

A close-up photograph of a crown of thorns, a hammer, and nails resting on a wooden surface next to a stack of books. The crown of thorns is made of dry, brown, spiky branches. The hammer is made of dark wood with a metal head. The nails are made of dark metal. The stack of books is made of light-colored wood. The background is a wooden surface with a vertical grain.

At the Cross

Readings for the 2025 Lenten Season

Introduction

For decades, Dr. David Case has blessed Faith Memorial with his Biblical insight through teaching, preaching, and writing. His devotional endeavors have been used by the Holy Spirit to increase the importance of the “God-events” marked in the Christian calendar. Year after year, Advent, Christmas, the Lenten season, Holy Week, and Pentecost are revisited with fresh interpretation and powerful personal application. That is the purpose of Christian devotionals. As you read and re-read this year’s Lenten devotional, drink deeply from the Biblical texts, prayerfully give access to the Holy Spirit to lead you in the Truth, and be grateful for the many ways that God has used Dr. Case to build us up in the most holy faith.

Pastor Jonathan W. Morgan

Ash Wednesday

Acts 9:1-30

With today's reading, we begin the observance of the Lenten Season, 2025. Lent combines forty days plus seven Sundays. It concludes on Easter Sunday.

The Gospel begins with the Incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But why the Incarnation? Jesus Christ came to give His life as a ransom for many! This is the heart of the Gospel. The sweet baby in a cradle will conclude his earthly life with what theologians call the **Christ event**, some thirty-three years later. This event will include His arrest, the six trials, His crucifixion, and His resurrection three days later. We will relive the **Christ event** this Lenten season.

What is the importance of the **Christ event**?

1. This event represents the most defining moment in human history. This moment gives us a contrast between despair and hope, death and life, being lost and being found, the contrast of the condition of sin and the promise of righteousness.
2. Our text for this day reminds us that this defining moment is not just in theory but in actual reality. The **Christ event** will produce a real change in one's life.
3. Our text reminds us that this event is not just for a good moral Jew but for all people. The effect of the event goes deeper than the stain of sin has gone. The Gospel is for all people.
4. Our text establishes the fact that if the chief of sinners, Saul of Tarsus, can become a changed individual, salvation is for all who believe in the saving act of Jesus Christ.

Some of the details of this **Christ event** story will be discovered over the next seven weeks.

First Sunday of Lent

Preparation for Ministry

Luke 4:1-13

The last seven days in Jerusalem did not happen in a vacuum. The days of the **Christ event** were the result of a three-year period of preparation that began with the temptation of Jesus at the start of His earthly ministry. Today's text reminds us that: *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.* Jesus, being fully God and fully man, felt the full force of each temptation. Having no food for forty days, He was extremely hungry. Being fully divine, there was not the slightest chance that Jesus would yield to this temptation. In theology, this is known as the impeccability of Jesus.

Temptation number one was aimed at Him physically. *Turn stones to bread!* Jesus responded, *man does not live on bread alone.* Temptation number two was the offer of a shorter, easier way to Jesus' reign over the earth. *All this domain I will give You. All You have to do is worship me!* Jesus responded, *worship God and serve Him only.* Temptation number three involved offering proof to the people that God was with Jesus. Satan said, *throw yourself down from the top of the Temple and the people will believe. And, besides, God has promised to protect You* (Psalms 91:11, 12). Jesus responded, *don't put God to the test!* Luke tells us that Satan left Him until an opportune time! In other words, I'll be back, this isn't over yet!

This narrative of temptation prepared Jesus for three years of ministry. It also prepared Him for Passion Week including His death and resurrection. Jesus came to earth to die! Very early in His ministry, Mark reminds his readers that the enemies of Jesus were conspiring together as to how they might destroy Him (Mark 3:6).

Second Sunday of Lent

The Cost of Discipleship

Mark 8:31-38

At the beginning of today's reading, we notice that Jesus refers to Himself as *Son of Man*. Of course, Jesus knew He was the Son of God but he used *Son of Man* when He was speaking of Himself. This term identified Jesus with ordinary humankind.

The text records the first of three Passion Predictions found in Mark's Gospel. In very plain terms Jesus told His disciples what would occur when they came to Jerusalem. At once, Peter rebuked Jesus, *this will never happen to you!* Jesus responded, *get behind Me, Satan!* The voice was Peter, the thought was from Satan. Peter's rebuke provided an opportunity for Satan to tempt Jesus from going to the cross.

After the exchange with Peter, Jesus addressed the remaining crowd with what was involved with being a disciple of His. It was not a *cheap grace* relationship to use Bonhoeffer's* term. There was a cost to being a disciple of Jesus. First, a disciple must **deny** himself. Secondly, one must be willing to **take up** his cross. Thirdly, a disciple must **follow** Jesus.

*Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for everyone
And there's a cross for me.*

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945, was a German Protestant theologian important for his support of ecumenism and his view of Christianity's role in a secular world. His involvement in a plot to overthrow Adolf Hitler led to his imprisonment and execution. His *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1951) is perhaps the most profound document of his convictions.

Third Sunday of Lent

Thirsting for God

Luke 13:1-9

The second half of today's reading is a parable concerning a fig tree. As Jesus told this parable, a man had planted a fig tree in his vineyard. For three years, the man had come to this tree looking for fruit and finding none. After three years with no fruit to be found, in disgust he said, *cut it down! The tree is just using up the ground.* His vineyard-keeper replied, *Let it alone, sir. Give me one more year to dig around it and put in fertilizer. If after this year there is still no fruit, I'll cut it down.*

For many individuals, the Lenten season is a time of giving up something. I'll make a great sacrifice and do away with my favorite treat for the next forty days. I know an individual who made her great sacrifice for Lent by not eating her favorite candy bar. But what if the Lenten season is a time for adding to our lives, not giving up something as a great sacrifice? What if the Lenten season is a time for doing some positive things, like digging around my spiritual life, putting in fertilizer and expecting spiritual growth?

When viewed from this perspective, what are some additions to my spiritual life that I could add during this season of Lent? Perhaps my prayer life needs some attention. Rather than a quick prayer at night before I go to sleep, God would be pleased by my spending more time with Him. Perhaps I have become lax in my attendance at the times for worship. Perhaps, this is the time for me to begin tithing. The list can go on and on. In my spiritual quest to respond to my thirsting for God, it may be that what I do positively is more important than what I give up for a few weeks.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Crucial Choices

John 3:14-21

With the reading of today's Scripture lesson, we are reminded of one of John's favorite writing techniques. Many of his chapters begin with a narrative involving one or several individuals and the chapter will conclude with theological reflections that apply to every reader. In this chapter, frequently, the question is raised whether the entire chapter contains a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus or does the chapter contain theological reflections for all readers. For example, notice Jesus and Nicodemus talk about a crucial choice that Nicodemus must make – whether to not to be born again. Starting at verse fifteen, we note a change from Nicodemus to *whoever* (v. 15-16), *He who* (v. 18), *men* (v. 19), *everyone* (v. 20), *he who practices* (v. 21). Apparently, Nicodemus is not the only one that is faced with crucial choices every day.

Today's text mentions three choices everyone faces. The first choice is to believe in Jesus Christ as their personal savior or to reject Him. The choice is between eternal life or to perish! God has done everything He can do to enable us to make the right choice. Motivated by love, He gave His Son to our world so that we might be saved through Him. Ultimately, the choice is ours.

The second choice involves facing God's judgement for not believing in Jesus. Again, this was not God's original plan. God sent Light into our world. Rejection of that Light leaves God with no other choice.

The third choice brings one to the basic problem of the human condition – by nature, we hate the Light! We must choose to allow God to deal with our basic sin problem.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

From Death to Life

John 11:1-46

Today's reading is the familiar account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem for the last time. He approaches the village of Bethany, the hometown of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Before He enters the village, the sisters send word that Lazarus is sick. Jesus assures His disciples that Lazarus will not die, in fact, it's time for God's glory to be revealed. He remains outside the village for two more days before finally entering Bethany. By this time, Lazarus has died!

Jesus confronted the grieving sisters, both of whom said: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!* Jesus had healed many individuals over the past three years. He would certainly have healed his friend, Lazarus.

Being led to Lazarus's tomb, Jesus wept, He prayed, He cried out with a loud voice, *Lazarus, come forth!* Lazarus stepped out of the tomb still wrapped in his burial wrappings. Jesus told the crowd, *Unbind him and let him go!*

Over the past three years, Jesus had healed a multitude of people. But He did not come to be a great healer. He came to die on a cross so that sinners, dead in trespasses and sin, might be saved and experience the reality of transformation: from Death to Life!

This is the message of the Lenten Season. In the words of a Terry Toler song, *Even when Jesus is four days late, He's right on time.*

Palm Sunday

The Wounds and Sorrows of Ministry

Mark 11:1-1

Today's reading brings us to the beginning of Passion Week. The New Testament Canon contains four accounts of the earthly life of Jesus Christ. Each writer has his own purpose he wishes to share. Each individual writer selects various accounts from the life of Jesus and weaves them together to tell his story. No Gospel includes everything Jesus said and did; in fact, John tells his readers that *the books couldn't contain it all* (John 20:30-31). However, each writer has a rather complete account of Passion Week. Each Gospel account relates the events of this final week of Jesus' earthly life, beginning with the events on Palm Sunday by spending between 20% to 40% of their entire Gospel on this one week in Jesus' life. No wonder many commentators refer to a Gospel as a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction.

What is the emotion of this day? The crowds shout for joy when Jesus enters the city (Matthew 21:9, Mark 11:9-10, Luke 19:37-38, John 12:13). Why? Luke provides one reason – the crowds shout for joy because of the miracles Jesus has previously done! As Jesus enters Jerusalem, He weeps. Why? Because the city faces judgment due to the fact they did not receive Jesus as their Messiah!

Jesus will accomplish His ministry this week in Jerusalem. For this reason, the purpose of Passion Week, He was sent into our world. The fulfilling of this mission will involve wounds to Him personally and sorrow for the judgment that will soon come upon Jerusalem.

Maundy Thursday

Mark 14:12-26

With today's text, we are at the mid-point of Passion Week. Up to now, events have moved at a rather slow pace but now things will greatly quicken. Our text reminds us that the Thursday of Passion Week was the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed. Recall that the Jewish day extended from 6:00 in the evening to 6:00 the next evening. So, it is after 6:00 on Thursday evening. Jesus and His disciples are preparing to observe the first day of Unleavened Bread by eating the traditional meal for the occasion – boiled lamb, bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

This meal had been eaten for centuries as it recalled the deliverance out of Egypt recorded in Exodus. Moses led the people to the Mount where God said to them, *if you hear and obey, then you will be my chosen people* (Exodus 19). The people answered, *yes*, and are told how God's people should live (Exodus 20). However, there is one problem. The people have a stubborn mind and a hard heart. Prophets called the people to God's will but to no avail. Finally, a prophet saw a day when God would work on the interior of man's heart (Jeremiah 31:33).

Today's text reminds us that while Jesus and His disciples were eating the meal, Jesus stood up and introduced His new teaching. Jesus took bread, blessed it, gave the bread to His disciples and told them that the broken bread represented His broken body. Then He took the cup, blessed the cup and told them that now the words of Jeremiah were to be fulfilled. As often as they ate the bread and drank from the cup, they were to do it in the memory of Him.

Events over the next few hours will come quickly: betrayal, six trials, crucifixion, death. All before 3:00 the next afternoon.

Good Friday

John 18-19

The very name for this day is curious. What's *good* about this day? Jesus Christ is subjected to the most inhumane form of capital punishment known to all mankind. We can't sanitize His death. To be crucified was a dirty, profane way to die. There was not a clean crucifixion known to mankind. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was no different. There was nothing *good* about it! And yet, Christian faith over the centuries has referred to the events of this day as Good Friday. Why? Because what happened that day was *good* for mankind. It was the only way for sinful individuals like you and me to be saved.

Each of the four Gospels give special attention to the events of this day. The three Synoptics seem to give special attention to the human Jesus as He is crucified. Mark records Jesus crying out in a loud voice, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?* (Mark 15:34). Also, at His death Jesus cried out with a loud voice as He yielded up His spirit (Mark 15:37). Matthew records the same events as Mark. Luke records Jesus crying out with a loud voice, *Father, into your hands I commit My spirit* (Luke 23:46). All three writers note the scorn and mockery from the crowd and the two who were crucified along with Jesus.

The writer of the fourth Gospel presents a somewhat different scene. John records Jesus saying, *I am thirsty* (John 19:28) and then He said, *It is finished*, bowed His head and gave up His spirit (John 19:30). Who has the real account of His crucifixion? The Synoptic writers or John? They both do! Remember this is the God/Man on the cross. The Synoptic writers may offer the human side of His death while John reminds his readers that this is God, the Son, dying. All four writers ultimately told the same story. Jesus is dead. It's Friday, but Sunday is coming!

Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8

The long journey through the Lenten Season is over. The target events of Good Friday are in the past. It's Easter Sunday. There is hope in the air. There is a sense that a new day has dawned for all humankind. All four Gospel writers relate some aspects of this resurrection day. Our text today records the shortest account of Christ's resurrection. Other Gospel writers include events that occurred on that day while others record several post-resurrection appearances of the risen Lord.

However, there are a few interesting features in Mark's resurrection text. First, why the abrupt ending at verse eight? Some suggest that Mark had written more details but these were lost somewhere along the way in the transmission of the text. Most evangelicals reject this thought as it would reflect poorly on the integrity of the text. Almost every modern translation of the text will note later manuscripts add verses 9-20. The contents of these verses are accurate and are verified by other writers.

Another interesting feature of Mark's account is his choice of who is the first witness to the empty tomb. Women! In the first century, there were two types of individuals who were not permitted to provide testimony in a court case – shepherds and women. In fact, Mary Magdalene, another Mary and Salome arrived at the tomb very early on Resurrection Sunday. They found the stone rolled away and a young man sitting at the right. *You're looking for Jesus, the Nazarene. He has risen. Go, tell His disciples, and Peter, the good news.* They ran away, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them. They said nothing to anyone!

He is risen. He is risen indeed!