Below is a rough outline. Please feel free to adapt this to your group's needs and realities.

### Preparing the Room

You will need chairs, a small table, a metal or ceramic bowl, a hot pad or trivet (we use a small wooden cutting board), a candle, matches or a lighter, note-card-size pieces of paper, and pens or pencils. Place enough chairs in a circle to accommodate your group. Place the table in the middle of the circle. Decorate as you wish; a purple or black cloth, a small carving of Christ might enhance the atmosphere. Place the bowl on the trivet (this is to ensure that you don't damage the table or cloth.) Place the candle near the bowl.

Turn the lights in the room low, but light enough for people to be able to write. (All candlelight would be nice, but low electric lights and candles or lamps would also work.)

As participants enter, give each one several pieces of note-card-size paper and a pen or pencil. It would be effective to play somber, contemplative music as people are entering. (I'm fond of the prelude to John Michael Talbot's *The Lord's Supper* for this kind of thing. Or perhaps someone in your youth group plays an instrument and could play a prelude.) Place the remaining cards (make sure there are plenty) on the middle table, in case someone wants to use more.

After everyone has been seated, ask one of the participants to light the Christ candle. (Our class uses the one from our Advent wreath.)

Explain that this is a chance to write down all the things that have been weighing them down. Tell them that there is no rush; you want everyone to have time to think clearly. Tell them that you are all going to burn these things as a symbol of turning them over to God—of getting them out of your heads and hearts.

Play more music for ten minutes or so while people write and burn their papers. Model for them by burning your own paper, lighting it with the Christ candle.

### Invocation

Almighty and everlasting God, we know that you love everything you have made, and that you readily forgive our transgressions. God of mercy, create in our spirits a newness, that we, admitting our mortality and our tendency to falter, may be assured of your unconditional love. Through Jesus Christ, for whom we live. Amen.

### The Imposing of Ashes

LEADER: I invite you now to make an appropriate beginning of Lent by the imposing of ashes, as Christians have done since the beginning of the Church. Let us now kneel to show our humility.

Ask the participants to kneel in a circle around the table. Take the bowl (make sure it has cooled) and prepare to pass it around.

LEADER: Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth; grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our dependence on you, a reminder that we are welcome to turn over to you our darkest and heaviest secrets.

PEOPLE: Amen.

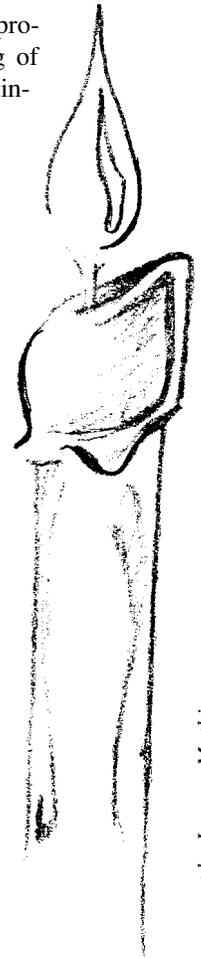
LEADER: God of love, may these ashes be a sign that we are welcome to cry out to you—in anger, grief, and pain..

PEOPLE: Amen.

LEADER: O Christ, who became dust like us, help us to see these ashes as a release, a way to a new beginning with you.

PEOPLE: We are created from dust, and to dust our bodies will return. By the wearing of these ashes, we offer our suffering and brokenness to God.

Each participant takes ashes from the bowl and makes the mark of a cross on the forehead of the person to his or her left, saying the following words:



art by Lenora Mathis

By the wearing of these ashes, we offer our suffering and brokenness to God.

## Scripture Reading

Psalm 51

*Participants may sit for the reading.*

## Litany of Renewal

*Participants kneel again.*

LEADER: Most holy and merciful Creator, we know that we are unworthy of your love. We also know, with joy and gratitude, that we do not have to be worthy. We thank you for your everlasting mercy and grace.

PEOPLE: Amen.

LEADER: We kneel before you now, in our brokenness. We all have pain and sorrow and anger in our lives. Heal us, and give us peace.

PEOPLE: Amen.

LEADER: We all have burdens that make our hearts heavy and keep us from walking with you as we should. Take them away from us.

PEOPLE: Amen.

LEADER: We all have anxieties and fears that take over our minds and keep us from knowing the goodness of life. Cleanse us of these thoughts and feelings.

PEOPLE: Amen.

## Prayer of Confession

Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, we know that you want to be in communion with all of us, for you have told us so. We often turn away from you, and create a chasm between ourselves and you, and between ourselves and other people. Our inner selves are fragmented.

We know that you will meet us more than halfway, if we open our hearts to your love. Teach us how. Make our hearts clean and ready for your love, that we may never be cut off from you again. Through Jesus Christ who gave his life in love, Amen.

## Passing of Peace and Removal of Ashes

*Participants now pass the peace of Christ to each other in a circle*

*to each one's right, and in doing so remove the ashes of the person to each one's right. This is a sign that God's love and grace are sufficient to take away these burdens and fears.*

## Benediction

LEADER: Go in peace, and may your hearts soar with the knowledge that God can make a difference in your life. May your minds rest happily in the possibilities that are before you. May you go in peace and prepare for resurrection.

*—used with permission from Donna Kennedy and the 11th & 12th grade Sunday school class of Seventh & James Baptist Church.*

## Lenten Reflection

by Deborah Lynn

He set his face.  
Knowing in that moment  
every experience,  
every temptation  
that nipped his heels daily  
served as mortar  
to set

his foundation,  
his vision,  
his relational  
reality  
with  
the One.

He set his face.  
Knowing not the particulars  
of future time.  
Resolving only  
to be  
who he was,  
teaching and learning  
truths,  
embracing  
with integrity and love,  
a city,  
a vision,  
the One.

*—Deborah Lynn is a massage therapist and poet who lives in the forests near Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*

# Living in Lent: A Wilderness Experience

a sermon for the first Sunday in Lent

by Richard Groves

scripture text: Luke 4:1-3

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, which Episcopal priest and academician Barbara Brown Taylor calls “Outward Bound for the soul.” The Gospel reading for this Sunday each year is the story of the temptations of Jesus. Like Moses before him, and the children of Israel, and Elijah, Jesus went to the desert. Lent begins with Jesus in the wilderness and ends as he rides triumphantly into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. On the Sundays ahead we will accompany Jesus all the way.

The wilderness to which Jesus went was that barren, waterless expanse called the wilderness of Judea. Later, he set the parable of the Good Samaritan on the “road that leads from Jerusalem down to Jericho,” right through the heart of the wasteland. The harshness of the place, its unrelenting, unforgiving meanness, has made a metaphor of the geography. Jesus had a “wilderness experience” out there in the desert.

The terrain of the metaphorical wilderness is familiar to us, even if we have never seen the physical place. For we have all been there. But we did not go there on purpose. We were compelled to go.

I am at a peculiar transitional stage in life; old enough that friends, colleagues, and former classmates are beginning to die, or they are receiving fateful news about terminal illnesses; yet young enough that their deaths, or their impending deaths, are still said to be early or too soon. At some point people will stop saying that, the way that at some point people stop saying that your hair is prematurely gray.

Word came last week from a friend from Cambridge days, word about his wife’s deteriorating physical condition. We

were friends; they were members of our church; our kids were the same age. On my desk there is a picture of the four of us having coffee on the sidewalk in front of Au Bon Pain in Harvard Square. It has been a long, painful struggle with cancer. Seven, eight, ten years, I lose track. But now, finally, the decision has been made—no more surgeries, no more chemotherapy, just wait for the end. She is not yet fifty. I am sure that when death comes, people will say that it was early, too soon.

It has been a wilderness experience for my friends and their family, like experiences we have all had, or will have. Maybe we were not led into the spiritual desert by life-threatening illness, maybe it was personal failure and disappointment in ourselves, or disillusionment with people we trusted, or maybe it was sin and an overwhelming sense of guilt, or confusion and uncertainty, doubt and despair, or maybe it was tragedy, sudden and devastating. Whatever gave us entry into that desert place, we have all been there. We know the terrain. But we did not go on purpose. Forces outside ourselves compelled us to go there.

Yet in Lent we are asked to go to the wilderness Sunday after Sunday, day after day, of our own free will. Why on earth would we do that? Why would anyone go to the wilderness on purpose? We know what happens out there.

In the wilderness we are tested in ways that seem to have been designed with us in mind, and we begin to suspect that someone out there knows us very well. Obviously gifted, Jesus was tempted to use his considerable powers to satisfy his own needs, and not just his physical needs, his ego needs as well. “Worship me and I will give you the whole world,” the Tempter said. “You want the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever, world without end. Amen? I can give it to you.” There was something in Jesus that resonated with that temptation. We may not want to believe that, but there must have been something in him that wanted to say yes, or it would not have been tempting.

Barbara Brown Taylor compared living in Lent with the final exercise in Outward Bound, being left alone in the wilderness. “The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next 24 hours. That is when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you are really afraid of...” That is the nature of the wilderness. That is what happens out there.

If someone were to say what our spiritual weaknesses are, yours and mine, they would say, “It is this, or it is that.” But they would never guess what it really is, because we have spent a lifetime refining ways to hide it. Yet in the wilderness—in the ICU, in the funeral home selecting a casket, waiting by the

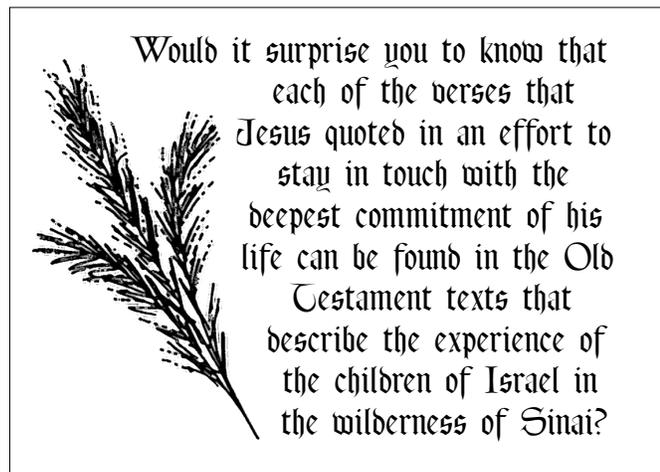


Jesus looked into the abyss. The temptations were real. He actually thought about changing sides, gaining the whole world but losing his soul in the process. He seriously considered attracting a mass following with a theatrical use of his powers, putting God to the test in the process.

phone, standing face to face with the one to whom we have been unfaithful, with the pain so apparent on his/her face—everything is stripped away—the disguises, the projections and rationalizations, all that hides us from others and even from ourselves—our weaknesses are exposed, and temptation speaks tantalizingly, almost irresistibly to our greatest vulnerability.

My friend Wilson was entering the last stages of his life. He knew it. His wife, Hazel, knew it. His grown sons knew it. His doctor knew it. So, when he left town for the weekend, the physician wrote on Wilson's chart that if anything happened no "heroic measures" were to be taken to preserve his life. Wilson was ready to go. Hazel was ready to let him go. Their wilderness experience was coming to an end. Someone else's was about to begin.

On Saturday Wilson's breathing became labored. The



young physician on call worked at a nearby military base. His dream was to be invited to join the practice when he finished his tour of duty. To have someone die on his watch was not exactly the impression he wanted to make. Against advice, he decided to do a biopsy, and in the process he punctured one of Wilson's lungs, and Wilson died. The young surgeon suddenly found himself all alone in the middle of a vast wilderness. In an act of hubris he had caused the death of a patient. Frantically, he worked to bring Wilson back, only to see him slip away again. He panicked, and brought him back again, and again he slipped away. Finally, the hospital chaplain literally pulled the distraught doctor off Wilson's body.

"You have to go talk to the family," the chaplain said.

A look of terror came across the physician's face. "I can't do that," he said.

"You have to," said the chaplain. "It's your responsibility."

"You do it for me," he begged. "I can't."

"I'll go with you," the chaplain said, "but this is something you have to do."

I was in the family room with Hazel and her sons and daughters-in-law; we knew nothing of the drama that had taken place behind the swinging doors that led to surgery. The door opened, and we saw the ashen-faced young doctor. He took one step inside the family room and collapsed in a sobbing heap on the floor, saying over and over, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Then in as unlikely an act of forgiveness as I have ever witnessed, Wilson's brand new widow knelt on the floor with her arms around the young doctor, joined by her sons and her pastor, and together we prayed for him.

That's the kind of thing that happens in the wilderness, and that's why we don't go there on purpose. We "are suddenly exposed," Barbara Brown Taylor said, "like someone addicted to painkillers whose prescription has just run out. It is hard. It is awful. It is necessary to encounter the world without painkillers, to find out what life is like with no comfort but from God..."

That is what we really find out in the wilderness—what is left at the center of our being after everything else has been taken away.

Jesus looked into the abyss. The temptations were real. He actually thought about changing sides, gaining the whole world but losing his soul in the process. He seriously considered attracting a mass following with a theatrical use of his powers, putting God to the test in the process.

Perhaps we do not like to think of Jesus in that way, but if he did not think seriously about the possibilities that flitted into his mind while he was in the Judean wilderness, he was not really "tempted as we are, yet without sin," as the Epistle to the Hebrews says. (4:15) He looked into the abyss, and just before he fell, he reached back and grasped the single line that linked him to his lifelong, life-supporting trust in God.

Each time Satan spotted a chink in his armor and aimed a temptation toward it, Jesus desperately quoted scripture. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'"

"If you will worship me, all this shall be yours." "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and God only shall you serve.'"

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple; for it is written, 'God will give the angels charge of you, to guard you.'" "It is said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Would it surprise you to know that each of the verses that Jesus quoted in an effort to stay in touch with the deepest commitment of his life can be found in the Old Testament texts that describe the experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai?

In the wilderness we find out what is left at the core of our being when everything else is taken away. What we fear is that when we are forced to fall back on the center of our self there won't be anything there. An image comes to mind.

The only time I ever came close to dying was when I was in high school. Members of our senior class were on our graduation outing to a lake in East Texas. I was not a good swimmer and found myself farther out than I intended to go. Somehow, trying to get closer to the banks I began struggling. I was too far from my friends to call for help, and suddenly I was underwater, frantically trying to get back to the surface.

My lungs were beginning to burn. If I could bounce off the bottom, I reasoned, I could make it to the surface. But I had no idea how deep the water was. If the bottom was twenty feet beneath me, I was doomed. But I did know what else to do. So I sank slowly, deliberately until my feet touched bottom. I

pushed off and fought until my face broke the surface of the water.

Our greatest fear in time of testing is that there won't be a bottom. We will sink deeper and deeper into oblivion. Many of us have found, to our great surprise, relief, and even joy, that the opposite is true.

There is a paragraph that, over the years, I have quoted to many people who were wandering around in the middle of their own wilderness. I have had occasion to quote it to myself. It is from the Presbyterian minister and teacher William Barclay:

"We are still alive and our heads are above the water; and yet if someone had told us we would have to go through what we have actually gone through, we would have said it was impossible. The lesson of life is that somehow we have been enabled to bear the unbearable and to do the undoable and to pass the breaking point and not to break."

It has not been true for some, but it has been true for many of us. We have found that there is a core, there is a bottom.

We have discovered the existential truth of the testimony of the psalmists:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. (23:4)*

*Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!  
If I make my bed in (the place of the dead), thou art there.  
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall guide me." (139:7-9)*

We have made God's promise to Joshua our own: "I will neither leave you nor forsake you." (Joshua 1:5)

We have taken Jesus at his word, "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) And again, "I will pray that God will send you another Comforter to be with you for ever..." (John 14:16)

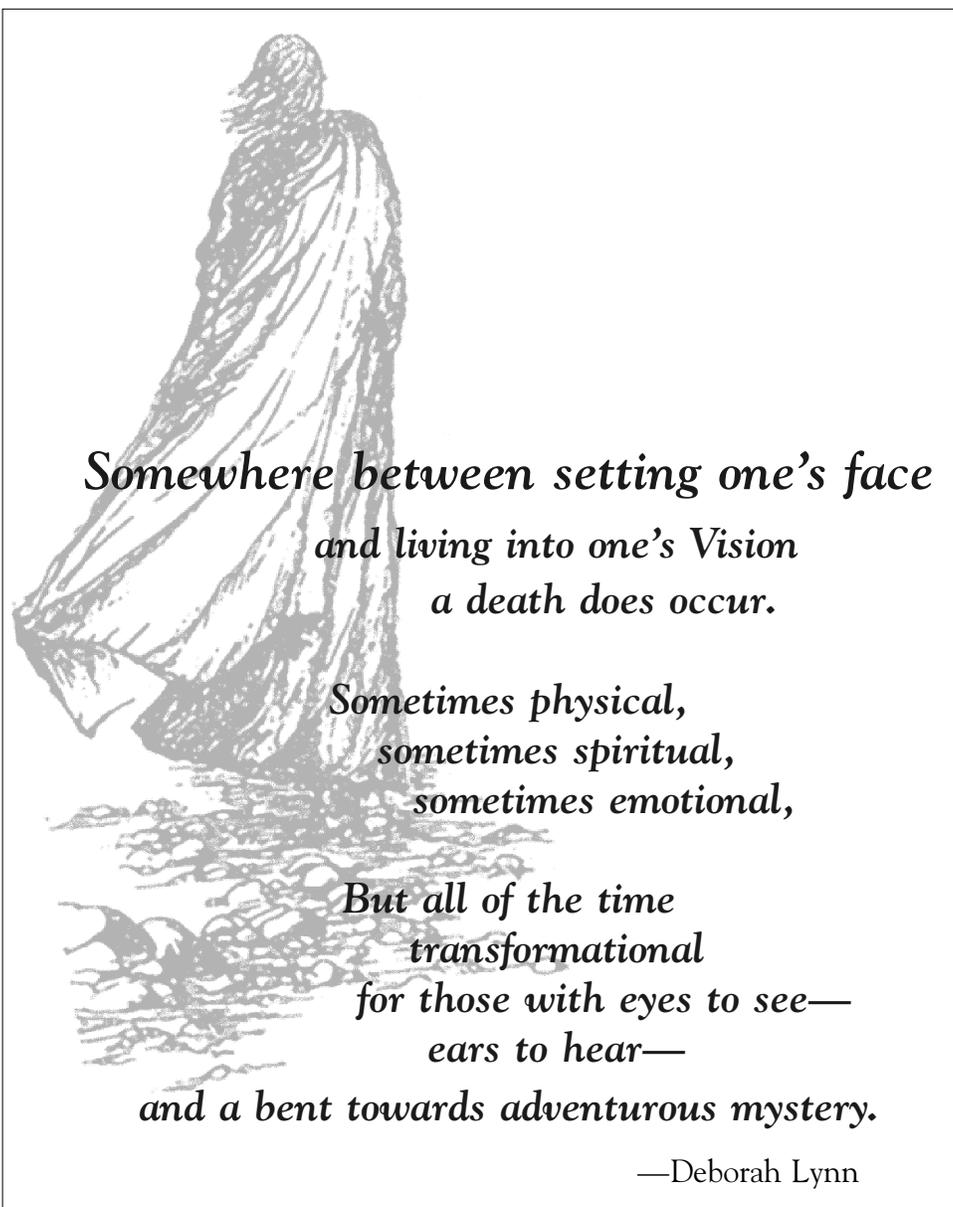
In that confidence we face the unknown wildernesses that lie ahead, and the testings that will seem designed especially for us. And in that confidence we begin the Lenten season, entering the wilderness intentionally, setting up camp, living there for forty days and forty nights, as an act of spiritual discipline.

We will dare to look inward, to consider our own spiritual depths, because "thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." And because we know that down the road, on the other side of Gethsemene, beyond Golgotha, is Resurrection morning.

In the days ahead may we find at the very core of our being, that deep place of "groanings that cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:27), God's ministering Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that, hard experiences notwithstanding, we are the children of God.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

—Richard Groves is a minister in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.



**Somewhere between setting one's face  
and living into one's Vision  
a death does occur.**

**Sometimes physical,  
sometimes spiritual,  
sometimes emotional,**

**But all of the time  
transformational  
for those with eyes to see—  
ears to hear—**

**and a bent towards adventurous mystery.**

—Deborah Lynn

—Deborah Lynn is a massage therapist and poet who lives in the forests near Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

# In the Wilderness

## a hymn for the first Sunday in Lent

*John Ballenger, b.1963*

LOBE DEN HERREN 14.14.4.7.8.  
"Stralsund Gesanguch," 1665

First Sunday in Lent  
Year B  
Mark 1:9-15

1. "You are my son," they heard as Jesus rose from the water.  
"And by this sign the word shall know my sons and my daughters:  
all who obey, they will know utter dismay—  
led just like lambs to the slaughter."
2. Spirit that comforted, led then to great tribulation.  
Jesus was driven out into the world's desolation.  
With the wild beasts, into the desert released,  
there to face trials and temptation.
3. This cannot be good news, we want the Spirit who pleases,  
not one demanding our lives—one that all turmoil eases.  
Leave us in peace, and from your plans us release.  
We want a God who appeases.
4. Hear now the truth, there is no faith without facing danger.  
Passion and mystery all brought life in the manger.  
Angels appear, when the great trials are near—  
when God's peace seems like a stranger.
5. It is in wilderness that we discover our wonder.  
There our God blesses us in tones resounding with thunder.  
Calling our names, with love our lives God does claim  
with ties that nothing can sunder.
6. "You are my child, we hear, "and I will give you my blessing.  
Then in the wilderness, my love you will be confessing.  
Lend me your ears, I'll love away all you fears."  
God's love we'll all be professing.



*John Ballenger, a minister in Decatur, Georgia, is the poetry and drama editor for Seeds of Hope. John asks that you let him know if you use the hymn, and, if possible, send a copy of your church bulletin for that service. Send it to the Seeds of Hope office at 602 James, Waco, TX 76706, and we'll see that he receives it.*

# About Face!

## a lenten children's sermon

by Mark McClintock

### Children's Sermon

*Note: When the children have come to the designated place for the children's sermon, turn your back to them before you begin.*

Good morning. I'm glad to see you all this morning—that is, I'm glad you're here. How many of you know the story Jesus told about a son who ran away? Sometimes it's called the story of the Prodigal Son. No, don't raise your hands, I can't see them. The story is found in Luke 15 in the Bible, and it's about a young man who asked his father to give him a lot of money. The son left home and wasted all the money. He had to work for a pig farmer, a really disgusting job, and he was so hungry, he wanted to eat the pig slop. The son began to understand that he had done something wrong.

Speaking of wrong, does something seem a little strange this morning? Usually I can see you, but today, I can't seem to find you. Oh! I'm facing the wrong way!

*Turn around to face the children.*

Oh, hi, there! What do you know? You were there all along, I was just turned around backward. It wasn't a very good choice to face that way, was it? No, this is much better. Well, this young man in Jesus' story realized he had made some bad choices, too. He wanted a happy life, and he thought he could get it by running away and spending lots of money on silly things. That was the wrong way to go! When he understood that he was wrong, he had to make a choice. He could keep living with the pigs. Or he could go back to his father, who might be angry and might yell at him and might tell him to go away. Should he stay with the pigs? Should he go back to his father? Even though it was hard and he was a little scared, he decided to back to his father.

Have you ever done something you knew was wrong? Something that might get you in trouble? Something that your parents might be angry about? Doing something wrong is like going the wrong way. What should we do about it? Should we lie and say somebody else did it? Or should we run away and hide? No, even though it may be hard and we might be scared, it's much better to go to our parents and tell the truth. Then we're doing the right thing, going the right way, just like it's better when I face the right direction.

You know what? When that son in Jesus' story went back home, his father didn't yell at him or tell him to go away. His father ran to meet him, gave him a big

hug, and threw a party to celebrate his son coming home. And that's a story about the way God loves us. When we've done something wrong, if we turn and go the right way, telling the truth about our bad choice, God welcomes us back. And God helps us keep going the right way! Let's pray.

God, our Perfect Parent, thank you for loving us when we make good choices, and even when we make bad choices. When we're doing something wrong, help us stop and do what's right. Help us go the way you want us to go, just the way Jesus did. Amen.

### Activity Idea

Have the children make Easter cards to take to a local prison or juvenile detention center. The cards might follow the theme of the Prodigal Son story.

—Mark McClintock is a minister in Waco, Texas.



# The Return of the Prodigal

## a sermon for the second Sunday in Lent

by Richard Groves

*Scripture text: II Corinthians 5:16-20; Luke 11:11b-32*

In 1983 while visiting in the home of a friend in the village of Trosly, France, Henri Nouwen was captivated by a poster on the wall, a reproduction of Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son."

"It's beautiful," he said to his friend. "It makes me want to cry and laugh at the same time... More than beautiful... I can't tell you what I feel as I look at it, but it touches me deeply." That day a powerful relationship began between the theologian-academician-writer and a three-hundred-year-old painting, a relationship that led Nouwen into the deepest recesses of his soul and was responsible, as much as anything, for his being able to give up academic life and become a parish priest for L'Arch, a community near Toronto that provides care for persons with severe mental handicaps. Nouwen thought of it as coming home.

Of course, it was not simply a relationship between a man and a painting. For the painting is a depiction of the most powerful and insightful of all of Jesus' parables—the parable of the prodigal son. You might say then that Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, is the story of a man's encounter with a painting of a parable. And this is a sermon about a story of a man's encounter with a painting of a parable.

First, let me say a word about the painter and the painting. When Rembrandt was a youthful artist, around thirty years old, he painted a dashing young man, strikingly dressed, raising a drink glass high overhead and holding a woman on his knee. The model for the woman was his wife; Rembrandt himself served as the model for the *bon vivant*.

How could he have known in those carefree days of youth what life would bring the two of them? How could he have known that he would outlive her, that he would outlive a second wife and five of his six children, that he would be hounded by debtors all of his life, and that he would die thirty years later a poor, lonely old man?

"The Return of the Prodigal Son" was one of Rembrandt's last paintings. In it the father and son embrace in a small circle of light. All the other figures are in varying degrees of shadow. The prodigal is on his knees, his face buried in the robes of his father, whose hands are on the back on his son's shoulders.

The young man's back is toward the viewer. His head is shaved and his face is turned to one side. He is dressed in rags; one of his shoes has fallen off, the other has no heel. A close-up of the father reveals that he is looking slightly off to one side, suggesting that he may have become blind in his old age. His aged face suggests that he has "cried much and died many deaths." Nouwen wonders whether Rembrandt himself was not both the prodigal son and the welcoming father.

At various times over the decade that Henri Nouwen studied Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal Son" and allowed himself to be examined in light of it, he identified with everyone in the painting—the prodigal, engulfed in his father's arms; the elder son, standing to the right, tall, erect, well-dressed, angry; even the father, "a nearly blind old man holding his son in a gesture of all-forgiving compassion." But Nouwen's identification began elsewhere. It began in the shadows.

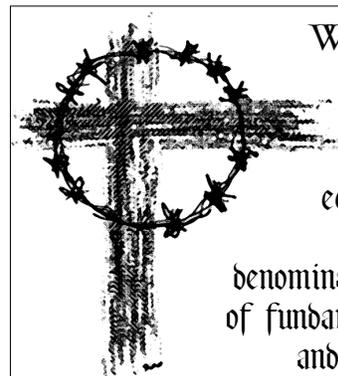
For in Rembrandt's painting there are not two figures—the father and son—nor three, the father and his two sons, but six figures—the father and his two sons, and three mystery figures, two women and a man. The women stand behind the father at different distances, almost lost in the darkness. The man is seated to the father's left, and he too is partially hidden by the encroaching shadows.

Who are they? What are they doing there? "Their way of looking," Nouwen said, "leaves you wondering how they think or feel about what they are watching."

The women are so far in the background that you cannot guess what is on their minds. The seated man stares blankly into space. He is not even looking at this powerful human drama that is being acted out a few feet to his right. There is a slightly depressed expression on his face. Clearly, he is not interested.

They are bystanders, Nouwen said, observers. They represent different ways of keeping one's distance. In their eyes "there is indifference, curiosity, daydreaming, and attentive observation; there is staring, gazing, watching, and looking; there is standing in the background, leaning against an arch, sitting with arms crossed, and standing with hands gripping each other." That is where Nouwen's identification with the painting began.

"Every one of these inner and outer postures is all too familiar to me," he said. "For years I had instructed students on



We deliver papers on the rise and fall and rise of the Religious Right or the socio-economic reasons for the decline of mainline denominations or the emergence of fundamentalism world-wide—and we do so without ever asking, "But is it true?"

the different aspects of the spiritual life, trying to help them see the importance of living it. But had I, myself, really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God?" He feared that the answer was no.

I am struck, when I think about it, by how hard it is for us, even those of us in the church, *especially* those of us in the church, to step to the center and kneel and allow ourselves to be held by a forgiving God.

Some of us are religious functionaries, professionals or dedicated laypeople whose job it is to help other people discover and develop their spirituality. Our business is religion. But even as we do our religious work we push our own spiritual concerns further and further beneath the level of consciousness. It is as though we have chosen to deal with our own religious issues vicariously, through others. By focusing on other people's subjectivity we avoid asking ourselves, "Why am I struggling so hard? What am I afraid of?"

Some of us are academics, specialists who have been trained to objectify and analyze. Whereas earlier in our lives we

His far country had not been a place of "riotous living" or a pigsty; it had been the lecture halls of academia and the sanctuaries of the church, but it was a far country nonetheless. And he was ready to go home.

were unashamedly religious, now we are interested in "the religious enterprise." We turn the light of our discipline on the subject matter. We deliver papers on the rise and fall and rise of the Religious Right or the socio-economic reasons for the decline of mainline denominations or the emergence of fundamentalism world-wide—and we do so without ever asking, "But is it true?"

"Are the fundamental claims of religion true? Is there a God with whom we have to do? Is there a morality built into creation, which we are bound to obey and not just write papers about? Is prayer possible? Is there life after death? Are any of the claims of the church true? If they are, what does that have to do with me? Me personally—a flesh and blood, time-bound, featherless biped, a human being who when you get right down to it is not much different from any other human being?"

Henri Nouwen confessed that when he went to France to see his friend he was "anxious, lonely, restless and very needy," physically and spiritually exhausted, and that he "felt like a vulnerable little child who wanted to crawl into its mother's lap and cry." His far country had not been a place of "riotous living" or a pigsty; it had been the lecture halls of academia and the sanctuaries of the church, but it was a far country nonetheless. And he was ready to go home.

I sense a similar readiness on the part of many people I know, a disillusionment with their own far country, whatever or wherever it was, and a readiness to be reconciled with God, a deep desire to go home. That is why some have come back to church and why some who never left are waking up. In a day of

confusion and uncertainty, it is a sign of hope.

I am struck by something else, however. I am struck by how much of what we do in the church actually keeps us from stepping into the center of the picture, kneeling and letting ourselves be held by a forgiving God.

Early in his book *Nouwen* recalled a funny incident involving the painting. He did not make much of the incident, but it struck me as strangely symbolic.

After seeing the reproduction in his friend's home in France, Nouwen decided he had to see the original, which hung in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Rembrandt's painting, an eight feet by six feet canvas, was, of course, the focal point of the room in which it was housed in the museum. Nouwen took one of the red velvet chairs situated directly in front of the painting. The primary source of light in the room was a large window in the wall opposite the painting. As the sun moved in the sky, of course, the slant of the light changed.

At one point Nouwen became aware that his eyes were getting tired. The reason, he discovered, was that the light which had been ideal when he first sat down was now causing a glare off the surface of the painting. So he picked up his chair, and moved it a few feet to the right, which solved the problem.

But the museum guard, ever alert to any untoward movement in the vicinity of the priceless painting, stepped quickly to Nouwen and confronted him, telling him in strong terms that it was not permitted to move the chairs. Nouwen tried explain the problem about the light, but the guard would hear none of it. He asked the foreign visitor to get up and move the stuffed chair back to where it belonged. Which, of course, Nouwen did.

But he still had the problem of the lighting. The only thing to do, Nouwen decided, if he was not to get severe eye strain squinting into the glare, was to sit on the floor, which he proceeded to do. No sooner had he taken his new position, however, than the guard was on him again. "It is not permitted to sit on the floor," he said.

"But what am I to do?" Nouwen asked. "There is a painful glare in my eyes if I sit in the only place in the room I am evidently allowed to sit." The guard spotted a radiator beneath the window on the opposite wall. "It is permitted," he declared, "to sit on the radiator."

So Nouwen made himself more or less comfortable on the radiator and was beginning to meditate again on the painting when a tour group came through. The guide took one look at the visitor sitting on the radiator, left the group and began to lecture Nouwen, telling him that it was not permitted to sit on the radiator. At which point the guard left his position and accosted the tour guide, saying that it had been he who had given permission to the visitor to sit on the radiator in the first place and that it was, too, permitted.

There followed a lengthy argument in Russian which Nouwen did not understand, the outcome of which was that either the guard or the guide called a manager who solved the problem by going into an adjoining room and returning with another red velvet stuffed armchair which he offered to Nouwen, which is probably why he was a manager.

When all of the hubbub had died down, Henri Nouwen looked up at Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son."

The elderly father with his arms around his son. The young man in rags, his shaved head buried in the chest of his father. Nouwen had a funny thought. Suppose the figures in the painting were real. And they were experiencing that powerful event of home-coming and the deepest emotions of which human beings are capable, and looking out on the comic scene that had just been played out.

Wouldn't it have seemed incredible? To be in the presence of such power and glory and to get involved in a stupid Lauren and Hardy routine of where one is permitted to sit! Henri Nouwen imagined that he could see the figures in the painting smiling.

I've been there. I have been in hospital rooms where going-home scenes were being acted out, that deepest of all human dramas, and I have seen medical people become inordinately preoccupied with monitors and charts; I have heard them engage in nervous institutional chit-chat, their own versions of where you can or cannot sit.

I fear that there have been times when I have talked through mighty moments of the spirit, out of a need to be helpful or useful, or maybe it was just discomfort at not knowing what to do or say.

And I worry that sometimes church activity is little more than chair-moving and rule-making, things that seem to have something to do with that which is ultimate but which may have the effect of shielding us from the very thing they are supposedly about. And the effect may be intended.

Loren Mead of the Alban Institute, one of the leading experts on the state of the Church in America, once began a presentation with a series of graphs showing us what we already knew, that over the past thirty-five years every mainline Christian denomination has gone into sharp decline. The numbers are hard to come by, but there may be more Muslims in America today than there are Episcopalians. Money has begun to dry up as well, and every national body has downsized in recent years.

There are some things the church can do to help itself, Mead said. There are some chairs that need to be moved and some rules that need to be made. But the main thing the church can do is to stop being preoccupied with saving itself. It should get back to its basic task of bringing people and God together, proclaiming with Paul, "Be reconciled to God."

If the church is to be saved, and it will be, it will be because it has had the courage to lose itself in bringing people to God. But before that can happen those of us in the church must cease being observers standing in the shadows watching other prodigals come home. We must dare to step into the centered circle of light, kneel in repentance, and feel the arms of a loving, forgiving God around our shoulders. We must let

Charlotte Elliott's prayer be our prayer.

Charlotte Elliott was a bright, industrious young woman who became an invalid at 32 and remained in that condition for the next fifty years. Faced with a lifetime of uselessness and despair, for there was not much even an able-bodied woman could do in mid-nineteenth century England, she realized that one thing she could do from her bed was write. Over her lifetime she wrote at least 150 hymns, including one of her first, one that surely was autobiographical:

*Just as I am, without one plea,  
But that thy blood was shed for me,  
And that thou didst me come to thee;  
O Lamb of God, I come.*

May God grant us the courage to pray that prayer and to lead other prodigals to the center of God's forgiving love. Amen.

—Richard Groves is a minister in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

### What smothers the flame?

Does loneliness, fear, or  
a broken heart?

Does separation, anger, or  
a spoiled dream?

Does pain, grief, or  
a crucifixion?

**NO! I shout, NO! These can't  
extinguish the blaze.**

**There must be a resurrection.  
no, I whimper, no, this must not  
black out the flame.**

**Please God, please—  
there must be Life.**

**This Flame needs to keep breathing  
This Savior needs to keep saving.**

**Or else—there is no  
resurrection,  
no Life.**

**Yet, I am alive  
I am alive**

**The Mystery continues.**

—Greg Kershner

# quotes, poems, & pithy sayings

So, refusing to look back,  
and joyful with infinite  
gratitude,  
never fear to outstrip  
the dawn,  
praising,  
blessing,  
and singing,  
to Christ your Lord.  
—*Brother Roger of Taizé*

We Are Dust  
We are dust in pain.  
The light shines through us  
as through wave-spray,  
dust of water  
breaking, or the falling rain.  
—*Ursula K. LeGuin*

Revelation. Listening. Humil-  
ity.

Remember—  
the root word of humble and human  
is the same—  
humus: earth.  
We are dust. We are created;  
It is God who made us and not we ourselves.  
But we were made to be co-creators  
with our Maker.  
—*Madeleine L'Engle*

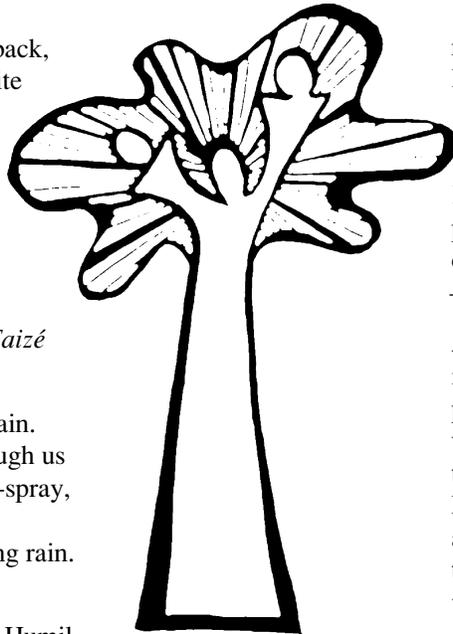
Frail dust, remember  
That thou art splendor.  
—*Wendy Wasserstein*

This, then, is our desert:  
to live facing despair, but not to consent,  
to trample it down under hope in the Cross.  
To wage war against despair unceasingly.  
—*Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude*

Sometimes at that moment (in despair)  
a wave of light breaks into our darkness,  
and it is as though a voice were saying,  
“You are accepted.  
You are accepted by that  
which is greater than you.”  
—*Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations*

The republic is a dream. Nothing happens unless  
first a dream.  
—*Carl Sandburg*

Don Quixote appears to be insane, but somewhere  
deep inside we know he had at least part of it



art by Susan Daily

right—like finding splendor in the tawdry, like treating the  
lowliest prostitute like a princess... It seems to me the godliest  
kind of chivalry.  
—*Katie Cook*

Francis [of Assisi] look at Holy Devotion not as a kind of  
piety, but in the medieval meaning of the term: a quickness to  
do the will of God once you know it.  
—*Murray Bodo, OFM*

And what ought to be my place (the place of the privileged)  
in a world filled with the oppressed? This, I suppose, is the  
perennial question, the question, perhaps, which forms the  
very heart of the Sermon on the Mount. One can hardly escape  
the feeling that this is the central question of our century also.  
It is, above all, a question that I have preferred to ask in the  
abstract surrounded by family and friends. But for me now,  
the question has been raised by the bodies and souls of those  
who suffer. (Has the answer been posed by those who serve?)  
—*Marc Ellis, A Year at the Catholic Worker*

*who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave...  
Philippians 2:6-7*

During Holy Week, members of the Open Door Community  
in Atlanta, Georgia have traditionally participated in a form of  
spiritual discipline that is peculiar to that community. They  
spend 24 hours with the homeless people of their city. Stan  
Saunders, a New Testament professor at Columbia Theological  
Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, writes of this tradition:

There are many folks, even in the churches and perhaps  
among the homeless themselves, who might regard this exercise  
as foolish, or not worth the risks, or as merely a token gesture.  
The Bible indicates otherwise. Among many biblical passages  
that affirm the importance of this spiritual discipline, the Christ  
Hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 stands out. Paul's use of this hymn,  
in fact, suggests that anything short of this kind of embodied  
witness to the power of the cross falls short of his definition of  
what it means to be Christian. More importantly, the hymn points  
us toward a foundational form of discernment and witness to who  
God is, namely, "solidarity with the humiliated."

I need to warn you about this passage. There is good  
historical reason to conclude that immersion into it has the  
potential to shape our imagination and practice in decisive  
ways...

—*from Hospitality, the newspaper of the Open Door Community*

# Tragedy, Meaning, and Faith

## a conversation for the third Sunday in Lent

by Richard Groves

scripture text: Luke 13:1-6

So, Jesus, did you see the article that was in the paper last week? The one about the guy who shot all those people at the lottery office? Got it right here.

*Matthew Beck woke up early that morning, fed his cat and greeted his father. Dressed casually in jeans, he slung his black bag over his shoulder and headed out the door with the parting words of "Well, I'm off." ...*

*"He looked perfectly normal," his father said in (Saturday's) Hartford Courant. I had seen him when he was depressed, and he certainly wasn't depressed.*

*But soon after walking into the headquarters of the Connecticut Lottery Corporation on Friday morning, Beck, a 35-year-old accountant, took a handgun out of his bag and shot the lottery president and three supervisors to death.*

*Beck shot himself in the head.*

*(Winston-Salem Journal, March 9, 1998)*

What do you think about that, Jesus? What's the world coming to, huh? When he said, "Well, I'm off," he meant it, didn't he? Crazy people and guns. That's the problem. Too many guns out there. Stress is what does it. It builds up and builds up, and some people just crack. Pick up a gun and go out and shoot somebody. That's what I think. What do you think?

*Why do you think they died?*

What do you mean?

*Those particular people. Why did they die? There were a lot of people in the building that morning. Secretaries, technicians, whoever does whatever has to be done to keep a lottery running. They didn't get killed. Just the president and the supervisors. Why do you think they died?*

I don't know. Maybe the guy just got tired of writing million dollar checks to other people, and decided to take out his frustration on the higher-ups. Or maybe it was just their time to go. Maybe their number was up. That's what I was always told. If it's your time to go, you're gonna go, and there's not a thing you can do about it.

*So, you think there might be some kind of transcendent reason why they were killed?*

I wouldn't know a transcendent reason if I saw one.

*You think that maybe God had something to do with it?*

I'll leave that for the preachers to worry about. And you can bet they will. I'm sure that at the funerals of those four

guys the preachers were sweating, trying to figure out how to explain to people, especially to the families, what on earth God was up to the morning that fellow went in there shooting people. Was God taking a coffee break or watching some little yellow flower grow on the side of a mountain somewhere, and this crazy accountant slipped by under God's radar screen? I don't know about things like that. That's your department.

*You think that the guys in the lottery office just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time?*

No, sir, I don't believe in that. I don't believe that at all.

*You think maybe they had it coming?*

You mean getting killed?

*What do you think?*

Could be. You never know what's really going on. You can't tell from what you read in the newspaper. I mean, four people got killed, and the paper told us all about it in eight sentences. Two sentences a person. You don't know what was going on. Maybe they did have it coming.

*Like, for what?*

Well, you know, maybe this accountant caught them skimming money, and they were gonna fire him. Blackball him. That's what they do to whistleblowers. Get rid of them.

*So, maybe they had it coming?*

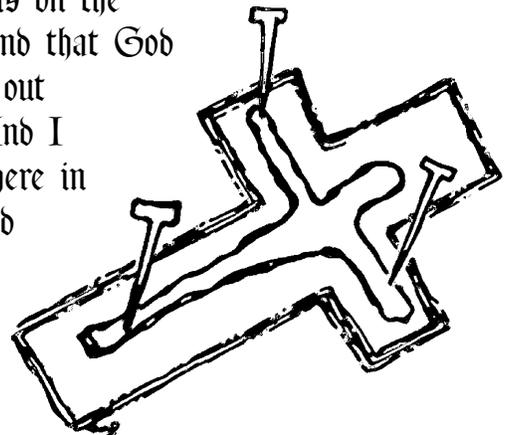
Well, I didn't say they deserved to get shot and killed. What I'm saying is that sometimes people do things, and they're kind of responsible for what happens to them.

*Like, for instance?*

Like when a woman goes to a man's apartment. Or when she wears really revealing clothes.

*So...?*

I think that the rain falls on the just and on the unjust and that God doesn't go around giving out umbrellas to the just. And I think that God is out there in the storm, getting soaked to the skin like the rest of us.



So, she's just asking for it.

It?

Yeah, it!

*It's her fault?*

In a way. It's like when people go downtown at night and get beat up and robbed and then act like victims!

*They're not?*

Listen, you go walking down town at night and get yourself mugged, don't come crawling to me looking for help! You brought that on yourself.

*So, you're saying maybe they did have it coming, the guys the accountant killed?*

Could be.

*But they weren't just at the wrong place at the wrong time?*

I'll tell you what; until you are willing to deal with the state of your own soul before God, look it full in the face, you'll never know what faith or believing in God means.



No, that's for sure. My mama had these little sayings. Like, things don't just happen. My brother and me would be washing dishes and we would break a plate, and she would come in and ask who did it, and we would just stand there. And she would say, "Somebody did that. Things don't just happen."

And she applied that to bigger things, like life itself. There's a reason for everything, she would say. We may not know what it is. We may never know what it is. But there's a reason for everything. Things don't just happen.

*Like babies getting sucked up by tornadoes?*

You mean like in Florida?

*Yeah. A tornado pulled a baby right out of its mother's arms. You're saying there was a reason for that?*

I gotta admit that it's hard to see how there is. But my mama would say, We may not know what the reason is. But there is a reason even for something like that. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform." That's Bible.

*That's what you would say?*

I don't know what I'd say. Let me tell you something. Maybe I wouldn't say that—or maybe I would, I don't know—and maybe you wouldn't say that. But you can bet a mama and daddy would say it.

*They would say it was God's will?*

Yes, sir.

*Why would they say such a thing?*

Because otherwise they would have to believe that their baby died for no reason at all, and that's a thought that human beings cannot bear. They'd rather believe that God did it than believe that.

*But if they blame God...*

They're not blaming God. They're letting God bear the burden. God is their scapegoat. They don't hate God for it. They appreciate it. They're grateful.

*But what if God won't bear the load? God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust, right?*

Then they put it on themselves.

*They take the blame themselves?*

Happens all the time. A terrible thing happens to someone they love, and the first thing they think is, It must have been something I've done. It must be my fault. My sin has brought on this terrible thing. You see, it has to be someone's fault! Somebody has to be responsible.

*So they can be punished?*

No, so things will make sense. Like when your disciples saw the man who had been born blind and you wanted to know, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" What kind of question was that? How could a baby sin before it was born?

But you knew, didn't you? You knew that human beings have to have a way to makes sense of things. No matter how crazy an explanation sounds, there are people out there who will believe it. Because otherwise they would have to believe that sometimes things just happen or that sometimes people end up in the wrong place at the wrong time or that the rain falls on the just and on the unjust alike.

*So, they'd rather take the guilt on themselves...*

...than think that tragedies happen for no reason at all. Give human beings enough time and pressure, and they can figure out how just about anything makes sense—if you just look at it in the right way. You know what they call it before they get it figured out?

*What?*

A senseless tragedy. You see it in the papers all the time. A terrible thing happens and people say, It's a senseless tragedy. A tragedy is a terrible thing that happens that doesn't make sense. There is no reason for it. It doesn't fulfill any kind of purpose. But people can't have senseless things happening. They can't live with that.

There has to be an ordering of things, a pattern that they can figure out. Because if there is a pattern, then they know what they have to do to make their way. But if there isn't a pattern, if there's not a meaning that they can figure out, that suggests something real scary—that maybe nothing means anything. Maybe *they* don't mean anything. Folks would rather believe just about anything than live with that.

*Including assuming the guilt?*

Putting the weight on their own souls. It would likely prove to be too heavy a load for mere mortals, but it's a way of making sense of things. You see, once they make sense of it, it's not a tragedy any more. They've got it figured out. They know what it means. They're at peace.

*A strange kind of peace.*

Well, as the fellow said, a person with a "why" can live with any kind of "how." Who said that?

*I don't know.*

I thought you were supposed to know stuff like that. Well, anyway, what do you think, Jesus? About the guys in the lottery office?

*And the baby in Florida?*

Okay, yeah.

*I think that you are evading the issue.*

By doing what?

By coming up with all these answers as to what it all means.

That's evading the issue? Coming up with the answers? That's what we're supposed to do, figure it all out, like I told you.

*It's also a good way to evade the issue, put it out there at arm's length and talk about it, as though it has nothing to do with you.*

All right, I'll bite. What am I evading?

*Whether way deep down inside the foundations of your own soul are trembling. You read about four people getting killed, and you want to philosophize about it, talk about what it all means. What you don't want to talk about is what all this has to do with you.*

Wait a minute. I talked about how we have to make sense of things, how it scares us way down deep to think that maybe things don't make sense at all and how we tie ourselves in all sorts of mental and spiritual knots to avoid that. I talked about all that.

*No, you didn't talk about "we"; you talked about "they." How they entertain all sorts of strange ideas trying to make sense of things. You're perfectly willing to talk about someone else's guts. You're just not too keen on talking about your own. I'll tell you what; until you are willing to deal with the state of your own soul before God, look it full in the face, you'll never know what faith or believing in God means.*

Which is?

*Faith is how you live when you don't have any explanations, when you don't know any answers. Faith is resting in the presence of God and relying on the love of God to get you through.*

You never did answer my question. What do you think about the dead guys in Connecticut?

*I think that the rain falls on the just and on the unjust and that God doesn't go around giving out umbrellas to the just. And I think that God is out there in the storm, getting soaked to the skin like the rest of us.*

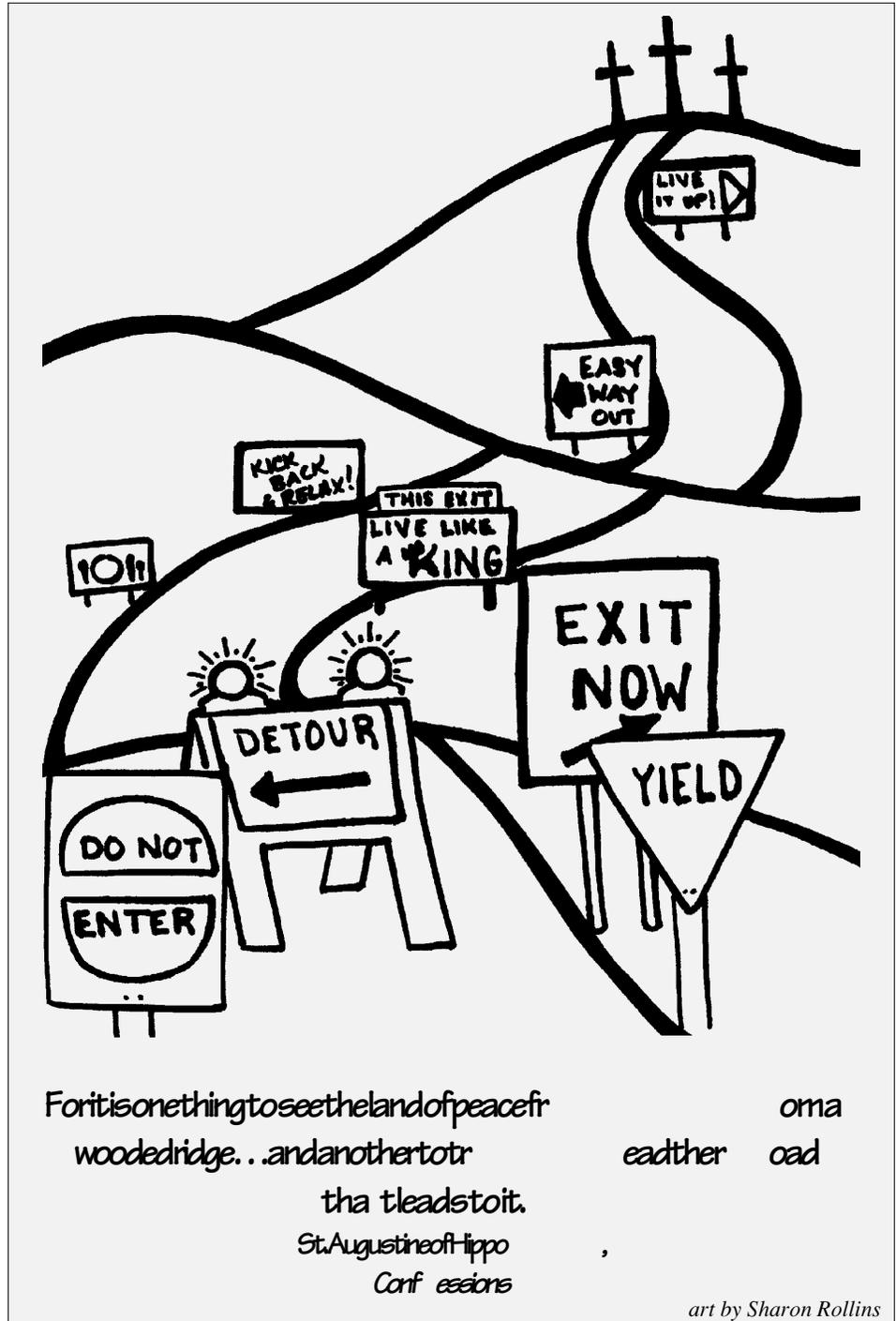
That's it? That's enough?

*It has to be. And it is. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."*

Will it be enough in Gethsemene?

*It will be enough in my Gethsemene. What about yours?*

—Richard Groves is a minister in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.



# The Hour is at Hand

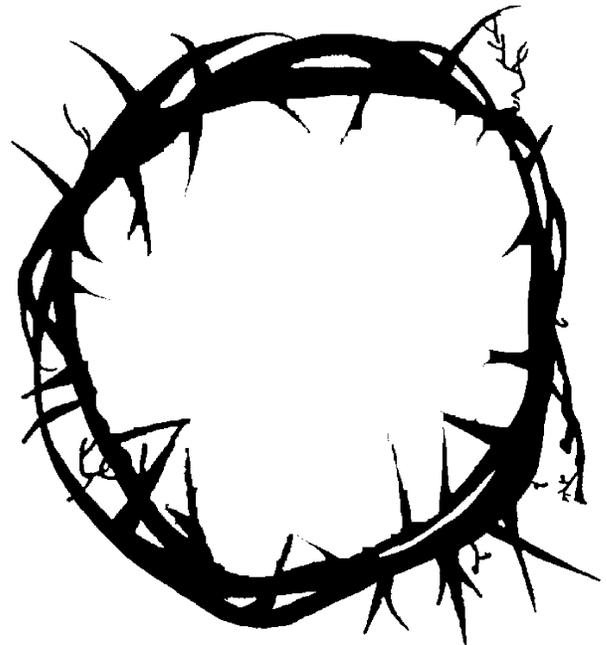
## a hymn for the fifth Sunday in Lent

*John Ballenger, b. 1963*

ST. MARGARET 8.8.8.8.6.  
Albert L. Peace, 1844-1912

The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Year B  
Jeremiah 31:31-34  
John 12:20-33

1. The hour is finally at hand.  
Darkness comes upon the land.  
The wind blows chill;  
the clouds roll in.  
Across the Savior's face the  
shadow of the cross now falls.
2. Unless the grain of wheat falls down  
and dies upon the waiting ground,  
it will remain  
a single grain,  
but if it falls and dies,  
it will a harvest bear.
3. Write Your law upon our hearts.  
You are God, and we your people.  
To serve you  
we must always follow  
to Calvary's cross and then beyond  
to Easter's rising sun.
4. The hour is once again at hand.  
Darkness falls across the land.  
The wind blows chill;  
the clouds roll in.  
Across the church's heart the  
question of the cross now looms.



*John Ballenger, a minister in Decatur, Georgia, is the poetry and drama editor for Seeds of Hope. John asks that you let him know if you use the hymn, and, if possible, send a copy of your church bulletin for that service. Send it to the Seeds of Hope office at 602 James, Waco, TX 76706, and we'll see that he receives it.*

# The Spirit of Holy Week

## a true story about Palm Sunday compassion

by Allen Reasons



art by Peter Yuichi Clark

On Palm Sunday, our church in Houston had a bake sale to raise money for BayouFest, our annual community festival at the church. At the sale, worshipers were invited to purchase a delicious dessert to cap off the full Sunday meal that each family looked forward to in our own homes. Cookbooks were also available from which one could prepare a meal based on a tasty recipe of one of our church members.

It was a fun activity in which we raised almost \$600 for BayouFest. Of course, the side benefit was that we all got to enjoy something sweet that afternoon.

As soon as worship was over, people scrambled for the best-looking cake and a copy of the Cornerstone cookbook. It was all happening on the porch outside of the sanctuary.

While everyone was busy hunting for the tastiest-looking treat for their Sunday feasts, a stranger was leaning up against one of the columns, about four feet from the dessert table. He

was not dressed in what was for us typical Sunday finery. His hair was disheveled, and his countenance was such that I knew he did not feel completely comfortable.

I later found out what I suspected immediately: that he didn't want dessert to cap off his Sunday meal; he needed a Sunday meal. He needed food for his family and place for his baby to sleep that night. He needed help.

There he stood. One by one, we bought our cookbooks and our cakes, and there he stood. I'm sure a few people spoke to him, "Excuse me," while they nudged past him for the next dessert table.

Finally, when everyone was gone, there he stood, still with empty pockets. No cake, no pie, no cookies, no recipe book. Empty pockets, empty face, empty hope.

He and I talked for a couple of minutes. I discovered that he needed help, wrapped in love. I did what I thought I could to help.

I doubt if I'll ever see that man again. But I pray that he climbed into a clean bed that night with renewed hope in his heart and assured love in his soul.

That Sunday was Palm Sunday. The conclusion to my sermon that morning was this:

"To see as Jesus sees is to see the individual faces and needs of those around us. When Jesus looks at Houston, I don't think He sees one of the largest cities in the country with all of its buildings and heavy traffic—a city that wishes it had a football team. I think he sees a young person afraid to tell her parents the truth. He sees a homeless father hoping that the spirit of Holy Week opens some passerby's heart."

I didn't plant the man on the porch to see if anyone would live the sermon. I think God did.

—Allen Reasons was pastor of a church in Houston when this story occurred. Now he is pastoring in West Virginia.

## call to worship for the fourth Sunday in Lent

LEADER: Be glad in the Lord and rejoice,  
O righteous ones,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

PEOPLE: You are a hiding place for me;

LEADER: You preserve me from trouble;

PEOPLE: You surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

LEADER: Be glad in the Lord and rejoice,  
O righteous ones,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

PEOPLE: Steadfast love surrounds those  
who trust in the Lord.

Psalm 32:7, 10-11

# Oh, Blessed Is He

## a hymn for Palm Sunday

*John Ballenger, b. 1963*

LYONS 10.10.11.11.

arr. from J. Michael Haydn?, 1737-1806

Palm Sunday  
Year B  
Mark 11: 1-11  
Philippians 2:5-11

1. Oh, blessed is he who leads this parade.  
Our hopes in his pow'r, we loudly proclaim.  
Hosanna, our Savior, it's surely God's will.  
We follow you gladly, our dreams to fulfill.
2. The hour is now late, the crowds are all gone,  
and Jesus revealed—a fraud all along.  
Not leader, no power, no sign from above,  
just symbols and stories of God's rich deep love.
3. That love it does shock and our views reverse;  
it takes of the last, and makes them the first.  
The meek they are blessed and the humble raised high,  
and Jesus our dreaming may magnify.
4. The things that we see, are not as they seem.  
And God in the dust, the dust does redeem—  
incarnate in Jesus, in serving he leads,  
and from his obedience his honor proceeds.



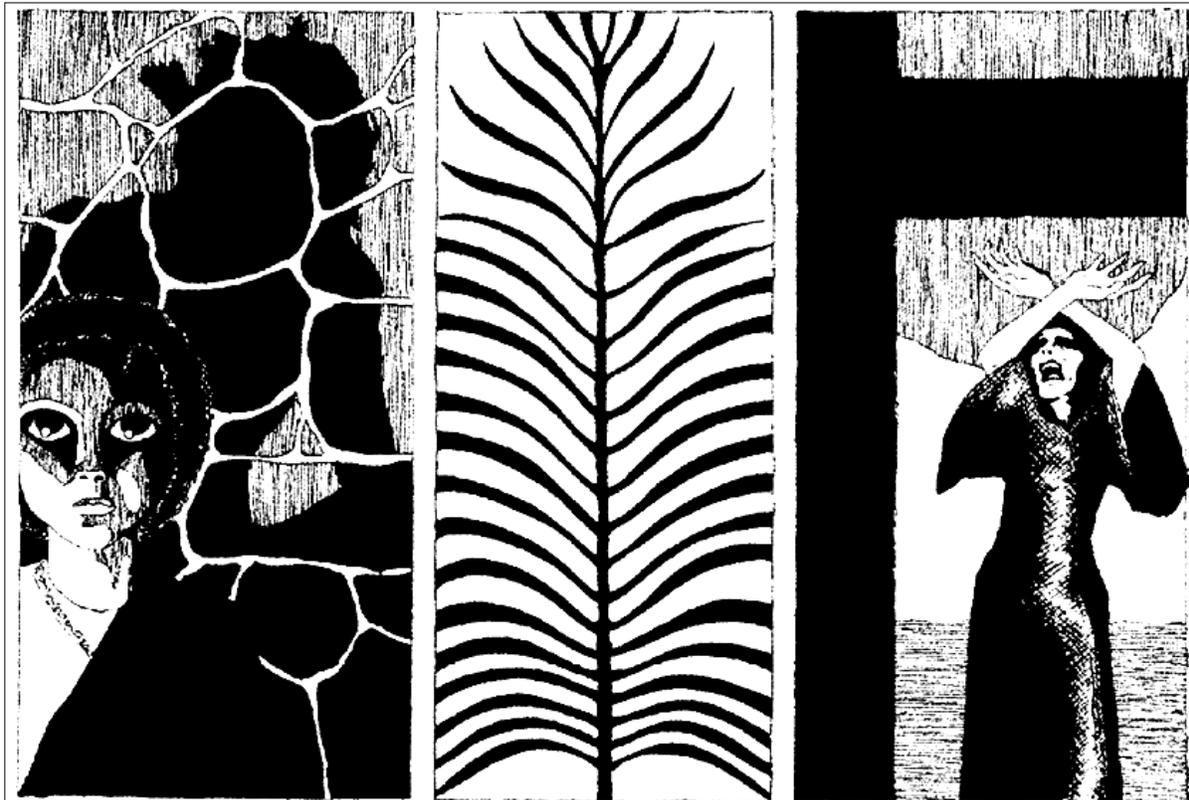
*art by René Boldt*

*John Ballenger, a minister in Decatur, Georgia, is the poetry and drama editor for Seeds of Hope. John asks that you let him know if you use the hymn, and, if possible, send a copy of your church bulletin for that service. Send it to the Seeds of Hope office at 602 James, Waco, TX 76706, and we'll see that he receives it.*

# What Does God's Love Look Like?

## Thoughts for Holy Week

by Brett Younger



art by Robert Askins

If you were handed Crayolas and construction paper and were told to come up with a picture of God's love what would you draw? Would you draw green grass and flowers on a sunny day? Would you draw a happy family at a picnic? The people at the foot of the cross said that God's love looks like Jesus dying.

When the disciples preached and wrote about Jesus' death they said that it looked like the forgiveness of God. They had trouble explaining the connection between the cross and forgiveness, but they were sure that if you could picture God's forgiveness it would look like Jesus dying. When people hurt us, we don't suffer in order to forgive them. Suffering is the shape of forgiveness.

Imagine a wife untrue to her husband, through no fault on his part. She thinks he knows what she's done, but she doesn't confess and she doesn't stop being untrue. Her husband loves her and suffers because of what she's doing. She sees his suffering and is moved by it. He obviously loves her. She asks for and receives forgiveness. His love and forgiveness change her. His suffering love creates a new relationship. The costly forgiveness of God looks like the cross.

Several years ago, I went with a group of friends to see a film on Jesus' life. We planned to go to dinner afterwards and

talk about what we didn't like. As I watched the movie I made mental notes on the historical inaccuracies. The temple was smaller than that. The disciples weren't that old. John the Baptist's dungeon didn't look like Joan of Arc's dungeon. I felt like Roger Ebert going to church. When Jesus carried the cross I started to point out that victims only carried the crosspiece, but then I realized that the woman next to me was crying. The church is made up of people who have caught a glimpse of the suffering love and painful forgiveness of God.

The cross taught the disciples what goes on in God's heart. God feels the pain of the hurting. God suffers with orphans, widows, and the poor. The disciples thought they saw something of God in a vulnerable baby born among the homeless, living as an immigrant, associating with outcasts, comparing the kingdom to receiving a little child, being executed as a criminal and being buried in a borrowed tomb. They came to believe that God is with us when we are alienated, suffering, and dying.

Friedrich Nietzsche said, "The last Christian died upon the cross." It's an overstatement, but most people don't live with God's suffering love.

Sixteen years ago, while a seminary student, I was the associate pastor at an inner city church in Louisville, Kentucky.

The church is in the poorest part of town. Everyone who can has moved to the suburbs. No one was there by choice—except the pastor. As the membership escaped, the church went from six hundred in attendance to less than one hundred. The pastor had a fine reputation. He had chances to go to a more attractive position, no one would have blamed him, but he stayed. Twenty-five years he stayed—marrying and burying, loving the ones left behind.

At most nursing homes there are victims of Alzheimer's who no longer know where or even who they are. After a while, quite understandably, their families stop visiting so often—except for a few husbands and wives, children and friends, broken-hearted people whose loved one hasn't recognized them for years, but they keep coming. It's painful for them to be around someone they love, now so little like themselves, but they keep coming day after day, week after week, year after year.

A retired woman tutors a fourth grader who doesn't seem

to respond in any way. She wonders if she's doing any good and guesses that she isn't, but she keeps coming.

A nurse has been told countless times that he needs to stop being so personally involved, but he keeps giving his heart to his patients. Each time one of them dies, he goes to the funeral and grieves with the family.

A single woman gives her money to those whom she thinks need it more than she does. The people whose light bills she helps pay don't think about how the woman could use the money herself.

A father keeps loving his wayward son with all his heart though the son stopped caring long ago. Everyone tells the father to give up, but he keeps the porch light on, just in case.

Some people reflect the suffering love of God that's reflected in the cross. At first glance, they may look foolish, but if we look carefully we'll see that they look like Jesus, like children of God.

—Brett Younger is a minister in Waco, Texas.

# Sharing the Wounds of Christ

## a litany for Holy Friday

by Brett Younger

LEADER: Let us challenge one another to share the wounds of Christ.

PEOPLE: God give us the courage to turn the other cheek,

LEADER: To spend time with people who can give us nothing,

PEOPLE: To stand with people who are the underdogs,

LEADER: To care for people who have made terrible mistakes,

PEOPLE: To do good that will earn us no applause,

LEADER: To share food with the hungry,

PEOPLE: To become a better friend to someone with AIDS,

LEADER: To do those tasks we all find discomfoting,

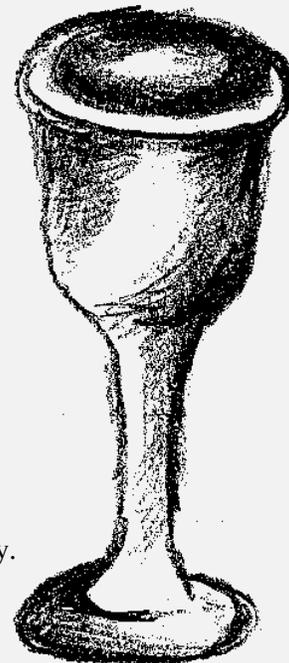
PEOPLE: To lovingly hold hands stiffened by arthritis,

LEADER: To take other people's children to the park,

PEOPLE: To really listen to a lonely person,

LEADER: To treat discarded people as the children of God they are,

ALL: God, give us the courage to do these things, and to do them with joy.



art by Lenora Mathis

*Brett Younger is a minister in Waco, Texas. See page 23 for the meditation from which this litany is taken.*

# Sharing the Wounds of the Cross

a meditation for Holy Friday

by Brett Younger

You come home one evening from a wonderful play that made you cry. You start to pitch the program in the trash, but then you sit down, read through it again, and remember. You don't want to forget what it felt like to be there. You put the program on your dresser. You'll look at it again tomorrow. Maybe you'll throw the program away then or maybe you'll keep it a little longer.

On Monday morning, people all over Jerusalem looked at the palm branches they had left on the dresser. They didn't want to forget the day before. They started to pitch the palm branches into the trash, but then decided to keep them a little longer.

Jerusalem was going to be Camelot and Jesus was going to be King Arthur. The crowds had dreamed of trumpets, towers, long flowing robes, and sparkling silver scepters. The disciples would be the knights of the round table, shining in their armor, using might for right, battling to snuff out evil.

Five hundred years earlier, the prophet Zechariah said that one day there would be a day like Palm Sunday. That ancient promise was etched indelibly in the mind of a glory-starved nation. For half a millennium they kept an eye open for David's successor to gallop into town and assume the throne. The orchestra was forever rehearsing, "Happy days are here again."

When Jesus decided it was finally time for the world's most anticipated parade, they were ready. As he rode like a conquering king into his capital city, the people lined the street and cheered wildly. They waved their palm branches and spread them like a royal carpet. The owner of the dry cleaners suggested that everyone lay their coats before Jesus' donkey. Vendors were hawking refreshments, bags of confetti, and those obnoxious, long, skinny horns.

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest," they cheered until they were hoarse. They laughed and cried and danced and sang. The disciples thought that it was the best day they had ever known and they weren't far from the truth.

Everything, however, changed five days later when the grand marshal of the parade was carried out of town in a casket. There would be no round table, no Camelot. The path Jesus chose was revealed not only on Palm Sunday, but on Good Friday. That made it clear what it means to follow Jesus. And it isn't what we've been hoping for.

Like the Palm Sunday crowd, we want to see what we want to see. We'd like a Messiah who makes our lives easier. We have in our minds the Messiah we'd most enjoy following. But

in order to follow, we have to give up our preconceived ideas, and admit that his way leads to the cross.

In *Ah! But Your Land is Beautiful*, Alan Paton tells the story of Robert Mansfield, a white man in South Africa twenty-five years ago. Mansfield was the headmaster of a white school. He took his athletic teams to play cricket against the black schools until the department of education forbade him to do it any more. He resigned in protest. Shortly thereafter, Emmanuel Nene, a leader in the black community, came to meet him.

"I have come to see a man who resigns his job because he doesn't wish to obey an order that will prevent children from playing with one another."

"Mr. Nene, I resigned because I think it is time to go out and fight everything that separates people from one another. Do I look like a knight in shining armor?"

"Yes, you do, but you're going to get wounded. Do you know that?"

"I expect that may happen."

"Well you expect correctly, Mr. Mansfield. People don't like what you're doing. But I am thinking of joining with you in the battle."

"You're going to wear the shining armor, too."

"Yes, and I'm going to get wounded, too. Not only by the government, but also by my own people as well."

"Aren't you worried about the wounds, Mr. Nene?"

"I don't worry about the wounds. When I go up there, which is my intention, the Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' and if I say I haven't any, he will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?' I couldn't face that question."

Sharing the wounds of the cross takes a variety of forms: turning the other cheek, spending time with people who seem to have nothing to offer us, standing with the people who are losing, caring for those who've made terrible mistakes, doing good that will receive no applause, sharing food with the hungry, becoming a better friend to someone with AIDS, emptying bedpans, holding hands stiffened by arthritis, taking other people's children to the park, listening to a lonely person, treating discarded people as children of God, praying not for an easier life but for strength, following Christ on the road less-traveled, discovering God's grace.

For in following all the way to the cross, we'll find that the journey offers only one guarantee: in the long run, we'll gain far more than we lose. The cross changes all the definitions. Power, success, and even happiness, as the world knows them, belong to those who take them for themselves; but peace, love, and joy are gifts from God given to those who give themselves.

Palm Sunday, even with all the joy it represents, isn't nearly enough. Leftover palms aren't worth keeping. You and I need the cross. We need to lay down our tiny aspirations and take up the hope of following Jesus. Following Christ is hard, but if we share the cross, then by grace, at the end of the road, God will bring Easter.

—Brett Younger is a minister in Waco, Texas.

# Reflections on Holy Week

by Matthew Hanchey

## Mixed Feelings



I have mixed feelings about Easter. Part of it has to do with the fact that Jesus has so many names, so many roles in God's plan, that I cannot keep track of them all. I have trouble identifying all the things he is to me. Here is Jesus: the King of Kings and a personal friend, all-knowing yet concerned about the most trivial events in my life. Frequently, in reflections and conversations, God reveals a new face to me, so I try to explore it, to learn how God fulfills my needs and desires more completely than I had known.

Recently, I was explaining to a friend how my understanding of my relationship with Christ was based on my dealings with my earthly father. She pointed out that God was also a listener, a comforter, a healer—in other words, like a mother. I was taken aback, not that I couldn't conceive of God that way so much as that I never had before. So I prayed that I might more fully see God as a nurturer and listener.

Soon after that, another friend expressed his concern that he was not giving back to God enough of what he had been given, and that this made the thought of judgment a terrifying one. How different a picture than mine! I think that I understand God as one thing, and then I find I've lost my handle on the others.

This was in the back of my mind when I was sitting around a campfire with some of my friends. One girl present was a stranger to me, a friend of a friend, but when she learned that I was a Christian, she asked me this question: "How do you feel about the crucifixion?" I knew the answer without thinking.

"It's the most important part of Christianity," I replied, and then, to show I meant business, I followed by stating, "In fact, it's the most important event in history."

"So you think it was a good thing? You're glad it happened?" she asked.

In my mind I retraced the steps that led to the cross. It's a familiar story, and I always have the same reactions. I feel betrayed myself when Judas kisses Jesus in the garden. I'm indignant at the way the Pharisees railroad Jesus and the way Pilate surrenders his authority. Why didn't somebody do the right things and put a stop to this?

"No, no. It was a terrible thing. If I had been a Pharisee, I would have spoken up," I proclaimed proudly.

"But if anyone at all had done the right thing," she returned, "it seems that that person would have condemned you to a life without hope for salvation." I tried to explain to her that it was a necessary evil and that Jesus really wanted those things to happen, and she nodded and smiled but seemed dissatisfied with my eventual explanation.

Actually, I was, too.

I cannot bring myself to rejoice in the events leading to his death, but I obviously have no cause to rejoice in anything otherwise. I can soothe myself a little by thinking that he knew ahead of time everything that was going to happen. That he knew how he would be treated, who would betray him, and

how he would die. That the final outcome was already assured. But I also know that nobody likes to be betrayed, rejected, and murdered—especially by loved ones, and everybody is Jesus' loved one. Jesus didn't pray, "Let this cup pass from me," just to have something to say. He suffered, and that is why it was a sacrifice.

I feel betrayed myself when Judas kisses Jesus in the garden. I'm indignant at the way the Pharisees railroad Jesus and the way Pilate surrenders his authority. Why didn't somebody do the right things and put a stop to this?

This Easter I have to deal with two perspectives on Christ. When I rejoice in the risen Messiah, I am going to have to mourn for the fallen one. When I am grateful to the risen Christ for the life he has given me, I won't forget how each day I betray him and crucify him all over again. I have mixed feelings about Easter and about Jesus, too, but I rest in the faith that he does not have mixed feelings about me.

—Matt Hanchey is a graduate student in biology at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

# The Women Went That Morning

## a hymn for Easter Sunday

*John Ballenger, b. 1963*

LANCASHIRE 7.6.7.6.D.

Henry T. Smart, 1813-1879

Easter Sunday  
Year B  
Mark 16:1-8

1. The women went that morning  
to see where Jesus lay.  
They wanted to anoint him;  
they sought a place to pray.  
A stranger in a white robe  
said, "Jesus is not here  
He goes ahead before you,  
and to you he'll appear.
2. They left the tomb of Jesus  
amazed and terrified.  
The stranger said "Tell others,"  
but they did not comply.  
The heavy stone was rolled back,  
their heavy hearts remained.  
Their Savior was not with them,  
and fear their hearts constrained.
3. We hunger for the simple;  
we long for what is nice.  
As if it must be easy,  
believers to entice.  
But resurrection glory  
proceeds from darkest dread,  
to face the loved one buried  
now raised up from the dead.
4. God waits for us to notice  
that miracles abound,  
and Easter truth surrounds us,  
wherever truth is found.  
The mysteries of our faith  
are true to God's own way,  
and we arise to wonder  
each resurrection day.



*John Ballenger, a minister in Decatur, Georgia, is the poetry and drama editor for Seeds of Hope. John asks that you let him know if you use the hymn, and, if possible, send a copy of your church bulletin for that service. Send it to the Seeds of Hope office at 602 James, Waco, TX 76706, and we'll see that he receives it.*