

Sundays of Lent 2025 Messages

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)

Russell, Kentucky

*Ash Wednesday – March 5 – “Opening Our Hidden Life
To God”*

*First Sunday in Lent – March 9 – “The War Against The
Desert Fox”*

*Second Sunday in Lent – March 16 – “Check Your Ego At
The Door”*

*Third Sunday in Lent – March 23 – “Are We A good Fig Or
A Rotten Fig?”*

*Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 30 – “Let Me Tell You About
This Guy”*

Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 6 – “Preparing To Die”

"Opening Our Hidden Life To God"

Message for *Ash Wednesday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 5, 2024

JOEL 2: 1-2, 12-17 * 2 COR. 5: 20b-6:10

MATTHEW 6: 1-6, 16-21



GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND
FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS
RISEN!!

We keep a lot about ourselves hidden. We have secret thoughts, secret desires, secret feelings. We have a lot to keep hidden. We hide things from one another because we're ashamed of what's inside of us. One spouse may hide something from the other spouse; a child may hide something from a parent or from another sibling; a child may hide something from a teacher, so many possibilities. We humans hide things!

Some people may think we have a pure heart, but we know that impure thoughts have often entered our heart. Others may think we are unselfish, but we know how much selfishness remains within us. Still others may think we are strong and courageous, but we know how weak and afraid we really are.

I don't believe we ever come to know anyone completely. You can experience every possible intimacy with someone; you can live with someone through the passage of years; you can share great joys and great sorrows with someone, and you will still not know everything about them. People will still surprise and

sometimes, shock you. There is an inner part of people we never see. There is a hidden part of ourselves we never reveal. A little girl was riding along on her bike when she bumped her head on the low hanging branch of a tree. She ran into the house hollering, "Mom! Mom, Joey hurt me!" Mom looked up from what she was doing and said, "Sissy, Joey didn't hurt you. Joey's not even here. He went to the grocery store with your daddy."

The little girl got this startled look on her face. Then in a bewildered sort of voice she said, "Whoa! You mean stuff like this can happen on its own? Bummer!"

In today's Scripture from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus directs our attention to our hidden life. He draws the contrast between our outward appearance to others and our inner spiritual reality.

Jesus tells us that we can easily become caught in the contradiction of audiences. On the outside we can appear to be seeking God, or trying to do what's right; but on the inside, we can be preoccupied with making a certain impression on other people. It's not God's approval we're seeking, but the applause of others so we put on a show.

Winston Churchill once admitted to three impossibilities: To walk up a ladder leaning toward you; To kiss a girl leaning away from you; remember this is Winston Churchill so it would also apply to trying to kiss a man leaning away from you; and third, speaking on a subject you know nothing about.

Today is Ash Wednesday; if you didn't know, it's the first day of Lent: For your information, I looked it up in the Bible (it's not there!) and there's no verse that says, "Thou shalt celebrate Lent." Moses didn't have that as one of the commandments on those tablets; there are no commandments to celebrate Lent.

Well, regardless, here we are again! Today we enter into a new season of Lent. Although the church calendar rolls over to a new year with Advent, to me there's something about Lent that feels like a new beginning.

I think a lot of it is the time of year, with spring approaching. The word "Lent" actually comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "lencen." It means "lengthen" and is connected to the lengthening of days with spring's approach. Don't forget to turn your clocks ahead one hour this Saturday night.

The season lasts 40 days, not including the Sundays within Lent. Sunday is always a little day of resurrection. 40 days has biblical significance. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights when Noah was in the ark. Moses stayed on the top of Mount Sinai for 40 days. And before he launched his ministry, Jesus retreated to the wilderness and fasted for 40 days. Then he was tempted by Satan.

So a 40 day season is a timely one. Lent has always been a season of preparation. It's a revival period. It's meant to stir up the embers of our faith, to rekindle the flames of our devotion and our hope in the Lord.

Traditionally, Lent is associated with practices to stimulate and energize our faith. It's also observed by devotional readings, prayer and acts such as fasting and almsgiving.

We could think of the season of Lent as a long road that stretches out before us. We walk along this road during the weeks of Lent, not concentrating on the tiny steps we take, but instead, focusing on our destination and our destination is yes, the cross of Jesus! The cross of Jesus casts a long shadow over this Lenten road and this shadow reaches all the way back to the beginning, to Ash Wednesday. Tonight we lift our eyes to the cross as we begin our Lenten journey with confession, then

ashes on our foreheads as a sign of repentance, and then finally, the gift of Holy Communion.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Only one other time in the life of a Christian besides Ash Wednesday do you hear these words. Of course if you are the one being buried, by the time the pastor says these words, it is too late for you to do anything about it. The prophet Joel announces to the city as if a battle is expected. "Sound the trumpet" that military instrument used to rouse the troops' spirits during battle. "The Day of the Lord is coming near." We are to prepare for a battle with the most difficult enemy of all and no it's not Satan, it's us, you and me. We are our own worst enemies!

John the Baptist preached repentance, Jesus said we should repent. One simple meaning of the word 'repentance' is 'to turn around.' Lent calls us to turn around toward God, toward our crucified Lord. Once we've turned, we walk toward him. He is our focus this season. The focus of Lent is not ourselves and not the opinions of others.

Joel encourages the people of Israel to return to the Lord with all your heart. In the midst of many peoples, cultures and foreign influences Israel grew more and more like the cultures around her than the people of the covenant God had led out of Egypt. This steady erosion of Israel's faith and identity led the prophet Joel to conclude with a question, "Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" - a question worth asking even today.

Is God to be found in a job, a building, a church, a lifestyle, a relationship or a car? If you believe the advertising messages around you, most of which try to associate ultimate human happiness with a job, building, lifestyle or car, you will find that we are not too different than the Israel of Joel's time.

Christians have simply become too watered down living in our surrounding culture just like the Israelites of Joel's era.

Jesus talks about this in our Gospel reading from Matthew 6. In this chapter, he warns you, me and the whole Christian community not to lose our direction and our focus on God. As we walk in our journey of faith, we are in danger of doing just this; it's too easy to start to concentrate on the little steps that we take, the good deeds that we do. When we do, the opinions and approval of others begin to matter more than they should, much more than they should.

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."

I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse in his book, *THE MESSAGE*: "Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding." And folks, who is our audience?

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is telling us that when we practice giving alms, when we pray, when we fast, we must not do these things for public approval. This is like watching the little footsteps we take along our journey of faith and waiting for the applause of others for our meager progress. When we live this way, it's all about the approval of others and not at all about our relationship with God.

On this Ash Wednesday, we lift our eyes and our hearts to the cross of Christ. Yes, we will pray; yes, we will give offerings; yes, some of us may even fast. But my hope is that all these things are because of Christ and not because of any hope for approval and recognition. Most/all of you came forward and received the sign of the cross in ashes on your foreheads as a

sign of true repentance. This can be very meaningful for us, can be very meaningful, for us as individuals and as a worshipping community, we are all marked by sin and the power of death. Ashes, especially on the forehead of a baby, are a startling reminder of the harsh reality of sin and death, and our need for forgiveness and salvation.

This harsh reality comes home to us even more strongly when we stand at the open grave of a loved one, as I did this past Friday for a member of St John, whom I had visited twice and communed once on a couple of occasions. By the time we get to the grave, we have run out of things to do. Our hands are empty. Most likely everything has been tried; doctors, hospitals, prayers, positive thinking, good deeds, special diets and whatever remedies are at hand. We are mortals, flesh and blood. We may be able to put death off sometimes, but we can't stop it, and we certainly can't raise ourselves from the grave.

Our hands are empty, but God's are not. Because God loves us and we are His children thru Christ, we have the gift, the absolute gift, of new life beyond the grave. This is the promise and the relationship that hold us in life and in death. This is a promise worthy of our attention, worthy of the commitment of our whole selves. This is why we walk the road of Lent with our eyes on our crucified Lord and Savior.

In this season of Lent, listen to Jesus. Let's all stop looking at our own little footsteps and waiting for the approval of the crowd. As we live in relationship with Christ, our prayers don't have to be impressive and long; our giving should be generous, yes, but done in secret; and our fasting or our devotional reading or our self-denial should never, never be flaunted for public consumption. God hears and sees us and, as Jesus promises in our gospel reading, we will be blessed by God.

You and I are on the road to the cross. Keep your eyes on Jesus and his saving death and resurrection for you. Do pray; do help others; do discipline yourselves with faithful practices. But, do them all in thanksgiving and to the glory of the God who saves you.

Ash Wednesday gives us the opportunity to touch, to feel, to smell, to see that we were made from dust and to dust each and every one of us will return. Ash Wednesday reminds us that life is short; it is a precious gift from God, a gift we need to cherish.

Only you and God know what it is in your faith walk that you need to work on. Whether that needs to be done in a very public way that others may see or whether it is done behind closed doors as you get on your knees in prayer with God, that is for you and God to decide. In the words of our ancestors of the faith: "I invite you, therefore, in the name of the church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word."

Lent is the Season of the Church Year that brings suffering to the fore. Beginning tonight with the imposition of ashes we move week by week closer to the Cross of Christ. Lent culminates on Good Friday - good for us, yes, but an awful experience of suffering for Jesus. It's the worst night of my life; I can't imagine just how bad it was for Jesus.

This is, therefore, a good time for us to bring our disappointments, our sorrows, and our hurts to God. There is room for all of them under the shadow of His Cross.

AMEN!!

“THE WAR AGAINST THE DESERT FOX”

Message for the First Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 9, 2025

DEUTERONOMY 26: 1-11 * ROMANS 10: 8B-13 * LUKE 4: 1-13

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

A husband and wife both found themselves unemployed. Day after day they pounded the pavement to look for new jobs. Meanwhile, they pinched their pennies to stretch their funds. One evening, the man came home and he found his wife wearing a dress he'd never seen before. “Is that a new dress?” he asked.

The wife blushed and stuttered, “Yes, honey, it is. I – I – I bought it today.”

Why on earth would you buy a new dress? You know we don't have any income!”

“I know,” she said, “I was downtown to apply for a job there. And I passed by the window of Sharon's Dress Shop. And there was this dress hanging in the window, and it was so cute. I thought, ‘there's no harm in trying it on.’ So I went inside. I tried it on, and it fit so perfectly. It's like Satan was sitting on my shoulder, urging me to buy the dress.”

Her husband said, “When that happens, you need to tell the devil, ‘Satan, get behind me!’”

“That's exactly what I did!” she replied, “But then Satan said, ‘You know, it looks great from back here, too!’”

If you haven't caught on from my story, today I will be preaching on something that will apply to every man, every woman, every boy and every girl.

Sometimes Preachers have to preach on subjects that apply to only part of the congregation.

For example:

- On Mother's Day, the sermon is directed primarily to the Mothers of this church
- On Father's Day, the sermon is directed primarily to the Fathers of this church.
- On Grandparent's Day, the sermon is directed to the grandparents.
- On Memorial Day, the sermon is directed to the military and more to those who have passed away who served in the military. On Veterans' Day, the message is directed to all those who have served in the military or are serving in the military today.

But when a pastor preaches about TEMPTATION, it applies to every man, woman, boy and girl. Every Bible character that we hold in high esteem had to deal with temptations just like we do. Believe it or not, the Angels of heaven had to deal with temptation, and one third of them failed the test of temptation.

The Lord Jesus had to deal with temptation.

It doesn't matter if a person is a pastor, deacon, teacher, choir member, or a lay person; we ALL have to deal with temptation.

I read about the pastor of a church in Indiana who said when he was a young pastor he would hug the older women because there was really no problem with temptation. But, he said that as the years have gone by, he has had to stop that because the older he gets, the better the older women look!

Every child of God, remember we're all children of God, and each and every one of us has to deal with temptation every day of our lives whether we are young or old.

As Christians, we are called to be fishers of men, but there's an important truth we often overlook- Satan is also a fisherman. He longs to lure you in and hook you with temptation. We all face the struggles of temptation, and even Jesus was tempted. However, the key difference is that Jesus never got hooked.

As a fisherman, I've learned a few important lessons about fishing: Always fish in places where you know there are fish and understand the conditions of the water; Discover what the fish are biting on; Be persistent in your efforts.

Satan is a skilled fisherman and employs these same strategies when he casts his lines. Since he is not omnipresent, he cannot be everywhere at once. Satan carefully chooses where and when to fish. When he decides on a location, he selects the right lure to use and goes to work; and make no mistake, he is relentless in his pursuit. This morning, let's explore how we can gain victory over temptation and avoid becoming one of Satan's catches.

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.”

Jesus' being tempted in the wilderness shows us that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. Led by the Holy Spirit, He faced these challenges to confront sin directly. The temptations He experienced reveal not only His reliance on God but also represent the struggles that everyone faces. These temptations can draw us away from trusting in God and His promises, tempting us with quick fixes and worldly gains. On a practical level, this account reminds believers today to be alert and prepared when facing temptation. Jesus fasted and prayed to prepare for His trials, highlighting the need for spiritual habits in our lives, highlighting the need for spiritual habits in our lives. When does Satan tempt us? I'm glad you asked.

For example, the devil tempts us when we are...feeling spiritually strong or having a high spiritual experience.

Jesus was tempted right after His baptism. At His baptism, God affirmed Him by saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This shows that temptation can often arise after we experience a significant spiritual moment or achievement.

The devil tempts us when we are...physically weak, such as when we're sick, hungry, or tired.

Jesus went without food for 40 days, which would have put a huge physical strain on His body. Temptations often come when we're feeling weak, such as during illness, hunger, or fatigue. I once fasted for 36 hours when I was in Luther League

many years ago, nothing to eat and only unsweetened apple juice to drink and not whenever I wanted some.

The devil tempts us when we are...isolated or alone, without the support of friends, family, or community.

Jesus was alone during this time. His disciples were not there. Temptation often happens when we are alone.

At the beginning of WWII, the Germans pioneered a new form of mobile armored warfare. It is referred to as the Nazi Blitzkrieg. The famous commander of the 7th Panzer Division during the African Campaign, and then the 1940 invasion of France, was Erwin Rommel. His leadership of German and Italian forces in North Africa established his reputation as one of the best tank commanders of the war and earned him the nickname "The Desert Fox."

The Desert Fox created tank tactics that included using combined ground forces, speed, deception and terrain to surprise and overwhelm enemy forces. The largest tank battle was in Kursk, Ukraine involving some 6000 tanks, 2,000,000 troops and 4000 aircraft.

When General George Patton counter-attacked Field Marshal Rommel in World War II, Patton is reported to have shouted in the thick of battle: "I read your book, Rommel!! I read your book!" He knew the German leader's strategy and planned his moves accordingly.

After Jesus was baptized, the Gospels tell us that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where for 40 days He was attacked and tempted by the devil to disobey God's plan of salvation. The tactics Jesus used were the words of Scripture to defeat the "Wiley Fox" called the devil in those 40 desert wilderness days.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, we see a powerful lesson about dealing with temptation. Jesus, as the Son of God, faced the devil as a human- Feeling the same struggles we do. Understanding what tempts us can help us live better lives. Temptation can come in everyday situations, like when we want something now instead of waiting, or when we seek power and recognition at the expense of others.

Satan uses a different set of lures; first off, Satan casts the lure of...Sinning against God.

Satan was trying to tempt Jesus into sinning against God, which would disqualify Him from being the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Throughout these temptations, Satan aimed to persuade Jesus to avoid the cross, despite it being the means through which He would save everyone who believes. Satan understood that if he could convince Jesus to skip the cross, then all of humanity would be doomed and would have to endure eternal punishment for their sins.

Satan casts the lure of...doubting our relationship with God.

Satan's goal in tempting us is to undermine our faith and relationship with God. He seeks to make us question our identity as children of God and encourage us to be self-sufficient, independent from Him. The 1st temptation is a great example of this.

Notice how Satan begins with doubt, saying, "IF You are the Son of God". This is a classic tactic to make us question our identity and relationship with God. Instead of trusting in God's provision and care, Satan wants us to take matters into our own hands. This is a subtle but insidious message that Satan loves to convey: that we can meet our own needs without depending on God; but this is a lie. The truth is, as children of God, we are called to humility and dependence on Him. We are not self-sufficient; we need God's guidance, protection, and provision in our lives.

Bottom line, Know...how to not get hooked. Every fish knows the way not to get caught is don't open your mouth. But just like that juicy worm, Satan offers up some juicy temptations.

While the World often advises people to simply "say no" to temptation, there's an even more important aspect of resisting temptation; being prepared to respond to it with the truth. Jesus, when faced with Satan's temptations, didn't just refuse to comply; he was ready to quote Scripture in response. With a simple phrase, "It is written," Jesus defeated the devil's plans, drawing on God's Word that lived within Him. This shows us that resisting temptation is not just about refusing it, but about being equipped to counter it with the truth. By living in the power of God's Word, Jesus demonstrated that we can overcome the evil one with the same strength and wisdom He showed us.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, it showed us that we all face spiritual battles. The devil tried to tempt Jesus, knowing his weaknesses, but Jesus resisted

through prayer, Scripture, and faith. This shows us that we can do the same. This passage reminds us that temptation is a common struggle. We can find comfort in knowing we're not alone. By leaning on our faith community and God's promises, we can stand strong against temptation. Ultimately, this passage is not just about resisting temptation, but about deepening our love and commitment to God, and living faithfully as His servants. But we must always be on guard against the wiles of the devil. The last verse tells us: 'When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.'

Satan wasn't finished with Jesus. "Nailed to the cross Jesus would hear the last temptation repeated as a taunt. Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us." But there was no rescue, no miracle, no easy, painless path for Jesus to save others, quite simple, he could not save himself and us."

None of us ever gets to the point where we are beyond being tested. Through His life, His Temptation, His suffering, His death and resurrection Jesus offered His perfect Self as the only acceptable substitute for our broken commandments. When Jesus had completed all that the prophets had promised He would do, He went to the cross in our place to take on His shoulders the wrath of God we deserved.

Folks, it is not a sin to be tempted; no, but it is a sin when he puts these thoughts in our minds and we choose to dwell on them and worse, to act on them.

May God bless you today as you face the storms of temptation that come your way! Every time they come, just look up and smile at the God who loves you, and wants to help you get through the storms of temptation.

AMEN!!

“CHECK YOUR EGO AT THE DOOR”

Message for the Second Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 16, 2025

GENESIS 15: 1-12, 17-18 * PHILIPPIANS 3: 17-4:1 * LUKE 13: 31-35

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED.

Restaurants, clubs, and upscale bars sometimes have rather strict policies about what you can bring in with you. Some want to keep things like hats, coats, and briefcases out of people's way, so they put a check room just inside the door, and post signs at the entrance that say something like, “For the safety and convenience of all our customers, please check your hats, coats, and bags at the door.”

Those of you who were alive in the 80s which is about all of you and alert back in the 80s which may not be as many may remember the recording of the song “We Are the World,” whose proceeds went to help famine victims in Africa. Some of the top recording artists from a wide variety of fields all got together to sing the song.

Quincy Jones, music and record producer, who passed away this past November, had been in the business a long time, and he knew very well what stars and celebrities are like. But he also knew that the project they were working on was important, and that if they did it well, the whole would be greater than the sum of its parts — their cause was bigger than any one star, or even than all of them put together. And so he put a note at the entrance to the recording studio when all the stars came: “Check your ego at the door.”

Apparently the sign did its job — it was quite remarkable how that group of very diverse stars was able to work and sing together to record “We Are the World.” They understood — for that little time, at least — that there was no room for pride, arrogance, or celebrity status when they had such a big and important task ahead of them.

There was a much bigger and infinitely more important task ahead of Jesus at the time he spoke the words of our gospel today. His mission wasn't the feeding of thousands or even millions of hungry mouths — it was the salvation of billions upon billions of lost souls, and the forgiveness of their countless sins. We've talked a number of times in the last few months about how Jesus set aside the glory that was due him as the Son of God — we can hardly call it “ego” — and humbled himself to become a man to save us.

But for anyone to receive the benefits of what Jesus came to do, or to be a part of what he's still doing today through his church, he or she must also leave all pride and arrogance behind. When you enter into God's House, into the kingdom of heaven, check your ego at the door.

As I re-read part of today's Gospel, try to look at the various people who talk or whom Jesus talks about and consider how pride plays into what they are and where they're heading: “At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you. He, Jesus, said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, Listen I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’”

So a fox is a wild animal; a chicken is a domestic animal. Foxes slink about under the cover of darkness ready to strike quickly and tear animal flesh apart with its sharp teeth. A chicken roosts at night, doesn't even have teeth, forget that stuff about hen's teeth, and feeds on insects and grain and when I was a kid, I found out even baby mice. These are two very different animals and yet here they appear almost side by side in our reading from Luke.

My family and I spent the first 13 years or so living with my grandfather and he raised chickens, lots of chickens. He would even order little ones every spring to replace most of the ones who found their residence in our freezer. We didn't have to worry about foxes; he had a bunch of foxhounds that he also raised but then again, foxes weren't a problem, rats were. The little chicks didn't stand much of a chance against those rats. But we're talking about foxes and one specifically.

Herod. Herod is the fox in our gospel reading. He is a ruthless man. It is thought that he had two of his own sons, his own sons, murdered because he feared their

growing political power. Now, Herod is out to kill Jesus. The Pharisees, those good, honest to goodness, trustworthy Pharisees, not the hypocritical Pharisees, (is there a difference?) who were pretending concern for Jesus, come to warn Jesus of this. Maybe they hope to intimidate and frighten Jesus, for they are certainly no allies of his. But Jesus is not intimidated by either the Pharisees' scare tactic or Herod's threats.

What was going on with these Pharisees and their egos? We have to ask ourselves why they were giving Jesus this "warning" about Herod wanting to kill him. Could they really have had Jesus' best interests at heart? Not likely.

Since Jesus gave them a message to take back to Herod, they were probably working — at least indirectly — with Herod and his people, even though normally they didn't get along at all. They were willing to work together for a common purpose, though — getting Jesus out of the way.

That was why the Pharisees were being such "nice guys" and warning Jesus about Herod — who probably really had no intention of killing Jesus. Jesus was a threat to them and their position in Jewish society, because up till now, everyone thought the Pharisees had all the answers and so they had tremendous influence. But the bigger Jesus got in the eyes of the people, the smaller they became, and they didn't like that. So far they hadn't had much success stopping or discrediting Jesus, so now they were trying to manipulate him into moving out of the countryside, where the people were flocking to him, and on to Jerusalem, where they had more influence and he could be more easily controlled. In their sin-blinded unbelief and arrogance, they didn't see that they were trying to pull a fast one on the all-knowing and almighty Son of God.

But Jesus, of course, would not be fooled. His answer to them was basically, "It doesn't matter what you say to me or what anyone might do. I am going to do what I came to do, and I am going to finish it when it's time to finish it. I will not be manipulated into serving your selfish purposes."

It's pretty easy to see the sin in what these Pharisees were doing. And when we look at all the times in the Gospels when they went up against Jesus, their arrogance is pretty obvious.

But, sadly, this kind of manipulative arrogance didn't die with the Pharisees. It's still quite common today, and it's not always so easy to see, because it's often

disguised as knowledge or sincerity, just like the Pharisees' warning about Herod here.

Jesus declares that he must be 'on his way' and that he will reach Jerusalem. There is something much larger than Herod the fox working in this world and in this ministry of Jesus. Remember the time when the crowd outside of Nazareth sought to throw Jesus over the brow of the hill, but Jesus 'passed through the midst of them and went on his way.' Jesus has a mission, and God is with him to complete it. No one but God is truly in control of Jesus' life and mission, not the crowd in the temple that day in Nazareth and certainly not Herod.

You and I will encounter plenty of foxes in our own Lenten journey and walk of faith, foxes that seem out to get us. Sometimes that fox is our own illness or despair, sometimes our own weakness and sin. Or we might face the situation of someone in the work place, someone we know socially, or even someone in our family who deliberately hurts us. Such foxes can be untruthful, false friends, sneaky, and deceptive. Worse is when we fear for our lives in a situation of domestic violence. We've also seen foxes in the public arena. Smear campaigns still take place in public elections, using the power of innuendo and scare tactics to intimidate and defeat many a good person.

There are a lot of foxes in our world. Jesus shows us how to deal with them. Jesus is clear about who holds his life and his future. God does. Jesus doesn't let Herod's threats stop him from doing what he knows is God's will for him and the world. Jesus will go to Jerusalem. Herod can't stop him. Jesus will be killed, but it won't be Herod's doing. And, his death will not be God's final word either. The final victory belongs to God and the risen Christ.

The foxes of this world don't have the last word over us either. Lent is a journey. Life is a journey. As you and I seek to live faithfully, it is important for you and me to remember who holds us, and who has the final word over us. God does. So we face the foxes with courage and determination, refusing to be drawn into their hurtful and evil ways. Their way is finally doomed. Instead, the way of love, God's way, will triumph.

Jesus uses the illustration of a hen gathering her chicks to describe what God is about. God desires to gather all of us into a place of protection and safety. Seems hopeless, though, after all, what chance does a hen and her chicks stand against the wily fox? But we know, we know the whole story and we know it's not hopeless.

God will have the victory. God raised Jesus from the dead and God will save us too. The journey ends with the powerful grace of God.

Jesus is referring to a coming day of judgment. He refers to the natural characteristic of hens who will vigorously protect their young. If there is a bird of prey about, they will cluck and call their chicks to find protection under her wings. After a devastating fire in Yellowstone National Park, a ranger found a dead, burned prairie chicken. When he kicked the carcass three little chicks came running out. They had survived the fire because their mother had given her life for them.

Jesus followed God with courage and determination, sacrificing even his own life for us and the whole world. As his disciples, we are called to follow with courage and determination. God is with us, full of love and grace, seeking always to gather us as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. We don't need to let the foxes of this world frighten us and derail our mission.

Jesus is who he is, and that cannot be changed. He is a Rock that cannot be moved, and we thank God for that, because he is the Rock of our salvation! Jesus said, "I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day"—he was determined to go all the way to the cross and do everything it took to achieve our salvation. And he shows that same determination today in giving us that salvation and all his blessings, just as he promised, through his Word, through Baptism, and through the Lord's Supper.

The eternal life he secured for us with his resurrection from the dead gives us every reason to eagerly await our Savior's coming to take us home.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

“ARE WE A GOOD FIG OR A ROTTEN FIG?”

Message for the Third Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 23, 2025

ISAIAH 55: 1-9 1 * CORINTHIANS 10: 1-13 * LUKE 13: 1-9

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

There are a series of texts known as the Mesopotamia Lament Genre that were written thousands of years ago. All of these works were written when that civilization was either overwhelmed by a natural disaster like a flood, or an earthquake, a hurricane or a fire or an invading army. Interesting that we've experienced all those in this country in the past year and some right here in this area. Fortunately we haven't had to deal with the invading army.

In the Old Testament, the book of Lamentations is believed to have been written as a response to the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and in a group of works called the Pseudepigrapha. The Psalms of Solomon, a series of some 18 Psalms, religious songs and poems written by Solomon, not the book 'Song of Solomon' or the book of Psalms in our Bibles were written in response to the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans. What makes all these works fascinating are the questions they raise. In all of these situations, whether the disasters were caused by humans or by natural causes, each of the civilizations asked their gods, that's with a small g, but they asked their gods why? Some even asked the real God, why; why did God allow this to happen? What did the people do wrong to incur the wrath of the God or gods? Why was God angry at them?

We have many questions that begin with the word, "why." It's a child's favorite question-why!

How many questions can you think of that begin with "WHY?" 1) Why is the time of day when traffic moves the slowest called "rush hour?" 2) Why do we park our car in our "driveway?" 3) Why is the sky blue? 4) Why does our hair turn gray when we get older? 5) Why is freight moved by a boat called "CARgo?" 6) Why is

freight moved on wheels called a “SHIPment?” 7) Why are some things Pretty ugly? Why does something taste awfully good? These are just a few.

A question that comes to mind when I read this passage from Luke is “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

I want to share a story with you and please, pay attention to it and think like a horse. You’ll understand what I mean:

Mr. Horse was just like all the other horses on the westside of Filly. He liked making lots of bucks at his job at the Colt firearms factory. He thought of himself as a real thoroughbred stud and drove the same car as all the other studs... a Mustang convertible. Ever since he was a foal, Mr. Horse liked to drink alcohol. A lot. It made him feel like a stallion even though it made him act like a camel. His nickname was ‘Heineken’s Hoof,’ but everyone pretty much just called him Mr. Horse. Again, Mr. Horse was a normal horse like every other horse.

One day Mr. Horse was driving his Mustang convertible and stopped off at the beer trough store on the way to his paddock from the farrier. He named his sports car ‘the Mare Wrangler’ by the way. He saw his buddies from the herd at the beer trough and had a good ‘ol time. He drank and drank and then trotted out to his mustang to head to the stable. He knew he should not drink and drive, but he was a stud so he did it anyway. He was headed home and then it happened. He came around a curve near his house and drove off the road and drove into a tree. It was avoidable, but he wrecked his car.

Mr. Horse got out and could not believe his bad luck. He hit a tree in his car and now the front end was all busted up along with most of the rest of the car. He called the tow truck and it came and took his beloved car to the local repair shop.

Later that evening, his friend called him and asked about his accident and how he was feeling. It really was not an accident, but more of an on-purpose with terrible judgment that could have killed another horse. His friend asked him several times why he had gone from the beer trough store right to driving. What were you thinking? What if something worse had happened? Why didn’t you stop drinking? All he could say was ‘nay, I say, Nay! You’d have to be a horse to understand that! His friend seemed to think that Mr. Horse had done something wrong because the crash happened.

“At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus asked them, ‘do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them; do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’”

Our Gospel lesson today hints at the same questions. What had the Galileans done to deserve death at the hand of Pilate? They must have done something wrong to deserve that kind of death, correct? Or the 18 who were killed in the accident when the tower of Siloam fell, how come the tower fell on them and not on someone else? What did they do to deserve that? Where was God in all of this? How come God allowed it to happen?

Recently, we have watched as natural disasters have traumatized our nation with the fires in California and other places, even closer to home, the flooding that has wiped out people’s homes and businesses and even some families, tornadoes, hurricanes. Where was God? Why would God allow this to happen? What did the people who experienced these tragedies do wrong?

Jesus gives a fascinating response that it was no one’s fault. Accidents happen; they are no one’s fault. The tower didn’t fall on the 18 because they were worse sinners than anyone else. The tower just fell. The 67 who were killed when the helicopter crashed into the jet over the Potomac, no one survived; surely they must have been pretty bad sinners; they were not! The plane that crashed in Pennsylvania and the one in Alaska; not because they were worse sinners than others who were flying that day; they were accidents. Then that plane that turned upside down when it landed; no one was killed, sure, 21 were injured but not a single person died. Again, an accident. We can blame it on pilot error or faulty equipment.

Now is the time to make sure your walk with God is right. Now is the time to make sure that if you got hit by a bus on your way home, heaven forbid, or a mountain falls on top of you, or you slipped on a banana peel and cracked your skull open, now, NOW, is the time to make sure you are right with God, before the accident happens.

Accidents happen; disasters happen; humans decide to do violent acts against other humans, and sometimes innocent people are in the wrong place at the wrong time. We didn't deserve any more than anyone else to have that pane of glass fall out of the window and onto our head, but are you ready if it does happen?

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down; why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

This is one of the many parables or stories in the Bible. Parables are stories that use every day things and events to teach a lesson. Jesus often told parables to help the disciples and crowds understand what he was talking about. But usually these stories, although they had a moral, were not easy to understand. The parable of the barren fig tree is one of those stories.

We hear that a man planted a fig tree in his vineyards.

Why would someone plant a fig tree in among grape vines? Fig trees belong in orchards with other fig trees, where they can pollinate each other and produce figs. And any farmer who knows anything knows it takes at least three years for a fig tree to produce figs. Seems pretty crazy.

Then the fig tree didn't produce fruit for three years. He was really unhappy that this tree was taking up space and using water and fertilizer and STILL had not produced a single fig. He was really angry. So he told the gardener to cut the tree down – just get it out of there – get it out of his sight!

Now, the gardener, who was obviously much smarter than the owner, knew about the life of a fig tree and that it couldn't possibly produce fruit in only 3 years. So he begged the owner to let him continue to fertilize the tree for another year. Then, if the tree still did not produce, he would cut it down.

Jesus told this parable to a group of people who probably did not get it. This is not about the poor fig tree, but about what God expects of His followers. In this parable, Jesus is trying to tell his listeners to be ready for whatever life brings and to use their lives wisely. But how?

First of all, the owner is really God. He feeds and nourishes us and expects that we become fruitful, good faithful members of His Kingdom. He provides us with everything we need. But you notice that the fig tree was planted in with grape vines. We are ‘planted’ among those not like us to allow us to flourish and prosper as an example of God’s love.

And God expects us in time to grow and bear ‘fruit’, to be good active members of the community and of His Kingdom. We need to cultivate our relationship with God. We need to read the Bible, say our prayers and listen to those who can teach us about God’s love.

We need to pay attention to our fruit as it begins to grow– those good figs that make us a good Christian and a good person; and those ‘rotten’ figs that we need to change. We all have traits that are good and we need to remember those and count them daily. We need to give thanks for them and live. Those rotten figs which are not good (like always being negative or angry or vengeful) should also be counted. And we need to try and decrease those rotten figs so that each time we count them, they are less.

We need to learn from those who are really fruitful, who produce good figs with everything they do. We all know people we seem to be doing everything right and make the world a better place. We need to study them and see how they are bettering the Kingdom of God. Hang around them, ask questions, learn from them.

We need to become active, not sit around waiting for the good figs to suddenly appear. Get out on the streets, spread God’s love, help others who need it. No one ever produced anything good from sitting on our duff and waiting for something to miraculously drop in their lap. Generally, all we get is a bigger lap. Each and every one of us can do something in the community to make it a better place. Get up and get moving, but bear good fruit when we do it, not just being active for the sake of looking busy.

And, MOST OF ALL, we must always remember, even when we aren’t fruitful or still have rotten figs or run around just to look busy, God does not ‘cut us down.’ He is like the gardener who knew what the fig tree needed. He doesn’t give up on us, no matter how many rotten figs we may have. He continues to feed and nourish us until we bear good fruit. His love is eternal; all we have to do is stay close to Him and let him nourish us.

AMEN!!

“LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THIS GUY”

Message for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 30, 2025

ISAIAH 12:1-6 * 2 CORINTHIAN 5:16-21 * LUKE 15:1-3, 11-23

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

Can you believe; we're already into the fourth week/Sunday of Lent! Two more and it's Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week, again why it's called Holy I'll never know but then three more weeks and it's Easter!! He is risen!

Today on this 4th Sunday of Lent we are looking at arguably one of the most famous stories Jesus tells. I don't know about you, but I love a good story and from what we read in scripture, Jesus was a master storyteller.

One of the things that makes for a great story is the way you get caught up in it, the way you identify with the characters of a story. If you've ever read a critic's write up of a new movie or book, inevitably the critic will evaluate the characters of the story. They were too shallow; they were 'cartoonish;' they were not real to life. Or, the characters developed and grew with the story line. They were three dimensional; they were real, which meant the critic could identify with what the character was going through.

I love the way Jesus tells a story and I love reading the Bible because inevitably the characters of his stories, his parables, sort of draw you in and I find myself at least not only identifying with them, but in the interesting position that the characters of the story often have commentary to make on my life as I am reading their story.

But the opening verses today: Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees, how we love those Pharisees, the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." What right do they have to talk about Jesus that way?

Jesus not only went to the cross because of the Pharisees and scribes, both groups who were sinners but not in their minds, nor did they realize that Jesus went to the cross with more sins than everyone he ever ate with or welcomed! But that's another story, isn't it?

The Pharisees wished to monopolize religion for their own set group. They were the most religious people of their day, devoted keepers of the Mosaic Law and yet they were the worst of the enemies of Jesus. Instead of rejoicing in that they were in the presence of the Son of God, they sought to find means to kill him. Rather than rejoice that God would love and save all men from their sins, these self-righteous, spiritually proud hypocrites wanted to exclude all but their own kind from the grace of God. When Jesus preached and taught, He attracted vast crowds of the kind of people the Pharisees considered undesirable. They murmured, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Praise God! Jesus receives sinners and not only does He receive them but He joins in sweet fellowship with them! Who does this Jesus think He is!

The story is told of a little girl whose parents never went to church. However, they insisted upon her attendance and what is more, she had to be able to recite the preacher's text for the day. One morning she rushed home excited: "Oh mama, my name is in the Bible." "That's not likely," responded her parents. "But it is! The pastor read it this morning. 'This man receiveth sinners, and Edith with them.'" If you need help, the little girl's name was Edith!

This is more than just a mispronunciation. There is a beautiful truth here. Can you put your name there? "This man receives sinners, and (Norman, David, Darlene, Sun Ae, Brian) with them."

We are all sinners!

The story today in our Gospel lesson is one that is often entitled 'The Prodigal Son.' Did you ever think that that title gives an injustice to the story because it already frames it and focuses our attention on one of the sons, not both. One of the things I love about the Bible is the fact that as I go through life, all of the characters begin to come to life. All of them have something to teach me about my life. All of them are people I can identify with, whose roles I have either played or watched others play.

There is no question I lived through my prodigal son days, did you? When I read about the younger brother in the story, I immediately remember my teen years and

early twenties. Those were the years you would do whatever it took to get out on your own, live your life the way you wanted to, although we can feel that way at any age. Church was something you did on a Sunday but only from the pew, never from the pulpit! Boy, has that changed!

Our teens and twenties are often when we sow our wild oats as they say, make unwise financial decisions, make some questionable acquaintances, and begin to realize that maybe our parents were not as dumb as we thought they were. In fact, maybe we could use some of their advice and help. As we live and learn from life, we begin to think that maybe it's time we travel home with a slightly different attitude and see what we find, if we left home. I am so glad I never left home until my later twenties.

Then again, I would venture to guess that all of us have played the role of the elder brother too. Me, I had an older brother and sister who ruled over me and the younger Staker children! If anything, I wanted to leave home just to get away from them. That would have been a major mistake. But remember the elder brother was the responsible one, the one who was always right, the one who was quick to rub it in with 'I told you so.' The one who knows exactly how things should be done, who makes sure every 't' is crossed and every 'I' is dotted. The one who can't believe that his father is letting his younger brother get away with this ('how come he gets to stay up as late as I do? He is younger than me! How come he gets to watch TV later than I did when I was his age? How come his piece of cake is bigger than my piece of cake?') And there was always that line from the Smothers Brothers show 'Dad always did like you best!'

What is really fascinating in the story is that each brother does not quite get what he expects. The younger brother comes back willing to be a servant, but the father insists on accepting him back as a son with all the responsibilities that entails. The older brother can't believe the father is throwing the younger brother a party and wants to know when will he get his party, and the father tells him, 'Everything I have is yours.' Does that include the younger brother?

So which one would you say is the hardest to identify with sometimes? Do you know what the word 'prodigal' means? It means to be extravagant. I have heard it said that the true prodigal in this story is not the son, it's the father. The kind of extravagant love the father of this story gives is the hardest role of all to play. His willingness to let the younger son go and then to accept him back with a party, a love party if you will, an agape love party with no strings attached or at least none the story tells us about; complete with the best robe, a ring on his finger, sandals

on his feet, and the fatted calf, dead of course, all of that is hard to accept. The father's willingness to reach out to his older son whom he knew was angry at him; the son looking at him with disapproving eyes for how he was accepting his younger brother back after all he had done, all he had given away, all he had lost of the family's fortune, that's not easy either. What the older son hasn't realized is that his younger brother only got a third of his father's wealth; the older son will get two thirds of the estate; he gets the rest in other words. That's the way the law of inheritance worked in a 2 child family. The younger son was entitled to a third; he got it; if dad made millions more, they all belong to the older brother. Why is he mad? When dear old dad told him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours, he meant it. It all belonged to the older son.

A group of well-intentioned people met to discuss ways and means of helping a friend who had been down on his luck recently. Knowing him to be an extremely proud person, who would not accept money, they decided to arrange a bogus raffle. They told him that they would all draw numbered slips of paper from a hat, and the person who drew the number four would win \$500. They didn't tell him that the number "four" was on every slip.

After the drawing, each of the conspirators glanced at their slips and crumbled them up in the manner of disappointed losers. Then they waited to hear their friend announce that he had drawn the winning number. But he didn't say anything. Finally, one member of the group asked him, knowingly,

"What number did you draw?"

He said "Six and seven-eighths," holding up...the hat-size tag.

That is a fairly good example of a man who is really down on his luck. But, in today's text, Jesus gives us an even better one about a wealthy young man who leaves the comfort of his father's house to strike out on his own. We are all very familiar with this story.

Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it. The misguided, inexperienced youth has his fortune but they are soon parted. He is in a distant, famine-plagued land, and penniless. The only employment he can find is caring for pigs. Then he discovers that they are eating better than he is. In Jesus' words, "He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything."

He was lonely. He was without resources. He was starving. There was no one to offer him a helping hand. He was really down on his luck. And it was in that state; of utter desolation, that he 'came to himself,' he came "To his senses," as the Bible puts it.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

At that point, of true repentance, the joyful father begins to make preparations for a party to celebrate the boy's return.

God's love calls us to learn to share our love with all we meet. To be willing to minister to the lost, the lonely, the brokenhearted, the poor, the disposed, the foreigner, the displaced, the desolate, the lost, the abandoned, even if we feel it is their fault that they are where they are in life. Even if we feel they deserve what they got. We are called to feed the hungry, to clothe the poor, to help the needy, to visit the sick and imprisoned, to reach out in love. To love the unlovable, the outcasts, the misfits, even the ones who hurt us the most who are often members of our own family. It is so easy to play the role of the prodigal son and the elder brother, but what about the role of the father in this story? How extravagant is your love?

Let us remember God and the love he has shown all of us through Jesus. He knows our sin and suffering for he has endured them as well. He has forgiven us and desires to embrace us again into his family. Let us remember him and there will be rejoicing in heaven and on earth over every sinner that turns from going their own way and back to God.

Amen.

“PREPARING TO DIE”

Message for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 6, 2025

ISAIAH 43: 16-21 * PHILIPPIANS 3: 4B-14 * JOHN 12: 1-8

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

How do you feel when you go to church? Do you ever feel pressure of any kind? Some of us may feel pressured to be perfect when we go to church so that people will think well of us. Have you ever felt pressured to be perfect; can you be perfect? Metaphorically speaking, we work hard to make sure we have every hair in place. But a healthy church is a place where we can let down our hair and not hide our flaws behind a façade of perfection. In church, we should be able to reveal our weaknesses to find strength rather than conceal our faults to appear strong.

Worship can be an intensely personal and yet very corporate experience. We can worship alone, with a small group of friends, and with our local body of believers. There are many ways in which we can praise and worship God; some people dance, some will raise their hands; some close their eyes and bow their heads in reverence.

Worship doesn't involve behaving as if nothing is wrong; it's making sure everything is right—right with God and with one another. When our greatest fear is letting down our hair, perhaps our greatest sin is keeping it up.

A key principle of worship is that it costs you something. It is impossible to worship Jesus and leave the same way you came. You may say, "Well, I come here all the time and I don't always leave changed." You can come to a worship service and leave the same way you came, but you cannot come and worship Jesus and leave unchanged.

It will cost you to worship Jesus, and that cost is change. Sometimes, Jesus calls us to change how or where we spend our money. Sometimes it is a monetary change

in our lives. The disciples here are worried about the monetary value of the perfume Mary pours on the feet of Jesus. They see it as wasteful, while she and Jesus view it as the cost of worship.

Sometimes it will cost you your pride as Jesus calls you to humble yourself and follow Him more closely. This was Mary's house. She was not to take the role of a servant and wash her guest's feet. However, she was willing to sacrifice her pride to worship Jesus.

Sometimes it will cost you time as Jesus calls you to serve Him. Maybe it will cost you something of yourself as it did with Mary. She used her tears as water. It cost Mary her glory, as she took her hair, what the Bible says was a woman's glory, and used it as a towel to dry the feet of Jesus.

The disciples are upset about the cost of the perfume but do not miss that Mary is paying a high price for following Jesus, and that price is more than just money.

You and I came to worship God this morning. What will it cost you to worship Him? In other parts of the world this morning, gathering to worship Jesus may cost them their lives, but those dear saints are willing to pay the price. It could cost some of them their business and financial support as they would be boycotted and abandoned in their villages and towns.

So often we reduce the price we pay to worship Jesus as the amount we put in the offering plate when it comes by. Certainly, the offering you give is an act of worship and sacrifice, but there is so much more to it than that. It costs us personally, in pride, humility, service, and so many other ways.

If you believe the only sacrifice you have to make is financial, you are making concessions to God. You are paying a price for what you believe will keep Him off your back. That doesn't build a relationship, that doesn't build dependence, that doesn't recognize His generosity, and that's not worship. It will cost us our reputation, our financial stability, our job and even at times our relationships with family and friends. Are we willing to go all the way or it will cost us our anointing!

Nothing there moved the heart of Jesus except the sacrifice of this woman and her response in worship to her Savior. Are you moving the heart of God? Only your brokenness in worship will do it.

The purpose of worship is to exalt Christ. For you and me to be reminded of His commandments, His love, His might, His power, and of His return. Worship that exalts Christ happens through music, sermons, prayers, drama, poetry, readings, visual images, and other ways. The importance is not the form of worship, but the object of worship. The method of worship will never surpass the purpose of worship, and if it does, then you are no longer worshipping Christ. You are worshipping a style of worship, the act of worship, or the individual leading worship.

Notice that the people around Mary do not approve of her style of worship. They think she is behaving irrationally. When has love ever been rational? They are focused upon the style of her worship, the instruments of her worship, and not the one she is worshipping.

Folks, we need to quit worrying about what others think. There are a lot of churches today that have altered their worship services so as to "not be offensive to the lost." How ridiculous! Worship is not for the lost because they don't know the One we worship. Worship is the song of the redeemed, sung to the Redeemer. It is the praise of the saints to the One who has made them Holy. It is something we do for God's pleasure, without respect of what others might think of us or how they might judge us.

Mary did not put Jesus on her calendar; she did not have to schedule some time in her otherwise busy day specifically to honor Jesus. She did it when the opportunity presented itself. She was ready and eager to honor Him and was thus able to do so at a moment's notice.

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom He, Jesus, had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

Mary loved Jesus. But, she knew he was going to die. She also knew she couldn't take away that journey. She did the only thing she could, blessed the feet that would take him through it.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a

thief; he kept the common purse, in other words, he was in charge of the money, and he used to steal what was put into it.' Judas criticized her for anointing Jesus' feet with costly, fragrant ointment. Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my funeral. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

John is a great story-teller and his story fascinates me, partly because of how it differs from similar stories in Matthew and Mark. In those gospels, the woman anointing Jesus is nameless, and it is implied that she is a prostitute. Mark says "a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. Some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way?'" No mention of Mary or Judas by name. Matthew even says 'But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' Interesting to note, the footnote for Matthew's text says Judas Iscariot was not alone in his objections to the use of the expensive aromatic ointment.

In our text today, John places the anointing before the triumphal entry which takes place next Sunday, Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week and on Friday or Saturday. Matthew and Mark place it on Tuesday or Wednesday evening of Passion Week. The best solution seems to be that it took place on the earlier day, but was placed later by Mark and Matthew because it fit better into his narrative at that point, serving as a sharp contrast to the treacherous actions of Judas. Bottom line, chronological order was not the main concern of the gospel writers.

We know the woman in John; she's Mary. Mary who sat at Jesus' feet another time, and her sister Martha got mad at her for not helping in the kitchen. While the other two gospels have Jesus' head being anointed as a sign of his leadership, feet were anointed only when embalming the body for burial. Mary was able to see that Jesus was going to die. Anointing his feet was a way of preparing him for that journey. Not many of us have the courage to face death like this.

It's not easy to accept that someone we love is about to die. Having lost my Mother, my younger brother Herb and then Joyce in the last 10 years, which yes, covers a lot of time, it's still tough. And I know I'm not the only one here who's lost loved ones, and recently, some of whom knew they were going to die; and accepted it and looked forward to it! It's tough to accept that someone we love is going to die.

I suspect that Mary was able to face Jesus' death because she had come to see death differently after Jesus had brought her brother Lazarus back from death. But the raising of Lazarus was, in fact, Jesus' undoing, his Undoing! After that event, religious leaders grew concerned about his powers. They began to plan his death.

Even Jesus became cautious. He no longer went about in public in Judea. The chief priests and Pharisees had given orders; anyone who knew where Jesus was should tell them, so that he might be arrested. As the Passover drew near, people wondered, will Jesus come to Jerusalem for the festival or will he stay away? Tension was high. And, given human nature, people had begun to take sides.

Before we proceed much further, remember that the Gospel of John was written by the Apostle John. He addressed himself repeatedly in the book as, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He focused on the life, works and words of Jesus.

Into this social and political climate that John sets the story of Jesus and Mary. Jesus has once more come to the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and this is not Mary the mother of Jesus. He's in Bethany, visiting with Lazarus, Martha and Mary who displayed their affection for Jesus in different ways. They honored Him with a dinner. Martha prepared and served the meal. Lazarus was "reclining with... (Jesus) at table" -- not only eating together with Him, but conversing, talking with him, thanking Him, especially for what He did to him. But notice how Mary displayed her love for Jesus.

She took a pound of expensive perfume and anointed the feet of Jesus. Usually, anointing is done on the head, especially to honor someone. But Mary anointed the feet to show not only her humility, but her devotion. In other words, she wanted to show her love and care for Jesus. And consider also the cost she used for anointing.

Because Mary perceived the worth of Jesus, she loved Him more than her valuable possession. Also, the expression of her love could not be hidden. Take note, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

And her love for Jesus was characterized as giving Him the priority. Her expression of love, however, was faulted by Judas. He said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Mary prioritized in giving it to Jesus. It did not mean that she did not want to give to the poor. But in that instance, she had the opportunity to express her love for Jesus and everything else was secondary.

Another final observation on how Mary expressed her love for Jesus: She used her hair to wipe the feet of Jesus. It was against Jewish custom for a woman who is in charge of a public dining to appear in the presence of men with unbound hair. But in the case of Mary, love was stronger than custom. And she was willing to use the valuable part of her person to serve the most base or dirtiest part of the body of Christ.

Jesus is now a hunted man. He knows he will go on to Jerusalem for the Passover. He also knows that he will never leave. Mary prepares Jesus' feet for the journey only he can take and Jesus facing a road only he can walk, and knowing it's a journey from which there is no turning back. Jesus needs a friend so he lets Mary soothe his tired feet and ease his weary soul.

A few days later, at the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus washes their feet. But I'm getting ahead of the story. In our story today, Jesus shows us that to be God's servant means knowing when to do unto others and when to let others do unto you.

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

If he was speaking about his physical presence, he was right. We do not have him here in the flesh. But we know that, in spirit, Jesus is with us always to strengthen and guide our lives. Jesus will not take our journey away from us, no matter how easy or hard it may be; but he does walk with us on the path. May we accept Jesus' presence and support, and may it be a balm to our souls from which we find the courage to face and walk the paths before us.

AMEN