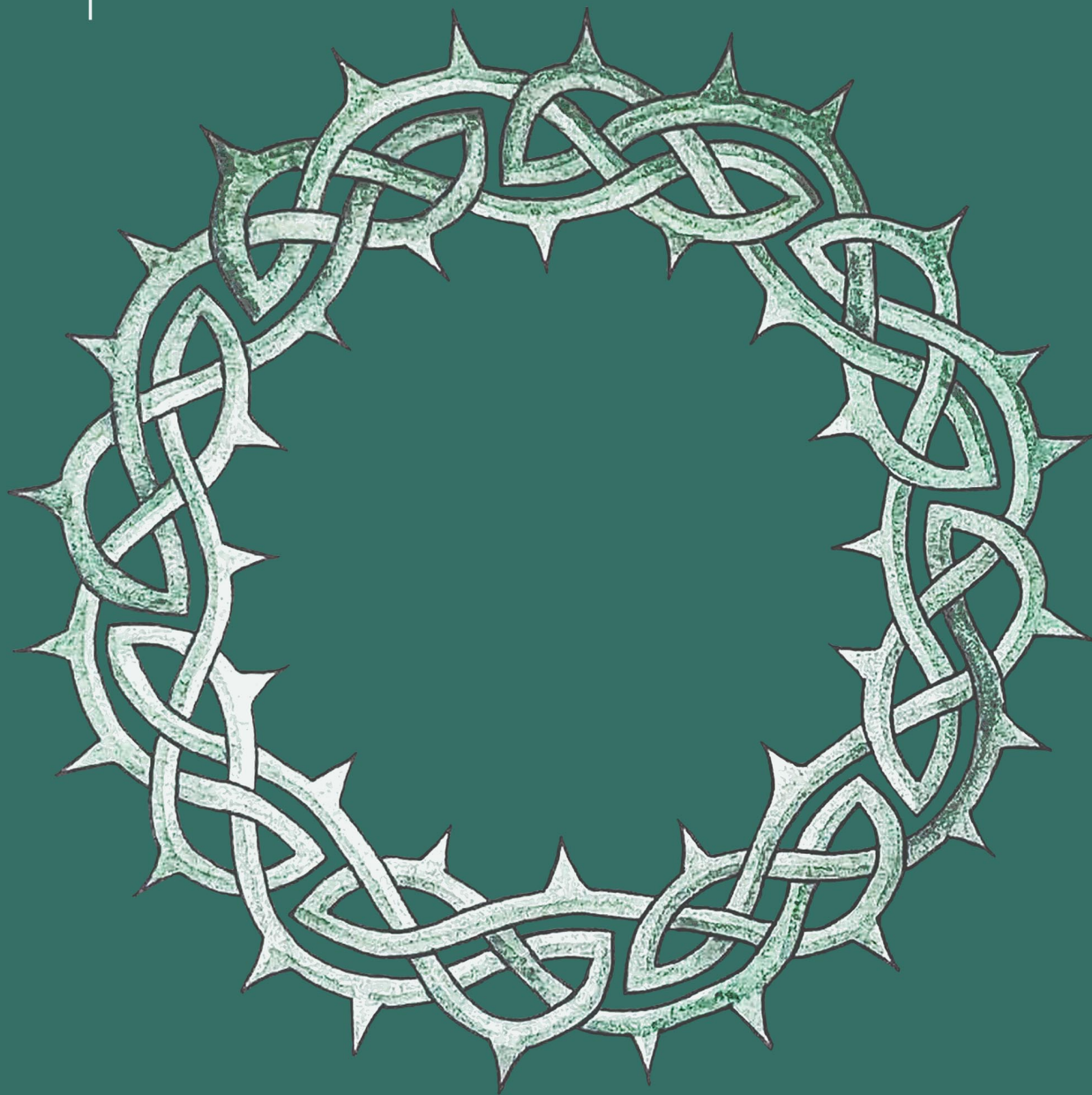


LEVEL

GROUND
mennonite church



2021 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL SERIES

week one: feb 17 - feb 20

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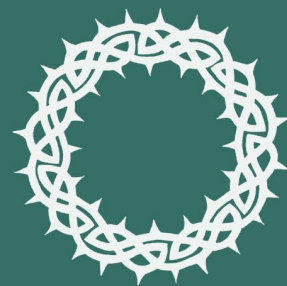
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DAY 1: FEB 17, ASH WEDNESDAY

Theme: Dust you are and to dust you will return

Scripture: Genesis 3:19

Prepared by: Andrew Haak



Let's face it: death is a pretty depressing topic, a real conversation-ender if you ever try to bring it up. We don't like to think about death. We spend a lot of time believing we are invincible or trying to cheat, delay and ignore death by creating a sanitized world where death isn't seen or talked about. But can the topic of death, specifically our own mortality, really be avoided as we prepare to enter a season of Lent?

If it is not obvious to you, Advent and Lent are very different seasons with contrasting tones and focus.

In Advent we anticipate Jesus....

....In Lent we follow Jesus

Advent emphasizes what we receive....

....Lent emphasizes what we set aside

Advent leads to a manger....

....Lent leads to a cross

Lent begins at the beginning. While Lent marks the beginning of the journey that takes us to Easter week, it also draws our attention back to the very beginning, our beginning even. Lent starts with Ash Wednesday, which means Lent starts with dust, dirt, and ash.

"... for dust you are, and to dust you will return."

Ash Wednesday reminds us of where we come from, that we are mortal. No one wants to be reminded of death, particularly our own inevitable death, but this is what Ash Wednesday does. Ash Wednesday is supposed to be jarring, a cold splash of reality that wakes us from our spiritual slumber and malaise.

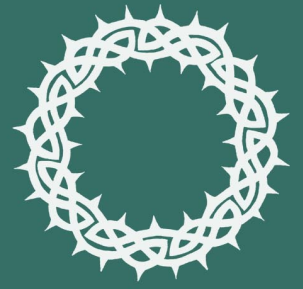
The ashes of this day remind us that we are finite and that we fail. This truth left on its own is depressing and crippling, even fatalistic; but dust doesn't tell the whole story, even if it is to dust we will return. The whole truth is that we are dust and so much more.



Gen 3:19

By the sweat of
your brow
you will eat
your food
until you return
to the ground,
since from it you
were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you
will return.

(TNIV)



To be reminded that we are made of dust points not only to the precariousness of life, but also the preciousness of life. Yes, life as we know it is fragile and fleeting: our days are short in the grand scheme of things, and despite our best efforts life can end abruptly without notice.

And yet. Life is also to be cherished and celebrated, not only because it is perishable and vulnerable, but because our life is animated and sustained by the very breath of God. At the very beginning God breathed, and from the dust humanity was born. And so we are more than just particles of dirt and dust bonded together with no greater meaning or value: we are made and held together by an act of divine love. And through this union of love and matter we have existence, worth, purpose, and hope.

God is in the business of bringing life out of what seems dusty, dry and barren. This isn't just about creation at the start, this is also how he continues to be present and at work, for God never stops sowing and sustaining life. This Lent we may find ourselves feeling our limits; we may be strained, we may seem lost, we may feel dried out. Lent's call to follow Jesus to the cross can look counterintuitive: it sounds exhausting, dreary, and burdensome. And yet this is the paradoxical path of Lent: to follow Jesus to his death is to find ourselves more alive in him even as we acknowledge our mortality and draw nearer to the cross.

**This Easter you are invited to join as Level Ground
reflects on what it means to follow Jesus to cross.**

Today we remember that though we may come from dust we are made with love, to be loved and to love. We remember that though we are finite and frequently fail, we are sustained by the very breath of God who comes again and again to breathe new life in us, by a God who brings life out of death.

God, during this season I open myself to you. I name the parts of my being that feel dry and lifeless; I invite you to enter and cultivate these parts of me to nurture life. May the Spirit plough and prepare the soil of my soul so that I am able to receive Christ anew this Lent.

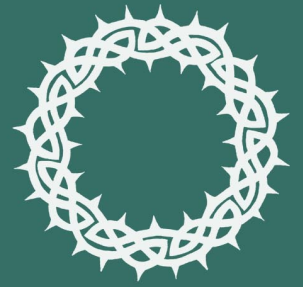
Listen: "Beautiful Things" by Gungor
(Listen [HERE](#))

Reflect:

Where do you invite God to sow and grow life in you during the season of Lent?

DAY 2: FEB 18

Theme: By His wounds we are healed
Scripture: Isaiah 53
Prepared by: Christy Price



When I read Isaiah 53, I am awed by how Isaiah prophesied about Jesus 700 years before Jesus walked the earth. And I'm touched by the language used to describe Jesus:

He was a 'tender shoot,' with 'no beauty
or majesty to attract us to him.'

He was a 'man of sorrows,' 'familiar with
suffering,' and 'despised and rejected by men.'

And even though 'we esteemed him not,' He still took
upon himself 'our infirmities and carried our sorrows.'

'He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed
for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace
was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.'

And the amazing thing is this: 'While we were still sinners, Christ died
for us.' (Rom. 5:8).

We did nothing to deserve his sacrifice. We didn't prove ourselves worthy. We didn't become righteous and right with God before Christ died for our sins. But Jesus chose to die for us anyway, and God planned this long beforehand. He knew that we would never be able to live up to His standards for holiness, that we could never be good enough on our own, that we would miserably fail over and over again, and so, in His great Love for us, He sent His one and only Son to die for us, that we might live.

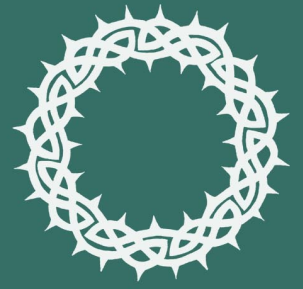
As we begin Lent, a time of reflection and of setting things aside, perhaps fasting or giving something up for God for a time, let us remember Christ's sacrifice for us, what He gave up for us. He left the throne of heaven to come and be born into poverty. He left his home, He "made himself nothing ... he humbled himself to death—even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:7-8). And He did this out of His great love for us, for me, for you. Yes, even you and me—who cannot do anything apart from Him.



Isaiah 53:11

After he has
suffered,
he will see the
light of life and
be satisfied;
by his
knowledge my
righteous servant
will justify
many, and he
will bear
their iniquities.

(NIV)



I often feel so unworthy, like I'm not enough, but I have been made enough through Christ. And, God loves me so much that He gave Jesus to save me—without my having done anything to earn it. Below, I've included a link to a song that has spoken to me recently, about not being too hard on myself and remembering that God's mercies are new every morning. I hope it encourages you too.

Sometimes I wonder what I can give up for God, for Jesus... and yet whenever I ask God what He wants of me, He usually says, "Time." He wants to spend time with us, just being with us—to reveal himself to us, to minister to us, to speak to us. Too often, when we give time to Him, we want to do all of the talking, to tell Him of all of our needs and our struggles, and this is not a bad thing—He wants us to come to Him with our worries, problems, & prayer requests. However, I want to encourage you, in this season, to just be still before Him, to rest in His presence, and to listen to what He has to say to you today. (Go ahead, ask Him: "Lord, what do you have for me today?") He is kind, He is patient, He is good, He is loving. He will not be harsh or unjust. We can trust Him and open ourselves to what He wants to say to us. He just wants to be with his people, with us. And Christ made a way for that to happen.

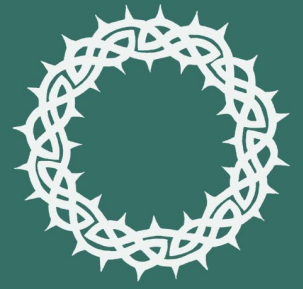
Prayer:

Lord, thank you for your sacrifice.
Thank you for taking our sins, fears, and infirmities upon you.
Thank you for giving us in return forgiveness, peace, healing, and salvation.
We receive it and all that you have for us.
Wash us clean by your blood.
Help us to rest in you and in your presence.
Help us not to be too hard on ourselves,
as you have made a way for us to come into right standing with God.
We love you, we honor you, we esteem you.
Help us to receive your love for us.
Amen.

Listen:

"New Today" by Micah Tyler
(Listen [HERE](#))

Theme: Jesus's Humility
Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11
Prepared by: Jesse Nickel



As someone who preaches on a semi-regular basis, it's humbling to reflect on how few of the sermons I've listened to I actually remember. There aren't many. However, one that stands out was a sermon given by Darrell Johnson, former Regent College professor, on Philippians 2:5-11, a well-known passage often referred to as the "Christ Hymn." The sermon was part of a series called "The God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ," in which Johnson explored how we come to know God more fully through knowing Jesus.

All these years later, what has stuck with me was the powerful way that Johnson focused in on the significance of the "therefore" of Philippians 2:9, and how central it is to understanding what this passage tells us about the heart of God—about *who God is*—and the means by which Jesus has made this known to us.

Paul begins in verse 6 by describing Jesus as being "in very nature"—in Greek, *en morphē*—"God." From the beginning, Jesus was of one essence, one being with God. So, prior to his incarnation, this Jesus—himself God—was considering or reflecting upon being *en morphē* God, and what it would look like to manifest this reality. How would one put this "being in very nature God" into practice? Having stated what Jesus decided this *did* not mean (a theological discussion for another day), Paul goes on in verses 7 and 8 to describe what Jesus decided it *did* mean: making himself nothing, taking the form of a slave, and, having become human, humbling himself by becoming obedient all the way to death—even death on a cross. These verses trace what is quite clearly a downward trajectory: from being *en morphē* God to being *en morphē* a slave; in humility, living his human life in obedience all the way to death—and not just any death, but the horrific and shameful death of crucifixion.

And then? "Therefore God ..."

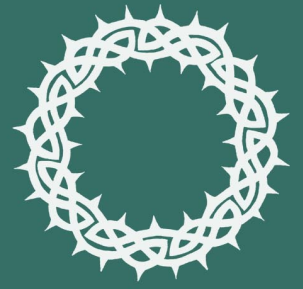
The downward trajectory is reversed: God exalted Jesus, God raised Jesus to the highest place, and God gave Jesus "the name that is above every name" (v. 9)—God's own name, "Lord," *Yahweh*!



Morphē

(pronounced Mor-phay)

Often translated as 'form' in English, the original Greek word 'morphē' doesn't have an exact equivalent but generally means "the outward expression of an inner essence."



The “therefore” of verse 9 is integral to understanding how the first half of the hymn—the downward journey (vv. 6-8)—is related to its second half—the upward exaltation (vv. 9-11). With this “therefore,” Paul informs us that the reason God did what God did in verses 9-11 is that Jesus did what he did in verses 6-8! It is *because* Jesus became a slave, in his humanity humbled himself, and lived in faithful obedience all the way to death, that God exalted him. Why? Because in doing so Jesus showed that he had rightly discerned what being *en morphē* God looks like. It is because Jesus showed us what God is like in *this* way (and not any other) that God exalted him to share in God’s own glory. This is revolutionary!

In this Lenten season, I think that two points stand out most significantly from all this.

First,

as we remember the journey of Jesus that led to the cross, let us remember that this, too, is part of—perhaps even the centre of—how Jesus makes God known to us. At the heart of the incarnation is not self-glorification or empowerment, but humility, obedience, and faithfulness. What takes place on the cross is not out of character with God; rather, it *reveals* the character of God.

At the heart of God’s identity is self-giving love.

Second,

let’s not neglect the context in which we find this Christ Hymn, as part of Paul’s exhortation to the believers in Philippi to imitate Jesus in their relationships with one another:

“Let this same mind be in you, as was in Christ Jesus” (v. 5). We, as the image-bearers of God, are called to live with one another in ways that reflect this heart of God. We are called to show the world what God is like—the God we have come to know most fully in and through Jesus the Messiah, our Lord.

Prayer:

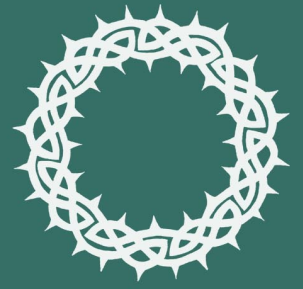
God, thank you for making yourself known to us in Jesus.

May the wonder, the mystery, and the power
of your steadfast, faithful, self-giving love captivate, challenge,
and form us. Would you, by the power of your Spirit,
be at work renewing our hearts and minds, so that
they might conform more and more to your image.

Amen.

DAY 4: FEB 20

Theme: John the Baptist and Jesus's baptism
Scripture: Mark 1:1-11
Prepared by: Clifford Weber



Keep Your Confession Current

Lent (ugh), single syllabic misery that drives straight to the point of the nails on the cross where righteousness meets crucifixion. Maybe not my favourite commemorative faith pillar, but I am the gold in need of the Refiner's fire. That is how confession works.

Is it out with the old sludge and in with the new sludge? No! It is out with death and in with new life. Confession is key.

John's baptismal revealing of repentance is a remarkable act by the desert dwelling cousin of Jesus. For all the Temple practices offered, why this? What is this?

Read:
Mark chapter 1
verses 1 - 11

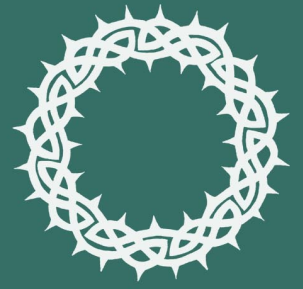
Reflect:
Consider the acrostics on the following page.
Reflect on the words and add your
own as they come to you.

Pray:
Jesus, lead me on a path of confession and repentance
with someone. Please let me know who that is and let
them know too. May we find each other and find the
life for which you purposed on the cross.
In Jesus name, Amen.



Mark 1:2-3

As it is written in
Isaiah the prophet:
"I will send my
messenger ahead
of you, who will
prepare your
way— a voice of
one calling in
the wilderness,
'Prepare the
way for the Lord,
make straight
paths for him.' "



SPIRIT

Service into truth, _____
Provident mindfulness, _____
Incisive directive, _____
Repentant footsteps, _____
Infinite breath of life, _____
Tangible fruit, _____

CONFESSION

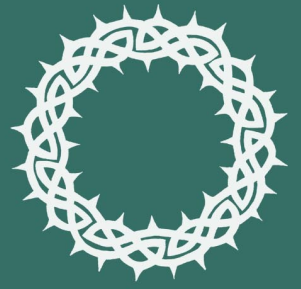
Caring counsel, _____
Observing obligation, _____
Nurtured nutrition, _____
Faith formation, _____
Evangelical enterprise, _____
Sustaining supplication, _____
Spiritual Serenity, _____
Inverted dishonesty, _____
Opportunity, _____
Nailing it to the cross, _____

BAPTISM

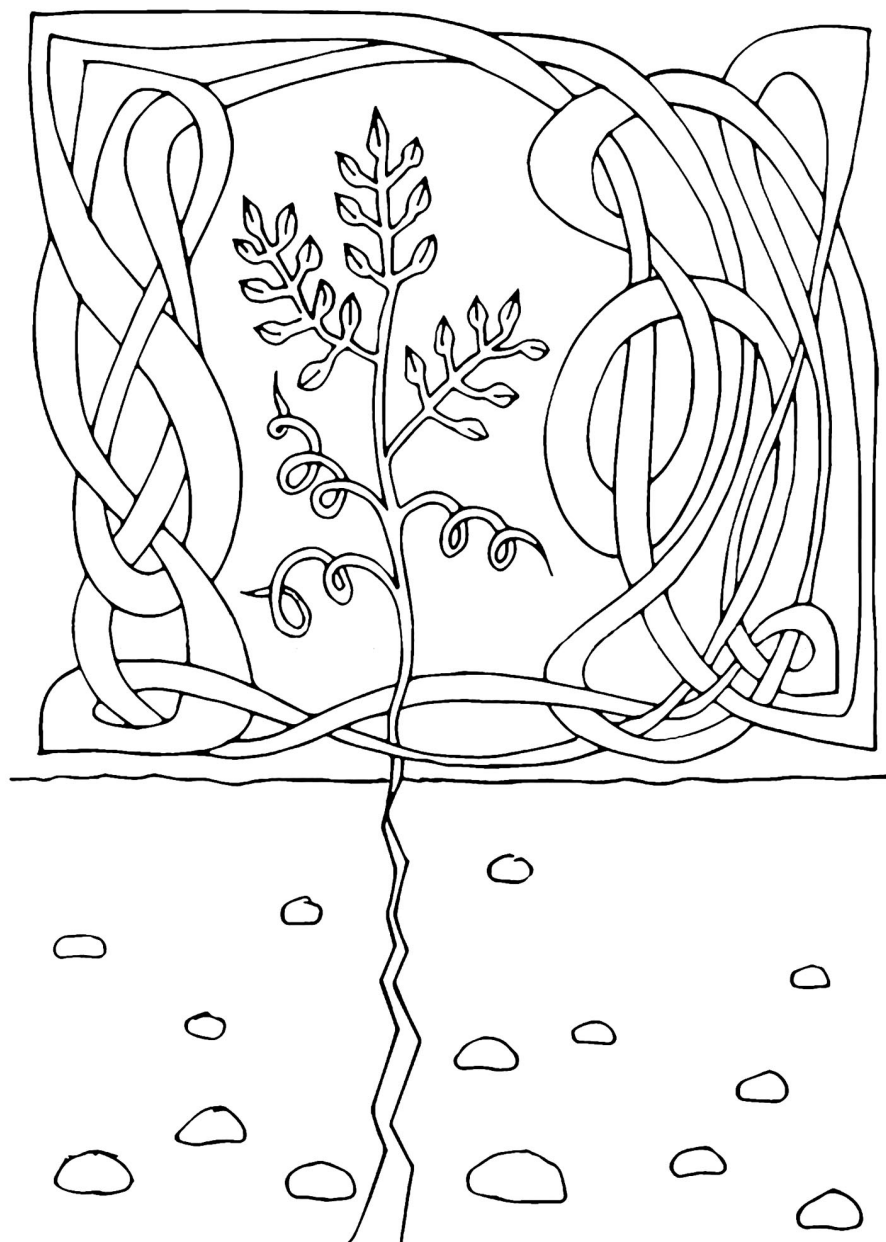
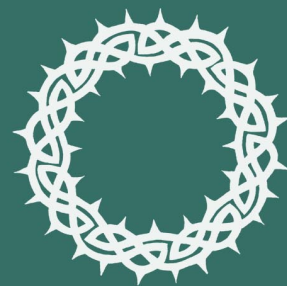
Blessing of burden, _____
Acknowledging atonement, _____
Preparation for piety, _____
Thankfulness in trials, _____
Inclusive integrity, _____
Set-apart for service, _____
Mature marksmanship, _____

COLORING ACTIVITY

For all ages of contemplative
colourers, sensational scribblers
or meditative makers.



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Isaiah 52.13 - 53.12 © Mary Fleeson / www.lindisfame-scriptorium.co.uk 2020