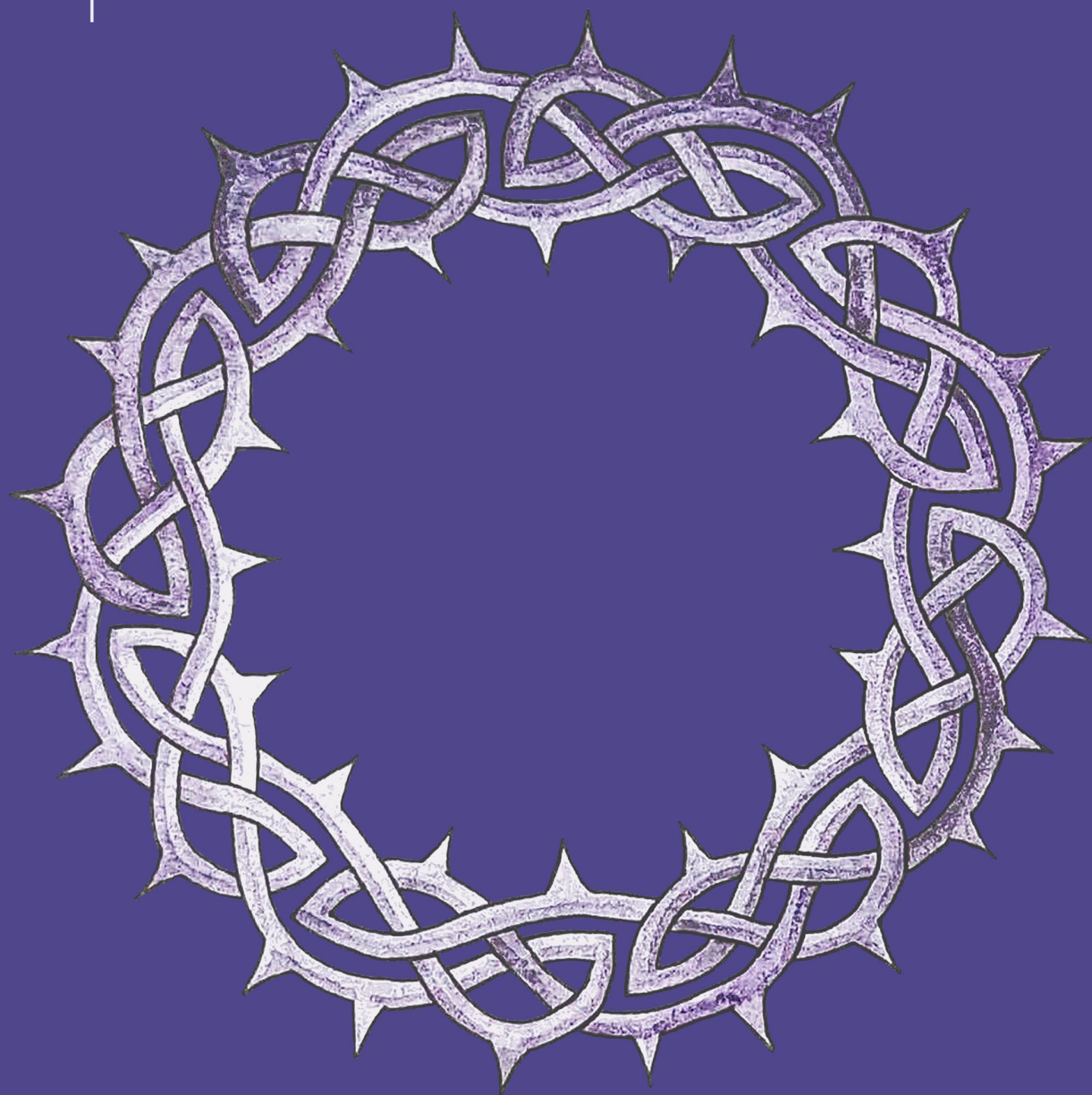


LEVEL

GROUND
mennonite church



2021 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL SERIES

week six: mar 21 - mar 27

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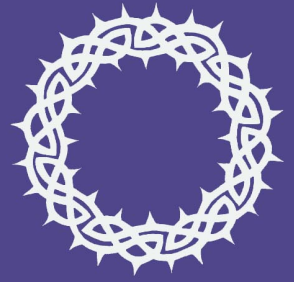
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DAY 33: MAR 21, FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Theme: The Transfiguration

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-13

Prepared by: Greg Theissen



In reading through this familiar passage of the Transfiguration again in preparation for this devotional, I was struck by how much of the account is actually focused on the disciples, and is for their benefit and instruction.

The voice of God from the cloud proclaims,
"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.
Listen to him!"
Matt 17:5

God is not speaking to or for the benefit of Jesus (i.e. "You are my Son..."), but to and for the disciples. The episode of the Transfiguration is framed before and after by discussions of Jesus' suffering and death. Immediately prior Jesus explains to the disciples that in going to Jerusalem, he will suffer, be killed, and raise from the dead (whereupon we get Peter's misguided rebuke—Mt. 16:21-22). At the end of today's passage we have Jesus again instructing the three disciples about his raising from the dead, and his suffering to come, just as Elijah, who came before him (i.e. John the Baptist), suffered.

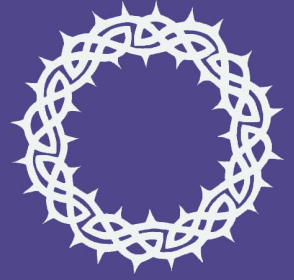
The common Messianic expectation of the time, seemingly shared by the disciples, was that the Christ would come with might and power to overthrow the oppressive Roman power and deliver God's People. Jesus has been telling his disciples something very different about what is going to happen, and the message is not sinking in. So, in the Transfiguration, Jesus allows the disciples to witness his glory, affirming that he indeed is the Messiah, and even more ... but then rather than proceeding as the disciples, and indeed all of Israel, expected, he proceeds down the mountain to continue the doomed journey to Jerusalem, and proceeds to reiterate what he has been trying to teach his disciple:

that he must suffer and die,
and then rise from the dead.



Matthew 17:2

There he was
transfigured
before them.
His face shone
like the sun,
and his clothes
became as white
as the light.
(NIV)



While it is not always a legitimate application to take words to the disciples as words directly to us, I think the words spoken here by God to the disciples are well heeded—

“Listen to him!”

May we take this season of Lent as an opportunity to not just presume God to act a certain way and presume our Christian lives of following after him to look a certain way. Let us not babble on like Peter, trying to keep Jesus in the box of what our expectations are of him, but let us listen to him and listen to what his expectations are of us. I suspect we may not necessarily hear what we want, but being a disciple is not the call to be in control; it is to heed his call:

**“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.”**

Mt. 16:24

Prayer:

(sit/kneel in extended silence after saying the following prayer)

“Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”

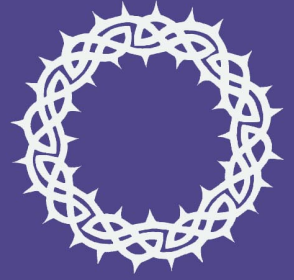
1 Sam. 3:9

DAY 34: MAR 22

Theme: Jesus and the Rich Man

Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

Prepared by: Kristina Toews



When I was a child and I read this passage, I thought to myself, “good thing I’m not rich!” and then proceeded to think that this didn’t really apply to me. Yes, my family and I owned things and we had possessions, but we weren’t really “rich.” Now I think about wealth quite differently, and this passage is one that I struggle with.

According to the way I thought as I child, I’m still not “rich.” I don’t have a mansion, fancy cars, or my own plane. There are lots of people who have more than me and at times I feel jealous. But I’m not a child any longer, and looking around in Abbotsford I can also see that I have more than lots of people. When I think about wealth globally, I’m definitely in the top tier.

**Getting to know brothers and sisters in Christ through
Mennonite World Conference has made me reconsider
what it means to be rich.**

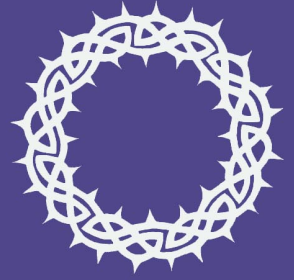
Comparing myself to the way the majority of the people in the world live, I am very rich. Living in Canada gives me so many privileges. I don’t have to pay to go to the doctor, to go to school; we live in a stable and safe society. These privileges feel normal, it doesn’t seem like that would make me rich. But it’s not normal everywhere, and having these privileges as a starting point gives me a lot of advantages; it’s like having a head start.

I’m grateful for the friends I have in different countries around the world, and there is so much that I am learning from them. Yet in our relationships there is sometimes a weight, a tension. Because I was born in Canada, I started life with more privilege than some of my friends, and now I have access to more opportunities for wealth than they do.



Mark 10:29-30

“Truly I tell you,”
Jesus replied,
“no one who
has left home or
brothers or sisters
or mother or father
or children or
fields for me and
the gospel will fail
to receive a
hundred times as
much in this
present age:
homes, brothers,
sisters, mothers,
children and
fields— along with
persecutions—
and in the age to
come eternal life.
(NIV)



What does it mean to be brothers and sisters when I have more than them?
How can we walk together when resources are not shared equally?

I recognize that they have other wealth to share that I don't have, their experience, knowledge, resources, and of themselves. I am so thankful to know them! Yet, that still doesn't take away the tension, the unfairness that I started with more and continue to have more.

Jesus said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" It's not impossible, but it's hard. Most of us aren't going to be so radical to sell everything we own and give it to the poor. I know I'm not ready for that. But what is my responsibility with the wealth and privileges that I have? What actions am I taking to ensure that my privilege isn't harming others or causing more inequality?

I don't have an easy answer to what it means to have wealth and follow Jesus. It's hard, a hard reality to wrestle with. But I don't think Lent is a time of easy answers. I will continue to sit with this tension about wealth, and bring it to Jesus. He's the only one who can guide us on the hard path to enter the kingdom of God.

Prayer:

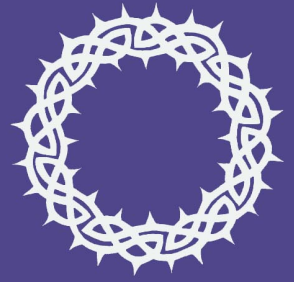
Lord thank you for your presence with us in every hard reality.
Show us how to follow you in every way, including with our possessions.

DAY 35: MAR 23

Theme: I am the True Vine

Scripture: John 15:1-17

Prepared by: Jonathan Rempel



I am not a gardener.

While I enjoy being close to those that have a green thumb, my calling in life is definitely not to be working as a gardener. That being said, my one aunt is naturally gifted with growing plants. Year after year I watch her prepare her garden in the spring and tend to it throughout the spring, summer and fall. While I have been able to reap the benefits of her garden, I only get to see a very small portion of the work that goes into having a productive garden. Why do I share this? Because gardening is hard (We'll get back to this).

I always enjoy hearing that Jesus is my friend. It is encouraging and comforting to hear that the Messiah is always rooting for me. While that is true and He is, this is not the only thing to glean from this passage.

This passage offers us a choice:
Do I follow Jesus and let Him prune in my life?
or
Do I pass by Jesus?

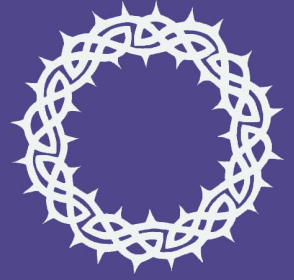
You see, from watching my aunt garden I know that pruning something can be hard, invasive, and ultimately will alter whatever is being pruned. Now I am sure we have all been asked if we trust Jesus, and many of us have said "yes". But before answering "yes", this time ask yourself if you are okay with letting Jesus be invasive and literally life altering. While I don't think that Jesus solely works in massive life altering acts, I hope that it can be seen that following Jesus does at times require some pruning.



John 15:1-2

"I am the true vine,
and my Father
is the gardener.
He cuts off every
branch in me
that bears no
fruit, while every
branch that
does bear fruit
he prunes so
that it will be
even more
fruitful."

(NIV)



When I was preparing this devotional, a song called "Faithful Wounds" by Cory Asbury came to mind. In this song the lyrics share the struggle of this choice of letting someone else prune in your life and how it can be difficult and even painful. In this song the chorus reads:

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend
Faithful, Lord, the dealings of your hand
The troubles and the trials
Like the Gold refined in fire
Faithful are the wounds of a friend"
(Click [HERE](#) to listen)

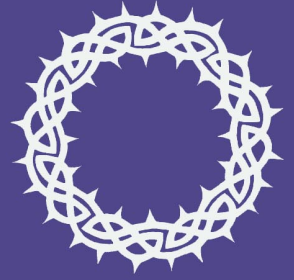
I think this song is a great encouragement for us, that while pruning may hurt at times, when it is done by Jesus it is done solely out of love and for our benefit.

It often takes a lot of time and encouragement for me to fully accept Jesus as the gardener of my life. Sometimes He might even be wanting to cut some branches that I am fond of, or even leave some that I would rather have gone. However, if I truly trust Jesus and believe that His acts are out of love, then why should I not be willing to leave those choices to God?

Prayer:
Jesus, I pray for the strength to trust you.
I pray that although gardening is hard work,
that I can have my eyes set on your love.
Thank you for being my friend and caring for me.
Amen

DAY 36: MAR 24

Theme: I am the Good Shepherd
Scripture: John 10:1-18
Prepared by: Orlando Unruh



I'm always amazed when I read about sheep in the bible and see them for real at my father-in-law's farm.

He has a distinct way of whistling that he uses to communicate with them. In the morning, when the worker walks by the pen towards the house to get his orders for the day, the sheep just lay there. But as soon as my father in law shows his face and whistles, they all run to the gate and are ready to be led out.

The same at the end of the day when he is on his horse; he rides in the fields and whistles, and they all come running home to the safety of the pen.

When Jesus compared himself to a shepherd, he evoked an image that every man who heard his words understood. These men were either shepherds themselves, or knew people who were. They understood the devotion that shepherds had for their sheep. Jesus not only said that he was the good shepherd, but he also told the men standing around him that they were his sheep—if they followed him. He promised to give his sheep eternal life.

This was a promise he could keep because Jesus and his father were one.

Do you know your shepherd's voice?

Do you recognize his voice or "whistle"?

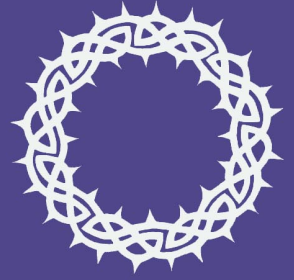
Do you obey his call?



John 10:14-15

"I am the good
shepherd;

I know my sheep
and my sheep
know me—just
as the Father
knows me and I
know the Father—
and I lay down
my life for
the sheep.
(NIV)



Knowing Jesus as your shepherd leads steadfastly to contentment. That contentment doesn't come from always getting your desires; it comes from trusting that what God gives you is enough. Consider these words:

What if God says no? What if the request is delayed or even denied?

If God says, "I've given you my grace, and that is enough," will you be content?

Content. That's the word. A state of heart in which you would be at peace if God gave you nothing more than he already has.

Reflection:

Think for a few moments about the implications of having a divine shepherd watch over you.

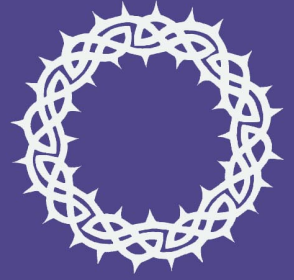
Read Psalm 23 for some additional insight into this idea of Jesus being your shepherd.

DAY 37: MAR 25

Theme: Lazarus, I am the Resurrection and the Life

Scripture: John 11:1-44

Prepared by: Jane Born



John 11 opens with an introduction to the main cast of characters: Lazarus, and his sisters Martha and Mary. I want to begin by walking through the story from Mary's point of view. Mary and Martha send an urgent message to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Although it is urgent, this message is filled with confidence. The sisters know that Jesus loves Lazarus, and they know that he is able to perform miracles. Surely he can heal their brother, his beloved friend. Imagine Mary's shock, then, when her message receives no response. Jesus doesn't write, he doesn't send someone to update the sisters on his plans, and he doesn't appear. Mary is left on her own to interpret the silence and the absence as her brother gradually grows worse.

And then the unthinkable happens: Lazarus dies. This presumably young, healthy man is suddenly gone. Mary grieves, she prepares the body, she watches as the tomb is sealed—and still there is no word from Jesus. When he finally does arrive, John lets us know that Lazarus has already been dead for four days. Martha speaks with Jesus first, and then she returns and tells Mary, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." Mary gets up and rushes out to meet him. When she sees Jesus, she falls at his feet, weeping, and says "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." What an ambiguous statement!

Is she angry? "Lord, it is your fault that my brother died."

Is she reaffirming her faith in the midst of disappointment? "Lord, my brother has died, but I still believe that you are a miracle-worker."

Is she confused? "Lord, you loved my brother. Why weren't you here to save him?"

Scholars debate the meaning of her statement. But John knows how to craft a story; he knows how to make space for the reader to enter into the action. We can't determine what Mary was thinking and feeling in this moment, and therefore we can bring our anger, our faith, our confusion, and our tears into the narrative. There is space for us here.

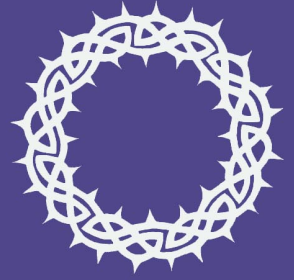


John 11:25-26

Jesus said to her,
"I am the
resurrection
and the life.
The one who
believes in me
will live, even
though they die;
and whoever lives
by believing in
me will never die.

Do you
believe this?"

(NIV)



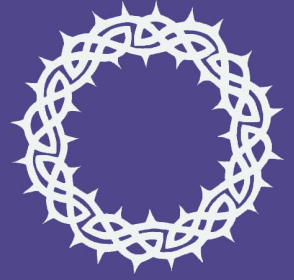
How does Jesus respond to Mary? How does he respond to us? He is deeply moved. He weeps. And then he tells the sisters and the Jews that have gathered to mourn to remove the stone sealing the entrance of the tomb. Does Mary begin to see what is coming? Jesus tells the sisters to believe, and then he cries in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." In an instant, everything changes. Tears of grief become tears of joy. Everything that was lost is now restored. Lazarus emerges, shedding bits of shroud right and left.

Most of us probably think that this is the end of the story. This was always the cut-off point in my Sunday School lessons. But there is more to the story. There is something bigger going on, something more significant than a single miracle and the restoration of one family. John actually highlights this bigger story several times. The first time occurs right after Jesus receives the sisters' message, when he makes the following statement: "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." You might think he is referring to the power displayed by God through the miracle, or the praise received by God on account of the miracle, and this isn't entirely wrong. Power and praise are part of God's glory. But the Gospel of John identifies the cross as God's greatest glory.

**For John, the crucifixion is synonymous with glorification.
So framing the story of Lazarus as the revelation of God's glory is John's way
of letting the reader know that this is really about the cross.**

The second time John highlights the bigger story occurs when Jesus announces the meaning of the miracle he is about to perform. After Martha mistakenly thinks that Jesus is referring to her brother's resurrection on the last day, Jesus corrects her: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." In the Gospel of John, every miracle is a sign that reveals something about who Jesus is and what he has come to give us. The life restored to Lazarus is physical rather than eternal, but it points towards the eternal gift of life Jesus offers through his own death and resurrection.

The third time John highlights the bigger story occurs after Lazarus emerges from the tomb. Here we learn that the council of chief priests determine to put Jesus to death because of this miracle. In the Gospel of John, the events of the passion are set into motion by the resurrection of Lazarus. So this is not a story about whether or not Jesus will resurrect Lazarus—it is a story about Jesus' decision to provoke a final confrontation with the Jewish leaders that will end in his crucifixion.



Now, you may be wondering why I took the time to walk through the story from Mary's perspective.

My reason is simple:
I think that when we are suffering, we often live Mary's perspective.

We don't understand God's apparent silence and absence. We can't see beyond our immediate trauma and need. We lose sight of the bigger story. John 11 reminds us that when we are literally blinded by grief, Jesus responds with compassion. He does not rebuke Mary for her lack of faith, and he does not criticize her for failing to understand when he spoke about his own death and resurrection. Instead he enters into her experience and weeps with her. But then, in chapter 12, another miracle occurs. John tells the reader that Mary pours out a pint of nard and anoints Jesus for his burial. No one else understands what she is doing. The disciples rebuke her for her wasteful extravagance. But in that moment, she finally sees the bigger story that is unfolding, and she responds with an offering of worship and fellowship.

This text invites us to look at the story of Lazarus in a new way. John takes Mary's experience of suffering and recontextualizes it within the larger narrative of redemption. This does not mean that her suffering is canceled out or invalidated—grief over the loss of a brother is a very real thing, as are the griefs we carry in our own hearts. Instead, it means that Mary's suffering is transformed into an opportunity for deeper fellowship with Jesus, and that it is ultimately bounded by the hope of the resurrection. In conclusion, I invite you to consider the following questions:

Where are you hurting?
Where are you in need of hope?
Is there a place where Jesus is inviting you into deeper fellowship?

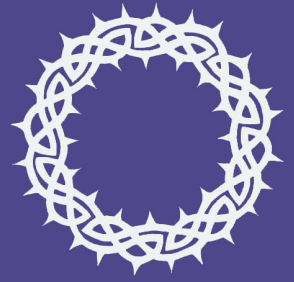
Prayer:
May the power, the presence, and the comfort of the risen Lord encounter your hearts,
and may you walk in the light of his death and resurrection.

DAY 38: MAR 26

Theme: Love Changes Everything

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Prepared by: Keith St. Jean



Most of us don't enjoy the thought of paying taxes, even if we know that the money is being used to fund important services like medical coverage, education, or infrastructure we still don't like the thought of losing more of our hard earned pay to taxes. Taxes, I'm sure, are not on most people's 10 best lists. In Jesus' day the idea of taxes had an extra measure of dislike attached to it. Taxes were a symbol that they were not free, they were a constant reminder that Israel was controlled by the Roman Empire, who demanded complete obedience and swift retribution for any infraction. The person whose job it was to collect those taxes was considered the worst sort of person, he was more than just a government official, the tax collectors in Israel were considered traitors and thieves and were hated by the people.

Enter Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, the man in charge, in the eyes of the general populace Zacchaeus was the worst of the worst, so hated that most Israelites didn't even consider him to be human but rather relegated him to a status below slaves and foreigners because he had abandoned God and his people. This was Zacchaeus, a man with power and authority,

But alone.

Reviled.

Cursed.

Outcast.

Zacchaeus was very aware of what the people thought of him but in spite of that, or perhaps because of it, he desperately longed to see this man,

this teacher,

this miracle worker,

this Jesus that everyone was talking about.

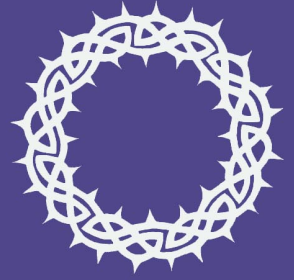
He would not allow himself to be diverted from seeing Jesus. He sees a tree, with a limb that offers a great view of the road that Jesus will walk down. Zacchaeus runs to it and begins to climb.



Luke 19:9-10

Jesus said to him,
"Today salvation
has come
to this house,
because this
man, too, is a
son of Abraham.
For the Son of
Man came to
seek and to
save the lost."

(NIV)



Jesus stops under the tree Zacchaeus has climbed, looks up and says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."

To go to someone's house, to enter their home and sit and eat with them is a sign of very intimate fellowship—it is a sign of acceptance—Jesus is committing himself to a relationship with Zacchaeus. Jesus is showing us a new way, he sees Zacchaeus not as a sinner but as a human being who, above all other things, requires love. A love that accepts him as he is and then quietly makes its presence known in his life.

The rest of the story shows Zacchaeus' response to the love and acceptance that Jesus offers. "I will give half my wealth to the poor, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much."

Zacchaeus's response was extravagant and it led to blessing for the entire community. Love changed Zacchaeus completely, it changed the way he saw the world, it changed the way he saw other people, and perhaps more importantly it changed the way he saw himself. Suddenly Zacchaeus became aware of the possibility of becoming everything God had created him to be and it consumed him.

A realization of how much we are loved by God will always lead to extravagant acts of blessing because love changes our perspective and makes us realize how much love is needed in this world. When we realize that we are loved it should then lead to the realization that all the people around us are loved as they are. This realization should create a solidarity with the people around us that leads us to want to express that love in practical and tangible ways. Love causes us to both love people more and to love more people and to express that love in acts of blessing and compassion. You've heard me say it before: **LOVE CHANGES EVERYTHING.**

Do you realize how much you are loved?
When you do everything in your life will change.

Reflection:

Have you ever done something extravagant to show someone how much you love them?

What motivated you to do this?

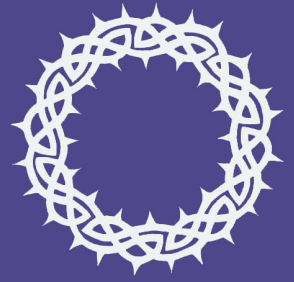
What would it mean to you to truly know that God sees you not as a broken sinner but as a beloved child? How would this reality change your life?

DAY 39: MAR 27

Theme: Jesus Anointed by Mary

Scripture: John 12:1-11

Prepared by: Josh Willms



Lets set the stage a little:

The pharisees have set a trap for Jesus in Jerusalem. If he shows his face they will be ready to arrest him. He's become too dangerous and must be silenced. The people are restless and long to overthrow the brutality and injustice of the Roman oppressors.

Meanwhile Jesus arrives in Bethany, a town near Jerusalem. He is staying with Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Fun fact: Jesus had earlier raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11).

They welcome Jesus into their home and throw a feast in his honour. I love that the writer of the Gospel of John makes sure to record that Martha is the one who served, so here you have Martha serving away as usual and Mary getting out of it. That's just typical. As someone who can relate to Martha fairly strongly sometimes, I always felt like she got a raw deal, but we can talk about that another time.

During the feast Mary breaks a jar of perfume and anoints Jesus' feet with it. What is anointing anyway?

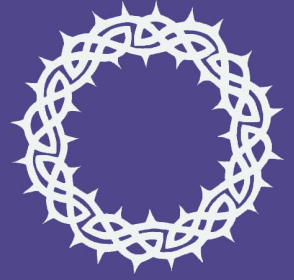
The definition of anointing is "to smear or rub with oil" in order to "make someone or something sacred." In other words the intent of anointing is to empower someone to accomplish God's work.

In our story, Mary is anointing Jesus as the king that was promised, the Messiah, the deliverer, that the people of Israel had been waiting for. But why Mary? Why was she the one to anoint Jesus? My theory is that, that's how God works.. Throughout the story of the Bible He uses flawed, broken, incomplete individuals to accomplish his purposes. As we see from Jesus' ministry, He is at work in the margins. It's those that society brands as 'not good enough,' or 'damaged goods,' that Jesus associates with and it is His rag tag group of followers that He uses to change the world.



John 12:8

"You will
always have
the poor
among you,
but you will
not always
have me."
(NIV)



Let's talk a little about perfume. As the author notes, "the house was filled with the fragrance" of the perfume (John 12:3). The Jesus Storybook Bible says this: "The thing about perfume back then was that it didn't come in bottles, it came in jars. And the jars were made out of precious stone, like alabaster. But here's the catch: the jars didn't have a lid, or a stopper, or anything. So the only way you got the perfume out was if you broke the jar. Once you broke the jar, that was it - you had no more. Most people didn't use perfume because it was too precious. They just kept it on a shelf and looked at it. So you see, this perfume was her most precious thing in all the world. It was her treasure."

Mary's anointing of Jesus was sacrificial, as Judas complains, she wasted a whole year's wages in this act. Her anointing of Jesus was also intimate. I picture Mary, kneeling at Jesus' feet, washing them with her tears, wiping them with her long dark hair and pouring the expensive perfume over them. Her action was also scandalous. As a woman in that culture to be so intimate with a man in public who was not her husband ... tongues would have been sent wagging all over Bethany.

And yet Jesus defends her saying, "Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial." It seems that Mary, more than anyone was aware of the significance of her actions. This anointing is an echo of Samuel's anointing of King David all those years before, and yet it was so much more than that. Mary was preparing Jesus for his eventual death and burial. Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. He knew he was travelling to his death. Mary's anointing of Jesus sets up Jesus as the king who would die to save his people.

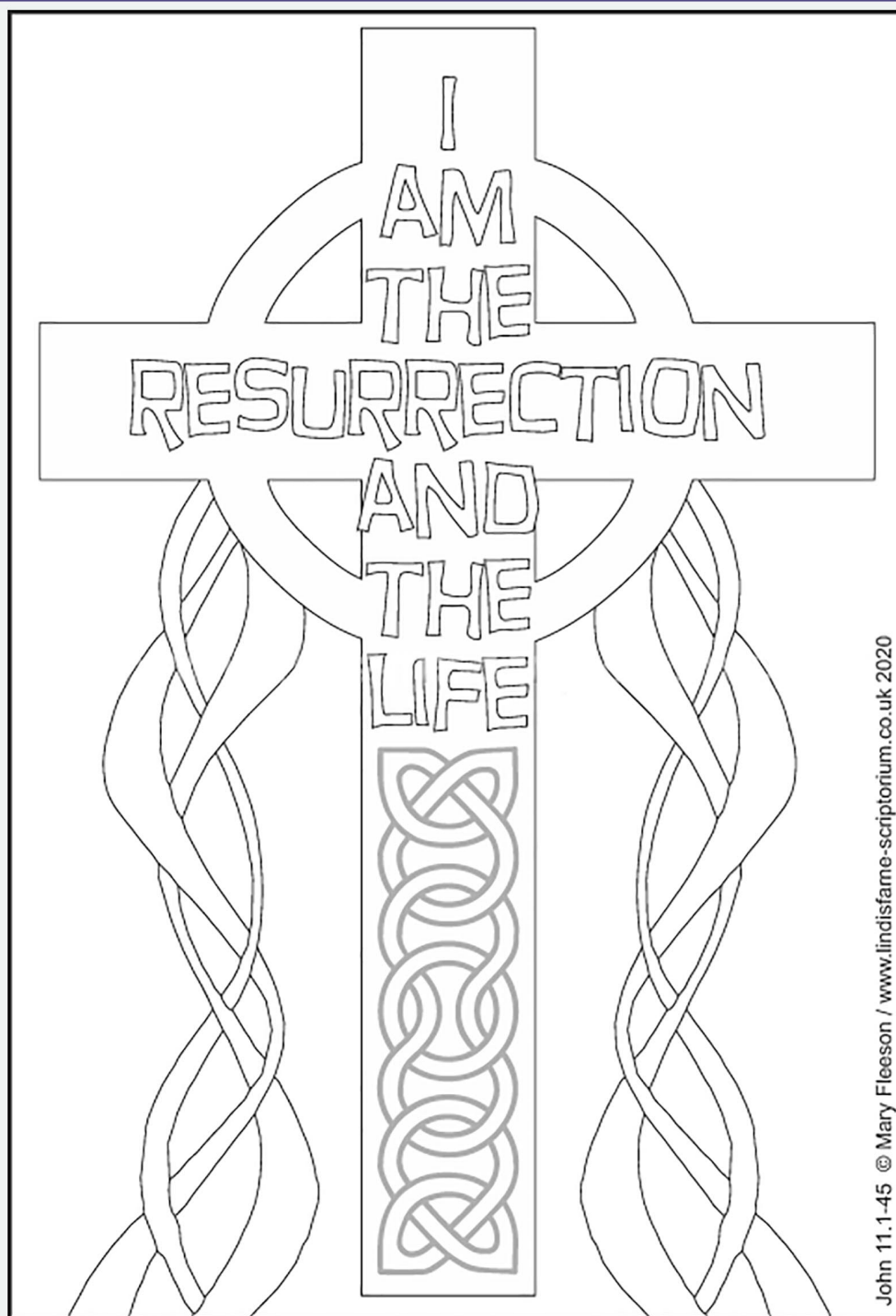
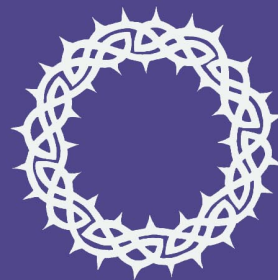
It's the very next day that Jesus enters Jerusalem to the waving of Palm fronds and cries of Hosanna! Hail the King of Israel! And within a week those same crowds will be shouting Crucify Him! Mary seemed to know what was coming, that Jesus was travelling toward his death in Jerusalem.

Prayer

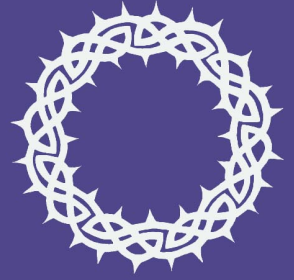
Jesus we ask that you give us eyes to see and ears
to hear where you are moving in our world.
Help us to have the courage to follow you and as Mary did.
We want to know you and be known by you Jesus.
Amen

COLORING ACTIVITY

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



John 11.1-45 © Mary Fleeson / www.lindisfame-scriptorium.co.uk 2020



then Mary took
an expensive perfume;
she poured it on Jesus'
feet and wiped his feet
with her hair.

John 12.1-11 © Mary Fleson / www.lindisfarne-scriptorium.co.uk 2020

ORIGAMI ACTIVITY

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep
and my sheep know me" John 10:14

For this activity you will need a square sheet of paper
and a marker or pencil.

