



YOU ARE

here

Daily
Devotional

Exploring the scripture of Lent 2022
through images of the Holy Land

BARN GEESE
WORSHIP

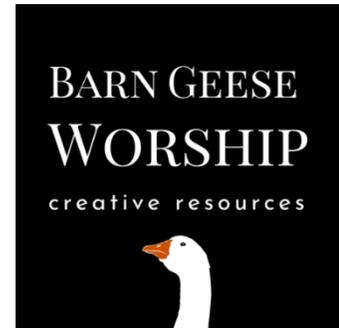
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Introduction

Welcome to the devotional for the *You Are Here* worship series. This season explores Jesus' location throughout our Lenten scripture readings, and since we're paying such close attention to place, we wanted you to be able to see the places that the scriptures are talking about. Hence this photo devotional, which offers glimpses into the Holy Land alongside a mix of biblical devotion, history, and personal reflection.

Daily entries run from Transfiguration Sunday through Easter Sunday and include:

- A daily focus text drawn from Sunday's scripture readings,
- An image from the Holy Land,
- A short reflection,
- An intention for the day, and
- A prayer.

A word about the writing style: I use first-person "I" language throughout this devotional. Partly that's because many of the devotions share my personal experience of being in the Holy Land, so using a third-person voice feels awkward. Partly it's because the prayers I wrote are prayers I would pray/have prayed/am going to pray again. I hope they resonate with you, invite you to explore a different dimension of prayer, or simply function as handholds into your own conversation with the Divine.

Contributors

The Rev. Victoria Larson (that's me!) is gooseherd-in-chief at [Barn Geese Worship](#). I visited the Holy Land in January 2014 as part of a seminary trip, and since assembling this devotional, I have resolved to better label my photos.

The Rev. Drs. Angela and Martin Zimmann served as special assistants to the Rev. Dr. Munib Younan, the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and as co-pastors at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, the English-speaking congregation in Jerusalem, from 2013-2014. They currently live in Pennsylvania.

The Rev. Dr. Mark Vitalis Hoffman, Professor of Biblical Studies at the United Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania, has studied in the biblical lands and regularly leads trips there. You can see more of his photos in BibleWorks Bible software and in the [Atlas of the Biblical World](#) he coauthored. He also blogs regularly at <http://bibleandtech.blogspot.com> and shares other resources at his [ScrollandScreen.com](#) site.

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February 27
TRANSFIGURATION

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

Luke 9:28

“The mountains are calling, and I must go,” said John Muir once, to the deep gratitude of souvenir-shop product designers everywhere.

Mountains do call me: to climb to the best vantage point, to seek solitude, and to find a clear view, both inside and outside my own head. For Jesus, they were a favorite spot to pray. Scholars can't be sure exactly which mountain features in this passage, but Mount Tabor in Galilee near Jesus' hometown is a strong contender.

God, it's simpler to be mindful of your nearness with a majestic view, a clean breeze, a quiet space. Help me to perceive you down in the valley, too: in the faces and voices of friends, neighbors, and especially those in need. Amen.

Today I will... find a few moments to get a bird's-eye view of the coming Lenten journey. I'll find a place up high, whether the top of a local mountain or the roof of my apartment building or the stool at my kitchen counter. I will breathe deeply, holding space for God's presence to make itself known.



Mount Tabor from Nazareth. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Monday, February 28

Extol the LORD our God, and worship at God's holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.

Psalm 99:9

The city of Jerusalem, where God's holy mountain of Zion is traditionally located, pulls us—and Jesus—toward itself throughout the Lenten season. Jerusalem started out as a tiny little citadel, as unlikely to be the seat of God's throne as a shepherd boy was to be God's chosen king. Maybe that's why King David, who started out as a lowly shepherd not even counted among Jesse's sons when a prophet came looking for them, chose it as his own city, the most important in his kingdom.

*God, you made a hill into your holy mountain and a shepherd boy into a king.
What might you make of the things I think are broken?
What might you make of me?
Amen.*

Today I will... think about where God might be drawing my attention to a little, unregarded thing. Today I will notice and honor its particular presence.



The Temple Mount from the Mount of Olives. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Tuesday, March 1

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

Exodus 34:29

Our Lenten journey begins tomorrow, which means that today is the day when I will eat many pancakes. Without apology. I will grab that maple syrup and go to town.

The tradition of Fat Tuesday emerged because Lent is traditionally a season of fasting, so people needed an excuse to use up the nice stuff in their pantries. Today, it's an opportunity to simplify, to clean out, to pare down—and to party.



Celebrating at home in Jerusalem.
Photo by Angela and Martin Zimmann.

God seems to be in the extravagant Mardi Gras spirit in this reading from Exodus: divine glory overflows so abundantly that it marks Moses' face, even if he doesn't know it. We, too, are marked with God's abundant grace.

God, you marked me with your love when you claimed me as your child. Let that joy shine out of me in all that I do today. And let all I do today include eating pancakes. Amen.

Today I will... affirm: I am marked with radiant grace, and that deserves to be celebrated.

Wednesday, March 2
ASH WEDNESDAY

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Joel 2:1-2

The weather on the Sea of Galilee is changeable. Strong storms can blow up without warning, testing even the most skillful of sailors.

Lent can feel the same way, especially because it arrives in the middle of the workweek, when my mind is deep in the “get it done” track. Regardless of how beleaguered I’m feeling by my undomesticated to-do list, Lent arrives with all the suddenness of a storm. It insists that I stop. That I feel the reverberation of the call to repentance deep down in my bones. That I raise my head and look around, broadening my focus from what’s right in front of me to take in what’s coming over the horizon.

God, let the squall of your Spirit blow through me. Clear out the cobwebs of habits that don't help, mindsets that don't mend, thoughts that don't lead to life. I offer you my whole heart. You and I both know it's a work in progress. Amen.

Today, I will... make time to halt in the rhythm of my workweek and reflect on the ways in which the world—and my own life—are not as God desires.



Looking over the Sea of Galilee. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Thursday, March 3

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:21

Jesus spoke those words from the Mount of the Beatitudes, a hillside in Galilee overlooking the sea. The landscape there forms a natural amphitheater that made Jesus' words echo in the physical space. They still resound today.

St. Augustine wrote of something called *ordo amoris*, or the order of loves. It was a way of talking about one's priorities, but why use a dull word like priorities when one can use the word loves? Loves is more accurate anyway: the things I choose to prioritize reflect the truth about what I love the most. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Lent calls for a deep examination of my *ordo amoris*. My *ordo* is never perfect. I know that I should have God there at the top of the list. But Luther spoke about sin as a state of being curved in on oneself (*incurvatus in se*) for a reason. Maintaining a proper *ordo amoris* is difficult precisely because sin is always curving my loves in on myself.

God, I'm a turned-in-on-myself mess. I trust you to forgive me, but please unbend me, too. Reorder my loves. Straighten out my ordo. Amen.

Today I will... examine a document—a budget, a calendar, a to-do list—and ask myself, What is the order of my loves? I will change one thing on the document that will allow me to better direct my love outward today.



The Mount of the Beatitudes from the Sea of Galilee. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Friday, March 4

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Psalm 51:11

Once upon a time, an altar that looked a lot like this one stood in Tel Be'er Sheva, an Iron Age settlement south of Jerusalem on the edge of the Negev Desert. And then, one day, it didn't. It was destroyed, and its stones were salvaged for other work until archaeologists uncovered them in the 20th century and pieced them back together.



It's tough to pinpoint exactly when a bunch of rocks got taken apart, so it's hard to know exactly when or why this altar was destroyed. A compelling argument has been made that it was done by Hezekiah, king of Judah, as part of his religious reforms in the 8th century BCE. Hezekiah cemented Jerusalem as the religious center of his kingdom by destroying all the "high places"—places of ritual sacrifice—outside of it (2 Kings 18:2).

Be'er Sheva four-horned altar.
Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

It's an interesting idea, limiting the ritual worship of God to a single place—though I suppose we do something similar when we think of the church sanctuary we visit on Sundays as the only place where we go to meet God. God, on the other hand, doesn't seem to feel constricted by our attempts to keep God in a conveniently centralized location.

God! You keep surprising me.

Why is it that you delight in turning up when you're least expected?

Why don't you wait until I get my heart and mind ready to meet you?

Yes, God. I just heard what that sounds like out loud. Let me change gears.

Thank you, God, for not waiting until I'm ready. You and I would be waiting forever.

Thank you for stealing in. Amen.

Today I will... ask myself where God is creeping through the confines I set in place. When has God surprised me by being present where I wasn't expecting to find God?

Saturday, March 5

The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Isaiah 58:10-11

As a resident of the northeastern United States, I was quickly impressed by the sheer number of rocks and the unrelenting brown of the dry and hilly landscape that surrounds Jerusalem. Considering that I was in a geographic area roughly the size of New Jersey, I figured the whole place looks like that. But when we traveled to Dan, I learned I was wrong.

The Tel Dan Nature Reserve sits where the headwaters of the Jordan River spill down from the northern mountains and gather as a little stream that builds and builds into a strong-flowing river. The Jordan then feeds the Sea of Galilee before reemerging at the southern end of the massive lake and continuing toward the Dead Sea. Tel Dan struck me because it is unexpected, a spring of water after a long stretch of parched places.

God, thank you for wellsprings of joy in the middle of dry ground. For friends. For family. For strangers who let me pet their dogs. For the people I love who care passionately about the world, who keep me caring too, even when I'm tired. Take me to the place, God, where I can be that person for others. Amen.

Today I will...name the wellsprings of joy in my life that sustain me when others go dry.



Flowing water at Tel Dan. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

March 6

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground...and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

Deuteronomy 26:1-2

It wasn't until I was touring the third or fourth tel (archaeological site) during my first trip to the Holy Land that I finally took a close look at the round, empty shells hanging in the trees that grew everywhere with undomesticated self-satisfaction. Pomegranates, I realized. Those are pomegranates! My relationship to pomegranates had hitherto been confined to rare sightings at grocery stores. Pomegranates are a luxury. They are not supposed to be growing wild, profuse to the point that no one bothers to harvest them except the birds.

My reaction bears something in common with the reactions of the first Hebrews to set foot in the Promised Land. Following Moses' order, they brought back some of the produce they found. The cluster of grapes they cut down was so large that they had to carry it between two poles (Numbers 14:23). Such was the amazing bounty of the land God had promised to them. If our God is so prodigious with pomegranates, what could God be growing in me?

God, help me sort through the million-and-one things going on in my overwrought brain. Guide me to the fruits of your Spirit: faith, hope, and love. In the person choose to be today, may friends and strangers see me returning those fruits to you. Amen.

Today I will...consider what gifts God has given me and name one thing I can return to God as a first fruit today.



Pomegranate rind. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Monday, March 7

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

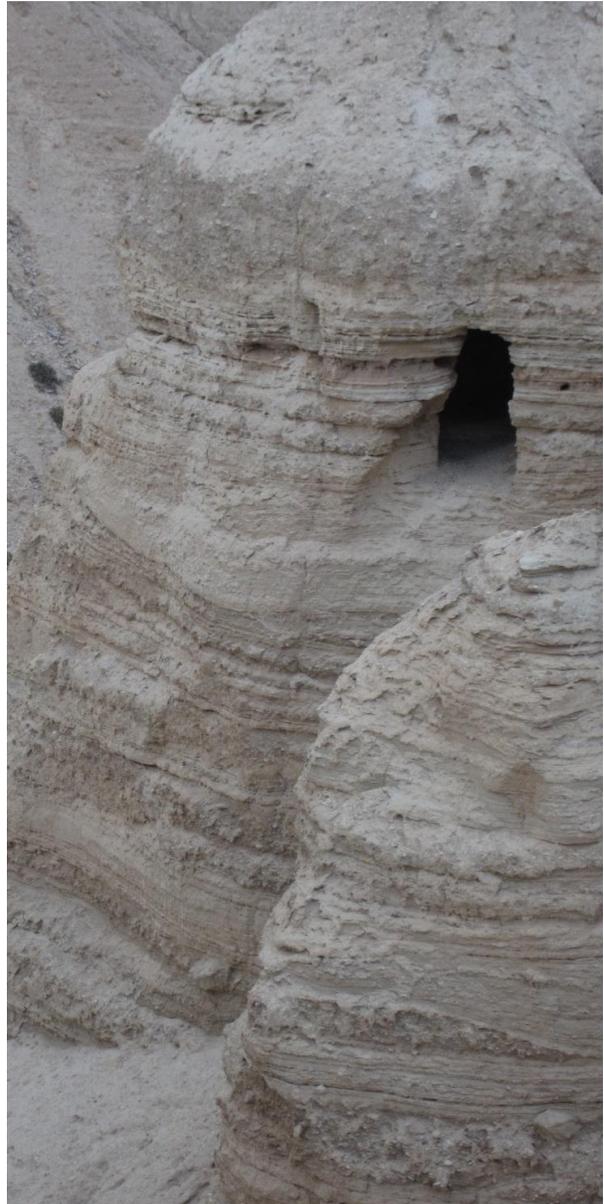
Psalm 91:1-2

The story I heard at Qumran was that in 1946, a teenage shepherd of the nomadic bedouin people threw a rock into one of the caves. He was surprised to hear a shattering sound. When he investigated with his cousins, they found the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the second-oldest record of scriptural books we know, stored inside ancient clay jars. Scripture speaks of the gospel being kept as "treasure in clay jars." At Qumran, it was literally true.

Qumran was also the site of a community of Jewish ascetics called Essenes (circa 200 BCE to 200 CE). John the Baptist may or may not have been connected with them. Essenes were into ritual purification. They looked down on fleshly needs in favor of spiritual ones.

For all the ways I still find to follow that Essene example, finding fault with my body and growing frustrated at its weaknesses, I remember that God still chose to become incarnate: to be fleshy, to be clay, to be breakable.

*God, when you gave us the treasure of your Son, you gave him in the clay jar of an earthly body. Teach me to honor my own body — not just because of the gospel it holds, but because your hands formed it before I ever knew what gospel was.
Amen.*



Cave 4 in Qumran. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Today I will...honor the "clay" God has formed by doing something that puts me in touch with my body—a dance, a stretch, a walk in the woods, or just a few deep breaths. I will follow God's example, and call it good.

Tuesday, March 8

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart..."

Romans 10:8b

The multiplicity of ways that Christianity uses word is a source of confusion and delight to me. Scripture is called the Word. So is Jesus. But scripture and Jesus are not the same thing. Similarly, I cherish the sacraments, which my Lutheran ilk speak of as the Word united with physical elements.



Prayer at the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. Photo by Victoria Larson.

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart...." How does the nuance change as I think of that Word as scripture, as Christ, as sacrament?

What does it mean that the Word is something I can touch and taste, and someone who once lived and died and lived again, and something I can read and hear?

*God,
your Word is so many things:
a lamp to my feet,
a light to my path,
a law that convicts me,
a gospel that comforts me,
a verse that comes
when I need it most,
a morsel of bread that fills me,
a drop of water that saves me.
Bring this Word nearer, God.
Let it be on my lips
and in my heart today.
Amen.*

Today I will...reflect upon which image of God's Word feels most alive to me now.

Wednesday, March 9

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.
Luke 4:1-2b

I was staggered by the wilderness of Judea when I first saw it. As a child, when I imagined Jesus going off into the wilderness, I pictured a Looney-Tunes-like desert, sandy and full of cacti and the occasional mischievous coyote. But the wilderness of Judea isn't like that. It's utterly charmless, even hostile. It's brown: brown scrub, brown dirt, brown rocks — endless rocks. I never realized how dastardly the devil's invitation to turn stones into bread was until I saw the wilderness of Judea.

I've always wondered why the Spirit would lead Jesus into a place like that. I don't have great answers. But lately, I've had a new question: When, later on, did Jesus recall the wilderness?

Maybe it happened several times, right before he'd disappear to go off by himself and pray. Surely he remembered the wilderness on the night of his arrest and trial. And during his crucifixion.

Maybe the wilderness feels less scary when I remember that I've been somewhere like it before.

God, you've brought me into the wilderness in this life, and I'm pretty sure you'll do it again. Give me wisdom to recognize when your Spirit is leading me. Give me strength to stay where you put me. Give me faith to trust that you never leave me alone. Amen.

Today I will...name what wilderness I have encountered or am encountering right now.



Bethany beyond Jordan. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Thursday, March 10

The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and...brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Deuteronomy 26:8-9



The Jezreel Valley from Mount Carmel.
Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

The Jezreel Valley lies a few miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. I remember it for two things: First, it's called the breadbasket of Israel, because so much farming happens across its wide green lap. Second, it's the scene of famous battles from the time of the Judges, including one that Deborah led. Those two themes—warfare and abundant land—meet in today's verses too.

This this has often been the case for the promised land. To read the Hebrew Bible is to receive the impression that the Israelites were almost constantly at war with their neighbors, including those who possessed the land before they did. To read the New Testament is to glimpse the fractious

“peace” that the Jewish people endured under the Roman Empire mere decades before a major rebellion. To read today's news is to know that the Holy Land is still a site of ongoing conflict, a tangled knot of harms done and borne. In the face of such a record, how can God continue to promise peace and plenty?

God hasn't given me a clear answer on that one, but the question makes me mindful of the story of the place where this photo was taken: Mount Carmel, where Elijah killed the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18). The bloody story reinforces the recurring theme of violence in the sacred story, but the site of the green fields below reminds me of God's promise through Isaiah that swords will be beaten into plowshares. The land is resilient. So are God's promises.

God, I don't understand the violence that fills this world. I don't know what I can do against the intractable conflicts that continue to rage between people and peoples. But I know that your call is to peace. Help me be an agent of that peace today. Amen.

Today I will...look for new, green life rising up in creation. I will lift to God the conflicts in my own life that are calling for peace.

Friday, March 11

Then the devil took [Jesus] to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, '[God] will command [God's] angels...to protect you...'"

Luke 4:9-10

From ancient times, Jerusalem was touted as the place where the Son of David would resume the mantle of kingship and bring God's reign to earth. Such promises are heady stuff, and the devil knows it. The devil brings Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem—the place, architecturally, right over the Holy of Holies, or the inner sanctuary—and dares him to jump. If there's any place where God would keep God's promises, the devil nudges, surely it's here.

Jesus chooses to trust God's promises rather than test them. He knows the devil he's dealing with, and he knows the God he's dealing with, too. He may be faint with hunger and near-wild from forty days in the wilderness, but he's no fool.

Well, I am a fool, with a record of yielding to temptation. Jesus is perfect because I cannot be.

God, help me release the drive to be perfect, to be good always, to not disappoint you or other people, because frankly, I can't do it. Instead, teach me the far more difficult trick of trusting in your promises, your grace, and your redemption. Amen.

Today I will...show Jesus one place in my life where I feel like I am constantly trying and failing and commend it to his grace.



Scale model at the Israel Museum of the Temple Mount around Jesus' time.
Photo by Victoria Larson.

Saturday, March 12

Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.
Psalm 91:9-10

Nimrod's castle is named after the Biblical king, but it wasn't built until long after his reign. It sits in the north of the Holy Land on the slopes of Mount Hermon. Though administrated by Israel since 1967, the international community considers the area where the ancient fortress sits to be Syrian territory. The fortress, with its thick stone walls, is a witness to and symbol of persistent longing for security and safety.

From what do I need protection? What does safety look like in my life? How does God provide the refuge I seek? What voices in my community are crying out for shelter?

God, you've been my help in ages past. You're my hope in all my days

to come. Whatever storms may blast my way, protect me. And wherever I have the capacity to give refuge to others, help me open the door. Amen.



Nimrod Castle.

Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Today I will...take time to learn about who in my community needs protection: from hunger, from a housing crisis, from gun violence, from abuse, from poverty. I will commit to one action toward providing that protection.

March 13

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life...

Psalm 27:4

As the Barn Geese were preparing this Lenten series, we reflected on the particular importance that home can have. Katie remembered what it was like when her parents moved out of her childhood home while she was in her freshman year of college. All of a sudden, she had no place to go to that really felt like home. She remembers that in that year, she heard a preacher say, "If you're wondering where your home is, Jesus is your home." That was balm to her for a long time.

What does home feel like? How is Jesus home for me? Who do I know who is looking for a home right now?

God, there are times when I feel adrift. I have a permanent address, but no sense of home. Please be my home. Help me find my sense of place within the sense of your presence. Amen.

Today I will...offer someone else the comfort that Jesus offers me by welcoming me into the house of my God.



Street signs in Bethlehem. Photo by Martin and Angela Zimmann.

Monday, March 14

God brought Abram outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then God said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Genesis 15:5

The fence surrounding the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth is topped with stars. And why not? Jesus is one of the numberless descendants of the desert patriarch described in Genesis 15. For Christians, he is the fullest expression of God's promise that Abraham's descendants would be a blessing for all nations, grafting us into the promise that God has already extended to the Jewish people.

Jesus makes me part of God's chosen family. How do I relate to this idea of family tied by love and sacrifice, not by genes?

God, the world can feel so fragmented, so lonely. But a glance at the night sky reminds me that you have created connections among stars and strangers. Thank you for making me a part of your beloved people. Lead me to offer others what you have given to me: a chosen family. Amen.

Today I will...reach out to a member of my chosen family and remind them that I love them.



Basilica of the Annunciation. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Tuesday, March 15

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:20

The starry theme continues today! These stars were strung above the streets of Bethlehem, the town where God fulfilled our long expectation by becoming flesh and blood. It's through Jesus' citizenship in heaven that our own comes.

Luther spoke of Christians living as citizens of two kingdoms, the earthly and the heavenly.

What are my civic duties as a citizen of earth? And what are they in heaven? Do these responsibilities complement one another, conflict, or both?

God, send your Spirit to fill me with the wisdom and the wherewithal to live with a foot each in heaven and earth; striving toward the kin-dom of the first while living in the kingdoms of the second. Amen.

Today I will...take an action toward healing my community, whether it's purchasing extra groceries for the local food bank, donating to a local clinic, volunteering for a tutoring program, asking a refugee family resettling here if I can make them dinner, or....



Stars hung in the streets of Bethlehem.

Photo by Victoria Larson.

Wednesday, March 16

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Luke 13:34

There are so many voices that compete with God’s. This thought comes to me whenever I hear Jesus speak these words in the gospel of Mark. I can hear his frustration, his sorrow, and his longing. They resonate within me, but so does the plight of the people who fail to listen. God’s voice isn’t always easy to pick out from the crowd, and even when it is, there’s so much that demands my attention.

But in the very same verse that implies godly frustration, Jesus offers another, contrasting divine image: a mothering hen.

The frustrated God, the mothering hen: How do these two images mingle in my imagination? Does the mother hen ever give up protecting her chicks? Does God ever cease spreading wings over me?

God, a cacophony of other voices calls to me. Where is your voice? I long to hear it, even if we both know that my skills as a listener can use some work. Call out, God. Please don’t give up. Amen.

Today I will...meditate on the image of Jesus as a mothering hen.



Near Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Thursday, March 17

For [God] will hide me in [God's] shelter in the day of trouble; [God] will conceal me under the cover of [God's] tent...[and] set me high on a rock.
Psalm 27:5

In Jerusalem, the Church of St. Anne stands like a fortress, all strong lines and thick walls. Inside, the church is noteworthy for its acoustics, not its defensibility. I remember singing a simple chant with a few other members of our tour group inside the church. We sounded like a full-throated choir.

This verse of the Psalm has always struck me as odd. Isn't being hidden away in the shelter of God quite a different thing than being set high on a rock?

St. Anne's reminds me that a single place can have several defining qualities. The same Crusader-era church whose thick walls offered protection through the centuries was also designed to help the human voice soar. It is a place for hiding and for revealing.

God, you convict the comfortable and comfort the convicted. In whichever category I find myself today at any given moment, give me what I need to grow in love for you, for myself, and for my neighbor. Amen.



Interior of the Church of St. Anne.
Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Today I will...contemplate how God provides me with protection, as well as how God asks me to be vulnerable.

Friday, March 18

Then [God] said to [Abram], "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O LORD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

Genesis 15:7-8

As I toured from one ancient site to another, the thing that impressed itself upon me was the sheer age of the civilizations that have lived in the Holy Land. Tel Megiddo dates to at least 6500 BCE, several millennia before Abram and Sarai came along. Abram asks, "How shall I know that I am to possess this land?" This question takes on a different shade of urgency when one is standing amid the signs of another civilization that made its home in the land long before the promise was made. It takes on a different shade of fairness, too—especially in a place where land rights have been violently debated for generations.

What do I do when God's promises leave me with so many questions, like Abram?

God, let's be clear: I'm not you. Not all knowing. Not all seeing. I have so many questions about how you're going to keep your promises. How will you redeem this broken world? How are your people supposed to be a blessing to all nations when we've caused such harm? How am I supposed to be a part of your healing of the world? In the midst of what I can't know or understand, bless my questions and help me to trust in your goodness, in your grace, in your unconquerable love. Amen.

Today I will...bring honest questions to God in prayer. I will practice sitting in my discomfort if God doesn't seem to be coming through with an answer I can understand.



Tel Megiddo. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Saturday, March 19

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He 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.'"

Luke 13:31-32

This dialogue with the Pharisees takes place as Jesus makes his way toward Jerusalem and his Passion, teaching and healing as he goes. Capernaum had been the public center of his ministry. There, Jesus taught in the synagogue. There, he healed Peter's mother-in-law. And there is the possible site of a first-century house-church, known as the House of Peter.

It's challenging to establish if this was the actual site of Peter's home. But I love the idea that while Peter was off following Jesus all around the countryside, his mother-in-law, and presumably his wife, kept faith in their own way, and that because of their devotion, their house became one of the oldest Christian churches.

How many people like that—especially women—are responsible for the growth and survival of the Church? Who is in the background, uncredited, unseen, building the foundations of faith?

God, teach me to look for the hidden figures of my faith: the people who taught me about you; the people who showed me what life with you is like; the people who are often overlooked. Teach me to recognize their mustard-seed work, the stuff that can move mountains. Teach me to honor them well. Amen.

Today I will...acknowledge that my own faith is the result of centuries of invisible labor. I will look more closely at the people I consider successful or admirable and strive to see the people in the background without whom they could not flourish.



Synagogue at Capernaum. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

March 20

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:1

This picture was taken on the road leading from Jericho to Jerusalem—the road, you may recall, where Jesus situated the parable of the Good Samaritan. If you’ve ever wondered how someone could be left to die on the side of the road, well, just wait until you experience this road. It’s barren, sharp-edged, and dangerous, full of inclines that have claimed more than one hapless tour bus and replete with places for murderous bandits to thrive. On top of that, the journey to Jerusalem is all uphill.

What parts of my life feel dry and weary right now? What uphill battles am I fighting? What would refreshment and relief feel like?

God, let me be honest: I wish I didn’t need you. I wish I was self-sufficient, worldly-wise, and thoroughly independent. Show me the beauty of thirsting for you, God. Let me see the loveliness of leaning. Amen.

Today I will...admit that I can’t do everything alone. When I need help, there’s no shame in leaning on others.



The Jericho-Jerusalem way in wilderness. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Monday, March 21

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

Luke 13:1-2

Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said that preachers should prepare their sermons with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Such a task isn't to be undertaken lightly. The world is full of great tragedy as well as great triumph. To interpret both through the lens of faith is to claim that no corner of existence is untouched by God's hand. It sounds so nice in theory, but then I read of the most recent blood-boiling political machination or natural disaster and ask, "REALLY, God? Where were you in that?"

If I claim that God is present in all things, it's tempting to ascribe God's judgment to calamities in the news. Jesus tells us that God's judgment is not to be sought out in such things. It isn't that God doesn't care or that God fails to judge, but rather that God prefers that I seek God's presence rather than look for God's punishment.

God, in you we live and move and have our being. There are so many moving, living things that need to know that you're near them right now. Meet them where they are. Tell them that you're there. Let them feel you, know you, trust you. Amen.

Today I will...pick up the newspaper or skim my newsfeed and notice what events are calling out for God's presence. I will commend them in prayer to God.



White dove (her name was Cassidy) atop newspaper. Photo by Angela and Martin Zimmann.

Tuesday, March 22

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.

1 Corinthians 10:1-3

On the Jordanian side of the Jordan River, our tour guide assured us that we were standing on the exact spot on the correct riverbank where Jesus had been baptized. Across the river, on the Israeli side, we could hear the tour guides assuring their groups of precisely the same thing.

In Israel and Jordan, Christians are in the minority. Muslim and Jewish practices dominate social structures in a way that feels unfamiliar to a Westerner—a needed reminder of the privilege Christianity still enjoys. It's needed because in Western culture, religious discrimination still pervades social attitudes toward Muslims and Jews. Antisemitism especially has troublingly deep roots. In fact, theologians used to turn to this passage to justify it.



Jordan River at Bethany beyond Jordan.
Photo by Victoria Larson.

How ironic, since this passage begins with this staunchly inclusive angle, recalling that we all passed through the sea from captivity into liberation. For Jews, the heart of this truth is remembered through the story of the Exodus. For Christians, it is reimagined through the sacrament of baptism. For both, this image of the Jordan River—which parted to let the Jewish people pass through into the Promised Land and in which Jesus was baptized—remains a geographic reminder of the ways in which God can work on both banks of the river to bring healing to all.

God, I tend to look at rivers and see a barrier, a boundary. But you look and you see a means of bringing everyone into your gracious promises. Draw my attention to the water's presence everywhere in my life. Let it be a reminder of your abundant love. Amen.

Today I will... pay attention to the times when I touch water: rain, baths, whistling tea kettles. When I encounter water, I will remember that in baptism, God has erased all the boundaries between me and God's love.

Wednesday, March 23

Then [Jesus] told this parable: "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.'"

Luke 13:6-7a

When I asked my photographer friends for photos of fig trees, no one could find any. Instead, I dug up this picture of a tree growing by Be'er Sheva on the edge of the Negev Desert. I can't recall exactly why I took this photo, but I suspect it had to do with the fact that somehow this tree was still alive: the dozens of tiny shoots coming out from the trunk had green leaves. I was struck by the resilience of this tree that had found a way to strive toward life even when its main branches had withered. It reminds me of the fate I hope for the fig tree in Jesus' parable. The gardener advocates for its welfare even when it fails to thrive. Perhaps it responded to the gardener's renewing regimen. Perhaps it found another way to flourish.

*God,
lover of my soul,
redeemer of the world,
defender of fig trees,
you even care for the parts of me
that don't work the way I want
them to. Lead me to consider
those parts with the same grace
you extend to them.
Amen.*



Tree growing near Be'er Sheva.

Photo by Victoria Larson.

Today I will...name one slender green blessing growing from a part of me that I consider unfruitful or frustrating.

Thursday, March 24

... you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
Psalm 63:7

Seagulls circle the Sea of Galilee, carefully watching the tourist groups on the off chance that someone is packing French fries. They are ubiquitous, squawking, pesky attendants on the pilgrimage.

They recall an insight from my New Testament professor, who relished informing our Greek language class that there is no ornithological difference between doves and pigeons. What difference does that make to our understanding of the nature of the Holy Spirit, he asked, if her symbol evokes urban pests on dirty sidewalks instead of purity and softness?

How do I picture the Holy Spirit? What qualities do I associate with her? Where might I be overlooking her action because it doesn't appear as expected?

God, I believe that you're at work in invisible corners, in the margins, and on the outside of the boundaries I draw. In places where the world is dim, teach me to look up and know that I'm under the shadow of your wings. Amen.

Today I will...notice the creatures that I usually deem pests and imagine how they might reflect God's presence.



A bird at the Sea of Galilee. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Friday, March 25
FEAST OF THE ANNUNCIATION

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Luke 1:26-28

I found it in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth: one of the most unique depictions of the Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary that I've ever seen. Despite my only record being memory and this rather fuzzy picture, it's still one of my favorite renditions of this scene.

In Annunciation iconography, the angel usually stands at a respectful distance from Mary to tell her the news. Mary herself is seated, demure, head bowed, taking in the angel's words with tranquil composure. But in the eaves of the Basilica, a stained-glass angel hovers urgently near Mary. She is standing, leaning in, hand cupped to her ear like she's eager to hear the angel's secret. Mary isn't demure in this version. She is God's co-conspirator.

God, you chose a plan to save the world that depended on the "yes" of a teenage girl. Bless me with the boldness of Mary. Give me a spirit that leans in eagerly to hear you whisper your redemptive love for the world. Amen.

Today I will...contemplate Mary as a spiritual mentor. How does her example of rebellious co-conspiracy resonate for me?



In the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Saturday, March 26

Seek the LORD while [God] may be found, call upon [God] while [God] is near..."

Isaiah 55:6

The moments that left the deepest impressions on me from my trip to the Holy Land are the ones when I recognized that I was walking on ground that Jesus himself walked: the same stone pavements, the same dirt paths. The land itself was a powerful connection to biblical events that feel otherworldly and out of reach.

The Christians who live in Israel, about 2 percent of the population, call themselves “living stones.” Some of them can trace their lineage back to the time of Jesus.

These people and this land provide a unique and irreplaceable connection to the stories of the Bible. It is true that Adonai may be found wherever Adonai chooses to be. It is also true that the quality of God’s presence in the Holy Land—refracted through a deeply rooted place and people—isn’t like I’ve experienced it anywhere else.

God, you choose to build yourself a temple out of living stones: people whom you have saved; people who long to serve you. Bring peace and justice to Israel and Palestine. Help me listen to the stories of their people. Sustain me in patient care for all caught in this conflict. Amen.

Today I will...pray for peace in Israel and Palestine. I will look for and listen to the stories of the living stones.



Walking on the Mount of the Beatitudes. Photo by Victoria Larson.

March 27

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

2 Corinthians 5:17

In seminary, whenever it rained, we precocious pastors-to-be would run through the drops of water yelling, “Remember your baptism!” Years later, I encountered Christina Rossetti’s poem “Winter Rain,” which speaks of the beauty behind the sodden brown and gray landscape of late winter: “Where the kind rain sinks and sinks / Green of Spring will follow.”



Baptismal font at Bethany beyond Jordan.

Photo by Victoria Larson.

Lent is a word that comes from the Germanic root for spring. As the seasons change during Lent, I often find myself anxious as the landscape oh-so-slowly greens. It’s not dissimilar to the impatience I direct toward myself whenever I sense that the good work of the Spirit is happening a little too gradually within me.

Part of remembering my baptism is recalling that God never gives up on me. When one season of the year or stage of my spiritual growth seems interminably dreary and slow to advance, I can lean into an image of God dripping grace upon me, knowing that growth will come from sodden soil.

God, you are a very patient gardener. I’m not. I’m ready for green shoots and flowers already! And while we’re at it, I, too, am ready to be blooming. Show me the beauty in March rain and in slow but steady growth. Amen.

Today I will... immerse myself in God’s creation, celebrating the signs of spring’s advance.

Monday, March 28

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

Joshua 5:9

At Gilgal, the Israelites paused on the border of the Holy Land after having wandered for forty years. During that time, the old warriors who had come from Egypt had died, and none of the boys born had been circumcised. Gilgal was the place where they remedied that, and the new generation was swept into the covenant that had belonged to the old. The disgrace that God rolled away at Gilgal was the doubt of the previous generation, which didn't believe that God would do what God had promised.

The new generation brings fresh hope, fresh ideas, and fresh energy to the life of the community. In church, we often speak of young people as our future. But a friend who specializes in youth ministry is fond of reminding me that they are our present.

God, was Jesus seriously only thirty-three when he died? That seems really young, God, younger every year that I grow older. Remind me how often you speak through the voices of the young: children, teenagers, twenty-somethings. Open my ears to listen. Amen.

Today I will... seek out a child or teenager and ask them about their hopes, their doubts, and their dreams for the world and for our Church.



Boy supervising camels at Petra, Jordan. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Tuesday, March 29

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

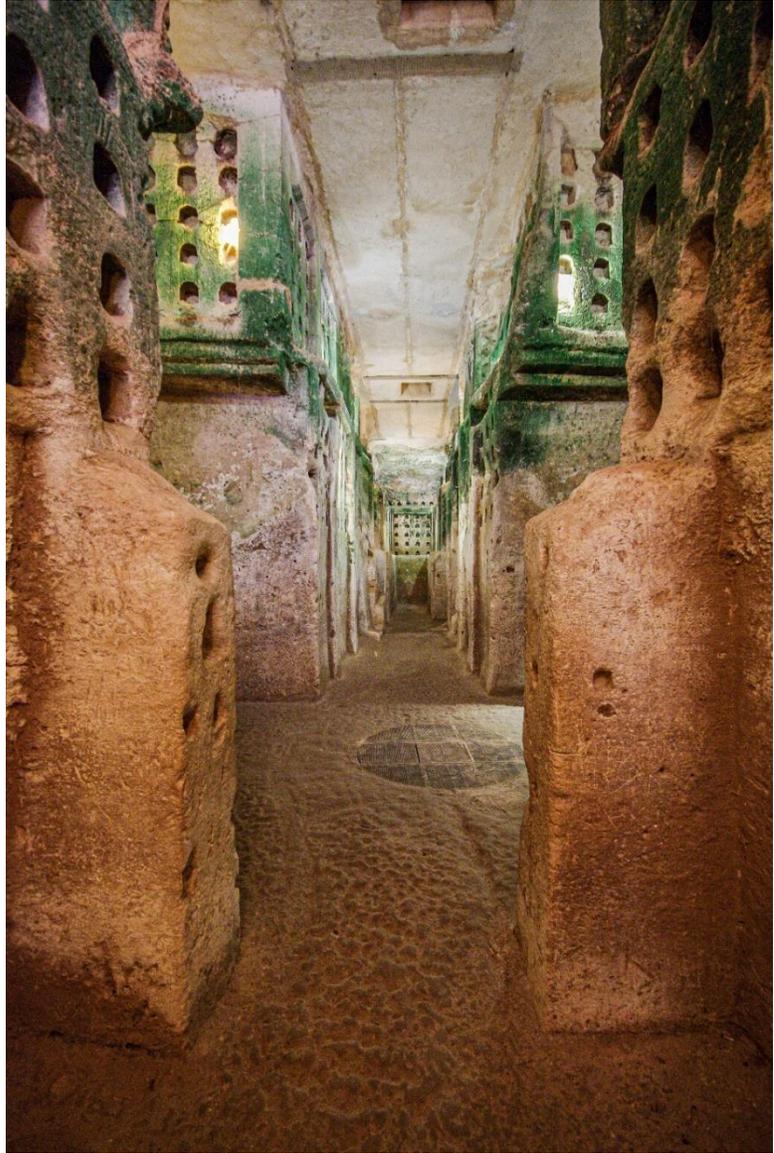
Psalm 32:7

I'm most familiar with the word columbarium because I've visited churches that have them. The little stone niches are used to hold the cremated remains of the dead. But the word's etymology contains the Latin word columba, or dove, and at Maresha, I saw why.

At Maresha, a cave complex in the Judean hills, there is a massive underground cave covered in niches where doves once nested: old-school columbaria.

When in my life have I felt that I've found my niche? That I belong? That I'm sheltered? When have I felt that was about my life in God?

God, you are my hiding-place. You keep me out of trouble. And then, when I manage to find trouble anyway, you get me out of it. As I go through this day, let me feel your protecting Spirit surrounding me. Let me meet the setting sun with shouts of deliverance. Amen.



Columbaria at Maresha. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Today I will... shout. Really. I'm going to do it. I'm going to find a place where it's safe enough to be disruptive, and then I'm going to shout out glad cries of deliverance—"Hosanna!"—as an act of praise. If I can get animals and small children to shout with me, all the better. I will reflect on how it feels to take up that kind of space in order to praise God.

Wednesday, March 30

So [the prodigal son] set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

I have to imagine that the father was actively waiting for his son. He saw the boy “while he was still far off,” after all. That seems like a parent who casts a glance toward the horizon at every opportunity, a parent who never gives up hope that their child will return. This is how God loves us, Jesus suggests through this parable. Every one of us.

There are so many people who fall through the cracks of our systems of support, like people suffering from mental health issues, poverty, houselessness, or addiction. So many people don't have anyone looking out to the horizon, hoping for their return. The burden of this tragedy is overwhelming for me to carry alone. But God's own attentive love beckons me to keep coming back to the edge of the field, keeping God company while God waits and waits.

God, I think you probably know how hard it is to be disappointed by the people you love—I mean, you've got me, after all. But I have to tell you: sometimes my compassion is exhausted, and I don't know how to replenish it. God, will you watch at the edges of the field for my loved one's homecoming? Will you help me find the space to recover? Amen.

Today I will...name the heartbreak that comes from loving people who need more help than I'm able to give, especially those who are far from safety and security. I will lift those people in prayer to the God who never gives up hope.



View across a field in Galilee. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Thursday, March 31

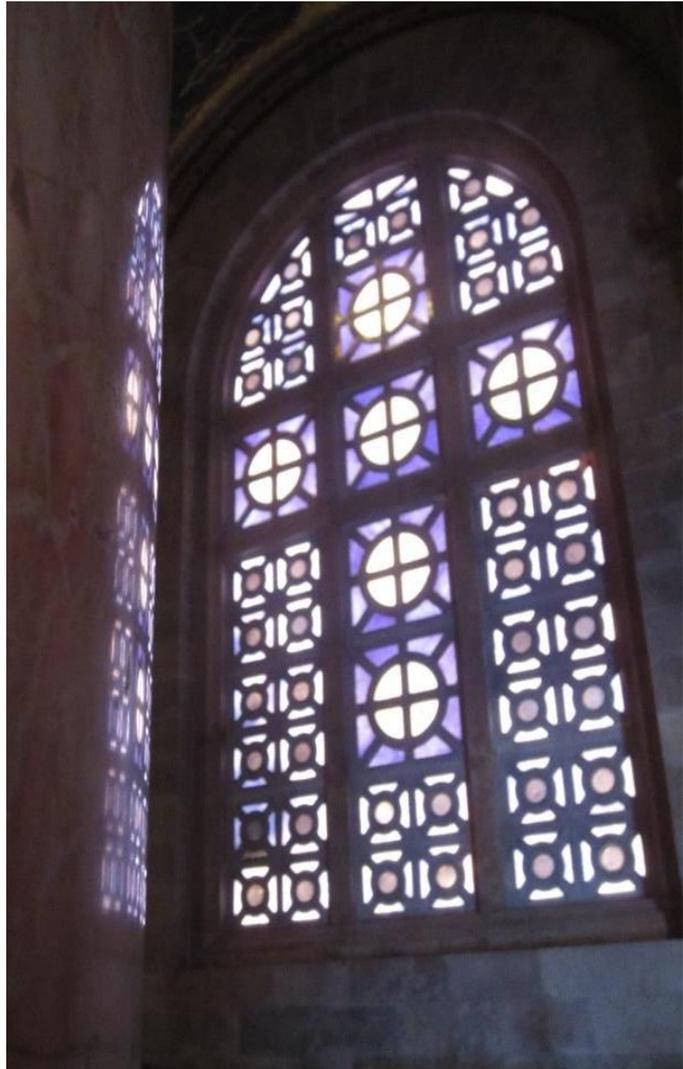
So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making [God's] appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:20

The Church of All Nations on the Mount of Olives is built over a piece of bedrock where tradition holds that Jesus prayed on the night of his arrest. The funds to build it in the early 1920s came from twelve separate nations, lending the basilica its name. The structure is a witness to the Christian call to reconciliation reflected in Paul's letter to Corinth.

The alabaster panels of the windows were dyed purple to evoke the solemnity of Christ's agony in the garden. Purple is the color of Lent precisely because it's meant to call that solemnity to mind throughout the season, but I confess that this penitential color is mixed up in my mind with the joy of spring: it is the shade of early crocuses and hyacinths.

Those layers of multiple meaning suit the story of the Passion just fine. Jesus' agony in the garden where this church is found is awful indeed, and at the same time it is a necessary part of the story that leads us to the empty tomb on Easter morning.



Alabaster windows in the Church of All Nations. Photo by Victoria Larson.

God, this whole purple thing confronts me with the truth that I don't always feel what I'm supposed to feel in the moment I'm supposed to feel it. Bless my heart when it's not in the same mood as my brain, and vice versa. Remind me that you are more interested in my authenticity than in my appropriateness. Amen.

Today I will... notice the color purple in the world around me. Each time I do, I'll remember that God is there in both joy and sorrow.

Friday, April 1

The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Joshua 5:12

Israeli breakfast is the best breakfast in the world.

There were at least three mornings during my trip to the Holy Land where I broke down in gastronomic rapture and just wandered around the hotel dining room taking pictures. There were eggs and yogurts and dates and salad. (Salad for breakfast? YES. It is lemony and fresh and delicious.) There were roasted tomatoes and roasted peppers and roasted eggplant. There were sauces and a horde of cheeses. There was an incredible dish of fava beans with roasted garlic and lemon and olive oil. This discovery caused me great distress, as I found it on one of our last days and there were so few breakfasts remaining during which I could devour it. Be still, my yearning tummy...

The produce of the land that the Israelites ate when the manna dried up was, I can attest, very good indeed.

God, to those who are hungry, give bread. And to those who have bread, give hunger for justice. Amen.

[traditional Argentine prayer]

Today I will...take the time to pause and appreciate the food that I eat. I will remember that it comes from God's good earth, and be mindful that it passed through many hands to come to me.



Israeli breakfast. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Saturday, April 2

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing."

Luke 15:25

I wonder what the elder son felt when he heard the music coming from his father's house. Was there a flutter of anticipatory joy in his belly? Was there a nasty tickle of cold suspicion that his wastrel brother had returned?

Approaching celebration from a distance can be a tricky thing. "From a distance," Bette Midler sings to us, "there is harmony." But up close, the complex webs of human relationships make things a lot more complicated—just ask any adult child at a big family gathering. Just ask Jesus, who gathered with his friends at Bethany for a meal a week before his death—a story we'll hear in church tomorrow.

As Easter approaches, plans for family gatherings are either in formation or are conspicuously absent.



Preparing for a banquet in Jerusalem.
Photo by Angela and Martin Zimmann.

God, you know how families are. Your Son had a mother and brothers and sisters and chosen family too, and wasn't that complicated? Where my family is healthy, keep it growing. Where it is dysfunctional, help me to name it, and to learn where my family ends and I begin. Keep me rooted in the promise of your resurrection, which tells me that you can make all things new. Amen.

Today I will...acknowledge the validity of whatever I feel about upcoming family gathering(s), while also praying that God will direct my heart toward the joy that flows from Christ's empty grave: a promise of liberation from whatever still binds me or those I love.

April 3
FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negev.
Psalm 126:4

It's still possible to see watercourses in the Negev today. Wadi are dry riverbeds that occasionally stream with excess rain that runs off the Judean hills to the north of the desert. I learned to identify wadi by looking for the signs of waterflow in the dry landscape, and maybe some optimistic vegetation that's a little greener than everything else, too.

I've only ever seen the arrival of the water on video, but it's clear why the psalmist got so worked up over it. The restoration of the waters is deceptively slow: the brown churn of liquid seems to creep across the landscape at a snail's pace, right up until the last minute, when the speed of the huge mass of water catches observers by surprise.

God's grace can be like that. I spend a lot of time preoccupied with making myself ready to receive God's favor, God's love, a sense of rightness with God, only to realize it's here. It's overwhelming in its magnitude—not because of what I've done, but because that's the God we're dealing with: the one who loves showing up in the middle of my desert with a stream of life-giving water.



Ein Gev wadi. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

God, do it again: surprise me with your nearness, your vastness, your incredible love, your overpowering grace. Amen.

Today I will...hold my imperfections gently. When my inner critic raises its voice, I will stop, take a breath, and remind myself that I may not be perfect, but I am overwhelmingly beloved.

Monday, April 9

The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Isaiah 43:20-21

Throughout the psalms, there's a recurring idea that creation praises God by simply being what God created it to be. Trees clap their hands as the wind blows through their leaves. Mountains leap joyfully out of the landscape as tectonic plates move and merge. The wild animals honor God by drinking deeply from what God delights to give them: life, being, water in the wilderness. Robert Jensen called humankind "the praying animal," but the psalms reveal that humans join a creation already praising God.

God, in you I live and move and have my being. In little acts of being human today, help me to recognize in myself someone that you have formed, someone you have chosen, someone in whose being you find delight. Amen.

Today I will...be mindful of my creaturely self—of my bodily needs to move, to drink, to eat, to sleep, to love, to connect with others—and name these simple acts of being as delightful to God.



Ibex at Ein Gev. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Tuesday, April 5

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him....

Philippians 3:8-9a

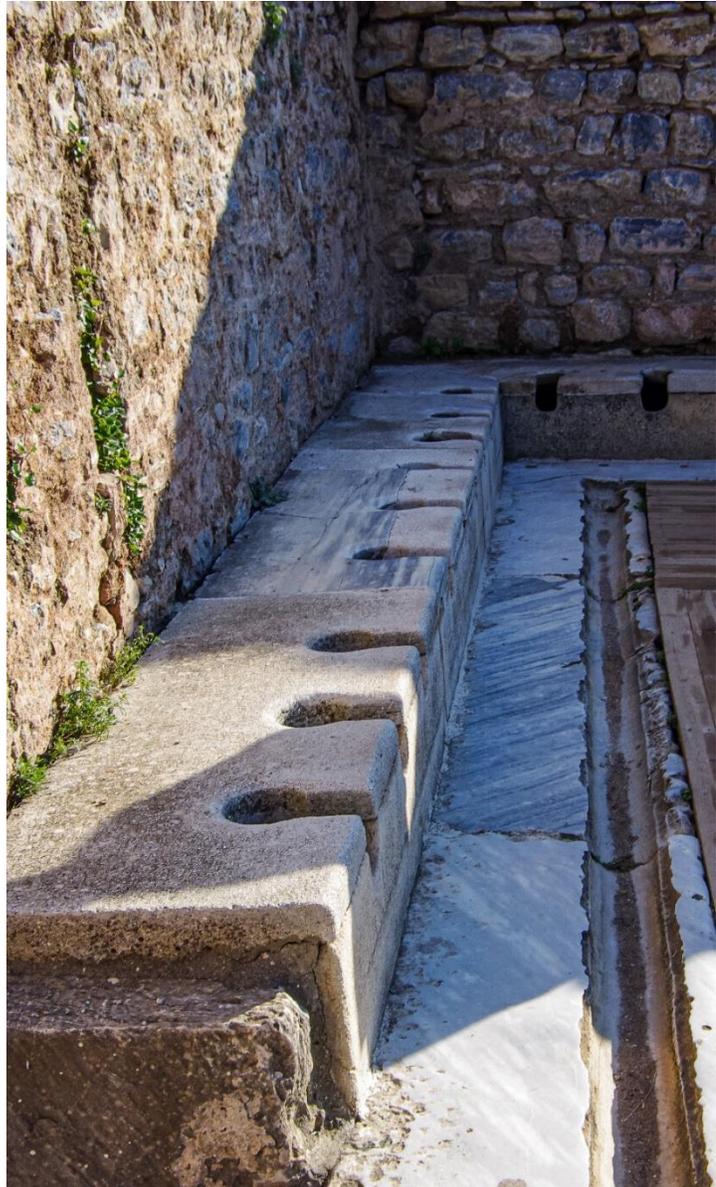
Let's talk about that word rubbish. In Greek it's *skubalon*, and it's also a little more forceful than "rubbish." Skubalon is the crap that you throw to dogs because it's so worthless. It's garbage. It's excrement. Not to be indelicate, but it's poop.

("Poop" was not the word I used in the first draft of this devotional.)

It's helpful to encounter the rawness of this word in prayer. Prayer itself can be raw. In prayer, I show up for conversation with a God who loves me deeply and who is present in my worst moments as well as my best. Such a God, I believe, wants to hear about my...poop. Perhaps, as Paul suggests, it's in the middle of an honest reckoning about the poop that God can do God's best work.

God, I've got some poop I need to discuss with you. Reassure me that you are as familiar with it as the loving mother of a child who still needs diapers. Lead me into an honest reckoning of the things I think are most important. Center my life in Christ. Amen.

Today I will... name my poop in prayer, and be as honest as I can with God about where I feel that I need God the most.



Fancy latrine at Ephesus.
Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Wednesday, April 6

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

John 12:1

On the Mount of Olives, there is an old Jewish cemetery overlooking the Temple Mount. According to a Jewish interpretation of holy text, the resurrection of the dead will begin there.

Because the cemetery is 500 years old, it wasn't around in Jesus' time, but the association of the Mount of Olives with death surely was, thanks to Jesus. Jesus went to the village of Bethany in this gospel story, on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

I wonder often about the dinner conversation that night. Did the raising of Lazarus come up? The man was right there at the dinner table, after all, and remembering his story might have given some strength to Jesus' disciples who stood at his newly dug tomb a few days later.

Who have I lost to death? Who do I hope to see again on the day of resurrection? What stories give me strength in times of grief?

God, you are the God of the living and the dead. Help me name the people whom I miss. Comfort me with the promise of resurrection. Tell me again the stories of new life. Amen.

Today I will... name in prayer my loved ones who have died. I will tell God what I remember most about them. I will pray to meet them again, on the day of resurrection.



Necropolis outside Temple Mount. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Thursday, April 7

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.

John 12:3

I listened recently to a podcast about the sense of smell. It's one of the least-valued of our senses—sight and hearing beat it out by a wide margin—but Covid-19 has revealed that we underestimate its consequence. Smell is like a superpower: it lets us walk into a room and, without any other clues, know if someone is cooking or cleaning, if something's on fire, if there's food that's gone bad, whether someone just washed a dog, and so on.

It's also the most evocative of our senses, the one tied most closely to memory. This makes me wonder what happened for the disciples after this night whenever they smelled nard, an aromatic ointment. Did they remember that night in Bethany? What emotions or images would come to them?

God, you created a world and gave people a nose to smell it. How marvelous! How disgusting! Today, when smell brings me to a place, a memory, a feeling, a thought, let me find you there. Amen.

Today I will...pay special attention to the world of smell. I will bring to mind scents that I love, and I will be mindful of the places and emotions where they bring me.



Lavender growing in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Photo by Victoria Larson.

Friday, April 8

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters...

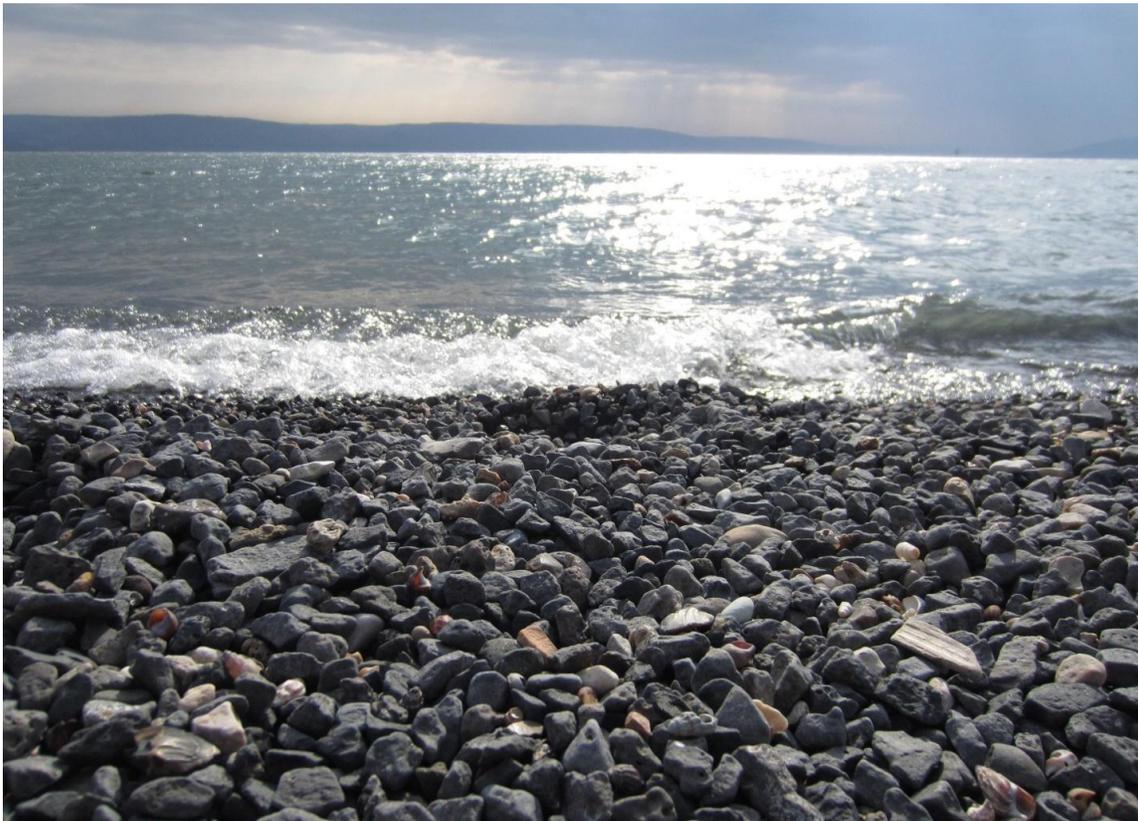
Isaiah 43:16

In ancient times, the sea was an allegory for chaos. It is changeable: placid one moment and murderous the next, full of mysterious creatures and unknowable depths.

Through such waters, God makes a path. Through chaos, God makes a way. This is who God is, the one whose first act was to make order out of chaos.

God, have I introduced you to my various sea monsters? They are many, and they promise there are more lurking under the surface, frolicking in the chaotic currents of my life. Help me, God. Grant that my monsters may be tamed or perhaps even befriended. Order the chaos. Make a way in the sea. Amen.

Today I will...consider what chaos in my life I need God's help in ordering. I will bring it to God in prayer, and then do my very best, if only for today, to leave it there.



The Sea of Galilee. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Saturday, April 9

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126:6

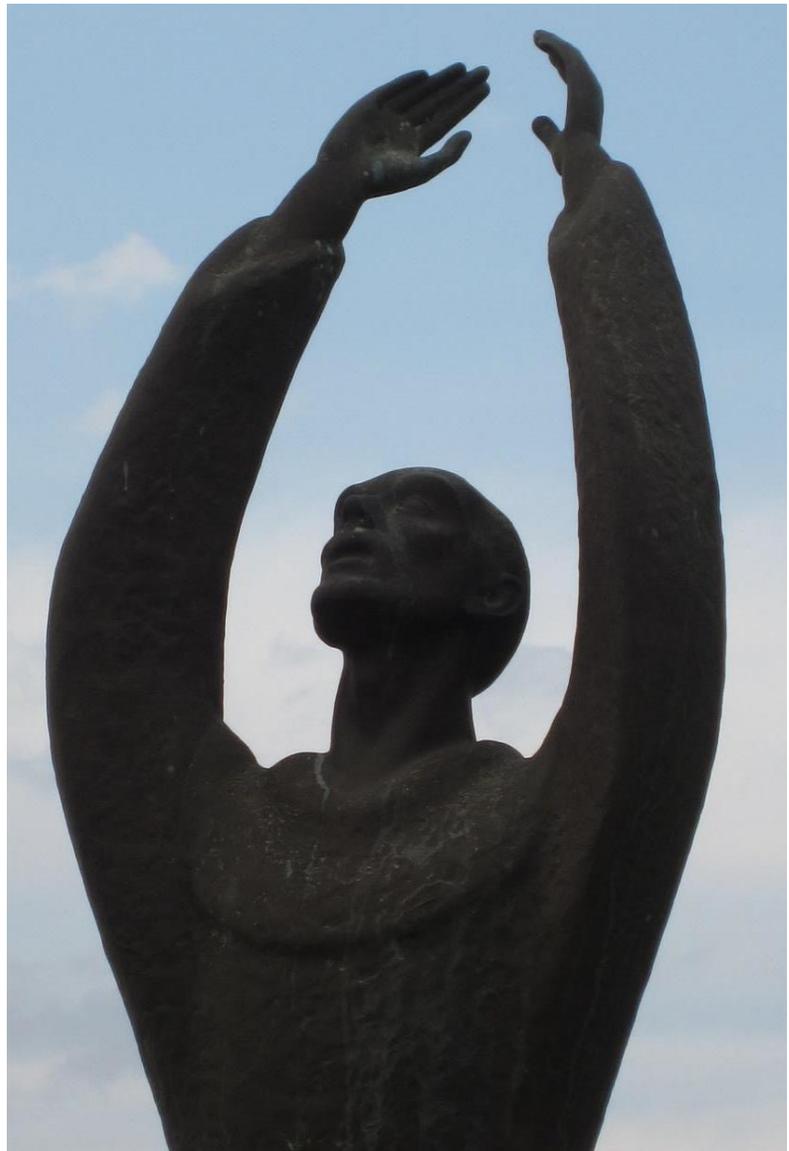
It's the Saturday before Palm Sunday. This time next week, we'll be keeping vigil outside the stone tomb. It's about to get intense.

One thing that strengthens me when I know hard times are coming is remembering the psalmist's wisdom—or is it a promise? “Those who go out weeping...shall come home with shouts of joy.”

I've lost track of the identity of this statue in Peter's hometown of Capernaum, but I would like to imagine that it's Peter himself, captured in the moment when he returned from the events of Jerusalem to tell people that Christ has risen.

The time of weeping is ahead.
But joy is coming soon after.

God, prepare my heart for the week that's coming. Open me up to the story of Christ's Passion. Through it, bring me nearer to you. If grief becomes too heavy, give me to those who will help carry it. When joy comes again, may I use it to help carry others. Amen.



Statue in Capernaum. Photo by Victoria Larson.

Today I will... take a solid minute—a full sixty seconds—to breathe and meditate on the coming week. I will pray for room to experience Holy Week fully.

April 10
PALM SUNDAY

As [Jesus] was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen...

Luke 19:37

In the moment Luke describes, this street, running for a kilometer down the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, would have been full of market stalls, of people, of animals; full of noise and sights and smells.

A hullabaloo would have begun at one end of it, shouts that had a shape to them: Hosanna! Save us! People would have hacked down greenery and thrown it into the street. The way would have cleared. He would have appeared.

God, how is it that no matter how long I've been expecting you, you always surprise me when you appear? As I remember the story of your entry into Jerusalem, fill me with the deep joy of your nearness. May that joy sustain me in the days to come. Amen.

Today I will...picture it: the bustle of the street, the hustle of daily life suddenly suspended, and I will envision seeing him from the midst of the crowd. I will imagine the joy, the swirl, the powerful surge of exultation: the one for whom I have been waiting has suddenly, without warning, appeared.



The Cardo (one of the main streets) of Jerusalem in Jesus' time. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Monday, April 11

As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it...

Luke 19:41

The Sanctuary of Dominus Flevit (The Lord Wept) is a church that sits on the Mount of Olives near the path Jesus is said to have taken during his triumphal entry.

I love the idea of the Lord who wept being a sanctuary, a place of shelter and repose. In a culture that seems to push relentless positivity, it's a blessing to recall that one of the most triumphal moments of Christ's life was marked by tears. Jesus wept for a city that he knew was a long way from finding the peace for which it yearned. The city is still worthy of that grief.

Have there been moments in my life—even moments couched in triumph—where I've recognized that I'm still a long way from the thing I truly need?

God, you know what it is to feel great joy and also great sorrow, and to feel them just moments apart or even at the same time. When this world brings me to tears with its complexity and chaos, its insatiable need and terrible tragedy, its foolishness, and its brokenness, help me into the sanctuary of the Lord who wept. Amen.

Today I will...I carry that grief to the sanctuary of the Lord who wept in prayer.



View behind the altar of the Church of Dominus Flevit. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.

Tuesday, April 12

Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me.
Luke 22:52b-53a

Throughout the rest of this week until Thursday night, Jesus teaches every day in the Temple. As a Jew, this was a deeply sacred place to him.

During Holy Week, Christians retell the sacred story of the Passion. The story is crucial to our identity. It's also a story that has been leveraged over the millennia as an excuse for Christians to make enemies of the Jewish people.

God, it's so easy to pretend that this story isn't about me, that it happened long ago and far away. That I would never deny like Peter, betray like Judas, manipulate like the chief priests, or tyrannize like Pilate. Tell me that you love me no matter what, God, so that I can tell you the truth about who I am and recognize that I, too, need resurrection. Amen.

Today I will... acknowledge the Church's story of antisemitism, accepting that I'm not free of it. I will commit to certain practices this week: rather than label the people who put Jesus on trial as "other." I will strive to look inside myself for the guilty party in Jesus' death. I will confess my complicity in the world's brokenness. I will acknowledge my own vulnerability in the face of temptation.



The Western Wall of the Temple Mount: the only remains of the original retaining wall.
Photo by Victoria Larson.

Wednesday, April 13

For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe that one by whom he is betrayed!

Luke 22:22

Today is Spy Wednesday, the day when Judas went to the chief priests of the Temple to make his deal. There's a lot of speculation about what could have motivated Judas to betray Jesus as he did. Personally, I'm not compelled by the explanations that boil down to "Judas was a bad person." I'm moved by the ones that interpret Judas' choice as that of a man who was trying to set a stage for Jesus, hoping to force the final confrontation between the worldly authorities and Jesus' divine power. No one expects Jesus' power to work the way it does. No one thinks that there is victory on the other side of the grave. No one expects God's greatest strength to be in the weakness of death on the cross.

God, I'll admit it. I wish you worked on my schedule, or at least that you would share with me the details of whatever divine plan is up your sleeve. Forgive me for wanting to force your hand. Teach me to hold my own desires more gently and to open myself to yours. Amen.

Today I will... consider the ways in which I'm like Judas. I will name the times I have wanted to force God to act, the times when I've set a timeline for divine intervention, the times I've put God to the test. I will remember that Jesus loved Judas, and not even knowing what he would do changed that.



The Temple Mount from the Mount of Olives. Photo by Victoria Larson.

April 19
MAUNDY THURSDAY

When [Jesus] got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”
Luke 22:45-46

In the tumultuous mash-up of pilgrimage and tourism that pervades the Holy Land, the Garden of Gethsemane still feels like a retreat. Ancient olive trees grow there, and even in winter it is verdant and quiet. I could see why Jesus had a habit of praying in that place. I could also get why the disciples fell asleep. There’s an extra detail in this Bible verse that’s intriguing to me: they were asleep “because of grief.” I don’t usually fall asleep because of grief—or do I?

When do I turn my face into a tear-soaked pillow and turn to sleep as a sanctuary from the intensity of feeling? When do I turn myself away from the pain and brokenness in my life, in my community, in my church, in my world, because continuing to feel is too much to bear?

God, if you want me to stay awake to face everything going on in this world, you’d better give me the strength. The resilience I need lies only with you, in the knowledge that Jesus lived and died and rose again to do what I cannot: save, redeem, and heal this world. Keep me rooted in that truth, God, and I will do my best to stay awake and keep on praying. Amen.

Today I will...name the grief that I feel in my life. I will lift it in prayer to God.



The Garden of Gethsemane. Photo by Victoria Larson.

April 15
GOOD FRIDAY

A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.

Luke 23:27

The path that Jesus is said to have walked from Pilate's quarters to the hill where he was crucified is called the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows. But according to the biblical narrative, the only people who recognized and expressed the profound sorrow of that path on the day of the crucifixion were the women who followed Jesus.

Today the Via Dolorosa is a regular-looking street in the Old City in Jerusalem. Plaques marking the fourteen stations of the cross stud the walls that surround it. As I walked the path that Jesus took to his death, I could have stopped to buy anything from a Turkish coffee service to an olive-wood nativity set. It was a stark reminder that the world keeps turning even in the moments when grief makes it feel like it's stopped for me.

Who do I know who is walking a way of sorrow right now?

God, as I prepare my heart to hear the worst part of the story of your Child, move me to reach out to someone who needs company for a little old-fashioned breast-beating. Amen.

Today I will...stop my world for someone who is sorrowing. I will reach out to them—a call, a text, a note of support—to let them know that they are not alone.



The Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. Photo by Victoria Larson.

April 16
HOLY SATURDAY

Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.

John 19:41

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is home to two of the holiest sites in Christianity: the place where Jesus was crucified and the place where his tomb stood.

Only one person at a time is permitted in the innermost chamber of the Aedicule, the mini-shelter that houses the tomb. It takes a lot of waiting to get within sight of the place where Jesus was laid. (Even then, it's still protected by several layers of rock.) But waiting seems like an appropriate pastime for the pilgrims who come to visit this spot. For three days, Jesus' disciples waited. Today, across the world, Christians join in the ancient pattern of their vigil.

God, you've kept us waiting for so long. So many of us are waiting for you to break in and fix this broken world. I don't know what's keeping you. But I'm going to keep waiting. In this sacred time of waiting, you tell us the good news again: new life is coming like a thief in the night. Amen.

Today I will...keep watch for signs of resurrection.



The Aedicule and the Dome of Anastasis in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Photo by Victoria Larson.

April 17
EASTER SUNDAY

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.
Luke 24:1-3

When the women first went to the tomb on that resurrection morning, what they found didn't immediately look like joy. It didn't look like victory, either. It looked like...well, to be honest, they had no idea what it looked like. There had been a body. Now there wasn't one. What on earth were they supposed to make of that? No one's first thought was our Lord and Savior has come back from the dead. It's just not where the mind goes as a first option.

But that's how God works! The option I think is too wonderful, the future I think is too much to ask for—that's God's baseline. God's imagination is always greater than mine.

God, ALLELUIA! Amen.

Today I will... celebrate the resurrection of Christ along with the Church in all times and places. I will imagine myself at the empty tomb. I will acknowledge the confusion that sometimes comes when God's will is done. I will abandon myself to the joy of discovering that the divine imagination has already reshaped the world.



Inside the Aedicule in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Photo by Mark Vitalis Hoffman.